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ALBERT CAMUS'S ABSURD IN 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN FICTION

by

Alec Faiman

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the
University Honors Program

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ABSTRACT

Albert Camus's Absurd in 20th Century American Fiction

Alec Faiman

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Out of the turmoil caused by significant intellectual and scientific developments during the 19th century, many people seem to believe that life has no inherent purpose. Albert Camus's existential treatise *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) outlines his theory of the absurd. Using Camus's thoughts on the absurd and various critical texts to supplement his theory, this thesis will show that the side effects of the humanity's intellectual and scientific progress up to and including the late-20th century are documented at length in John Updike's *Rabbit, Run* (1961), Paula Fox's *Desperate Characters* (1970), and Bret Easton Ellis's *The Rules of Attraction* (1987). Together these texts illustrate a pattern of absurdity in characters of 20th century American fiction. Although these novels largely limit these feelings to Americans of European descent who occupy places of privilege in society, they document an increase in absurdity in terms of both the extent to which the individual is affected as well as the number of people who confront the absurd.

KEYWORDS: Albert Camus, absurd, American Fiction, 20th century, *Rabbit, Run*, *Desperate Characters*, *The Rules of Attraction*

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

During the 19th century, European thinkers confronted and grappled with difficult questions about humanity's place in the universe. Western thought operated for millennia based on the assumption that human beings were exceptional creatures, second only to God in the grand scheme of things, and people were largely confident about their individual and collective experiences. But fundamental discoveries in science and profound questions asked by philosophers began to dispel these myths. Astronomers gained a more accurate picture of the vastness of the cosmos. Charles Darwin propounded the theory of natural selection, which, according to Malcolm Bradbury, "threatened alike religion and humanism" (2). Karl Marx introduced an economic theory so radical it has engendered dissatisfaction coupled with hope in people of every subsequent generation. Friedrich Nietzsche famously stated that humanity's faith in a higher power was at an end, prognosticating a decline in religious belief continuing even today. Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) brought his ideas of the unconscious to the forefront of psychology, emphasizing how factors beyond our control may regulate our behavior. These theories and others, though largely confined to European intellectual history, suggest a growing loss of faith in human exceptionalism.

Out of the turmoil caused by these significant intellectual and scientific developments during the 19th century, many people seem to believe that life has no inherent purpose, that humanity is alone on this journey, and, as a result, lacks meaning. This sentiment, like much of the subsequent existentialist movement, seems grounded in Nietzschean thought. It is important to note that Nietzsche was not the first to put forth

such theories (see Epicurus and Lucretius, among others), but his views were incredibly influential. Nietzsche's writings indicate that, although the universe does not bestow any definite meaning upon humanity, we can assert our existence onto the physical world and make something new out of what is there. Meaning, in this sense, stems from our ability to see ourselves realized in our surroundings, to "make things beautiful, attractive, and desirable for us" (Nietzsche 239). Expanding upon this view, artists seem to be the most fully realized people in this world, for they can give their lives a sense of purpose.

This perspective, with its emphasis on the artist, is not realistic in modern society because, under the conditions Karl Marx explicates, most people have neither the time nor the inclination to create. Members of Western society are alienated from the truest essence of life: creation. Marx writes, "the worker relates to his product as to an alien object" (72). That is, people are forced into a cycle of wage-labor, performing jobs which carry no meaning or significance to them for the sake of survival. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer evoke this idea when they write, "Capitalist production so confines [consumers], body and soul, that they fall helpless victims to what is offered them" (737). In addition to being indoctrinated into a culture of hollow consumption, the conditions enumerated by Marx, Adorno, and Horkheimer also prevent people from creating anything of meaning in their free time, due to their being exhausted by tedious labor and inundated with vapid consumer culture.

With these conditions of existence in mind, one sees how existentialism developed a stronghold on 20th century philosophy. French philosopher Albert Camus's existential treatise *The Myth of Sisyphus*, published in 1942 with the English translation following in 1955, outlines feelings common to 20th century Western humanity. Camus

examines these feelings – including anxiety, doubt, uncertainty, alienation, faithlessness, apathy, and meaninglessness – through his theory of the absurd, essentially the state of knowing life has no inherent meaning. In an attempt to pinpoint its essence, Camus offers several definitions and examples of the absurd. In his most effective definition, Camus explains that people become absurd when “The primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millennia ... that denseness and that strangeness of the world is the absurd” (14). This “primitive hostility” is the seemingly inescapable fact that the universe does not have a grand plan for one’s existence. One who suffers this realization and attempts to grapple with it, learning the truth of their existence, is called the absurd individual: one who longs for meaning but knows there is little chance of finding or creating it.

Tracing the history of existential philosophy and humanity’s reaction to the absurd, Camus believes people automatically turn to religion to imbue the universe and their lives with a sense of meaning: “Through an odd reasoning, starting out from the absurd over the ruins of reason, in a closed universe limited to the human, they deify what crushes them and find reason to hope in what impoverishes them. That forced hope is religious in all of them” (32). Confronted with the absurd, the human instinct is to find comfort in religion in order to suppress these absurd feelings. Camus argues that, faced with the possibility that there is no grand plan for one’s life, the individual “forces” a sense of religious hope. Still, Camus’s philosophy is sometimes vague regarding the psychological realities imposed on the absurd individual, and his work is even less concerned with the economic and social circumstances that limit one’s ability to create a life of value.

Slavoj Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) sheds further light on how the individual, or the subject in psychoanalytic terms, copes with an existential crisis and their subsequent yearning for meaning. Žižek's work, largely based in Lacanian psychoanalysis, covers three major issues in relation to the absurd: lack, fantasy, and the big Other. For the purposes of this work, a lack corresponds roughly to the feeling of the absurd. It is the seemingly inescapable longing and alienation alive in many individuals stemming from the knowledge that the world has no inherent meaning, that people cannot exist in the way that best suits them. This psychoanalytic lack, however, is largely unconscious, thus differentiating it from the conscious knowledge of the absurd. The absurd seems to occur due to an existential crisis in the individual that engenders absurd feelings; it requires a catalyst. The individual reacts to this lack with fantasy, which parallels Camus's thoughts on the individual's religious instinct in that both occur because people wish to structure their absurd lives by way of desiring that which would instill in them a sense of meaning. This desire, then, manifests itself as a suppression of the absurd feeling. Žižek continues Lacan's use of the big Other which, in applying Žižek to Camus, is best conceptualized as "ideas of anonymous authoritative power" (Johnston), or, society. These powers, such as society at large, institute norms and mores through which the individual is viewed and subsequently forced to conform. This conformity, too, is a suppression of the absurd.

The principal link between Camus and Žižek is that both the individual's absurd state and the subject's lack reflect the above-mentioned feelings seemingly common to a particular segment of 20th century humanity. Camus writes, "He [the absurd individual] feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this

confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (28). Along with this experience, Žižek posits, “we try to fill out the unbearable gap of ... the Other’s desire, by offering ourselves to the Other as the object of its desire” (116). That is, people feel an insufferable lack because they are imperfect in the eyes of the big Other and try to fantasize a way out of these feelings of inadequacy. Absurd individuals have a similar response to their predicament; they suppress their absurdity through fantasy in an attempt to cope with the feeling that they live in an indifferent universe. Camus’s thoughts on the absurd and Žižek’s explanation of the lack and subsequent fantasy in the individual are useful in exploring the consequences of humanity’s intellectual and scientific progress up to and including the late-20th century.

Camus and Žižek grapple with similar issues, and they are particularly useful in relation to each other in order to bring out larger philosophical issues as well as individual responses to existential and psychological crises found in American literature from this period. The texts examined in this thesis include John Updike’s *Rabbit, Run*, Paula Fox’s *Desperate Characters*, and Bret Easton Ellis’s *The Rules of Attraction*. Updike’s *Rabbit, Run* illustrates the ideas found in Camus and Žižek’s texts primarily through its titular protagonist, Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom. Faced with the realization that his ordinary middle-class life is vapid and therefore not for him, he rejects his family, marriage, and community, fantasizing about a hedonistic life free from responsibility. Sophie Bentwood from Fox’s *Desperate Characters* undergoes a similarly life-shattering experience and must grapple with feelings of absurdity. Sophie, unlike Rabbit, time and again fails to properly fantasize and suppress the absurd, and the novel ends with Sophie’s world in a state of disorder. Chronologically last, the characters in Ellis’s *The*

Rules of Attraction are largely bereft of any desire to fantasize about a better life because they are so enmeshed in absurd reality. They view fantasy as ultimately futile and instead engage in empty hedonism similar to Rabbit's, but without the chimeric promise of a brighter tomorrow, thus illustrating the fact that this feeling of the absurd is only increasing in a certain portion of American culture as time passes. The characters documented in these novels exemplify Camus's theory of the absurd and its effects on the individual, indicating a broader presence of the absurd in American literature from this period. These novels also illustrate that individual and cultural feelings of the absurd increase over time, suggesting that, for certain privileged members of society, and their social group in particular, it is increasingly difficult to find answers to questions of meaning and purpose.

CHAPTER TWO

Rabbit, Run

John Updike's *Rabbit, Run* examines the quarter-life crisis of an average middle-class U.S. citizen. The novel very much belongs to its time, considering both the protagonist's (and even Updike's) treatment of women and minorities as well as its emphasis on the middle-class, a group that emerged and flourished in the post-war era. Updike's place as an intellectual – he graduated from Harvard and often wrote for *The New Yorker* – indicates that he was likely at least aware of existential philosophy, even if it is doubtful he subscribed to Camus's theory of the absurd. Still, Updike's infamous literary creation Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom contains many elements of the absurd. After discovering he has lost faith in his life as a responsible member of a distinctly middle-class family, Rabbit spends much of the novel grappling with this discovery: the revelation that his life – his existence – is absurd. These philosophical issues engender psychological ones, and Rabbit attempts to suppress these absurd feelings through fantasy, the primary forms being sex, religion, and self-deification. His sense of self is largely the result of his relationship with the big Other, or society as a supreme force outside himself, which further induces an inflated sense of self. After temporarily returning to his familial life, Rabbit's story ends much as it begins: running from his obligations in a desperate attempt to suppress the absurd, presumably by creating a new life for himself away from the domestic "traps" that terrify him.

Updike's novel chronicles a few months in the life of its titular character. He is married to Janice, with whom he has a son, Nelson, and a baby on the way. Over the course of the novel, Rabbit leaves them and lives with a prostitute named Ruth. After

Janice gives birth to their daughter, Rebecca, Rabbit returns to his family. This return is brief, and after Rabbit again abandons his family and goes to Ruth, Janice has a nervous breakdown and accidentally drowns Rebecca in the bathtub. Rabbit, after completely alienating himself from his former life, decides to leave Ruth as well and the novel implies he will begin life anew completely separated from everyone he once knew.

Rabbit is not his given name; this moniker, bestowed upon him at a young age, conjures his “breadth of white face, the pallor of his blue irises, and a nervous flutter under his brief nose” (Updike 5). For the reader, the name suggests the image of a small animal, ready to break into a sprint and flee the moment it perceives any threat. Rabbit’s name is the subject of further wordplay from Updike: “angst” appears in his surname as an inescapable part of his identity (Crowe 88). Rabbit often acts based on a kind of nervous, animalistic instinct, for he too flees what he perceives as a threat to himself: the absurdity of his current life. His troubles, unlike a rabbit’s, are not primal; they stem from his ordinary middle-class existence.

The elements which lead to Rabbit’s confrontation with the absurd appear in the novel’s opening pages as Rabbit walks home from his job as a kitchen gadget salesperson. He stumbles across a pickup basketball game, and, despite being much older and larger than anyone else in the contest, he joins and enjoys himself. Explaining Rabbit’s need to intrude upon this game, Gerry Brenner writes, “The intensity of physical action is missing from the workaday world ...” (6). Playing basketball, Rabbit feels alive in a way he has not felt in years. Throughout the novel, Rabbit contrasts his everyday domestic life with his former glory as a high school basketball star. He tells a local reverend, Jack Eccles, “I played first-rate basketball ... And after you’re first-rate at

something, no matter what, it kind of takes the kick out of being second-rate” (Updike 92). Rabbit struggles to adapt to being an average working-class citizen after the glory of his high school years. Rabbit was a basketball star, and he is troubled that the children in the pickup game have “never heard of him” (Updike 7). This realization sets him down the path of discovering that his life is not the one he imagined for himself, that life, he believes, could be much better.

The absurd feeling in Rabbit first materializes when he arrives at his home after the pickup basketball game. He finds his pregnant wife watching television and is immediately disgruntled once inside: his wife does not perform every domestic function he expects; Nelson is at Rabbit’s parents’ house and Rabbit must collect him; and Rabbit must also pick up the family car from his in-laws. A children’s program plays on television, and a character promoting individuality says, “Know Thyself ... Don’t try to be Sally or Johnny or Fred next door; be yourself” (Updike 10). But, in his normalcy, Rabbit closely resembles his next-door neighbors. Rabbit considers the “fraud” that “makes the world go round” (10), the scheme that keeps him and his neighbors in their quiet, ordinary lives. Thus, Rabbit takes the program’s message to heart.

The feelings of purpose and vitality which Rabbit encountered during the basketball game, his subsequent repulsion for his familial obligations, and the discontentment caused by the motivational quote inspire him to examine his life. Explaining the beginnings of the absurd realization, Camus writes, “one day the ‘why’ arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement” (13). Camus later emphasizes the importance of “begins,” for this initial question, “why?” sparks the questioner’s journey into the absurd. This absurd realization occurs in Rabbit soon after

he ponders the “problem” of picking up his son and “feels sickened by the intricacy” of the requirement (Updike 15). Rabbit reaches his breaking point when Janice makes a mundane request as Rabbit leaves to gather the car and their child. After a brief argument, she “calls from the kitchen, ‘And honey pick up a pack of cigarettes, could you?’ in a normal voice that says everything is forgiven, everything is the same. Rabbit freezes, standing looking at his faint yellow shadow on the white door that leads to the hall, and senses he is in a trap. It seems certain. He goes out” (Updike 15). With the knowledge that his life will forever be a series of these tedious domestic concerns, Rabbit fully realizes and becomes absurd. Janice’s innocent request for cigarettes causes Rabbit to ask “why?” concerning his life. The petty argument, the messy house, and the mundane routine of it all, coupled with his remembrance of a time when his life had what he feels was real purpose and substance, engender the absurd within Rabbit. He becomes “weary” of his life, “amazed” that it has come this far in a direction he perhaps never intended.

His fears of the domestic “trap” swell when he contemplates the lives of his parents while walking to their home to retrieve Nelson. Rabbit recollects a typical suburban argument arising over a strip of grass between the houses of his parents and their neighbors, and he fears his life will be reduced to these trivial matters (Updike 18-20). So, instead of picking up his son and the car and returning home to Janice, Rabbit secretly makes off with the car and drives into the night, heading South toward Florida. Kyle Pasewark offers a potential motivation for Rabbit’s actions: “Rabbit requires of life what seemed possible in basketball – to be isolated and, therefore, free to be recognized as a star” (4). While Rabbit desires the glory basketball brought him, this reading of

Rabbit's motivations places too much importance on Rabbit no longer holding an esteemed place in society. Rabbit craves a better life for himself, but his conduct after abandoning his family does little to suggest that he wants to reclaim social admiration. Rather, his behavior stems from the absurd. Instead of attempting to be "recognized as a star," he often acts on pure instinct in trying to escape that absurdity, i.e., the "trap" of his domestic life. Related to these actions is Camus's further explication of the absurd: it is the "confrontation" between the realization that the world and one's life are irrational "and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart" (21). Rabbit believes he can solve this irrationality by rejecting his familial and social responsibilities; in starting fresh, he hopes to remake himself given his new perspective on life.

Much of the rest of the novel follows Rabbit's unsuccessful attempts to escape his absurd state. He seems to act on personal will alone, often disregarding the feelings of others entirely. These attempts are a form of fantasy, of which Žižek writes, "fantasy ... provides the co-ordinates of our desire – which constructs the frame enabling us to desire something ... through fantasy, we learn to desire" (118). After the subject conceives a lack, they must desire something which will then fill this lack. Žižek's thoughts on fantasy apply to this novel because in Rabbit's absurd state he must grapple with the issue of no longer having a structure within which to organize his life. Formerly his existence was very much representative of a typical, 1950s suburban male: married with children, holds a steady job, owns a house, etc. These traits are in themselves forms of fantasy, for they structure one's life, but they are socially acceptable fantasies. Rabbit's primary method of coping with the absurd – in this sense, the lack of structure in one's life – is to suppress it through decidedly different forms of fantasy; that is, after asking

Camus's "why?" he attempts to escape his absurdity through various types of desire largely alien to his former domestic existence. Camus believes this escape often takes the form of religion, and Rabbit seeks existential fulfillment by desiring a sense of religiosity different from what appears to be the norm in the social space of the novel. Additionally, Rabbit attempts to gratify himself through sex and an inflated sense of personal worth.

The novel offers a psychological source for the importance Rabbit places on sex. While Janice is in labor, Rabbit sits in the hospital waiting room reflecting on his past, specifically his basketball days and high school girlfriend:

Mary Ann. Tired and stiff and lazily tough after a game ... [h]e came to her as a winner and that's the feeling he's missed since. In the same way she was the best of them all because she was the one he brought most to, so tired. Sometimes the shouting glare of the gym would darken behind his sweat-burned eyes into a shadowed anticipation of the careful touchings that would come under the padded grey car roof ... the two kinds of triumph were united in his mind. She married when he was in the Army; a P.S. in a letter from his mother shoved him out from shore. (Updike 170-71)

The intervening years have done little to dim Rabbit's perception of his high school years as the best of his life, when he played great basketball and was adored. Evoking this memory, critic Lewis Lawson believes "his abandonment by Mary Ann initiated a sense of estrangement from a world of density, dryness, and discreteness ... Thereafter his life became a desperate attempt to get back on dry land by re-experiencing ontological assurance through the sexual act, seeking the certainty that he had lost" (233). With Mary Ann, Rabbit felt a sense of completeness that he has not since experienced. By seeking

sex with Ruth and Janice throughout the novel, Rabbit hopes to return to this halcyon period with Mary Ann when he was sure of his place in the world.

The above passage from the novel illustrates a key component of Žižek's psychoanalysis: "Fantasy conceals the fact that the Other, the symbolic Order, is structured around some traumatic impossibility, around something which cannot be symbolized" (123). So this Lacanian big Other, this abstract source of judgment and appraisal, is ultimately impossible to fully satisfy. Therefore not only are Rabbit's best memories in themselves incomplete, but also his subsequent fantasy – in this instance his desire for sex – further obfuscates this impossibility. He subconsciously structures a large part of his life around this sexual drive because he believes sex can "conceal" this past trauma – Mary Ann's abandoning him.

Rabbit's need for sex, however, only heightens his absurdity because sex, an ultimately futile implement in the face of the absurd, cannot provide a lasting sense of purpose. Rabbit, deciding his impulse to drive to Florida is unrealistic, returns to his hometown. After visiting his old coach, Marty Tothero, Rabbit spends much of the novel living with a woman named Ruth. She is a prostitute and, for a while, seems to find in Rabbit a sense of security and order. For Rabbit, Ruth fulfills his profound need to complete and define himself through the sexual act. Clinton Burhans Jr. argues that Rabbit turns "to sex as a selfish end in itself instead of as a means to giving love and pleasure to another" and "increasingly and desperately turns inward ... not giving but taking, not sharing but dominating" (157). Instead of viewing sex as a way to become physically intimate with someone he cares about, Rabbit uses it to gain a sense of meaning, to return to a time when he felt sure of who he was.

Because Rabbit utilizes sex for selfish reasons, it drives a wedge between him and the women he pursues sexually, which as a result further engenders his absurdity. Rabbit forces Ruth to perform oral sex, and his constant focus on sex produces a relationship that is never able to sustain itself. Rabbit's need for sex is part of the reason he abandons his family in the first place. When he returns home from the pickup basketball game, he feels that "Just yesterday ... [Janice] stopped being pretty ... her mouth has become greedy; and her hair has thinned" (Updike 8). Rabbit's need to suppress the absurd through fantasy prevents him from viewing Janice as anything more than a sexual object. Rabbit's destructive desire also appears when he returns to his family after the birth of his daughter, Rebecca. This return, however, does not occur because he loves and misses them but instead due to a sense of familial obligation and the urging of Reverend Eccles; Rabbit only appears to enjoy his time with his family briefly during a scene with his son, Nelson (Updike 193). Shortly after Janice arrives at home from the hospital, Rabbit attempts to coerce her into having sex (Updike 211-14). When Janice rejects him, Rabbit leaves once again. This second desertion causes Janice to spiral into a depression so deep she becomes drunk and accidentally drowns Rebecca in the bathtub. Thus, Rabbit's actions have a two-pronged effect: they both force a greater feeling of absurdity on his weary mind and also cause irreparable harm to those around him.

Additionally, Rabbit uses religion as a form of fantasy in an attempt to suppress the absurd. This structuring through fantasy is similar to what Rabbit does with sex, and Lawson posits, "The sexual act for Rabbit is analogous to the church; each represents an opening to reality ... a transcendent experience such as he feels at that moment exists elsewhere" (238). Rabbit needs the structure offered by religion if he hopes to effectively

suppress the absurd, and he feels threatened when Ruth says she does not believe in God. After Rabbit responds that he thinks he believes, “he wonders if he’s lying. If he is, he is hung in the middle of nowhere, and the thought hollows him” (Updike 78). He then sees church-goers on the street in their Sunday best, and “he clings to the thought giddily; it seems a visual proof of the unseen world” (78). In the face of the absurd, Rabbit feels he will be completely lost if he does not believe in something greater than himself.

Considering this need, Lawson argues, “[Rabbit] wants a religion in which all his decisions will be made for him by a Benevolent Dictator” (244). In his absurd state, caused in part by a profound uncertainty about the world and his place in it, Rabbit craves the presence and assurance of God because it is perhaps the only force with the capacity to pacify Rabbit’s absurdity.

In addition to this desire for an authoritarian God, Rabbit also searches for a sense of divinity within. He does everything in his power to cope with his absurdity, and he compensates for his feelings of doubt and anxiety with those of confidence and egotism. Remembering a radio newscast that reports that the Dalai Lama is missing (Updike 28), Rabbit tells himself that “He is the Dalai Lama” (Updike 45) and declares to Ruth: “I made you ... I made you and the sun and the stars” (94). That is, Rabbit believes that he is above Ruth even to the point of “creating” her; she may as well not exist without him. He suppresses the absurd with delusions of grandeur in the face of his ordinary, middle-class existence. Rabbit even obtains employment as a gardener, recreating himself as a modern Adam, returning to some idyllic fantasy of Eden until he is convinced to briefly return to his family due to Rebecca’s birth. But even during this homecoming, Rabbit still grapples with the absurd. He “hates all the people ... advertising their belief that the

world arches over a pit, that death is final, that the wandering thread of his feelings leads nowhere” (Updike 201). Rabbit views the people around him as corrupted and irreligious, and this reality threatens to undo everything he has done to suppress the absurd. He has to create a direction for “the thread of his feelings,” and he accomplishes this through self-aggrandizement.

This inflation of self seems to give Rabbit the freedom to disregard the feelings of others, an action which relates to the previously discussed sexual relationships which Rabbit uses for purely egotistical purposes. Speaking to Ruth, he says, ““When I ran from Janice I made an interesting discovery ... If you have the guts to be yourself, other people’ll pay your price” (Updike 129). His need to fantasize his way out the absurd leads to a sort of demoralization; he no longer feels bound by social norms that govern most people’s behavior. Camus, however, pushes back on this idea of absurd immorality. He argues, “The absurd does not liberate; it binds. It does not authorize all action” (67). The absurd does not excuse Rabbit’s behavior, it should merely open his eyes to the reality of the world. Camus continues, “All systems of morality are based on the idea that an action has consequences that legitimize or cancel it. A mind imbued with the absurd merely judges that those consequences must be considered calmly” (67). For Camus, the absurd should allow one to consider the reasoning of accepted morality. The absurd, then, ought to give Rabbit the ability to realize why he cannot value his pleasure above all else. The absurd individual needs to understand the necessity for morality in the first place, regardless of the existence of an omniscient God or any inherent meaning for human life. But given Rabbit’s place in life, he is not ready to fully grapple with the absurdity of his life, and he consequently reacts in a narcissistic manner.

Rabbit's failure to properly address the absurd is also partially due to the big Other, or society as a force that desires certain actions from the individual. A subject, such as Rabbit, wishes to both please and rebel against the big Other's desire. This desire is liberating, because it gives one something to strive for, and controlling, for it limits what one can desire in the first place. The big Other places this "mandate" upon the subject, who "does not know why he is occupying this place in the symbolic network" and subsequently asks, "'Why am I what I'm supposed to be?'" (Žižek 113). Rabbit, like this hypothetical subject, questions his place in the social order, thus leading to his alienation from his former social position.

The big Other is representative of many different aspects of the world outside the subject, but the important ones, especially for *Rabbit, Run*, are the social institutions and immediate society surrounding the subject. Rabbit's family and people like Reverend Eccles stand in for the big Other and attempt to place a mandate upon Rabbit, the subject, in an attempt to suppress his absurdity. The big Other's failure, Burhans posits, occurs because "Nowhere in [Rabbit's] milieu is there anything to help him find either positive goals or clear directions. The traditionally central institutions of the family, the school, and the church continue to function, but they have become empty or meaningless or corrupt" (156). They offer Rabbit none of the purpose which he craves. Their strategy of suppression is ineffective because an existential crisis of this magnitude cannot be forgotten about, which allows Rabbit to use and subsequently justify his forms of fantasy – sex, religion, and self-deification – as means for suppression.

Rabbit thus believes that the big Other can offer him no help in his absurd state, a feeling advanced by Rabbit's dawning disenchantment with authority figures, another

consequence of his absurd state and part of the reason he elevates his sense of self. Even though the father is typically one's primary authority figure, Rabbit's father is rarely mentioned, and this engenders a sense of longing for authority. It is therefore unsurprising when Rabbit tracks down his high school basketball coach, Marty Tothero, and briefly stays with him after first leaving Janice. Lawson, noting Rabbit's desire for capable authority figures, writes, "Since Rabbit attaches a kind of Paradisiac significance to his basketball days, Marty Tothero seems to have a kind of divine presence for Rabbit" (235). If Rabbit believes high school was a kind of Eden, then Tothero is a stand-in for God. Rabbit, however, is immediately shocked to find this father figure can offer him no guidance. On a double date, which first brings Rabbit and Ruth together, Tothero's date slaps him in response to his calling her a "tramp" (Updike 58), an event Rabbit characteristically perceives as emasculating. After viewing Tothero without nostalgic lenses, Rabbit believes Tothero can offer him nothing of substance, which leads to his relationship with Ruth.

Reverend Eccles, another authority figure, tries to act as something of a superego to Rabbit's troubled conscience and is more sympathetic to Rabbit than most. Brenner, in part because of Eccles's sympathy, goes so far as to label Eccles as "amateur psychologist" as well as "the extreme example of ineffectual authority" (4). By appealing to Rabbit's sense of morality and faith in God, Eccles believes he can make Rabbit understand that he should return to his former life. Because of this, he often mediates between Rabbit and the rest of his family. Eccles even grapples with similarly absurd issues signaled by Rabbit's perception that Eccles "wants to be told ... that he's not lying to all those people every Sunday" (Updike 115). Despite this hint of the absurd, Eccles

struggles to fully grasp Rabbit's absurd state, and asks Rabbit, "In what way do you think you're exceptional" (Updike 92). As a result, Rabbit rejects Eccles's advice concerning his marriage and pursues faith on his terms. During a game of golf with Eccles, Rabbit hits a great shot and proclaims, "That's it!" in answer to Eccles's earlier question concerning what Rabbit is searching for outside his marriage (Updike 114-16). Rabbit yearns for a sense of purpose which Eccles cannot understand, and, consequently, Eccles is, for Rabbit, merely another ineffectual mentor.

Because Rabbit cannot gain guidance from society at large, he seeks meaning within himself. Bernard Schopen contends that "this confrontation with the world ... forces Rabbit to turn inward for guidance" (530). This self-inflation offers Rabbit the clearest path out his absurdity, and by the end of the novel – when he again runs away from his family, this time at baby Rebecca's funeral – he seems to truly believe that he is above what life has so far afforded him; he thinks he can do better. Rabbit is so enmeshed in and deluded by his fantasy that he destroys any chance of returning to his former life. In front of the mourners, he proclaims that he is not responsible for Rebecca's death: it was Janice's fault. Gaining no sympathy, absolution, or validation from anyone at the funeral, he again runs (Updike 253). With no other recourse, he finds Ruth, now pregnant with Rabbit's child, and thus responds to her practical questions concerning their future together: "I don't know any of these answers. All I know is what feels right. You feel right to me. Sometimes Janice used to. Sometimes nothing does" (Updike 262). This final admission of uncertainty suggests a potential failure of the forms of fantasy Rabbit has utilized throughout the novel; but the novel's end implies that he will continue to use these forms of fantasy to an even greater extent because they have the potential, he

believes, to suppress the absurd. When Ruth also refuses to give Rabbit what he needs – when she does not assist in his efforts to suppress the absurd through fantasy – Rabbit runs from her as well. Unable to reach a reconciliation between his domestic, middle-class life and his absurd state, Rabbit chooses to dive into his fantasy, likely continuing to suppress the absurd through sex, religion, self-deification, and any other means available to him.

Rabbit tends to ignore Camus's warning that the absurd does not excuse all behavior. Interestingly, the novel neither advances a conservative agenda decrying the breakdown of family values nor praises Rabbit's sexual freedom and rejection of tradition. Instead, the novel, by exploring the thoughts and actions of an ordinary citizen who realizes that his life is not what he thought it was, suggests a broader, cultural issue for middle-class, white America. A modern reader notes, however, that with female characters such as Janice, Ruth, and Rabbit's mother, Updike seems uninterested in exploring any aspect of them that does not directly involve Rabbit. Patricia Lockwood, paraphrasing Barbara Probst Solomon, mentions Updike's "habit of painting women in his fiction, rather than inhabiting them" ("Malfunctioning Sex Robot"). The longest female-centered scene in the novel documents the consequences of Rabbit's actions on Janice, who apparently depends on Rabbit to such an extent that when he leaves she cannot cope and accidentally kills their child. Part of the limited presence of female characters stems from Rabbit's being the main character, but it also hints at the underlying misogyny apparent throughout Updike's oeuvre. Thus, Updike may push the reader to sympathize with Rabbit simply because the novel devotes itself to exploring Rabbit's motivations while doing little to challenge his deplorable actions. Still, the novel

remains a thought-provoking examination of post-war 1950s malaise, and Rabbit serves as an exemplary representation of Camus's concept of the absurd individual in 20th century American fiction.

CHAPTER THREE

Desperate Characters

Paula Fox's *Desperate Characters* documents a few days in the lives of Sophie and Otto Bentwood. Middle-aged Brooklynites, bourgeois and well-educated, they face an onslaught of crises over this short period of time. The novel tracks what these middle-class characters perceive as urban decay, suggests the general unrest in the U.S. during the Vietnam War, and hints at an ever-growing apathy in the America's white middle class. The text itself often steers away from advancing political or social agendas; instead, it illustrates the ways in which a certain part of society reacts to and grapples with social issues in the wake of the 1960s. The novel's desperate characters -- Sophie, Otto, as well as other members of New York's educated middle class -- are exemplary representations of Camus's concept of the absurd. Sophie, as the main character, has the most fully developed confrontation with the absurd. After a brush with mortality that haunts Sophie throughout the novel, the delicate seams of her life begin to unravel. Sophie then attempts to find an escape from this feeling, to create some sort of fantasy with which to suppress the absurd; but if such an escape exists, she cannot find or make use of it. One of the principal reasons for her failure is that many of those around her, the other members of her social group, seem occupied with a similar feeling. That is, the big Other – society – offers no consolation or escape for Sophie. There does not seem to be a conclusion for Sophie's struggles even at the novel's ambiguous conclusion – Sophie and Otto holding each other as their lives fall apart around them – leaving little hope for a reconciliation with her absurd state or even an effective fantasy with which her absurdity could be suppressed.

Sophie's absurdity begins in the novel's opening pages. She and Otto settle down for a routine dinner, and their lives together appear unremarkable. They have everything they require – Otto works as a lawyer and Sophie translates French literature – but lack passion. During this repast, a stray cat appears at the rear door, and Sophie, sympathetic to its hunger while Otto seems comfortable in his skin of cynicism, opens the door to offer milk to the animal. After allowing Sophie to pet it for a moment, the cat lunges and bites her hand so hard that it “[hangs] from her flesh” (Fox 25). Eventually, the cat removes its teeth and runs away, but Sophie initially conceals this incident from her husband and tells herself it is “nothing” (Fox 26). Martha Conway writes, “she would like to ignore the anarchy, just as she tries to ignore the bite on her arm, but cannot” (174). Conway's “anarchy” refers to the social tumult of the late 1960s hinted at throughout the novel, tumult which Sophie and those like her largely wish to avoid. But this cat bite causes Sophie to grapple with both the reality of the outer world and her mortality in ways she seems to have previously evaded. Sophie immediately feels the dread associated with an injury from a wild animal: she fears rabies. Sophie, of course, knows that there is a cure for rabies, but she fears the necessary vaccines and cannot seem to fully convince herself that she will not die from this bite. At the very least, this confrontation with a potentially life-threatening disease causes mortality to be a constant presence in her thoughts.

The cat bite and Sophie's subsequent fear of death act as catalysts which directly cause Sophie's absurdity. Camus writes that the absurd is the “incalculable tumble before the image of what we are, this ‘nausea,’ as the writer of today calls it” (15). That is, upon reflecting on the apparent reality of life as it exists divorced from a comprehensible God

or divine plan, the absurd individual feels their grip on reality slipping, calling into question the very structure of their life. However unlikely it is that she will contract rabies, Sophie nonetheless grapples with her mortality and the apparently arbitrary nature of her life. At one point Otto, unable to handle her insistent pessimism in the wake of being bitten, explodes and excoriates her apathy. Sophie persists, saying it is “‘what’s behind it that bothers [me]’” (Fox 174). She does not name it, but, from Otto’s despairing response that “‘There’s nothing behind anything,’” it seems that Sophie refers to what she perceives as the cold reality of the universe, a universe which appears predisposed to fill one’s life with senseless tragedy and strife. Contrasted with Otto’s belief in the universe’s indifference, Sophie seems to believe that the universe is not indifferent but almost malevolent, arguing, “‘But, by extension, everything you say could have come true! One more step, one more minute’” (Fox 175). Sophie is terrified by the tenuous nature of her existence; she feels that everything could come crashing down any minute.

This argument between Sophie and Otto implies that neither believes in a benevolent God, hinting at the lack of religion in their lives. At one point, Sophie thinks, “‘I have no pride, no resources, no religion, nothing’” (Fox 137). These thoughts suggest a lack of religion, if not a yearning for the meaning that religion may offer. Aside from this instance, religion is rarely mentioned in the novel, and none of the characters seems even remotely pious, perhaps exacerbating their feelings that the universe is either malicious or simply indifferent. This religious absence perhaps belongs to the period in which the novel was written, just a few years after the infamous *Time* magazine cover asking, “‘Is God Dead?’” Thus, the characters cannot turn to religion for answers, and Sophie’s existential absurdity worsens.

Desperate Characters also extends traces of this absurd state to the people surrounding Sophie, including her husband. Otto does not grapple with the absurd to the same extent as Sophie, or at least, if he does, the novel does not concern itself with documenting his struggle in depth. However, Otto undergoes a crisis of his own when his law partner, Charlie, leaves their practice. This departure is particularly troubling for Otto, who, as Irving Howe writes, “wants to draw a tight, modest circle of order in his life” (29). Charlie’s reasons for leaving hinge on his belief that he is a man of the people, committed to helping the disadvantaged. Alternatively, Otto has little time for the underprivileged. Evoking the sentiments of Otto, Sophie, and others like them, the narrator comments, “What the owners of the street [where Sophie and Otto live] lusted after was recognition of their superior comprehension of what counted in this world” (Fox 32). This need to feel superior is contrasted with the impoverished inhabitants of homes on a neighboring block. Otto complains, “I watched a colored man kick over a trash basket yesterday. When it rolled out into the street, he put his hands on his hips and roared with laughter” (Fox 33). While Otto’s inclusion of the man’s skin color seems partly motivated by racism, his reaction essentially illustrates that he is distrustful of anyone who does not occupy the same space of middle class, well-educated privilege as himself. Otto’s pessimism concerning the state of the world stems primarily from a perceived threat from the lower class; he believes they are encroaching on the bourgeois structures within which his life is formed, such as his gentrified neighborhood, the outward cleanliness of both himself and his surroundings, and the sanctity of the law.

Additionally, many people whom Otto and Sophie encounter throughout the novel exemplify absurd traits, hinting at a larger social condition permeating their bourgeois

culture. These characters include the lawyer Charlie, as well as a host of other intellectuals, such as lawyer Mike Holstein, an unnamed playwright at Mike's house-party, and a disaffected professor called Leon. They all evoke a sense of the social, political, or creative lethargy which implies that these characters, while not undergoing an absurd crisis like Sophie, are perhaps near the tipping point; their lives are likely just as tenuous as hers, and their own absurd tumble is perhaps imminent. Otto says that Mike "[suffers] from culture desperation" and is "like one of those movie starlets who announces she's studying philosophy at U.C.L.A." (Fox 36). Mike finds little satisfaction in the banality of a traditional law practice, so he represents unconventional clients such as "writers and painters" (36). The unnamed playwright announces that "We [the bourgeoisie] are all of us dying of boredom ... That is the why of the war, the why of the assassinations, the why of why. Boredom" (Fox 39). Leon, once hoping that political change could facilitate a better world, laments that he did not "see socialism in the United States in [his] lifetime" (Fox 110). These characters have their fingers on the pulse of the bourgeois experience, and they are all discontented by their individual and collective failure to imbue their lives with a sense of meaning.

This social class grapples with these issues to this extent perhaps because they seem to understand the world for what it is; the characters are perhaps too informed for their own good. Sophie and Otto are clearly well-educated, as evidenced by their decidedly intellectual careers. The other characters who populate the novel are similarly educated, up to date on the latest trends in thought and culture. Bruce Bassoff contends, "Fox's characters suffer from the ... sense that real existence is somehow elsewhere and that their acts have no real consequences" (36-7). Although their educations, and the

accompanying leisure time afforded by economic comfort, have made them informed citizens, they seem either unwilling or unable to affect change. Sophie's one attempt to reach out and help – the incident with the cat – leaves her in a state of existential crisis. These intellectuals do not run for office, work for a nonprofit, or create art in a Nietzschean attempt to imbue life with meaning. Rather, they are so apathetic that they can do little but reflect on the world and how it has come to exist in its current state, leading Conway to write that “the Bentwoods are remarkable for their impotence” (174). The irony of their situation is their ignorance of the fact that they too are contributing to society's apparent destruction by doing nothing to mitigate its apparent regression.

This bourgeois ineffectuality also stems from the culture in which they exist and their relationship to it. The novel emphasizes its Nixon-era New York setting through detailed descriptions of physical locations and occasional references to important social and political events. Sophie and Otto encounter Mike Holstein's son, also named Mike, at the party, and Sophie asks Otto: ““Did you notice how young Mike behaved? How he looked? Did you see that Hungarian ribbon around his forehead, or folk art ribbon, or whatever it was?”” (Fox 50). This critique of the younger generation's fashion choices suggests a disconnect between Sophie and Otto and the younger, countercultural generation. Young Mike's “folk art” and Sophie's perplexed reaction hints at a sharply divided culture. Her statements also support Bassoff's argument that the novel exists “In a culture which trivializes ideals by the sheer weight of its material means and which also turns ideals into fads” (47). Young Mike is a college student in New York, likely going along with the “fad” hippie movement of the late 1960s, while Sophie “trivializes” his appearance, part of the “ideal” of the hippie persona. Thus, Sophie propagates her

bourgeois social, political, and cultural apathy by mocking Mike's potentially earnest countercultural statement. This derision allows her and those like her to perpetuate their weary ineffectuality while conditioning the younger generation to eventually do the same when they have taken their parents' place in society.

Sophie's absurdity also springs from her lack of certitude about her life and her place in the world as well as her unique awareness of these issues. The cat bite acts as the catalyst which allows her to exist outside of her life, able to view it from an alienated, somewhat objective perspective. As the novel further elucidates details of Sophie's psyche, it becomes apparent that the cat bite is but the climax in a long series of events leading to Sophie's absurdity. In addition to this possible contraction of rabies, Sophie feels, in Žižek's terms, that she cannot understand what the big Other wants, and consequently cannot give herself some viable "mandate" with which to satisfy the big Other (Žižek 113). Žižek argues that this breakdown occurs due to the "incapacity of the subject to fulfill the symbolic identification" (113). That is, the subject yearns for this symbolic identification in order to know their place in the world. Sophie, however, feels alienated from the people around her as well as any material or intellectual structures that formerly instilled in her a sense of purpose.

Part of Sophie's particularly troubled relationship with the big Other stems from her problematic relationship with her parents, the all-important authority figures who structure one's childhood. She confides in Charlie, Otto's up-to-now partner, that her father "shot himself with an Italian pistol" (Fox 67). This detail, although mentioned just once, reinforces the notion that Sophie is off balance; it is clearly not common practice for her to discuss trauma of this nature with a casual acquaintance. Additionally,

Sophie's mother lives in California, and their communication is limited to the occasional letter which always seems to fail in conveying much of anything, making Sophie feel that "she, Sophie, had no life at all" (Fox 66). Thus, Sophie can find no consolation in or guidance from her family; an integral piece of her past is useless to her.

Sophie's alienation applies also to her relationship with Otto. Their marriage, though seemingly stable, is profoundly mundane. The apparent banality of their relationship is shaken, however, by Sophie's newfound absurdity. After a brief argument at a party the night Sophie is bitten, Sophie feels something she has not previously encountered. The narrator remarks, "[Sophie and Otto] had averted what was ordinary; they had felt briefly the force of something original, unknown, between them. Even as she tried to name it, it was dissolving, and he left her suddenly just as she had forgotten what she was trying to remember" (Fox 40). This passage illustrates the infrequency of true contact between Sophie and Otto and hints at a potential shift in the nature of their relationship due to Sophie's absurdity. But this unique, transcendent moment is temporary, and their relationship seems to revert back to its normal state. Evoking the nature of the Bentwood's marriage, Douglas Kennedy goes so far as to argue that the "novel speaks volumes about the loneliness at the heart of the domestic contract" (2). This appraisal is illustrated by the fact that Sophie does not find solace from her troubles in Otto but instead internalizes much of her struggle. At one point Sophie even feels she has "misplaced Otto" (Fox 117), temporarily forgetting that he has any effect on her life. Indeed, upon fearing that her death may be imminent, she does not worry about how the situation will affect Otto, how profound his grief would be if his wife's life were in danger. Instead, Sophie worries about herself, largely internalizing her anxieties or

seeking comfort elsewhere, and, given the state of their relationship, her behavior is unsurprising. Sophie finds in Otto neither escape from the absurd nor any sort of meaningful symbolic mandate. Her marriage is unable to provide her life with the structure she craves in her absurdity.

Consequently, Sophie, hoping to suppress her absurdity, attempts to provide some structure to her life through fantasy. Concerning Sophie's troubles, Jonathan Franzen writes:

Sophie flees from one potential haven to another, and each in turn fails to protect her. She goes to a party with Otto, she sneaks out with Charlie, she buys herself a present, she seeks comfort in old friends, she reaches out to Charlie's wife, she tries to phone her old lover, she agrees to go to the hospital, she catches the cat, she takes to bed, she tries to read a French novel, she flees to her beloved country house, she thinks about moving to another time zone, she thinks about adopting children, she destroys an old friendship: nothing brings her relief. (12)

Sophie searches everywhere for some sort of fantasy in an attempt to cope with and suppress her absurdity. Sophie mines relationships with old friends in an attempt to find the fantasy which is not provided in her family life. She seems close to Claire, wife of socialist Leon, and even confides, "I'm depressed by my idleness, I guess" (Fox 115). But Sophie leaves Claire's apartment without feeling she has connected with Claire or communicated anything of herself: "filled with foreboding and sadness ... her good-bye to Claire was almost inaudible" (Fox 117). Another acquaintance, Tanya, calls to inform Sophie of her life's recent events. The comfort with which Tanya launches into the minute details of her affairs indicates that this is not an uncommon practice, but Sophie

no longer cares. She interrupts, ““Don’t you know how dumb you are? You think because somebody’s husband sticks it in you, that you’ve won! You poor dumb old collapsed bag! Who are you kidding!”” (Fox 187). Sophie lashes out at Tanya’s personal fantasy – having an affair with a married man and believing he would leave his wife for her – perhaps jealous of Tanya’s ability to structure her life around this possibility. Sophie views Tanya’s fantasy as merely a delusion, but her outburst likely occurs because she yearns for a fantasy as effective as Tanya’s.

Sophie experiences further failed attempts at fantasy in her work as a translator. Camus, outlining possible coping mechanisms of the absurd individual, writes, “All existence for a man turned away from the eternal is but a vast mime under the mask of the absurd. Creation is the great mime” (94). Similar to Nietzsche’s beliefs about art, Camus posits that the most effective use of the absurd individual’s time is to express themselves through creation. Before Sophie’s tumble into the absurd, she took part in the creation of works of art, translating works of literature from French to English. Friend Mike Holstein even requests that Sophie recite a passage from poet Charles Baudelaire (Fox 42). But Sophie encounters difficulty with her translations from the novel’s start, and her absurdity finally shatters any meaning she once found in creating an original work of art. This loss of creativity reaches its climax when Tanya phones late in the novel. Sophie remembers that the two met when “Sophie was still caught up with translations,” and Tanya “worked then, and still did, for a French news agency” (Fox 186-7). So, when Sophie castigates Tanya’s way of life in an attempt to ruin this friendship, it corresponds with a wish in Sophie to ultimately terminate the creative part

of her life because it no longer serves its structuring function; it cannot provide an adequate sense of fantasy for her absurd life.

Given the many avenues down which Sophie pursues fantasy, the novel also hints that perhaps Sophie's attempts to suppress the absurd will ultimately prove futile. The novel devotes a chapter to Sophie's affair which, though morally questionable, at least illustrates an attempt by Sophie to escape from the boredom of her life. While this affair occurred before Sophie's plunge into the absurd, it is doubtless a previous attempt at fantasy as Sophie first began to question her life. But this attempt ended with Sophie being rejected by her lover, and Sophie believes that, even if she had left Otto, she and her lover "would have tired of each other, gone trundling down the worn ruts of sexual boredom and habit, it didn't matter. She had chosen him at a late moment in her life, when choices were almost hypothetical" (Fox 86). In this moment of reflection midway through the novel, Sophie questions if she even retains the will to fantasize. This tragic instance of Sophie's apathy illustrates a key point in Camus's philosophy. While he advocates for acceptance of the absurd, this acceptance does not permit apathy. He famously writes, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (123). That is, the absurd individual – Sisyphus in Camus's example being the supreme example of absurdity – must accept the reality of their life and, in spite of everything, continue. But Sophie can neither accept her absurdity nor find a fantasy potent enough to suppress the absurd. For Sophie, the absurd does not represent an opportunity to see the world as it is, embrace this reality, and continue with her life. Instead, the novel diagnoses Sophie, and perhaps her bourgeois class, with a way of life that is both absurd and hopeless.

Consequently, the novel's ambiguous ending leaves little hope for Sophie or anyone else. If Sophie was so close to plunging into the absurd this whole time, as the novel hints at in its depiction of her marriage, social life, alienated work, etc., it seems only a matter of time until those around her reach their respective breaking points. From the novel's perspective, Sophie does not seem an isolated incident or an exception to the rule. Rather, Sophie is but one of many people in the bourgeois class of 1970s New York who feel that the world and their place in it are changing for the worse. This hopeless mood leads Kennedy to posit, "Disappointment and existential despair loom everywhere" in the novel (1). But the text does not feel compelled to name the primary causes of these symptoms, for they are difficult to articulate on a social or cultural level. It could be, as in Otto's case, a perceived threat from lower classes and the growing place for minorities in a changing country; after all, to those with privilege, equality feels like persecution. Alternatively, Leon, who dreamed of U.S. socialism, seems to originate his disaffection in political and economic conditions. Perhaps the unnamed playwright said it best: boredom. That is, perhaps little is left for this class of people now that religion, art, and community no longer seem to provide the necessary answers. The novel is not entirely without hope, though: Sophie and Otto are left holding each other at the novel's close, providing a small but significant silver lining.

The novel's ending places the reader in a position similar to that of Sophie, Otto, and the rest of the characters who populate the novel. Instead of illustrating a possible avenue out of the despair that Camus believes should follow the absurd, the novel suggests that, for a certain part of the population, there is no way out. Along these lines, Malcolm Bradbury contends that "One motif of the Sixties [novel] was ... a new, self-

examining hyper-realism which drew the novelist towards reportage” (159). *Desperate Characters* follows suit by documenting the thoughts and experiences of its characters rather than philosophizing about the original causes and possible departures from this milieu. Camus would likely praise the characters for their unintentional ability to stave off forms of elusion from the absurd -- those attempts at fantasy which Sophie pursues without success, much to her dismay. Sophie, however, is unable to overcome despair after her realization that the universe is either indifferent to her existence or even malicious toward it. Thus, the novel demonstrates a case of the absurd in which the absurd individual undergoes a realization of their absurd existence but, instead of pursuing this newfound freedom with vigor and hope, wallows in existential despair.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Rules of Attraction

Bret Easton Ellis's *The Rules of Attraction* (ROA) follows a small group of students at a fictional liberal arts college in New England. Though often "dismissed as Ellis's weakest novel, reduced to a campus novel about sex, drugs, and the death of rock 'n' roll" (Colby 31), the novel actually draws attention to these details and their function in the daily lives of its characters to highlight a cultural apathy present in 1980s youth. In *ROA*, the traumas endured by the Baby Boomers seem to engender feelings of apathy in their children. This apathy and its accompanying meaninglessness and alienation signify the absurdity of their lives. That is, the young adults of Ronald Reagan's America grapple with Camus's concept of the absurd at an earlier age and to a more extreme extent than previously documented in the country's literature. This absurd state, no longer confined to a few select characters, seems to have spread through a significant part of the population.

However, privileged students from an elite private college cannot be taken to represent society at large. Javier Martín Párraga notes these unique circumstances of the wealthy: "those individuals who enjoy absolute economic wealth feel the anxieties of deprivation since they can no longer aspire to anything genuinely valuable" (6). Still, the lack of hope present in these students at a time in their lives assumed to be so full of possibility and experience hints at a troubling presentiment with far-reaching consequences. Furthermore, these characters completely lack any kind of adequate fantasy with which to suppress the absurd. Their absurdity is such an intrinsic part of their existence that it precludes any possibility of escape. They admit fantasy's futility

and wallow in their existential ennui, unable to imbue their lives with any trace of purpose.

ROA possesses little semblance of a narrative that drives the action; rather, it consists of a series of episodes depicting quotidian events in its protagonists' lives. One reviewer of the novel even argues that "scoring (drugs and assorted sexual partners) seems to be everyone's favorite pursuit" (Kakutani). Kakutani continues, writing that the reader is "left to echo [the characters'] own refrain: 'it's all so boring.'" In tandem with the novel's unusual structure, or lack thereof, the three central characters – Sean, Lauren, and Paul – rarely appear in the same scene unless they happen to attend the same party, but even in these arbitrary instances the trio never interacts as a whole. Sean serves as the connective tissue for the group, as he dates both Paul and Lauren at different times. This lack of narrative sequence and connection among the protagonists, while perhaps atypical in most literature, illustrates the listless, wayward state of these characters.

These characters exemplify absurd symptoms from the novel's start, but there is no world-shattering catalyst that plunges them into feelings of existential isolation. Instead, their absurdity seems intrinsic; it is a seemingly inescapable piece of their identity as privileged citizens in this late-capitalist era. The novel begins mid-sentence, plunging the reader into a first-person account of events leading to a sexual assault. The anonymous narrator is a first-year student who attends a party and, "desperate" to lose her virginity (Ellis 4), goes to bed with a random party-goer but is not sure who assaulted her once she awakes the next morning. She thinks, "'I always knew it would be like this'" (Ellis 7). Párraga asserts, "The reaction of this character to her rape, to the pain inflicted on her in a cruel and inhuman manner, is ... absolute indifference" (33). It is difficult,

however, to deduce the character's "absolute indifference" considering the fact that Ellis does not seem compelled to fully examine the psychological reality of someone who has undergone such extreme trauma; the reader does not encounter this character for the rest of the novel. Still, the character's admission of knowing it would turn out this way signifies an apathy immediately identifiable as a sign of the absurd. *ROA*'s opening in this manner also suggests the apparently quotidian nature of stories such as these in this environment. This story, though shocking, seems far from unique in the world of the novel.

After this brief opening section, *ROA* continues in the same monologue driven prose with each chapter distinguished by the narrator's name, the primary speakers being Sean, Lauren, and Paul. Colby argues, "The expectation of further character development following the name is frustrated by the novel merely constituting a series of narrative voices that are indistinguishable apart from the fact of these referents" (36). These characters do not have unique voices, thoughts, or encounters that differentiate them from each other. If their names did not appear at each chapter's start, it would often be difficult to tell Sean, Lauren, and Paul apart. Though they may be considered the protagonists of the novel, their prominence fosters little change or growth as characters. Párraga contends that "the novel's style echoes the characters' angst, which is equally chaotic and fluctuating" (31). These characters have no precise identity to separate themselves from myriad other mentioned students who seem almost identical to them. Colby goes so far as to label these characters as "subjects" to signify their near complete lack of individuality (25). For Colby, their flatness does not justify their being termed "characters," a moniker which implies a certain level of development and individuality. This apparent

shortcoming in the novel, or what Colby calls Ellis's tendency to "underwrite" (24), indicates a superficial, empty existence void of meaning or purpose. Camus predicts this ubiquitous absurdity, writing that "the conditions of modern life impose upon the majority of men the same quantity of experiences and consequently the same profound experience" (61). The novel's 1980s setting perhaps engenders the presence of uniformity to a particularly extreme extent. Thus, the flatness of these characters and their lack of change throughout the novel further suggest the absurdity of their lives.

The characters' uniformity is in part a symptom of their existence in the social and economic conditions of late capitalism present in 1980s consumer culture. The absence of character development evokes Fredric Jameson's concepts of the "death of the subject" and the "waning of affect" in postmodern art, specifically literature. Robert T. Tally describes these concepts:

Where once the supposedly superficial or formal element could be said to reflect a core meaning in the individual self, this increasingly appears to be impossible, since for all practical purposes such a psychologically enclosed self no longer exists. At the level of culture itself, this loss of self is typified by the evanescence of a sense of historicity, most noteworthy in the perceived lack of either memory or hope. (93)

In a society driven by Reaganomics and the production and sale of capital, there is no place for individual identity. The fact that the reader can only tell Sean, Lauren, and Paul apart by the chapter headings illustrates the degree to which these characters personify the postmodern "loss of self." This homogeneity also reflects the theories of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who, conceptualizing late capitalism in a way similar to

Jameson, contend, “culture now impresses the same stamp on everything” (730). This lack of individuality is present throughout the novel as characters continually mistake one person for another. Lauren, trying to identify someone, says, “‘It’s probably the Freshman, Sam’” and her friend replies “‘His name’s Steve’” (Ellis 157). The most likely scenario seems to be that both are wrong in this world of late capitalist homogeneity.

Ellis further hints at the roots of the characters’ absurdity by detailing the protagonists’ troubled interactions with their parents in several scenes. At one point Paul travels to Boston to spend the weekend with his mother, a childhood friend named Richard, and Richard’s mom, Mimi. They stay at the Ritz-Carlton, and Paul notices that his mother and family-friend Mimi have brought eight suitcases between them for the two day visit. Their dialogue indicates that the parents and their respective children have nothing to discuss beyond shallow gossip and chit chat, causing Paul to think, “Just pretend she’s not crazy and things will go smoothly” (Ellis 151). Later at dinner, Richard actively tries to upset his mother, telling a joke shocking in its inclusion of explicit sexual detail, racism, and misogyny, provoking her to ask, “‘What has happened to you?’” (Ellis 168). This scene and others similar in nature illustrate a fundamental disconnect between these generations beyond the usual parent-child antagonisms. Near utter alienation from their parents suggests that these characters cannot seek refuge from their absurdity in their families, further engendering feelings of hopelessness.

The novel also includes a brief chapter from Paul’s mother’s point-of-view, demonstrating that her and Mimi’s coping mechanisms differ little from that of their children. She narrates, “Mimi had two more vodka Collins ... [and] took a valium and went to sleep” (Ellis 174). Paul and the rest of his generation clearly acquired their drug

habits from their parents, indicating a larger presence of apathy among the upper class. The novel does not specifically track potential catalysts for this absurd feeling, but the characters clearly live absurd lives. Concerning the origins of the absurd, Camus writes, “I don’t know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it. What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me?” (51). Both generations depicted in *ROA* seem to believe that the world possesses no inherent meaning, and consequently they spend much of their lives in a state of apathetic defeat.

The novel implies that the older generation and their children underwent profound trauma due to the Vietnam War and subsequent cultural malaise. Ellis includes as an epigraph a passage from Tim O’Brien’s *Going After Cacciato* (1978): “The facts ... still did not have real order. Events did not flow” (vii). Ellis’s choice of author emphasizes the novel’s post-Vietnam setting and, considering this attention to Vietnam, it is useful to consider Malcolm Bradbury’s description of the relationship between postmodern literature and its treatment of war. He argues, “history is seen not as a haunting progress, but as a landscape of lunacy and pain” (158). Ellis doubtless conforms to this broad portrayal of postmodernism, and *ROA* contains several references to landmark events of the 1960s and their consequences. One character, Marc, while shooting heroin, states, “John F. Kennedy did it He screwed it up ... our mothers were pregnant with us when we ... I mean, he ... was blown away in ‘64 and that whole incident ... screwedthingsup” (Ellis 24). Hinting at the turbulence of 1968 – a year in which progressive heroes Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Francis Kennedy were assassinated, the Vietnam War escalated, and Richard Nixon took control of the White House – Marc ponders, “Jesus ...

think if you had a brother who was born in '69 or something ... They'd be ... fucking bonkers" (24). Marc's statements evoke a sense of "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder" as "a sociopolitical category" (Colby 30), a classification which signals a cultural sense of distress and apathy that permeates the novel.

Furthermore, the failure of the Baby Boomers and the progressive movements of the 1960s and 1970s to institute lasting economic and social changes – as evidenced by the election of Ronald Reagan, the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment, and the continuation of the morally and ethically dubious War on Drugs – engenders a feeling of ineffectuality in the young people of the 1980s. Early in *ROA* a character notices "a big poster of Reagan that someone had drawn a mustache and sunglasses on" (Ellis 3). Outside of this example, however, the novel rarely references political or social matters because the characters do not find them meaningful. In tandem with this political estrangement, Colby argues that the novel "can be read as mourning the losses and literary and cultural tradition suffered by 1980s culture" (31). The speakers often note the music playing at parties and in dorm rooms, everything from Talking Heads to R.E.M., and Sean steals someone's copy of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. However, the characters fail to recognize these cultural artifacts as meaningful pieces of a "cultural tradition"; Sean never seems to read the novel, and characters often confuse musical artists in their narration (Ellis 13), thus reducing art to empty allusion. Together, these conditions lead the novel's college students, a group usually devoted to politics and art, to be completely alienated from these potential outlets for their existential angst.

The characters' absurdity also stems in part from a profound sense of alienation. Ellis's characters never successfully communicate or share themselves with another

person. This lack of communication manifests itself partly in the apparent intellectual vacuum of the campus. Sean, signaling his belief that 1980s culture is completely vapid, thinks that “a typical Freshman question” consists of something like “Is there life after WHAM?” (Ellis 29). That is, Sean believes Freshman emphasize the importance of transient pop groups, implying a stunning lack of culture or social awareness.

Alternatively, when Lauren convinces Sean to accompany her and several other students in visiting a retiring professor at his home, Sean seems threatened by their academic discussion as well as the professor’s apparent feelings for Lauren (Ellis 223-5). Sean feels alienated from this intellectual discussion – a potential means of truly conveying a sense of his identity to other people – and is unable to communicate with Lauren or anyone else at the gathering. The absurdity of these characters is such that they cannot find intellectual stimulation on a college campus.

Another aspect of this ubiquitous alienation concerns the tendency of many characters to distance themselves from otherwise serious topics through irony and gallows humor. This proclivity demonstrates Žižek’s conception of cynicism, or “the popular, plebeian rejection of the official culture by means of irony and sarcasm ... to confront the pathetic phrases of the ruling official ideology – it’s solemn, grave tonality – with everyday banality and to hold them up to ridicule” (29). These characters, in their absurd states, maintain a certain distance from dominant social ideologies, and, correspondingly, mock much of the bourgeois ideology which society presents to them. However, this distance is in itself an ideology, suggesting that any attempt at fantasy is futile. At several points Sean talks to acquaintances in the common area, where in one instance they make a “blacklist” of people they hate (Ellis 29). This list includes, among

many others, “anyone who comes to breakfast who hasn’t stayed up all night” as well as “Boys who can’t hold their liquor” (Ellis 29-30). Since their criteria are so broad and arbitrary as to incorporate much of the student body, this list compounds their alienation by actively isolating them from the majority of their peers.

This cynical distancing, then, acts as a kind of defense mechanism, deflecting potential discussions of serious issues that may prompt critical thinking or suggest a sense of personal identity. Further examples of these humorous and ironic tendencies include scenes in which Sean and his friends crack abortion jokes (Ellis 42), Paul mourns the death of a made-up best friend to appear vulnerable (84), and Sean and another friend laugh off a student’s suicide (203). This avoidance of serious issues allows the characters to go through their lives without having to genuinely communicate with others. By never presenting a genuine version of themselves, they close off their inner lives to any potential companions who may instill in them a sense of community and shared experience and thus provide a sense of hope in their absurdity.

This cynicism also allows them to participate in a revolt against society’s dominant ideology which would of course discourage jokes about abortion and suicide. Camus labels revolt as “one of the only coherent philosophical positions” and “a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity ... devoid of hope,” “the certainty of a crushing fate” (54). In the face of insignificance and eventual oblivion, Camus believes that, instead of submitting to apathy, people must accept these conditions and live their lives as best they can. So, when Sean and his friends laugh about abortion and suicide and Paul invents dead friends to appear vulnerable, they confront their “obscurity,” attempting to accept feelings of significance and meaninglessness by mocking their

conditions of existence. But, as noted in the above “blacklist” example, their attempts at revolt tends to incite greater feelings of alienation by forcing them to discuss issues they find meaningless instead of attempting to create meaningful dialogues with other people. This version of revolt does not, as Camus thinks revolt should, give them an adequate escape from absolute apathy. These characters remain too enmeshed in their absurdity to use this simple means of revolt, and they remain hopeless.

Their abject despair also arises from the failure of these characters to pursue meaningful forms of fantasy. Religion and any sense of higher purpose, which Camus believes people often seek when confronted with the absurd, are entirely absent from the novel. This lack of religion perhaps signals the extent to which these characters internalize the absurd; it does not occur to them to find meaning through religion. Likewise, they do not find purpose in any sort of social or political objective. Evoking the political movements of the 1960s, David Harvey notes that students “demanded freedom from parental, educational, corporate, bureaucratic and state constraints” (qtd. in Colby 30). But the only form protest takes in *ROA* consists of the above-quoted scenes depicting children rebelling against their parents and social mores. These acts of rebellion, however, are not substantial enough to provide the characters with a sense of meaning.

Elsewhere, these absurd characters encounter difficulty in trying to convey a sense of their emotional states to those around them. Colby examines the craft employed in evoking this alienation:

Ellis highlights the isolation of the subjects narratologically through his use of the monologue, trapping the reader within the confines of his first-person narratives. The monologue, by virtue of its single voice, becomes symptomatic of the

subject's state of detachment, textually realizing the subject's cognitive cartography that alienates them from a wider global world. *The Rules of Attraction* ... further[s] this alienation by being composed of a collection of multiple monologues. (35-36)

This simple narrative device imposes limitations on the characters' ability to relate to each other. As a result, Sean, Lauren, and Paul struggle to identify what the Other desires, thus blocking their ability to properly fantasize. Žižek writes that "we try to fill out the unbearable gap of ... the opening of the Other's desire, by offering ourselves to the Other as the object of its desire" (116). The subject attempts to please the big Other by appearing desirable and worthy of love. But this offering cannot occur when, as in *ROA*, the usual fantasized communication with the big Other -- fantasized communication which usually guides one's desires -- is absent. Sean, Lauren, and Paul's isolation is so extreme as to preclude any kind of recognition of what the big Other may desire from them. They are not, however, anxious concerning this lack of fantasy; they simply despair because they seem unable to conceptualize a sense of fantasy in the first place.

Ellis places this failure of communication at the center of many interactions between the novel's characters. Colby notes of this pattern and argues, "That the depersonalized subjects cannot connect to their exterior world or to one another on any kind of psychologically intimate level ... testifies to the lack of social relations between the subjects within the apparent social collective" (36). In the few instances in which characters reach out to others, they are mocked and rejected. For example, this line in a scene from Lauren's perspective: "'I want to know you,' Sean whines" (Ellis 260). Lauren's interpretation of Sean's seemingly impassioned plea indicates the futility of

vulnerability and communication in this environment. Furthermore, stream-of-consciousness driven passages detail the feelings of an unnamed woman infatuated with Sean as she yearns to reveal her feelings: “Wait for that moment. A moment so filled with such expectance and longing that I almost do not want to witness its occurrence” (Ellis 142). But after failing to disclose these feelings to Sean at a party (Ellis 181), she commits suicide (194). Sean is never aware of her or her feelings for him, and, after hearing about the suicide, laughs and attributes the cause of her suicide to a lack of sex (Ellis 203). This social atmosphere punishes those with the audacity to appear vulnerable and connect with others, intensifying their isolation and in extreme cases leading to suicide.

The breakdown in communication also partially explains the characters’ narcissistic hedonism: if there is no big Other around which to structure one’s desire, there is only oneself left to gratify. This gratification takes the form of the sex, drugs, and alcohol which litter the pages of the novel. The characters depend on these excesses to such an extent that there is rarely a page without reference to at least one of them, but more often than not all three appear in some form. Fittingly, Ellis introduces each main character at a party which they all attend. Sean drinks beer, reflects on a drug deal from earlier in the day, and “end[s] up going home” with a random woman (Ellis 9). Paul also consumes a great deal of alcohol in addition to smoking marijuana and going to a woman’s room hoping to have sex. The girl says, “‘I really like you,’ ... before she passe(s) out,” at which point Paul responds that he likes her too, “even though he barely [knows] her” and leaves (Ellis 12-13). Finally, Lauren drinks and has sex with a stranger, but during intercourse she thinks about her boyfriend, Victor, who is travelling in Europe

(Ellis 16). Interestingly, this travelling boyfriend is as close as Lauren comes to fantasy in the novel. He does not remember her (Ellis 263-4), but Lauren consistently tells herself that they love each other. The lack of communication between them, however, gnaws at her (Ellis 296), and this insubstantial fantasy proves futile. With no other recourse, Lauren, like Sean and Paul, consumes great quantities of drugs and alcohol throughout the novel.

The immediate presence and subsequent ubiquity of drugs and meaningless sex highlight the emptiness of these hedonistic pursuits; they provide no escape from the characters' absurdity. Instead, the characters' lack of enthusiasm even in pursuit of sex, drugs, and alcohol illustrates the insignificance of these actions. This behavior does not imbue their lives with a sense of purpose but simply passes the time, perhaps engendering an even greater feeling of absurdity. Toward the end of the novel, Sean and Lauren drive through New England, doing cocaine in their hotel rooms as they go from town to town with no purpose (Ellis 302-5). This road trip, like all their attempts at escape, ends in despair when Lauren undergoes an abortion (Ellis 306). If the two had anything upon which to base a relationship, then this escape could have fulfilled the fantasy function. But they lack both identity and desire, and their trip, like everything else they do, ends in despair.

Camus hints at despair throughout *The Myth of Sisyphus*, as it seems a natural reaction to an absurd life. He writes, "Thinking of the future, establishing aims for oneself, having preferences – all this presupposes a belief in freedom," but "that freedom to be, which alone can serve as basis for a truth, does not exist. Death is there as the only reality" (Camus 57). That is, people naturally respond to the beliefs that life is

meaningless and death signals ultimate oblivion by deciding to not set goals or believe in the future. The characters of *ROA* seem stuck in this particular state of absurdity. Sean, for example, attempts suicide twice (Ellis 240, 245), Lauren casually relates the details of a friend's suicide attempt (265), and a woman with feelings for Sean commits suicide (194). Their conditions of existence are such that they do not hope for anything beyond fleeting hedonism. Camus, however, believes that one must move beyond this despair. He contends that the absurd individual can "decide to accept such a universe and draw from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation" (Camus 60). This hope largely stems from creation – of art, love, etc. – but, due the economic, social, and cultural conditions of their upper class, privileged place in society, the characters presented in *ROA* possess no means for moving beyond their nihilism. The novel ends just as it begins, mid-sentence at a party, with the characters having changed little, if at all, implying that this apathetic cycle will continue indefinitely. These individual cases of absurdity illustrate a wider cultural malaise in the social elite, suggesting the failure of late-capitalism to instill in even the most successful people any sense of meaning.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Rabbit, Run, *Desperate Characters*, and *The Rules of Attraction* illustrate a pattern in the way literary characters exemplify the absurd in 20th century American fiction. It is important to note that each of these texts was written by a white author, two of whom are men whose other writing occasionally suggests conservative leanings. These writers also operate from a position of economic privilege, as do the characters in their novels. These circumstances suggest that these texts and the conclusions drawn from them do not represent the whole of U.S. society; instead, they indicate an apparent feeling common among white, well-off individuals in the latter half of the 20th century.

These novels illustrate a progression of the absurd over time in terms of both the number of characters affected as well as the magnitude of the absurd feeling in the individual. In *Rabbit, Run*, only Rabbit and, occasionally, Reverend Eccles seem to grapple with the absurd. In *Desperate Characters*, protagonist Sophie exemplifies the absurd to the greatest extent, but many of those around her seem to be in a similar state of existential crisis. Lastly, Ellis's *ROA* presents a landscape in which seemingly every character is absurd. The growth of absurdity illustrates that feelings of meaninglessness and the subsequent yearning for fantasy are increasing as time passes. Absurdity is not a new phenomenon, but its growing prominence in a world increasingly viewed through secular, ironic lenses suggests that people continue to struggle in the vacuum left by religion and existential purpose. This idea that civilization exists in a state of inexorable decline also suggests a conservative tendency in these novels; as the world becomes more accepting and underrepresented groups possess a greater degree of influence in society,

those who previously monopolized power undoubtedly feel threatened. Indeed, while not the focus of this work, each text chronicles characters who profess racist and sexist beliefs.

The novels differ, however, in their treatment of the absurd catalyst. For *Rabbit*, it is the combination of a perceived return to high school glory and an immediate confrontation with the mundanity of his domestic situation. For *Sophie*, a cat bite causes a confrontation with mortality that sends her spiraling into existential confusion. In *ROA*, Ellis does not seem compelled to explicitly document the absurd catalyst; for Sean, Lauren, Paul, and those around them, the absurd is intrinsic. This inescapability of the absurd contrasts the two earlier novels in which there still seems a chance of living a life free from the absurd. When introduced, *Rabbit* and *Sophie* seem as if they have long been on the brink of absurdity but still separate from it. Ellis's characters, however, are absurd from the start and remain so throughout the novel. This difference advances the idea that the absurd is affecting a larger number of individuals as time goes on.

As more people confront the absurd, society will be less successful in providing fantasy for them because the absurd is coupled with decreased belief in social institutions and dominant ideologies. Increased absurdity on a cultural scale engenders greater feelings of absurdity and apathy in the individual. This inference relates closely to Jean-Francois Lyotard's conception of postmodernism, which he defines as "an incredulity towards metanarratives" (qtd. in Brown 59). For Brown, this line of reasoning signifies "that postmodernists no longer take seriously the idea that history is heading for a happy ending" (59). Applied to the absurd, Lyotard's reasoning suggests that this breakdown of meaning signals a kind of cultural entropy, an idea certainly present in Ellis's novel.

In tandem with the novels' disparity in the roots of the absurd, the novels also present different absurd responses for their characters. Rabbit abandons his family and attempts to find meaning in sex, religion, and self-deification, all to no avail. Sophie remains committed to her marriage but seeks fantasy in old friends and creativity, yet she also fails to suppress her absurdity. Sean, Lauren, and Paul engage in drug use and meaningless sex, but they maintain a distance from these forms of fantasy; they believe fantasy is ultimately futile and can only manage to distract themselves from their absurdity for brief, fleeting moments. With this lack of fantasy, *ROA* suggests an endless, apathetic milieu for people with this kind of privileged status. This existential predicament hints at a potential reckoning with white, privileged identity as the 20th century drew to a close. These questions persist even today as white America continues to oscillate between acceptance and rejection of people of color and immigrants in particular.

The absurd progression signifies a corresponding trend in American literature of this time: the loss of religion. *Rabbit, Run*, written in the aftermath of the conservative 1950s, contains a reverend as a prominent character, and Rabbit sometimes ponders larger religious questions in the midst of his absurd crisis. Alternatively, the two later novels seem to assume a sense of social secularism, in itself a principal cause of the absurd. In the latter two novels, the only prominent instance of a character yearning for religion comes from Sophie, but her realization is brief and soon forgotten. Sensing this secular movement in the late 1960s, Ronald Sukenick writes, "God was the omniscient author, but he died: now no one knows the plot..." (qtd. in Bradbury 162). In keeping with art's continual reflection of social issues, writers like Fox and Ellis seem to have

picked up this sentiment and run with it in novels such as *Desperate Characters* and *ROA*. In agreement with a general decline in religious belief in the last 50 years (Twenge et al. 1), any sense of religiosity is almost entirely absent from the characters depicted in these two novels. This growing loss of faith engenders a confrontation between the human need for meaning and an apparently indifferent universe. This disconnect lies at the heart of existential philosophy, and it seems humanity and its literature will continue to grapple with this issue.

This secular tendency runs in tandem with the social and political circumstances in which the novels were written. Published between 1960 and 1987, respectively, these novels document a late-capitalist U.S. with a population largely divided in its vision of the future. Wavering between conservative and liberal presidents in this period, the American people seem unable to reach a consensus regarding the country's direction and ideology beyond staunch anti-communism, and even then there are dissenting opinions. This environment fosters generations of disaffected individuals such as Rabbit, who finds no meaning in his work as a kitchen gadget salesman. Likewise, bourgeois Sophie and Otto cannot affect lasting social change either due to failure or a simple lack of initiative. Additionally, Sean, Lauren, and Paul, functioning as stand-ins for the entirety of the upper class members of Generation X, have absolutely no political or social ambitions. So, with no way out of these conditions of alienated labor (Marx 72), the cycle seems doomed to repeat itself for the foreseeable future.

This alienation stems in part from an idea found in philosophers such as Marx, Nietzsche, and Camus: artistic expression. Rabbit, in his strictly middle class existence, never seems to consider creation as a possibility after confronting the absurd. Sophie's

profession implies a creative side to her character, but she struggles to continue with her art after becoming absurd. Ellis's characters, though occupying a privileged position which would allow them to use their time in pursuit of artistic creation, fail to recognize its usefulness. These alienated characters do not create anything that allows them to realize themselves in the external world, assert their existence, or communicate their thoughts, fears, and desires. Instead, they have so internalized the conditions of their social and political environment that they generally do not even attempt artistic expression. For them the absurd engenders apathy so extreme that they devote their lives to the Sisyphean struggle of rolling the rock up the hill without realizing that "the struggle ... itself is enough to fill [their hearts]" (Camus 123); they are unable or unwilling to imbue life with meaning or purpose.

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