CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF SELFHOOD OUTLINE

> All novels, of every age, are concerned with the enigma of the self. … It is one of the fundamental questions on which the novel, as novel, is based.
> —<mark>Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*</mark>

Fiction dramatizes human conduct. This class will focus on how changing beliefs and customs over the course of history have informed that conduct, and how that has changed how writers have fiction have depicted their characters.

Some things change while others remains the same:

Change:
- The sense of time.
- a movement toward what we as writers of fiction call "inner life," a concept the ancients would not have understood.

Constant but Variable:
- The underling question in examining human affairs always reduces to how people at a given time and place balanced **freedom against fate**.
- There is also a continuing tension between **universality/cosmopolitanism vs. particularism/parochialism/nationalism** ("Who is my tribe?")

TWO CAVEATS:

1. We can only surmise what people thought or believed by what they wrote, so we are constrained to literate cultures whose records have been preserved.
   a. Celts—most of what we know is second-hand or limited to artifacts
   b. Pre-1600 B.C. China: again, artifacts, nothing written.

2. No culture at any point in time is monolithic—all are internally contradictory
   o China: Confucism vs. Mohism
   o India: Hinduism vs, materialist/empiricists vs. Janism (ethical focus) vd. Buddhism
   o Greeks: Parmenides (change is impossible) vs. Heraclitus (all is in flux)
   o Hellenistic era/Rome: Stoics vs. Epicureans (Narcissism of minor differences)
   o Islam: Traditionalists vs. Rationalists
   o Christianity: Early communities were small, diverse, isolated; Gnosticism vs Orthodoxy, Pelagius (reason & capacity for good) v Augustine (depravity & sinfulness)

Three issues we'll track over time:
- Freedom vs fate
- Inner life

MESOPOTAMIA (10,000 BCE)

~9500 BC – Climate warms up, Ice Age ends, forests and grasslands expand

Gilgamesh 2150 BC
- About a young king learning what he can't do
- Questions in a sophisticated way:
    - what is our place in the order of existence?
    - what is the meaning of life?
    - what is our relationship to the gods?
    - what are our duties to others?

EGYPT

Very traditional culture
- Little opportunity to better one's station (scribes, soldiers)
- Absolutely **no place for individualism**, originality or creativity in Egyptian art—or, for that matter, in Egyptian society.
- Nothing to learn from outsiders.
- Egyptians believed in beauty, proportion, balance, order, eternal truth, and repose—a concept called *maat*, often represented by an upright feather and personified as a goddess
- Also believed in enjoying life—and continuing that enjoyment in the afterlife
- Not obsessed with death—obsessed with the afterlife

Egyptian Identity:
- **Lived by an understanding of one's role in the society.**
- **Did what your father and father before did. Stability.**
- **Gods ordained the world order for all time, your job was to maintain it.**
- **Best way to assure future was to continue the past.**

Literature:
- A wealth of literature in a variety of genres has survived
    - romances (often with a moral attached) and love poetry
    - victory hymns, hymns and prayers to the gods
    - magical texts & advice on how to reach the afterlife
    - private correspondence
    - business documentation
    - teachings on how to become wise & meditations upon the transitoriness of life (~2100 BC "Song of the Harper" predates Horace carpe diem by 2000 years)
        - Be of good cheer. Forgetfulness is advantageous to you. Follow your heart's desire all your life. Anoint your head with myrrh. Clothe yourself in fine linen. Do things while you are here on earth. Do not grieve until the day of lamentation overtakes you. Enjoy life and do not grow weary of it. No-one takes his possessions (out of this life) and no-one who has departed returns.

GREECE

Iliad: King Nestor intervenes between Agamemnon and Achilles, telling the latter:

"Do not seek open quarrel with the king, since there is no equality with the honor granted to a sceptered king, whom Zeus has glorified. You may be a man of strength, with a goddess for your mother, but he is more powerful because his rule is wider."

A man's duties, from swineherd to king, derive from the role he occupies within the given structure of the community.

- Modernity equates morality with choice.
- Homer's warriors cannot choose to be moral or not.
- Each is simply good or bad at performing the duties of his role.

INNER LIFE/PRIVACY

Lacking any concept of interior life, Homer turns that life into a spectacle of the gods in battle over the human world. Hence the humanness of Homer's gods. The inner world was opaque, but the divine world was real. **The gods inhabit our heads as well as heaven.**

NOTICE KEY SIMILARITIES:

- Existence is mysterious and can only be understood as the will of the gods.
- The gods have arranged the world for all time.
- Identity is a function of role within the society.
- The role is part of the gods' eternal design.
- The "good" is fulfilling the duties of one's role.

SOMETHING CHANGED 800-400 BC—THE AXIAL AGE (Karl Jaspers)

In general:
- A tendency toward monotheism or a fundamental unity or truth underlying reality.
- God or the truth were not hostile but benevolent or neutral.
- Man could figure out the natural world and his place in it.
- The problem of suffering: why do the virtuous and non-virtuous alike suffer?
  - Buddhism developed the idea of *maya*
  - Christianity revived the concept of an afterlife.
  - Hinduism developed concept of karma.
  - Judaism developed idea of the covenant, the law, then the Messiah
  - In China, Confucianism (ethics) and Taoism (metaphysics) emerge

THE GREEKS IN THE AXIAL AGE

Pre-Socratics
- Investigate and question the natural world and develop sophisticated mathematics.
- This led to the belief there were immutable laws underlying natural phenomenon.
- Man could understand those laws through the use of **reason.**
- This **elevated the sense of the power of individual initiative and understanding**.
- In terms of human affairs, however, a sense of fate in human affairs remained:
  - **Heraclitus: "Character is fate," i.e., a man's (unique) character is his destiny.**
    - **Compare to Platonic/Christian notion of immortal soul/Imago Dei.**
  - **Herodotus** believed **behavior was shaped by culture**.
  - **Thucydides** believed **behavior was shaped by political forces**. "The strong do what they can. The weak suffer what they must."

"Post-Socratics"

- **Plato:**

- o *Tripartite Soul*: A Just soul (wisdom, justice temperance) is one in which reason is aided by the spirited to control the appetitive. ***Immortal Impersonal Soul***
  - o ***Self-Interest vs the Good***: counters Thrasymachus's contention that laws serve the wealthy & powerful and everyone pursues their own self-interest. Plato responds that pursuit of raw self-interest makes a man's better self a slave to his worse self. A Psychological not a moral response
- **Aristotle:**
  - o Eudemonia (flourishing) implies individual fulfillment
  - o Heraclitus + Virtue
  - o "the man is the father of his actions as of children"—. **One might worry that this seems to entail that the person could not have done otherwise**s. Aristotle responds by contending that her present character is partly a result of *previous* choices she made.
- **Stoics:**
  - o **Happiness comes through accepting one's fate**. **A man's fate is fixed, but he still must assent to it.** Chrysippus: **your actions are 'up to you' when they come about 'through you'**
- **Epicurians:**
  - o Everything, including man, is **made of atoms** which observe absolute laws, and thus **everything is pre-determined**.
  - o **The Swerve**: slight deviations in the deterministic universe.

GREEK LITERATURE => MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

- The tragedians (**Aeschylus & Sophocles**) depicted the **same tragic view of life as Homer**, man **yearning to be free but constrained by fate**.
- Characters were larger than life—"wondrous and strange"

- **Euripides:**
  - o Thought little of the **Homeric gods and portrayed them as petulant** onstage.
  - o Avoided the "wondrous, strange" heroes of Aeschylus & Sophocles and instead **used commonplace, down-to-earth men and women who have all the flaws and vulnerabilities ordinarily associated with human beings.**
  - o Differed from Aeschylus and Sophocles in making **his characters' tragic fates stem almost entirely from their own flawed natures and uncontrolled passions**.

Theophrastus (student of Aristotle)—The Development of Types
- *Moral Types:* a catalog of characters premised on moral type—the flatterer, the coward, the newsmonger, the backbiter, the braggart, et cetera.
- **"character is destiny"—your character (type) is pre-assigned and it is fixed.**
- Helped form the comic characters of Theophrastus's student **Menander, New Comedy**:
  - o Plays commonly deal with the conventionalized situation of thwarted lovers.
  - o Role of chorus greatly diminished, elevating main characters.
  - o Stock characters: the cunning slave, the wily merchant, the boastful soldier, the cruel father.
- A century later, influenced Roman dramatists Terence and Plautus, whose plays led to the "comedy of manners"
- Influence continued to 1600s:
- Revived in the Renaissance: commedia dell'arte
- English writers especially found Theophrastian characters useful, all the way through the 19th century. Fielding, Smollett, Thackeray, and Dickens employed them
- Found in secondary or comedic characters even today, where they are sometimes called *tropes*. A catalog of them can be found on the website [TV Tropes & Idioms](#), including:
- Boy/Girl Next Door, Femme Fatale/Black Widow, The Third Son, Whiz Kid, **Absent-Minded Professor, Mad Scientist**, Bad Boy, Bad Girl, **Gentleman Thief, Evil Twin**, **Evil Clown, Hooker with a Heart of Gold, Warrior Monk, Jailbait**, Jewish Mother, Magical Negro/Ethnic, Monster-in-Law, Pompous Ass, Nerd, Snooty Servant, Devoted Domestic.

Plutarch (~100 AD), whose *Parallel Lives* was arguably as much if not more influential than Aristotle's *Poetics*

- His biographies were *moral* portraits, in that each depiction, though psychologically sophisticated and richly detailed, was premised on showing how the moral framework of a particular subject's character dictated his choices.
- Plutarch's portrait of Caius Marcius, which inspired Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, reveals a man who, out of warrior's pride, refuses to cave to the demands of the masses, and embraces the destiny his overweening mother convinced him was his to fulfill. In this, he resembles Antigone or Orestes, facing a choice between destruction or betraying something he values deeply, i.e., no real choice at all. The shadow of fate defines their lives.

INNER LIFE: "DIARIES"

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* (~180 AD). Never meant for publication.

Travel diaries: Other early diaries come from Middle Eastern and East Asian cultures. For example in China, Lio Ao, a scholar who lived in the 9th century, kept a travel diary. In the 11th century, Ahmed Ibn Banna kept a diary about his travels in Northern Europe, arranged by date like modern diaries.

In the Medieval era, **diaries were used by mystics to record spiritual interpretations of daily events.**

CHRISTIANITY:
- "For by grace are ye saved, through faith, and not that of yourselves." Grace is "a gift of God." (St. Paul)
- **Augustine:**
  - In Confessions and *On the Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine argues that creaturely misuse of freedom, not God, is the source of evil in the world and that the human will has been corrupted through the 'fall' from grace of the earliest human beings, necessitating a salvation that is attained *entirely* through the actions of God, even as it requires, constitutively, an individual's willed response of faith.
  - "Do not try to fashion your Self, for you will only fashion a ruin."
  -
- **Opposite view: Pelagius: man can do good through the use of reason.** Deemed a heretic.

- **Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274)**
  - Man is **hardwired to will certain general ends ordered to the most general goal of goodness. Will is *rational* desire: we cannot move towards that which does not appear to us at the time to be good. Freedom enters the picture when we consider various means to these ends**.

INNER LIFE/PRIVACY

Augustine, Anselm & Aquinas: Solitude is an essentially rebellious, sinful act, for it separates the solitary individual from the Christian community—and there is no escaping God's scrutiny, to think such a thing is itself sinful.

Confessions: the radical interiorization of evil.
.
Anselm: "On the Fall of the Devil:" the pursuit of one's own good without reliance on God or anyone else is both radically self-deceptive about one's identity as a creature of God and about one's true good, namely, sharing in God's community.

Aquinas: What does a wicked person's mind report to itself when it is doing evil? Aquinas gives us a wonderful description of what he thinks it was like for Satan to have convinced himself that he was going to succeed in rebelling against God. Satan believes it's possible to achieve ultimate happiness by his own efforts, rather than receiving it as a gift from God.

SIMILARITIES :
- Assertion of individual will = defying some fixed order: fate, God's Law
- However, a countering belief that assertion of will/reason in pursuit of virtue aligns oneself with one's true destiny/God's design/the Law (Socrates/Aristotle/Stoics/Pelagius)

RENAISSANCE

The Second Great Era of Tragedy (Shakespeare to Corneille and Racine)
- Once again, as in Ancient Athens, man stood at the border between two explanations of the world, divine and humanistic.

Pico della Mirandola, writing in the fifteenth century (a hundred years before Shakespeare), considered men capable of fashioning their own destiny—"the molders and makers of ourselves."

Benvenuto Cellini (begun in 1558, died 1571). His autobiography candidly recounted the artist's murders and mistresses.

Picaresque Novel: 1594 *Lazarillo de Tormes*

> **Based on Arabic folktales** that were well-known to the Moorish inhabitants of Spain. Negative portrayal of priests and other church officials. Arabic literature possessed a literary tradition with similar themes: *maqamat* in which a wandering vagabond makes his living on the gifts listeners give him after extemporaneous displays of rhetoric, erudition, or verse, often done with a trickster's touch.

> **Curious presence of Russian loan-words in the text of the *Lazarillo*** suggests influence of medieval Slavic tales of tricksters, thieves, itinerant prostitutes, and brigands, who were common figures in the impoverished areas bordering on Germany to the west. When diplomatic ties to Germany and Spain were established under the emperor Charles V, these tales began to be read in Italian translations in the Iberian Peninsula.

> As narrator of his own adventures, **Lázaro seeks to portray himself as the victim of both his ancestry and his circumstance**. This means of appealing to the compassion of the reader would be directly challenged by later picaresque novels such as *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599/1604) and the *Buscón* (1626) because **the idea of determinism used to cast the *pícaro* as a victim clashed with the Counter-Reformation doctrine of free will**.

> **Endings: often involved reformation of some type.**

Chinese Novel ***Journey to the West*** (1590), picaresque in style.

Shakespeare's Richard of Gloucester—Richard III (1593; 1st performed 1633)
- Like Odysseus, Richard is a role-player, a quite deliberate wearer (and discarder) of masks.

- Odysseus and Richard distinct from the dissembler in Theophrastus's typology: They are not the effect but the cause of their mutability, emphasizing man's self-consciousness, not his enslavement to fate.
- Still, the fact **Richard is a villain** is telling.
- **Traditionalists**, both secular and religious, **rejected the idea of self-fashioning man** (Augustine). **Fear. Explains why a character as mutable as Odysseus remained unique as a hero—but not a villain or clown—for centuries.**

INNER LIFE/PRIVACY

During the Renaissance, people began keeping diaries as a way to express opinions without any intention of one day publishing their writings.

In these works, there was more of an emphasis on reflection and introspection rather than recording everyday events. The earliest recorded use of the word "diary" in reference to a written daily record was in 1605.

Montaigne's *Essais* (1580): Everyday life, including the life of the mind, is "messy," and attempts to find simple answers or final solutions often leads to violence either against ourselves or others.

Like Montaigne, **Pascal** (*Pensées* – 1680) saw humans as **muddied, filled with "astonishing contradictions"; and we possess "no truth which is either abiding or fully satisfactory."** We are **moving constantly, both in our minds and in the world**, trying to make sense of things and finding no stable resting place. The endlessness of our own perversity teaches us something about the infinitude of our longing: **It can be sated only by the presence of God in our lives.**

THE ENLIGHTENMENT

An obsession with the root causes of human behavior and a belief in a mechanistic universe controlled by cause and effect.

INNER LIFE/PRIVACY

Until the 18th century, most **diaries** were kept by men and were usually just daily notes about business or farming. Others kept spiritual diaries of sorts, in which they counted their blessings and confessed their sins. **As literacy rates rose, the cost of paper dropped, and people became more aware of the self**, keeping diaries became more popular in the 18th century.

The **first publication of private diaries occurred in 1818**, with [John Evelyn's record of his life](#) (1640-1706) in 17th century England. Followed by the more famous **Samuel Pepys's Diary: 1660-1669. not meant for publication. Not published till 1825**.

THE NOVELS OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Key Themes:
- **"Men of Principle" vs "Men of Policy,"** the need to hide one's true feelings—and intentions—at the royal court. (Created an oppositional politics of unmasking hypocrisy.)
- A devotion to **cause and effect, both requiring the same moral nature, meaning only virtuous motives could inspire good deeds. Evil acts accompanied by professed noble motives => deception/masquerade**, hiding one's "true motives."
- Nefarious deeds were attributed to **"conspiracy."**
- **Contrarian view: Benard Mandeville, "Private Vice, Public Goods."**
- **An ethos – even politics (republicanism) – of "sincerity" (authenticity).**
- **Greatest era of satire** in Western history.

- **Daniel Dafoe**
  - *Moll Flanders* (1722) and *Roxana* (1724) lure the reader into puzzling relationships with narrators the degree of whose own self-awareness is repeatedly and provocatively placed in doubt.
- **Samuel Richardson**
  - *Pamela: epistolary novel*: employs what Richardson was to call "writing to the moment": the capturing in the texture of her letters the fluctuations of the heroine's consciousness as she faces her ordeal.
  - *Clarissa:* who arguably produced the **first literary work of detailed psychological realism.** At its centre is the taxing soul debate and eventually mortal combat between the aggressive, brilliantly improvisatorial libertine Lovelace and the beleaguered Clarissa. Even in its own day, *Clarissa* was widely accepted as having demonstrated the potential profundity, moral or psychological, of the novel. It was admired and imitated throughout Europe.
  - **Lovelace = outwardly charming and respected gentleman, with "the plottingest heart in the universe,"**
- **Henry Fielding** answered with *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749), which retained the realistic psychology but **placed more emphasis on the individual in his social context**.
  - **Essay on Augustan theme of the separation of appearance and reality: "The actions of men are the surest evidence of their character."**
- Tobias Smollett: satire, Theophrastian types:
  - *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748)
  - *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* (1751)
  - *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771).
- **Laurence Sterne: Tristram Shandy:** Tristram, the narrator, is **isolated in his own privacy and doubts how much**, if anything, **he can know even about himself**. Sterne is explicit about the influence **of Lockean psychology**.
  - John Locke introduced the concept of **tabula rasa -- all behavior, inclinations, and thought patterns were learned, rather than inherent**.
- **Denis Diderot: the self as social construct**, a series of roles. *Rameau's Nephew.*
- **Jane Austen:** reaction to sentimental novel and are part of the transition to 19th-century literary realism. Keen psychological and sociological insight.

REACTIONS TO THE ENLIGHTENMENT

- **Scottish Enlightenment:** countered idea that all human events resulted from an identifiable human design: "invisible hand"
- **French Revolution:** "That the actions of liberal, enlightened, and well-intentioned men could produce such horror, terror, and chaos, that so much promise could result in so much tragedy, became, "the master theme of the epoch in which we live" (Shelley).
- **Wordsworth:** The revolution revealed "This awful truth" that "sin and crime are apt to start from their opposite qualities."
- **Hegel:** History is a vast impersonal force, a "stream" that sweeps men along.

ROMANTICISM:
- **glorification of all the past and nature**, **preferring the medieval rather than the classical.** the natural world inherently good, human society is filled with corruption
- **Indebted to the chivalric romance** and its tendency to portray men and women in mythic terms, i.e., as universal types or as "larger than life"
    - Germany: Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*
    - Great Britain: Sir Walter Scott and James MacPherson (Ossian)
    - France (Post-Bourbon Restoration): Alexandre Dumas (Count of Monte Cristo, Three Musketeers), Victor Hugo (Hunchback of Notre Dame), George Sand
    - America: Melville, Hawthorne, Emily Dickinson
- **Transcendentalism** (Emerson, Thoreau): **privileged feeling over reason, individual freedom of expression over the restraints of tradition and custom. It often involved a rapturous response to nature. Rejection of harsh, rigid Calvinism**, and promised a new blossoming of American culture

GOTHIC NOVEL:
- Enlightenment obsession with cause and effect gets undermined by the French Revolution, where noble motives lead to horrific effects.
- **Major shift in characterization:** emerging from the realization that good character can produce bad consequences and vice versa.
- **A resurgent focus on dark, impenetrable forces at work on human beings.**
- English: Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1765) playfully initiated the vogue for Gothic fiction. William Beckford's *Vathek* (1786), Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), and Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796). **Dungeons and endless corridors.**
- American: Washington Irving and **Charles Brockden Brown** (*Wieland*, *Ormond*, *Edgar Huntly* (*Memoirs of a Sleepwalker*)*, and *Arthur Mervyn*). Sensational violence, dramatic intensity, and intellectual complexity. **Caves (unknown wilderness) – darkness, vastness – replace dungeons and corridors.**
    - **"the unanticipated consequences of purposive action"—Charles Brockden Brown**
    - His novels are **intellectual explorations of the evil caused by well-intentioned and benevolent persons.**

- Not only do **sincerity and benevolence often contradict each other,** but **virtuous motives time and time again create contrary consequences.**
- **His characters analyze their motives meticulously. Only to find they "set in motion a machine over whose progress [they] had no control."**

- **Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jeckyl and Mr. Hyde* (1886** – predates Freud's first written works by 5 years). Deemed "Gothic" but prefigures Freud's theories of self-alienation and the unconscious.

NINETEENTH CENTURY REALISM NOVELS

- The novels of Balzac, Stendhal and Flaubert epitomized this approach, seeking to portray in rich detail but straightforward prose the daily, often mundane lives of middle and lower class men and women.
- In America, the most prominent Realist writers were William Dean Howells and Henry James, who replaced Romantic philosophizing with psychological dissection.

THE NATURALIST REACTION TO REALISM: DARWIN, FREUD, MARX, AND NIETZSCHE

- **Emile Zola** responded to overly sentimental, prudish, bourgeois view of man found in Realism. Focused on a commitment to **a more scientific depiction of human behavior, which he believed was dictated by "nerves and blood."**
- **Individual psychology was necessary but insufficient to explain behavior**;
- The **skepticism unleashed by Darwin, compounded by Marx and Nietzsche and culminated by Freud**, fundamentally challenged the core concept of the self or soul.
- **American Naturalists**—Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, Eudora Welty, Theodore Dreiser—**committed to portraying men and women of the lower classes, how their lives were determined by overwhelming forces.**
- **revealed an interest in the inner worlds of characters, what made them choose, even if the choices proved illusory or the result of chance**.
- There is possibly no novel in American letters more dedicated to psychological precision that Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*.

FREUD

- Freud's influence revolutionized psychological depiction.
- Freud's concept of the unconscious **fundamentally challenged the Enlightenment view of man as rational actor**, replacing him with an individual who was **intrinsically alienated from himself and fundamentally conflicted.**
- man remains at all times a mystery—if not a stranger—to himself has informed (or haunted) dramatic characterization ever since—from D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* to Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* to Ian McEwan's *Atonement*.

- And yet psychoanalysis also reasserted the power of insight and the capacity of the individual to, at least to some degree, change.

20ᵀᴴ CENTURY

INNER LIFE/STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

- Although William James invented the term "stream of consciousness," Freud's concept of random association in psychoanalysis would arguably assist writers in developing a technique, though this has been disputed.
- **Early 20th century: James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner.**
- **mid-to-late century writers: Samuel Beckett, William Styron, Ken Keasey, William Burroughs and Thomas Pynchon**.
- It remains in use today in the work of writers as varied as **Cormac McCarthy, Patrick McCabe, Salmon Rushdie and Bret Easton Ellis.** It **owes its longevity at least partially to its ability to capture not just thought but its disintegration**, increasingly a concern as the twentieth century proceeded.

EXISTENTIALISM

> If I try to seize this self of which I feel sure, if I try to define and to summarize it, it is nothing but water slipping through my fingers. I can sketch one by one all the aspects it is able to assume, all those likewise that have been attributed to it, this upbringing, this origin, this ardor or these silences, this nobility or this vileness. But aspects cannot be added up.
>
> —Albert Camus, *An Absurd Reasoning*

- World War I: The sense of a coherent universe guided by a superior intelligence, let alone one concerned with human affairs, seemed not just quaint but repulsive.
- Existentialism emerged from this deepening skepticism, and this movement had a profound effect on narrative.
- Gestated in the nineteenth century, and claimed **Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche** as its seminal lights, it would reach full maturity in the mid-twentieth century with **Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus**.
- existentialism **returned philosophy to the Stoic and Epicurean concern with morality**.
- **Heidegger**'s *Being and Time*:**we acquire consciousness "in the middle of things,"** and to the extent there is **some core or rock bottom to our natures**—**a self**—it is reflected in our **biological limits and the cultural baggage of our time and place**, nothing more.
- **Rejecting God completely, Sartre denied the existence of a transcendent self, and instead believed whatever core identity man might possess was in a perpetual state of creation (this is what he meant by "existence precedes essence").**

- Concept of radical freedom **echoes Pico della Mirandola**'s Renaissance description of mankind as **"the molders and makers of ourselves. We make ourselves but there is no reliable rule to follow, no guarantee one result will prove better than another. We choose and accept responsibility, then choose again.**
- **Camus** believed in political engagement and resistance, even if it's futile or ultimately meaningless. **The point was to be authentic**, not successful.
- Sartre: re-conceptualizing Marxism— **he recognized, like the Naturalists before him, that the realities of power and poverty, of terror and subjugation put very real constraints on actual liberty**.

KAFKA AND HIS PROGENY: MAN AND HIS EXISTENTIAL PROBLEM

> The quest for the self has always ended, and will always end, in a paradoxical dissatisfaction.
> —Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*

- Franz Kafka protagonists remain something of a cipher, the "I" in a dream.
  - Some of the writers who followed Kafka **largely abandoned psychological realism altogether**, considering it an unproductive dead end—**what good had psychological insight provided in preventing the century's atrocities**?
  - The Absurdist plays of **Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, Frederich Durrenmatt, Harold Pinter** present characters who can at any time exhibit baffling contradictions or behavioral reversals.
  - **Milan Kundera** never gives his characters backstories but instead provides them with an existential problem revealed in a "code" embodied in certain words.
    - For Tereza in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, that code consisted of the words body, soul, vertigo, weakness, idyll, Paradise. For Tomas it was simply lightness and weight (to reflect the lack of gravity to existence in a world without Nietzsche's concept of eternal return).

LATE 20TH CENTURY

- Recent developments in **cognitive science, neurobiology, artificial intelligence** and other fields continue to expand our understanding of our nature and our behavior.
- In particular, **the role of the unconscious in decision-making is being charted in ways inconceivable even a decade ago, and with each discovery of how much our behavior is dictated by matters beyond the ego's awareness, the traditional concept of the self takes another hit.**
- **Situationist social scientists have argued for—and experimentally validated—the overwhelming influence of social factors in determining behavior rather than an individual's past behavior, her ethical beliefs, her emotions or anything else one might describe as her "character."**
- There are no such things as character traits and thereby no such things as virtues. (Virtue Ethicists respond:

- The **Situationist thesis was prefigured in fiction by Orwell's *1984*. Jerzy Kosinski's *Painted Bird* is one of the more famous novels to explore this terrain.**
- French philosopher **Jean Baudrillard: technology has eliminated the self altogether**). **Simulation has made the image of a human activity more real than actual human life; television personalities, sitcom characters and game avatars are more emotionally gratifying than friends and family**
- Feminist relational autonomy:
  - [is built on] the conviction that persons are socially embedded and that **agents' identities are formed within the context of social relationships and shaped by a complex of intersecting social determinants, such as race, class, gender, and ethnicity**.

In this conception, **personal autonomy is a capacity that we acquire through meaningful socialization**. It is an accomplished faculty, rather than something we automatically possess just by being left alone without interference by others.
- Compare to **Alexis de Tocqueville**:

  "They owe nothing to any man, they expect nothing from any man; they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands. Thus not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart."

AMERICAN MAINSTREAM: RETURN TO REALISM

- The **American mainstream is far more comfortable with the Realist tradition**—featuring characters who resemble ordinary people, with inner lives that most readers would consider recognizable
- **Not just commercial writers but also literary writers as diverse as Philip Roth, Toni Morrison, Annie Proulx and Jonathan Franzen.**
- **Fictions premised on ideas (or "Concepts") tend to minimize the importance of psychological realism**; understanding how people—and thus characters—think and feel in their daily lives.
- The only thing **distinguishing contemporary practitioners from Howells and James** and their other nineteenth century forebears **is a certain wariness, a retreat from confidence, an understanding of the limits of self-understanding** that events of the twentieth century oblige.
- Realism's reemergence may be due to the fact that the horrors of the two world wars have receded in collective memory.
- **influence of the visual media**. **drama & action trump introspection. Inner life is seen as boring.**