

Sane or Insane: The Crisis of the Anti-Hero in Kingsley

Amis' The Green Man

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Abstract: Published in 1969, Kingsley Amis' *The Green Man* is the story of the disenchanted Maurice Allington who is haunted by ghosts as well as existential questions. Revamping the conventional ghost story genre, Amis puts supernatural events in the contemporary context and presents a profound analysis of the existential crisis faced by modern man. Throughout this article, I use the term "existential crisis" with reference to the feeling of an acute sense of loneliness and isolation in a world that lacks any coherent meaning. This fundamental feeling of loneliness is further exacerbated by one's recognition of his own mortality and the inevitable sense of dread that accompanies it. For the purposes of this article, I utilize several existentialist concepts Sartre develops in *Being and Nothingness* to examine more thoroughly the dilemmas faced by Maurice Allington in *The Green Man*.

Key words: existentialist philosophy, existential crisis, Jean Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness, Kingsley Amis, The Green Man

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.
(From Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach*)

When asked what there is to write about in England at the time in an interview dated 1973, Kingsley Amis replies: "Anything. That question brings up the whole question of what the novelist is up to. And this brings up another thing which I think is in favor of the British writer here — he is not distracted from his proper task, which is to write about human nature, the permanent things in human nature. I could reel you off a list as long as your arm, beginning with ambition, sexual desire, vainglory, foolishness — there's quite enough there to keep people writing" (qtd. in Salwak: 4). Amis further concedes that the dress in which these abstractions are clothed must be

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contemporary, unless the writer is detaching them deliberately, and the contemporary details must be right. Published in 1969, *The Green Man* is a representative text in which Amis puts these ideas into practice through the story of the disenchanted Maurice Allington who is haunted by ghosts as well as existential questions. Revamping the conventional ghost story genre, Amis puts supernatural events in the contemporary context and presents a profound analysis of the existential crisis faced by modern man.

I believe that the arguments raised by existentialist philosophers in the 19th and particularly the 20th centuries shed significant light on the predicaments faced by Maurice Allington. I also argue that Maurice's case is representative since the "demons" that haunt him and the problems that plague his life are familiar to many others in our age. Throughout this article, I use the term "existential crisis" with reference to the feeling of an acute sense of loneliness and isolation in a world that lacks any coherent meaning. This fundamental feeling of loneliness is further exacerbated by one's recognition of his own mortality and the inevitable sense of dread that accompanies it. Unable to find any reliable purpose or external meaning in existence, the individual suffers from a sense of disorientation and confusion in the face of an apparently meaningless or absurd world (Cooper, 1999, p. 8). Drawing on these points, many existentialists focus on action, freedom, and decision as fundamental, while opposing themselves to rationalism. In addition to the rejection of reason as the source of meaning, they also emphasize the feelings of anxiety and dread that we feel in the face of our own radical freedom and our crippling awareness of death.

One of the leading figures in 20th century French philosophy and existentialism, Jean Paul Sartre develops his ideas in fictional (*Nausea* and *No Exit*) and philosophical (*Being and Nothingness* and *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*) works. In the words of Marjorie Grene: "we owe a debt to Sartre for the appalling honesty with which he most of all twentieth-century philosophers has faced the consequences of our common crisis" (p. 136). Like his German predecessor Heidegger, Sartre is deeply interested in the liminal experiences of anxiety and death as well as "authenticity" as a norm of self-identity linked to the project of self-definition through freedom and choice. For Sartre, existence precedes essence and thus there is no meaning outside existence itself. In this sense, the existential choices one makes in life determine the human "essence" which Sartre defines as past occurrences and choices. There is consequently no theological, scientific or historical framework that can determine the essence of any given individual or existence itself. According to Sartrean existentialism, then, there is no ultimate "human nature" imposed by God or by genetics. According to Sartre "man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being" (1956, p. 553). Sartre uses the world responsibility in its ordinary sense "as consciousness (of) being the incontestable author of an event or of an object" (p. 553). Accordingly, man is the sole author of whatever situation he finds himself in since nothing "foreign has decided what we feel, what we live, or what we are" (p. 554). In brief, we all are who we make ourselves to be and therefore bear responsibility for the lives we lead as active agents of our destinies.

Being and Nothingness is widely recognized as Sartre's major philosophical work and is considered to be one of the most influential texts of the existentialist movement as a whole. It is possible to suggest that the important existential themes of loneliness, despair, and the anxiety of personal freedom were given large-scale expression with the publication of this book. Hence, *Being and Nothingness* is rightfully praised as a highly ambitious and systematic treatise that captures, probably to a greater degree than any other book of modern philosophy, the angst of the twentieth century mind. For the purposes of this article, I utilize several existentialist concepts Sartre develops in the book to examine more thoroughly the dilemmas faced by Maurice Allington in *The Green Man*.

Maurice Allington, who is in his early 50s and married for the second time, has a daughter from his first marriage and runs an inn called *The Green Man*. The whole story of the book takes place in four days during which Maurice has a talk with God, his father dies, he arranges a sexual party of three, his second marriage breaks down and he starts of a new and closer relationship with his daughter. Through his protagonist Maurice, Amis examines the issues of normality and stability in the modern man. There seems to be many people like Maurice who outwardly appear normal and who continue to work and lead a supposedly regular family life but when Amis leads the readers inside the walls of the inn, one is confronted with the rather unpleasant reality: Maurice is an alcoholic, and suffers from hallucinations, and “jactitations” — spasmodic jerking of the limbs, at night. He suffers from both imaginary and real illnesses.

So what is at the root of Maurice's suffering and mental instability? Although it is possible to attribute the anguish and distress he feels to his mid-life crisis, dysfunctional marriage or problems with parenting, Maurice's “real” problems lie much deeper. Namely, I contend that Maurice suffers from “the human condition” and finds it increasingly difficult to grapple with his intuitive recognition of “nothingness” that implicates existence as a whole. “It is through man that nothingness comes into the world; and, indeed, that *is* the reality of man: that through him nothingness comes into the world. But the reality of man is freedom; and freedom is in fact, Sartre tells us, the human being putting his past out of play by secreting his own nothingness” (Greene, 1973, p. 127). However, man recognizes himself as a free agent through the consciousness of *dread* defined as “the dizzying mood in which I recognize myself, not only as not being what I was, but also as being, in the mode of *not* being it, the future that I will, or ought to, be.” (p. 127). I would argue that this is the mood from which Maurice is everywhere in flight. Evading the revelation of dread, which exhibits him as an emergent freedom, responsible for his own being, Maurice falls back on what seems to be the most available alternative: bad faith and social role-playing.

According to Sartre, “The human being is not only the being by whom *negatites* are disclosed in the world; he is also the one who can take negative attitudes with respect to himself (1956, p. 47). Self-negation is universal and the kinds of behavior which can be ranked under this heading too diverse. For this reason, Sartre focuses his attention on one determined attitude which he deems essential to human reality. In his view, this attitude is such that “consciousness instead of directing its negation outward turns it toward itself. This attitude, it seems to me, is *bad faith* (*mauvaise foi*)” (p. 48). Frequently identified with “falsehood”, bad faith can be briefly defined as “a lie to oneself, on condition that we distinguish the lie to oneself from lying in general” (p. 48). Maurice Allington exhibits “bad faith” as an individual since he busies himself with the hustle and bustle of everyday life to avoid facing the terrifying responsibility of choice. He evades responsibility for his actions by numbing his mind with alcohol and by distracting himself with sexual escapades. Neither does he genuinely care about his daughter, father or wife. He “plays the part” of a father, son and husband without any inner conviction which shows in his attitudes towards the members of his family. Taking care of everyday business and providing his family with food and shelter, Maurice simply seems to get by. In other words, he just goes with the flow without showing any real effort or asserting meaningful agency. Hence, he objectifies himself into a “thing”, merely being acted upon rather than acting.

The causes of Maurice's troubled state of mind can be further traced back to his acute sense of ontological insecurity and his subsequent alienation from the people in his life. He seems to have very little time for his second wife as well as his daughter and he is promiscuous. He lacks principles, he can see nothing wrong in starting a relationship with his best friend's wife and he can even suggest a sexual party of three to his wife and

mistress. As Joyce tells him "I don't know what you think about people, which is bad enough, but you certainly go on as if they're all in the way. Except for just sex, and that's so that you can get them out of the way for a bit. Or you just treat them like bottles of whisky — this one's finished, take it away, bring me another one" (p. 244).

Maurice aims to derive all the pleasure he can get from life but he is not willing to give anything in return to others. As a result, he is desperately lonely. Although he lives with his father, wife and daughter, it is clear that he hasn't been able to form a true relationship with any of them. His relationship with his daughter is so pathetic that he hasn't found the time to talk to her about her feelings at her mother's death. From this perspective, Maurice's mental instability and erratic behaviors can be attributed to his feelings of estrangement and alienation in an absurd world that for him is devoid of any inherent meaning. In the existentialist sense of the word, alienation refers to the estrangement of the self both from the world and from itself. Contrasting sharply with the idea of an ordered cosmos where human beings are designated their rightful places, the idea of alienation connects existential philosophy to the modern experience of a meaningless universe. Maurice's way of dealing with such existential anxiety is turning his back on his real problems by engaging in all sorts of escapism. Yet the recreational mechanisms he uses to counter his fear of being in the world do not eventually bring him any peace of mind. When earthly pleasures are not enough for him he seeks excitement and thrill in the supernatural.

If who we are is defined by our existing, then — judging by his actions — Maurice does not at all seem to be a role model to follow. Aptly described by one critic as "one of the testy, selfish and bigoted Amis bastards" (McDermott, 1989, p. 160), Maurice is a hedonist who relentlessly seeks pleasure wherever he can find it. His alcohol addiction and womanizing activities are in this context ways for him to satiate his desire for pleasure. Yet for him, it is the anticipation, rather than the consummation, of pleasure that is precious:

Seduction is the unique sensual act; other pleasures, including sex *per se*, are mere activities, durative and repetitive. Each particular seduction is a final and unchangeable thing, a part of history, like a century before lunch or a winning try (few of which carry the bonus of orgasm). And a sculpture can become nothing but a stale grotesque, a poem lose all its edge, but nothing of the sort can happen to what you got up to that night with the princess or the barmaid. (p. 108)

As these words illustrate, Maurice perceives the "seduction" of a woman infinitely superior to the act of making love which marks a kind of closure. While seduction is idealized as the "unique sensual act", the sexual act itself is denigrated as "durative and repetitive" and thus, boring. Perceived in this way, "sex" cannot be an antidote the tedium that ails Maurice's life. Rather, it is the thrill he finds in snaring his prey, so to speak, that gives him satisfaction. However, the satisfaction he feels when seduction is finalized is only a fleeting reward since it vanishes into thin air at the moment of triumph. Such moments are cherished in so far as they make possible future libidinous schemes. For instance, Maurice wants to satisfy Diana sexually primarily because that will allow him to proceed to his bolder project of an orgy with both her and his wife Joyce. Although he voices strong desire for this prospect several times, he feels almost disappointed when he finally succeeds in convincing them both: "I was puzzled by the sensation that Joyce had let the situation down in some way: having wished beforehand for nothing better than her ready acceptance of the orgy project, I was now wishing she had put up objections for me to beat or wheedle out of the way" (pp. 115–116). Maurice's apparent disillusionment here may be attributed to emptiness he feels once he makes sure he will get what he wants. Finding relish mainly in the struggle itself, i.e., the process of seduction, he fails to celebrate fully the imminent prospect consummation.

For Sartre, desire is a project of being fully incarnated and embodied since the being which desires is consciousness making itself body. From his point of view: "desire is not only the clogging of consciousness by its

facticity; it is correlatively the ensnarement of a body by the world" (1956, p. 392). Thus, the consummation of desire holds the promise of endowing the individual with the sensation of "being-in-the-midst-of-the-world" which is the ultimate project of his "being-in-the-world". However, "The ensnarement of consciousness in the body normally has its own peculiar result — that is, a sort of particular ecstasy in which consciousness is no more than consciousness of the body and consequently a reflective consciousness of corporeality" (p. 397). Consequently, pleasure is the death and the failure of desire because it is not only its fulfillment but its limit and its end.

Sartre's observations explain why Maurice's efforts to dispel the existential angst he feels at the root of his being through sexual experimentation are ultimately unsuccessful. Whatever temporary release Maurice can find in excessive drinking or sex is unsustainable since he can never find peace as long as he averts facing his "real problems". And the main problem for Maurice seems to be that he is a man "on the run" without a final destination. Unable to find any meaning or solace in his life and terrified of the lurking presence of death, he wanders about aimlessly and lacks the courage to look soberly at himself and at his life. The following passage is representative of Maurice's general state of mind:

As I walked over to where my Volkswagen was parked in the yard, I told myself that I would soon start to relish the state of being alone (not rid of Amy, just alone for a guaranteed period), only to find, as usual, that being alone meant that I was stuck with myself, with the outside and inside of my body, with my memories and anticipations and present feelings, with that indefinable sphere of being that is the sum of these and yet something beyond them, and with the assorted uneasiness of the whole. Two's company, which is bad enough in all conscience, but one's a crowd. (Amis, 1970, p. 55)

This passage shows the full extent of Maurice's alienation not only from himself but also from his surroundings. To begin with, the fact that he is almost horrified at the prospect of being "stuck with himself" is indicative of the nature of his feelings for himself. His uneasiness in this respect is also fundamentally related to existential questions of wider significance that are often unearthed during moments of forced contemplation. Maurice can avoid facing the burden of consciousness as long as he keeps himself busy working, drinking and copulating, but when he is left alone by himself "the assorted uneasiness of the whole" weighs in on him like a huge rock. Not particularly thrilled in the company of others, nor at peace with himself, Maurice pensively reflects that "Two's company, which is bad enough in all conscience, but one's a crowd". This comment alone suggests that Maurice is a deeply unhappy individual who is definitely not at home or at peace in this world.

Despite the intensity of his suffering conveyed through first person narration, Maurice fails to attract any sympathy from the readers since he is squarely presented as an unadulterated jerk *par excellence*. In addition to being an indifferent father and son, he is a manipulative and self-serving individual who shows no real concern for other people's feelings. As I have already remarked, Maurice is moreover a routine and remorseless adulterer who takes his sexual greed to a completely new level when he contrives a three in bed with his wife Joyce and his friend's wife Diana on the afternoon of his father's funeral. He even attempts a bargain with the evil Underhill, who reminds him that "it is you that have each time come in search of me" (p. 153), and who offers him "the veritable Secret of life". Having earned himself a name as a seducer of adolescent girls, Dr. Underhill tricked these girls into submission by magic and his henchman The Green Man. Like Maurice, he treated the female bodies he had conquered as sexual objects to be used and abused at will. Although Maurice's "sexual misbehaviors" do not extend to the abuse of female children, they are still strikingly similar to Dr. Underhill's. In this sense, it is even possible to suggest that Dr. Underhill is Maurice's alter ego, his Mr. Hyde, and represents the walking nightmare

he may one day become if he continues on this path of self serving — and ultimately self destructive — hedonism. Fortunately, Maurice comes to be aware of this dire situation when he discovers that he is singled out by the dead wizard because the two have so much in common. Namely, Dr. Underhill's illustrious career in the service of evil is the embodiment of all the salient and manifest moral ills in Maurice's character in magnified form. It is therefore only after boldly facing his "darker self" that Maurice can start his regeneration.

But before Maurice can find any salvation he has to gather enough courage to confront his demons, both literally and figuratively. This turns out to be a rather traumatic process during which he occasionally exhibits symptoms of madness. Haunted by the ghost of Underhill and obsessed with the mystery of the Green Man, Maurice sees horrific dreams and hallucinations. Such signs of mental instability alarm close family members and his friend and doctor, Jack who tells Maurice that these hallucinations can be explained. Still, the most powerful 'nightmare' that seems to torment Maurice is arguably the horror and the finality of death and the powerlessness of individuals in the face of it. Obsessed with the idea of death, Maurice cannot see why "everybody who's theoretically old enough to have understood what death means, doesn't spend all his time thinking about it" (pp. 76–78).

In addition to the familiar existential themes of anxiety, nothingness, and the absurd, *The Green Man* also critically examines the bankruptcy of God and religion. In the textual world of the book, even the member of the clergy who is supposed to invalidate the apparent absurdity of existence and existential uncertainties with the arguments of religion is revealed to be insufficient in fulfilling his traditional role. Introduced in the book as the new priest, Sonnenschein (sunshine) appears to be more interested in making the most of life in this world than preparing for the next one. Amis depicts him as a man who is least likely to be able to give help in saving one's soul. Rather than offering people visions of eternal salvation and the bliss of heaven, the Priest comes up with a historicist/materialist interpretation of immortality: "You know, this whole immortality bit's been pretty well done to death. One's got to take the historical angle. Basically, it was thought by the Victorians, especially the early Victorians, as a sort of guilt thing" (p. 179). Understandably upset by the priest's remarks, Joyce asks him: "What's the point of somebody like you being a parson when you say that you don't care about things like duty and people's souls and sin? Isn't that exactly what parsons are supposed to care about?" (pp. 174-175). Later, when Joyce asks the priest "What is God's purpose?", he replies: "What God wants us to do is to fight injustice, and oppression wherever they are, whether they are in Greece, or Rhodesia or America, or Ulster or Mozambique-and Angola or Spain" (p. 184).

God, on the other hand, does not seem to fare much better. In fact, upon closer examination, the "young man" who introduces himself as God appears to bear an uncanny resemblance to both Maurice and Underhill in some respects although he possesses much higher power. Far from being a benevolent and reassuring force of good, Maurice's God is a manipulator who is at best morally neutral and who exhibits occasional, yet perceptible, signs of cruelty. Maurice's brief conversation with him is arguably the thematic center of the novel and is followed by the narrative climax when Underhill tries to kill Maurice's daughter Amy. "God" is described as "about 28 years old, with a squarish not very trustworthy face, unabundant eyebrows and eye lashes and good teeth. [...] Altogether he seemed prosperous, assured and in good physical shape, apart from his pallor" (p. 199). Accepting Maurice's offer of a drink, God says: "I'm fully corporeal. I was going to warn you against making the mistake of supposing that I come from inside your mind but you've saved me that trouble. I'll join you in a little Scotch, if I may". Although the purpose of God's visit is to warn Maurice against Underhill, he stays for a chat and answers some questions about afterlife and the limits of man's freedom. When asked whether there is an afterlife God

answers: "I suppose there's nothing else you could call it really. It's nothing like here or anything you've ever imagined and I can't describe it to you. But you'll never be free of me, while this lot lasts" (p. 207). He also dismisses his supposed representative on earth by calling him an idiot who makes God out to be Mao Tsetung (p. 207). Still, God is of the opinion that the church should be used when appropriate and he reminds Maurice that as a priest of the Church Sonnenschein has certain techniques at his disposal (p. 207). What God means here is soon revealed when the unwilling priest is almost forced by Maurice to perform a ceremony of exorcism to rid the world of Underhill.

With the portrayal of the worldly priest and anthropomorphic God, Amis seems to suggest that there is no transcendental authority or source of truth that can people can turn to or rely on. Man is thrown to this world and has to cope with whatever life brings on his own. By challenging conventional representations of God and Christian dogma, Amis further implies that neither God nor religion can provide the answers men seek in the 20th century. Referring to his depiction of God in an interview, Amis says

The Green Man's God is slightly malignant, doesn't at all object to inflicting suffering, but that is not his main concern. He's running a game that's much more complex than that. He's admitting that he's not omnipotent, and that what may strike Allington as very arbitrary is in fact forced upon him because of the rules of the game [...] Of course I incarnated God in *The Green Man* as a young man simply because he can't be an old man with an enormous white beard. The idea of a young, well-dressed, sort of after-shave lotion kind of man, I think, made him more sinister. That was the intention, anyway. (qtd. in Salwak, 1975, p. 16)

In the same interview, Amis also tells that the supernatural elements in the book should be taken as earnestly as possible since none of what happens in the book takes place in the hero's mind. The supernatural and the natural parts are intimately related because the hero is made aware of his own deficiencies by finding out that the reason he is being picked on by the dead wizard to fulfill his designs is that the wizard feels Allington's character is essential for his purposes. The fact that Allington is a man who doesn't care for people and manipulates them for his pleasure is the link between the two and it should be taken very seriously (p. 17). With these tips, Amis emphasizes the moral lesson to be derived from the book; namely that Maurice brings all these troubles upon himself with his reckless and selfish actions. Thus, one is led to think that Maurice gets what he deserves and that he can only sort out the mess that is his own doing by fundamentally changing his patterns of behavior.

In the words of Sartre: "The one who realizes in anguish his condition as being thrown into a responsibility which extends to his very abandonment has no longer either remorse or regret or excuse; he is no longer anything but a freedom which perfectly reveals itself and whose being resides in this very revelation" (1956, p. 195). Most people, like Maurice himself, flee anguish in bad faith. Yet, as Maurice's case aptly illustrates, this attitude of self-denial is unsustainable and counterproductive in the long run. From an existentialist point of view, then, Maurice cannot be excused as the unfortunate victim of a cosmic joke or the prey of a cruel hoax designed by the evil Underhill. By living irresponsibly and carelessly, Maurice paves the way for his mental disintegration and himself summons the ghosts that come to haunt him.

Ultimately, Maurice is a profoundly confused and lost character who is throughout the action unable to form any true and lasting relationships with his family or his friends. He is depicted as a drunkard, a womanizer and a cynical manipulator with little interest in others. The death of his father followed by some supernatural interventions initiate in him a turbulent process of self-discovery that leads to the realization that the only worthwhile thing in life is to form close and lasting relationships with a handful of people. The main idea that Amis foregrounds is that human beings are ultimately lonely in life. Loss of religion, lack of faith, sexual

promiscuity, alienation and the weakening of family ties implicate the lives of many people like Maurice who are desperately trying to find their way in the world. According to Richard Bradford "[The Green Man] shows that the complex intellectual systems that accumulate around the generally secure perspectives of middle-class England are verbose bunkum when the individual has to confront the actuality of evil and malice; in this case Allington's battle with an agent of Satan who almost kills his daughter" (1998, p. 81). So it is not only God and religion that are ultimately ineffective but also the sustaining illusions provided by contemporary society. As a modern man who takes the rational organization of the world as granted, Maurice is not initially equipped to deal with the supernatural horrors that come to threaten himself and his family. As his friends and family are inclined to doubt his sanity rather than give him credit for his ghost stories, he is forced to fight this battle alone and learn to deal with events and enemies that are beyond the grasp of his cognitive capacity. Moreover, the battle he needs fight is not only external but also internal. Maurice does not only resemble Dr. Underhill but also the Green Man whose potentially deadly energies are reflected in him in the form of an insatiable sexual appetite and self-destructive tendencies. By saving his daughter Amy from the Green Man and having Dr. Underhill exorcised, Maurice regains a new sense of identity and self-worth. In a way, he saves himself from the moral vacuum that he had been floating in by endangering his life to rescue his daughter.

In the final analysis, then, Maurice is the product of his times as much as anything else. He straddles the thin line between sanity and insanity like many other ailing souls in the modern world. He seems to be just another lost soul who is overburdened by existential questions and uncertainties that undermine the search for a meaningful existence. In this context, it is possible to argue that he is a hollow man whose lack of any real emotional depth and whose inability to find a substantial meaning in existence result in socially erratic forms of behavior such as alcoholism, drug addiction and sexually deviant behavior. Consequently, he can start to resolve the crisis of existence only after defines the meaning and purpose of his life. In the words of Robin Sims, *The Green Man* is thus a "moral" novel "though not a sanctimonious one: Maurice achieves growth not in doing what he is told, but in following his desire to its dark heart, and acting upon what he sees there. True to its paradoxical nature, the murderous green man is also the engine of Maurice's regeneration" (2007, pp. 96-97). Still, the prospect of regeneration with which the book ends is not completely unproblematic since the reader is led to wonder whether the 'existential crisis' that had brought Maurice down can be indefinitely averted. At the end of the book, Maurice meditates on his redefined perception of death:

I found I had begun to understand the meaning of the young man's prophecy that I would come to appreciate death and what it had to offer. Death was my only means of getting away for good from this body and all its pseudo-symptoms of disease and fear, from the constant awareness of this body, from this person, with his ruthlessness and sentimentality and ineffective, insincere, impracticable notions of behaving better, from attending to my own thoughts and from counting in thousands to smother them and from my face in the glass. (Amis, 1969, pp. 252-253)

This conclusion seems to defy the earlier note of optimism that followed Maurice's destruction of Underhill together with the Green Man, and hailed the hero's forthcoming regeneration. Here, Maurice explicitly welcomes death as a liberating force that will rescue him from a recognizably dire state of existence. Referring to himself in the third person while listing his complaints about his *being* — both body and mind — he still appears to be considerably alienated from himself. What's worse, Maurice exhibits clear signs of exhaustion and weariness with the "business of living" as well as his state of awareness. In brief, he seems to be fed up and looking forward to the big sleep. This yearning for the state of unconsciousness corresponds to the Freudian death wish, with the only

difference that it is consciously recognized.

This final note of pessimism is certainly in tune with the general mood of the novel which is permeated with a profound awareness of nothingness and the futility of human endeavor in the face of it. "We are a negation, a hole in being; our manner of existing is a disintegration of a unity, a flight from ourselves, and, inexorably, a failure. And in this condition the honest attitude is dread: a mood which swings, it seems, between blind arrogance — *I am responsible, I give meaning, I make the world* — and blind despair — *I am nothing, an unjustifiable fact, a contradiction, prey to the Other's look, a mere means to the Other's end. Wherever we turn, we find an impasse*" (Greene, 1973, pp. 135–136). Within this framework, we either strive vainly and absurdly for an empty authenticity or relapse into bad faith. Either way, our actions leads to suffering whereas all our aspirations fail. Man is, as Sartre famously remarked, a useless passion.

However, there is more to Sartre's philosophy than a straightforward affirmation of gloominess since the philosopher retains his conviction that, despite the odds, human beings are still capable of "authentic existence" on condition that they stand by their choices and face the consequences unflinchingly. Rather than giving into pessimism and despair, human beings should redeem themselves, at least from "bad faith", by accepting complete responsibility for their existence. In his words:

I am responsible for everything, in fact, except for my very responsibility, for I am not the foundation of my being. Therefore, everything takes place as if I were compelled to be responsible. I am abandoned in this world, not in the sense that I might remain abandoned and passive in a hostile universe like a board floating on the water, but rather in the sense that I find myself suddenly alone and without help, engaged in a world for which I bear the whole responsibility without being able, whatever I do, to tear myself away from this responsibility for an instant. For I am responsible for my very desire of fleeing responsibilities. (1956, pp. 555-556)

Despite the rather enigmatic ending of the book, it is still possible to suggest that Maurice eventually recovers at least some sort of "meaning" from the grasp of the numbing sensation of nothingness that overwhelms mankind. All in all, *The Green Man* has certain important insights to offer in relation to the existential crisis faced by modern man. Mainly, Maurice's case illustrates that diversions such as alcohol, drugs, sexual fantasies do not provide an antidote to loneliness and alienation. The only thing that may bring solace to the individual is thus Maurice's endeavor to connect with people who are dearest and closest to him. By rescuing his daughter, he also recovers a kind of creed to combat his feelings of skepticism, fear and nihilism. Using Sartrean terminology, Maurice climbs out of the despairing abyss of self-awareness to achieve some form of self-affirmation, however fragile or tentative it may be. In this context, the novel foregrounds and extols man's search for a personal philosophy in the face of rampant disbelief and the erosion of moral standards. In *Girl 20* a minor character probably voices Amis's views when he observes that "very nearly everybody who's ever done anything has believed in something, and by anything I don't mean anything important. I mean anything whatever". So rather than succumbing to nihilism in the face of an indifferent universe that lacks any intrinsic meaning, the individual should aspire towards an authentic state of existence that may only be achieved through constructive action. In this sense, Amis's message for the individual who is traveling toward the unknown is to find a unique purpose for this journey and try to make it as pleasant and meaningful as possible in the company of loved ones.

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