

SARTRE, JEAN PAUL

Jean Paul Sartre, his influence and importance. Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980) was a French novelist, playwright, theater director, literary critic, and public activist. He exercised great influence on younger writers, and, through his very popular plays, on a wide sector of the French public.

Jean Paul Sartre, the Life. Sartre was born in Paris, son of an officer in the French navy. (His father died of a fever two years after Jean Paul's birth, and the young man was turned over to his mother's care. When Sartre was twelve years old his mother remarried, and moved to La Rochelle. (His mother's new marriage was to a cousin of the Nobel Laureate Albert Schweitzer.) Young Sartre, an avid but quirky reader, went on to study at the Ecole Normale Superieure, the premier center for philosophical thought in France. (The great inspiration for Sartre, and what led him into philosophy, was the thought of Henri Bergson, about the nature of time.) At the Ecole Normale Sartre formed a lasting, if volatile, relationship with the eminent political philosopher to be, Raymond Aron; Sartre also perfected his gifts for pranks, on several occasions fooling the administration of the ENS into imagining impending disasters, against which they needed to protect themselves immediately. Subsequently he taught in Laon and Le Havre and then studied in Berlin. In France he became a professor at the Lycée Pasteur in Neuilly. In 1929 he met the woman who was to be his lifetime companion, Simone de Beauvoir. By 1946, at which time he founded the revue *Les Temps Modernes*, he had almost completely left teaching for journalism. He had begun writing full time. He had behind him the experience of having been arrested by the Gestapo, during the Occupation, and held for over a year, during which time he was able to read all of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, and to take many steps toward his own version of Existentialism.

Sartre's Works. Jean Paul Sartre was a prolific writer, who wrote in many genres. Arguably his most compelling novel is his first, *La Nausee*, *Nausea*, published in 1938. Returned after years of traveling to his home town of Bouville—which resembles the Le Havre where Sartre taught—Antoine Roquentin settles down to write a biography of an eighteenth century French gentleman. As time goes by, and he pursues his daily scholarly routine, Roquentin becomes growingly aware of the natural world around him. On one famous occasion he finds himself facing the roots of a gnarled tree in the park. He feels threatened by the inhuman knot of roots, then, in looking for a word to protect himself with, for *racines*, he finds he is on the other side of language, and this occasion becomes a revelation, to him, of the human unfriendly character of nature. That is not all he realizes. At the same time he makes this discovery about the roots he realizes that man is on his own, unsupported by nature or by anything other than his own will; this is essentially the foundation of existentialism, which Sartre will write out through all his major works, in the following years. The basic premises active in this novel will pervade Sartre's ambitious : *L'Être et le néant*, 1943, *Being and Nothingness*, in which he lays out his philosophy formally.

Reading

Primary source reading

Existentialism is a Humanism, tr. Carol Macomber, 2007.

Secondary source reading

Hayman, Ronald, *Sartre: A Life*, 1987.

Further reading

Aronson, Ronald, *Camus and Sartre*, 2004.

Original language reading

Wittman, H., *L'esthétique de Sartre*, 2001.

Suggested paper topics

Look into the early relation of Sartre to his intellectual hero, Henri Bergson. What attracted Sartre to Bergson notions of time? Does Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, or his *Nausea*, reflect an ongoing preoccupation with the nature of time? Was the later influence of Martin Heidegger important for this same relationship?

Look into Sartre's drama and short fiction. Some think he is at his finest in those genres, where the inherent ambiguity of human existence is at its sharpest, as is the need to choose. Does Sartre's philosophy, in the formal sense, interface effectively with his fictions?

Excerpt

<http://www.anselm.edu/homepage/dbanach/nausea.htm>

6.00 p.m.

I can't say I feel relieved or satisfied; just the opposite, I am crushed. Only my goal is reached: I know what I wanted to know; I have understood all that has happened to me since January. The Nausea has not left me and I don't believe it will leave me so soon; but I no longer have to bear it, it is no longer an illness or a passing fit: it is I.

So I was in the park just now. The roots of the chestnut tree were sunk in the ground just under my bench. I couldn't remember it was a root any more. The words had vanished and with them the significance of things, their methods of use, and the feeble points of reference which men have traced on their surface. I was sitting, stooping forward, head bowed, alone in front of this black, knotty mass, entirely bestial, which frightened me. Then I had this vision. It left me breathless. Never, until these last few days, had I understood the meaning of "existence." I was like the others, like the ones walking along the seashore, all dressed in their spring finery. I said, like them, "The ocean *is* green; that white speck up there *is* a seagull," but I didn't feel that it existed or that the seagull was an "existing seagull"; usually existence hides itself. It is there, around us, in us, it is *us*, you can't say two words without mentioning it, but you can never touch it. When I believed I was thinking about it, I must believe that I was thinking nothing, my head was empty, or there was just one word in my head, the word "to be." Or else I was thinking . . . how can I explain it? I was thinking of *belonging*, I was telling myself that the sea belonged to the class of green objects, or that the green was a part of the quality of the sea. Even when I looked at things, I was miles from dreaming that they existed: they looked like scenery to me. I picked them up in my hands, they served me as tools, I foresaw their resistance. But that all happened on the surface. If anyone had asked me what existence was, I would have answered, in good faith, that it was nothing, simply an empty form which was added to external things without changing anything in their nature. And then all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste of things, this root was kneaded into existence. Or rather the root, the park gates, the bench, the sparse grass, all that had vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder—naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness. I kept myself from making the slightest movement, but I didn't need to move in order to see, behind the trees, the blue columns and the lamp posts of the bandstand and the Velleda, in the midst of a mountain of laurel. All these objects . . . how can I explain? They inconvenienced me; I would have liked them to exist less strongly, more dryly, in a more abstract way, with more reserve. The chestnut tree pressed itself against my eyes. Green rust covered it half-way up; the bark, black and swollen, looked like boiled leather. The sound of the water in the Masqueret Fountain sounded in my ears, made a nest there, filled them with signs; my nostrils overflowed with a green, putrid odour.