

AN UNLIKELY REMEDY: AN ADOLESCENT EXISTENTIAL HERO AND
HYPERREALITY IN DAVID MITCHELL'S *BLACK SWAN GREEN*

A Graduate Research Project

By

NICOLE R. SUMRALL

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Approved as to style and content by:

Cathryn Merla-Watson, Ph.D.
(Research Project Supervisor)

William S. Bush, Ph.D
(Department Chair)

William S. Bush, Ph.D
(Director of Graduate Studies)

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ABSTRACT

An Unlikely Remedy: An Adolescent Existential Hero and Hyperreality in David Mitchell's *Black Swan Green*

(August 2012)

Nicole R. Sumrall, BA., University of Texas at San Antonio
Chairperson of Advisory Committee: William S. Bush

In this graduate research project I examine how David Mitchell's *Black Swan Green* engages the postmodern condition during the Falklands War in 1982 through its focus on hyperreality, as defined by Jean Baudrillard. Specifically, I argue the novel provides a remedy to the postmodern condition through an adolescent existential hero, Jason Taylor, who navigates hyperreal simulations. These simulations, moreover, shape his facticity, or the facts of his lived reality, and when he transcends his facticity he becomes an existential hero, I propose. Finally, I call upon Jean Paul Sartre's existentialism to understand Jason Taylor's reckoning with the postmodern condition, thereby asserting its intersection with the postmodern condition, particularly simulation and hyperreality.

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to, and because of that, I strive to be the same height as you. But I worry I'll always be short, in more ways than one.

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SECTION I. INTRODUCTION

David Mitchell's *Black Swan Green* (2007) relays thirteen-year-old Jason Taylor's social and psychological struggles during 1982. The novel is set in the fictitious village of Black Swan Green in Worcestershire, England. In the novel's thirteen chapters, Jason transforms from a timid, self-conscious boy into an aware, conscientious young man. *Black Swan Green* focuses on Jason's life during and after the Falklands War and the war's impact on his community. Through its focus on Jason's extensive use of television and radio broadcasts as avenues for information, this novel explores the postmodern condition informed by media technologies in the home and society.

His dependence on technology for information is, as Jean-François Lyotard argues in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), the inevitable direction developed society is heading toward in 1982, which is characterized by social and cultural dependency on technology for scientific advancement and questioning the scholastic merit of narratives and literature. He clarifies, "I have decided to use the word *postmodern* to describe [the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies]... it designates the state of our culture following the transformation which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts" (Lyotard xxiii). These "game rules" apply to literature and science, but also culture and the capitalistic (and political) control which is part of every aspect of knowledge informing a society. Lyotard argues information can be bought and sold, as well as restricted or censored, or the State could control gathered information, creating new legal issues (6). This novel reflects the postmodern condition through its

examination of the restrictions and proliferations of knowledge via media technology during the Falklands War in relationship to the central character Jason.

Postmodernism's status as a philosophy or literary lens of interpretation has been, and still is, a point of contention for scholars. In *Critical Keywords in Literary and Cultural Theory* (2004), Julian Wolfreys explains "there is little general consensus concerning the meaning of either *postmodernity* or *postmodernism*, and their use and history are chequered" (190). Paula Geyh commented in 2003 that postmodernism "seems almost to mean or describe everything - and therefore, some of the critics of postmodernism would say, it means nothing" (3). Postmodern theory has also been criticized by Jurgen Habermas for its self-referential nature, which creates a contradiction by referring to the ideas or concepts that postmodernism seeks to undermine and critique. Postmodernism's ambivalence stems from the inability to specifically define postmodernism as a movement or to confine it to specific dates.

These struggles concerning postmodernism, moreover, parallel those concerning existentialism: existentialism rose as a response to modernism, but is not categorically a postmodern reaction. Prominent existential philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Martin Heidegger straddle the line between modernist and postmodernist theory -- it seems both the modernists and postmodernists are quick to claim either one for their own -- but existentialism, as the philosophy which their writings shaped, is arguably a liminal state between modernism and postmodernism. Without strict definitions and restrictions on existentialist theory, existentialism combines with other philosophical or literary theories to provide a hermeneutics that engages with a text

beyond the restrictions of modernist or postmodernist theory.

To examine how *Black Swan Green* engages the postmodern condition, I will use Jean Baudrillard's postmodern philosophy of simulation and hyperreality in conjunction with Jean Paul Sartre's existentialism to redress the concerns of inevitability in postmodern society, with a particular focus on the central character Jason. In *Being and Nothingness* (1956), Jean Paul Sartre explains the concept of facticity as being the undeniable facts of an individual's existence, in relation to the state or condition of existence, such as being a human and not being able to claim "I am a bird" or being human and not being able to choose our social position in life, such as the status of the family we are born into or in what country we will be raised as children. One possible way of reinterpreting Sartre's definition of facticity for postmodern society is to consider postmodern conditions such as hyperreality as undeniable facts that individuals must actively engage to be aware of the impacts as well as to overcome the perceived inevitability of social death in postmodern society.

Sartre argues that an individual can overcome his or her own facticity, the irrefutable facts of an individual's life and contingencies by looking beyond what is factual and looking instead to what is controllable. An individual is able to exercise freedom, and through chosen actions they are able to live in accordance with a personal moral code and thus live an authentic life, a life of freedom without bad faith. Sartre extensively argues in *Being and Nothingness* that existentialism is, in fact, a philosophy of ethics; he argues that when one man acts he affects all men (*Being* 350). The primary tenet of existentialism is "existence precedes essence," as Sartre explains in

"Existentialism is Humanism," republished in Walter Kaufman's *Existentialism From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, that "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world - and defines himself afterwards... Man is nothing else but that which he makes himself" (349). Existentialism is rooted in action, specifically morally praiseworthy action, reaffirming Sartre's existential humanism as the core of his existential philosophy.

The existential hero in literature is typically male, adult, financially independent of any other individual, and mobile. These characteristics are, of course, not specific to only existential heroes. A pattern emerged with authors such as Sartre, Albert Camus, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Gabriel Marcel, whose plays and novels have been considered paradigmatic existential texts due to existential themes contributing to the articulation of the existential hero. However, little scholarship exists on adolescent existential heroes. Lucio Ruotolo's *Six Existential Heroes: The Politics of Faith* explores the minority heroes. Of these heroes, two are women: one is an African American and another is Jewish. Only one is an adolescent, Ralph in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Ruotolo's argument of a British adolescent as an existential hero establishes existential heroes are not restricted to adult male, non-Western protagonists, which opens the door for reinterpretation of literary texts that may contain existential heroes who deviate from the norm. There are many similarities and differences between Ralph and Jason, the primary difference being that Jason's narrative spans thirteen months of his "everyday" life, whereas Ralph is stranded on a remote island following an airplane crash for a brief period of time. Adolescent existential heroes, in sum, are rare in western literature;

therefore, Jason's characterization as such a hero requires further examination, especially in relationship to the postmodern condition.

I argue that *Black Swan Green* engages the postmodern condition and figures Jason as an existential hero to remedy this societal ill or condition. Existential themes are present in the novel and Jason's progression as a character resembles, but is very different from, other established existential heroes in literature. Jason's character, however, is exceptional due to his facticity. I argue that part of Jason's existential facticity is his engagement in hyperrealities throughout the novel, and I apply Jean Baudrillard's examination of simulation and hyperreality to analyze Jason's hyperrealities.

My central thesis intervenes into literary scholarship in two key ways: first, to reiterate, Mitchell provides a remedy to the postmodern condition by creating an existential hero in a postmodern novel and establishing an existential hero who is adolescent, British, and engaging the postmodern condition is an exception to the currently established norm of existential heroes which, to my knowledge, is novel; second, I argue facticity can be understood to include hyperreality and simulation, both of which are considered part of the postmodern condition, allowing facticity be revised to include human conditions which arise after Sartre's publication of *Being and Nothingness*, therefore expanding his argument instead of invalidating it. *Black Swan Green* is informed by the postmodern condition, in sum, and David Mitchell's use of Jason as an adolescent existential hero provides a countermeasure against the death of humanism the postmodernists espouse as the inevitable fate of humankind.

To that end, my argument is organized into three main sections. To demonstrate Jason's engagement with postmodern condition through simulation, I will first explore the history of the Falklands War and its connection with hyperreality in *Black Swan Green*, followed by an explanation of the hyperreality of Jason's family. I will then establish Jason's facticity and argue he is an existential hero because he transcends his facticity in the final sections.

SECTION II. SIMULATION AND HYPERREALITY IN *BLACK SWAN GREEN*

Central to the plot in *Black Swan Green* and an important part of Jason's life is the Falklands War. The Falklands War, which lasted for seventy-four days off the coast of Argentina, was the next major war after the Vietnam War that ended seven years prior. The Vietnam War brought violence and death into the homes of viewers in technologically advanced societies such as the United States and England. The Falklands War began on Friday, April 2nd, 1982, when Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands to claim sovereignty. On May 2nd, English forces sunk the *Belagrano*, which prompted the famous "Gotcha" headline, seen pasted in the 'rocks' chapter. Days later, the *HMS Sheffield* was hit by a missile strike and was sunk. On May 25th, the *HMS Coventry* was hit by an airstrike and began to flood. Within twenty minutes, the ship began to sink. This is the ship that fictitiously claimed Tom Yew's life in *Black Swan Green* (Mitchell 111).

The Falklands War occurred in 1982, just as described in *Black Swan Green*. The details, the names of newspapers and tabloids are all real, as well as the details pertaining to news reporters and their reports. The fiction is in Jason's narrative, and in Tom Yew's participation and death in the war. The novel as a whole is historically accurate in the depiction of true headlines (such as "Gotcha" (Mitchell 100) and "Cease fire called in the Falklands" (115)) and reported war events; details as small as the full names of reporters, like Brian Hanranhan, contribute to the historical accuracy of fictional characters during the war. In this way, *Black Swan Green* engages in the postmodern condition of 1982 as work of realism attempting to represent the past as realistically as possible.

In the wake of the Vietnam War, considered the "first television war" (Taylor 251), England believed the American media was responsible for changing the American public opinion of the war (in a negative way) and "the British were resolved that this would not happen in the Falklands. Accordingly, only 30 journalists and crew—all British—were allowed to accompany the troops to the South Atlantic and they were to be heavily dependent on the military for information and communications back to Britain" (Taylor 252). This dependency on the military for information meant that reports by the media were often days late and the information was censored. Certain facts were not allowed to be released, and credible journalists and photographers often found themselves in a situation where they were unable to report on what they saw. Ambiguous wording and lack of clear details was one of the ways reporters circumvented the Ministry of Defence's strict policies, which reflects the changes in communication due to restrictions in media communication as part of the postmodern condition.

Part of the difficulty in news reporting during the Falklands War is that, in 1982, technology existed that allowed for faster, more informed news reporting not only in newspapers or radio broadcasts, but also in television coverage and photography, however Parliament restricted media coverage to the public. Economically advantaged families in technologically advanced societies such as England often had several televisions in different rooms of the house, which reflected the desire for constant viewing. The Ministry of Defence, aware of the relationship with the television for information and news coverage, restricted the media's access to war information. Because of the perception of the possible media "spin" that could turn English citizens

against the war, the military and Ministry of Defence's relationship with the media was strained and tense. The awareness that the English had with the way the war *could* be reported, against how the military was *allowing* it to be reported, put the English public in the difficult position of being ignorant to many aspects of the war, as well as victims of misreporting. The "information age" of the 1980s is critical to understanding Jason's engagement in the hyperreal simulation of the Falklands War. Information technology, not only from a military perspective, was the prevailing means of communication in 1982, and in *Black Swan Green* as well with the rising use of satellite communication and other media disseminating news faster than ever before. Lyotard's argument that information could be restricted or censored proves true in the Falklands War, further informing the postmodern condition within *Black Swan Green*.

The postmodern condition in the novel, I additionally argue, is characterized by Baudrillard's concepts of simulation and hyperreality. Baudrillard's works on simulation and hyperreality were written and published in close proximity to the Falklands War (one the year before the war and the second a year after the war). Baudrillard's philosophy is cohesive in exploring the multiple ways simulations affect humans in a postmodern society. The elements of what Baudrillard claims exists in postmodern society is present in Jason and his family; moreover, Baudrillard's criticism of the capitalist structure which pervades in the novel reflects the mentality of the 1980s, specifically the political and economic state in England at the time. The hyperreality Jason participates in by means of media coverage of the Falklands War through the limited simulations provided by television and radio. Baudrillard begins *Simulacra and Simulation* with a basic working

definition of simulation: “to dissimulate is to pretend not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have. One implies a presence, the other an absence” (Baudrillard 4). To understand simulation a different way, to dissimulate is to claim or pretend to not have what one does have, and to simulate is to claim or pretend to have what one does not have; the latter is the case with Jason in *Black Swan Green*.

In the novel Jason's engagement with media simulations compensates for his absence from the Falklands War. This experience simulates, or feigns possession of, an actual participation in the war. He is unable to separate himself and simulation of the war because, according to Baudrillard, separation is no longer possible: “the impossibility of rediscovering an absolute level of the real is of the same order as the impossibility of staging illusion. Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible” (*Simulacra* 15). Jason does not see his situation as a simulation or obsession, though he acknowledges his participation in consuming information and immersing himself in war reports and reenacting the war in his imagination. He comments, “the war's become the first thing I think about in the morning and the last thing I think about at night, so it's nice to hear about something else” (Mitchell 103). Initially, it seems as though Jason as a thirteen-year-old young man living comfortably in England, does not have a reason to worry about the state of affairs regarding the Falklands War. However, the war informs his inability to differentiate between the real and the hyperreal that causes Jason's anxiety and concern.

In *Simulations* (1983), Baudrillard argues there are three orders of simulation: the first is the classical counterfeit, the second is the production, or industrial, as in the

“robot” and machinery, and the third is the order of code (83). The order of the code refers to the way society is connected and maintained through digital, electronic code, such as radio waves, binary, and even the way we understand DNA as the molecular structure of human existence. These codes are intangible, but have defined meaning and value, and more importantly, are reproduced. He claims that the third order is the order of simulation and the hyperreal, where "the very definition of the real becomes: *that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction...* At the limit of this process of reproductibility, the real is not only what can be reproduced, but *that which is already reproduced*. The hyperreal" (*Simulations* 146). Television and radio broadcasts and photography reproduce the real and replace the real, serves as a surrogate for the real in a society where reproduction is constant.

Toward the beginning of the novel, the chapter "rocks" exemplifies simulation in that it begins with a highly detailed, and at the same time ambiguous, account of the beginning of the war from Jason's point of view. Jason thinks, "the newspapers weren't allowed to say which of our warships'd been hit at first, 'cause of the Official Secrets Act. Now it's on BBC and ITV... There was no film of the battle. Just a mucky photo of the ship belching smoke while Brian Hanrahan described how survivors were rescued by the HMS Arrow or Sea King helicopters" (Mitchell 97). Although Jason, at multiple times in the novel, admits media coverage is limited, he also regurgitates detailed facts about the Falklands War from television broadcasts. For example, Jason thinks about what England has as an advantage and narrates, "we had the HMS *Hermes*, HMS *Invincible*, HMS *Illustrious*, the SAS, the SBS. Pumas, Rapiers, Sidewinders, Lynxes, Sea Skuas,

Tigerfish torpedoes, Admiral Sandy Woodward" (Mitchell 97). The names of these ships, weapons, and even full proper names of crew are provided throughout the duration of the Falklands War in the novel. Jason's regurgitation of this information reflects his absorption in the war and his retention of information as facts. When Jason is watching footage of Leopoldo Galtieri in Buenos Aires, "thousands of people are chanting, 'We feel your greatness!' over and over. The noise is stopping me from sleeping... Some young men jeer at our cameras" (Mitchell 98). Jason is not actually in Buenos Aires, hearing the noise of people chanting. Instead, he is seeing, through the camera and broadcast on the news, the prerecorded footage. And yet, throughout the chapters during the war, Jason repeatedly refers to himself as being affected by the current situation. His involvement is psychological rather than physical, and reflects his inability to differentiate his physical presence and his psychological simulation.

Jason's ardent support of England in the war and unwavering faith in Parliament's justification of the war exacerbates his failure to distinguish between simulation and reality. Jason's conversation with his sister Julia reveals Jason's belief of the British government being fundamentally truthful despite the severity of the situation (Mitchell 106). Jason comments, "John Nott, our Minister of Defence, would never lie to *us*. Julia asked how I *knew* we were being lied to? 'We're British,' I told her. 'Why *would* the government lie?' Julia replied, To assure us that our wonderful war is going swimmingly when in fact it's going down the toilet. 'But,' went my answer, 'we're winning'" (Mitchell 106). This scene reflects not only Jason's naivety, but also his, as well as the English public's, faith in the government and military.

The British Parliament did, in fact, provide false information to the public regarding the circumstances surrounding the Falklands War. Clive Ponting, a civil servant working in the Ministry of Defence, was charged with leaking military information under the Official Secrets Act. He reported that, “contrary to reports, the decision to sink the *Belgrano* was made by the Prime Minister Thatcher and Defence Secretary John Nott, the decision was actually made by a War Cabinet with more accurate information (specifically on the location of the ship in relation to the Total Exclusion Zone and other ships) than originally admitted” (Evans 103). Ponting was tried in court but was not convicted by a public jury.

The relationship between the reality of the war and the representation of the war through media is, as Paula Geyh explores Baudrillard's distinctions between the real and reproductions, a relationship in which the reproduction replaces the reality. Geyh explains, “Baudrillard is helpful, particularly in his suggestion that the relationship between the original and the reproduction, between the real and the copy, has undergone a fundamental transformation in the postmodern era” (13). Information could be distributed over great distances through satellite and radio communications, and through multiple media including print and visuals due to technological advances such as digital coding. The existence of such technological advancements were part of the complaint levied by the British public against the government during the Falklands War; if the capability of accurate reporting was possible, the public did not need to be left uninformed of the true progress of the war. The government control and restriction created a time delay that was artificial and unnecessary.

Media technology created a change in the postmodern society where the distinction between reality and reproduction and representation were blurred. Geyh continues, “once, perhaps...the distinction between the real and the reproduction seemed relatively clear. But our technologies are so advanced that our copies increasingly become simulacra-reproductions sufficiently powerful that they first obscure, then displace, and ultimately replace (that is, function as) the real” (13). This representation functioning as the real describes the case with Jason.

In the postmodern British society, Jason engrosses himself in secondhand knowledge of the war which is readily accessible through the media, and he internalizes within himself the conflict abroad. He never travels to the Falkland Islands, nor does he have any connections with the military, but his psychological state often traverses the distance to reflect a sentiment of "being there" as a participant. He does not always specify exactly where he has gained the information about the war (“There's a rumor...” (Mitchell 105)), but describes situations in terms of us vs. them: “The hills blocked *our* radar, so *we* didn't see the warplanes coming till *they* were right on top of *us*” (emphasis added) (Mitchell 105). Jason has no primary experience of the Falklands War, but identifies with British soldiers as “us,” which reflects solidarity with the representations of British soldiers he sees from the television and newspapers. The representations of the war replace the reality of the war; Jason is not participating in the war, but the representation serves to provide and construct a reality of what war experiences are, but only in terms of the media that are accessible.

Jason's constant need for media saturation is what makes this situation a

postmodern simulation, because “the logic of the hyperreal is always co-present with the techno-scientific power of capital to transform *every* element of its reproductive assemblage” (Abbinnett 86). Jason is from a socioeconomically advantaged family where technology is accessible because his parents purchase multiple media mediums (televisions in the living room and bedroom, record players, radio). He has constant access at home because of his parents, who are unaware of his fascination with the war. Through this interaction, Jason loses the ability to differentiate the medium (the television) from the message (depictions of war). Baudrillard claims, “finally, the medium is the message not only signifies the end of the message, but also the end of the medium. There are no more media in the literal sense of the word (I’m speaking particularly of electronic mass media) - that is, of a mediating power between one reality and another, between one state of the real and another” (*Simulacra* 57). Once the Falklands War ends, Jason’s fascination with news coverage from the radio, television, and newspaper stop. During the war, he was “keeping a scrapbook about the war” (Mitchell 102), but afterward is rarely seen in front of a television or listening to the radio. Jason does not describe himself as having kept or keeping a scrapbook of any other event, so the reader has no reason to believe that this is a habit or hobby of his during or prior to the narrative. His scrapbooking, as well as his dependency on the television for information, dissolves once the war ends, signaling the dependency was superficial and contingent upon Jason’s engagement in the hyperreality of the Falklands War.

Jason does not acknowledge his deep level of engagement in the hyperreal

simulation of the Falklands War, and it is only when the war ends and the media coverage stops that Jason is freed from this hyperreality. Part of living in a society in third order simulation is that Baudrillard claims, "we live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning" (*Simulacra* 79). Jason, in this way, is surrounded by media technologies which bombard him with sights, sounds, and images of a war thousands of miles away. Media immersion is prevalent throughout *Black Swan Green* in Jason's perception of the war but also in his participation with the hyperreality of his family. Baudrillard's claim of the end of the medium and the end of the message illuminates Jason's reaction to the news coverage of the Falklands War in that Jason's inefficacy to divorce the medium from the message echoes the observations Baudrillard noted about postmodern society. Jason does not always say that he saw it on the news or he read in the newspaper. Often he narrates facts and scenarios regarding the war without any specific source for the information, as though he were reporting it firsthand. The medium, such as the newspaper, television, and radio all lose the perception of being the medium of information and instead become a source of information directly. However as Baudrillard points out, no communication is actually occurring. Baudrillard claims, "rather than creating communication, it exhausts itself in the act of staging communication. Rather than producing meaning, it exhausts itself in the staging of meaning" (*Simulacra* 80). In the same way that to simulate is to feign to have what one does not, communication is feigned because the medium no longer delivers a message. War coverage that targets feelings of the unity and supports as participation in the war is the same type of "participation at every level" where an artificial connection and

simulated participation occur, which creates a false sense of unity and a false sense of communication. Jason does not communicate with the television set or the BBC, nor does he connect with any of the soldiers at war. Jason's perceived communication is one-sided and therefore not communication. This inability to communicate represents the end of the medium.

SECTION III. THE TAYLORS AS HYPERREAL

Also framing Jason's hyperreal engagement with the Falklands War is Jason's hyperreal family. Baudrillard details an example of a family's hyperreality in *Simulacra and Simulation* where the family, which seems cogent, is destined to dissolve. The 1973, PBS television documentary "An American Family" was arguably the first reality television show. When the show aired, and even now in 2012, "it was a watershed of some kind... the series heralded nothing less than the demise of the nuclear family" (Lim np). The production sought to film the Loud family's everyday and unscripted behavior. The project was "designed as an experiment, the series was intended to document the generational and gender tensions of Watergate-era family life for future anthropologists" (Heffernan np). The difficulty is that, as Baudrillard points out, by watching the Loud's family dissolve, society is "witnessing the end of perspectival and panoptic space... and thus to the very abolition of the spectacular. " (*Simulacra* 30). Instead, we are in a society of simulation and the hyperreal, the third order of simulation: the order of the code. The order of the code changes society: never before was it possible to watch other people's lives without them knowing you are watching. The television is voyeuristic in nature. The show was, in a way, a home movie but with a stranger behind the camera. Baudrillard argues, "The producer's triumph was to say: 'They lived as if we were not there.' ... The 'as if we were not there' being equal to 'as if you were there'" (*Simulacra* 28). Because of the media technologies that have developed in modern and postmodern society, it is possible to experience hyperreal simulations of people, places, and events with the goal of making the viewer feel as though they were "there."

In the same way that the Louds were on television as part of a documentary, all of Britain was on television during the Falklands War, thereby contributing to the simulation of being "there." The unity that Jason feels with the English soldiers, I argue, stems from the media portrayal of the majority of England supporting the war in an effort to perpetuate support. The Taylor family watches news footage intended to document the Falklands War, and Jason particularly internalizes the nationalistic sentiment of the war as an "us versus them." Realizing the possibility of being watched, recorded, and documented, not only by all of the English public but also the world, the television was no longer a medium of information or entertainment. It was now possible that the family, any family, could become the subject of the television and take into account the possible presence of an all-knowing, all-seeing camera and change their behavior to provide performance. The end of the panoptic space is further realized because the filming of the Louds and "An American Family" occurred in the family home. The invasion of the camera and the television into the family home represents a further penetration of the media and the gaze in the postmodern society. As Baudrillard points out, "Something else in regard to the Louds. 'You no longer watch TV, it is TV that watches you (live)'" (*Simulacra* 29). The relationship between the spectacle and the spectator is reversed; the viewing audience (spectator) participates in the spectacle, and once the spectacle, cannot return to being a spectator.

Baudrillard examines the Loud family and claims, "besides, this family was already hyperreal by the very nature of its selection: a typical ideal American family, California home, three garages, five children, assured social and professional status,

decorative housewife, upper-middle-class standing. In a way it is this statistical perfection that dooms it to death" (28). Baudrillard's argument that "statistical perfection" is hyperreal and leads to the destruction of the family applies to the Taylors; they are outwardly perfect with their material success and social status, but the family cannot sustain the facade because of various reasons, both financial and emotional. Like the Louds, the Taylors have an invading presence entering their home. As a response they refashion themselves to appear more socially idealistic. Jason explains, "When the Lambs visit, salt-and-pepper magically turn into 'the condiments.' ... Baked Alaska for 'dessert,' not 'afters.' We use the mother-of-pearl napkin rings" (Mitchell 47). In the presence of guests, the Taylors change the way they speak to give the appearance of high-class instead of using colloquial speech. He also indicates that the Taylors choose to use high-end decorations. He also points out changes in behavior and use of alcohol on these special occasions. He notices "the drinks cabinet is only open when visitors and relatives come ... [Michael and Brian] were both wearing the golf jersey the other'd given him for Christmas" (Mitchell 45). Michael and Brian appear to have a habit of drinking heavily and arguing during family occasions, but this is a repeated and expected occurrence.

The Taylors perform when they know they are being observed, especially when the spectator invades their home. A visit from the Lambs prompts the Taylor family to perform as "better" versions of themselves. Before the Lambs arrive, Jason says he has "already taken down my map of Middle-earth and hidden away my globe and anything else Hugo might think babyish" (Mitchell 43). The invasion of spectators into the home warrants, for Jason, a need to censor and present himself in a particular way-- as not a

"baby." This performance is similar to the performance that occurs when one is being watched or has the perception of being watched, such as in the panoptic space.

The homes of the Taylors and Louds are thus figured as panoptic space. Criticism of "An American Family" focuses on the actual presence of the camera in the home filming the family: "some critics argued that the camera's presence encouraged the subjects to perform. Some even said it invalidated the project. That line of reasoning, as [the producer] has pointed out, would invalidate all documentaries. It also discounts the role of performance in everyday life, and the potential function of the camera as a catalyst, not simply an observer" (Lim np). The Taylors, specifically Michael and Helena, perform every day. They perform for each other, and they perform for their children. Even in the midst of tensions between Michael and Helena, the family performs the ritual of eating dinner together. Jason thinks, "you could hear the strain in the room like the squeak of cables. Mum boasts to visitors and relatives how, no matter what, we sit around as a family and share an evening meal. She'd've done us all a favor if she'd given this tradition a night off" (Mitchell 114). Because Jason's family functions as hyperreal, they simulate enjoying dinner together and having conversation. When Michael overly politely addresses Helena about the rocks for the rockery, carelessly dumped by the workmen in the driveway blocking Michael's access to the garage, Helen explains "'there was a misunderstanding about delivery times'" (Mitchell 114). After Michael and Helena argue, Julia says, "'In my exam today... This term I'm not totally sure about, 'Pyrrhic victory,' came up. Do you know what a 'Pyrrhic victory' is, Dad?'" (Mitchell 115). After this comment, Michael leaves the table without responding. The

Taylor family is feigning communication and simulating togetherness when, even in Julia's case, conversation is a simulation.

In the same way producers selected the Louds as the family featured in their television show, Mitchell selects this family to be at the center of his novel to demonstrate the changes and evolution of the nuclear family. The difference, though, is that the Louds were real people living in a hyperreal lifestyle, whereas the Taylors are fictitious, but function in the same manner to reveal aspects of familiar situations that are simulations and, when removed, cause the family to collapse. Both families serve to represent the "typical" or "ideal" but, when examined with scrutiny and performing for society's gaze, both are "doomed" to death. The biggest argument, and perhaps one of the only scenes where neither party is performing, occurs after Helena has discovered that Michael has taken a loan against the house. He explains it to Helena:

'You *don't* understand! I took out the loan because *there was a shortfall!* I know money is for *the little people* to sort out, but as you may have noticed while you did your Sherlock Holmes act this afternoon, we've got *thumping* great ruddy mortgage payments to keep up on the *first* mortgage! Insurance premiums on all this junk you insist on buying! Utility bills! Your blessed kitchen and your Royal ruddy Doulton dinner service - that we use to impress your sister and Brian twice a year at most - to pay for! Your car to be replaced when ashtrays gone out of fashion! And now, *now*, you've decided that life isn't worth living without ... New adventures in landscape gardening! ... I'd be *grateful* if you didn't give *me* the third bloody degree on how *I* choose to juggle *your* bills.' (Mitchell 104)

Up to this point in the novel, Jason has described his mother's remodeling and spending without a hint of financial difficulty questioning if his family could afford it. As a reader, we have no way of knowing if it is or is not the case that Michael took out the 5,000 pound loan (Mitchell 103) to cover Helena's expenses. In the last chapter of the novel, Jason overhears two women gossiping about his mother and father's divorce, and one of

them claims that Michael took out loans "to the tune of twenty - *thousand* - pounds" (Mitchell 279). This number is obviously significantly larger than the amount that Helena confronts Michael about during their argument. It could be possible that Helena exaggerated the amount Michael loaned against the house or the gossiping women are simply exaggerating the amount of themselves. They also speculate about Michael's role in an affair that Helena describes as an "'incident' of Michael's five and a half years ago" (Mitchell 54). The two gossiping women claim that Michael, "borrowed a *hill* of money without so much as breathing a *word* to his own wife, using her family home as collateral" (Mitchell 280). Michael does begin to explain to Jason he has been having an affair and that Michael and Helena decided to divorce. Michael tells Jason, "sometimes, you can love *two* people in different ways at the same time... Your mother and I..." (Mitchell 278). When Michael visits the Taylor house to gather more of his belongings as he is moving out, Michael arrives with his mistress Cynthia. Jason agrees to meet her, and after a brief conversation, learns that the two of them grew up together and that Michael has known Cynthia longer than Helena. Jason thinks, "If Dad'd married this Cynthia in the first place, instead of Mum, and if they had a son, would it have been me? Or a totally different kid? Or a kid who's half me?" (Mitchell 284). Jason understands that his existence is possibly contingent upon Helena and Michael as his biological parents and that his own life could have been very different, or possibly not his life at all.

The hyperreal family is, then, a combination of exterior and internal simulations. These simulations involve the participation of family members to project a facade of having what the family does not have: familial cogency. Jason's parents simulate

financial and marital stability, but it is revealed their marriage has been a simulated relationship for several years and financial constraints have plagued the family quietly in a traditional single income household. Jason's family eventually dissolves when his parents divorce, which represents the end of Jason's participation in the hyperreal simulation of his family.

SECTION IV. – SARTRE'S EXISTENTIALISM AND JASON AS AN EXISTENTIAL HERO IN *BLACK SWAN GREEN*

The hyperreal simulations that Jason engages in daily life are part of his contingencies and facticity, and I contend in this section that because Jason transcends his facticity, he is an existential hero. Martin Heidegger used the word “facticity” as a concept in *Being and Time*, published in 1927, which served as a starting point for 20th century studies in human existence and influenced many scholars, including Sartre. Heidegger argues that facticity is *thrownness*, or the characteristic of being “thrown” into the world (127). In response to *Being and Time*, Sartre wrote *Being and Nothingness* in 1943. Sartre argues that facticity is the collection of contingencies; it is the facts of an individual's existence that cannot be changed or disputed; it is an

inapprehensible fact of my condition... this part of my condition is what causes me to apprehend myself simultaneously as totally responsible for my being - inasmuch as I am its foundation - and yet as totally unjustifiable. Without facticity consciousness could choose its attachment to the world in the same way as the souls in Plato's *Republic* choose their condition. (*Being* 131)

Jason's life in England, his parents, his social status, his race and sex, are all parts of his facticity. Another explanation of Sartre's facticity is, “what he terms our 'facticity' – the sum of 'facts' about us, including our social situation and physical circumstances – and it in no way undermines our freedom. This is because, according to Sartre, we cannot have freedom without a context, and we can always rebel against this oppression” (Reynolds 56). Key to understanding the idea of facticity is the relationship of rebellion against oppression. Before Jason is able to transcend, he rebels against the oppressing forces: his

identity, his fear, and the bullies who torment him. Understanding facticity, and understanding Sartre's argument that facticity needs to be overcome in order to exercise freedom, are the precursors to understanding Jason's transcendence.

While facticity is part of human existence, facticity can be an obstacle that restricts our free will because we choose to allow it to appear as an obstacle. Facticity is the sum of the facts about our lives, but it is also the way we define ourselves. A different way of thinking about transcendence is that, "human existence, for Sartre, is hence typified not only by what he calls our facticity, but more by the negation of this facticity: *by the suggestion that I am not just the sum of facts about me at this present moment*" (Reynolds 57 emphasis added). Jason's family is hyperreal and this is part of his facticity. Jason's other contingencies are his engagement in the hyperreality of the Falklands. Each of these aspects of Jason's life contributes and help him define himself during his transcendence.

For existential philosophers, the inability to reconcile facticity as an obstacle to transcendence is considered living in "bad faith," as opposed to living an "authentic" life. Bad faith, in the simplest definition, is explained by understanding that "the structure of human existence for Sartre is one of both facticity and transcendent freedom, and bad faith is the denial of, or the failure to coordinate, these two aspects of our lives (BN: 56)" (Reynolds 73). Bad faith is an attribute of an action or a manner of living. An action can be made in bad faith if an individual chooses that action knowing it is not truthfully what they desire, or an individual's existence can be in bad faith because the whole of the life they live is against their true desire. Bad faith is the state of being that humans,

according to existentialism, live in prior to transcendence to live an authentic life.

Authenticity is the state in which the decisions humans make, as well as the manner in which they live, is in accord with their own personal values. Bad faith is overcome through recognizing facticity and objectively accepting facticity as the “facts” or contingencies of life, but choosing to live in accord with those established values instead of living in bad faith. Authenticity, through transcendence, is freedom and is a motion towards life (instead of towards death); “for both [Sartre and Heidegger], an authentic existence involves recognizing and living in accord with certain truths of the human situation – crudely, Sartre encourages us to assume our freedom, whereas Heidegger encourages us to assume our mortality” (Reynolds 84). The concept of freedom and free choice arises after Jason's transcendence; he chooses to rush towards life and live instead of focusing solely on his eventual death. Jason's choice to rush toward life instead of death is rooted in the existential hero itself:

If people condemn our works of fiction in which we describe characters that are base, weak, cowardly and sometimes even frankly evil is not only because those characters are base, weak, cowardly or evil... Whereas the existentialist says that the coward makes himself cowardly, the hero makes himself heroic; and that there always a possibility for the coward to give in to cowardice and for the hero to stop being a hero. What counts is the total commitment, and it is not by a particular case or particular action that you are committed altogether. (*Existentialism* 360)

Jason, for the majority of the novel, is weak, cowardly, and laments his life through self-depreciating comments and thoughts. He changes by directly engaging his facticity and view himself objectively, and through his commitment to change, he makes himself heroic, more specifically, existentially heroic.

Jason's transcendence as an existential hero in *Black Swan Green*, moreover, begins in the second half of the novel. The existential hero is a protagonist in literature who acknowledges facticity, views facticity objectively, and acts according to personal moral standards. Adolescence can be considered a liminal state between childhood and adulthood, but for Jason his adolescence is marked with extensive self-reflection and resolution, a characteristic rare in adolescent protagonists. Sartre argues that an individual can overcome his or her own facticity and contingencies by looking beyond what is factual and looking instead to what is controllable. An individual is able to exercise freedom, and through chosen actions is able to live in accord with a personal moral code, and thus live an authentic life. This is referred to as transcendence, and I argue, Jason transcends his facticity because he ends his engagement with hyperreal simulations and exercises freedom to live in accord with his own moral code. During his visit to Goose Fair towards the end of the novel, Jason commits a series of actions which affect himself and others and leads him to understand himself and his place in the world, separate from the previous simulations which had no consequences. Simulation in the postmodern condition separates actions and consequences, whereas real interactions have immediate consequences.

Jason begins to change when he visits the Hall of Mirrors at Goose Fair and he confronts Upside Down Jason and Maggot (Mitchell 249). The Hall of Mirrors features shaped and curved mirrors which distort a person's reflection providing the illusion of a differently shaped body. First, Jason encounters Gelatinous Cube, "all face, no body, just

twiggy limbs waving at its corners" who tells him, "*You can only change superficial features. An Inside-You must stay unaltered to change the Outside-You. To change Inside-You you'd need an Even-More-Inside-You, who'd need an Inside-the-Even-More-Inside-You to change it. And on and on*" (Mitchell 249). This monologue represents Jason's understanding that if he desires to change his life, he must change from within himself, instead of superficially. Maggot, one of his inner voices, responds and tells Jason, "*Don't listen to them. Ross Wilcox and Gary Drake and Neil Brose pick on us because you don't blend in. If you have the right clothes and spoke the right way and hung out with the right people, things'd be fine. Popularity's about following weather forecasts*" (Mitchell 249). This represents the part of Jason who desires superficial, physical changes to make himself appeal to other students and girls, without changing his actual personality. His final confrontation is with Upside-Down Jason Taylor, who suggests, "*How about an Outside-You... who is your Inside-You too? A One-You? If people like your One-You, great. If they don't, tough. Trying to win approval for your Outside-You is a drag, Jason. That's what makes you weak. It's boring*" (Mitchell 249). Jason agrees with Upside-Down Jason, and it is in this moment that Jason objectively views his facticity and separates himself from his facticity. This is his moment of transcendence, a moment of understanding of himself and his life, and although an anticlimactic scene, the importance of this event is evidenced by Jason's actions immediately after this scene and for the last fifty pages of the novel.

After his visit to the Hall of Mirrors, Jason stumbles across his father walking around at the fair and Unborn Twin asks him, "*Suppose you never see him again?*"

(Mitchell 253). This scene begins the chain of events that change Jason's life because, for the first time in the novel, he chooses to act because of his own desires, not because of anyone else's request, or as part of a simulation in a hyperreal family. He reacts to the thought of losing his father (through death) and instead chooses to act through affirming life and his future. Jason rushes back to his father and tells him he wants to be a forester when he becomes an adult. Jason thinks to himself, "I'll *always* remember meeting Dad tonight. I know I will" (Mitchell 254), expressing a sentiment towards his father that is not previously seen in the novel. The use of the word "always" also implies an infinite, indefinable amount of time, limited only by Jason's lifetime, even though he is not acknowledging his future expiration.

Immediately after this scene, he decides to return the wallet (and money) he found before his trip to the Hall of Mirrors to his enemy, Ross Wilcox, to avoid Wilcox's abusive father beating him if he found out the money was stolen and subsequently lost (Mitchell 254). This action is merciful because Jason is choosing to prevent Ross Wilcox father from beating him when he returns home, instead of being the cause of the beating. Although Jason initially thought of himself as beating Wilcox by way of Wilcox's father, once he realizes the severity of the possible beating, he can no longer be the cause of the abuse. Instead of keeping the wallet (and money) in favor of distancing himself from the consequences of the wallet being lost by Wilcox, Jason chooses to return the wallet and prevent the escalating situation. This is, according to Sartre, an authentic action: "in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre makes it clear that there are two fundamental ways of being in bad faith. The most obvious of these is by denying our freedom (transcendence)

and pretending that we have no choice but to go along with a certain situation" (Reynolds 73). Jason is not denying his participation in the "situation" nor pretending he has no choice but to "go along" with the current course of events. Instead, he chooses to change the outcome of the situation. This is when Jason begins to understand the consequences of his actions, as tragedy unfolds and Wilcox's life is changed.

Moments after Jason returns the wallet, Wilcox finds his girlfriend kissing another man in the back of a Land Rover, and after speeding away on a motorcycle, has an accident and loses his right leg below the knee (Mitchell 257). These events are part of Jason's transcendence because he freely chooses to give Wilcox the wallet back which changes Wilcox's circumstance (he is no longer searching for the wallet) and causes him to search for his girlfriend instead. Jason claims a contribution to Wilcox's accident during a one-sided conversation – if not single-handedly causing the accident in his mind – saying it was his fault, but not his fault, "But it is. But it isn't. But it is" (Mitchell 289). In this scene Jason realizes that he has the ability to *do* (action) or *not do* (inaction), and by choosing to *do* he understands his actions have consequences and he therefore takes control of his life instead of allowing his facticity to justify inaction. Transcendence is rooted in action and, because of Jason's and his resulting transcendence, Jason becomes an existential hero. He transcends his facticity rooted in the postmodern condition by disengaging simulation and engaging reality, and accepts the outcomes of his real actions.

The novel ends with Jason moving with his mother to Cheltenham following his parents' divorce (Mitchell 282). Jason's move, as well as attending a different school, is not a choice Jason actively makes at any point in the novel. Because Jason is a minor,

this decision is made for him, and no part of the novel explains the reasoning behind the future living arrangement or the manner in which his parents came to the conclusion of his mother received custody. The existential hero is usually mobile, able to move freely in body and mind, but also able to travel short or long distances. Sartre's narrator in *Nausea* decides to move to Paris and leave his small town where he had lived all of his life. Jason's move is similar; Jason was raised at "9 Kingfisher Meadow, Black Swan Green, Worcestershire" (Mitchell 291) until right before his fourteenth birthday during his parents' divorce, but this decision was not his own. This does not make Jason less of an existential hero, but reflects the difference between adolescent and adult narrators.

Jason's character, an adolescent existential hero, is an intricately structured individual who realizes himself as well as his role in the world. When Jason confronts himself in the Hall of Mirrors, he is able to see himself objectively for the first time. This self-reflection allows transcendence of his postmodern facticity; Jason does not fight himself or resolve to change himself. Instead, he examines himself and his life and asks himself it is possible that he could be one identity, a combination of the inside and the outside identities he embodies. His assurance in himself after this realization is unspoken; he reacts with actions that define himself and his values, instead of reacting with empty words or valueless behavior. The choice to return the wallet to Wilcox is his act of establishing his personal values. He could have allowed Wilcox to be abused by his father for losing the wallet and money, and even though Wilcox bullied and tormented him, he values Wilcox's life and returns the wallet to avoid his beating. His action is a free act, meaning he was free to choose otherwise and free to choose that

action as well. This is the essence of transcendence; to choose to act and not choosing to be bound by set circumstances. Because Jason's actions are real actions with visible consequences, and he accepts responsibility for those consequences, Jason transcends his facticity and is remedied of the postmodern condition. Jason's character is an alternative Mitchell constructs to argue against the death of the real and the inescapable fate of the postmodern subject.

SECTION V. CONCLUSION

Black Swan Green, as a postmodern novel, encompasses the conventional literary elements such as criticism of capitalism, magical realism, and obstacles specific to technologically advanced society. However, the greater impact of Mitchell's novel is the alternative to the traditional postmodernist ending: instead of the typical nihilistic or hedonistic overtones, Mitchell instills a lingering hope through the protagonist. By creating a postmodern existential hero, Mitchell rejects the fate of the postmodern protagonist as destined for failure in society. Mitchell creates a protagonist whose decisions are void of God and organized religion, consistent with postmodernist tenets, but Mitchell provides salvation through existential transcendence.

Jason's transcendence of his facticity categorizes him as a rare type of existential hero. Adolescent, financially dependent, British, and transcending a facticity not previously addressed in literature before, his hyperreal facticity is specific only to the postmodern condition. *Black Swan Green's* existential themes parallel those of established existential works by Sartre and other existential writers, and consequently Jason's transcendence is marked with action, change, and resolution. Jason is one of the few, if not only, existential heroes in literature which address the postmodern condition specifically and require a new understanding of the facticity of the postmodern condition. Hyperreality as facticity provides philosophers and literary scholars a novel way of approaching the existential hero in postmodern literature and conceptualizing the postmodern condition more generally. It is imperative, then, that the interpretation of literature and philosophy intersect and adjust to reflect the changes in

society. Without a new understanding of facticity within the context of the postmodern condition, existentialism could be considered an outdated and irrelevant form of philosophical and literary interpretation and inquiry. Existentialism, as a philosophy of ethics, is not concerned with the state of society as much as the actions an individual makes in that society. Existential philosophy provides solutions to the postmodern condition without engaging in a debate about compatibility between existentialism and postmodernism. To this extent, Jason is a postmodern existential hero, embodying the postmodern condition and the existential ethics of "existence precedes essence" and acts for all humans as a moral exemplar.

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VITA

Nicole Renee Sumrall is an English Literature graduate student at Texas A&M University – San Antonio in San Antonio, Texas. Born and raised in Houston, she attended the University of Texas at San Antonio for her undergraduate degree where she double majored in English and Philosophy. Her academic interests include literary and critical theory, the Modern and Postmodern novel, Continental philosophy, epistemology, and philosophy of language. She will be returning to the University of Texas at San Antonio in Fall 2012 to begin the pursuit of a graduate degree in Philosophy.

Nicole attended the PCA/ACA Southwest Division conference in April 2011, and the South Atlantic MLA conference in November 2011. Her conference paper for the PCA/ACA focused on gamer interaction and gamer theory in MMORPGs. The SAMLA conference presentation was a joint paper presentation with LaTanya Woods on Dr. Rebecca Brown's panel which focused on food in literature. Nicole and LaTanya's papers focused on food rationing during World War II in a pair of British epistolary novels, *Henrietta's War* and *Henrietta Sees It Through*.

In her personal life, Nicole enjoys spending time with her family, pets, and is a Tae Kwon Do practitioner. In the future, she intends to complete a doctorate degree in Philosophy.

Nicole Sumrall

10914 Rustic Cedar

San Antonio, Texas, 78245

nsumrall05@gmail.com