TRACES OF EXISTENTIALISM IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Abstract: *This article examines how Jean-Paul Sartre and “existentialism” were presented to U.S. audiences between 1944 and 1963. Using qualitative reception analysis, it compares three arenas that mediated Sartre for Americans: mass and general-interest magazines, elite literary-intellectual journals shaped by Cold War cultural politics, and universities that made existentialism teachable through translation, reviewing, anthologies, and educational broadcasting. Across these settings, U.S. commentary repeatedly relied on three competing frames: moral resistance (Sartre as an ethical witness of occupation and responsibility), personality/fad (existentialism as spectacle, fashion, or caricature), and domestication (existentialism stabilized as a canon and classroom topic). The study argues that “Sartre in America” was not a simple import of French philosophy but an institutional construction shaped by editorial incentives, political pressures, and pedagogical needs.*

Keywords: *Jean Paul Sartre; existentialism; reception history; American periodicals; Cold War culture; translation; canon formation; Hazel E. Barnes; Walter Kaufmann*

INTRODUCTION

Between the end of World War II and the early 1960s, Sartre became unusually visible in the United States. He appeared not only as a philosopher but also as a wartime voice, a literary celebrity, and a political problem. Yet the U.S. “reception” of Sartre was never just a matter of readers discovering ideas from abroad. American institutions—magazines, journals, and universities—did the framing work. They decided what counted as “Sartre,” what existentialism sounded like in American idioms, and how seriously it should be taken.

This article asks: How did U.S. mediators frame Sartrean existentialism from 1944 to 1963, and what patterns recur across different sites of reception? The period begins with Sartre’s wartime publication in a major American magazine and ends around the point when his public identity in the U.S. increasingly blended with more explicit political radicalism and a changing campus climate (as tracked by reception historians). [1,4]

I argue that U.S. reception repeatedly organized itself around three frames that overlapped and competed:

1. **Moral-resistance frame:** existentialism as lived ethics and responsibility under occupation and crisis.
2. **Personality/fad frame:** existentialism as cultural spectacle—style, controversy, and sometimes parody.
3. **Domestication frame:** existentialism stabilized as a teachable canon through translations, anthologies, disciplinary review, and educational media.

These frames help explain a persistent paradox: existentialism could be mocked in popular culture while becoming a durable reference point in American classrooms.

METHODS

This study uses qualitative reception analysis combining (1) close reading of representative U.S. periodical texts and (2) institutional tracing of academic “infrastructure” that enabled existentialism to circulate in English and in university settings. The corpus is organized into three arenas:

- **Mass and general-interest outlets** introducing Sartre to broad audiences (e.g., *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*). [1,2,5]
- **Elite literary-intellectual journals and networks** operating within Cold War cultural politics (including discussion of *Partisan Review* via reputable secondary accounts and documented Cold War cultural history). [3,6,7]
- **Universities and academic channels,** tracked through key English publications, review signals, anthologies, and educational broadcasting. [4,8–12]

Texts were coded for (a) attribution of Sartre’s public identity (resister/celebrity/philosopher/political actor), (b) rhetorical stance (admiration, alarm, satire, explanation), and (c) institutional function (public introduction, gatekeeping, canon formation). Frames were identified inductively and refined into the three-frame model reported here.

RESULTS

1) Moral-resistance framing (1944–1946)

Across the three reception arenas, Sartre’s U.S. image consolidated through four linked developments that repeatedly activated the same three frames (moral-resistance, personality/fad, domestication).

Moral-resistance entry (1944–1946). Sartre first reached a wide American readership in a strongly ethical register. *The Atlantic*’s 1944 publication of “Paris Alive: The Republic of Silence” presented him as a credible wartime witness whose central themes—freedom under pressure and responsibility without self-deception—were immediately intelligible to non-specialists. [1] This early framing mattered because it gave existentialism an American “moral seriousness” at the point of entry, even before most readers encountered the philosophy as philosophy.

Shift to spectacle (late 1940s). Almost immediately, popular reception also moved toward personality and controversy. Liebling’s 1946 *New Yorker* profile treated

Sartre less as a system-builder than as a public phenomenon surrounded by talk, irritation, and fascination. [2] Sartre’s 1947 *Nation* essay on American “myths” likewise worked as a provocation that invited readers to respond to the author’s posture and tone as much as to his argument. [5] The effect was double-edged: the personality/fad frame expanded existentialism’s reach, but it also encouraged simplification—existentialism as mood, style, or “ism.”

Elite journal mediation under Cold War conditions (late 1940s–1950s). In higher-cultural venues, existentialism was often made “usable” as a vocabulary of freedom, responsibility, and anti-totalitarian seriousness—while Sartre’s politics remained a recurring point of tension. Accounts of the period emphasize *Partisan Review*’s role in shaping what counted as legitimate “serious” existentialism in U.S. intellectual culture. [6] At the same time, documented Cold War cultural histories show that intellectual life operated amid institutional pressures and influence networks (including organizations associated with the Congress for Cultural Freedom), conditions that encouraged selective emphasis and caution around politically charged figures. [3,7]

Academic domestication (1950s–early 1960s). Existentialism became durable in the U.S. when universities supplied the infrastructure that makes an imported philosophy teachable. Barnes’s 1956 translation of *Being and Nothingness* enabled sustained scholarly engagement, with disciplinary notice extending beyond philosophy (e.g., review indexing in *American Political Science Review*). [8,9] Kaufmann’s 1956 anthology packaged existentialism into a classroom-friendly canon. [10] Barnes’s 1962 educational television series illustrates the “university-to-public” bridge that further stabilized existentialism as teachable knowledge rather than passing fashion. [11,12] Reception scholarship also treats course adoption and academic networks as key evidence of this domestication process. [4]

DISCUSSION

The three frames help clarify why “Sartre in America” so often appears contradictory or unstable across the period. In mass culture, existentialism could operate as a moral vocabulary for thinking about responsibility, freedom, and postwar disillusionment, yet it could just as easily become a celebrity spectacle organized around persona, romance, cafés, and scandal, or even a punchline reduced to fashionable angst. These registers did not simply coexist; they competed, allowing Sartre to be both authoritative and trivialized, both admired and mocked. In elite journal culture, existentialism could be treated as a serious philosophical stance with genuine ethical urgency while simultaneously being framed as a political problem—suspect for its perceived proximity to Marxism, its critique of liberal consensus, or its challenge to American Cold War sensibilities. The same article could praise Sartre’s intellectual force and worry about his ideological implications, producing a reception that reads as both engagement and containment.

In universities, the incoherence was often resolved by transformation. Sartre was reorganized into teachable forms: translated excerpts, anthologized “key” essays, survey chapters, disciplinary reviews, and educational broadcasting that converted an unruly public figure into manageable curricular content. These frames were not merely interpretive habits; they corresponded to institutional needs. Magazines required legible stories, recognizable personalities, and public interest, which favored moral narrative and biography. Elite journals functioned as cultural gatekeepers under ideological pressure, which favored selective emphases that were academically “usable” and politically defensible. Universities required stable materials and repeatable formats, which favored packaging, standardization, and pedagogical infrastructure. Taken together, the evidence supports a basic claim: U.S. reception was shaped as much by institutions as by ideas. Sartre did not arrive as a single, stable object; he arrived as an assemblage produced through editorial strategy, Cold War context, and the machinery of teaching.

CONCLUSION

From 1944 to 1963, American magazines, journals, and universities did more than “receive” Sartre—they participated in producing a particular Sartre for American readers. In the first phase of his U.S. visibility, reviews and profiles tended to cast him as an ethical witness of the Occupation: a writer-philosopher whose authority derived not only from ideas but from lived historical ordeal, resistance, and moral seriousness. This framing made Sartre legible as a European conscience in a moment when American audiences were eager to translate wartime experience into usable moral narratives. Yet the same media system that elevated his ethical posture also transformed existentialism into a consumable cultural scene. Popular venues repackaged Sartre’s thought as spectacle and lifestyle, turning “existentialism” into a recognizable pose—complete with cafés, black turtlenecks, smoking, and a fashionable aura of sophistication. In that register, the philosophy could be circulated widely, but it was also simplified into a set of attitudes and surfaces, increasingly available for parody. [1–12]

Elite journals, meanwhile, performed a different kind of construction. They negotiated Sartre through the pressures of Cold War cultural politics, sorting his work into acceptable and unacceptable meanings: existentialism could be praised as a rigorous modern philosophy or condemned as nihilism, moral relativism, or political irresponsibility, depending on how it was positioned against communism, liberal humanism, and the era’s anxieties about ideology. Over time, universities consolidated these scattered representations into something institutionally stable. Through translation decisions, anthology selections, disciplinary review, and educational broadcasting, they domesticated Sartre into teachable units—classroom texts, surveyable themes, and manageable debates—often separating “the philosopher” from “the provocateur,” and reducing the disorderly public phenomenon to a curricular object. The result was an American Sartre who was simultaneously highly visible and

carefully bounded: easy to mock as a cultural performance, yet durable as a canonized figure in classrooms and academic discourse. [1–12]

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