Nausea Study Guide

Nausea by Jean-Paul Sartre

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Introduction

Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophical novel *La Nausée* (1938; *Nausea*) is a seminal text of the existential movement that emerged in France during the 1940s and 1950s. In *Nausea*, Sartre, who became a figurehead of existential philosophy, explores fundamental questions and ideas that he elaborated upon in his later works.

Nausea is written as the diary of Antoine Roquentin, a thirty-year-old man who is grappling with a sense of revulsion at his consciousness of his own existence and of the existence of the people and objects around him. Roquentin, who is profoundly lonely, without friends or family, expresses a sensation of "sweetish sickness" in contemplating the absurdity of life. He refers to this sensation, which is both mental and physical, as the Nausea.

Nausea takes place primarily in the fictional French seaport town of Bouville, where Roquentin has been living for the past three years, while he works on research for a biography he is writing of an eighteenth-century French politician. Roquentin eventually decides to abandon the biography, as he has come to the conclusion that it is a meaningless project. He begins to hope that he and his former girlfriend, Anny, will get back together again and that their love will cure him of his Nausea. However, when he goes to visit Anny, she once again rejects him, and Roquentin is plunged into crisis, for his existence seems all the more repulsive to him. He ultimately resolves his philosophical crisis by deciding to take on the creative project of writing a novel, which he feels will be an antidote to the Nausea.

Nausea exemplifies a philosophical exploration of the nature of existence and the challenge faced by an individual who becomes keenly conscious of the fundamental absurdity of life. Sartre further explores themes of consciousness, loneliness, transformation, and freedom, in terms of his existential philosophy.

Author Biography

Jean-Paul Sartre was born June 21, 1905, in Paris, France. His father died when he was only one year old, after which he and his mother lived with his maternal grandparents. When he was eleven, his mother remarried, and they moved to La Rochelle. Sartre described his childhood and young adulthood in his Nobel Prize—winning autobiography *Les Mots* (1964; *The Words*). He studied philosophy at the Ecole Normale Superieure, in Paris, from which he graduated at the top of his class in 1929. It was there that he met Simone de Beauvoir, who graduated second in their class and was to become his lifelong companion as well as a major feminist and existentialist writer in her own right. The relationship between Sartre and de Beauvoir, which has become legendary, lasted over half a century and was characterized by the intense intellectual sharing of two great minds made complicated by Sartre's numerous extended affairs with other women.

Upon graduating from the Ecole Normale, Sartre served for two years in the Meteorological Corps of the French military. During the 1930s, he taught at several different secondary schools throughout France. His first novel, *La Nausée* (*Nausea*), was published in 1938. In 1939, with the outbreak of World War II, he was drafted into the army. He was captured by Germans in 1940 and spent nine months in a prisoner of war camp. In 1941, he was released from the prison camp and returned to Paris, which was by then occupied by German forces. Sartre joined the French Resistance movement and wrote for the underground Resistance newspapers *Combat* and *Les Lettres Francaises*. The publication of his greatest philosophical tract, *L'etre et neant* (*Being and Nothingness*), in 1943, established him as a leading figure at the forefront of existential philosophy. By the end of the war, Sartre's combined working out of existential philosophy and his passionate commitment to political causes had earned him celebrity status. He was awarded the French Legion of Honor in 1945 but refused to accept it.

After the war, Sartre became increasingly committed to active participation in political causes, and his existential philosophy developed along these lines as well. He and de Beauvoir founded the literary, philosophical, and political journal *Les Temps Modernes* in 1945, which became a major forum for debating existential ideas. Among his major works may be included the novel *Nausea*, the philosophical tract *Being and Nothingness*, the play *Huis-clos* (1944; *No Exit*), and the autobiography, *The Words*. In 1964, Sartre was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature for *The Words* but refused to accept the honor.

Starting in 1960, his eyesight began to seriously deteriorate, and he was nearly blind by the time of his death. In the last decade of his life, he essentially stopped writing, although he continued to be involved in political causes through ongoing activism and remained in the public eye by giving widely publicized interviews. Sartre died of a lung tumor on April 15, 1980. The extent of his international reputation may be gauged by the attendance of twenty-five thousand people at his funeral.

Plot Summary

Nausea is written as a diary begun by Antoine Roquentin in January of 1932. Roquentin, a thirty-year-old man, has been living in the small French seacoast town of Bouville for the past three years, during which he has been researching and writing a biography of the Marquis de Rollebon, an eighteenth-century political figure. Roquentin lives alone in a one-room apartment near the train station. Before moving to Bouville, he had spent many years traveling throughout the world.

Roquentin begins writing the diary in order to record a subtle change he has noticed in his perceptions of himself and the world around him. He is disturbed by his own consciousness and by uncertainty about the significance of his life, and he is questioning the meaning of the existence of objects and people in the world. He has recently begun experiencing episodes in which he is overcome with a sense of revulsion, or "sweetish sickness," in grappling with these questions. Roquentin refers to this sensation, which is both mental and physical, as the Nausea:

Then the Nausea seized me, I dropped to a seat, I no longer knew where I was; I saw the colours spin slowly around me, I wanted to vomit. And since that time, the Nausea has not left me, it holds me.

Roquentin spends his days in the Bouville library working on his book, and he often spends his evenings sitting in local cafés. Sometimes he walks through the streets at night, observing the people. On Sundays, Roquentin strolls through the streets of the town, observing the respectable, middle-class townspeople in their Sunday promenade as they exchange pleasantries with passing acquaintances.

At the library, Roquentin has become acquainted with a man whom he refers to as the Self-Taught Man because he is in the process of reading all of the books in the library in alphabetical order. The Self-Taught Man asks to see Roquentin's picture postcards from his world travels, and the young man reluctantly invites him up to his room to oblige him in this.

One day, Roquentin unexpectedly receives a letter from Anny, an English actress with whom he had a relationship for three years. He and Anny broke up six years ago, and he hasn't seen or heard from her in about four years. Anny tells him that she is going to be passing through Paris in a few days and begs him to come to visit her while she is there.

Roquentin goes to the Bouville art museum and examines the paintings in the portrait gallery, which contains portraits of the city's many founding fathers, local politicians, and influential businessmen. Roquentin ridicules these portraits, which are designed to justify the existence of these men by emphasizing their power and influence over the town.

After three years of working on his history of the Marquis de Rollebon, Roquentin comes to the conclusion that the project is meaningless, and he decides to abandon the writing of the book altogether. As his research and writing of this book has been the focus of his life for several years, Roquentin is thrown into an even greater sense of crisis. He realizes that he has been writing the book in order to avoid facing his own existence.

Roquentin reluctantly agrees to meet the Self-Taught Man for lunch at a local restaurant. The Self-Taught Man explains that he is a communist and a humanist. While he seems to expect that Roquentin will be sympathetic to his political and ideological attitudes, Roquentin is critical and disdainful of both communism and humanism. In the midst of this awkward and unpleasant conversation, Roquentin is overcome with the Nausea and abruptly leaves the restaurant without explaining himself to the Self-Taught Man.

Roquentin takes the train from Bouville to Paris to visit Anny. He realizes that he is still in love with her and is hoping that they may be able to get back together again. When he visits Anny at her hotel in Paris, they have a long conversation in which she explains to him how her attitudes about life have changed, and he tries to explain to her the thoughts he's been having about the Nausea. Roquentin feels that although they have been separated for several years, they have both been thinking about the same things and have changed in similar ways.

Anny, however, does not take much interest in his ideas and makes it clear that she has no interest in becoming involved with him again. She explains that she is living as a "kept" woman, meaning that she is financially supported by a wealthy man to whom she is not married and does not love, but with whom she travels throughout the world. She rather coldly dismisses Roquentin, telling him he does not mean anything to her anymore. Roquentin later sees her at the train station, where she boards a train in the company of the man by whom she is "kept." Although Anny sees Roquentin from the train window, she remains expressionless and does not acknowledge him.

Roquentin returns to Bouville, but he has decided that he is going to move to Paris in a week. On his last day in town, he stops by the library. There, he witnesses a scene in which the Self-Taught Man makes sexual advances toward a young schoolboy. Roquentin says nothing, but the Corsican who guards the library yells at the Self-Taught Man that he has seen what he did to the boy. The Corsican punches the Self-Taught Man in the nose and tells him never to come back to the library again. As the Self-Taught Man is walking out of the library, blood streaming from his nose, Roquentin attempts to help him. But the Self-Taught Man refuses his help and walks off down the street.

In his final two hours before catching the train to Paris, Roquentin goes to the Railwaymen's Rendezvous café to say goodbye to the waitress, Madeleine, and the café manager, Francoise, and to write in his diary what has just happened with the Self-Taught Man. While he is at the café, Madeleine offers to play a certain jazz record that he likes, which contains the song "Some of These Days." While listening to this song, Roquentin imagines that it has been composed by a Jewish man sitting at a piano in

New York City and sung by an African American woman. In contemplating the creative process that resulted in this song, Roquentin realizes that he wants to try writing a novel. The idea of writing a novel seems to him to be a sort of resolution to the Nausea that has been distressing him.

Characters

Anny

Anny is an English actress with whom Roquentin was in a relationship for three years. They broke up about six years before the events of the story take place and have not seen, written, or talked to each other in about four years. One day, Roquentin unexpectedly receives a letter from Anny, stating that she will be passing through Paris in a week and asking him to come visit her while she is there. Roquentin goes to visit Anny in her hotel room in Paris with the hope that she will want to get back together with him. He and Anny have a long conversation in which she explains to him that she had always wanted to experience "perfect moments" in life but that she now realizes there are no perfect moments, and so she no longer expects to have them. Roquentin tries to explain to her his own thoughts about the Nausea, but Anny does not seem interested in what he has to say. She tells him that she is living as a "kept" woman, meaning that she is being supported as the mistress of a wealthy man whom she does not love and whom she is not going to marry. Anny rather abruptly tells Roquentin to leave, because a young man (presumably a lover) is coming to visit her. She tells Roquentin that she no longer has any use for him. Later, at the train station, Roquentin sees Anny board a train with a tall, Egyptian-looking man who is presumably the man by whom she is being "kept." Although Anny sees Roquentin from her window on the train, her face remains expressionless, and she does not acknowledge him. In visiting Anny, Roquentin had hoped that the answer to his internal struggles would lie in renewing his love relationship with her. However, when he realizes that this is not possible, he is once again left to grapple alone with the significance of his existence.

The Corsican

The Corsican is the man who serves as a security guard for the library in Bouville. Toward the end of the novel, he sees the Self-Taught Man making sexual advances at a young schoolboy. The Corsican immediately walks over to the Self-Taught Man and yells at him and then punches him in the face, causing his nose to bleed profusely. The Corsican then orders the Self-Taught Man to leave the library and never come back.

Francoise

Francoise is the manager of the Railwaymen's Rendezvous café, and also works as a prostitute in an upstairs room of the café. Roquentin maintains a purely sexual relationship with Francoise, although she does not charge him for sex, as she does with her customers. During his last few hours in Bouville, Roquentin sits in the café. He had hoped to be with Francoise one more time before leaving town, but she is entertaining another male customer and does not have time for him.

Madeleine

Madeleine is the waitress at the Railwaymen's Rendezvous café. During Roquentin's last few hours in Bouville, while he is sitting at the café, Madeleine offers to play a record of the jazz song "Some of these Days." Although he has listened to the song many times before, he finds on hearing it this time that it helps him to realize that he wants to write a novel.

Ogier P.

See The Self-Taught Man

Antoine Roquentin

Antoine Roquentin is a thirty-year-old man who begins keeping a diary in January of 1932. Roquentin has spent several years traveling throughout the world. He is supported by a modest family inheritance, so he does not have to work to make a living. For the past three years, he has been living in the small seacoast town of Bouville, France, while doing research and writing a history of the Marquis de Rollebon, an eighteenth-century French political figure. Roquentin begins his diary in order to record the subtle changes he has been experiencing in his perceptions of himself and the world around him. He finds that he has been experiencing a "sweetish sickness," which he calls the Nausea. The Nausea, which is both a physical and a mental sensation, comes over him at moments when he is feeling overwhelmed by a sense of disgust at the absurdity of existence.

Roquentin eventually decides to abandon his book about the Marquis de Rollebon because he feels that the project is meaningless. One day, he receives an unexpected letter from Anny, an English actress with whom he had a relationship for several years. Roquentin and Anny broke up about six years ago, and they haven't seen or heard from one another for several years. Anny's letter states that she will be passing through Paris in a few days and begs him to come visit her while she is in town. Roquentin realizes that he is still in love with Anny, and he hopes that they will get back together again. He imagines that this love will be the answer to his confusion over the nature of his existence and the significance of his life. However, when he goes to visit Anny in her hotel room in Paris, she makes it clear that she has no interest in getting back together with him, and she rather coldly informs him that she no longer has any use for him.

Toward the end of the novel, Roquentin decides that he is going to move to Paris and work on writing a novel. He feels that this creative process will serve as some kind of resolution to his struggles over the meaning of his existence.

The Self-Taught Man

Roquentin meets the Self-Taught Man during his daily visits to the Bouville library. The Self-Taught Man sits at the library reading during his free time, and Roquentin figures out that he is trying to read all of the books in the library in alphabetical order. The Self-Taught Man explains that he began this project about seven years ago and expects that he will have read them all within another six years. Although they have often exchanged pleasantries while at the library over the past three years, Roquentin and the Self-Taught Man have never socialized together outside of the library.

The Self-Taught Man asks to see Roquentin's picture postcards from his world travels, and Roquentin reluctantly invites the man up to his room to see them. He gives the Self-Taught Man a handful of postcards to take home with him, and the man then offers to take him to lunch sometime, to which Roquentin reluctantly agrees. When Roquentin and the Self-Taught Man meet for lunch, the man tells him that he is a communist and a humanist. Although the Self-Taught Man seems to expect that Roquentin holds these same values as well, Roquentin is disdainful of these views.

On Roquentin's last day in Bouville, while he is at the library, the Self-Taught Man is caught making sexual advances toward a young schoolboy. The Corsican also sees this, and he yells at the Self-Taught Man and punches him in the face, causing his nose to bleed profusely. The Corsican tells him to leave the library immediately and never come back again. The Self-Taught Man takes this punishment passively and quietly leaves. Roquentin offers to help him, but the Self-Taught Man refuses to accept his help and walks off down the street.

Themes

Change, Transformation, Metamorphosis, Rebirth

Roquentin begins writing his diary because he has noticed a subtle change in his perceptions of himself and the world around him. He hopes that by recording his daily perceptions, he will be able to make sense of the nature of this change, which he describes as "an abstract change without object." He realizes that, at various points in his life, he has been "subject to these sudden transformations," in which "a crowd of small metamorphoses accumulate in me without my noticing it, and then one fine day, a veritable revolution takes place." Roquentin expresses that he is terrified of this "new overthrow in my life" because "I'm afraid of what will be born and take possession of me." *Nausea* describes the process of transformation that Roquentin experiences. Images of metamorphosis and rebirth throughout the narrative emphasize the centrality of this theme to the novel as a whole.

Consciousness and Self-Reflection

The narrative of *Nausea* is motivated by Roquentin's extreme consciousness of his own perceptions of himself and others. His diary is an exercise in self-reflection, an attempt to express and record the details of this extreme self-consciousness. On several occasions, Roquentin examines his face in the mirror for long periods of time. He seems to be trying to evaluate the physical features of his face, but this exercise serves as a metaphor for Roquentin's struggle to make sense of his own humanity. This motif of gazing at his reflection in the mirror symbolizes his process of self-reflection, as recorded in his diary. At a point of crisis in the story, Roquentin is overwhelmed by his consciousness of his own existence, to the extent that he feels plagued by his own thought processes. "If I could keep myself from thinking!" he cries. Roquentin eventually comes to the conclusion that his constant thinking and his consciousness of himself constantly thinking are precisely what define his existence. Because he exists, he can't help but think. He asserts, "My thought is *me*: that's why I can't stop. I exist because I think . . . and I can't stop myself from thinking." Later, he states:

I am. I am, I exist, I think, therefore I am; I am because I think, why do I think? I don't want to think any more, I am because I think that I don't want to be, I think that I . . . because . . . ugh!

Loneliness

Roquentin's experience of extreme loneliness, and his perception of the people around him as lonely, is a significant element of *Nausea*. Roquentin lives an extremely lonely life. He has no family, no friends, no girlfriend, and few acquaintances. He explains, "I live alone, entirely alone. I never speak to anyone, never; I receive nothing, I give nothing." Although he has been essentially alone for the past three years, Roquentin

realizes, "For the first time I am disturbed at being alone." Because he himself is so alone, he is keenly aware of the loneliness of other people around him. Roquentin tries to cure his loneliness with the idea that perhaps he and Anny may get back together again. When Anny once again rejects him, Roquentin must return to his previous state of utter loneliness. By the end of the novel, he does not seem to have resolved the problem of his loneliness.

Freedom

Freedom is another important theme of *Nausea*. Roquentin frequently mentions the fact that he is entirely "free." He has no commitments to family or friends, and, because he is financially supported by a small inheritance, he has no commitments to holding a job or earning a living. At one point he states, "All I wanted was to be free." The idea that every individual is free is central to Sartre's existential philosophy. Sartre asserted that every individual is faced with complete freedom to choose how she or he responds to the world. Sartre believed that this fundamental freedom carries an enormous responsibility, for each individual is accountable for his or her own actions. In *Nausea*, Roquentin is keenly aware of his freedom to act in the world, and yet he is unsure of what to do with this freedom.

The Nature of Existence and Experience

The central thematic concern of *Nausea* is with questions of the nature of existence and experience that came to define the philosophy known as existentialism. Throughout the novel, Roquentin grapples with uncertainty about his own existence and the existence of objects and people in the world around him. He finds existence itself to be meaningless and repulsive. However, in a moment of crisis, he realizes that the fact of his own existence constitutes his only reality and that there is nothing more to life than this fundamental existence. He comes to the conclusion: "I am the Thing. Existence, liberated, detached, floods over me. I exist."

Style

The Fictional Diary

Nausea is written in the form of a fictional diary. An "Editors' Note" that opens the novel states that the diary was found among the notebooks of Antoine Roquentin. Since the diary is entirely fictional, as is the character Roquentin, Sartre's inclusion of this "Editors' Note" adds a sense of authenticity to the story. The "diary" also includes several editors' footnotes, which explain certain inconsistencies in the entries. For example, one footnote explains that a word has been crossed out in the handwritten original of Roquentin's diary, while another clarifies a date that was not specified in the original. Like the "Editors' Note," these footnotes create a sense of authenticity, as if Roquentin had been a real person and his original diary were a real document. These elements in the novel contribute to the story's sense of realism.

First-Person Narrative

As a fictional diary, *Nausea* is written in the first-person singular narrative voice. Roquentin is the narrator of the story, and all of the events are described from his unique perspective. The first-person narrative device is effective as a means of conveying one individual's internal thought processes and his struggles with the nature of his own consciousness. The reader is thus immersed in Roquentin's perceptions of the world around him and his efforts to grapple with the nature and meaning of his own existence.

The Philosophical Novel

Nausea is a philosophical novel, or novel of ideas. Although it is a work of fiction, Sartre utilized the novel form in order to express and explore his philosophical ideas. Many critics have been impressed with Sartre's success in expressing his existential philosophy through the medium of fiction. Through this approach, as compared to a purely philosophical work, Sartre gives his philosophical ideas a sense of immediacy and relevance to the experience of the individual trying to make sense of his existence.

Historical Context

France Between the Wars

Nausea is set in 1932 and was first published in 1938. The 1930s are often referred to as the interwar period, which spanned the years between the ending of World War I and the beginning of World War II. During this time, the French government was known as the Third Republic. In World War I, which began in 1914, the Germans invaded France. World War I ended when the Allied forces defeated Germany in 1918. With the outbreak of World War II in 1939, Germany once again invaded France. In order to avoid further conflict, the French government made an agreement with Germany in 1940. According to this agreement, the Third Republic was dissolved, and France was divided into a German-controlled region, which became known as Vichy France, and a French-controlled region that served in weak acquiescence to German forces. In 1942, Germany invaded this French-controlled region as well. During this period of German occupation, a French resistance movement formed to sabotage German forces and undermine the occupation. Sartre was very active in the French Resistance, as well as writing for underground Resistance newspapers. In 1944, the American allied troops landed in Normandy, which served to turn the tide of the war against German forces. This period of the war is known as the Liberation because it resulted in the freeing of France from the German occupation.

Existentialism

French existential philosophy emerged in 1940s and 1950s. It developed out of the philosophical school of thought known as phenomenology. Existentialism is a philosophy that questions the nature of human existence. According to existentialism, man is defined by the simple fact that he exists. Sartre put forth that each individual is constituted by a numerous series of choices that she or he makes throughout life and that everyone is fundamentally free to make such choices from a vast array of possibilities. Existentialism further stresses the fundamental absurdity of human life and tends to focus on negative experiences, such as pain, despair, and fear of death. Sartre posited in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) that the opposite of existence is nothingness and that by choosing to live, one chooses existence over nothingness.

French existentialism is rooted in ideas of the nineteenth-century philosophers Søren Kierkegaard, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Friedrich Nietzsche. During the 1920s and 1930s, the German philosophers Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers laid the foundation for French existentialism. Sartre was particularly influenced by Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1943), to which he paid homage with his title *Being and Nothingness*, the defining text of the existential movement. Sartre's contemporary, the French Algerian Albert Camus, developed his own existential ideas in the essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942) and his philosophical novels *The Stranger* (1942) and *The Plague* (1947). Simone de Beauvoir, another important French existential thinker, elaborated upon Sartre's ideas in

her novels, particularly *She Came to Stay* (1943) and *The Mandarins* (1954). De Beauvoir further introduced a feminist perspective to existential philosophy.

Twentieth-Century French Literature

Nausea is a work of existential fiction and is generally grouped with the existential novels and memoirs of his fellow French authors de Beauvoir and Camus. The existential novel is regarded as a transitional form that bridged the development of post—World War I and post—World War II French literature.

In the immediate post—World War I era, an avant-garde literary and artistic movement called dadaism emerged and flourished for several years. Dadaism developed as a reaction against the horrors of World War I and the bourgeois values of the middle class. The dadaists disdained rationalism and reason in trying to create works of poetry that defied conventional uses of language. Dadaists were more concerned with the response of the reader or viewer to their work than to the intrinsic aesthetic value of the work itself. However, because dadaism was defined more by what it was reacting against than by constructive aesthetic principles, it evolved after several years into the more positive approach of surrealism. Surrealist literature, which took form primarily through poetry, is characterized by an antirationalist sensibility, with an emphasis on unstructured writing that expresses irrational, unconscious states of mind. The surrealists were strongly influenced by the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and were concerned with the deep psychological element of human experience. The French writer Andre Breton emerged as the major spokesperson for the surrealist movement, which he delineated in his *Surrealist Manifesto* (1924).

In the post—World War II era of the 1940s and 1950s, a new movement in the French novel emerged and came to be known as the *nouveau roman* ("new novel") or anti-novel (a term coined by Sartre). The writers of the *nouveau roman* were strongly influenced by existentialism, in that they emphasized the absurdity of life and reacted against normalizing bourgeois values. Thus, the *nouveau roman* is characterized by a defiance against conventional expectations of narrative, story structure, and character. One of the leading writers of the *nouveau roman* was Alain Robbe-Grillet, whose novel *Jealousy* (1957) is one of his best-known works. Existentialism was also an important influence on the theater of the absurd, which emerged in France during the 1950s and 1960s. Theater of the absurd draws on the philosophies of existential writers, such as Sartre and Camus, and emphasizes the absurdity of human life. Samuel's Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* (1953) is regarded as the most representative work of the theater of the absurd.

Critical Overview

Nausea is considered to be the seminal text of French existential philosophy. The influence of *Nausea*, along with Sartre's other writings, on twentieth-century thought has been profound and pervasive. Roquentin's philosophical dilemma, as expressed in *Nausea*, has been regarded as representative of the experience of modern life in the twentieth century. As Hayden Carruth, in an introduction to an English translation of *Nausea*, remarked, "*Nausea* gives us a few of the clearest and hence most useful images of man in our time that we possess," adding, "The power of Sartre's fiction resides in the truth of our lives as he has written it."

Critics generally agreed that, in *Nausea*, Sartre effectively utilizes the medium of fiction to explore philosophical ideas that he would later develop in *Being and Nothingness*. However, critical opinions have varied on the question of how successful *Nausea* is as a work of fiction in its own right. As Marie McGinn, in an essay in the *British Journal of Aesthetics*, commented:

[*Nausea*] remains a collection of striking illustrations of philosophical ideas, but never gels into a unified work of art in which all the parts are motivated by an overriding aesthetic aim.

Critics have debated the philosophical implications of the novel's ending with Roquentin's decision to make his life meaningful through the pursuit of an artistic endeavor□the writing of a novel. Many agree with Sartre's conclusions about the role of the artist□be it a musician, novelist, or painter□in society and the redeeming qualities of artistic endeavor. A. van den Hoven, in an essay in *Sartre Studies International*, remarked:

Roquentin ultimately favors music and writing because they allow him to entertain the possibility of composing 'an adventure that can't take place;' a story that may redeem his existence retrospectively and shame the readers into recognizing the facticity of their existence.

Whatever the evaluations of *Nausea*, as a work of philosophy or of literature, Sartre is universally recognized as one of the most profoundly influential thinkers of the twentieth century.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Brent holds a Ph.D. in American culture from the University of Michigan. She works as a freelance writer and editor. In the following essay, Brent discusses the theme of storytelling in Sartre's novel.

At the very end of *Nausea*, Roquentin comes to the conclusion that he wants to write a novel and that this process will serve as a solution to the problem of existence that he has been grappling with. During the course of *Nausea*, Roquentin's thinking about the concepts of adventure, heroes, and storytelling gradually develop to the point at which he comes to conceive of the process of writing a novel as an adventure and the role of novel-writer as that of a hero.

During the many hours Roquentin spends sitting in cafés and overhearing the conversations of the people around him, he is aware of people's tendency to tell one another stories. However, he realizes that because he is always alone and has no one to talk to, his ability to tell stories to others has deteriorated. He says, "When you live alone you no longer know what it is to tell something. . . . [Y]ou plunge into stories without beginning or end."

On the other hand, he feels that being so alone has made him more observant of the stories he sees taking place in the world around him, through his observations of people interacting with one another in cafés and on the streets.

Roquentin has recently gotten the urge to tell someone about the changes he is experiencing, which is why he decides to start writing the diary. In the beginning of the diary, he feels somewhat uncomfortable trying to write down what happens to him. He comments, "I am not in the habit of telling myself what happens to me, so I cannot quite recapture the succession of events. I cannot distinguish what is important."

Meanwhile, as Roquentin has been conducting research and writing his biography of the Marquis de Rollebon, he is in the process of writing the story of the Marquis's life. Yet he feels that the distinction between a factual history and a fictional novel has begun to blur in his own writing:

I have a feeling of doing a work of pure imagination. And I am certain that the characters in a novel would have a more genuine appearance, or in any case would be more agreeable.

He briefly toys with the idea of writing a novel about the Marquis de Rollebon, instead of a history, but quickly dismisses the notion.

Roquentin begins to think about the concept of adventure and what it means to him. He knows that he has certainly experienced many "adventures" in the conventional sense of the term. He has traveled all over the world, had strange and exciting experiences, and met many different kinds of men and women. "I have had real adventures," he says.

But then he wonders where all of these adventures have led him and if he has really learned or gained anything from these exciting experiences. He admits, "I am generally proud of having had so many adventures." But he suddenly begins to think that these were not truly adventures at all, and he starts to feel as if "I have never had the slightest adventure in my life, or rather, that I don't even know what the word means any more." He then comes to the conclusion, "No, I haven't had any adventures."

Roquentin makes a connection between the concept of adventure and the act of storytelling. Because he has had so many adventures during his world travels, he knows that he has many stories to tell that others would find quite interesting. However, he begins to question the value of such adventures and of the stories that can be made of them. He thus begins to wonder what the concept of "adventure" truly means to him.

Roquentin comes to feel that adventures are not so much a matter of traveling to exotic places and meeting interesting people, but that an adventure can be something that happens internally, such as a change in one's state of mind. He comes to the conclusion, "This feeling of adventure definitely does not come from events." Roquentin wants very much to experience this sense of adventure in his life, but he realizes that it is not something he has any control over:

Perhaps there is nothing in the world I cling to as much as this feeling of adventure; but it comes when it pleases; it is gone so quickly and how empty I am once it has left.

In a moment of revelation, Roquentin realizes that the very fact of his existence is an adventure in itself, that his consciousness of his existence is an adventure, and that he himself is the hero of the adventure of his own existence:

Nothing has changed and yet everything is different. I can't describe it; it's like the Nausea and yet it's just the opposite: at last an adventure happens to me and when I question myself I see that it happens that I am myself and that I am here; . . . I am as happy as the hero of a novel.

Roquentin comes to realize that adventure is not an experience a person can actually live, but that an adventure is defined by the telling of the story of an experience. He concludes that while a person is living through an experience, it never seems like an adventure; one never feels like a hero. But when a man tells the story of his experience after the experience has ended, the story itself is what makes it an adventure and what makes the teller of the tale the hero of the adventure:

This is what I thought: for the most banal even[t] to become an adventure, you must (and this is enough) begin to recount it. This is what fools people: a man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his own life as if he were telling a story.

In the ending of *Nausea*, Roquentin puts together his ideas about storytelling, adventures, and heroes in a sudden realization of how he might find a way to justify his existence and perhaps rid himself of the Nausea. He has a sort of revelation while

listening to a record of a jazz tune called "Some of These Days." Roquentin finds that, in listening to this tune, his sense of Nausea seems to dissipate, and he even feels a sense of joy. He imagines the process by which the tune was created. He imagines a Jewish man sitting at a piano in an apartment in New York City, composing the music and writing the lyrics. He imagines an African American woman singing the tune in a recording session from which the phonograph record is produced. He feels that the man and woman who created this recording are "a little like the heroes of a novel."

From this thought, Roquentin realizes that he, too, could create something that might have the same effect on himself and others that the jazz tune has on him. Since he is not a musician, he knows that he is incapable of composing a song. However, he knows that he can write well, and so he comes to the conclusion that he wants to try writing a novel. He imagines himself writing "[a] story, for example, something that could never happen, an adventure. It would have to be beautiful and hard as steel and make people ashamed of their existence."

So Roquentin's desire to have adventures of which he is the hero evolves into a desire to write a work of fiction that would be an adventure in itself and of which he, as the author, would be the hero.

Source: Liz Brent, Critical Essay on *Nausea*, in *Novels for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Topics for Further Study

Sartre was one of the philosophers at the forefront of the French existential movement. Learn more about another major existential thinker, such as Søren Kirkegaard, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietszche, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Martin Buber, Albert Camus, or Simone de Beauvoir. What are the major works of the philosopher or writer you choose? What are the central ideas put forth by this philosopher or writer? Explore your opinions in comparison to these ideas. To what extent do you agree or disagree with them, and why?

Learn more about another important French writer from the twentieth century such as Andre Breton, Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard, Andre Malraux, Louis-Ferdinand Celine, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Samuel Becket, Eugene Ionesco, or Marguerite Duras. What literary movement (or movements) was this writer associated with? What are some of the major works of this writer? How is this author's writing characterized, in terms of style, theme, and subject matter?

In *Nausea*, Roquentin's experience of listening to a jazz record helps him to define and make sense of his own purpose in life. Research a major jazz musician from the twentieth century. What were this musician's major works (songs, albums, compositions, etc.)? How has this musician's unique style of playing or composition been described? To what extent did this musician influence other musicians or the development of jazz music in general? If you are able to find and listen to a recording of this musician's work, pick one song, musical number, or composition, and describe the music in your own words. What thoughts, feelings, or mood does this music evoke?

Nausea is a novel written in the form of a fictional diary. Write your own original short story in the form of a fictional diary.

Compare and Contrast

1930s: The French government is a constitutional democracy known as the Third Republic, based on the Constitution of 1815.

Today: The French government is a constitutional democracy known as the Fifth Republic, based on the Constitution of 1958.

1930s: France is a member of the multination alliance known as the League of Nations, which formed in the wake of World War I and was designed to maintain world peace.

Today: France is a member of the United Nations, which replaced the League of Nations at the end of World War II. France is also a member of the multination political and economic alliance known as the European Union.

1930s: France is a colonial power with national sovereignty over regions of North Africa and Indochina.

Today: France is no longer a colonial power, as most former French colonies have established national sovereignty.

1930s: The French unit of currency is the franc.

Today: The French unit of currency is also that of the European Union, the euro.

What Do I Read Next?

L'Etre et le néant (1943, *Being and Nothingness*) is Sartre's masterpiece of philosophical writing. In this work he directly expresses his fundamental philosophical ideas, which became the foundation of French existentialist thought.

Huis-clos (1945, *No Exit*) is regarded as Sartre's greatest dramatic play. *No Exit* concerns three characters who have died and who find themselves in an afterlife in which they are stuck together in a room. Through this fantastical premise, Sartre explores some of his fundamental philosophical ideas.

Les mots (1964, *The Words*) is Sartre's Nobel Prize—winning autobiographical account of his childhood and early adulthood.

Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée (1958, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*), by Simone de Beauvoir, is an autobiographical memoir, including discussion of de Beauvoir's experiences as Sartre's personal companion.

L'étranger (1942, *The Stranger*), an existential novel by Albert Camus, is on par with Sartre's *Nausea* as a seminal work of existential fiction. *The Stranger* expresses Camus's existential philosophy through the experiences of a young man whose mother has recently died and who finds himself committing a brutal crime.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1992), by Philip Thody, offers a general introduction to the life and works of Sartre.

Situating Sartre in Twentieth-Century Thought and Culture (1997), edited by Jean-Francois Fourny and Charles D. Minahen, offers a collection of essays discussing the works of Sartre in the social, cultural, political, and historical context of the twentieth century.

Introducing Sartre (1998), by Philip Thody and Howard Read, offers a fun and easy-to-digest introduction to the life, work, and thought of Sartre.

Further Study

Fullbrook, Kate, and Edward Fullbrook, *Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre: The Remaking of a Twentieth-Century Legend*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993.

Fullbrook and Fullbrook provide critical discussion and reevaluation of the legendary relationship between Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre.

Fulton, Ann, *Apostles of Sartre: Existentialism in America, 1945—1963*, Northwestern University Press, 1999.

Fulton discusses the influence of Sartre's existentialist thought and writings on American intellectuals of the post—World War II era.

Giles, James, ed., *French Existentialism: Consciousness, Ethics, and Relations with Others*, Rodopi, 1999.

Giles provides a collection of essays by various authors discussing the fundamental ideas of French existential philosophy.

Murphy, Julien, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Jean-Paul Sartre*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999.

Murphy offers a collection of critical essays by various authors examining the life and work of Sartre from a feminist perspective.

Sartre, Jean-Paul, and Benny Levy, *Hope Now: The 1980 Interviews*, University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Levy provides interview material from a series of long interviews with Sartre, conducted during the last year of his life.

Scriven, Michael, *Jean-Paul Sartre: Politics and Culture in Postwar France*, St. Martin's Press, 1999.

Scriven provides critical and historical discussion of Sartre's life and work in the cultural and historical context of France during the post—World War II era.

Shack, William A., *Harlem in Montmartre: A Paris Jazz Story between the Great Wars*, University of California Press, 2001.

Shack provides historical discussion of the jazz music scene in Paris during the 1930s. Shack particularly focuses on the presence of African American jazz musicians who came to Paris during this period.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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