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Existentialism and the Bildungsroman: At the Crossroads of Philosophy and Literature

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ABSTRACT

Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* both focus on the search for meaning in life and the formation of identity amidst differing experiences with societal expectations. The former is a bildungsroman while the latter is existentialist fiction. Julien Sorel's identity is shaped through his interactions with society and his experiences with class, religion, ambition, and recognition by others. Antoine Roquentin, on the other hand, searches for meaning in life through his interactions with history and relationships, and also his understanding of individual freedom and the contingency of existence itself. For Sorel, reliance on society is an essential part of navigating class, as it offers him opportunities for advancement, but this dependence ultimately undermines his ability to create his identity. By contrast, Roquentin distances himself from established structures of meaning and begins to envision creating meaning outside of social validation. An examination of characterization, narrative form, and most importantly, characters' developmental trajectories reveals the significance of socialization in the process of self-formation. These novels demonstrate that literary form can express philosophical ideas through their characters' experiences and choices.

INTRODUCTION

Nausea and *The Red and the Black* are both literary works, with the former typically understood as a part of the existentialist tradition and the latter as a bildungsroman. Through literature's narrative style, internal and external dialogue, and themes, two distinct but structurally related types of self-formation are revealed. Both novels are fundamentally concerned with the same question of how an individual can cultivate a meaningful identity despite the pressures and uncertainties of society. Analyzing the two works together reveals that the boundary between philosophy and literature is not as strict as it seems. As Iris Murdoch suggests in her discussion of existentialism as "romantic rationalism," literature often communicates philosophical ideas through its representation of relationships, emotions, and the whole human experience.[1] In *Nausea*, the protagonist Antoine Roquentin is the subject of this romantic rationalism. Set in twentieth-century France, Roquentin is horrified by the overwhelming notion of meaninglessness in the world, leading to a sensation of "nausea" and forcing him to search for meaning independently of externally prescribed sources of meaning. Stendhal's portrayal of Julien Sorel's developmental struggle for self-definition, on the other hand, is distinct in that Sorel is both dependent on

[1] Iris Murdoch, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1953).

and eventually defeated by socialization. He uses his experiences with society to understand class and act on his ambitions of furthering his status, but they also prevent him from forming a self that is independent of these expectations.

CONTEXT FOR EXISTENTIALISM AND THE BILDUNGSROMAN

Existentialism is a philosophical theory which tries to explain the concept of human existence. It emerged primarily in nineteenth and twentieth century Europe, through the writing of philosophers and authors such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Søren Kierkegaard.[2] Existentialist thinkers often turn to forms of expression such as novels and plays in order to highlight the lived experience of contrasting anxiety, alienation, freedom, and self-creation. Thus, existentialism has taken on a literary quality that makes fiction effective in exploring philosophical concerns. Novels, and all their elements, such as narrative style, imagery, and characterization, help deliver an accurate understanding of abstract concepts because they allow readers to witness the experiences and choices of characters. This relationship is essential to the intersection between philosophy and literature, and especially important to understanding existential thought through fiction.

The tight interconnection between existentialism and literature is particularly well represented in the works of Sartre and Camus. As aforementioned, Sartre's novel *Nausea*, in particular, illustrates the fundamental ideas of existentialism through protagonist Antoine Roquentin, who is a man overwhelmed with the anxiety that existence may lack any real meaning. He eventually chooses to change his life in order to search for purpose and identity. Moreover, Camus uses *The Stranger* to explore the concept of "the absurd," which is the belief that life does not have any inherent meaning even though humans are constantly searching for it. Both notions emerge from the human impulse to understand what it means to exist without any predetermined purpose or values. Both authors wrote in other literary forms, such as essays and plays, but developed fundamental philosophical concepts in their novels, using fiction as a means of expressing what it means to be human.

While Sartre places an emphasis on radical freedom, Camus further explores the absurd as the conflict between a human's relentless search for meaning and the world's indifference to this search.[3] Regardless, Sartre's concept of freedom and Camus' idea of the absurd both create the understanding that identity is shaped through human behaviors and decisions, not discovered as a universal truth.

Sartre's famous statement that "existence precedes essence" lies at the center of existentialism. "Existence precedes essence," or that "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards" is integral to the understanding of human existence.[4] However, Sartre is not arguing

[2] Kevin Aho, "Existentialism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, published January 6, 2023, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/.
[3] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (Vintage Books, Random House, 1991).
[4] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber, ed. John Kulka (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

that this freedom is independent from societal or external circumstances. Individuals cannot control the situation into which they are born, including conditions such as class, historical era, or family relations. He refers to these limitations as "facticity," and argues that true authenticity is exercising freedom within these constraints. In *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, he argues that humans are not born with a fixed purpose or identity despite facticity, and identity is created by assuming responsibility for one's choices no matter the circumstance. With no permanent meaning imposed upon human existence, individuals have agency in choosing how hardship will shape their identity and understanding of life. Humans have to actively construct identity, existing first and then defining themselves through their decisions and actions.

These concepts are especially well illustrated in Sartre's novel *Nausea*, where the protagonist Roquentin experiences a detachment from the world around him. Near the middle of the novel, Sartre constructs a climax, and Roquentin suddenly feels that ordinary objects are unfamiliar and meaningless, leading him to ponder the unpredictable nature of existence. Abruptly, he realizes that existence just "is," with no real necessity for justification. This realization produces the sensation he calls nausea, which is the disturbing awareness that reality has no meaning. Sartre uses fiction in this novel to immerse the reader emotionally into the experience of coming face-to-face with meaninglessness. Roquentin's realization allows him to be open to the possibility of freedom and to create meaning during the collapse of traditional structures.

Sartre himself describes this use of fiction as a means of understanding and interpreting philosophical ideas in his essay *Existentialism Is a Humanism*.[5] In this essay, he takes special care to mention George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss* and Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma*. *Mill on the Floss* is the story of a young girl named Maggie Tulliver who chooses "human solidarity and self-sacrifice" over the man she loves.[6] *The Charterhouse of Parma*, on the other hand, is centered around La Sanseverina, who believes that "a great love justifies any sacrifice, and…she is even willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for passion's sake if life demands it."[7] Sartre claims that "I maintain they are equivalent, inasmuch as the ultimate aim in both cases is freedom," and uses the two novels as case studies to reveal existential freedom through lived experience.[8] Each protagonist appears to represent separate moral systems, with Tulliver's eventual self-sacrifice and Sanseverina's relentless pursuit of love at odds with one another. However, Sartre is making the argument that they can both be understood through the same fundamental philosophical principle: both characters freely commit themselves wholly to their values rather than rely on external standards.

As such, Sartre's essay exemplifies the significance of using existentialist ideas to interpret literature. He explains that just as authors are able to create a story that is mutable and constantly changing, individuals construct their lives through evolving choices. When interpreting these novels, existentialist ideas are not merely theoretical doctrines but are used to clarify characters' decisions and actions. Thus, philosophy, as

[5] Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*.
[6] Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, 50.
[7] Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, 50.
[8] Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, 50.

expressed through fiction and literature, helps readers come to the conclusion that identity is a construction, and it is important to make moral and ethical choices in an attempt to create oneself.

In particular, existentialist fiction and the bildungsroman genre share concerns about self-formation. The bildungsroman is a genre which tells the story of the social and psychological development of a young protagonist and follows their life until adulthood. It originated in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Europe, well before existentialism was recognized as a popular philosophical movement. The bildungsroman typically focuses on the internal transformation of a character who struggles to discover identity and purpose while navigating the external pressures of society.[9] Similar to existentialism, the bildungsroman introduces questions of freedom, formation of identity, and the search for meaning in life. Both existentialist writers and authors of the bildungsroman ask a similar question of how free an individual is to live a meaningful life within society. In novels, such as *Jude the Obscure* and *David Copperfield*, protagonists oftentimes experience an alienation from the society they inhabit, framing society as something that restricts characters in their search for identity and purpose. Paradoxically, characters need to fully immerse themselves in their world despite oftentimes experiencing pain and hardship in order to form their identities. Protagonists in the aforementioned novels experience states of poverty and social instability but ultimately pursue personal aspirations after struggling against rigid social hierarchies. For instance, in *Jude the Obscure*, the titular character has ambitions of intellectual and social success, but he struggles to achieve either because of his social status, failed relationships, and societal expectations.[10] His struggle under circumstances out of his control shows how these experiences can ultimately help to shape identity. In pursuit of similar goals, characters in existentialist fiction seek meaning and live authentically in environments which frequently deny both. Sartre claims that our identity is made up of choices and actions, and the bildungsroman also has a shared concern of self-formation, and shows how an individual builds their identity through their conflicts with the world around them. Sarah Graham in her book *A History of the Bildungsroman* points out that the genre repeatedly discusses an individual's struggle between satisfying their needs and conforming to the demands of society.[11] Rather than simply accepting their role in the world, characters in the genre are formed by means of engaging with the struggles associated with suffering and failure. Therefore, the process of maturing in the bildungsroman draws parallels to the existentialist process of seeking authenticity, as well as the relationship between freedom and facticity, in existentialism.

Ultimately, the connection between existentialism and bildungsroman lies in their shared focus on the search for meaning in life. It is through the study of existentialism that the concepts of freedom, authenticity, and creation are examined and defined, while the literary tradition of the bildungsroman explores these concepts through the portrayal of characters' struggles to overcome difficulties on their path towards self-formation. Most importantly, the study of existentialism and bildungsroman in conjunction with one another illustrates the significance of socialization in these processes: whether

[9] Sarah Graham, *A History of the Bildungsroman* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).
[10] Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1896).
[11] Graham, *A History of the Bildungsroman.*

self-formation is done independently of it or socialization is used as something to rely on and be guided by.

THE RED AND THE BLACK

The Red and the Black is a foundational bildungsroman set in post-Napoleonic France.[12] Despite its reputation as a foundational story of the bildungsroman genre, it includes a number of existentialist themes. As such, readers should read this novel with later existentialist concerns in mind. Post-Napoleonic France is a world in which inherited social structures remain powerful even as traditional systems of meaning begin to fracture. Consequently, the main character, Julien Sorel, undergoes a development that is inseparable from the historical conditions surrounding him. As a bildungsroman, *The Red and the Black* illustrates Julien's process of building himself as a painful and nonlinear struggle between his innermost desires and the social standards he is expected to meet. From the opening chapters, Stendhal describes Julien as alienated from his hometown of Verrières because his intellectual and emotional capacity is distinct from the laboring masculinity of his father and brothers. "[Julien's father] might perhaps have forgiven Julien his slender build, ill-suited to heavy manual labour and so unlike that of his elder brothers; but he could not abide this obsession with reading—he could not read himself."[13] Julien's father sees no value in him, viewing his obsession with books as a weakness and even going so far as subjecting him to violence and humiliation. He berates Julien to catch his attention, calling him a "lazybones," "brute," and hitting him with a "long pole used for knocking down walnuts."[14] These opening scenes establish an integral part of the bildungsroman, which is the protagonist's estrangement from their family and the larger society. Stendhal, however, adds more nuance to this traditional bildungsroman structure by illustrating how Julien's alienation is the impetus of his self-discovery and calculative nature. He learns how to inhabit identities strategically because he understands that success depends on manipulating the social codes of Restoration France, a society governed less by authenticity than by appearances. Julien constantly wavers between his personal belief of who he is and who society requires him to be on the outside, creating a profoundly existential crisis of split consciousness.

Ambition and Performance

This conflict is most apparent in Julien's multifaceted attitude towards ambition and social mobility. As a reference, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe follows the traditional bildungsroman development of the protagonist as they mature and eventually integrate into society.[15] Through Wilhelm's experiences, he achieves self-knowledge, forms mature relationships, and accepts social responsibility. He is fully integrated into society at the end of the novel, having found a great understanding of himself. Julien's experience, however, is unique because it reveals the impossibility of true assimilation in a society with an unchangeable class hierarchy. Stendhal writes about Napoleon, a

[12] Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*, trans. Catherine Slater (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[13] Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*, 19.
[14] Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*, 19.
[15] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, trans. Eric A. Blackall, ed. Victor Lange (Princeton University Press, 1995).

symbol of social mobility, as someone Julien looks up to, demonstrating that Julien believes becoming like Napoleon and achieving military glory and heroism will put him on the path to self-realization. Julien is so obsessed with Napoleon that he secretly keeps a portrait of him in his bedding despite living in a household that despises Napoleon for legitimizing commoners. When Madame Renal discovers this box, Julien is thrown into a panic, "seiz[ing] the box without a word of thanks or any other kind, and [runs] into his room where he lit a fire and burned it on the spot."[16] He understands the "extent of the risk he had just run," implying that even though he knows his reputation and consequently his life would be ruined if he was found out, he was still willing to keep Napoleon, his role model, close to him. To Julien and to Stendhal, Napoleon is not just someone to be admired for his military success, but an individual who is a symbol of self-creation and active resistance to social norms. Julien laments, "I should have been a sergeant under Napoleon. I shall be a grand vicar among these future curés [parish priests]."[17] He is disappointed that he will not be able to realize what he believes to be his true prestige under the tutelage of Napoleon in the army, and that without Napoleon, the zenith of potential, Julien will have to be content with hiding his ambitions behind a religious mask. Restoration France prevents Julien from following Napoleon and seeking freedom from social expectations, ensuring that the church is the only path Julien can utilize for advancement. This is ironic because Julien is forced into a profession that is fundamentally disconnected from his personal desires. At the seminary in Besançon, Julien comes face-to-face with religious corruption, social hypocrisy, and a dominance of conformity. His individuality makes his classmates mistrust and ostracize him, and he describes that "there won't be much difference between a seminary and a prison; I must leave my plain clothes in some inn or other, and resume my black suit."[18] This "black suit" refers to the robes Julien was required to wear at the seminary, but it becomes a symbol for the simultaneous restriction of his free will and decision to conceal his emotions, ambitions, and peasant origins in favor of class advancement. This moment is a turning point in the novel because it marks when Julien discards his Romanticism and sense of self by constantly monitoring his gestures, language, and emotions in order to fit the expectations of others. For instance, Julien, "in order to win over the old curé Chélan, on whose good grace he realized that his future prospects depended, [he] had learnt by heart the New Testament in Latin."[19] Instead of learning the New Testament because he is genuinely establishing his faith, Julien adopts an artificially religious persona as a means to enter polite society, demonstrating how socialization becomes something helpful for him to rely on in his efforts for advancement. Simultaneously, Stendhal uses Julien's attempts at assimilation to critique a society that is hostile to authenticity and independent expression, a system which will eventually undermine Julien's process of self-formation.

Love and Authenticity

This does not, however, mean that socialization is purely something that Julien relies on throughout his life, nor does it mean that he is simply a social climber who lacks any sincerity. Firstly, Julien's emotional relationships disrupt the outwardly calculated identity he tries to maintain, illustrating how external

[16] Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*, 63.
[17] Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*, 203.
[18] Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*, 175.
[19] Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*, 21.

experiences interfere with a character's attempts to change internally. This is an essential characteristic of a bildungsroman, and love, especially, complicates the occurrences in a bildungsroman story. Falling in love is the grappling of self against engineered outward appearances, allowing the protagonist's pretense to slip away. For instance, Julien's relationship with Madame Renal is driven by his ambitions and desire to imitate upper-class individuals. He tries to copy noble seductions and sees love as another performance that will allow him to dominate over his class environment. Yet Stendhal manages to demonstrate how genuine emotions destabilize Julien's carefully constructed mask. During an encounter with Madame Renal, "Julien stopped thinking about his black ambition and his plans that were so difficult to execute. For the first time in his life he was carried away by the power of beauty. Lost in a sweet and aimless dream quite alien to his character, gently clasping a hand he could admire for its flawless prettiness…"[20] Julien experiences a vulnerability, and perhaps even love, that allows him to move away from his "black ambition," or his obsession with power and control as well as his dependence on socialization. The color black also recalls Julien's black "suit," or robes, which he wears as a member of the clergy. He originally finds these as representations of the restrictive nature of his social status and the inability to follow his dreams of enlisting in the army, which is represented by the color red. During the Restoration, however, Julien realizes that members of the clergy actually become the most influential political leaders in reestablishing the old social order, fulfilling his desires for "black ambition." This particular contrast between the church and the military allows readers to come to the understanding that *The Red and the Black* can be read as a reference to the two main choices Julien faces throughout his life: adopting the red uniform of the army or the black cassock of the clergy.

Being with Madame Renal places Julien one step closer to authenticity and emotional presence, but also puts him in a position where his process of self-formation and desire to receive societal validation begin to conflict. Ultimately, this conflict will lead to socialization defeating him and his formation. Julien's development is nonlinear, fluctuating between authenticity and performance. He analyzes his own feelings frequently while simultaneously distrusting them, turning introspection into a crisis of anxiety. This problem is further accentuated by his affair with Mathilde de La Mole, in which desire and self-awareness become inseparably linked to the act of performing an ideal. Julien "tried to keep himself entertained by thoughts of military glory and devotion to his country. Was he in love, then? He really didn't know, but in his tortured mind he did find Mathilde absolute mistress of happiness and of his imagination…Mathilde had absorbed everything; he found her everywhere in the future."[21] Their relationship is a constant push and pull, both of them imagining themselves as characters in literary fantasies with their romance as an act of aristocratic heroism. Julien is consumed by his desire for narratives and performances when with Mathilde, but he still cannot fully control or rationalize his feelings as he is constantly forced to don a mask in order to successfully meet society's expectations. This differs from more integrative bildungsroman narratives where the characters are able to resolve their confusion with experience. In this case, Julien's greater self-awareness about his internal conflict intensifies his instability, illustrated by Stendhal's usage of free indirect discourse. Despite being in third person, this narrative style is highly internal, allowing for a fragmentation that anticipates existentialist

[20] Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*, 70.
[21] Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*, 406.

concerns: the instability of the self and the impossibility of fully reconciling inward freedom with external social structures. While socialization originally provided a framework for movement in Julien's status, it ultimately undermined his self-formation.

NAUSEA

Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* is a quintessential existentialist novel set in the early twentieth century fictional town of Bouville, which translates literally in English to "Mud Town."[22] Throughout the story, the protagonist Antoine Roquentin gradually loses faith in the systems of meaning that had previously organized his understanding of the world, and chooses instead to undergo self-formation independently of socialization. Sartre integrates philosophical concepts into lived experiences through Roquentin's day-to-day life, illustrating the close connection between existentialism and literature.

Firstly, exploring the structure of the novel is essential to understanding Sartre's existential concerns. *Nausea* is written as a journal composed of fragmented entries recording Roquentin's immediate experiences and reflections. The fragmentation presents an incomplete story that simultaneously poses a barrier to and offers unique insight into the protagonist's inner workings. The diary itself is imperfect, which lends itself to the interpretation that the story is empty of "perfect moments," which, according to Sartre, are temporary but highly curated moments that individuals attempt to force life into producing.[23] *Nausea* resists the notion that life is inherently narrative because it does not have a coherent story. The readers experience events simultaneously with Roquentin; things occur moment-by-moment, without any certainty. The diary form of the novel thus embodies a central existentialist principle that meaning is not given in advance because events are not connected to larger purposes as they occur: instead, identity and meaning must be constructed retrospectively. An especially interesting aspect of *Nausea* is that it opens with undated diary entries. These opening pages create a sense of temporal disorientation and instability, with Roquentin writing, "The strangest thing is that I am not at all inclined to call myself insane, I clearly see that I am not: all these changes concern objects. At least, that is what I'd like to be sure of."[24] Although he initially insists that he is "not at all inclined" to consider himself insane, the confidence of this assertion immediately collapses in the final sentence, "At least, that is what I'd like to be sure of." Roquentin presents a desire to maintain a rational distinction between himself and the world around him, but he is caught between certainty and doubt, leaving him unable to fulfill this desire. He lacks a stable framework through which to interpret his experiences, constantly suspended between the boundaries of surety and uncertainty. Moreover, he locates the source of his disturbance to also be "concern[ed with] objects," implying that reality as a whole, not just his perception of it, has become unfamiliar to Roquentin. As such, Sartre plunges readers into an ongoing crisis whose significance remains uncertain, and both Roquentin and the readers are suspended in a state of disorientation. The journal becomes dated only after Roquentin begins to systematically document the sensations overtaking him, ultimately transforming his writing into an attempt to impose order upon an increasingly incomprehensible reality.

[22] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., 1964).
[23] Sartre, *Nausea*.
[24] Sartre, *Nausea*, 11.

As the novel progresses, Roquentin discovers that chronology alone cannot create significance, just as historical facts found in his research cannot provide a predetermined purpose for existence. Therefore, the diary format of the novel is emblematic of the tension between human desire for order and the fundamentally contingent nature of existence.

Departing External Meaning

At the beginning of the novel, Roquentin attempts to create order in his life by conducting historical research on Marquis de Rollebon. Reflecting on his research in the middle of the story, however, he states, "M. de Rollebon was my partner; he needed me in order to exist and I needed him as to not feel my existence."[25] Roquentin's research on the Marquis reflects a desire to simultaneously understand and reject his present existence through the past stability of history, which offers coherence, purpose, and continuity. Roquentin hopes to find meaning in objective knowledge, but as the project progresses, he becomes increasingly dissatisfied. His extensive research is fruitless, as it feels as though historical documents do not reveal anything about the truth, and Rollebon himself appears to be more of a narrative construction and less of a real person. This realization that objective knowledge does not bring meaning or understanding of life is essential to one of Sartre's existentialist claims that human beings cannot rely on external circumstances or preexisting structures to define themselves. Instead, Roquentin must confront his own existence and embrace his freedom to decide and act in its totality. By realizing that he has been trying to escape this condition by immersing himself in the life of another person, Roquentin gains the ability to pursue a sense of self and purpose without restraints from outside boundaries. Meaning is not something that is meant to be discovered after being hidden. It is created and shaped afterward through conscious development and searching, producing an understanding of existence that is uncertain and amorphous.

This conflict of instability is most well-represented by the famous chestnut tree scene, where the reader witnesses contingency. Roquentin is sitting alone in a public park when he suddenly is overwhelmed by the intense awareness of existence. He stares at the root of a chestnut tree, stating, "In vain I tried to *count* the chestnut trees, to *locate* them by their relationship to the Velleda, to compare their height with the height of the plane trees: each of them eluded the relations in which I tried to enclose it isolated itself, and overflowed."[26] The verbs "count," "locate," and "compare" all indicate that Roquentin was searching for rational ways to categorize his new understanding of reality. He approaches the trees through measurements and spatial relationships, trying to transform them into objects that can be understood and controlled by the human consciousness. Despite these attempts, all the trees "eluded" his categories and instead "overflowed" them, implying that the existence of the trees is something that cannot be contained within the boundaries of concepts. Roquentin now understands that reality and existence are not something language or even rational thought can capture, and these relations are those "which [he] obstinately maintained in order to delay the collapse of the human world, of measurements, quantities, directions." Significantly, Roquentin uses the phrase "human world," demonstrating his understanding that existence itself and the network of meanings imposed upon it by humans are two completely different

[25] Sartre, *Nausea*, 133.
[26] Sartre, *Nausea*, 129.

things. Using this newfound understanding, "measurements, quantities, [and] directions" are purely "arbitra[ry]" and are not inherent properties of reality. Instead, these are but conceptual frameworks that humans build in order to make sense out of existence and a means for Roquentin to try and understand his own existence rationally and objectively. He is not just looking at the tree, but looking into himself, forced to reconsider his own way of seeing objects, people, and experiences.

This relationship between humans and nature can be represented by Romanticist M.H. Abrams' "Mirror and Lamp" theory.[27] While the "mirror" represents the classical view that art reflects the external world, the "lamp" represents the Romantic theory that art lends clarity to an individual's soul. As such, when these frameworks cease to "bite into things," or serve their purpose, existence and the world lose their familiar structure to humans. The "measurements" that Roquentin attempts to use have no value because an individual is not a camera, objectively capturing everything in a manner that allows him to perceive the world with simplicity. He must use the outside world to gain a better understanding of himself. Roquentin admits, "Of these relations (which I obstinately maintained in order to delay the collapse of the human world, of measurements, quantities, directions) I felt their arbitrariness; these relations no longer bit into things. Superfluous, the chestnut tree there, in front of me, a little to the left. Superfluous, the Velleda."[28] The repetition of the word "superfluous" in relation to Velleda and the chestnut tree does not mean that he believes that they are needless in the real sense of the word; he recognizes that they exist without a predetermined purpose, referring back to the idea presented in Sartre's essay *Existentialism Is a Humanism* that "existence precedes essence." The chestnut tree possesses no innate meaning beyond what humans believe it to have, and the deterioration of these projections in Roquentin's mind exposes him to the contingency of existence itself.

As mentioned earlier, this new understanding represents the intersection of Romanticism and existentialism. While Romanticism emphasizes sublimity, existentialism highlights contingency and meaninglessness, lending insight into how existentialist literature can transform a pattern of self-discovery also found in Romantic literature. Existentialism and Romanticism both employ encounters with the external world as opportunities to understand the self. However, they do so in starkly different ways. While Romanticism in its interactions with nature may allow an individual to better comprehend themselves and their relationship with the world around them, existentialism destroys confidence placed in such coherence. Nature exposes the radical contingency of the world and one's own existence. As such, Roquentin is no longer able to classify and measure the world, placing him in an unsettling realization, or nausea, that reality will never be confined to the order humans attempt to impose on it. By illustrating these ideas and concepts, *Nausea* presents itself as an example of how existentialists use literary instances of revelation to make fundamentally different philosophical conclusions.

[27] M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953).
[28] Sartre, *Nausea*, 130.

Other Responses to Freedom

Roquentin's interactions with other characters further develop the novel's exploration of existential themes. Sartre presents individuals in Roquentin's life who attempt to escape the burden of being "condemned to freedom" by living under fixed ideals and identities. One such individual is the Self-Taught Man, one of Roquentin's acquaintances and a devout humanist. He announces to Roquentin that "All men are my friends…I am a Socialist, that all of them are my life's goal, the goal of my efforts and that they don't know it yet. It's a holiday, Monsieur."[29] This declaration that "all men are [his] friends" paints the Self-Taught Man as a kind and generous individual. However, Sartre presents the statement as evidence that he believes in an abstract philosophy disconnected from the reality of individual existence. Firstly, the word "all" serves as an encompassing adjective that removes any distinction between individual people. To the Self-Taught Man, humanity is a category to conquer rather than a collection of unique humans. This belief is even more pronounced when he continues to say, "I am a Socialist, that all of them are my life's goal, the goal of my efforts and that they don't know it yet." The repetition of the word "goal" indicates that he wants to organize human existence around a single objective, and the phrase "they don't know it yet" indicates a confidence that condescendingly assumes that he understands others' lives and existences better than they themselves do. To the Self-Taught Man, individuals are not able to freely create their own meaning, but the whole of humanity possesses a common purpose towards which it is moving. These ideals serve as a direct contrast to Roquentin's increasing awareness of freedom and discovery that no such universal purpose exists. Therefore, the Self-Taught Man's beliefs serve as an example of what existentialists view as abstraction as an attempt to escape the burden of freedom. He can avoid the unsettling reality that humans must create their own values without any external validation by defining humanity according to one ideal, even remarking that this experience is akin to a "holiday." A holiday symbolizes an opportunity for celebration that offers shared purpose and harmony, but Sartre suggests that this harmony is fake because it is built on the foundation of ignoring the ambiguity and individuality of human existence.

On the other hand, Roquentin's former lover, Anny, is experiencing a similar existential crisis. She tells him, "I feel there are no more perfect moments. I feel it in my legs...There has never been such a revelation, I can't say: starting on such and such a day, at such a time, my life has been transformed. But now I always feel a bit as if I'd suddenly seen it yesterday. I'm dazzled, uncomfortable. I can't get used to it."[30] Throughout her life, Anny has been pursuing the "perfect moments," or, to her, moments in which reality seems to achieve aesthetic harmony and significance. By the time Roquentin comes to meet her, however, this belief that human existence can transcend its ordinary contingency and acquire a deeper meaning through careful arrangement of circumstances has collapsed. Anny confesses, "I feel there are no more perfect moments. I feel it in my legs," revealing that her disillusionment is not merely intellectual but physical. Anny continues to explain that "There has never been such a revelation, I can't say: starting on such and such a day, at such a time, my life has been transformed." She struggles to identify a specific defining origin of her existential awakening, mirroring the gradual development of Roquentin's

[29] Sartre, *Nausea*, 116.
[30] Sartre, *Nausea*, 144.

understanding through a series of unsettling encounters with existence. Sartre portrays existential awareness as a slow accumulation until the individual suddenly comes to a realization. Finally, Anny feels "as if [she] suddenly [saw] it yesterday. [She is] dazzled, uncomfortable. [She] can't get used to it." A contrast is drawn between the words "dazzled" and "uncomfortable," signifying the duality of existential revelation. Like nausea to Roquentin, Anny's realization is illuminating and disturbing at the same time. "Dazzled" evokes a sensation of enlightenment in which comforting illusions fall away, revealing the disturbing truth of freedom of existence. Anny's inability to "get used to it" demonstrates that existential awareness resists assimilation into ordinary patterns of thought and that existence does not contain privileged moments of transcendence waiting to be discovered. This idea is also reflected in Romanticism, and creates a point of continuity between Romantic and existentialist representations of meaningful experience. As such, Sartre can be seen as a Romantic rationalist, as Iris Murdoch argues. The relationship between these traditions of Romanticism and existentialism is not causal. Instead, the similarities between the two reveal how the latter often adapts the literary experience of trying to understand a meaningful relationship between the self and the world. As Anny is left groping for such perfect moments, Roquentin simultaneously experiences the collapse of such concepts when he sees the chestnut tree in the park.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, reading *The Red and the Black* in conjunction with *Nausea* shows that boundaries separating literature and philosophy, and more specifically the bildungsroman and existentialism, are permeable. In particular, existentialist philosophers see a genuine importance in fiction literature because the existentialist view of life is well expressed in a narrative style of writing where problems of meaning, value, and societal expectations influence both the individual and the story, or life, itself. Protagonists of both novels, Julien Sorel and Antoine Roquentin, respectively, begin their journeys by searching for meaning that exists outside of themselves. While Sorel's journey is fueled by social ambition, romantic conquest, and a heroism befitting of Napoleon, Roquentin chooses to discover himself through history, human relationships, and abstraction. The shared concern of their stories is that of self-formation in the context of socialization, even if the role socialization plays in each character's life is vastly different. Julien accepts his execution after abandoning the ambitions that defined him, ultimately defeated by the socialization that he once relied on, and Roquentin feels hope after confronting his existence and the possibility of creating meaning through artistic creation, independent of socialization, while listening to the jazz recording "Some of These Days" at the end of the novel. Both endings, one tragic and one open-ended, construct the understanding that meaning is not hidden in the world waiting to be discovered but something that humans must actively create regardless of the role interactions with society has in a human's life.

As previously mentioned, fiction has a distinct role in both the bildungsroman and existentialist traditions because it lends insight to a character's choices and how those choices shape their understanding of themselves and the world around them. In a bildungsroman such as *The Red and the Black*, moral and personal development are achieved through experiences that teach the protagonist how to navigate the

conflicts between individual desires and societal demands. Julien Sorel undergoes this development as his relationships, ambitions, and eventual imprisonment put him face-to-face with the ethical consequences of wearing a mask for the sole purpose of societal integration. At the end of the novel, when he rejects social ambition in favor of sincere emotion, shedding his carefully constructed mask, he demonstrates moral development in spite of socialization. But this recognition comes after his social ambitions collapse, and is too late to prevent his execution. Sartre employs this shared emphasis on ethical choice in his writing and gives it a strong philosophical foundation. Existentialism, as a framework, fundamentally rejects the idea of predetermined human essence, or purpose, forcing Roquentin to validate his own choices instead of using any external standards. As Sartre argues in his essay *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, individuals become the products of their choices, and these choices are only significant if they are freely made. *Nausea* is written based on this principle, illustrating Roquentin's gradual abandonment of inherited sources of meaning as a decision to create purpose in his life. In both novels, ethical and moral decisions are the very mechanism by which identity is formed. And in literature, character is constructed through the concrete choices that fiction uniquely allows readers to witness over time.

In different ways, the bildungsroman, by choosing to be written around a certain character, traces the protagonist's movement toward maturity through significant experiences. Despite his moral compromises, Julien continually imagines himself as a somewhat Napoleonic figure and tints the reader's perception of him as that of a hero. His experiences with nobility, the clergy, and love create a dramatic narrative, even if his life comes to a heartbreaking end. On the other hand, Roquentin becomes what is considered an anti-hero, or a character that lacks traditional heroic qualities and is instead imbued with self-interest and cynicism. His defining experiences are those of encounters with ordinary objects, failed relationships, and even philosophical reflection. These distinctly unheroic events create a new existential heroism, where the protagonist must confront the much more difficult experience of creating meaning. In this sense, *Nausea* is not a rejection of the bildungsroman and its heroic narrative, but rather a reframing of its central problem of formation through an existentialist framework. The differences between *The Red and the Black* and *Nausea* in terms of the role of socialization matter because they emerge from such profound similarities. Both begin with the problem of how a self is formed through lived experience, but they lead their characters down two completely different paths of formation, in alignment with the bildungsroman and existentialist tradition, respectively. When taken together through a comparative close reading approach, the novels reveal that identity is neither an essence waiting to be discovered nor a role society can successfully impose, but an ongoing project of self-creation. Therefore, these novels can be understood as distinct but structurally related responses to the journey of self-formation: while Julien's development is shaped and eventually defeated by socialization, Roquentin's search for self and meaning occurs separately from it.

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