Implications of Sartre’s Secular Existential Philosophy on Heroism

Beyond Sartre’s philosophical analysis of understanding the subjective elements of the human condition, his literary works inspired a fresh look at who our hero truly is in a world empty of norms and values which are traditionally embedded within the institution of religion. It is the hero who inherits the burden of total freedom and total responsibility for his actions. It is in this situation, a world free of morality, that one is at risk for becoming an anti-hero. We can identify this individual as the hero of existentialism. Our existential anti-hero experiences, like others, alienation, despair and anguish. This hero lives in a world without moral absolutes and his choices may not serve the interest of all or the common good. Compared to our conceptions of how the modern hero might act; to serve the common good, be courageous. selfless and achieve a moral outcome through his heroic act, our existential anti-hero will be criticized for acting out his convictions, for violating social and cultural standards of behavior. In the end, the anti-hero realizes he has achieved nothing short of ridicule and shame, and concludes the world is absurd.

Other existential writers of the literary genre have also written about the anti-hero. These character’s lives reflect the absurdity of the human condition. Albert Camus (1913-1960) characterized absurdity as the “divorce between man and life, actor and setting” in his novels. Camus’ characters are alienated, estranged and socially marginalized in society, unable to conform to social values and only able to establish a sense of being through continual social rebellion.