ABSTRACT

LAURA ANNE SIMSON. “No More Perfect Moments”: Restless Fancies, Insatiable Hearts, and the Decay of the Story in Existentialist Narrative From Fyodor Dostoevsky to Paul Bowles. (Under the direction of Professor Halpern.)

Though all characters experience life, not all have adventures. Jean-Paul Sartre makes the distinction between these two states of being in his 1938 existentialist manifesto, *Nausea,* through the self-inflicted choice - to live or to tell - that drives his narrator’s quest for meaning. However I argue that this choice begins not in Paris but further east, to 19th century St. Petersburg and two Russian authors who bestirred the discontent and unrequited hope that would, over the next century, manifest in the existentialist writings of thinkers such as Sartre and Paul Bowles. Each work in this oeuvre explores the journey towards the “perfect moment,” the ideal fusion of living and telling created by Sartre and generated from Fyodor Dostoevsky’s narrative structure in *Crime and Punishment,* that constitutes an adventure.For Sartre, Dostoevsky achieves this perfect state by employing two distinct narrators that upon convergence produce the perfect moment Sartre imagines. However the conclusive redemption in Dostoevsky’s finale, or the *essence*, leaves no room for self-exploration or *existence,* which Sartre deems the fundamental purpose of man. Thus in *Nausea* he leaves his character’s fate as a question; he leaves his essence undefined. In *The Sheltering Sky,* Bowles overturns both narrative structures and commences with the perfect moment, then spends the remainder of the novel destroying it. The central characters Port and Kit enter the novel as each other’s essence, each individual adventure told and governed by the other. But when the couple’s relationship falls apart so do their adventures and they are left with nothing but their individual existences, neither which can survive without the other. In the end, Sartre’s resistance to and Bowles’s conclusive rejection of the possibility of a lasting adventure ultimately forces one to question whether the traditional narrative has a place at all in existentialism.