

Review

Existentialism in two plays of Jean-Paul Sartre

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Accepted 26 January, 2012

Existentialism is the movement in the nineteenth and twentieth century philosophy that addresses fundamental problems of human existence: death, anxiety, political, religious and sexual commitment, freedom and responsibility, the meaning of existence itself (Priest, 2001: 10). This study tries to define what existentialism is and stresses themes of existentialism. This research finally points out these themes of existentialism by studying on two existentialist drama plays written by Jean-Paul Sartre who was a prominent existentialist writer. The plays by Sartre studied in this research are 'The Flies' and 'Dirty Hands'.

Key words: Existentialism, freedom, absurdity, anguish, despair, nothingness.

INTRODUCTION

Existentialism is the philosophy that makes an authentically human life possible in a meaningless and absurd world (Panza and Gale, 2008: 28). It is essentially the search of the condition of man, the state of being free, and man's always using his freedom. Existentialism is to say that something exists, is to say that it is. To state something's essence, is to state what it is (Priest, 2001: 21). In other words, existentialism is a philosophical thought that deals with the conditions of existence of the individual person and their emotions, actions, responsibilities, and thoughts. Jean-Philippe Deranty stresses in his article "Existentialist Aesthetics" that existentialism owes its name to its emphasis on "existence". Existence indicates the special way in which human beings are in the world, in contrast with other beings. For the existentialists, the human being is "more" than what it is: not only does the human being know that it is, but, on the basis of this fundamental knowledge, this being can choose how it will "use" its own being, and thus how it will relate to the world. "Existence" is thus closely related to freedom in the sense of an active engagement in the world (Deranty, 2009). Stephen Priest in his 'Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings', argues that most existentialist thinkers are interested in: what is it to exist? Does existence have a purpose? Is there an objective difference between right or wrong? Are we free? Are we responsible for our actions? What is the right sort of

religious, political, or sexual commitment? How should we face death? (Priest, 2001: 29). We can briefly define existentialism as: 'existentialism maintains that, in man, and in man alone, existence precedes essence'. This simply means that man first is, and only subsequently is, this or that. In a word, man must create his own essence: it is in throwing himself into the world, suffering there, struggling there, that he gradually defines himself. And the definition always remains open ended: we cannot say what this man is before he dies, or what mankind is before it has disappeared (Garman, 1944).

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE AND EXISTENTIALISM

Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, Gabriel Marcel, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre have made the most significant contributions to existentialism. Jean-Paul Sartre (1905 to 1980) is one of the greatest French thinkers. A polemical and witty essayist, a metaphysician of subjectivity, a political activist, a revolutionary political theorist, a humanistic novelist, a didactic playwright, his genius lies in his powers of philosophical synthesis and the genre-breaching breadth of his imagination (Priest, 2001: 10). Sartre, in his writings, stresses some themes in analysis of existentialism.

Jonathan Webber in his 'The Existentialism of

Jean-Paul Sartre', points out themes of existentialism: existence precedes essence, abandonment, absolute individuality and absolute freedom, subjectivity of values, responsibility for choice, anxiety, despair, the self and bad faith (Webber, 2009).

In 'Existentialism and Humanism', Sartre argues that aesthetic existentialism which is represented by him is more consistent. It is, if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence, a being whose existence comes before its essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept of it. So, what is "existence precedes essence"? Sartre argues that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself (Sartre, 2007: 21). Sartre points out the first principle of existentialism in his 'Existentialism and Humanism': "there is no human nature since there is no God to conceive of it. Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be and since he conceives of himself only after he exists, just as he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself" (Sartre, 2007: 22). However, since most of the existentialists followed Nietzsche in the conviction that "God is dead," art's power of revelation is to a large extent devoted to expressing the absurdity of the human condition (Deranty, 2009).

In 'Existentialism and Humanism', Sartre clarifies and partly revises his view of existence and essence. He divides the things that exist into three kinds: human beings, artifacts, and naturally occurring objects. In the case of human beings, existence precedes essence. In the case of artifacts, essence precedes existence and in the case of naturally occurring objects, existence and essence coincide. The idea of the object is also necessary for the object to exist. Essence precedes existence in this case because there is an answer to the question 'what is it?' before, and independently of, a correct affirmative answer to the question 'is it?' The essence of the paper knife predates and is required by its existence. In the case of naturally occurring objects, such as stones and trees, their being does not predate their being what they are. In the case of human beings, Sartre means there is no predetermined human essence and there is no human nature fixed in advance of human existence (Priest, 2001: 25). Sartre, like other philosophers of existence, had the idea "existence precedes essence" which meant for him that all existing things in the universe are meaningless. Only through our consciousness they have meaning, which means that it is we who create meaning.

The terms "anguish", "abandonment", and "despair" are commonly used by existentialist thinkers. These terms express the experience of human freedom and responsibility. Existentialists like to say that man is in anguish. This is what they mean: a man who commits

himself, a man who realizes that he is not only the individual that he chooses to be, but also a legislator choosing at the same time what humanity as a whole should be, cannot help but be aware of his own full and profound responsibility (Sartre, 2007: 25).

Sartre explains "abandonment" as: "it is we ourselves, who decide who we are to be" (Sartre, 2007: 34). As for "despair", Sartre argues that despair means: we must limit ourselves to reckoning only with those things that depend on our will, or on the set of probabilities that enable action (Sartre, 2007: 35). By "abandonment", existentialist mean to say that God does not exist and that it is necessary to draw the consequences of his absence right to the end. The existentialist strongly opposed to a certain type of secular moralism which seeks to suppress God at the least possible expense. For existentialism, everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence forlorn (Priest, 2001: 32).

Sartre's existentialism is based on human freedom. Sartre's view of freedom is: "I am condemned to exist forever beyond my essence, beyond the causes and motives of my act. I am condemned to be free. This means that no limits to my freedom can be found except freedom itself (Sartre, 1992: 439)".

Human-reality is free because it is not enough. It is free because it is perpetually wrenched away from itself and because it has been separated by a nothingness from what it is and from what it will be. It is free, finally because its present being is itself a nothingness in the form of the "reflection reflecting." Man is free because he is not himself but presence himself... Man cannot be sometimes free and sometimes slave; he is wholly and forever free or he is not free at all (Sartre, 1992: 440).

One of the most famous claims of 'Being and Nothingness' by Sartre is that, we are aware to some extent of our freedom, and the responsibility that comes with it, but we try to hide this from ourselves. We are aware, claims Sartre, that the pressures and demands that the world presents to us are the result of the ways in which we see and engage with things, and that this in turn is the result of our changeable characters rather than any fixed natures.

But explicitly thinking about this induces in us a feeling of anguish. In order to avoid this, we try to deny this responsibility for the way we are and the ways in which we behave.

This is what Sartre calls "bad faith". To be more precise, he uses this term in more than one way. In its most general sense, it labels the attempt to deny the basic structure of human being, that the way an individual sees the world is determined by that individual's character, which in turn can be changed by that individual. We deny this by pretending that our characters are fixed and unchangeable (Webber, 2009: 89).

Sartre thinks there are fundamentally two manners

of being: being-for-itself and being-in-itself. Roughly, being-for-itself is subjective being and being-in-itself is objective being. Being-for-itself is the kind of being that pertains to one's own existence. Being-in-itself is the manner in which the world external to one's own reality exists. Being-for-itself entails the existence of consciousness, and consciousness of itself. Because it entails consciousness, it entails that directedness towards the world called "intentionality" which consciousness entails. Being-for-itself is free and entails a kind of lack or nothingness (Priest, 2001: 115). Sartre suggests that "I am a kind of nothingness because there is nothing that I am independently of my self constitution through those choices" (Priest, 2001:116). Being-in-itself is opaque, objective, inert and entails a massive fullness or plenitude of being. Being-in-itself is uncreated, meaning that although it is, it never began to be and there is no cause and no reason for it to be (Priest, 2001: 117).

EXISTENTIALISM IN TWO PLAYS OF JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

In existentialism drama, the dramatist examines the metaphysical life of man and protests against it; existence becomes the source of his rebellion. It is made of utmost restriction, a cry of anguish over the insufferable state of human being human. Existential drama is impotent and despairing. The existential dramatist makes his characters subhuman. Existential drama exaggerates human bondage (Exiri, 2009).

'The Flies' was written by Sartre in 1943. 'The Flies' is a call to people to recognize their freedom. The play, 'The Flies', is about finding freedom which is an important theme of existentialism. "Once freedom lights its beacon in a man's heart, the gods are powerless against him" (Sartre, 2.102). In the play, Sartre wants to show freedom through the protagonist of the play Orestos. Human freedom is very important according to existentialism. Sartre has got the idea that people have the ability to create their own world through freedom. Sartre's opinion is that people are free to make a choice and to act according to that choice. Orestos is free in the play so he can make decisions about future, however his sister Electra who always thinks of past to get her revenge, is not free, so she cannot look ahead and have freedom; "for fifteen years I dreamt of murder and revenge" (Sartre, 3.2.114). "I had a dream. I saw our mother lying on her back. Blood was pouring from her, gushing under the doors. A dream" (Sartre, 3.2.109). In the play, it is pointed out that if one wants freedom, he needs to get rid of past issues and look ahead. In the play, human freedom is the most important issue, it is more important than deeds of the gods. We see another existentialism theme in here, the lower situation of the

gods in the play decreases our reverence for the gods. In the play 'No Exit', Garcin cannot leave the room where they are together because he needs the others to judge him; we have the same idea in 'The Flies'. Sartre in his 'Being and Nothingness' argues that so as to have freedom, one needs to ignore what others think about him or how others judge him; Sartre calls this "being-for-others". "Ah, if I only knew which path to take! ... yet this you know: that I have always tried to act aright. But now I am weary and my mind is dark; I can no longer distinguish right from wrong. I need a guide to point my way.... And yet -- and yet you have forbidden the shedding of blood.... What have I said? Who spoke of bloodshed" (Sartre, 2.2.89)? Orestos who was not free at first is in need of what other people think of him or how they will guide him. "It's now you are bringing guilt upon you. For who except yourself can know what you really wanted? Will you let another decide that for you" (Sartre, 3.2.115)? One cannot act freely, if he takes the judgment of others into consideration. "Only yesterday I walked the earth haphazard; thousands of roads I tramped that brought me nowhere, for they were other men's roads. Yes, I tried them all.... But none of these was mine. Today I have one path only, and heaven knows where it leads. But it is my path" (Sartre, 3.2.105).

Orestos is aware of his freedom. Another issue that prevents people from recognizing his freedom is not to get rid of the effects of the past. Electra cannot have freedom because she is always busy with the past memories and this situation affects her moving to the future; "But I don't feel free. Can you undo what has been done? And we are no longer free to blot it out. Can you prevent our being the murderers of our mother_ for all time" (Sartre, 2.2.105)? In 'No Exit', three characters were in a room in hell, who admit their sins to each other and want others to judge them which prevent their acting freely; in 'The Flies', people in Argos do the same thing. But when they are judged by others, they cannot move freely. Religion in the play is ignored because nothing in existentialism is important than human freedom. Orestos says: "Orders? What do you mean? Ah yes the light round that big stone. But it's not for me that light; from now on I'll take no one's orders, neither man's nor god's" (Sartre, 2.1.90). "We are free Electra. I feel as if I'd brought you into life and I, too had just been born, I am free Electra. Freedom has crashed down on me like a thunderbolt" (Sartre, 2.2.103). Religious values do not have a chance to control human behaviors. Moral values and sins people commit can rule people's lives and behaviors but they prevent people from absolute freedom. We have the issues of "being-in-itself" and "being-for-itself" in the play as Sartre pointed out in his 'Being and Nothingness'. Another existentialist issue in the play is nothingness. The protagonist Orestes who has absolute freedom in the play notices vacancy around him, "why distort a past that can no longer stand up for itself"

(Sartre, 3.2.115)? Things are meaningless for him and this vacancy, as Sartre stresses in his 'Being and Nothingness', is nothingness. Orestos says "what do I care for Zeus? Justice is a matter between men, and I need no god to teach me it" (Sartre, 2.2.103). He means that gods cannot affect his decisions and judgments; "You are God and I am free; each of us is alone" (Sartre, 3.119). As Sartre points out, absolute freedom and being-for-itself are very related to each other. Without being-for-itself, one does not have absolute freedom. Being-in-itself is like a simple object, and does not have capability to make a decision or judge itself. Therefore, being-in-itself cannot be related to absolute freedom.

William Empson in his article 'Sartre Resartus' writes:

Kings are a bad thing, and the people of Argos ought to develop their own democracy... But an existentialist is much prone to walk away from a situation, free in spite of having been betrayed... One might think that the trouble with the existentialist view of life is that it is too mean, too convinced that betrayal is to be expected. The objection here is against its rosy trustfulness toward its own type of a hero. He has only to commit his private crime and this will in some magical way release his neighbors, who are also of course potential criminals, so he can very easily claim he did it for their sakes. Electra here after goading Orestos into the murders, turns round and says that she never wanted them; she only had fancies; she hates him for doing it; she will escape the Furies by repenting. All this emphasizes the more manly attitude of Orestos, who refuses to repent because an existentialist hero is free and in some way, above right and wrong... The central phrase of Orestos in this play, "human life begins on the far side of despair" (Empson, 1946).

Dr. Michael Delahoyde in his article 'Sartre, The Flies' writes what Jean-Paul-Sartre thinks about his own play 'The Flies':

Orestes makes a choice, and thereby exercises his freedom, when at the end of the play he takes on the fear and guilt of his people and thereby experiences alienation. At the beginning of the play, Orestes wants to acquire the memories of the people and thereby fill the void of homelessness in himself. But at the end of the play, by killing Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, he takes on the remorse of the people and frees them from their guilt. By making his choice, Orestes exists and creates his self (Delahoyde, 2011).

Another existentialist drama by Sartre, 'Dirty hands', written in 1948, is about the assassination of a leading politician. The play tells us how the killer carried out his mission. In the play 'Dirty Hands', we see that the protagonist Hugo feels emptiness in his life. "We're in a play. Nothing seems to me to be entirely real" (Sartre, 3.175). We see a theme of existentialism in the play,

nothingness. "All that is here lies" (Sartre, 3.177). Hugo experiences this nothingness issue in his life. Life seems to be meaningless for Hugo and he says "what are we" (Sartre, 5.204)? Hugo even experiences the nothingness in the idea of death. "A murder. I say, it's so abstract. You pull the trigger and after that you no longer know what goes on" (Sartre, 5.208). His own life is meaningless for him. "I have no wish to live" (Sartre, 2.143). Hugo does not have freedom at first, because he is a member of a party, he has to obey their orders. "If an assignment is given, you gotta carry it out" (Sartre, 2.172). Karsky, another character of the play, says "I don't have the authority to accept, I am not the only one who has to decide" (Sartre, 4.194). Another existentialism issue despair is seen in the play. "May be you think that I'm desperate? Not at all: I'm acting out the comedy of despair" (Sartre, 4.199). But one thing made him realize his freedom. When he saw his wife with Hoederer (another character in the play); Hugo killed him. He says "and besides, you have freed me" (Sartre, 6.233). "I have not yet killed Hoederer. Not yet. But I am going to kill him now, along with myself" (Sartre, 7.241). Realizing freedom, Hugo has changed.

Haim Gordon and Rivca Gordon in their essay, 'Sartre on Our Responsibility for Dead Lives: Implications for Teaching History' argue that in his play 'Dirty Hands', Sartre has challenged the maxim that each generation creates its own interpretation of history. He held that historical research discloses truths so as to obtain knowledge; it is a realm of relative judgments. Indeed, 'Dirty Hands' and many of Sartre's other writings resolutely indicate that an authentic responsibility toward the dead must include a responsibility for the truth about these dead lives - even if that truth is cruel, harsh, embarrassing, or painful. If you act as if each generation creates its own interpretation of history, or as if history is a story written by the victors, your regard for the truth about the lives of the dead vanishes, as does your concern for truth as guiding your daily life. Furthermore, 'Dirty Hands' shows that by such disregard you give way to banal and evil approaches. Respect for facts disappears. Cynicism very often thrives. Genuine knowledge is banished to the sidelines. Frequently, bewitching myths and loathsome fantasies based on partial truths prevail unchallenged. Note that responsibility toward dead lives is part of Sartre's overall understanding of our responsibility in the world. Central to this responsibility is respect for the freedom of others and the willingness to struggle that this freedom will not be abused or destroyed. 'Dirty Hands' clearly indicates that a person's death in no way relieves me of my responsibility to respect that person's freedom which existed on earth until his or her death, and to struggle that the memory of this freedom will not be distorted or destroyed. In 'Dirty Hands', Hugo is willing to die so that the truth about the dead Hoederer's freedom, and deeds, will not be erased

from history. By assuming responsibility for Hoederer's death - even if he himself has to die for such a decision - Hugo is also assuming responsibility for the world as a place where truth deserves to be heard and known by all and sundry. This point deserves to be emphasized. Through his courageous decision to respect the dead Hoederer, Hugo is helping to create a world where truth is not erased from history so as to serve the current interests of banal politicians and narrow adherents to the communist (or any other) party line (Gordon and Rivca, 2001).

CONCLUSION

Sartre, as an existentialist, show up some themes in his work which are absurdity: life is absurd, it makes no sense and has no meaning or ultimate purpose, but human beings need it to make sense, to have meaning and purpose. Rejection of meaning-giving narratives: It is not enough to say that life is absurd; the existentialists repeatedly make the point that when philosophy, religion, or science tries to make sense of it, the attempts always fail. Alienation: this is the feeling that you are a stranger in your own life, a stranger in the world. Anxiety: this is the feeling of unease you get when you start to recognize that life is absurd. Forlornness: this is the feeling of loneliness you get when you realize that no one can help you make sense of your existence. Responsibility: everybody bears responsibility for making their lives through it. Authenticity: people want authenticity- people in a way that's in tune with the truth of who they are as human beings and the world they live in. Individuality: An important of developing an authentic and satisfying life is individuality. Passion/engagement: being passionate or engaged is another important aspect of living an authentic life. Death: this is the ultimate context for all human actions and an important source of the absurdity of life (Panza and Gale, 2008: 30).

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