

# *The Useful Uselessness: Contemporary Crisis of Literature under Sartre's View*

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**Abstract.** This paper discusses the existentialist crisis of contemporary literature. In an era dominated by technology and utilitarianism, this crisis is often expressed through "uselessness". From Plato's suspicion of the influence of poetry to the marginalization of literature under economic rationalism, this criticism can be traced back to. This paper draws lessons from Kant's distinction between intrinsic value and instrumental value, and holds that literature helps to cultivate moral autonomy, critical reflection, and emotional depth to resist reductive utilitarianism. This paper challenges the duality of literature and science by using the theoretical viewpoints of Žižek and Lacan, and proposes a structural interdependence. The focus of the discussion is Sartre's theory of commitment literature, which regains the power of literature to stimulate ethical responsibility and action. Through the close reading of *Nausea*, this paper reveals how the literary form realizes the freedom of existence and enables readers to participate in moral judgment. Finally, this paper examines the fictional violence as a tool to break ideological complacency and deepen moral consciousness when the moral framework is established. Literature is by no means useless. It refuses to serve the direct purpose and ensures its role as a political and ethical medium.

**Keywords:** Sartre, committed literature, fictional violence, literary ethics, existentialism

## **1. Introduction**

Loneliness has become a symbol of our generation, spanning the entire course of our life: from childhood memories of the absence of parents during the holidays to teenagers' sad loneliness; From being alone in the middle of the night, adults rushing to finish their studies before the deadline, to their parents being alone one after another. Many people finally acquiesce in welcoming each sunrise in an empty home, quietly obeying fate and coexisting with loneliness. At such times, people often turn to literary works, whether novels or realistic works, for emotional comfort and shelter.

Facing this dependence, today's literature, however, is facing a survival crisis: it is considered "useless". In a technology-driven era, the education system gives priority to natural science, which has triggered a debate on the relevance of the humanities. Under the guidance of the utilitarian goal of political and economic progress, policymakers have reduced the funding for humanistic education. This trend raises an urgent question: should this policy be adhered to or must it be reconsidered?

Therefore, the philosophical defense of literature is imperative. In addition to aesthetic experience, literature provides survival care in modern anxiety. This paper discusses the so-called useless predicament of contemporary literature. First, it traces the origin of this proposition and summarizes its main arguments. Using the theoretical framework of Žižek and Lacan, this paper discusses the dialectical transformation between literature and natural science, and holds that literature and natural science are interdependent rather than absolutely opposite.

Next, this paper analyzes Sartre's theory of committed literature (*littérature engagée*) as a direct rebuttal to the theory of uselessness. The article also explores a paradoxical dimension: the potential of literature in shaping human behavior, which may lead to the opposite crisis of literature becoming "too useful". In this context, this paper discusses the ethical implications of fictional violence.

On this basis, this paper argues that literature is neither passive nor marginal. It is still a dynamic medium, which not only shapes the scientific paradigm, but also is shaped by the scientific paradigm, eliminating the traditional gap between Humanities and science. The productivity of literature lies not only in its profound connotation, but also in its political effectiveness: its ability to form readers' ideology and stimulate action, such as Sartre's committed literature, and its contact with symbolic violence and moral consequences. The unique freedom of literature liberated from instrumentalization and mechanization can not only cure loneliness, but also closely integrate with the structure of reality.

## **2. An overview and analysis on the contemporary existential crisis of literature**

### **2.1. The history of the “uselessness” of literature**

Whether literature, be it fictional or realistic, has practical functions has always been a concern of philosophers and theorists. Its roots can be traced back to ancient Greece, where Plato denounced the deceptiveness and alienation of literature. He maintained that poetry and drama, in particular, skillfully shaped individual ideology, morality and behavior in an irrational and unpopular way [1]. However, Plato's criticism mainly focused on the negative social consequences of literature, rather than completely denying the functionality of literature and emphasizing the influence of literature.

Although the knowledge and cultural authority of literature were often reaffirmed in later historical periods, in Jeremy Bentham's works, the rise of utilitarianism and pragmatism, as well as the industrial and technological revolution, prompted people to doubt the social value of literature. Bentham's ethical philosophy is rooted in the principle of "the greatest happiness of the greatest majority of people", and believes that abstract ideals, such as those represented in literary texts, are not enough to measure and are, in fact, invalid [2]. Therefore, literature began to reevaluate from the perspective of instrumentalism, especially in a productivity-oriented society, which increasingly evaluated disciplines based on their ability to provide quantifiable social or economic returns. This change has led to the gradual marginalization of literature in public discourse and education policy.

### **2.2. Contemporary existential crisis**

In the contemporary era, this kind of instrumental logic not only persists, but also has been strengthened with the emergence of digital technology and the dominant position of accelerating information flow. As Kenan pointed out in *The Death of Literature*, the literary texts that were once the core of the construction of cultural authority have been replaced by more direct and consumable storytelling forms, especially those that spread through social media platforms [3]. Traditional literary genres such as poetry, fiction and drama are increasingly obscured or even swallowed up by

simplified narratives embedded with short digital content. In this new media ecology, literature is now facing a survival crisis, because its economic utility, its contribution to GDP and other national productivity indicators, and its relevance in the contemporary knowledge dissemination circuit are increasingly questioned.

This crisis is particularly prominent in the education sector, where literature and humanities are now assessed mainly on the basis of graduates' employability, reflecting a broader education and social paradigm driven by academic qualifications. Students and families are increasingly giving priority to degrees with higher labor market value, while policymakers are responding by directly reducing funding for the humanities. According to the data of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2024), the funding cuts of American public universities in literature and humanities ranged from 15% to 20%. In the UK, the Office for Students stipulated in a decision in 2021 that the funding for arts and humanities would be reduced by 50% per student and regarded as a "lower priority" in the national education plan. Similarly, the data from the European University Association (2023) show that due to the policy changes in favor of STEM field and applied science, the decline in countries on the European continent is about 10%.

### 2.3. Definition of “usefulness”

To understand the concept of "uselessness" in literature in a meaningful way, we must first clarify the meaning of "usefulness". In Kant's moral philosophy, usefulness is mainly understood as instrumental value, that is to say, something is considered useful because it is a means to achieve an end and helps to achieve specific, usually material goals. According to this logic, literature, especially that do not serve economic, political, or utilitarian goals, may be considered redundant.

However, this view ignores another core principle of Kant's Ethics: the difference between instrumental value and intrinsic value, as well as the crucial level. In Kant's view, morality is not derived from utilitarianism, but from rational autonomy and ethical obligations. Literature, although seemingly divorced from its direct function, can participate in this moral field by cultivating self-reflection, critical reasoning, and awareness of human dignity. Although these abilities are not "useful" in a narrow sense, they are essential to Kant's personal moral development [4]. As he wrote in the *Groundwork of Moral Metaphysics*:

“Act in such a way that you treat mankind, whether in your own way or in the way of anyone else, not only as a means to an end, but always as an end.”

In this context, some modern utilitarian discourse and criticism that think literature is useless tend to adopt a narrow value framework, that is, to measure the value only through the contribution to external results such as political reform, social progress or economic productivity. In the process of doing so, they risked making the human subject instrumental, subjecting personal consciousness and ethical reflection to the goal of the system. This runs counter to Kant's "Formula of Humanity", which insists on the inviolable value of everyone without considering ideological or political legitimacy.

Therefore, literature is not excluded from the category of utilitarianism, but can challenge the premise on which narrow utilitarianism is based. Its apparent "uselessness" may actually mean resistance to instrumentalization, affirming the ethical role of literature in maintaining human autonomy and moral reflection in an increasingly goal-driven world.

## 2.4. Transformation of “uselessness” with Žižek- Lacanian theories

Secondly, in addition to Kant's defense of the usefulness of literature, the dialectical analysis of Žižek and Lacan puts forward a provocative reversal: "uselessness" itself can be reflected through the inherent transformation in binary opposition. This change of concept draws on Lacan's psychoanalysis: the subject is fundamentally split, positioned between the symbolic order composed of language, law, and cultural norms and the reality of resisting symbolization. Lacan did not propose a rigid dichotomy, but emphasized a structural tension: the subject exists as a split place, where symbolic things cannot fully cover the truth. In the context of interdisciplinary thinking specifically in our situation, it may be helpful to regard symbols as consistent with the thinking and expression methods used in humanities, and to regard reality as reflecting the elusive and often unexpressed reality that natural science tries to grasp. Importantly, this split is internal to the subject, which shows that any binary relationship between humanities or language and things that cannot be said is structurally interconnected through the fundamental absence of the subject [5].

This internal contradiction, rooted in the absence of the main structure, does not solve the duality but supports the duality as a generative tension. Rather than aiming at reconciliation, this tension becomes the meaning of the symbolic order, and identity and knowledge are constantly generated and withdrawn. In this sense, Lacan's framework not only reveals the impossibility of unifying the subject but also lays a foundation for Žižek to completely reinterpret the dialectical movement.

The Hegelian trinity of Žižek provides a convincing framework for understanding this dialectical structure: the initial position (thesis) inevitably leads to its negation (antithesis), rather than solving the contradiction between them in a comprehensive way. For Žižek-Lacanian, the subject itself emerged from the failure of this symbolic reconciliation; Contradiction is no longer just an obstacle, but an engine of Subjectivity - "the subject is the result of the failure of self-identity" [6].

On the basis of this theory, the dialectical framework can be applied to the binary opposition between literature and natural science. In this structure, literature and humanities are thesis, and natural science is the opposite. This synthesis did not solve the tension between the two, but preserved it as a “scarred” unity. This scar is manifested not only in the internal limitations of each field, but also in the external ideological structure that maintains them. Literature is destroyed by objectivity, causality, and quantifiable necessity; On the contrary, science is troubled by the requirements of narrative, aesthetic, and reflective.

This synthesis does not achieve harmony, but reflects a lasting tension: Literature regards the world as a multi-level, subjective experience, while science seeks to extract measurable, objective truth. Scars mean that it is impossible to have a clean division, and each field inevitably bears the imprint of another field.

Through the lens of these scars, the synthesis becomes clearer: the "uselessness" of literature and the "usefulness" of science form a contradictory unity. The "uselessness" of literature has become crucial precisely because it resists instrumental rationality, disrupts the closure of ideology, and introduces reflexivity into the system originally dominated by efficiency and control. The value of literature is that it can make things complicated, cause discomfort, and introduce ambiguity. No matter how inconvenient these disturbances are, they are the basis of the fundamental human problem: Who am I? Where am I from? Where am I going? Long before the emergence of science, these problems defined the living state of mankind, and literature and the humanities continued to maintain their vitality.

### 3. Sartre's literary ethics: language, freedom, and responsibility

#### 3.1. Sartre's committed literature

Sartre stands among the most affirmative defenders of the usefulness of literature—not in the utilitarian sense of productivity, but as a force capable of guiding the public toward political, social, and moral righteousness. In *What is Literature*, he asserts that writing is never innocent or purely recreational; on the contrary, every act of literary creation entails a moral choice. For Sartre, literature is inherently engaged, selecting which truths to be unveiled, disrupting complacency, and calling for the freedom of humanity.

Sartre insists that through literature, both writer and reader should take ethical responsibility. He maintains that every writing act is a moral choice and cannot be separated from the social and historical background of its occurrence. As he observes, “To write is to make an appeal to the reader that he recognize the freedom of man” (Sartre, 1988, p. 42). This formulation underlines the core of Sartre's commitment: the writer's words must invoke and respect the reader's autonomy, inviting her to confront and interpret and act at her own free will rather than retreat into passive consumption.

Consequently, the writer occupies the role of a moral tutor, compelled to reflect and reveal social injustices rather than to comfort or entertain. From Sartre's perspective, “art for art's sake” is a disregard of duty—a form of negative faith in which the writer fails to realize the burden of freedom. Instead, literature must function as an instrument of disruption, unsettling the conventions that perpetuate inequality, alienation, and oppression. By describing the real situation, whether it is the bureaucratic absurdity of post-war France or the discomfort of the survival of a literary work of personal persistence, “it has hit the core of the mainstream order” [7]. In doing so, the author acknowledges that language itself is an act: naming a phenomenon or dramatizing a conflict is itself a political act, which has changed people's views and possibilities.

This way of understanding writing as action, on the other hand, has a clear obligation to the reader. Sartre stressed that without the active participation of readers, language is still a group of invalid tags on the page. As he puts it, “it is through the reader's interpretive freedom that the work is brought into existence” [7]. Thus, the writer must anticipate and respect the reader's capacity to interpret, judge, and decide. A text becomes truly “committed” only when it incorporates this dialogic relationship, treating the reader not as a passive recipient but as a co-creator of meaning. In practical terms, this means that the committed author must calibrate tone, structure, and narrative complexity so as to challenge the reader, to provoke critical reflection, and ultimately to incite moral or political action.

#### 3.2. Literary freedom in action: commitment and critique in *Nausea*

*Nausea* serves as a paradigmatic example of these principles at work. Through the diary entries of Antoine Roquentin—a solitary historian who gradually becomes aware of the sheer contingency of existence—Sartre dramatizes the moment at which language and narrative reveal the “brute facticity” of being [8]. Roquentin's instinctive response to a simple tree root, described in painful detail, forced him and the extended readers to realize that the world lacked an internal purpose or reason. This cognition is not an intellectual abstraction, but a living physical experience: Roquentin “felt” his own nausea. By immersing the reader in this sensation, the novel performs two functions simultaneously. First, it concretizes an abstract philosophical claim—existence precedes essence—by turning it into a palpable affective moment. Second, it invites the reader to reenact that moment

of disorientation, to question his own assumptions about meaning and identity, and thereby to exercise freedom in redefining values.

In addition, *Nausea* reflects Sartre's proposition that the writer cannot simply describe injustice or alienation, but must reveal the underlying structure supporting these injustices or alienation. The background of the novel is a rigid and complacent French town, which is the epitome of modern bureaucratic society. The characters Roquentin met, from self-taught people who mechanically read each book in alphabetical order to the barmaid who respectfully greeted him, all embodied various forms of dishonesty. Everyone lives in a self-imposed script that denies true freedom. By exposing these plays, Sartre not only criticizes the untruthfulness of individuals, but also points out the social systems that foster this untruthfulness - education, labor, and commerce. This dual criticism fulfills the author's responsibility, shows a comprehensive mirror of injustice, and illuminates the dimensions of the individual and system.

At the same time, Sartre clearly pointed out that committed literature is not a specific solution or propaganda call for weapons. On the contrary, it helps to awaken consciousness and inspire readers to decide their own course of action. Roquentin did not walk out of the crisis with a ready-made social reform plan; instead, he was determined to write a novel to capture the "beauty and terror" of existence [8]. This meta literary turn reflects Sartre's view that the writer's ultimate commitment is to create a work that embodies freedom in form. The reader, in turn, must decide how to respond to that freedom—whether to remain in bad faith or to embrace the challenge of self-definition.

#### **4. Further discussion on fictional violence and literary standards**

##### **4.1. Fictional violence and the politics of moral response**

The discussion of responsibility and interpretation naturally produces preparations for a deeper exploration of fictional violence. If the power of literature lies in its calling for readers' ethical freedom, then the description of violence is far from a sensational shift, but a powerful catalyst for moral reflection. Graphic portrayals of oppression, brutality, or resistance confront readers with the real stakes of freedom: the suffering inflicted when individuals or groups are denied agency. By dramatizing violence in a committed work, the writer forces readers to confront the ethical dimensions of power and to question their own complicity in systems that condone or perpetuate harm. In this sense, novel violence has become a means to deepen readers' self-awareness and expand writers' responsibility to the field of visceral emotion.

Sartre's view of literary responsibility naturally opens up a broader ethical field. Literature intervenes not only by constructing a symbolic world, but also by shaping readers' moral responses to problems such as suffering, oppression and violence. If the author has the obligation to disclose the reality and call on readers to give ethical identity, the specific content that triggered this identity, especially the content related to the expression of violence, needs to be more carefully examined. What are the moral consequences of violence in the novel? How does this description affect readers' moral responsiveness? When these issues are placed within the framework of the commitment document, especially within the scope of its purpose of changing awareness and guiding action, they have new urgency. Obviously, the author's responsibility does not end with the act of expression; it extends to the readers' emotional and cognitive life, and forms an interpretational way that ultimately leads to or hinders the ethical communication with the world.

In this regard, Sartre's work intersects with the later theoretical intervention, especially violence typology. Žižek distinguishes three forms of violence: subjective (direct and visible aggression), objective (embedded in language or ideology) and systematic (rooted in economic and political

structures). Although mainstream discourse tends to focus only on the former, the latter two—things hidden under the surface of social normality—committed literature must be exposed. Fictional representations of violence, then, carry a double potential: they may either conceal the deeper structures of injustice by sensationalizing immediate acts, or they may force readers to confront the ideological and systemic mechanisms that enable such acts to recur. Literature has thus become a battlefield, where the expression of violence can anesthetize or awaken the moral feelings of readers.

This dynamic forces the author to use violence, not as an unprovoked aesthetic feature, but as a dialectical means that can disrupt the reader's normative assumptions. The narrative act becomes an ethical act precisely to the extent that it harnesses the fictional scene not to reproduce brutality for spectacle, but to reconfigure the reader's relationship to structures of harm in the real world. As Žižek pointed out, art constructs a "virtual space", in which it performs its own drama, but this virtuality is not separated from the historical or social reality, but the sublimation, concentration and mediation of the ideology and contradictions that shape the material existence. Therefore, the writer's description of violence must be consciously in the space of reflective mediation, so as to reflect rather than cover up the social and political forces involved.

When violence is manifested, it will never be ideologically neutral. It either interrogates its own possible conditions, invites readers to recognize and resist the invisible power system it produces, or anesthetizes readers, naturalizes cruelty, and prevents criticism. In this way, the violence in the novel has become the touchstone to test the depth and seriousness of the writer's moral commitment. If a writer fails to thematize the structural dimension of suffering and regards violence as disconnected from historical causality or moral complexity, he is not merely evading artistic responsibility; they risk conspiring with the ruling system that literature should reveal.

This leads to an important function of literature in contemporary society: to cultivate an informed and ethical reader. Just as writers must avoid the aestheticization of violence, readers must also resist passive consumption. Only when reading needs reflection, discomfort and repositioning can it become a form of action. The violence in the novel, properly rendered, is not to divert people's attention from reality, but to strengthen it. It forces readers to reevaluate their relationship with power, pain, and collective responsibility. Therefore, the dialectical tension between the author and the reader depends on the common responsibility: the former constructs narratives that expose rather than cover up injustice, while the latter regards these narratives as opportunities for moral clarification rather than entertainment.

## 4.2. Standards of contemporary committed literature

In an era dominated by the polarization of algorithm-generated content, false information and ideology, the risk of such literary participation has been amplified. This raises a question: under such circumstances, how does literature maintain its transformative potential? How can it penetrate noise, resist instrumentalization, and still serve as a carrier of truth?

The answer may lie in clarifying stricter criteria for evaluating literary commitment, which have both aesthetic basis and ethical requirements. At least three dimensions seem indispensable:

First of all, we must emphasize the originality of ideas. A focused literary work should express a novel perspective, not just copy the familiar ideological model. This does not mean formal innovation for itself, but a substantial novelty in how to understand and convey the human condition, especially its entanglement with social and political structures. Originality, in this sense, is ethical because it refuses to pacify the reader with what is already known or already agreed upon. It forces rethinking.

Second, the clarity and coherence of the narrative expression must be maintained. Complexity is not the enemy of commitment, but obscurity can be. A work that confuses its moral and philosophical significance may alienate readers or weaken its critical power. On the contrary, the clarity of style and the nuances of structure enable the reader to grasp the deep meaning of the content described. Sartre's ideal writers are not moralized; Their narrative style makes the demands for freedom and justice appear organically from the text structure. Subtlety and strength must go hand in hand: the reader should not be told what to think, but should be confronted with a world that demands thought.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the social impact of the work must be considered. Although the literary value cannot be reduced to direct political effect, the consequences of the text—that is, the ability to trigger discussion, reflection and action—are still an important measure of its commitment. Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* has promoted regulatory reform [9], and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* has exposed the caste violence in contemporary India [10]. These historical examples have proved the enduring potential of literature in influencing change. These texts do not operate merely at the level of aesthetic pleasure; they function as interventions, as acts of testimony, as provocations to reconfigure one's understanding of justice.

#### 4.3. Sectional conclusion: the role of fictional violence in committed literature

Synthesizing our research on fictional violence (section 3.1) and using the evaluation criteria of commitment Literature (section 3.2), we demonstrate that the expression of violence in narrative form is one of the most ethical dimensions of literary responsibility. When using moral intentionality, the depiction of oppression and cruelty can serve as a powerful stimulus for moral reflection, forcing readers to distinguish between the text that is only anesthesia and the text that really causes critical participation. In this capacity, the literature of commitment is similar to a secular Scripture, avoiding the prescriptive dogma, and cultivating a discourse space that can foster ethical seriousness.

Sartre's *nausea* provides examples of these dynamics. By presenting daily life as a fragmented and unimaginable form, the novel reveals the unique form of "quiet violence" in bureaucratic and social practice, and shows that violence does not have to be spectacular or public to produce profound moral power. This narrative strategy reconfigures the concept of violence, readjusts the readers' moral emotions, and thus fulfills the author's obligation to clarify the subjective and systematic level of harm.

Crucially, the ethical effectiveness of fictional violence depends on its integration within a coherent framework of originality, clarity and demonstrable social impact. Every description of violence must contribute to a broader narrative strategy, which should avoid unreasonable sensationalism and reductive preaching. Only in this way can literature maintain its potential for change: readers can not only perceive the world, but also re perceive the world, and take responsibility for its continuous reconstruction. In Sartre's words, writing, especially violent writing, is itself a form of behavior, and strict moral standards are required at every narrative stage.

## 5. Conclusion

Critics sometimes claim that "traditional literature is no longer legal or useful in these changing social environments". However, decades of psychological and educational research have shown that the opposite is true: literary novels constantly activate the human spirit. For example, studies have shown that readers of novels are easier to understand and share others' feelings, and loneliness and

stress are also significantly reduced. In Kant's words, this is reasonable - man must be regarded as an "end", not just a means. By fostering empathy, critical reflection, and experience sharing, literature retains value that cannot be recorded in the profit and loss account. To sum up, from the perspective of productivity, although novels and poems are "useless", they also safeguard the dignity of readers.

Sartre's theory of input literature strengthens this view. He has a famous argument that writers must "fight against... Violence, cheer readers up from complacency, and not focus on art just for the sake of art itself". For Sartre, every creative choice is a moral position: telling stories has become a moral behavior, calling on readers to recognize their freedom and responsibility. Faithful novels are more than entertainment; It expose injustice, shake established beliefs, and invite readers to jointly create meaning. From this point of view, describing an event or character is itself political - the author and the audience jointly create change through interpretation. The real purpose of literature is to break the status quo and awaken the connection with the world.

Literature eventually becomes a dynamic and inevitable force, rather than a marginal relic. It interweaves the objective facts with the subjective problems that define us, and builds a bridge between science and the humanities. Narration breeds new ideas, activates readers, and turns loneliness into unity. Kant reminds us that stories with an intrinsic purpose of human experience will fulfill our highest moral obligation. By cultivating the understanding of others and challenging readers to rebuild their beliefs, literature transforms calm reflection into an impulse to change and innovate. Finally, the freedom of literature—its "usefulness and uselessness"—is itself the source of its strength.

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