

Literature as a Guide to Ethics
Rereading the Relation between Literature and Ethics in Two Phases of
Sartre's Thought

Monireh Hojjati Saidi¹

Dr. Babak Abbasi^{2*}

Dr. Shahla Eslami³

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Abstract

In Sartre's existentialism, mankind is in the position of creativity in the two fields of ethics and art. Sartre links this creativity to the imaginary and believes that based on his/her imaginative consciousness, an artist creates what does not exist – but should exist – in the real world. While studying the relation between art and ethics in two phases of Sartre's thought, we aim in the present paper to deal with the question how Sartre's understanding of the relation between art and the imaginary in the first phase prepares the appropriate ground for the approach that follows it, an approach according to which literature, as a chosen artistic field can be employed as a guide for the formation of ethical values. These values are created and recreated with the aid of imaginative consciousness and with the author's and reader's participation. Consequently, we will show that in Sartre's existentialism, literature has an undeniable relation to ethics and can fill out the vacuum in his philosophy with regards to systematic ethical principles.

Key words: The Imaginary, Literature, Ethics, Existentialism, Sartre.

1. PhD Candidate in Art Philosophy, Faculty of Theology and Philosophy, Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch.

2. Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Theology and Philosophy, Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch.

*E-mail: baabak.abbassi@gmail.com

3. Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Theology and Philosophy, Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch.

Extended abstract

1. Introduction

Throughout history, art and ethics have been related to each other in different ways. Whereas philosophers like Plato considered art from an ethical viewpoint, the point of view of others such as Clive Bell emphasized that art is an independent phenomenon with its own evaluations which negate ethical evaluation. Nonetheless, rather than using the classic forms of philosophical discourse, existentialist philosophers have opted for literary or dramatic forms, and have, through fiction and drama, conveyed their own philosophical concepts and beliefs, thus practically introducing philosophical concepts to the realm of literature and theatre. In fact, for them artistic action is a self-willed and free activity through which human beings reveal the world.

2. Theoretical Framework

Among existentialist philosophies, in Sartre's philosophy mankind, as the possessor of free will, selects some values and creates an ethics of his own choice based on these selections, and in this way invites others to commitment as well. Sartre extends this ethical choice to the domain of art because he believes that in both the realms of ethics and art we are in a similar position of creation, and in the world of ethics we cannot decide about an action prior to doing the action. In Sartre's view, the ultimate goal of art, and particularly literature, is to possess the world again and manifest it as it is, but in such a way as if it were derived from human freedom. As such, for him, literature is accompanied by commitment and obligation and consequently, ethics, and he invites the reader to actively engage in reconstructing and re-creating the art-work as a new world.

3. Methodology

Based on this approach and by studying Sartre's philosophical and literary works in the two phases of his thought, we aim to review the distinctive features of his existentialism; then we investigate the meaning and place of ethics and art and their relationship in Sartre's

view, and ask whether he recommends the literary work as an ethical guide to the period of the work's creation or not; third, we try to understand the similarities and differences of Sartre's approaches as a phenomenological existentialist and as a Marxist existentialist. Finally, we try to find out about the role and place of the reader in this philosophical approach. In terms of its aims, the present study is fundamental-theoretical, and in terms of its nature and method, it is a descriptive-analytical one.

4. Findings and Discussion

According to this study, in Sartre's existentialism, mankind is in the position of creation in two fields of morality and art, particularly literature. Sartre relates this creation to the imaginary and believes that the author creates what is not in the real world but must be in his or her imaginative consciousness. In the present study, as we review the relationship between literature and ethics in two phases of Sartre's philosophical thought, the main question we aim to answer is how his view about the relationship of art and the imaginary in the first phase paves the way for the next approach in which literature, as a distinct art field, can be a guide for making moral values that are created and re-created by means of imaginative consciousness and the author-reader interaction.

In our discussion, Sartre is shown to have two different approaches to literature. First, he faces the artistic work in a phenomenological approach and views it as a means to release the individual from the difficulties of the world. This approach focuses on the imaginary and its impact on artistic creation. Living in the shadow of the imaginary is a passive and individualistic defence against the difficulties. But during World War II and Sartre's turn to Marxism, the second approach to the artwork emerges from this passive approach and this time, it focuses on the artist's commitment and obligation as well as the reader, and he introduces the mechanism of re-creating the world from the imaginary. That is how Sartre views literature as an invitation to a collective activity to change the world. Therefore, from the passivity of the first definition of the imaginary as a defence mechanism against the real world, Sartre extracts a narrative based on which the imaginary changes the world

with the help of the author's and the reader's moral commitment and obligation so that the world is made in the form it must be.

5. Conclusion

We believe that for Sartre, literature is an ethical event that always invites human beings to be remade at any moment. From this point of view, literature is a manifestation of and invitation to the creation of the ethical man, a man who has to create his own moral values. As such, the author and the reader, as free and committed human beings, create moral values in accordance to their own situation, society and era and they are responsible for all the good and evil events of human history. They are free to create, even though the author's responsibility is more than other people, because he or she, as an artist, uses the imaginary to offer what is not but must be to the readers and invites them to make and change the real world according to his or her imagination. In fact, in Sartre's existentialism, the author uses literature, particularly prose works such as the novel, fiction or drama to invite the readers to turn into the creators of morality in concrete situations, and follow its principles so as to attain a better world for all people. Therefore, in Sartre's existentialism, literature has an undeniable relationship with ethics and it can fill the existing gap in ethical principles in his philosophy.

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