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## ARTICLE

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### A Structuralist Analysis of Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Flies*

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#### Keywords:

1. Structuralism
2. Linguistics
3. Jean-Paul Sartre
4. The Flies

#### Abstract

Structuralism that began to be active in the 1950's is the approach to define the relationship between the part and the whole. This article provides the phases of linguistics that form the source of structuralism, theory and applications of structuralism and its terminology. This article mainly deals with a structuralist analysis of Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Flies*.

## INTRODUCTION

Structuralism is a critical approach whose aim is to decode the encoded whole composed of a system in order to discover the deep structure of a textual work out of the surface structure (Lane, 1970, pp.14-15). It appeared at the time of the World War II in 1940 as a result of meeting of the Prague School which turned from a linguistic school into a scientific école establishing the background of structuralism. Structuralism's sources are Ferdinand de Saussure, Russian Formalism and Prague School (Yüksel, 1995, p. 13, 33). The first source of structuralism is the new linguistic approach that is expressed in the book *Course in General Linguistics* by Ferdinand de Saussure published in 1916. Saussure treats the language as a system that is consistent, understandable, and self-sufficient (Saussure, 1976, p. 106). In terms of structural linguistic view, three linguistics schools have been formed: the Prague School, the Copenhagen School and the American School.

Developing the work of the American structuralist linguistics school, Noam Chomsky provides a deep structure and surface structure for each sentence. While deep structure is the abstract, basic form determined by the meaning of the sentence, surface structure is the form of explanation of the meaning that exists in the deep structure through pouring into words. Surface structure refers to surface meaning, and deep structure refers to deep meaning. Deep structure is obtained from surface structure (Chomsky, 1965, p. 16).

Russian formalism emerged as a reaction to social and symbolic point of view in the field of literature in Russia during the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. "Form" in Russian formalism is a phenomenon that can be examined by itself not only as the envelope of content but also as its own integrity (Eichenbaum, 1965, p. 112). The Russian formalists came from Russia and gathered under the roof of the Prague School, setting the basic principles of the structuralist movement. Russian

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formalist Roman Jakobson is the person who bridges Russian formalism and structuralism. In 1920 Jakobson passed from formalism to structuralism in Prague. Jakobson developed techniques for the analysis of sound systems in languages, inaugurating the discipline of phonology. Jakobson mentioned that there are the following six functions in any act of verbal communication (Jakobson, 1971, p. 95):

1. Sender
2. Message
3. Context
4. Contact
5. Code
6. Receiver

Jakobson's approach is also reflected in the work of Claude Levi-Strauss, who brought a structuralist approach to the human sciences. Levi-Strauss, whose works' essence is to understand the human being, examined them as interrelated items, which will form a general system of unrelated events (Levi-Strauss, 1963, p. 87). Every myth is a "word" and contributes to reveal the structure of "language".

Vladimir Propp, one of the Russian formalists, made the first analysis of narrative in the field of structuralist literary criticism. Propp has examined the contents of a hundred Russian folk tales, and classified them and found that the task features of the characters in the tales are limited and unchangeable. Seven spheres of action for all tales are as the following:

1. Villain
2. Donor
3. Helper
4. Princes (a sought-for person)
5. Dispatcher
6. Hero
7. False Hero

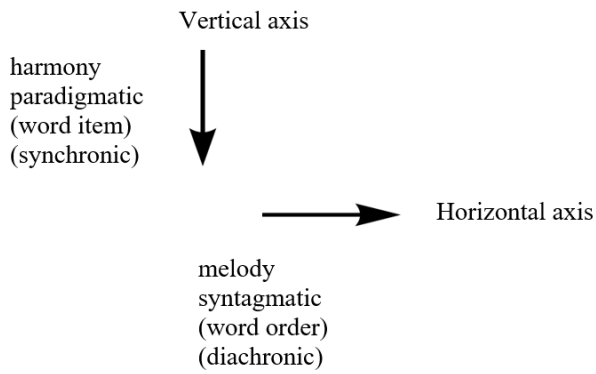
Propp mentioned thirty-one functions that are the actions of the characters in Russian folk tales. The sequence of functions is always identical. All fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure (Propp, 2005, p. 22-23).

Algirdas Julien Greimas has worked to identify the basic units that make up the plot of the narrative and to determine the possibilities of these units. Greimas proposed the actantial model that is based on Propp's theories. An action is divided into six actants which are also divided into three oppositions on the axis of desire, transmission and power (Greimas, 1983, p. 207):

1. Subject/Object
2. Sender/Receiver
3. Helper/Opponent

According to Roland Barthes, structuralist action consists of intellectual processes carried out in a systematic way. He aims to find the laws of that object. In order to reveal the data that is not obvious to the object in question, he broke up the object and reconstruct it after making the necessary intellectual findings. That object is now an object of "ideational" (Barthes, 1972, p. 215).

System is a transformational and self-operating wholeness composed of parts. In this system, each part relates to the other part and to the whole. The system is invisible (Hawkes, 1989, p.16). In order to decode the system of a textual work, the following terminology of structuralism has to be known. While synchronic linguistics deals with the status of a language in a specific time, diachronic linguistics analyzes language items the stages of evolution of linguistic elements at various periods in historical development (Culler, 1973, p. 8). Signifier is the element by which we refer to signified. When we call "tree", the concept of "tree" appears in the mind of listeners, and these two together create the sign. The complete sign is established when the correct signifier meets the correct signified (Saussure, 1976, p. 61). Binary opposition is the system by which, in language and thought, two theoretical opposites are strictly defined and set off against one another. It means that we are thinking in terms of differences, not similarities such as woman/man, raw/cooked (Leach, 1973, p. 36, 37). Syntagmatic relation means the horizontal relationships between units of a language. Each unit is a part which has to be in proper relationship with the next part and the whole. The words are set from left to right to organize a sentence. Paradigmatic relation means the relations between the units of a language which are identical in function and which can replace each other on the vertical axis. However, these units cannot come together in the same statement (Aksan, 1977, p. 116). Harmony is the polyphony composed of different musical notes which are simultaneously played by different musical instruments. Harmony is said to refer to the paradigmatic or vertical aspect of music. Melody is a linear succession of musical tones which is perceived as a single entity on the syntagmatic or horizontal axis (Levi-Strauss, 1963, p. 212):



Totemism is the relationship between people and nature (Leach, 1973, p. 112). For example, a totem is an animal, a plant, or any other object that provides a symbolic meaning for a person or social group. Levi-Strauss established a “homology” relationship between two totems and two clans through paradigmatic consciousness (Barthes, 1972, p. 208). Homology means that there is binary opposition between two things but all the same together they form a homology. A homology does not deal with two object or people only. It also deals with two relationships (Hawkes, 1989, p. 53). If clan A is named “Bear” and clan B “Eagle”, the relationship between clan A and clan B is similar to the relationship between Bear and Eagle because it is expected that those in clan Bear or Eagle develop some of the desirable traits of those animals.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), a French philosopher famous as an existentialist thinker, started his playwriting career during the Second World War. Therefore, the Spanish Civil War, the worldwide economic crisis, World War II and Germany’s occupation of France had enormous effect on Sartre’s ideas. He reflected his aspect of existentialism in his plays titled *The Flies* (1943), *No Exit* (1944), *Men without Shadows* (1946), *Dirty Hands* (1948), *The Devil and The Good Lord* (1951), *Nekrassov* (1956), and *The Condemned of Altona* (1959). Sartre’s theatre is based on the conflict between human’s needs and hopes, and the meaningless universe into which humans are thrown (Yüksel, 2011, p. 111). In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre’s aspect of existentialism is that human being is condemned to be free and that there is no limit to human freedom except the freedom itself (Sartre, 1992, p. 439). Human consciousness is not bound by natural laws: it can interpret them and decide how to act on them. The anguish which we feel when we are confronted with the vast and meaningless universe is something which Sartre calls “nausea.” To combat this “nausea,” man can use his freedom - freedom of thought, choice, action. But once man has made a choice, acted upon his choice and taken its responsibility, there is no turning back. This

choice stands as an imprint on his essence, on his human makeup, and it follows him for the rest of his days. According to Sartre in terms of freedom, there are two kinds of beings: ‘being as a subject’ and ‘being as an object’. Human’s existence of freedom depends on the on-going relationships between these two aspects.

In terms of ‘being as a subject’, human that is a conscious being is free by creating his or her own value system through choice, action and responsibility. In other words, those who are free ignore how others judge him or her. ‘Being as an object’ means that human beings give up the ability to judge themselves and create their own morals, and simply rely on others’ evaluations of them for guidance by letting others impose their morals on them. In this sense, like a stone, these human beings need the existence of others to have a meaning. In other words, one cannot act freely if he or she takes the judgment of others into consideration.

#### *A Structuralist Analysis of Jean-Paul Sartre’s The Flies*

Written by Jean-Paul Sartre in 1943, *The Flies* is a modern adaptation of Aeschylus’s *The Libation Bearers*, and Sartre makes a number of important philosophical points by changing the details of the original text in order to fit his idea of an existentialist hero, one who lives by his own moral code, acknowledges his own responsibility and freedom, and encourages the responsibility and freedom of others. The focal points for the structuralist analysis of *The Flies* are space, time, situation and characters.

Space is the town of Argos, Greece, a city plagued by a huge swarm of flies biting people of Argos as a reminder of their repentance due to the murder of the King Agamemnon. Argives live in repentance for all their sins, never speaking out and avoiding all actions that could displease the gods. In Argos, everyone fears the eyes of others which judge them. The world is the space where one has the chance to act and get one’s freedom. At the end of the play, Orestes frees the Argives from the flies.

Time is the present day, the day of Dead Men’s Day. Every year a ceremony takes place as a reminder of the Argives’ complicity in the murder of the King Agamemnon, and a large rock blocking the entrance to a cave is rolled away and the dead come out for one day to torment the living and punish them for their sins. The next day the dead return to the cave and it is closed until the next year. The Argives look only towards their past and the sins they have committed, and thus, they become blinded to their freedom. However, Orestes who becomes aware of his freedom looks towards his future

and kills the King Aegistheus and the Queen Clytemnestra who are responsible for Argives' remorse. As for the situation in the play, Orestes who was disposed of the town Argos for many years returns home on Dead Men's Day and finds that his mother Clytemnestra and her lover Aegistheus have murdered Orestes's father the King Agamemnon and now sit on the throne. Their guilt is imposed on the Argives by the kingdom's rulers – King Aegisthus and Zeus – who use remorse as a tool to repress the Argives. While the Argives are busy repenting and regretting, they are distracted from their personal freedom. Orestes's sister Electra who has been made a slave by the king and the queen urges her brother to murder them, which he does, and then he is hounded for the rest of his life by the Furies, goddesses of remorse.

The characters are Orestes, Electra, Zeus, Aegistheus and the Argives. Orestes has been raised in Athens and never committed himself to anything. He wants to belong to Argos, his birthplace. When he sees the servile life the Argives are living and meets his sister Electra, Orestes who becomes aware of his freedom decides to disobey the laws of the gods and murder Aegistheus and Clytemnestra to free the city. Electra is Orestes's sister. She waits for the day when her brother will come to free her and avenge the murder of their father the King Agamemnon by Aegistheus. Dominated by her desire for revenge, Electra spends her days in hatred of Clytemnestra and Aegistheus, who constantly punish her for refusing to repent for their crimes.

Zeus is the king of the gods. To maintain order, Zeus has devoted his existence to ensuring that humanity fears him and will follow his laws. He supports Aegistheus and Clytemnestra, who maintain control of their city through fear and remorse. Gods send the flies to the city due to Agamemnon's murder, and they bite the people as a reminder of their repentance. The flies later turn into Furies, goddesses of remorse when Orestes kills the king and the queen who is his mother. Aegistheus is the King of Argos. He killed the previous King Agamemnon fifteen years ago and took his throne. To maintain power, Aegistheus cultivated a deep sense of remorse in the people of Argos. Aegistheus forces the Argives to repent for Agamemnon's murder he has committed. The Argives are the people of Argos who completely accept their submission to Aegistheus. The Argives live in repentance for all their sins, judge one another, and avoid all actions that could displease the gods.

In the surface structure of the play there are some signifiers that enable us to reach the deep structure. The Idiot Boy signifies a 'being as an object' that is not free. The Idiot Boy appears only at the very start of the play.

He sits stupidly in the square while flies suck on the pus leaking out of his eyes. Like the Argives, he is completely passive and willing to take his punishment without complaint. The flies signify 'beings as an object' because the flies have no intrinsic meaning of their own. The citizens choose to interpret these flies as a punishment for their crimes and a reminder of their guilt. Eyes signify 'beings as an object' because eyes have no intrinsic meaning of their own. The Argives rely on eyes to judge. They confess their sins in the eyes of others asking for judgment, which is essential to their repentance. A stone signifies a 'being as an object' because it has no intrinsic meaning of its own. Zeus can only control stones but not people, he tries to reduce all human beings to the level of stones in order to impose meaning on human beings from above. So long as people fear him, he has power over them because they worry only about how he interprets their actions.

The Argives signify 'beings as an object' that are not free. The Argives have been taught to believe that taking responsibility for an act means to feel guilt over it. In Argos, where every person expects to be observed and judged by his or her neighbour, everyone fears the eyes of others, and thus, they cannot act freely. They are distracted from their personal freedom. They forget that it is up to them to choose a value system and decide what is right and wrong. Instead of choosing for themselves, they allow external forces (Zeus and Aegistheus) to impose a system of morality on them. They end up repenting for a "crime" that they never chose to interpret as a crime.

Repetitions give important clues to understand the deep structure of the play. There are repetitions of Zeus's trying to prevent Orestes from disturbing the order in Argos. Zeus allows murder when he knows that the murderer will feel remorse which pleases gods. In Act II Scene II, Zeus tells Aegistheus:

*"Once freedom lights its beacon in a man's heart, the gods are powerless against him."*  
(Sartre, 1989, p. 102).

As Orestes realizes his freedom, Zeus cannot force Orestes to atone for his crime. Therefore, Zeus tries to prevent Orestes from interfering with the remorse of the Argives in Act I by disguising himself as a foreign man, in Act II Scene I by causing light to flash around a stone in response to Orestes's request for a sign to leave Argos, in Act II Scene II by trying to convince Aegistheus to arrest Orestes, and in Act III by trying to convince Orestes to repent for the murder.

There is homology between two relationships; the relationship between Aegistheus and his populace, and

the relationship between Zeus and human beings. To impose order on his populace, Aegistheus comes up with a clever way of blinding the Argives to the fact that they are free: he tells them that they are guilty of Agamemnon's death and that they must atone for their sins. No one will step out of line because everyone fears the judgment of others. Aegistheus is the image he projects for others: a fearful judge. Aegistheus is a 'being as an object' because he cannot give any meaning to himself except the meaning that Argives give him, and thus, he is not free. Aegistheus has no power over those who know they are free and do not fear him. Similarly, by inspiring fear in human beings and by showing them signs, Zeus creates the moral systems intended to order human action. He must always present the image of a supreme judge to be feared and obeyed. Zeus is also a 'being as an object' because he cannot give any meaning to himself except the meaning that human beings give him, and thus, he is not free. Zeus has no power over those who know they are free and do not fear him. Aegistheus and Zeus have no physical power over human beings because they rule entirely through the power of moral persuasion and fear. At the Dead Men's Day ceremony in Act II Scene I, Electra dances and tells the crowd that there's no reason to be afraid of the dead. While Aegistheus tries to stop her through threats, Zeus causes a large stone to roll away from the cave. Similarly, in Act II Scene II, Zeus and Aegistheus cannot stop Orestes, and Orestes kills Aegistheus and Clytemnestra. Both Aegistheus and Zeus act to install and preserve order by hiding freedom from human beings, both are slaves to their images and are not free, and both share the burden of knowing that human being is in fact free.

The play is set on binary opposition between Orestes and Electra. In Act I, the Argives feels repentance for their sins related to the murder of the King Agamemnon. Orestes has no intention of doing anything in Argos because he has not any attachment and commitment with the past. Electra has lived for years with the belief that one day her brother will come and revenge for their father's death which is grounded in the past. In Act II Scene I, Orestes feels that his identity lacks content. Nothingness, or emptiness, is what allows for human freedom, choice, and action. Orestes, who asks the gods for a sign to leave Argos, realizes that his learned spirituality is impractical and says:

*"The light round that big stone... is not for me...; from now on I'll take no one's orders,*

*neither man's nor god's, but my path."*  
(Sartre, 1989, p. 90)

Orestes realizes his freedom and makes a free choice. His implicit rejection of revenge and parents which is grounded in the past is a reason for acting, and he takes the future as his motive to free the Argives from the flies and their remorse through killing the King Aegistheus and the Queen Clytemnestra who are responsible for the Argives' remorse. He decides that his life will have meaning if can free the Argives. He is aware of what the consequences of killing the king and queen might be, but he somehow believes that the act itself will free the people, and therefore the benefits outweigh the risks. Electra is unable to make a free choice because her action is already predetermined for her by her desire of revenge for her father's death which is grounded in the past. In Act II Scene II, Orestes acts on his free choice. In the absence of the pressures of the past or the moral commandments of the gods, Orestes kills Aegistheus and Clytemnestra in order to free the Argives from their remorse. While killing Aegistheus, Orestes tells him:

*"What do I care for Zeus? Justice is a matter between men, and I need no god to teach me it."* (Sartre, 1989, p.103)

He means that gods cannot affect his decisions and judgments. Having witnessed Aegistheus's death, Electra realizes that her hatred has died with him and she feels that his eyes are judging her. Electra sinks into cowardice and attempts failingly to stop Orestes from killing their mother. When she thinks how others judge her, Electra begins to see herself as nothing more than a murderess. At this point she feels the flies staring at her in judgment and realizes that the flies have become the Furies, goddesses of remorse, there to condemn her. In Act III, to maintain the order on human beings through being feared, Zeus offers Orestes and Electra the chance to replace the King Aegistheus and the Queen Clytemnestra through repenting of their crime. Revenge which is always grounded in the past is the one thing that makes Electra's life meaningful. Having helped Orestes kill Aegistheus and Clytemnestra, Electra's life becomes meaningless because her value system dissolves, and she turns to the judgment of others for meaning and repents of the murders. Like the Argives, Electra has also been taught to believe that to take responsibility for an act means to feel guilt over it. Although Orestes wakes up hiding in a shrine with the Furies surrounding him, he has clearly managed to hold on to his freedom. Having realized his freedom, Orestes has made his free choice, acted on it, and takes its

responsibility. By this way, he invents his own criteria for moral action. Orestes rejects Zeus's offer and says:

*"You are God and I am free; each of us is alone. ... Human life begins on the far side of despair."* (Sartre, 1989, p.119)

Here, "despair" means that human beings must limit themselves to reckoning only with those things that depend on their will, or on the set of probabilities that enable action. By rejecting Zeus's offer, Orestes has rejected all moral and political authority. Kings and gods must rule through the power of their image in the minds of human beings. A King or a god is necessarily a 'being as an object' and cannot be free. Orestes, who is a 'being as a subject' and has realized his freedom, cannot surrender it. Therefore, he takes the Argives' sins upon himself and leaves the city and the Furies follow him, and thereby he experiences alienation. In Act III, Orestes replaces the repentance of Act I with liberation. In wishing death upon another, and in seeing the dead, Electra who is a 'being as an object' suddenly sees herself a criminal, the same as all those citizens of Argos who wished death upon their previous king Agamemnon. Her past becomes her guilt, and she wishes to disown it and to put it behind her. By disowning her act, and thus her freedom, Electra succumbs to the temptation Zeus has offered her: an excuse, a story about her that takes away her freedom and makes her the plaything of social forces that forced her to act according to the assigned moves. Though the furies have physically left Electra alone, she will carry their darkness with her in the form of guilt and remorse forever.

## CONCLUSION

The surface structure of *The Flies* mirrors Sartre's conception of the structure of free-dom. In order to recognize one's freedom, one must let go of the past like in Act I, make a choice like in Act II Scene I, act on it like in Act II Scene II, and then take its responsibility like in Act III. The surface meaning of the play is that human must accept the past for what it was, for the real events that they did or didn't do, what they wished and desired and hated. Only then can they choose how the past will decide their future. Only those people who choose, act on it, and accept its responsibility can be free. Bemoaning one's existence and leaving it to the control of others removes freedom and responsibility.

As for the deep structure of the play, its harmony operates on binary opposition between Orestes and Electra. As Orestes is a 'being as a subject' and free, he

looks towards his future; however, as Electra is a 'being as an object' and not free, she sticks into the past. Its melody operates on the fixed cycle of the story of committing a sin and feeling guilt and remorse. The play ends but its melody continues because Electra will carry the darkness of the Furies with her in the form of guilt and remorse forever though they have physically left her alone. In terms of the deep meaning of the play, Orestes's mission becomes an effort to show the Argives who are manipulated by external forces that they do not have to act like "guilty people" by showing them that they are already free - that they have always been free because they are human beings. Human beings are aware to some extent of their freedom, and the responsibility that comes with it, but humans try to hide this from themselves. They are aware that the pressures and demands that the world presents to them are the result of the ways in which they see and engage with things, and that this in turn is the result of their changeable characters rather than any fixed natures. However, thinking explicitly about this induces in humans a feeling of anguish. In order to avoid this, they try to deny this responsibility for the way they are and the ways in which they behave. Human alienation from the surrounding world gives rise to freedom. Therefore, the final message of underlying deep structure in the play is that being free mostly has to do with knowing that you are free.

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**Jean-Paul Sartre'ın The Flies Eserinin Yapısalcı bir Analizi**

Halit ALKAN

*Özet***Anahtar Kelimeler:**

1. Yapısalcılık
2. Dilbilim
3. Jean-Paul Sartre
4. The Flies

1950'lerde etkinlik kazanmaya başlayan yapısalcılık kuramı parça ve bütün arasındaki ilişkiyi saptayan bir yaklaşımdır. Bu makale yapısalcı akıma kaynak olan dilbilim evrelerine, yapısalcı kurama, yapısalcı uygulamaya ve kavramlara değinmektedir. Bu makale temelde Jean-Paul Sartre'ın *The Flies* eserini yapısalcı yaklaşımla incelemektedir.