THEISTIC EXISTENTIALISM
IN THE FICTION OF TIM WINTON

by

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Abstract

This survey of Winton's fiction will claim that religious (or theistic) existentialism is the foundational weltanschauung of his work. I intend to investigate the extent to which the ideas of Soren Kierkegaard shadow characters in their move towards an ideal; that is, a personal connectedness with their concept of God. This thesis attempts to demonstrate that Winton's fiction reflects aspects of Kierkegaard's existential continuum, his Stages on Life's Way (1845), in its call to existential 'authenticity'. Both authors reject the conventional rigidity practised by much institutionalised religion and endorse a personalised connectedness between individuals and God.

Theistic existentialism is defined in the Foundational Chapter, including a distinction between this worldview, atheistic existentialism and traditional theism. Tim Winton’s work is justified generally in relation to this theistic existentialism.

My methodology is as follows: Kierkegaard’s three-tiered continuum Stages on Life’s Way with my adjustments (sub-categories) will be defined in the Foundational Chapter alongside a brief introduction to other existentialist thinkers whose ideas are consulted within the thesis.
A second chapter will demonstrate the way in which characters in one novel can be
categorised according to the three main Kierkegaardian stages: ‘The Aesthetic’, ‘The Ethical’
and ‘The Religious’. The novel Shallows (1984) encapsulates all the stages within its
characters and serves as a conceptual introduction to them.

Chapter Three will contain an analysis of three characters who belong to sub-groups
of the Aesthetic. Collectively here they are labelled ‘Destroyers’, including The Demonic and
Nihilist manifestations, since they destroy others or themselves respectively (or both). These
sub-categories of my own labelling are defined.

Chapter Four, entitled ‘Wanderers’, foregrounds characters who also belong to the
Aesthete’s realm of Unconscious Despair, living in the Temporal. They are not so actively
injurious as their Destroyer counterparts, however. Their lostness is characterised by a sense
of alienation, displacement and ennui. They do not participate or act in any meaningful
manner and have not ‘chosen’ their despair.

In ‘Searchers’ (Chapter Five) the characters are grounded in ‘The Ethical’ domain in
Kierkegaard’s Stages on Life’s Way. They have consciously chosen their despair and try to
self-Authenticate within their personal contexts. Often they are acutely aware that something
is still missing in their lives, despite their individualised affirmative action. These characters
are poised for epiphany, however unlikely they may seem. Grace is manifest in their lives in
very personally realised ways and these characters usually accept this, if often after a long
resistance.

The ‘Homecomers’ detailed in Chapter Six are those characters who experience a
personal relationship with God. This is an individual relationship which is never replicated in
another’s context. Each character in this category comes to an inductive connection, not a
deductive, top-down rapport. It is a bond based on mutual love and respect, fashioned for each person, in full recognition that this state, while held aloft by Kierkegaard as ‘ideal’ and superior to its forerunners, does not presuppose perfection in its subjects.
**Dedication**

For my dear family: Meg and Robyn, Peter, Gordon and Joan. Heartfelt thanks to you all for unwavering support and love. I couldn’t have done this without you.

And for you, Chris Wareham, for all the books (that I absolutely promise to return one of these days, only *slightly* dog-eared) and for your vast philosophical knowledge, happily shared with me over numerous cups of chamomile.

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“It was a tremendous help to me to discover a few years ago Aldous Huxley’s description of the two different ways in which religion can be approached. He speaks first of ‘the religion of immediate experience’ – a religion, in the words of Genesis, of “hearing the voice of God walking in the garden in the cool of the day”, the religion of direct acquaintance with the divine’ [...] It sends shivers, doesn’t it?

[...]

Then Huxley contrasts this with [that] which he calls ‘the religion of symbols, the religion of the imposition of order and meaning upon the world through [...] systems and their manipulation; the religion of knowledge about the divine, rather than direct acquaintance with it.”

– John Cleese