



Exploring Existential Angst, and the Self in Social Media *Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre in Nausea*

By Kelly Mansfield and Christine Onofrey

Subjects: ELA, Philosophy, French
Grade: 9-12

Introduction:

Students will be introduced to Existentialism through discussion and excerpts from Jean-Paul Sartre's novel, *Nausea*, which describes a certain vague feeling the main character, Roquentin, calls "nausea". This feeling is basically a result of suspecting that there is a reality behind what we perceive as reality, an objective and subjective reality or Self. Realizing that upon piercing the veil of existence, there's a subjective reality that we alone are responsible for creating - this creates a freedom, but also a burden and anxiety or nausea. That subjectivity (or the word "contingency" is used in *Nausea*) is the 1st principle of Existentialism. You may want to read some additional information to become more familiar with these ideas yourself. We recommend Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism* for you, or even as extended reading for students.

Roquentin's revelations about reality and human consciousness lead him to his understanding that "existence precedes essence". We exist first, and then do stuff and define who we are after the fact of existing. The implications of this are that we are all free to define our own essence. We exist, therefore we have anxiety about what to do with ourselves now that we exist. This overwhelming freedom is highly relatable to our students who are coping with their first waves of existential angst, as well as trying to construct their virtual Self/ Selves through multiplying social media and other online platforms.

Here, we provide 5 days (assuming about 50 minute classes) of lessons that incorporate passages from the novel and engaging activities designed to encourage students to look at their individual choices through the lens of free will and self determination. Lessons can be done together as a mini-unit, or choose one to do on it's own. Students should interact with these lessons using a journal to record their thoughts and experiences as they go through the material and group discussions.

Materials:

-*Nausea*, Jean-Paul Sartre. You only need to give students photocopies of excerpts.
Pagination used in these lessons corresponds to the A New Direction Paperback published in 2007
ISBN 978-0-8112-2030-9

- A student journal. Could be just notebook paper stapled, or copy paper folded and stapled.
- Small hand mirrors, or students phones set as a mirror. One per students if possible, or at least one for every 2 students.

Optional materials for the drawing of *The Scream*: decide on drawing paper, copy paper, or photocopies of the outline provided. Chalk pastels or coloring pencils.

Day 1

Objective: Students will notice and describe the difference between their internal and external states. They will experience their consciousness by noticing and recording their thoughts.

1. Students stare at their own faces in a mirror for a full minute.
2. After the minute is up, journal prompt: Write about what you noticed while looking at yourself. What did you notice about your face? What were you thinking about?

** As an extension activity/lesson, you could also have student partners stare at each other and then record what that was like, how was it different than looking at yourself, what were you thinking, were you trying to notice the appearance of your partner, were you wondering how you look to your partner, etc.

3. Read excerpt where Roquentin is looking at his face in a mirror, starting "I get up. There is a white hole in the wall, a mirror..." through "light halo gliding in the light." **p? - ?**
4. Journal: In what way can you relate your mirror experience to Roquentin's? What does Roquentin mean with his comment about the monkey? He sees something lower than the monkey. What does that mean? Why is he so fascinated/bothered by his reflection?
5. Discuss answers to all journal prompts so far in small group.
6. Share to class/ class discussion.
7. Homework: read "Chestnut Tree" excerpt for day 3.

Day 2

Objective: Students will gain an understanding of the feeling of nausea as described by Nausea's narrator, connecting it with their own feelings. They will be able to explain what is meant by "existence precedes essence"

1. Project image of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. Have students journal these questions:
 - How does this picture make you feel?
 - Why is the person screaming?
 - Describe a time when, on the inside, you felt like the person in this picture.
2. Group discussion. Class discussion.
 - Students discuss their answers in small groups, then share/discuss as a class.

3. Optionally: Provide students with a sheet of drawing paper, and chalk or oil pastels preferably, or crayons, colored pencils. If you need to save time, or have younger students, you may want to print out the coloring book page provided here instead of using drawing paper. Project the image of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, 1893. Students will copy the picture (20 minutes). While they are working (or separately, depending on your students), you can give information/ discuss the picture. Or you can skip the copy and just discuss the picture:

- Done in 1893 by Norwegian, Edvard Munch.
- Edvard was an Expressionist painter, meaning that expressing the subjective, internal reality of a person or scene was more important than actual physical, external reality.
- How is he distorting or exaggerating reality? What effect does it give? Agressive red sky, dynamic curving lines create a feeling of anxiety, excessive energy wanting release.
- Is he alone in the picture or not? There are other figures in the picture, but they are clearly not with the main figure. Their presence emphasizes the solitude/alienation of the screamer. Is he screaming so that they can hear him? How realistically is he drawn compared to the other figures? He stands out as his own self, in a different reality. Maybe a reality of internal consciousness instead of external "real" reality. Maybe in our shared external reality, he's not screaming at all, but standing perfectly still and silent? What do you think?

2. Students clean up and then answer the reflection questions in journal. (10min or homework)

Day 3

Objective: Students will gain an understanding of the feeling of nausea as described by Nausea's narrator, connecting it with their own feelings. They will be able to explain what is meant by "existence precedes essence"

1. Read Nausea excerpt "Chestnut Tree"

2. Journal Questions:

- What does Roquentin see?
- What is he saying about existence?
- Why can't you *touch* the "green sea" or a "seagull"?
- What does Roquentin mean about existence by "it was nothing, simply an empty form added to things from the outside, without changing anything in their nature."?
- We create words, symbols, categories for objects in our world. Are any of those actually what the object is?
- Use this scene in Nausea to explain what you think the meaning of Sartre's Existentialist quote, "existence precedes essence." What is existence, what is essence here?

3. Discuss in small groups

4. Share with class (class discussion)

Day 4:

Objective: Students will explore the concept of "Adventure" as described in Sartre's Nausea and apply this concept to their own social media presence.

Essential Questions: How do we use adventures on social media to shape the way that others view us? How do Sartre's ideas about adventures coincide or differ from ours? Is an adventure only authentic in so far as we can shape and share it on social media?

1. Read Passage: Pages 37-38 "I have never had adventures...But, Why? Why?"
2. Activity: What is an adventure? (materials needed--pictures of various activities from the mundane to the exotic)
 - Place pictures around the room and have students circulate at their own pace from picture to picture.
 - Students should determine to what extent the picture captures what they perceive to be an adventure by ranking the picture from 1-5. One is not at all an adventure while five is a really exciting and memorable adventure.
 - Once complete students should determine the three highest and lowest ranked pictures and then in a large group or small groups brainstorm what makes something an adventure.
3. Activity: Create a Tweet Jigsaw
 - Working in small groups, read and summarize the passage on adventures (pages 37-38) and summarize it using no more than 140 characters.
 - Jigsaw out to other groups and give and receive feedback.
 - Post these around the room.
4. Journal Questions:
 - To what extent do you mold your image (the "you" other people see and know on social media)?
 - How do you choose what to put on SnapChat, Twitter, and Facebook? How much does this look like your actual life?
5. Homework: Summarize the first full paragraph on page 39 "This is what I thought...But you have to choose: live or tell".

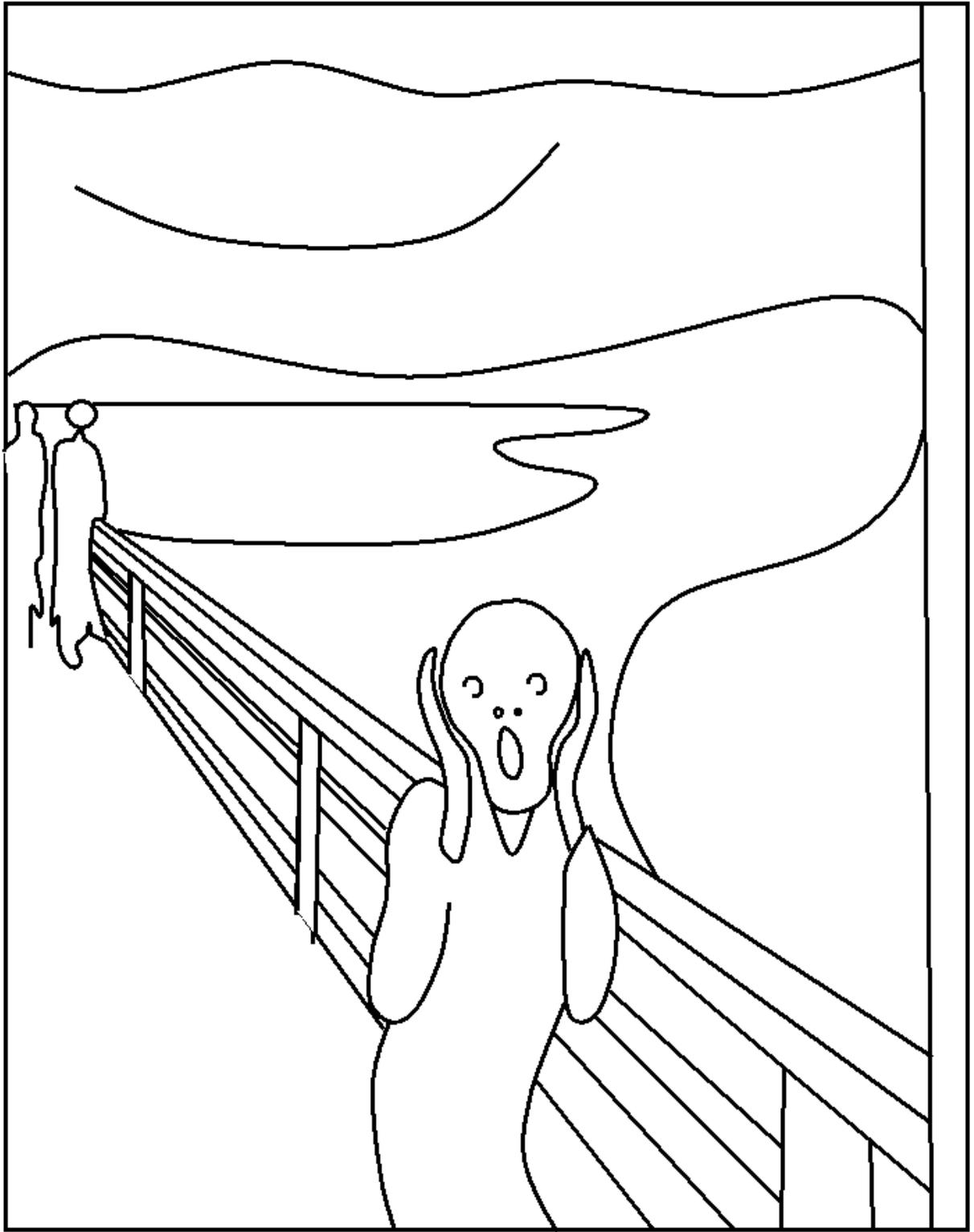
Day 5:

Objective: Students will examine how Sartre's views about living in Nausea are expressed, and how their own ideas about living their lives as individuals are impacted by social media.

Essential Questions: To what extent do you shape yourself to suit others or the image you want others to have of you? Is this an authentic way to live? How can you be the "hero" of your own story?

1. Lecture: The teacher should introduce the following concepts of existentialism:
 - As an individual you, and you alone, are responsible for your life choices.
 - Every choice you make impacts your life experience, and you have an infinite number of choices.

- You must make your choices with an eye toward your responsibility to society. You must ask yourself, “What kind of a world would it be if everyone behaved as I do?”
2. Think-Pair-Share: Working with a partner share the quick write/ exit slip as well as the summary of page 39. In light of the mini lesson, what questions and conclusions can you come up with? Each pair should create one conclusion and two questions. Pairs then split up and bring their conclusion and questions to small groups of 6-8 for further discussion.
 3. Activity: New Tweet Jigsaw
 - Working in small groups, read and summarize the passage on adventures (Pages 39-40 “But you have to choose...You might as well try to catch time by the tail.”) and summarize it using no more than 140 characters.
 - Jigsaw out to other groups and give and receive feedback.
 - Post these around the room.
 4. Survey about Social Media: Create three line graphs. This activity would work well with PearDeck or other internet-based program, but it is also quite effective of paper. Students should circulate to each graph and indicate their answer with an anonymous sticky note.
 - Graph One: “I spend time on social media to see how other people’s lives compare to mine.” (0 would indicate “not at all true” while 10 would indicate “Absolutely true”.)
 - Graph Two: “It is important to me that I receive feedback on social media.” (0 would indicate “not at all true” while 10 would indicate “Absolutely true”.)
 - Graph Three: In the last 7 days, I estimate that I have spent ___ # of hours on social media (include everything!) Here you may want to students just place sticky notes with the number of hours in order from lowest to highest.
 - Now, instruct students with iPhones to open their phones and go to Settings>Battery>Last 7 Days>Click on the Clock.
 - Ask students to total up the time they have actually spent on all social media apps.
 - Have students locate their original estimate and update it with this new information.
 - Class discussion about time spent on social media. Keeping in mind that this is a choice you are making, do you consider your time on social media as something that enhances or detracts from your life?
 5. Journal Questions:
 - Do you think you will consider changing your social media habits as a result of today’s lesson? In what ways? If not, why not?



Edvard Munch's, The Scream painted in 1893

