

Existential Meditation on Morality:

Janne Teller's *Nothing*

Even if the system politely assigned me a guest-room in the attic so I could come along all the same, I'd still prefer to be a thinker who is like a bird on a twig.

—Søren Kierkegaard, Journals and Notebooks, 1845/2001

The epigraph for this discussion on Janne Teller's (2010) *Nothing*, an artful and iconoclastic work of young adult fiction from Denmark, comes from the notebooks of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. Intended as a critique of academia (British Broadcasting, 2013), the sentiment expressed is offensive and amusing. If we understand “the system” as code for academia (reflective of Kierkegaard's contempt for the professoriate) (British Broadcasting, 2013; Kaufman, 1975), then Kierkegaard here implies that a bird on a branch is more seriously reflective than a professor at a university, or that a philosopher in a tree comes closer than an academic to the legitimate province of philosophy. To arrive at Kierkegaard's sense of the mission or responsibility of philosophy, we must draw, again, from the author's notebooks in which he writes: “What I really lack is to be clear in my mind *what I am to do*, not what I am to know, except in so far as a certain understanding must precede every action” (1835/2001, p. 15).

This remark suggests that, for Kierkegaard, the protocol for moral action is personal, reflective, and perhaps necessarily undertaken at a remove, like the philosopher/bird on a twig. At the same time, as Kaufman has observed (Partially Examined Life, 2011), the statement represents Kierkegaard's critique on the limits of reason or his objection to the aca-

demically placed on logic as the ultimate path to understanding. Therefore, the bird on a twig might be viewed as metaphoric of the retreat of the thinker to a place apart from institutionally sanctioned practices and beliefs. This situation is mirrored in another story of a thinker who took to the trees, Janne Teller's (2010) Batchelder Award-winning novel, *Nothing*.

In Teller's stylistically austere, existential allegory, a middle school student named Pierre Anthon, who lives in the town of Tæring [“a verb meaning to gradually consume, corrode, or eat through” (p. 229)], announces that “nothing matters . . . [s]o nothing is worth doing” (p. 1). Thereafter, he quits school and takes up residence in a plum tree. From his position above the doings of Tæring society, Pierre Anthon pelts his peers from the seventh-grade class with overripe fruit and “truth bombs,” or deconstructive statements that threaten the social and ontological sense of order and coherence that the kids have always accepted without question. From there, the seventh graders work to assemble an object lesson that will disabuse Anthon of his skepticism, but their plan degenerates into chaos. In the end—true to its existential roots—Teller's *Nothing* proposes no answers to the questions it raises, nor does it offer an alternative belief system to replace the one the philosopher in the tree debunks. The reader is left only with a menac-

ing admonition from the narrator of the story, Agnes, and must make personal sense of the moral message conveyed by the text.

Contextualizing *Nothing*

Outside of the theoretical realm, it is rare to discover a book that grapples as aggressively with questions of ontology, authenticity, and accountability, bear-

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ing out Kaufman's (1975) suggestion that "at least some part of what the existentialists attempt to do is best done in art" (p. 49). At the same time, the very features that make *Nothing* such an effective translation of existential thought and motifs make it an especially edgy reading choice for a youthful audience due to its extreme level of darkness and violence. However, I intend to argue that, despite the desolate and chaotic

universe portrayed in the novel (which couldn't be rendered any other way, as Teller is an inheritor of an unavoidably stark and unsettling philosophical tradition with antecedents in Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Camus), Teller creates a rich, intellectual conversation on the status of meaning, morality, and authenticity for 21st-century youth that raises the level of significance of literature written for young adults and catalyzes discussion on the ethics of authenticity and personal responsibility.

This deeper understanding, however, is difficult to access with (as yet) few scholarly essays dedicated to discussion of the book (see Lareau, 2012; Ommundsen, 2008; Wannamaker, 2015), coupled with the fact that reviewers have painted a fairly fragmentary and unflattering portrait of *Nothing*. For example, some critics dwell on the hideous procession of sacrifices offered to the moribund altar of meaning within the book (Lewis, 2010; *Publisher's Weekly*, 2010) as opposed to situating the action in a way that would clarify the relationship of the content with existential theory. In fact, after reading a review consisting of

a decontextualized catalogue of grotesqueries contained in the novel (e.g., a decapitated dog, the body of an exhumed infant, biological evidence obtained from a rape, and a dismembered finger), it is difficult to imagine what value might be gained from such a seeming grindhouse of a book. Therefore, similar to Wannamaker's (2015) general claim that literature acts as a guide to theory (although different, in that Wannamaker demotes the importance of existentialism), I will demonstrate how *Nothing* helps to clarify and extend the moral conversation in the philosophical literature and engages a new audience in dialogue with existentialism, a theory enduringly important for its emphasis on ethical critique and personal accountability.

If the term "existentialism," as Kaufman (1975, p. 11) suggests, is complicated by differences between its proponents, then there is another way to approach a definitional sense of the word as it is reified in the literature. For instance, one might argue that Teller's book demonstrates many of the classic themes commonly associated with existential thought, as identified by Kaufman (1975), such as hyper-consciousness of death and the irrationality of life (represented by Pierre Anthon's insistence on the futility of human existence and endeavor); struggle with anxiety (reflected in the children's collective hysteria to disprove Anthon's nihilistic thesis); adoption of a skeptical and anti-institutional stance (represented in Anthon's deconstruction of socially authorized beliefs and practices); and persistent critique of a lack of authenticity [reflected in the motif of seeming versus being and in the aggressive challenges to "self-deception" Anthon levels throughout the text (Kaufman, 1975, p. 42)]. Counterintuitive to conventional systems of morality, Teller's book ultimately proposes the prescriptive value of nothing, or a politics of (in)action as an assertion of personal integrity.

In Defense of *Nothing*

Admittedly, the shock factor of *Nothing* is high in terms of gore and subversive content, but the material is not gratuitous. The kids in the story live in a town that, basically, translates as "Corrosion" (Aitken as cited in Teller, 2010, p. 229), and it is obvious that a deterioration of ethical values drives the allegory. This is apparent not only in the grisly sacrifices gathered by the kids to affirm the existence of meaning, but in

Teller's satire aimed at greed and pretense when the abject collection amassed by the kids is ultimately declared a great work of art by an American cultural behemoth (implied to be the Museum of Modern Art in New York City) and sold for the remarkable sum of 3.5 million dollars. The riff on Andersen's (1837/2016) "The Emperor's New Clothes" in the final third of the book might be read through Baudrillard's (1994) post-modern analysis of the seduction and transparency of media images, but it is more appropriate to locate the variety of social commentary evident in *Nothing* as older than that. In other words, the evaluation is more properly understood, in the tradition of existential critique, as an expression of "the contrast [between] inauthentic . . . and authentic life" (Kaufman, 1975, p. 50).

Therefore, as with virtually everything that happens in the secondary ELA classroom, framing would be key to contextualizing Teller's novel in a way that would justify its academic merit and situate its social critique as one relevant to the ongoing conversation on ethics in contemporary culture. In terms of the structure of this article, I will provide a brief overview of scholars whose work frames this literary and philosophical discussion; draw from selected works of Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Camus to situate *Nothing* in a way that highlights its ethical content; and conclude with suggestions for classroom use of the novel.

Selected Literature Review

First, it seems important to situate Teller's novel *Nothing* in the context of debates surrounding children's literature at large and related conversations concerning attributes of Scandinavian literature written for children and young adults. For instance, *Nothing*, in terms of style and theme, can add to the ongoing discussion regarding whether the demarcations of "children's literature," "young adult literature," and literature produced for adults are still relevant. As scholars have argued for other titles, *Nothing's* resistance to categorization results from its genre-defying stylistic elements and age-transcendent audience appeal (Bjørk-Larsen, 2012; de Vries, 1997; Nikolajeva, 1998). Related to fluidity in terms of genre and audience, Bjørk-Larsen (2012) and Nikolajeva (1998) point to the tendency of Scandinavian children's literature to traverse conventional boundaries concerning appropriate content in literature written for young people.

This attribute is echoed by Ommundsen (2008), who characterizes Scandinavian literature by its predisposition for "taboo breaking" and "extreme depictions" (p. 38), and these qualities are reflected in Lareau's (2012) study of the "eroticization of children" in *Nothing* (p. 236).

Yet another thread of scholarly discussion useful for contextualizing *Nothing* concerns work situated at the intersection of literature produced for a youthful audience and philosophy.

Scholarship utilizing various philosophical frameworks for the interpretation of children's and young adult literature might be examined by audience age-group. For instance, notable studies of children's literature interpreted through distinct, philosophical approaches include Johansson's (2013) analysis of "moral thinking" (p. 89)

in a Norwegian picturebook informed by the theory of Wittgenstein. This group also includes de Rijke's (2013) analysis of existential motifs in the writings of Russell Hoban and Johansen's (2015) analysis of the Kierkegaardian evolution toward individual identity in the works of Shaun Tan. Notable studies incorporating philosophical perspectives in the analysis of texts written for a young adult audience include Gillespie's (2010) chapter on the value of philosophical theory for catalyzing literary analysis organized around key existential themes. This group also includes Wright's (2008) account of the existential framing of comic book superheroes and villains in the political context of the 1960s and '70s and Trites's (2000) Foucault-inflected reading of the mechanics of power in youth culture and young adult literature.

These studies are helpful for contextualizing the stylistic attributes of and challenges posed by Teller's novel. At the same time, they offer a methodological cue for analysis guided by philosophical perspectives. This essay contributes to the extant scholarship by building the conversation on this radical novel and by exploring how the allegory acts as a vehicle of moral critique.

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Begin at the End

In his essay titled, “An Absurd Reasoning,” Camus (1955) challenges the notion of meaning by refusing the possibility of certainty; subsequently, he explains the way everyday life empties out into gestural exercises to try to supplement absence or bury the uncomfortable apprehension of the void. Camus’s (1955) assessment renders life as pointless, “mechanical” (p. 10), and threatened constantly by an awareness of death, which he deems “the only reality” (Camus, 1955, p. 42). These preoccupations are drawn from his admiration for Kierkegaard (1843/1987) who, through the pseudonymous narrator “A” in *Either/Or*, writes:

How empty and meaningless life is.—We bury a man; we accompany him to the grave, throw three spadefuls of earth on him; we ride out in a carriage, ride home in a carriage; we find consolation in the thought that we have a long life ahead of us. But how long is seven times ten years? Why not settle it all at once, why not stay out there and go along down into the grave and draw lots to see to whom will befall the misfortune of being the last of the living who throws the last three spadefuls of earth on the last of the dead? (p. 29)

It is this Kierkegaardian sense of dread that seventh grader Pierre Anthon activates when he leaves school and unnerves his peers with the pronouncement, “Nothing matters. . . . I’ve known that for a long time. So nothing’s worth doing. I just realized that” (p. 5). After his withdrawal from society, Anthon relentlessly pursues his existential thesis from his place in a plum tree and provokes the kids to awaken to the acknowledgement of nothing. His comments include rebukes: “It’s all a waste of time. . . . Everything begins only to end. The moment you were born you begin to die. That’s how it is with everything” (p. 8); admonitions: “There’s nothing to wait for And there’s nothing at all worth seeing. And the longer you wait, the less there’ll be! (p. 62); and exhortations: “In a few years you’ll all be dead and forgotten and diddly-squat, nothing, so you might just as well start getting used to it! (p. 10).

Pierre Anthon’s criticisms delivered throughout the book are intended to rouse the kids from their illusions and liberate them from the human superimposition of order and purpose that existentialist writers like Camus, Kierkegaard, and Sartre attempt to strip away. His abbreviated lectures, delivered from a branch above his peers (making him seem like a kind of romantic deity), permit no refuge from anticipa-

tion of the end or shelter from criticism for attempting to disguise that inevitability. So part of Anthon’s troubling effect on the kids of Tæring is not that he is initiating them to a new concept, but that he is reminding them of an old one—one with the power to cut through polite routines and social rituals that conceal anxiety. His comments restore the centrality of death and, by extension, the futility of life and the struggle to ignore that condition, tenets central to existential writing.

This is precisely the understanding that the story’s narrator and effective mouthpiece for the group, Agnes, works to conceal. Early in the book, we learn from Agnes that this story is negotiated by the concrete realities of social class as much as, if not more than, abstract, philosophical debates. Agnes informs the reader that Anthon’s remarks are a direct assault on the idea that “We were supposed to amount to something,” and “[s]omething was the same as someone” (p. 5). Understand that the kids of Tæring enjoy a “swank” (p. 6) lifestyle. They possess a sense of self-importance that is threatened by the leveling potential of Anthon’s nothingness argument. Through her introductory comments, Agnes reveals that her peers live in attractively landscaped homes, view apartment dwellers with contempt, and have an investment in the status quo that ensures the continuity of their “worldly” existence, as Kierkegaard (1849/2013, p. 302) would describe it. They don’t bother with the interrogation of meaning because in their world, larger, cosmic questions are settled by conventional, social facts (i.e., that material prosperity, upward mobility, and the assurance of distinction override murkier issues of being, purpose, and mortality).

Furthermore, judging by the kids’ level of upset at Anthon’s attack on meaning, it would seem that they have never posed (or permitted) questions of ontological significance with the potential to destabilize their position and worldview. Speaking on behalf of the group, Agnes asserts, “We didn’t want to live in the world Pierre Anthon was telling us about. We were going to amount to something, be someone” (p. 9). Agnes tells us that the ultimate index of reality is how things look from the outside and that this sensibility is not in accord with Anthon’s revolt (p. 16). And although we see virtually nothing of the adults in the town of Tæring, there is reason to believe that the

values described by Agnes are an inheritance from the parents who wear “a mask” (p. 191) to conceal uneasiness as to the artificiality and pretense of their lives.

In the town of Tæring, maintaining a kind of “double-think” (Orwell, 1949/1961) insulated from doubt and despair is generally do-able until the destabilizing taunts of Pierre Anthon. From the moment Anthon opts out of the system, he activates worries concerning longstanding, social commonplaces and threatens the durability of broader assumptions that have allowed a particular way of life to flourish. After Pierre Anthon inserts doubt through his surreal, aerial volleys of Socratic dialogue, all beliefs are imperiled, and no intrinsic or transcendental sense of meaning is guaranteed. Agnes admits, “All of a sudden I was scared. Scared of Pierre Anthon” (p. 6).

Coming closer to the conversation on morality, Anthon not only acts as a representative of dread or messenger of the end, he interrogates a specific kind of dishonesty. And to understand that critique and its chaotic result in Teller’s novel, one must look to Sartre.

A Problem of Integrity

Like so many of the existentialist writers, Sartre owes a debt to Kierkegaard, who writes: “The unhappy one is the person who is always absent from himself, never present to himself” (1843/1987, p. 222). Sartre (1956) echoes this idea almost exactly in his conception of “mauvaise foi” or “bad faith” (p. 87) in *Being and Nothingness*: “[I]n bad faith it is from myself that I am hiding the truth” (p. 89). The ethical transgression in Sartre’s (1956) notion of bad faith is not so much the problem of lying, but the individual’s deliberate self-deception or conscious denial of the truth. This stress on consciousness cannot be underestimated because, in his rejection of Freud’s theory of repression, Sartre (1956) argues that one must be aware of something in order to conceal it (p. 93). This secondary and more insidious form of lying is revealed as a foundational problem in *Nothing*, as Agnes becomes more acutely aware of how pretense structures nearly every facet of sociality.

In fact, one could argue that the authentic cause for hysteria in the book is not the threat of meaninglessness, but the anxiety-provoking realization that

people “play” at life—all the time—like Sartre’s (1956) example of the waiter whom he discovers “playing at being a waiter in a café” (p. 102). Specifically, according to Sartre (1956), people pretend that the adoption of socially determined roles and values is natural and meaningful when they suspect otherwise. Awakening to consciousness of (and taking responsibility for) this phenomenon is central to Teller’s book, and it is located in the pervasive language of performance and deception found in many exchanges. For instance, Anthon scolds the kids by saying: “It’s all a big masquerade, all make-believe and making out you’re the best at it” (p. 8); and, “[H]ow come everyone’s making like everything that isn’t important is very important, all the while they’re so busy pretending what’s really important isn’t important at all?” (p. 25). Likewise, Agnes expresses anxiety regarding the exposure of deception in her remark: “We couldn’t go on making like things mattered as long as Pierre Anthon remained in his plum tree, yelling at us that nothing mattered” (p. 15). Reminiscent of Kierkegaard’s (1849/2013) critique of the “theater of life” (p. 292), these examples negatively foreground performative language like “masquerade,” “make believe,” “making out,” “making like,” and “pretending,” and centralize the violation of authenticity of which the kids (and their parents) are guilty and that Anthon’s existential “reality checks” aggressively expose.

Throughout the book, Agnes reveals awareness of a kind of betrayal of the truth or consciousness of hypocrisy. She recognizes that it is customary to base value judgments on external perceptions of significance as opposed to gauging meaning determined by an individual sense of worth. Based on this, it might be inferred that Anthon’s comments initiate feelings of guilt in the kids, judging by their frenzy to disprove his thesis regarding the absence of meaning (a frenzy caused, one would suppose, by their fervor to uphold

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dogmas in which they only partially believe). Perhaps this is what makes their betrayal of the objects sacrificed to the “heap of meaning” (p. 48) inevitable.

Interestingly, of all the arguments that Anthon makes to expose bad faith, he is most vigorous in his attack of the world of work (and attendant to that, the world of commerce), which, he argues, operates by false values driven by the desire for prestige. This is why, when Agnes asserts, “I’m going to be something worth being! And famous, too!” (p. 27), Pierre Anthon counters:

Sure you are, Agnes. . . . You’ll be a fashion designer and teeter around in high heels and make like you’re really something and make others think they are too, as long as they’re wearing your label But you’ll find out you’re a clown in a trivial circus where everyone tries to convince each other how vital it is to have a certain look one year and another the next. And then you’ll find out that fame and the big wide world are outside of you, and that inside there’s nothing and always will be, no matter what you do. (pp. 27–28)

In this diatribe, Anthon attacks the myth of social distinction and flattens the allure of status goods. He accuses Agnes of complicity in a fraudulent system disconnected from any authentic (i.e., personally held) index of value and foregrounds the outside/inside (seeming vs. being) dichotomy upon which the existential problem of bad faith is based (Sartre, 1956). Moreover, he refuses Agnes the sanctuary of self-deception that has been characteristic of sociality in Tøring.

At the same time, Anthon’s remark is important in the way it highlights the opposite end of the socioeconomic spectrum from the one emphasized in Sartre’s (1956) anecdote of the waiter. In the chapter titled “Bad Faith” from *Being and Nothingness* (1956), Sartre explains that the waiter could recognize the oppressive reality of his working life and “break away and suddenly elude his condition” (p. 102). Anthon, conversely, proposes a more incendiary possibility. In his critique, members of the privileged class might awaken to realize the moral bankruptcy of their existence and the precariousness of their position. Based on this Sartrean-Marxist bombshell, it comes as no surprise that, incited by Anthon’s progressively more penetrating complaints, Agnes eventually confronts the impossibility of “pretending” or lying to herself further about the vacancy of the bourgeois dogmas she has inherited from the adults.

Parsing the *Nothing*

In the first part of Kierkegaard’s (1849/2013) *The Sickness unto Death*, the pseudonymous author, Anti-Climacus, outlines the “busy occupations” (e.g., choosing a career, getting married, raising children, attending social engagements, etc.) in which people participate in order to distract themselves from intimations of despair (p. 328). Kierkegaard (1849/2013) argues that these “diversions” sidetrack the individual from a “truer conception of despair,” which is the human “condition” (pp. 296, 328). Likewise, Pierre Anthon interrogates the senselessness of practices dedicated to habitually parsing time:

If you live to be eighty, you’ll have slept thirty years away, gone to school and sat with homework for nine, and worked for almost fourteen. Since you’ve already spent more than six years being little kids and playing, and you’re later going to be spending at least twelve cleaning house, cooking food, and looking after your own kids, it means you’ve got nine years at most to live And you want to spend those nine years pretending you’ve amounted to something in a masquerade that means nothing, when instead you could start enjoying your nine years right away. (pp. 24–25)

Here, Anthon reduces the routine of life to a flat catalogue of mundane gestures intended to stave off the apprehension of irrelevance. If, as Kierkegaard (1849/2013) argues, “unawareness is . . . the most dangerous form of despair” (p. 321), then Anthon echoes this notion by critiquing actions performed automatically that inhibit critical “consciousness” and contemplation of larger, philosophical questions (Kierkegaard, 1849/2013, p. 317).

At the same time, Anthon adopts another Kierkegaardian argument in critiquing conformity with the values and practices of “the crowd” (1849/2013, p. 303). For instance, Anthon challenges the meaningfulness of actions undertaken in conformance with “how things are done” and points out inconsistencies from an existential perspective:

How come it’s so important we learn to say please and thank you and the same to you and how do you do when soon none of us will be doing anything anymore, and everybody knows that instead they could be sitting here eating plums, watching the world go by and getting used to being a part of nothing? (pp. 25–26)

First you fall in love, then you start dating, then you fall out of love, and then you split up again And that’s the way it goes, time and time again, right until you grow

so tired of all that repetition you just decide to make like the one who happens to be closest by is the one and only. What a waste of effort! (p. 59)

Pierre Anthon removes layer after layer of social sediment that lends a sense of naturalness and authority to the rituals of everyday life (e.g., observing etiquette, going to school, dating and getting married, working at a career, raising a family, etc.), causing them to appear pointless and absurd. Therefore, when Anthon directly confronts the kids with the possibility that the life they lead is deliberately neglectful of the status of “nothingness” (Sartre, 1956, p. 56), or broader questions of ontology, and comprised instead of failed strategies to assign purpose, the fragile world depicted in the allegory shatters in denial. It is at this point that the story escalates to a surreal level of violence as the kids construct a supposed monument to meaning.

Andersen Redux

It is necessary to dedicate at least part of this discussion to the assemblage of macabre artifacts in *Nothing*, but in a way that focuses less on the grotesqueries and instead emphasizes the ostensible motive for the endeavor, its failure, and the ethical implications of the media spectacle that ensues and exploits the false emblem of meaning.

Basically, the kids set out to prove to Pierre Anthon that there is meaning in the world that they can point to, which would, in turn, validate the transcendent notion of Meaning. And not surprisingly, their project assumes the form of a collection, as objects are markers of personal and communal meaning(s) (Pearce, 1992). Wannamaker (2015), in part, addresses the place of material culture in Teller’s novel through the critical lens of Posthumanism, which assigns primacy to objects as “mediators” rather than “intermediaries” in a social context (Latour, 2007, p. 85). However, the relationship between objects and people in *Nothing* is troubled because—in a process similar to the one described by Pearce (1992) and Stewart (2001)—objects are subordinated to people by being decontextualized and redeposited into a disingenuous account.

By way of explanation, initially, the kids labor according to a kind of anthropological methodology, collecting storied objects from community members,

things that distill sentimental or kitschy meanings. Thereafter, the project morphs into the collection of more protectively held or cherished possessions from which the owner is loath to part. Significance graduates in intensity at this point in the book because the kids sense the aura of importance instilled in these objects for the owner, but they misperceive the source of significance and come to believe that the pain upon loss of these objects equals “the meaning” (p. 157). And over a short span of time, this misperception catalyzes a chain of forced sacrifices no longer focused on meaning but retribution, as each kid exacts a more intimate sacrifice as retaliation for the object that s/he is forced to relinquish.

It should be said that, if the objects had any transcendent meaning or capability for reifying a broader sense of significance, that potential is betrayed by the bad faith in which they are acquired. For instance, Agnes demands Gerda’s hamster as remuneration for the loss of her sandals; Frederick exacts “Lady William’s” (p. 53) diary as payback for the loss of his flag; Otto requires the body of Elise’s baby brother in recompense for his boxing gloves; Ursula-Marie calls for Hussain’s prayer mat for the loss of her hair; Huge Hans requires Sophie’s virginity in recompense for the loss of his bike; Holy Karl demands the head of Elise’s dog as compensation for a religious statue; and Sophie demands Jon-Johan’s finger as reparation for the loss of her “innocence” (p. 106). The lack of discrimination between the trivial and profound in this catalogue is problematic, as is the kids’ utter abandonment of the pursuit of meaning ostensibly guiding the endeavor. That is, the quest for meaning is replaced by the motive of vengeance. Furthermore, the dishonesty of the effort is amplified by an obvious disconnect between individuals and the payback exacted (e.g., Holy Karl requires the squeamish Pretty Rosa to decapitate Elise’s dog, thus

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punishing Elise more than Rosa). All of which is to say that, in Teller's *Nothing*, the idea of meaning is always in peril, not (exclusively) because of Pierre's existential-nihilistic challenges, but because the kids don't wholly believe in it, and in bad faith they create a kind of false idol.

Thus far, I have attempted to argue that the way the kids sadistically exact, weaponize, and enshrine

[W]hether young readers endorse or refute Pierre's existential-nihilistic perspective isn't really the issue at all so much as the way the book dramatizes the moral courage required by dissent and the idea that individual choices are metonymic expressions of personal integrity.

"souvenirs of death" (Stewart, 2001, p. 140) in a moribund tableau points to bad faith and is antagonistic to the meaning they seek. More important, this dishonesty is iterated on a larger scale in terms of the exploitive attention the popular press lavishes on the kids in praise of their creation, in the manner of the Danish classic, "The Emperor's New Clothes," Andersen's (1837/2016) tale in which fraud is hailed as genius. Agnes details the hype and instant celebrity surrounding the kids and their bogus creation, which is so powerful that a local art critic is forced to retract his denunciation of the piece

as trash. And though Agnes well knows the corrupt method of acquisition that created the so-called "heap of meaning" (p. 158), she defers to public opinion for an estimation of its value, trumpeting: "[S]o many people couldn't possibly be wrong. Many! More! The truth!" (p. 176). Agnes doesn't actually believe this for the reason stated above, and her suspicion intensifies when Anthon suggests that the community has only seized on the controversy surrounding the contested collection as a stimulus for local business (p. 179). She admits, "I didn't tell anyone about my doubts" (p. 183), thus consciously choosing deception by indulging in the social refuge of wrongheaded public opinion. In so doing, she performs a kind of ironic reversal of the role of the child from Andersen's (1837/2016) fairytale, who boldly admits before all that the king

is naked. In Tæring, the kids recognize but have no interest in attesting to the truth, which is a cynical prospect indeed.

Not surprisingly, following an American museum's purchase of the collection for a ludicrous sum, which the kids accept as another validation of the meaning inherent to the objects, Pierre Anthon points out that, had the kids truly believed in the significance of their project, they "wouldn't have sold it" (p. 201). Anthon thus levels the unanswerable moral charge, similar to Kierkegaard's (1849/2013) indictment that "[w]hat is called worldliness is made up of just such men who . . . pawn themselves to the world" (p. 305).

By the time the tale comes to a close, the kids beat each other mercilessly, Anthon is murdered, and the "theater of life" (Kierkegaard, 1849/2013, p. 292), or socially authorized version of reality, has been restored. Agnes unemotionally reports on Pierre Anthon's funeral service and reflects vaguely on its significance: "[W]e cried because we had lost something and gained something else" (p. 221), but this is no iteration of Ralph's epiphany on the beach with the arrival of the naval officer in *Lord of the Flies* (Golding, 1954/2003). Instead, in summation of the story, Agnes issues the warning that "the meaning is not something to fool around with Is it, Pierre Anthon?" (p. 226), and we realize by this admonition that she defends bad faith over integrity.

The Moral Value of *Nothing*

Agnes recalls, after Anthon's death, that it seemed the kids could "hear him" speak: "The reason dying is so easy is because death has no meaning. . . . And the reason death has no meaning is because life has no meaning. All the same, have fun!" (p. 224). By concluding his tautological argument with the words, "All the same, have fun!" Anthon proposes that his classmates reconcile with death and the absurd condition and find pleasure in acceptance, as they will forever lack the certainty they seek.

This notion of "fun" or enjoyment in connection with nothing appears elsewhere in the text, notably when Anthon asks, "Why not admit from the outset that nothing matters and just enjoy the nothing that is?" (p. 28). Readers who would insist that the premise of nothingness necessarily leads to anguish might be surprised by Anthon's invitation to "enjoy

the nothing.” But the fact that Anthon seems content with his position in the tree (i.e., secure in his refusal of established values) constitutes the seduction of this character and the central paradox of the narrative. The idea of pleasure in nothingness is important due to its relationship with Camus’s (1955) essay, “The Myth of Sisyphus.” In this essay, Camus (1955) recounts the tale of Sisyphus who challenged the gods and earned the sentence of perpetually “rolling a rock to the top of a mountain” (p. 88). For Camus, this figure, wed “to a futile and hopeless labor,” represents the absurdity of life (pp. 88, 90). However, Camus argues that Sisyphus embraces the meaninglessness and in so doing, “negates” his punishment; therefore, “[o]ne must imagine Sisyphus happy” (p. 91).

The point of relation here is that the kids see Pierre’s self-imposed exile from society as an illustration of stasis instead of an ethical stance. They reproach Anthon, telling him “All you ever do is sit there gawking” (p. 9), and fail to see the morality in his plan of (in)action. Meanwhile, Anthon reverses their criticism on ethical grounds: “If nothing matters, then it’s better doing nothing than something. Especially if something is throwing stones because you haven’t the guts to climb trees” (p. 26). Here Anthon interprets “doing something” as cowardice if the action is undertaken in bad faith (i.e., out of fear of embracing nothing). Therefore, whether young readers endorse or refute Pierre’s existential-nihilistic perspective isn’t really the issue at all so much as the way the book dramatizes the moral courage required by dissent and the idea that individual choices are metonymic expressions of personal integrity.

Possibilities for Teaching

In terms of the utility of Teller’s *Nothing* for teachers, the book could serve as the centerpiece for a thematically related collection of young adult texts foregrounding philosophical themes and concepts (see Table 1). Of this list, Gaarder’s (1994) layered meditation on thinking and survey course in philosophy, *Sophie’s World*, is the most teachable text, while other selections offer complementary, individual reading possibilities, ranging from the Beckett-inspired, absurdist banter in Ostrovski (2013) to the Foucauldian rumination on authority and resistance in Lockhart (2008). Additional texts include de la Peña’s (2009)

Table 1. A sampler of YA books centralizing philosophical themes and concepts

Matt de la Peña (2009)
<i>We Were Here</i>
Jostein Gaarder (1994)
<i>Sophie’s World</i>
John Green (2005)
<i>Looking for Alaska</i>
Keshni Kashyap (2011)
<i>Tina’s Mouth: An Existential Comic Diary</i>
E. Lockhart (2008)
<i>The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks</i>
Emil Ostrovski (2013)
<i>The Paradox of Vertical Flight</i>

and Green’s (2005) depictions of kids who are trying to forge meaning in an indifferent world but are violently evacuated of identifiable reason or purpose. On the opposite end of the tonal spectrum is Kashyap’s (2011) quirky journey toward selfhood via imagined conversations with Sartre.

I see the greatest utility in *Nothing* as a primer for the study of existential literature, as I have attempted to demonstrate in offering multiple instances of correspondence between the novel and classic philosophical texts. Concurrent with reading *Nothing* (and building on adolescent readers’ enthusiasm for graphic texts), students might explore a selection of illustrated, introductory texts on philosophy, such as titles from series such as *Kierkegaard for Beginners*, *Introducing Nietzsche*, and other books of philosophical introduction. These books outline theoretical concepts with lucidity and are punctuated by engaging, comic illustrations that initiate students to primary philosophical texts.

At the same time, related to Connors and Shepard’s (2012) remarks concerning the potential for young adult literature to prompt sophisticated work in the service of state standards, the philosophical grounding attained through study of Teller’s *Nothing* might prepare students to write various types of claims. For example, considering the emphasis placed

on argument in the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) in tandem with existentialism's focus on individual morality, students could compose ethical or proposal arguments that would prompt them to "lay out more clearly the grounds and warrants of [their] own beliefs" (Ramage, Bean, & Johnson, 2001, p. 347). Ramage, Bean, and Johnson (2001) maintain that ethical arguments require students to "move from arguments of good or bad to arguments of right or wrong" (p. 347), which the authors find tantamount to posing a moral existential question, like "How should one live?" (p. 347). Similarly, proposal arguments often require the defense of solutions through an ethical analysis of "consequences" (Ramage, Bean, & Johnson, 2001, p. 350).

Identical to the ethical premise informing Sartre's (1975) essay, "Existentialism is a Humanism," the existential hero in *Nothing* refuses the possibility of Meaning, and instead enacts an individually derived code of conduct in the interest of broader, social accountability.

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