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Author(s)	Akasaka, Shintaro
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“Identification or Sympathy? : Sartrean Reception Theory”

Shintaro AKASAKA (Osaka University, Faculty of Human Sciences)

In the second chapter of *What is literature?* , titled “Why write?”, Jean-Paul Sartre treated the relation between a writer and his or her reader. He has played the key role in the history of the literary theory, attaching importance to the position of reader. Because of the complexity of his argument, many researchers have failed to grasp the core of his theory. In this presentation I aim to reconstruct the Sartrean reception theory which is treated in the text above, connecting it with other works of Sartre written in 1940’s.

To discuss the Sartrean reception theory, I would like to focus on the experiences of “identification” and “sympathy”, which arise when a person reads a novel. On the one hand, Sartre explains the experience of identification with a hero of the novel. On the other hand, he also mentions that of sympathy, in which the reader is separated from the hero. The point to be discussed is how to explain the meaning of these contradictory experiences found in the same reading of the novel.

To solve this problem, it seems reasonable to consider the experience of reading through three steps of organization.

In the first step, the reader falls into the story of the novel. This step is called “passion” in the sense of the renunciation of freedom. In this step, the reader renounces the possibility of positive action, and then he or she accepts the story, believing it as a whole.

Secondly, the reader goes into the story as a world, in which he or she finds quasi-spatiotemporal horizon, from the point of view of the hero of the novel.

The identification is found in the second step, but it is not completely realized. In the third step, the identification with the hero ends in failure, due to reading sentences written in the past tense or in the third person. The moment which breaks the identification is called “aesthetic distance”. Through this distance, where the reader does not identify himself or herself with the hero, the reader sympathizes with the hero.

The identification that makes no distance between the reader and the hero conflicts with the sympathy with aesthetic distance, although both of them are constitutive to the same experience of reading. As a conclusion, this research would show that the moment of the identification prepares for the sympathy, and that the sympathy, the last step of the dialectic of reading, negatively preserves the moment of identification.