

AMERICAN LITERARY WORKS CREATED UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF SARTREAN EXISTENTIALISM

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Abstract: *This article explores the influence of Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialist philosophy on American literary production from the mid-twentieth century to the contemporary period. By examining selected works by Richard Wright, Norman Mailer, and Paul Auster, the study identifies thematic and structural elements aligned with Sartrean concepts such as freedom, bad faith, responsibility, and the construction of self through action. The results demonstrate that Sartrean existentialism not only shaped the ideological atmosphere of postwar American literature but continues to inform narrative experimentation and character psychology in modern fiction. The article concludes that Sartre’s ideas have become deeply embedded in the American literary imagination, adapting to changing cultural contexts while retaining their philosophical core.*

Keywords: *Sartre, existentialism, American literature, bad faith, freedom, responsibility*

Introduction

Jean-Paul Sartre’s philosophical contributions—particularly his analyses of human freedom, consciousness, and responsibility—had a profound impact on global literary culture. Although existentialism originated within European intellectual circles, its themes resonated deeply with American writers navigating the uncertainties of postwar life, individual autonomy, racial injustice, and the expanding pressures of modernity.

American literature of the second half of the twentieth century often reflects a tension between personal agency and structural constraint—a tension central to Sartrean thought. This study examines how American authors absorbed, reinterpreted, and transformed Sartre’s existentialist concepts within their narratives.

Methods

This research employs qualitative literary analysis grounded in existentialist philosophy. Three authors were selected based on their explicit or implicit engagement with Sartrean ideas:

- Richard Wright, particularly *The Outsider* (1953)
- Norman Mailer, especially *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) and later essays
- Paul Auster, with emphasis on *The New York Trilogy* (1985–1986)

Primary texts were analyzed through the lens of Sartre's key philosophical works—*Being and Nothingness* and *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. Secondary criticism on existentialism and American postwar literature supported the interpretive framework.

Results

1. Richard Wright and Existential Freedom in *The Outsider*

Wright's novel is one of the clearest American engagements with Sartrean existentialism. The protagonist, Cross Damon, embodies Sartre's idea that individuals are condemned to be free and must create meaning through action. Damon's radical rejection of societal labels reflects Sartre's critique of deterministic thinking. However, his descent into violence reveals the dangers of misconstruing freedom as detachment from moral responsibility—an outcome Sartre warned against.

2. Norman Mailer's Existential Man and the Struggle Against Bad Faith

Mailer's early fiction and nonfiction echo Sartre's notion of bad faith, the human tendency to flee from freedom by denying one's responsibility. In *The Naked and the Dead*, characters confront moments where institutional structures—especially the military—threaten to reduce them to mere objects. Mailer's protagonists often rebel against such reduction, reflecting Sartre's belief that authenticity arises only when individuals assert their freedom despite external pressures.

3. Paul Auster and Postmodern Extensions of Sartrean Thought

Although Auster writes in a postmodern era, his narratives retain existential concerns central to Sartre's philosophy. *The New York Trilogy* depicts characters searching for identity and purpose within fragmented urban landscapes. Their quests reflect Sartre's argument that the self is not predetermined but constructed through choices. Auster extends existentialism into a postmodern context where meaning is not only self-made but also continuously destabilized.

Discussion

The analysis reveals that Sartre's influence permeates multiple generations of American writers. For Wright, existentialism offered a framework for exploring racial identity and the contradictions of American individualism. For Mailer, it provided a vocabulary for critiquing institutions that suppress personal agency. For Auster,

existentialism supplied structural and thematic tools for grappling with a world where meaning is elusive.

Although each author adapts Sartre differently, several recurring themes emerge: the burden of freedom, the search for authenticity, and the persistent threat of bad faith. These concerns remain relevant in American literature because they address enduring questions about selfhood, morality, and the possibility of meaningful action.

Conclusion

Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism has left a lasting imprint on American literary production. Writers from Richard Wright to Paul Auster have drawn upon Sartre's ideas to construct narratives that examine personal agency, responsibility, and identity. The continued presence of these themes suggests that Sartre's philosophy remains an essential interpretive tool for understanding American fiction, particularly in contexts where characters confront social fragmentation and existential uncertainty.

Future research may expand this inquiry by exploring Sartrean themes in African American literature, feminist writing, or contemporary genre fiction such as dystopian and noir narratives.



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