



Literature And Existentialism

Jean-Paul Sartre

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This is Jean-Paul Sartre's classic literary manifesto. Arguing on many levels, it is philosophical and historical, critical and pedagogic; yet there is a single intention which frames the whole. Among the topics discussed are: "What is Writing?" "Why Write?" and "For Whom Does One Write?"

Sartre, who died in April 1980, was considered one of the giants of modern philosophy. In 1964 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, an honor he rejected.

Literature And Existentialism Details

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Glenn Russell says

Twentieth century French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre maintained one value supreme above all others – freedom. This being the case, is it any surprise Sartre places freedom front and center when addressing literature’s connection with existentialism? Below are quotes from the second of this three part book, a part entitled ‘Why Write?’ along with my comments:

“With each of our acts the world reveals a new face.” ----- By this statement Sartre emphasizes a prime reason for artistic creation: the need artists and writers have to feel they are essential in relationship to the world, that is, through their writing or painting the world is revealed in unique and important ways. Literature places a distinctively human stamp on the world and with each new painting or book another valuable, vital stamp is added. I think we can all agree the world would be smaller and poorer without, to name just several, Virginia Woolf and Leo Tolstoy, R. K. Narayan and Raymond Chandler, Anne Tyler, Philip K. Dick and Shusaku Endo.

“It is the conjoint effort of author and reader which brings upon the scene that concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the mind. There is no art except for and by others. Raskolnikov’s waiting is my waiting which I lend him. Without this impatience of the reader he would remain only a collection of signs.” ----- I really appreciate Sartre on this point: readers awaken the words and sentences on the page, inventing and completing characters and scenes with their own feelings, emotions, ideas, intuitions and past experiences. Thusly, the work of art is rounded out, made whole and complete by a community of readers. Harry Haller receives a new, more expanded life each time I reread Hesse’s novel “Steppenwolf”.

“Thus, for the reader, all is to do and all is already done; the work exists only at the exact level of his capacities; while he reads and creates, he knows that he can always go further in his reading, can always create more profoundly, and thus the work seems to him as inexhaustible and opaque as things.” ----- Has anybody ever reached the bottommost level of Robert Musil’s “The Man Without Qualities”? I suspect a reader could spend an entire lifetime rereading this novel and discover new, deeper dimensions and meaning with each successive study. There are a number of novels I have reread multiple times, “The Stranger” and “Siddhartha” come immediately to mind and this has certainly been my experience – I have never reached the bottom; there is always more to learn and appreciate.

“And since this directed creation is an absolute beginning, it is therefore brought about by the freedom of the reader, and by what is purest in that freedom. Thus, the writer appeals to the reader’s freedom to collaborate in the production of his work. The book does not serve me freedom, it requires it.” ----- Sartre underscores how we are required to bring our freedom to our reading. An important aspect of freedom is openness of mind. If we find ourselves disinclined to read a novel by an author with a different sexual orientation or cultural background then ourselves, for example a novel like “Season of Migration to the North” by the Sudanese author Tayeb Salih where he explores cultural confrontation and racism, we might want to reflect on exactly how open-minded and free we really are.

“The characteristic of aesthetic consciousness is to be a belief by means of an engagement, by oath, a belief sustained by fidelity in one’s self and to the author, a perpetually renewed choice to believe. I can awaken at

every moment, as I know it: but I do not want to: reading is a free dream.” ----- Reading is a generosity, a giving oneself completely to a character and story, a gift to the writer. We can have mixed feeling reading an unsettling work, say a story of a child experiencing the horrors of war in a novel like Jerzy Kosinski’s “The Painted Bird” or a Thomas Ligotti tale of terror, but we keep turning the pages, keeping our free dream alive since we value our readerly commitment and engagement.

“The work can be defined as an imaginary presentation of the world insofar as it demands human freedom. The result of which is that there is no “gloomy literature”, since, however dark may be the colors in which one paints the world, he paints it only so that free men may feel their freedom as they face it. Above all, the unique point of view from which the author can present the world to those freedoms whose concurrence he wishes to bring about is that of a world to be impregnated always with more freedom. ----- Is there ever enough freedom in the world? Sartre thinks there is always room for more freedom – thus, more literature, more books.

Final note: I have cited works of fiction since, for the most part, Sartre uses fiction as examples throughout his book (Sartre famously disliked poetry). However, when he speaks of literature, not only is Sartre referring to novels and stories but other types of creative writing such as poetry, plays, essays and, yes, reviews.

Anders says

I recommend this book to anyone who gives a damn. The book is divided into 3 chapters, the first two addressing the hard to voice subjective dynamics of writing- the hows, whats, ifs and whys, very illuminating to anyone who has creative endeavors, hence my opening statement. Whatever field you find yourself in, the tracking of the spirit he undergoes makes sense, at least to me, a musician. He then goes into a lengthier chapter asking who you are writing for, a good question at any stage. His rendition of the history of western literature I am not equipped to corroborate or critique, but I do feel empathy for the naïve, honest, hopeful, utopian vision it triumphs into at the very end. Do read!

David says

To understand existentialism, Sartre is your writer. This book makes one understand how existentialism and art can be connected.

John Hanson says

Parts one and two were barely readable. Part three was a collection of long paragraphs each covering about a dozen different topics which changed after each period. I am not sure what kind of person enjoys reading such rambling. I am not one of them.

Jules says

Sartre philosophizes about writing in three parts, asking important questions: What is writing? Why write? For whom does one write? He takes a teleological approach at times, exploring writing as an end, but more often counters this, with reference to Kant: "art does not have an end", a work can always be continually edited, revised, altered. He sees writing as communication, as action, but his main thesis is that writing is about freedom. This is highly recommended reading for writers and readers and for students of existentialism

Luis Alexandre Ribeiro Branco says

It is an interesting book to read and learn from someone who deeply understood about Existentialism, nevertheless, regard arts and literature I am not sure if I agree with Sartre.

Jacki says

well, I tried. I read part of the first chapter and then skipped around a bit to parts that looked interesting. What I learned is that Jean-Paul Sartre is pretentious and annoying. Apparently he thinks that painting, music, and poetry are not art. Only prose is art (probably because that's the form of expression that he chose to write in and he's obviously better than anyone else).

Arif Abdurahman says

Yang saya pelajari, Sartre itu orang yg sok dan menjengkelkan. Tentu, yg pengen paham eksistensialisme, Sartre orangnya. Buku ini mengaitkannya dengan sastra. Ada tiga bab, yang membahas topik penting dan mendasar: Apa itu menulis? Kenapa menulis? Untuk siapa seseorang menulis? Sartre memperdebatkan segalanya, secara filosofis dan historis. Sayang, mungkin karena penguasaan bahasa Inggris saya yg payah, saya enggak terlalu paham, dan enggak terlalu berusaha juga buat memahaminya. Hehe.

Phillip says

I stopped having heroes a long time ago, but damn...I wish I could sit down with a bottle of sake with Sartre!

Brian says

The book bogs down in places when Sartre gets into Marxist/political explanations, but when he talks about the intellectual labor of the writer, the individual reader, the reading public, Sartre is, I think, at his most interesting and most profound. The book also offers an excellent history of Western European writing with a focus on readership and the way writing has been consumed over the last 4 or 5 centuries. I realized about midway through this history, however, that Sartre would have had to write another entire book if he had

chosen to consider folk art, folk tales and oral traditions as another form of literature.

Matthew! Lawrence! Rohrer! says

Bus Stop Existentialism:

Attempting to escape loneliness, I have taken to riding random buses in any direction with a copy of "Literature and Existentialism" in my hand. I do not enjoy the book, but I persist in hopes that its cover will impress intellectual females, or pseudo-intellectuals like myself, who are actually better than real intellectuals because they know how to let their hair down every once in a while.
