



The Age of Reason

Jean-Paul Sartre

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Set in France during the days immediately before World War II, this is the story of Mathieu, a French professor of philosophy obsessed with the idea of freedom. Translated from the French by Eric Sutton.

The Age of Reason Details

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Author : Jean-Paul Sartre

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melissa says

I had this job one summer at a Dillard's department store. I worked in the linens section. Nobody shops for sheets in the summer, I guess, because I spent a lot of time doing absolutely nothing. My boyfriend used to write me letters and send me to work with them so that I would have something to read. Well *that* got old so one day when I was poking around the props (you know - how they set up the entire fancy-pants mock bedrooms?) I found a copy of this book on a table. So I parked myself on a stool out of the view of the non-existent customers and started reading. At the end of each day I put the book back on the little mock-bedroom table. I got fired before I finished the book but eventually picked up another copy and completed it. A lot of people think Sartre is heavy but I found it to be a quite enjoyable summer read. Take it to the beach!

Mark says

The first part of his Freedom series should be required reading for any existentialist approaching his mid-30s without any aspirations of marrying or falling in line. Mathieu, a French philosophy professor, spends most of the novel trying to borrow money so he can pay for his mistresses' abortion. His friends are a sorted bunch who attempt to take away his only goal: ultimate freedom.

Some literary experts say the protagonist must transform by the end. But what makes this book so great is that Mathieu eventually returns to his former self. He becomes nothing and that theme of freedom in nothing rings through the rest of Sartre's work. Clocking in at more than 400 pages, it can be a rough read. But the final scene of a freed Mathieu undoing his tie while he contemplates and savors his failure to attach himself to anything is brilliant.

april says

An existential read at its finest.

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Tej says

'Age of Reason' is all about existentialism. Fiction and philosophy inextricably and 'entertainingly' combined almost rendering it a page-turner. I had never previously come across the guile and craft of Sartre, the artist and only knew Sartre, the philosopher whose authoritative philosophical monologues were curt and declarative, sans the resplendence of an artistic canvas. The vivacity and vividness with which Sartre paints each one of his characters amidst their existential exigencies leaves behind their ever-lasting impressions on the fertile mental space. Each name springs up in mind in a color and the association with that color is

complete, character and the color inextricable from each other. To me, the biggest achievement of this quite a long tale has to be the control that Sartre exercises over his writing.

His characters are a god-forsaken lot, condemned, abandoned and carrying on their shoulders the 'burden' of their freedoms. This abandonment is of their own choosing or unavoidable because they are conscious, disgruntled and bored individuals, committed to denouncement of bourgeois and the lives they lead. The pain and reclusiveness (both self-inflicted and forced) are only but a small price to pay for the freedom they cherish. Or is it? The very disgust and offence they inspire endears them all the same. This book asks more questions than it answers, creates more doubts than it clarifies, precisely, leaves one in the lurch. Those uninitiated with Sartre might just get too engrossed with the plot, when the very essence of this work lies beneath all the love affairs, affairs without love, suicides or attempts, abortions and pregnancies, communism and Zionism, politics and philosophy and the like. 'Existentialism everywhere' and no where without 'existentialism' where only the seeker is invited. This can very well serve as a rider attached to my recommendation :).

Reluctantly I call Mathieu the chief protagonist, not that he is not a chief protagonist, which he is but the attention that is given to each one of the six, seven or eight characters keeps them all at a vantage point of significance. The story is about Mathieu and his mistress Marcelle whom he had been seeing for seven years with a mutual agreement against marriage and child. Marcelle's pregnancy causes the turmoil, the havoc, the storm in the life of 'free' Mathieu. His desire to get rid of this child, a veritable blot on his freedom and 'principles', brings him face to face with his own self, his beliefs and his life.

Sartre's philosophy is contained in the phrase; 'existence precedes essence' meaning that man is not born with an intrinsic value but creates a value with his own will and actions. He is forlorn because he is devoid of God and thus only himself responsible for his actions (as well as inactions, inaction also being an action). He is free to choose and this freedom is his condemnation.

The story revolves around Mathieu in this philosophical background and brings to fore his existential struggles along with those of the characters linked directly or remotely to his life. There are far too many memorable moments that leave an indelible mark along with the questions and reflections to ponder a long time after the last page is turned over.

To put it succinctly, 'Age of Reason' moves from,

"Yes - you want to be free. Absolutely free. It's your vice" ...
..."Yes, yes - it's your vice."
"it's not a vice. It's how I'm made."
"Why aren't other people made like that, if it isn't a vice?"
"They are, only they don't know it."

Through.....,

" 'I have led a toothless life,' he thought. 'A toothless life. I have never bitten into anything. I was waiting. I was reserving myself for later on - and I have just noticed that my teeth have gone. What's to be done? Break the shell? That's easily said. Besides - what would remain? A little viscous gum, oozing through the dust and leaving a glistening trail behind it.' "

To,

"He yawned: he had finished the day, and he had also finished with his youth. Various well-bred moralities had already discreetly offered him their services: disillusioned epicureanism, smiling tolerance, resignation,

common sense, stoicism - all the aids whereby a man may savor, minute by minute, like a connoisseur, the failure of a life.

"It's true, absolutely true: I have attained the age of reason."

This was my very first foray into Sartre's fiction which I found thoroughly engrossing and thought provoking and replete with existential essence of human life. I may not agree with all that Sartre says but I still find synchronization with his efforts at deciphering the question of 'being human'. Surely have to explore more of him.

Deema says

"I have led a toothless life ... a toothless life. I have never bitten into anything. I was waiting. I was reserving myself for later on – and I have just noticed that my teeth have gone."

Reading *The Age of Reason* felt like navigating the dark recesses of my subconscious and coming face-to-face with my innermost anxieties. If that sounds awful, that's because it kind of was. I don't think I've ever finished a book on such a low note. I also don't think I've ever finished a book feeling so understood.

I could talk about the plot, but the plot doesn't matter, it's the subtext that does – this nagging regret of a life not lived; a life that has amounted to nothing because of a protagonist who bases every life decision on excessive forethought, a habit that steers him away from making any decision on a whim.

This whole book is about our freedom to make the choices we want to make but never do; about our deep need for change but secret desire to stay the same. This constant battle between how things are and how we want them to be causes us to lead a life of limbo, always in between things but never picking a side, until we find ourselves at the "age of reason" – that pivotal moment where making a radical decision could alter our lives forever. But do we take that risk?

It takes an incredible talent to be able to write a thought-provoking novel with so many multi-dimensional characters in so few pages. It also helps that the plot itself is interesting, and Sartre doesn't use words lightly. Each word is chosen deliberately, and each sentence packs a punch. This is a book that was written modestly but with absolute confidence in the message it was putting across, and it's a book I definitely won't be forgetting any time soon.

Sean Wilson says

Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Age of Reason* combines the author's existentialist investigations along with an analysis of human relations, continuing the philosophical intensity of Dostoevsky's complex melodramas. However, instead of an emphasis on religious morality and redemption, Sartre opts for a colder, more atheistic tone all under the threatening heat of the impending war. Sartre's tightly structured, dialogue-heavy novel works well in order to showcase his rather blunt but well observed viewpoints on freedom and human motives, even if at times it reads like a play. *The Age of Reason* features some brilliant set pieces, characterization and scenes that resonate long after putting the book down.

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Surbhi Verma says

The Age of Reason constantly debates what the idea of freedom is for a man. Whether growing old means one should make every decision with reason or simply reconciliation. Set in the backdrop of Second World War, the characters seem completely oblivious, choosing to live their insular lives with their selfish ambitions - chasing their own version of freedom. Seen from an individual's perspective, freedom seems justified but not entirely when contrasted to humanity. Sartre's thinking makes for a timeless read. His ideas still feel so relevant even in this age.

Natali says

I wouldn't call this novel beautiful because the characters are so tedious, but the story is strangely captivating. It reminded me why we should all tame our runaway thoughts. If, as this book and existentialist theory would have us believe, the most profound philosophical condition revolves around individual thought, then our philosophical condition can be so silly. Superfluous even. Jean-Paul Sarte writes about really capable people who are fundamentally insecure, petulant, and selfish. They react, not to reality, but what they perceive as reality and then feel sorry for themselves due to the outcome. They are far too relatable, to be honest, and I am grateful for the reminder about the sniveling, self-loathing, and self-pitying nature that can come a little too easy to all of us.

Steven Godin says

Over the course of two days in Paris during a hot summer in 1938, philosophy teacher Mathieu Delarue has a crisis on his hands, he needs to raise funds for an abortion so his life can retain the total freedom that he so dearly clings to, all the while there is a circulating tension with the threat of war looming. 'The Age of Reason' captures this period in time very well, but the overall narrative left me cold.

Expertly written?, yes, but drags along in places, Matthieu himself was a deeply studied character, and felt like a man stuck between a rock and a hard place in his attempts to straighten his life out. An influential work rather than an enjoyable one, it's probably a masterpiece. I have nothing against Satre, he was great friends with Simone de Beauvoir (one of my favourite writers), but when it comes to the writings of existentialism I much prefer Camus.

Keinwyn Shuttleworth says

I found this book on a much neglected dusty shelf in a back-alley-esque section of my local library and decided to take it home with me. I had never read anything written by Jean-Paul Sartre before (purely due to Sartre's intimidating reputation) but something about *The Age Of Reason* demanded to be read. Needless to say, I soon found myself swimming in the erratic seas of Mathieu Delarue's chaotic existence, completely in awe of Sartre's understanding of human impetus.

We meet Mathieu, a philosophy teacher living in a bohemian Paris that is between wars and in the midst of a heat wave. The world about him is in a tumultuous state and his own life begins to follow suite when he discovers that his reclusive lover Marcelle is pregnant. Seeking money for an abortion whilst fighting his own indecision and insecurities, the novel plunges us into three days of Mathieu's life, which is not only a life that brings him deep dissatisfaction, but is also a life that he is rapidly losing control of.

Like Ian Curtis bellowing out the prolific Joy Division song *Heart And Soul*, (lyric: 'Existence well what does it matter/I exist on the best terms I can/the past is now part of my future/the present is well out of hand') Mathieu seems to be a man without a past or a future, a man living between parenthesis who is so fearful of "existing too much" that he ceases to exist at all.

Through the narrative of this man, a single voice is heard, and that is the voice of Sartre himself. This is Sartre challenging the reader to explain Mathieu's anomalous motives, whilst highlighting the pointlessness of existence itself. This is Sartre forcing you to analyze your own life, which is essentially why this novel is an absolute must read.

Manny says

This is an excellent novel about unpleasant people, with some unforgettable scenes. Here's one of the ones I liked most. Daniel, a strange character who has never managed to establish a normal connection with the world, has been hovering on the edge of suicide for some time. He's finally decided he's going to do it. But he can't just leave his three cats to starve to death, so he puts them in a wicker basket and takes them down to the river to drown them. The basket is too small, and he can hear them fighting and complaining inside. But of course it doesn't matter any more.

When he gets there, he suddenly realises it's impossible. He trudges back home with his heavy basket and opens it. The cats emerge, looking very much the worse for wear. His favourite has a nasty scatch over her eye. In the middle of all the commotion, he's also managed to get himself scatched, and it hurts. He feels utterly miserable.

It's one of the most effective passages I know on the subject of why it generally isn't a good idea to want to kill yourself.

Edward says

Introduction

--The Age of Reason

