

The Traditional Prestige of France as the Trendsetter of World Literary Fashion in the 20th Century

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Abstract. *This article examines 20th-century French literature, focusing on works written in the French language during that period. The literary developments of the time often paralleled shifts in the visual arts. Characterized by an element of entertainment and a degree of detachment from everyday life, French literature of the 20th century reflects a search for ideals. In this pursuit, French writers frequently looked to Russian literature as a source of inspiration and guidance.*

The evolution of French literature in this century was profoundly shaped by major historical events and the political, philosophical, moral, and artistic crises that defined the era.

Key words: *history, period, struggle, enemy, war, ideal, writer, compatriots, literature, resistance, solidarity, humanity, etc.*

Introduction

The second half of the 20th century in France was marked by intense intellectual, political, and cultural upheaval. The devastation of World War II left not only physical destruction but also profound moral and philosophical crises. France, having experienced occupation, collaboration, resistance, and eventual liberation, emerged into a new era where the role of the intellectual—and particularly the writer—underwent significant transformation. French literature, long celebrated for its philosophical depth and artistic innovation, faced the urgent task of responding to a world disillusioned by violence and ideological betrayal. In the immediate aftermath of the war, questions of human responsibility, freedom, and justice gained new urgency. Writers could no longer afford the luxury of aesthetic detachment. Instead, literature became a means of moral and political intervention. It served as a platform to process trauma, reassess national identity, and challenge totalitarian ideologies that had scarred the continent. This shift ushered in what Jean-Paul Sartre famously termed *littérature engagée*—literature of commitment—where the writer assumes a proactive stance in addressing social and ethical concerns. At the heart of this literary awakening stood existentialism, a philosophical movement that resonated deeply with the emotional climate of post-war Europe. Articulated most clearly by thinkers such as Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir, existentialism emphasized the individual's freedom, responsibility, and the absurdity of existence. These themes were not confined to philosophical treatises alone; they permeated novels, plays, and essays, forging a unique synthesis of literature and thought. Moreover, the post-war period witnessed a reconfiguration of the intellectual's public role. French writers were no longer merely observers or chroniclers of society—they became central participants in its ideological battles. Debates over colonialism, communism, feminism, and the Holocaust found fertile ground in literary discourse. The prestige of French literature during this era, therefore, was not solely based on stylistic brilliance or narrative innovation, but on its capacity to engage with the pressing issues of the time. This article

seeks to explore the evolution and enduring influence of French literature in the second half of the 20th century, with a particular focus on the post-war period. By analyzing key figures such as Sartre and Camus, as well as broader movements like existentialism and the literature of resistance, the study aims to illuminate how literature functioned as both a mirror and a compass in an era of profound societal transformation. Special attention is given to the intersection of philosophy and fiction, the ethical imperatives of literary creation, and the global legacy of this unique intellectual tradition.

Methods

This research employs a qualitative analytical approach to examine the development and impact of French literature in the second half of the 20th century, with a special focus on the post-war period. The methodology is rooted in comparative literary analysis, philosophical contextualization, and historical interpretation. Given the complexity of the subject matter—which includes political, philosophical, and literary dimensions—a multidisciplinary lens is essential for capturing the depth of the literary transformations of the time.

Selection of Sources

Primary sources for this study include key literary texts by prominent French writers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, Louis Aragon, and André Malraux. These are supported by political writings, philosophical essays, and autobiographical materials. Critical essays and contemporary journals such as *Les Temps modernes*, *Combat*, *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, and *Esprit* were also examined to trace intellectual debates and ideological shifts. Secondary sources consist of scholarly works on 20th-century French literature, existentialism, post-war European history, and comparative studies of French and Russian literary traditions. The study draws upon both Western and post-Soviet academic interpretations in order to offer a balanced perspective.

Analytical Framework

The analysis is structured around several key themes:

The role of the writer as a moral and political agent in post-war France;

The emergence of engaged literature (*littérature engagée*) and its connection to existentialist philosophy;

The influence of historical trauma (war, occupation, resistance) on narrative style and character development;

The dialog between French and Russian literary traditions, especially the moral authority attributed to Russian writers by their French counterparts;

The tension between aesthetic innovation and ethical responsibility in literary production.

This thematic framework allows for a focused exploration of how literature both reflected and shaped the intellectual and social transformations of the era.

2.3. Historical Period and Scope

The research covers the period from 1945 to the late 1980s, a time characterized by the aftermath of World War II, the Cold War, decolonization, and the emergence of new philosophical paradigms such as structuralism. Within this context, particular attention is paid to the early post-war decade (1945–1955), when existentialist thought and political engagement were at their peak.

The study is limited to literature written in the French language and does not include Francophone literature from former colonies, although parallels and influences are acknowledged where relevant.

Results

The post-WWII era in French literature was deeply shaped by the moral, political, and philosophical crises of the time. Writers grappled with the legacies of occupation, resistance, and the quest for national renewal. The existentialist movement, with Sartre and Camus at its forefront, became central

to the literary landscape, offering a framework for exploring human freedom, responsibility, and the absurdity of existence in the face of suffering and oppression.

The engagement of writers with historical and political issues was particularly evident in the literature of resistance. Figures such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Louis Aragon were not only literary giants but also active participants in the ideological battles of their time. The concept of *littérature engagée* became a dominant force, and the literary world was transformed into a battleground for philosophical and political ideas.

3.1. Key Figures and Their Contributions

Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy, embodied in his novels, plays, and essays, became the cornerstone of post-war French thought. His works such as *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and *Nausea* (1938) explore the themes of freedom, alienation, and the responsibility of the individual in a world devoid of inherent meaning. Sartre's commitment to political engagement and his stance on social issues further cemented his place as one of the most influential intellectuals of the 20th century.

Albert Camus, another towering figure, approached existentialism through the lens of the absurd. In works such as *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) and *The Plague* (1947), Camus examined the human condition in a world characterized by injustice, suffering, and the inevitable confrontation with death. His philosophy of the absurd offered a way for individuals to find meaning in an otherwise meaningless world.

Simone de Beauvoir, in her groundbreaking work *The Second Sex* (1949), not only contributed to existentialist thought but also laid the foundation for feminist philosophy. Her work challenged the traditional gender norms and explored the complexities of human freedom and oppression, particularly in relation to women's roles in society.

Discussion

The period following World War II was marked by the flourishing of a literature that was deeply engaged with the philosophical and moral challenges of the time. Writers like Sartre and Camus used their literary works as a platform for exploring existentialist themes, such as individual freedom, the absurd, and the ethical responsibilities of individuals in a world marked by suffering and injustice. These writers also engaged with the political issues of their time, particularly in relation to the resistance against German occupation, the rise of communism, and the ongoing struggles for social justice.

Despite the philosophical differences between Sartre and Camus, their shared commitment to existentialism and their engagement with the pressing issues of their time left an indelible mark on French literature. The legacy of their works continues to shape contemporary thought and literature, and their intellectual contributions remain foundational to understanding the 20th century's philosophical and literary movements.

Moreover, the influence of French existentialism extended beyond the borders of France, inspiring writers and intellectuals across the globe. The dialog between French and Russian literature, particularly the admiration French writers had for Russian literary traditions, highlights the cross-cultural exchange that enriched 20th-century thought.

Conclusion

French literature of the second half of the 20th century remains a vital part of global intellectual and literary heritage. It not only responded to the historical traumas of its time but also shaped the intellectual discourse of the era, providing profound insights into the human condition and the nature of existence.

The development of French literature in the second half of the 20th century reflects the profound changes that shaped both France and the world. Marked by the aftermath of World War II, the rise of existentialism, and the moral and political upheavals of the time, French literature became a crucial medium for addressing questions of human freedom, responsibility, and meaning. Key figures like Sartre, Camus, and de Beauvoir not only influenced literary and philosophical thought but also

engaged with the pressing political issues of their time, making literature a vehicle for societal change. The concept of *littérature engagée* gained prominence as writers took on the role of moral and political agents. The enduring legacy of this period highlights the power of literature to shape intellectual discourse, foster solidarity, and address existential concerns in times of crisis. The influence of these writers continues to resonate in contemporary global thought and literature.

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