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Cross Temporal Analysis of Existentialist Authors
Dostoevsky, Kafka, Camus, and Ellison Relative to the
Divergence Between Their Disenfranchised and
Non-Marginalized Characters

ABSTRACT

Through their works, existentialist authors such as Fyodor Dostoevsky, Albert Camus, Franz Kafka, and Ralph Ellison endorsed groundbreaking beliefs which advanced the limits of intellectualism. Traits such as alienation, nihilism, absurdism, and authenticity seeped into the plotlines of their novels. Through the literary lens of New Historicism, a cross-temporal examination will be performed on several of their works. It will explore their intentional minimization of certain characters and how their storyline conclusions were deliberately written as ambiguous in order to bring their plights to the foreground. The authors purposely othered characters in order to make their story heard.

These four authors created characters whose shared existential transformations and profound life experiences paralleled or were painfully close to their own. Through their protagonists and supporting characters, Dostoevsky, Camus, Kafka, and Ellison utilized a type of rhetorical chronotope to convey a message about the negative effects of hegemonic exploitation due to race, gender, or economic circumstances. In addition, the writing of nineteenth century Dostoevsky and early twentieth century Kafka influenced the later writings of Camus and Ellison. Although these authors were trying to impart this message to their own respective audiences throughout a time-span of almost one hundred years, they were all essentially conveying a tragically similar message. It is a message that still needs to be heard today, as has become overwhelmingly apparent.

INTRODUCTION

Existentialist philosophy through the years has provided its readers with a myriad of thought provoking topics and discussions. Moreover, existential discourse has never ceased to expand or push the intellectual boundaries of its participants and readers, as do the authors who write about the subject and explore its themes. That is the main reason some of the preeminent authors of the field will be examined within the scope of this essay. The works and authors who will be analyzed in this thesis are as follows: *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka, *The Stranger* by Albert Camus, and *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison. Textual evidence from other works such as *Notes From The Underground* by Dostoevsky and *In the Penal Colony* by Kafka will also be examined to provide further support. Each of these works share common existentialist themes such as alienation, isolationism, authenticity, absurdism, nihilism, as well as other ideals from that sphere. Choice is also an important existential principle discussed within these works. Existential traits in the works of Dostoevsky, Kafka, Camus, and Ellison span the scope of almost one hundred years. Through a comprehensive cross-temporal examination of cultural, racial, and sexual stereotypes, evidence will be shown how disenfranchised individuals in the works of these authors were portrayed differently through the use of existentialist characteristics than those who were not marginalized.

LITERARY THEORY

The literary theory through which this essay will be analyzed will be New Historicism. It was chosen because when interpreting a work through this lens, history is allowed to be given an interpretive focus on footing equal to that of the literary texts themselves, instead of just providing background and expository information for the reader. In so doing, it allows for the text to be investigated through multiple angles and foci, such as through the multiple voices of

those who have been marginalized, rather than through the predominately hegemonic culture of that time period. Or as Bennett and Royle so aptly state: “history is in the making rather than being monumental and closed, history is radically open to transformation and rewriting” (132). History—especially sociocultural history—certainly played a significant role in the lives of each of the above mentioned authors and this reflects in the characters in their stories.

HISTORICAL, TEXTUAL, AND PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND

Dostoevsky, born and raised in Russia, focused on themes such as poverty and religion in many of his writings, and in later years was also affected by the Russo-Turkish War. Although religion does not factor into the novel, poverty does play a role in *Notes From The Underground*. Dostoevsky’s 1864 novella was the first existentialist novel according to Walter Kaufmann (52-53). The unnamed narrator, or Underground Man, self-isolates himself from society. He imagines petty grievances which are not there, alienating himself from any prospective relationships or friendships. He is living in abject poverty, but treats other people with disdain and as if he is their moral or social superior regardless of their community status, or even if their financial condition equals his own:

I told you just now that I was not ashamed of my poverty; so you may as well know that I am ashamed of it; I am more ashamed of it than of anything, more afraid of it than of being found out if I were a thief, because I am as vain as though I had been skinned and the very air blowing on me hurt. Surely by now you must realise that I shall never forgive you for having found me in this wretched dressing-gown. (Dostoevsky, *Notes* Part II Ch. IX)

He is miserable and wishes life the same for everyone else because he believes it has no meaning or value. As for Dostoevsky’s 1866 *Crime and Punishment*, both poverty and religion play

prominent roles. Dostoevsky's novel is about the moral and psychological angst of protagonist Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov, who makes a conscious decision to murder who he considers to be a dishonest elderly female pawnbroker. However, the murder, subsequent robbery, and events afterward do not work out like he planned, in no small part due to the moral influences in his life. In the following weeks, Raskolnikov wrestles with an existential crisis of conscience.

The twentieth century authors mentioned were touched by poverty and war as well. Camus grew up in abject poverty in Algeria after his father abandoned him. As a child, he observed the horrendous treatment of Muslims under colonial rule by their French colonizers. The ethics behind this type of treatment figures prominently in his novel 1942 *The Stranger*. Camus's text is about Meursault, an apathetic nihilist who murders an unnamed Muslim for no apparent reason after the death of his mother, a passing for which he shows no if little concern. During Meursault's trial, Camus demonstrates the novel's true absurdism. Throughout the trial, the judge is more appalled at the protagonist's apathy toward the death of his mother than the fact he committed murder:

But my lawyer had lost his patience, and, raising his hands so high that his sleeves fell, revealing the creases of a starched shirt, he shouted, "Come now, is my client on trial for burying his mother or for killing a man?" The spectators laughed. But the prosecutor rose to his feet again, adjusted his robe, and declared that only someone with the naivete of his esteemed colleague could fail to appreciate that between these two sets of facts there existed a profound, fundamental, and tragic relationship. "Indeed," he loudly exclaimed, "I accuse this man of burying his mother With crime in his heart!" (Camus 96)

Meursault is found guilty and sentenced to death in prison where he has an existential crisis which results in a peaceful awakening.

Although Kafka did not grow up in poverty in his hometown of Prague, he experienced cultural isolation due to his Jewish heritage. He was born half German and Jewish and struggled with it for years. Alienation showed through in both Kafka works, 1919 *In the Penal Colony* and 1915 *The Metamorphosis*. Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* is a short story and a rather graphic telling about the last use of a torture device that carves the punishment into its victim. A character known only as The Officer apathetically describes some of the functions of the machine in explicit detail:

The condemned man is laid out on his stomach on the cotton wool — naked, of course. There are straps for the hands here, for the feet here, and for the throat here, to tie him in securely. At the head of the bed here, where the man, as I have mentioned, first lies face down, is this small protruding lump of felt, which can easily be adjusted so that it presses right into the man's mouth. Its purpose is to prevent him screaming and biting his tongue to pieces. (Kafka, *Penal Colony* 117)

Absurdism also plays a role in the story, especially the ending. Physiological disfigurement and psychological torment appear to be themes in that work as well as his most famous novel *The Metamorphosis*, about a man named Gregor Samsa who wakes up one morning in the physical form of an insect. Needless to say Gregor's life is upended. His family, which is comprised of sister Grete and his parents, do not react well, and place him in isolation where he feels alienated from them. In the end, he makes a conscious choice which permanently alters his and their lives forever.

According to Arnold Rampersad in his biography of the author, Ralph Ellison was born in Oklahoma, and also grew up in poverty in Indiana (5, 21). He was African American, thus experienced racism on a level unknown by the other three authors. He also witnessed the birth

and completion of World War II, which impacted his writing. Its influence can be read in his 1952 novel *Invisible Man*. Ellison's novel is about an unnamed black man who felt invisible because of his race: "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (3). Many black veterans were treated harshly after their return from the war. The unnamed narrator in Ellison's novel travels to New York after being deceived by a school mentor. He is naïve in the beginning, but is awakened after many experiences with deceitful and bigoted people who use and exploit him because of his race. Throughout the novel the unnamed protagonist experiences multiple existential transformations and an eventual awakening. The traits these protagonists experienced, such as alienation, absurdism, isolationism, and authenticity were existentialist, even though for earlier nineteenth century authors the term was not as yet even in existence.

Existentialist thinking was born from continental philosophy. According to Simon Critchley, "Continental philosophy is the name for a 200-year period in the history of philosophy that begins with the publication of Kant's critical philosophy in the 1780s" (13). This led to the beginning of multiple philosophical movements, some of which were known as German idealism, French structuralism, postmodernism, and existentialism (Critchley 13). Continental philosophy diverges from its logic-oriented analytic counterpart. Analytic philosophy relies more on science and problem-solving, while the main themes of continental philosophy trend toward culture and history. Critchley further states that "texts of the Continental tradition make up a kind of documentary archive of philosophical problems, with a distinct relation to their context and our own and marked by a strong consciousness of history" (57). Out of continental philosophy came existentialism.

Existentialism as a concept is complicated, thus can be challenging to define. This is in no small part to the disagreement among the philosophers and authors who hold to and write about the philosophy. Their views sometimes have diverged vigorously, such as renowned philosophers Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre who had a well-known disagreement about the meaning of the term 'existence' itself, according to Briankle G. Chang (366). Nonetheless, there is one tenet they did appear to agree on, explains Chang, which was the theme of *Existence precedes essence* (366). This premise is one of the oldest ideological arguments in philosophy. Chang illustrates the point when she notes how

by existence, existentialists do not mean something being there in the abstract. Rather than designating a general concept arrived at by abstracting what is common to all that appears, existence here means—exclusively and precisely—individual existence or, we can say, existence grasped according to one's inalienable individuality. (366)

Existentialists place great emphasis on agency and individual choice, two tenets prominent in the canon of existentialist ideals. Chang explains this concept:

Existence means living and acting in the world. By extension, to act is to make a choice; action is always the outcome of choice making. This is the case, not simply because we make choices all the time, but because we cannot avoid doing so; indeed, even when we refuse to make a choice, the refusal is nonetheless a choice. In this sense, choice making is always of the self, in that a choice is always made by the self and for the same self as well. Because one must make a choice on one's own and because the choice made is for oneself only—although the choice made might have consequence for others—one is essentially responsible for oneself and for the choices one has made. Moreover, because

one is responsible for oneself as one responds to one's own calling to make a choice, one must be considered *free*. (367)

Existentialism was also a philosophy and literary movement born out of poverty and suffering. According to Steven Crowell, Jean-Paul Sartre self-identified himself with the label in Post-War Europe and with the popularity of other authors of like mind such as Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus, the philosophy of "existentialism became identified with a cultural movement which flourished in Europe in the 1940s and 1950s" (1). Other philosophers such as Martin Heidegger were also discovered to have works influential to the progression of the movement. In addition, the works of nineteenth century authors such as Fyodor Dostoevsky and early twentieth century Franz Kafka were found to be imbued with traits indigenous to the existentialist philosophy. Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* is suspected of being one of the earliest novels within that genre. The works of those two authors, as well as the writings of later authors such as Camus and Ellison were infused with known existentialist traits.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Born in 1821 Moscow, Fyodor Dostoevsky is the author from the earliest time period of the authors analyzed in this essay. His tomes, novels, and short stories were known for their acute psychological profiles of the most profound and darkest thoughts of humans at their weakest and most vulnerable points. He utilized themes such as alienation, isolation, religion (or lack of it), nihilism, authenticity, inauthenticity, and choice. In the beginning his work was reflective of his political beliefs. However, that changed once he was arrested and spent months in prison, then was given a reprieve in 1849 at the precipice of his execution. According to Gary Saul Morson in his biography of the author:

Instead of being executed, Dostoyevsky was sentenced to four years in a Siberian prison labour camp, to be followed by an indefinite term as a soldier. After his return to Russia 10 years later, he wrote a novel based on his prison camp experiences, *Zapiski iz myortvogo doma* (1861–62; *The House of the Dead*). Gone was the tinge of Romanticism and dreaminess present in his early fiction. (Morson)

In addition, during this time period is where Dostoyevsky's religious transformation occurred. Morson states that during his time in prison the author "became deeply attached to Russian Orthodoxy, as the religion of the common people, although his faith was always at war with his skepticism" (Morson). His post-Siberian writing took on a different tone, hence the turn to what would later become known as existentialism. As for Dostoevsky's 1864 *Notes From The Underground* and 1866 *Crime and Punishment*, both negatively target and pinpoint the nihilistic views expressed by the protagonists in each work. The characters within both works demonstrate qualities such as alienation, isolation, authenticity/inauthenticity, and make difficult choices which affect both themselves and others.

Born in 1883 Prague in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Franz Kafka—unlike the financially strapped Dostoevsky—was born into a middle-class background. Although Kafka was not imbued with the same socioeconomic issues of Dostoevsky, throughout his life Kafka was burdened with family issues. He was raised by an authoritarian father, attended law school, then went to work for an insurance company whose management also had authoritarian tendencies. According to Liam Rodger and Joan Bakewell, Kafka was "A hypersensitive, introspective person who felt emasculated by his domineering father" and who "eventually moved to Berlin to live with Dora Dymant in 1923, his only brief spell of happiness before

succumbing to a lung disease” (Rodger and Bakewell). The impact of both authoritarian figures was evidenced in his writings.

For instance, each of the storylines of *The Metamorphosis* and *In the Penal Colony* are heavily inspired by domineering father type characters who display or are written with authoritarian qualities. As expressed by Martin Puchner et al., “Franz Kafka’s stories and novels contain such nightmarish scenarios that the word *Kafkaesque* has been coined to describe the most unpleasant and bizarre aspects of modern life, especially when it comes to bureaucracy” (201). His writing also displayed such existentialist traits as alienation, isolationism, and absurdism. It is little wonder that Kafka was inspired by the writing of Dostoevsky. Moreover, as noted by Rodger and Bakewell, Kafka “exerted a tremendous influence on Western literature” and in turn also influenced the later writings of such existentialists as Albert Camus (“Kafka, Franz”). Existentialists such as Kafka and Dostoevsky would later influence the writings of American authors as well.

French Algerian Albert Camus was born in 1913—only a few months before the beginning of World War I and where his father would be fatally wounded in battle shortly after the start of the war in 1914. Camus’s only memories of his father were anecdotal, but one in particular would have a profound impact on him for the rest of life. According to David Simpson in his biography of the writer: “the only thing Camus ever learned about his father was that he had once become violently ill after witnessing a public execution. This anecdote, which surfaces in fictional form in the author’s novel *The Stranger* and is also recounted in his philosophical essay ‘Reflections on the Guillotine,’ strongly affected Camus and influenced his lifelong opposition to the death penalty” (Simpson). His socioeconomic status changed following the death of his father, which forced his family to live in abject poverty. Although this caused the

author much pain, through his schooling he was able to meet influential academics who would help his intellect flourish, all the while encouraging his affinity for reading. He was a voracious reader, consuming works from authors as varied as Nietzsche, Kafka, Dostoevsky, to writers of religious thought such as Saint Augustine. Although fascinated by the latter's religious writings, Camus did not share his enthusiasm for Christian ideology (Simpson). This viewpoint would be demonstrated in the development of the author's protagonists such as Meursault. As an adult, he began his writing career as a journalist in Algeria, which revealed "that he was greatly concerned with the injustices he saw in the French colonial system in Algeria" (Anderson 90). The poverty he lived through amalgamated with his experience of growing up within a French colonial repressive infrastructure could have contributed to his feelings of alienation and caused him to write about themes such as isolation, financial hardship, or others such as absurdism in his later works of fiction.

One of the American authors influenced by writers such as Dostoevsky was Ralph Ellison, born in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma in 1914. Like Albert Camus, Ellison lost his father when he was a toddler, thus knew what it was like to come from a lower socioeconomic status. However, his first creative love was not writing, but music. When he was young he spent three years studying at the seminal Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Nonetheless, according to Larry Ten Harmsel, he quit after a few years and moved to New York, where he met such famous writers as "Langston Hughes, and later with Richard Wright, [which] led to his first attempts at fiction. E. participated in the Federal Writers' Project, and his stories and essays appeared in *New Masses* and other periodicals. After service in the Merchant Marine (1943-45) he won a Rosenwald Fellowship (1945)" (Harmsel). Experiences with writers such as Hughes and Wright, in addition to his time in the military and coupled with experiencing financial hardship, all

influenced his writing. Existential traits such as alienation, marginalization, and absurdism was peppered throughout his writing. Certain characters in *Invisible Man*, especially marginalized ones, shared existential traits with those of the other authors, even though some of their work had been written about one hundred years before.

EXISTENTIAL TRAITS

Existential elements such as alienation, absurdism, isolation, authenticity, choice, and nihilism are a part of *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka, *The Stranger* by Albert Camus, and *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison. Nonetheless, not all characters in these novels experience these traits with the same proportion or intensity. For instance, nihilists in literature (or film) have a tendency to be men. Nihilism in the existential sense holds to the principle that life has no meaning or value. These novels, beginning with Dostoevsky's 1864 *Crime and Punishment* to Ellison's 1952 *Invisible Man* were written when societal attitudes and opportunities for women or persons of color were far harsher and limited than they are now, although some still hold on to their cruel racist belief systems as current political events have proven. The nihilists in Dostoevsky's *Notes From The Underground*, *Crime and Punishment*, Camus's *The Stranger*, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, and Ellison's *Invisible Man* are all white men, although they are not all protagonists. Dostoevsky's Underground Man and Raskolnikov are protagonists, as is Camus's Meursault. Conversely, Mr. Samsa (father of Gregor and Grete) in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, and Brother Jack in Ellison's *Invisible Man* are not. They are antagonists. Both characters are negative stereotypes who reflect the life experiences of their authors. Mr. Samsa is an authoritarian figure reflective of the views held by Kafka's father. On the other hand, Brother Jack is an anticommunist figure of the type who had betrayed African Americans who believed in the ideals of communism in the 1930s, according to

Barbara Foley in her journal on the topic (531). Other existentialist traits are also imbued in the protagonists.

Alienation and isolation are such characteristics. Meursault of *The Stranger*, Gregor Samsa of *The Metamorphosis*, Underground Man from *Notes From The Underground*, Raskolnikov of *Crime and Punishment*, and the narrator from *Invisible Man* all possess existentialist qualities within the scope of their realm. Meursault is isolated once he is sent to prison after being convicted of murder. Gregor Samsa isolates himself and is alienated by his family after he wakes up in the physiological form of an insect. According to translator Susan Bernofsky in her notes in *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka's word choice in his original writing might have had a different explanation:

Both the adjective *ungeheuer* (meaning “monstrous” or “huge”) and the noun *Ungeziefer* are negations— virtual nonentities—prefixed by *un*. *Ungeziefer* comes from the Middle High German *ungezibere*, a negation of the Old High German *zebar* (related to the Old English *tīber*), meaning “sacrifice” or “sacrificial animal.” An *ungezibere*, then, is an unclean animal unfit for sacrifice, and *Ungeziefer* describes the class of nasty creepy-crawly things. The word in German suggests primarily six-legged critters, though it otherwise resembles the English word “vermin.” (xvi)

Using a word such as *Ungeziefer* to describe Gregor's physiological transformation instead of the actual German word may have been Kafka's way of foreshadowing Gregor's eventual fate of sacrificing himself for his family.

Underground Man is isolated and alienates everyone around him due to his paranoia and nihilistic attitude toward his community. In *Crime and Punishment* Raskolnikov isolates and alienates himself due to his conflicting feelings of guilt, arrogance, paranoia, and nihilistic

Napoleonic mindset. He says as much to Sonya during his confession to her: "I was ambitious to become another Napoleon; that was why I committed a murder. Can you understand it now?" (Dostoevsky, *C and P* 347). The narrator in *Invisible Man* is forced into isolation multiple times, both above and underground due to the bigotry of society and betrayal of those he believes are his friends.

One other notable feature Meursault, Gregor Samsa, Underground Man, Raskolnikov, and the unnamed black narrator from *Invisible Man* have in common is that they all are males who travel on an existential journey. In fact three protagonists, including Raskolnikov, the unnamed black narrator, and Meursault all travel on a literal as well as an existential trek. Yet there are divergences between the journeys of these protagonists as a result of the choices they consciously make, or *feel* they are forced to. Choice is a key principle of existentialism. Meursault's journey into prison isolation is the result of a conscious decision he makes to kill. He makes a choice about the decision to act: "It occurred to me that all I had to do was turn around and that would be the end of it" (Camus 58). He could have turned and walked away, and his life would have taken a different trajectory, but the longer he hesitates, the more difficult the decision is *not* to kill. He ultimately accedes to his true self.

In addition to his conscious decision to kill, Meursault also has full agency regarding the eventual peace that comes with the acceptance of the resulting consequences of that decision. Raskolnikov also makes a conscious decision to murder a pawnbroker, yet *feels* he is forced to murder her sister because of a door that he carelessly leaves open. His choice between murder methodology is split between planning and recklessness. This is a theme throughout the novel, as Raskolnikov is existentially torn about his decision. Raskolnikov demonstrates this divergence with his emotional catapults between physiological sickness due to guilt and nihilistic arrogance.

As for Gregor Samsa, he has no choice when he wakes up as an insect, but in the end makes the decision to take his own life. The narrator in Ellison's *Invisible Man* breaks the stereotype, however. In the beginning, his journey to New York is based on a false premise, and near the end of the story he is forced to flee underground to avoid being physically harmed. It appears the more each author has been disenfranchised in real life, the less choice his protagonist is given. Although both Dostoevsky and Camus had experienced financial difficulty, they both had not experienced marginalization on the same level as Kafka or Ellison. Growing up Jewish in Prague, Kafka felt like an outsider. According to Walter H. Sokel in "Kafka as a Jew," "Living under the double threat of German racism and Czech pogromic populism, the Jews of Prague lived with an undertow of anxiety, a siege mentality of which, even though few admitted it, Kafka's nightmare fiction has become the eloquent testimonial" (841). Ellison as a black man had witnessed racism first-hand throughout his lifetime as demonstrated by the author's Introduction to a later edition of *Invisible Man*:

I had reported the riot of 1943 for the New York Post and had agitated earlier for the release of Angelo Herndon and the Scottsboro Boys, had marched behind Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., in his effort to desegregate the stores along 125th Street, and had been part of a throng which blocked off Fifth Avenue in protest of the role being played by Germany and Italy in the Spanish Civil War. (2)

Even though their protagonists traveled on these journeys, it was the *a posteriori* experiences of the authors which provided the guidance for their protagonists existential voyages.

Two dichotomous traits that have been mentioned but not discussed are authenticity and inauthenticity. These characteristics go to the heart of Sartre's concept of existence precedes essence: "becoming authentic is first of all a matter of lucidly grasping the seriousness of your

own existence as an individual – the raw fact of the ‘I exist’ – and facing up to the task of making something of your own life” (Guignon). By contrast, continues Guignon, “Everyday life is characterized by ‘inauthenticity,’ and in our ordinary busy-ness and social conformism we are refusing to take responsibility for our own lives. In throwing ourselves into socially approved activities and roles, we disown ourselves and spin a web of self-deception in trying to avoid facing up to the truth about what we are” (Guignon). In other words, the philosophical belief of existentialism holds that humans begin as a blank slate and are molded by the choices they make. They either become authentic through conscious choice and agency regardless of how difficult it is, or continue to live inauthentic lives by following along with society and not taking a moral stand. An interesting concept argued by Petr Vaškovic states that Dostoevsky believed that living an inauthentic life causes “fragmentation which is inherent in the human self,” and results in “individual *suffering*” due to the person trying to right themselves morally (Vaškovic). Inner conflict such as this could explain the existential experiences of the male protagonists in *Notes From The Underground*, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Stranger*, *The Metamorphosis*, and *Invisible Man*.

Dostoevsky’s Underground Man suffers from paranoia, mistrust, and pettiness. He also feels intense self-loathing:

I sometimes have had moments when if I had happened to be slapped in the face I should, perhaps, have been positively glad of it. I say, in earnest, that I should probably have been able to discover even in that a peculiar sort of enjoyment—the enjoyment, of course, of despair; but in despair there are the most intense enjoyments, especially when one is very acutely conscious of the hopelessness of one's position. (Dostoevsky, *Notes Part I Ch. II*)

After his encounter with Liza and ill treatment of her, he has one brief respite of guilt where the inauthentic iteration of himself tries to correct his moral center. But that moment ends all too quickly. He ends story in the same state the way he began it: “we feel at once a sort of loathing for real life, and so cannot bear to be reminded of it” (Dostoevsky, *Notes* Part II Ch. X). He concludes his notes still in an inauthentic state of self-loathing.

Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* begins to have an existential crisis immediately following his crime, especially the second murder which his narcissistic mind had not prepared for:

And if at that moment he had been capable of seeing and reasoning more correctly, if he had been able to realise all the difficulties of his position, the hopelessness, the hideousness and the absurdity of it, if he could have understood how many obstacles and, perhaps, crimes he had still to overcome or to commit, to get out of that place and to make his way home, it is very possible that he would have flung up everything, and would have gone to give himself up, and not from fear, but from simple horror and loathing of what he had done. The feeling of loathing especially surged up within him and grew stronger every minute. (Dostoevsky, *C and P* 110)

Raskolnikov experiences an emotional schism throughout the novel due to his extreme emotional and psychological fragmentation. This psychological schism in all probability is relative to why Dostoevsky chose the name Raskolnikov for his protagonist. According to Ervin Brody: “For the understanding of the implication which the novelist wished to convey with this name, it is necessary to look into the root of the word. Raskol is a compound noun consisting of the prefix *ras-* (originally *raz-*) and the root of the verb *kolot'* ‘to break, to split’” (121). This splitting is further evidenced by his severe bouts of fever and delirium: “A dreadful chill came over him; but

the chill was from the fever that had begun long before in his sleep. Now he was suddenly taken with violent shivering, so that his teeth chattered and all his limbs were shaking” (Dostoevsky, *C and P* 121). His inauthentic and authentic self did not begin to merge until after he confessed his crime to Sonya. He ends in an authentic state, having found romantic love and religious faith through her guidance.

Gregor Samsa’s fragmentation is different than the others. Kafka wrote *The Metamorphosis* during the early twentieth century and the era of modernism. Gregor was dutifully struggling in a stressful job because of money that his parents owed. He does not commit a murder or treat others with disdain like Dostoevsky’s protagonists. He is an inherently decent person who bears the financial burden for his family. His fragmentation occurs upon waking from “troubled dreams” in the form of an *ungeheuer Ungeziefer* (Kafka, *Metamorphosis* 3; Bernofsky xvi). As further discussed by translator Susan Bernofsky, there is an actual word in German for the English word insect, which is *Insekt* (xvi). Thus it could be inferred that Gregor might not actually be waking up in the physiological form of an insect, but is suffering from existential fragmentation. Walter H. Sokel offers evidence and a possible explanation for this in “Kafka’s ‘Metamorphosis’: Rebellion and Punishment” when he notes that “one of the most curious facts about it is Gregor’s lack of curiosity as to the causes of his change. These causes are something Gregor wishes not to know, something he would prefer to leave buried . . . It comes as the climax of a secret history of hostility and guilt” (214). Gregor is under an immense amount of stress, and is at his existential breaking point. After his family othered him, he felt that he had no other options thus chose suicide to end the suffering he felt he was causing his family. Although he made the choice to end his own life, Gregor Samsa does not find peace and redemption,

unlike Raskolnikov who attains both. Gregor Samsa's persona ends in a permanent state of fragmentation.

Albert Camus's protagonist Meursault is like Raskolnikov inasmuch as he makes a conscious choice to murder, yet unlike Dostoevsky's protagonist, Meursault does not find religion at the end of his life. But at the same time, he is at peace with his decision. Like the other protagonists, Meursault suffers an existential crisis. Before he chooses to murder, Meursault is living his life as an inauthentic self. Once he is found guilty and sent to prison, he is further isolated from society. His girlfriend Marie writes him letters, but the relationship soon falters. She is left with an ambiguous ending, like Liza and Sonya in Dostoevsky's novels, never to be heard from again. The most profound relationship in prison that Meursault has is with the prison chaplain. He has an intense conversation with him where he rebukes God:

I had lived my life one way and I could just as well have lived it another. I had done this and I hadn't done that. I hadn't done this thing but I had done another. And so? It was as if I had waited all this time for this moment and for the first light of this dawn to be vindicated. Nothing, nothing mattered, and I knew why. So did he. Throughout the whole absurd life I'd lived, a dark wind had been rising toward me from somewhere deep in my future, across years that were still to come, and as it passed, this wind leveled whatever was offered to me at the time, in years no more real than the ones I was living. What did other people's deaths or a mother's love matter to me; what did his God or the lives people choose or the fate they think they elect matter to me when we're all elected by the same fate. (Camus 121)

After this final reproach of religion, Meursault reconciles himself with his impending death and his choices in life. He accepts who he is. Unlike Raskolnikov who accepts God, Meursault not

only does *not* turn to God, but emphatically accepts his nihilism and is at peace with it. He is the opposite of Raskolnikov whose authentic self whole-heartedly turns to religion. Meursault's authentic self embraces his nihilism.

In the beginning, Ralph Ellison's unnamed black narrator in *Invisible Man* is living as an inauthentic self through his naiveté regarding the bigotry and deceitfulness of society. His fragmentation and eventual re-birth as an authentic self occurs at multiple points throughout the narrative. Ellison creatively inserts the language of a metaphorical birth midway through the story after the unnamed narrator is severely injured and admitted to a hospital where he receives shock therapy: "Two forces tore savagely at my stomach and back . . . But now the music became a distinct wail of female pain" (232, 235). After his injury, the unnamed narrator loses his memory, which he eventually gets back after the shock therapy. What he finds however, upon his discharge from the hospital is that his identity and persona have been altered: "Leaving him and going out into the paint-fuming air I had the feeling that I had been talking beyond myself, had used words and expressed attitudes not my own . . . Or was it, I thought, starting up the walk, that I was no longer afraid?" (Ellison 249) After his inauthentic self begins to change, the unnamed narrator perceives that the negative parts of his identity no longer belong to him. He is beginning to feel illuminated. His authentic self will emerge at the end of the novel when he is ready to leave his underground living area.

OTHERING AND ITS EFFECTS ON CERTAIN CHARACTERS

Othering is a type of marginalization supported by hegemonic society. It is a form of treatment meant to stereotype members of society those in power feel are different or are not worthy. This type of oppression of people in society has also been recreated by authors in

literature. There is also much scholarship to be found on the topic. One such secondary resource, written by Alison Mountz, provides an unambiguous definition of the word:

The term ‘other’ serves as both a noun and a verb. By placing one’s self at the centre, the ‘other’ always constitutes the outside, the person who is different. As a noun, therefore, the other is a person or group of people who are different from oneself. As a verb, other means to distinguish, label, categorize, name, identify, place and exclude those who do not fit a societal norm. In geographic terms to other means to locate a person or group of persons outside of the centre, on the margins. ‘Othering’ is the process that makes the other. ‘Othering’ is the work of persons who discriminate, and it has also been the work of social scientists and philosophers. (328)

However, there were also two seminal texts written about the subject in the twentieth century. French existentialist Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, first published in 1949, acknowledges there are differences between women and men but argues for gender parity. In her text, Beauvoir suggests that women are viewed as an Other: “She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other” (xxii). There are women characters who are othered in *Notes From The Underground*, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Stranger*, and *The Metamorphosis*.

A number of supporting women characters did not complete a full existential journey in these novels. Their stories are unfinished, with the audience left wondering about their end. If indeed their story did complete by the conclusion of the novel, it concludes in a peripheral manner only to add to the narrative of the protagonist. For instance, in *Notes From The Underground* there is the character of Liza, described in the narrative as a prostitute. She is

imbued with the stereotypical persona of naiveté and is treated cruelly by Underground Man. In the end, however, she is shown to be pious when she comforts the protagonist after his outburst, then leaves without accepting financial payment after the two have sex. During the 1800s when this text was written, society placed women into two categories—moral or amoral. There was no middle ground. A woman was either pious or promiscuous. However, Dostoevsky was sympathetic to the plight of women. In his work *A Writer's Diary*, the author explains his position:

I could not help but think once more about the need for higher education for women in Russia, a need that is most urgent at this moment in particular, in view of the serious pressure among today's women to be active, to be educated, and to participate in the common cause. I think that the fathers and mothers of these daughters ought themselves to insist on it for their own sake, if they love their children. In fact, it is only higher learning that is serious, attractive, and powerful enough to settle what is almost an agitation that has begun among our women. Only science can provide answers to their questions, strengthen their intellects, and take their heterogeneous thoughts under its wing. (Dostoevsky, *Diary* 534)

This open-minded thinking may be why his character of Liza blurs the line between the two moral standings. He was open-minded enough to realize that people are complicated, multidimensional, and do not fit the stereotypical typology. As for Underground Man and Liza, after paying for their intimate encounter, he does have an initial instant of regret: “then in shame and despair rushed after Liza,” but after that moment of despair he shifts back to his earlier mode of thinking, subsequently brushing her off: “I never met Liza again and I have heard nothing of her” (Dostoevsky, *Notes* Part II Ch. X). In the end, the audience is left to wonder what happened

to Liza. She is marginalized by the author to demonstrate society's hegemonic stereotypical thinking about women with limited financial means, in addition to how they were diminished and exploited.

The other Dostoevsky text, *Crime and Punishment*, features a female character named Sofya Semyonovna Marmeladov, otherwise known as Sonya. The character of Sonya is similar to Liza inasmuch as she breaks the stereotypical social standard that women were held to at the time. Sonya is morally pure and a prostitute, which is a dichotomous ethical position for a woman to have held in nineteenth century Russia. After Dostoevsky's near execution, he became more sympathetic to Russians living in abject poverty as well as oppressed women. Sonya does not become a prostitute because she wants to, she becomes one because she is forced to do so to support her family. Sonya is ashamed of her profession, yet is forced to carry a yellow card and not reside at the same address as her family: "my daughter Sofya Semyonovna has been forced to take a yellow ticket, and owing to that she is unable to go on living with us" (Dostoevsky, *C and P* 27). Raskolnikov eventually confesses to her because of his feelings and emotional connection with her. She is the first person that he admits his crime to once his guilt overtakes him. After he eventually confesses to the police and is sentenced to prison in Siberia, she travels with him there, where he has an existential spiritual awakening, yet *she* becomes ill: "She too had been greatly agitated that day, and at night she was taken ill *again*" (Dostoevsky, *C and P* 712-713 emphasis mine). It is almost as if once he begins to morally strengthen, she begins to weaken. As he is merging into a full authentic person, her strength is lessened. Although Raskolnikov is in prison, he has been redeemed, thus his future outlook appears positive. While Sonya—in no small part the reason for his transformation is mentioned—but is left with a future full of ambiguity and opaqueness.

In Kafka's text, *The Metamorphosis*, Grete Samsa, sister of Gregor is othered with tragic consequences. Gregor had been the breadwinner in the family, so when his transformation occurs, it upends the whole family's financial status quo:

If I didn't have to hold back for my parents sake, I'd have given notice long ago—I'd have marched right up to him and given him a piece of my mind . . . as soon as I've saved up enough money to pay back what my parents owe him—another five or six years ought to be enough— I'll most do just that. (Kafka, *Metamorphosis* 4)

In the beginning, Grete is initially supportive. She cares for him because his parents will not, because they are lethargic and unambitious. They had depended on him for financial support for quite a while, so as a result had become comfortable with the arrangement:

Gregor's father was admittedly in good health, but he was old and hadn't worked in a full five years, and in any case he was supposed to avoid overtaxing himself; in those five years— the first holiday in his strenuous and yet unsuccessful life — he had put on a lot of weight and now lumbered as he walked. And was Gregor's old mother now supposed to hold down a job, despite her asthma and the fact it was already an exertion for her to cross from one end of the apartment to the other, for which reason she spent every second day gasping for breath on the sofa beside the open window? And was his sister to go out working, this child of seventeen, whose lifestyle no one would begrudge her: dressing nicely, sleeping late, helping out around the house, taking part in a few modest entertainments, and above all, playing the violin? (Kafka, *Metamorphosis* 23)

Once Grete begins to care for Gregor, she starts to sense her own autonomy increasingly expanding and developing, which causes her to feel unappreciated. She starts to resent her

brother. After a while, she and the family believe they would be better off without him. He senses this feeling, so slowly begins to starve himself to death: “His opinion that he must by all means disappear was possibly even more emphatic than that of his sister” (Kafka 234). After Gregor’s death, the family is relieved that he is gone. They simply decide to go outside for a walk. In their minds, he had become a burden to them. However, after Gregor dies, the parents look at Grete as their meal ticket. They realize how much she has grown, so instead of giving her autonomy, in the end they decide to marry her off for financial reasons. Kafka might have written this ending for sister Grete in all probability because like Dostoevsky, he was sympathetic to the difficulties women were suffering during this time. As noted by Klaus Wagenbach and Henry Marx, Kafka had grown up in a family with three sisters and was closest to the youngest one named Ottla (443). He was sympathetic of her when she was trying to leave home and show some autonomy: “Kafka supported to the utmost Ottla's ‘abnormalcy’—for in 1918 it was really abnormal for a daughter to leave her parental home in order to learn a job and to live independently” (Wagenbach and Marx 443). This open minded thinking toward women in all probability fueled the language behind his creation, character development and ending for sister Grete.

In Camus’s *The Stranger*, multiple women are othered for reasons which will be discussed both here and below. Before he commits murder, Meursault has a physical relationship with a woman named Marie. In addition to being apathetic toward the death of his mother, he is the same toward Marie:

That evening Marie came by to see me and asked me if I wanted to marry her. I said it didn't make any difference to me and that we could if she wanted to. Then she wanted to know if I loved her. I answered the same way I had the last time, that it didn't mean

anything but that I probably didn't love her. 'So why marry me, then?' she said. I explained to her that it didn't really matter and that if she wanted to, we could get married. (Camus 41)

She visits him during the trial, then Meursault is found guilty, sentenced to death then remanded to prison. After a period of time Marie is mentioned in passing only as a remembrance of a past life: "The days had been long since she'd stopped writing. That evening I thought about it and told myself that maybe she had gotten tired of being the girlfriend of a condemned man. It also occurred to me that maybe she was sick, or dead . . . Anyway, after that, remembering Marie meant nothing to me. I wasn't interested in her dead" (Camus 115). The audience never knows what happens to Marie, her eventual fate left unknown. Camus's childhood of growing up in abject poverty without a father resulted in the author having a closer relationship with his mother. As a result, this may have been why he wrote Marie as a sympathetic character, intentionally exploited by the protagonist.

Another seminal text about the subject of othering is Edward W. Said's *Orientalism*. Said's work discusses Western hegemonic othering through cultural methodologies such as literature, history, and music. In his foundational text, Said demonstrates how language has been used to other the 'Orient' as lesser than or abnormal: "The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, 'different'; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, 'normal'" (40). That would explain the language used by Camus throughout *The Stranger*. During his life Camus had witnessed the brutal treatment Muslims received at the hands of the French colonizers in Algeria. In the story, Camus calls the victim that Meursault murders "The Arab" (59). He is the brother of the mistress of Meursault's friend Raymond Sintès, an abuser who beats his mistress for no good reason. Like her brother, her name is not mentioned, only the fact that she has

Moorish ancestry: “When he told me the woman’s name, I realized she was Moorish” (Camus 32). Both the victim and his sister are intentionally othered by Camus. Through the exploitation of their ancestry and religion, Camus is able to bring the oppression of these characters to the forefront. The exploitation and brutal treatment of Muslims is brought out into the open.

Another type of othering occurs in *Invisible Man*. Ralph Ellison breaks the stereotype of the protagonist othering the supporting character. In Ellison’s work, the title itself conveys the one being othered. As a black man, Ellison had seen racism on a completely different level. The unnamed narrator travels on both a literal journey and an existential one. Ellison provides explicit examples of othering in the South where the story of the protagonist originates such as this ‘Battle Royal’ where teenage black boys are blindfolded and forced to fight each other: “Some were still crying and in hysteria. But as we tried to leave we were stopped and ordered to get into the ring. There was nothing to do but what we were told. All ten of us climbed under the ropes and allowed ourselves to be blindfolded with broad bands of white cloth” (21). Once in Harlem, Ellison’s unnamed narrator continues to be deceived, but his naiveté begins to disappear after he becomes wiser, experiences metaphorical rebirths, and his authentic self begins to emerge: “But my hand struck the spear and I wrenched it free, gripping it midshaft, point forward. ‘They want this to happen,’ I said. ‘They planned it. They want the mobs to come uptown with machine guns and rifles. They want the streets to flow with blood; your blood, black blood and white blood, so that they can turn your death and sorrow and defeat into propaganda’” (558). In Ellison’s narrative, it is the protagonist who is exploited by hegemony. Nonetheless, the same point is made. The unnamed narrator is literally forced underground, but it is here where oppression is forced out into the open.

BAKHTIN'S CHRONOTOPE AND HOW IT CONNECTS THE AUTHORS

All four authors, Dostoevsky, Camus, Kafka, and Ellison use a mechanism called the chronotope in their existentialist stories. Philosopher and literary theorist M.M. Bakhtin explains the meaning of the term and its use in literature in his text *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*: “We will give the name chronotope (literally, ‘time space’) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (Loc 1306). Chronotopes are indigenous to the specific genre for which they are being utilized. In addition, time and space in a chronotope does not exist the same way that they do in real life. Time is not linear and space is relative; in other words, the reader never sees the complete journey—existential or otherwise. For a meta example of a depiction of a chronotope, an apt analogy would be Doctor Who’s time travel machine the TARDIS from the decades-long running British television series. Chronotopes can be abstract or concrete. They are structures such as a road or a castle, or a point in time, memory, or ideology. Utilizing a rhetorical chronotope through the marginalization of characters to focus attention on their plight is what all four of these authors did. The latter twentieth century authors were influenced by the works of the earlier writers, then all used or were impacted by their life experiences in a way that motivated them to use literary devices to bring awareness about people who had or were being oppressed during their lifetimes.

THE AUTHORS IN AN OVERALL CONTEXT

Although Dostoevsky, Kafka, Camus, and Ellison may have used the same literary mechanisms, the directional intensity of their writing was dependent upon their cultural and socioeconomic status. For instance, Fyodor Dostoevsky began to embrace Russia Orthodoxy after his near death experience in a Siberian prison. Like his protagonists, he had an existential crisis and underwent a transformation. He had financial problems, thus had no trouble creating

and developing characters steeped in poverty. Furthermore, he was sympathetic to the plight of impoverished Russian women. Before his time in prison, his writing was of a progressive nature: however, after his near execution, his work took a mystical yet dark tone. He delved into the dismal psychological undertone of humanity. He created characters such as Underground Man—a protagonist who treats others with disdain and cruelty regardless of their status in life. After having a relationship with his prostitute neighbor Liza and following a brief moment of regret and guilt, Underground Man resorts back to his nihilistic selfishness. He ends up alienated and alone. Liza on the other hand, is morally rounded even though she is treated harshly by him. Liza is a supporting character who is othered by the protagonist and whose ending is unknown.

Although not the exact same scenario, what happens to Underground Man and Liza is similar to what occurs to the characters of Raskolnikov and Sonya in *Crime and Punishment*. The situations of the latter two characters are written further to the extreme than the two in his 1864 work. Raskolnikov is a double-murderer who suffers an existential crisis, yet finds redemption and forgiveness in a Siberian prison. He fights his transformation for most of the novel, wanting to hold on to his nihilistic tendencies. However, eventually he confesses to Sonya, which does not immediately change his emotional situation, but begins the process. Although she provides moral strength for Raskolnikov, Sonya's future is ambiguous in the end.

Unlike Dostoevsky, Kafka was born into a stable financial situation. Nonetheless, his family life was plagued with troubles due to a father who adhered to a strict authoritarian rule in the household. This had a profound influence on Kafka, inhibiting his confidence in his writing:

Kafka did not believe himself to be a successful author, although he had won a prestigious literary award, the Fontane Prize of the City of Berlin, for one of his early stories, 'The Stoker.' He wrote three long novels, *The Trial*, *The Castle*, and *Amerika*, but

completed none of them. In despair he asked his friend and executor, Max Brod, to have them all burned at his death. (Puchner et al. 202)

Luckily, his friend Brod did not listen to him and published them anyway. Kafka's stories, *In The Penal Colony* and *The Metamorphosis* both involve physiological and psychological pain to the point of torment. This was reflective of the pain he felt for much of his life. Nonetheless, Kafka found emotional comfort in his younger sister Ottla through years of correspondence. The existential suffering Gregor experienced could have been based on Franz Kafka's feelings of oppression because of his father, and the lack of agency sister Grete felt could have been related to Ottla's own absence of autonomy due to her gender. The endings for both characters in *The Metamorphosis* are reflective of these causal relationships.

Camus, like Dostoevsky had known what it was like to live a life under dire financial circumstances. He grew up watching his mother perform back-breaking work, and this had a profound effect on him, according to his daughter Catherine Camus, as stated in an interview: "Camus's mother spoke very little. She had been deaf as a child, and when she lost her husband in World War I, she returned with her son to the home of her mother, where she had little say in the running of the house. 'She was very sweet and tender,' says Catherine Camus. 'Camus always wanted to speak for those who had no voice'" (Camus). He also witnessed the cruelty of French colonialists toward Muslims in the country of his birth, French Algeria (until they gained independence in 1962). Both of these events would influence his writing as can be viewed through the development and the marginalization of Marie and Muslims in *The Stranger*. Marie was the silent voice of women who were exploited and silenced such as Camus's mother. The unnamed Muslims were the faceless victims who had been othered by French colonists during the war.

Ralph Ellison grew up in poverty like Dostoevsky and Camus; however, unlike any of the other three authors Ellison was a black man, thus experienced a type of oppression unknown to them. Growing up in Oklahoma he witnessed the worst of racism and the Jim Crow South as evidenced by this excerpt written by Sam Anderson in “Ralph Ellison: Coming of Age During the Rise of the KKK,” describing the 1921 Tulsa Riot: “For two days, white mobs went to war on Greenwood, burning every-thing the Ellisons had admired—its churches, shops, hospitals, and houses. Residents trying to escape were mowed down with machine guns. There were eyewitness reports of airplanes circling and drop-ping incendiary bombs onto the roofs of buildings, burning them from the top down” (Anderson). Growing up during the tumultuous times of living in the Jim Crow South while under the racist and tyrannical violence of the Ku Klux Klan had an obvious impact on the writing of Ellison as the development of the characters such as the unnamed narrator and Brother Jack attest to.

UNIVERSAL INSIGHT—CROSS-TEMPORAL CONNECTIONS

Dostoevsky, Kafka, Camus, and Ellison all created protagonists who traveled on existential journeys and also used their stories to send messages to society. Dostoevsky wrote two characters whose ultimate existential trajectories took two diverging paths. *Underground Man* was left alienated with his inauthentic self away from God, while *Raskolnikov* found his authentic self through love and religion. Dostoevsky’s life had been changed through religion and he wanted to convey the message that other people could do the same. The characters he created were impoverished and exploited, thus through his writing he was able to send a message about the plight of the socioeconomic status of the Russian people.

Diametrically opposite to Dostoevsky as far as his views on religion were concerned, Camus created a nihilist protagonist who only was able to come to peace with himself after he

disavows any belief in God through his outburst at the prison chaplain. Conversely, Camus created the sympathetic supporting character of Marie, no longer able to communicate with Meursault, comparable to the way Camus felt his mother was not able to speak. Muslims were also silenced literally and figuratively in *The Stranger* as they had been in Camus's French Algeria during colonialism.

Kafka's Gregor Samsa is the most unique of all the protagonists. In *The Metamorphosis*, he wakes up believing that he has turned into an insect. However, that is open to interpretation. Kafka's 1915 work was written during the decades of the Modern Era that began with the Second Industrial Revolution, thus many in society were having a difficult time adjusting. Kafka could have been projecting the trauma and stress occurring during that time into the character of Gregor, a man who had problems coping with the demands placed upon him by modern society and familial pressure—a man who reminded him of himself. This projection could be why Gregor Samsa is portrayed as sympathetic, unlike Dostoevsky's and Camus's protagonists. He is alienated by his family after his 'transformation,' instilling in him a sense of guilt and self-loathing. In the end, he dies without peace and existentially fragmented. His sister Grete is initially praised by her parents after caring for her brother and finding her autonomy. However, in the end they decide to use her for financial means just like her brother. She is othered and oppressed by her own parents. By writing about the poverty that drove Gregor to his existential break and the sympathetic ending for Grete, Kafka was bringing to the forefront the issues of poverty as well as oppression of women.

Unlike any of the other primary characters, Ellison's protagonist is the one who is oppressed and exploited in *Invisible Man*. He is marginalized, othered, and deceived throughout the story. In the beginning he projects a modicum of naiveté, but it begins to fade after his arrival

in New York. The existential journey of the unnamed narrator is not unlike the one Ellison travels on himself after leaving Oklahoma at about the same age. In addition, the influence of Dostoevsky can be perceived in *Invisible Man*, the most noticeable being his work *Notes From The Underground*. For example, both protagonists reside below ground. Ellison's unnamed narrator is forced to live underground due to exigent circumstances, and the Underground Man because of poverty. Furthermore, the opening lines of both texts have a similar flow: "I am a sick man.... I am a spiteful man" and "I am an invisible man" (Dostoevsky, *Notes* Part I Ch. I; Ellison 3). Although Dostoevsky's influence is noticeable in these first lines, the two writers are conveying divergent messages. Dostoevsky's protagonist is projecting pettiness and self-pity, while Ellison's unnamed narrator is pointing out the racial blindness of his oppressors. By writing about the cruelty of racism through the prism of blindness, Ellison encourages his readers to view it through a new perspective. The four authors may have utilized differing methods, but they nevertheless all employed rhetorical chronotopes to focus on the marginalization, exploitation, and poverty of oppressed women and people of color.

Dostoevsky, Kafka, Camus, and Ellison chose different existential trajectories for their characters to make a societal point about disenfranchised and oppressed people. The truth is that they were essentially making the same argument. The tragic fact is that humans have been oppressing other humans for much longer and continue to do so. Just ask the descendants of enslaved people who arrived in America four hundred years ago or the families of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Rashard Brooks or any of the current congress persons of color who were afraid for their lives in the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. on January 6, 2021. America is currently in the throes of a severe existential crisis. Many Americans, and even the world have become alienated and isolated like the characters in the stories of Dostoevsky, Kafka, Camus, and

Ellison. As all four authors explicitly demonstrated, people do not escape their existential crises unchanged, regardless of whether their transformations are positive or negative. That same criteria certainly applies to circumstances in this country, if events and actions of the past year are any indicator. Doctors, nurses, and essential workers have acted as heroes, while conversely, corrupt police have killed black men and women, anti-maskers demonstrated the absurdity of politicizing health, whereas the insurrectionists of January 6 displayed the abject worst in humanity on multiple levels. Those in hegemonic power who oppress others reveal why the writings of Dostoevsky, Kafka, Camus, and Ellison are prescient today. As long as women and people of color are oppressed, their message will continue to be needed.

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