



Aesthetic Consciousness and Literature: Sartre's Existential Queries

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Abstract

Jean-Paul Sartre raised a number of pertinent existential questions exploring the realms of not just art, philosophy and literature, but addressed all aspects of man's being. His philosophic thought starts with two types of being- Being-in-itself and Being-for-itself. In-itself is the transcendent essence of human existence, therefore beyond the framework of space and time. Being-for-itself perpetually seeks completion. Being arises through Nothingness, yet Nothingness denies Being. He discusses three types of consciousness: perceptual, conceptual and imaginative. Imagination functions on the basis of the negation of what is here and now. The imaginative act results in the creation of an unreal object. Why then does man create art? This is the question which immediately arises in this context. All creative activity, according to him, derives its impetus from Being-for-others. Art is an expression language (the term 'language' here is taken in a wider sense and does not merely refer to verbal language) that reveals the others. Without language, no awareness is possible- of oneself as well as of others. Therefore, language becomes valuable as a means of revealing the other in his essential freedom. His essay 'What is Literature?' delves into the deeper queries of creation of literature beginning with what, for whom, what should and so on.

Keywords: Aesthetics, consciousness, existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, literature, language.

Introduction

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) declined the Nobel Prize for literature in 1964. He was not just a multitalented thinker accredited with several philosophical systems but also wrote novels, plays, essays on literary theory and art criticism and biographies. He challenged the predominant theories of his times, revisiting Marxism and Freud's approach to understanding humans. He was known for his political analysis and activism, specifically his opposition to the Algerian and Vietnamese wars. Most significantly, as a philosopher, he raised and addressed many queries concerning the nature and everyday life of human beings. Although he is widely known for his defense of freedom and human responsibility, his work is perhaps best understood as exploring the relationship between individuals and the environment.

The starting point of all philosophic thought whether aesthetic or epistemological, for Sartre is man's "Being". Being is distinguished into two types: Being-in-itself and Being-for-itself. In-itself is the transcendent essence of human existence, therefore beyond the framework of space and time. It is the image which man keeps of himself that which he intends to pursue in the course of his life. Being in-itself is identical with itself- the complete and plentiful being as opposed to the Being-for-itself which is perpetually seeking completion. It is the negative aspect of being, negating its own essence and at the same time seeking to pursue its essence. In order to reach its essence, it is forever trying to fulfil itself and so far as it is in the process of fulfilment it can never be complete. It will then cease to be the Being- for-itself and submerge into the in-itself.

For-itself constantly tries to be what it is not and consequently negates what it already is. This perpetually transcending for-itself is the human consciousness which through its choice of itself is projecting itself towards an essence. The state of consciousness always implies a thing of which one is conscious of and thus it presupposes a transcendence towards something. Consciousness here is reaching beyond itself towards that which it is conscious of and therefore it is essentially in a state of flight from itself. Being in-itself, on the other hand, has no connection with anything extraneous to it. It is complete in itself and absolutely positive; there is not a fraction of negation in it. Therefore, the distinction between 'within' and 'without' is meaningless for the in-itself; it is, as Sartre would call, the 'solid being'; it is what it is. Here there is no gulf between what it is and what it intends to be; for being itself is the fulfilled and completed aspect of man's being. This dual aspect of being is meaningful only in the context of man; for-itself and in-itself are the two aspects of man's being-his perpetually evanescent consciousness and his essence respectively. The in-itself in the context of man's life would be his past so far as it is dead and inert and beyond his control, or his future so far as it is reflected in his image of himself. Being-in-itself is pure and untainted being, while the for-itself is the nothingness; it can never be classified and defined because it is in a constant flux.

Being and Nothingness, though opposed to each other, are, at the same time, interrelated. Being arises through Nothingness, yet Nothingness denies Being. Nothingness is also a pursuit of Being in the sense it looks towards Being as a goal to be reached. This huge gap between Being and Nothingness remains perpetually, because in so far as Being is pure affirmation and Nothingness negation, they can never be submerged into one another. Nothingness is the peculiarity of human existence, and existence in this sense is different from bare survival. Man's consciousness which makes him a project for himself is what marks his existence.

Existence cannot be defined because man first exists and then makes any definitions of existence possible:

One does not find, one does not disclose nothingness, in the manner in which one can find, disclose a being. Nothingness is always an elsewhere. It is the obligation for the for-itself never to exist except in the form of an elsewhere in relation to itself, to exist as a being which perpetually effects in itself a break in being... Thus nothingness is the hole of being, this fall of the in-itself towards the self, the fall by which the for-itself is constituted. But this nothingness can only "be made-to-be" if its borrowed existence is correlative with a nihilating act on the part of being. This perpetual act by which the in-itself degenerates into presence to itself we shall call an ontological act. Nothingness is the putting into question of being by being-that is, precisely consciousness or for-self. It is an absolute event which comes to being by means of being and which without having being, is perpetually sustained by being. Since being-in-itself is isolated in its being by its total positivity no being can produce being and nothing can happen to being through being-except for nothingness. Nothingness is the peculiar possibility of being and its unique possibility. Yet this original possibility appears only in the absolute act which realizes it. Since nothingness is nothingness of being, it can come to being only through being itself. Of course, it comes to being through a particular being, which is human reality. But this being is constituted as human reality inasmuch as this being is nothing but the original project of its own nothingness. Human reality is being in so far as within its being and for its being it is the unique foundation of nothingness at the heart of being (Sartre, J.P., *Being and Nothingness* 78-79).

The above passage implies that Being and Nothingness are not separate entities but two dimensions of man's life-Being refers to that aspect which is identical with itself. It can be man's physical existence, the physiological aspect of man which can be dissected and defined in terms of definite physiological organs, their operations and functions. It can also be man's past which is beyond change. Thus being refers to that which is complete and categorizable about man. The human reality combines in itself both being and nothingness. Nothingness is the denial of any completion, it is a lack, and points towards an incessant change. Nothingness depends on Being for its existence. Unless man's physical being is there, his consciousness cannot arise. And it is this consciousness of man which negates the plenitude of Being for it transcends itself. It points towards the fulfilled Being which it desires to be and constantly tries to catch this essence which it desires to make of itself. In this process of transcendence, it is reduced to flux and thus creates a lack in itself between that which it is and that what it wants to be-its projected essence.

Sartre takes for granted the independent existence of the external world; he is an epistemological realist. But at the same time he holds that 'my world' (as I look at it) is born out of my free and conscious intention. There are three types of consciousness: perceptual, conceptual and imaginative. The imaginative consciousness posits its object in a manner different from that of a perceptual consciousness. Perceptual consciousness is dependent upon

the existence of the object perceived, while the imaginative consciousness implies the non-existence or absence of the imagined object. Imagination functions on the basis of the negation of what is here and now. The imaginative act results in the creation of an unreal object. Unreal can be taken as the opposite of the 'real', of 'what there is', and this is confined by Sartre to the level of man's sensible experience. The structure of imagination is defined as "something which is nothingness in relation to the world and in relation to which the world is nothing." There is a relation of mutual negation between imagination and reality. The imaginative consciousness is only possible with the annihilation of the consciousness of reality (or at least its shutting up for a while):

... the formation of an imaginative consciousness is accompanied, ... by an annihilation of a perceptual consciousness and vice versa. As long as I am looking at this table, I cannot form an image of Peter; but if the unreal Peter arises before me all of a sudden, the table which is before my eyes disappears, leaves the scene (Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination* 171).

Therefore, the attitude towards an unreal object is different from that towards the real. The attitude of consciousness determines the difference between reality and unreality. It has been seen that art is unreal. Why then does man create art? This is the question which immediately arises in this context. All creative activity, according to him, derives its impetus from Being-for-others. Art is an expression language (the term 'language' here is taken in a wider sense and does not merely refer to verbal language) that reveals the others. Without language there can be no awareness possible- of oneself as well as of others. Therefore, language becomes valuable as a means of revealing the other in his essential freedom. "One of the chief motives of artistic creation", says Sartre, "is certainly the need of feeling that we are essential in relationship to the world" (*What is Literature?* 26-27).

The artist does not create merely for himself (29-30)- is at the basis of all art-activity remains a hypothetical audience to whom the artist is communicating. The very attempt to concretize his image in terms of a sensuous form implies that the artist has (directly or indirectly) in mind, a beholder of his creation. The art-work emerges as the result of the collaboration between the artist and the audience. The artist embodies his image in terms of an art-object and this created object in itself is a nothingness unless the 'other' collaborates. The spectator too is a creator, though his creation is a directed creation-directed by the artist. Left to themselves all art-works are dead signs, it is the spectator, (as directed by the artist) that gives them their meaning. Thus the art-work lives only in its communicability. The artist makes an appeal to the audience for the recognition of freedom. (32)

Sartre chose to entitle his autobiography as *Words*. We could expect a man in love with words to have written some pamphlet on words. Also published as “Literature and Existentialism,” “What is Literature?” is an essay published in 1948. The essays “What is Writing?” and “Why Write?” were first published in French literary journals *Les Temps modernes*, *Situations I* and *Situations II*, later translated into English and published by the Paris-based literary journal *Transition* 1948. The translation in English by Bernard Frechtman was published in 1950. ‘What is Literature?’ begins with a contradiction and takes us into an argument over the meaning in literature. Sartre’s problem begins with distinguishing between forms of literature. He distinguishes between poetry and prose “for the purpose of clarity.” The first section of “What is Literature?” begins with the questions: “What is Literature? For whom does one write? What is literature? What should and could it be?”

He responds to these questions in his own unique way:

The writer is a speaker; he designates, demonstrates, orders, refuses, interpolates, begs, insults, persuades, insinuates. If he does so without effect, he is talking and saying nothing...Let words organize themselves freely and they will make sentences, and each sentence contains language in its entirety and refers back to the whole universe...One is not a writer for having chosen to say certain things, but for having chosen to say them in a certain way (38).

Sartre takes up languages of all cultures and revisits their origins. He studies and brings to light the French writers of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries and the impact of their language on French culture and society.

Language is our shell our antennae; it protects us against others and informs us about them; it is a prolongation of our senses, a third eye which is going to look into a neighbor’s heart. We are within language as within our body. We feel it spontaneously while going beyond it toward other ends, as we feel our hands and our feet; we perceive it when it is someone else who is using it, as we perceive the limb of others (35).

He seems to hint at the questions that every writer should ask: “What aspect of the world do you want to disclose? What change do you want to bring into the world by this disclosure (37)?”

Sartre here juxtaposes the role of the reader with that of the writer. His comment on the status and stance of the writer is unique and clear.

For a writer, the future is a blank page, whereas the future of a reader is two hundred pages filled with words which separate him from the end. Thus, the writer meets everywhere only his knowledge, his will, his plans, in short, himself. He touches only his own subjectivity; the object he creates is out of reach; he does not create for himself. If he re-reads himself, it is already too late. The sentence will never quite be a thing in his eyes. He goes to the very limits of the subjective but without crossing it. He

appreciates the effect of a touch, of an epigram, of a well-placed adjective, but it is the effect they will have on others. He can judge it, not feel it (50-51).

He elaborates, "Writing and reading go hand-in-hand. You cannot have one without the other. This is obvious. It is the joint effort of author and reader which brings upon the scene that concrete and imaginary object, which is the work of the mind" (52).

The next section, 'Why Write' compares the discipline of self-expression in writing to that of painting. When should a writer consider his story is finished? Sartre imagines and perhaps expects the artist to ask this question: "When should I consider my painting finished? When you can look at it in amazement and say to yourself, 'I'm the one who did that'" (49).

In the section, 'For Whom does one Write?' Sartre goes to the past of French Literature examining how writers from the eighteenth and nineteenth century "swallowed up, masked and made unavailable" the freedoms and values of their era. In contrast, an author's aim is to give the "fullest possible representation" of their world.

In the fourth section, 'Situation of the writer in 1947,' Sartre analyses the political role of the writer. "The American writer has often practiced manual occupations before writing his books; he goes back to them. He does not see in literature a means of proclaiming his solitude, but an opportunity of escaping it" (Lowrie).

In the concluding parts, Sartre delves on the position of Europe "preoccupied with reconstruction, depriving themselves of necessities in order to export". In his opinion, Writing is not living. Neither is running away from life in order to contemplate Platonic essences and the archetype of beauty in a world at rest (190). The war of 1914 (as First World War was referred to) precipitated the crisis of language; the war of 1940 (WWII) has revalorized it. He concludes with the words, "If it is true that to have, to make and to be are the prime categories of human reality, it might be said that the literature of consumption has limited itself to the study of relations which unite being and having" (192).

By raising the question "What is literature?" Sartre projects himself as a committed writer. Benjamin Suhl asserts, "Unlike his Neo- Marxist opponents, who force particular works of literature to fit the pattern of readymade theories, Sartre posits his theories only after his painstaking and exhaustive descriptions in "Being and Nothingness," and furthermore, he considers works, authors, literary genres and periods on their own terms and in their own context before explicating them in the light of his own system of criticism" (84). On the other hand critics such as Goldthorpe remark, "Sartre does not systematically relate his analysis of

the imagining consciousness to its function in specific works of literature. This may explain why critics have in general been slow to follow up the connection between his theory and his own literary writing” (134).

Ion Georgiou comments in this regard, “One begins to see Sartre’s philosophical inclinations, and perhaps we are the poor for not having as yet uncovered his philosophy of language. We are fortunate, however, to see the nature of literature from his vantage point, and one need to appreciate philosophy in order to grasp it. In short, writing prose is a purposeful moulding whose end is to transmit a message as accurately as possible.”

Conclusion

The writings of Sartre swept post-war Europe in the intellectual scene. They gave a new direction to contemporary thought. In the essay “What is Literature?” Sartre acts as an author as well as a philosopher to raise certain existential queries and also answer them in the same line of thought. His exploration into questions like why we read and why we write lead the literary world into deeper contemplation to be serious writers, although his theory of aesthetic consciousness attempts to give a phenomenological explanation of the aesthetic consciousness and he does not aim to construct any norms for aesthetic evaluation and appreciation.

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