

# A Sartrean analysis of Shipping News, Norwegian Wood and Blade Runner

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**Abstract:** *As soon as they are submerged in this faraway place of beauty and solitude, Quoyle's emotional wounds begin to heal but his demons still haunt him. The Shipping News is mainly about recovery: it's about having to confront your fears and face your past. It's about losing everything -- including hope -- and winning it all back. Quoyle thus emerges from being in itself in negating his past to being for itself in embracing his future as we will read with the later section on Blade Runner. Quoyle overcomes his damaged past as he negates it as an in itself to become being for itself to embrace his future with Wavey. Watanabe thus moves from being drowned in the past as an in itself to reinventing himself with Midori in the future as being for itself. The figure of Deckard is also seen to evince a growth from the in-itself to the for-itself.*

**Keywords:** Sartre, Past, Future, Overcoming, Memory

Being-in-itself (L'entre-en-soi) may be distinguished from being-for-itself (L'etre pour soi) in its being a static state of existence as its definition lies in a concrete and eternal, invariable essence, it possesses no potentiality for negating itself and projecting future possibilities for action or conceiving an alternate definition for itself as it is full positivity, being-in-itself *is* what it *is*, it is totally self-contained. Being-for-itself by contrast is a dynamic process of *becoming*, its existence precedes its essence, in that its essence lies in its freedom, potentiality and capacity for the nihilation of a current state of being of facticity at any

point in time so it *becomes* what it will be through transcending the in-itself of extant ego and situation, it is characterized chiefly by its fluidity and lack of a rigidified essence and hence its nothingness. This trait of introducing non-being, negativity and negation into the world is peculiar to human consciousness, in Sartre's terms "The being by which Nothing comes into the world must be its own Nothingness". It projects itself into the future through envisaging a spectrum of possibilities, which it is *not yet*, and negating competing possibilities through choice and action. The nothingness or lack that lies at the heart of being creates a yearning for fulfilment, and drives the human to seek to define is thus the sole agent responsible for his definition and being. Being-for-itself possesses the capacity to transcend its facticity at any given point in time because of its capability to reconstitute itself and its situation, it thus *is what it is not and is not what it is* owing to its ever-present capacity for flux, re-invention, transformation and evolution, as it is 'condemned to freedom and choice'.

The film Shipping News stars Kevin Spacey against type as Quoyle, a boy whose life has been shaped by the years of physical and emotional torment at the hands of his father. Life as Quoyle experiences it is simple and colorless, until he crosses paths with Petal (Cate Blanchett), a drifter who happens into his life one day and becomes his everything. This woman is a class act: she stays out late while a despondent Quoyle remains home with their daughter, Bunny, all the while pleading with Petal to give their marriage

another

try.

One momentous day, Quoyle receives word of his father's death, and returns home from the funeral to find Petal and Bunny gone from his life. Enter Agnis Hamm (Judi Dench), his aunt from his father's side who has stopped by to pay her respects on her way back to Newfoundland, where their family's ancestry lies. After news of Petal's death and the return of Bunny, Quoyle makes the decision to travel to Newfoundland with Agnis in hopes of regaining some semblance of order in life once again.

Once the story makes the transition to the coldly atmospheric coast of Newfoundland, more characters are introduced, more of Quoyle's family history is revealed, much to the silent dismay of Agnis, who would rather keep the wrongdoings of her family hidden from view. Quoyle attain a job at the local newspaper, makes good with editor Jack Buggit (Scott Glenn), who takes a liking to the fact that his work stirs up interest in the town; later, he awards Quoyle his own weekly column. As Quoyle makes his rounds, he meets interesting faces, and takes a liking to the local daycare operator, Wavey Prowse (Julianne Moore), a conserved woman with a young boy who suffers from minor mental defects.

Kevin Spacey stars as Quoyle, a dumb guy who has a bad family life and is stuck in a dead end job. He is married to a cheap tramp of a woman (Cate Blanchett) and the only good thing in his life is his beautiful little daughter. He's the type of guy who, when you walk into a room, you can immediately sense he is the smartest guy in it. The horrible revelations start when Spacey's mean spirited father kills himself and his wife. While Spacey is at the funeral, Blanchett decides to take off with her latest boyfriend and sell their daughter into white slavery. She gets \$6,000 for the girl.

However, the same day Blanchett and the boyfriend drive off a bridge and drown, ruining a very nice convertible. This is all very sad for Kevin, who loved her despite her infidelity and loathing for him.

A crusty old aunt that he's apparently never met before (played by Judi Dench) shows up and steals his father's ashes. However she takes pity on poor Kevin, and encourages him to leave the city and return to their family roots in Newfoundland, where she pees on the father's ashes in an outhouse.

They move into the crumbling old family home right on the Atlantic and Kevin gets hired by Scott Glen at the local newspaper, not doing the mind-dulling typesetting he is used to, but reporting on accidents and the local shipping news. He meets the lovely Julianne Moore, (who apparently was deported due to her performance in "Evolution") who is conveniently a widow with a small boy.

Along the way, he discovers his ancestors were pirates who moved the lighthouse signals (fire signals to guide ships away from danger) so merchant ships would crash into the nearby rocks and loot their ships; his aunt was raped by her brother (his father) at age 12 and had a baby with him; Quoyle discovers a headless corpse floating in the ocean which leads to his being lost at sea. He survives the bone chillingly cold North Atlantic water by using a cooler as a flotation device. When he is eventually rescued, it is not only revealed the missing head of the man was in the cooler, but the man was someone he interviewed who recently passed through town on Hitler's yacht.

It's a coming-to-grips story in which people realize their fears and their hidden secrets and make peace with their inner torments. However, it seems that everyone but the

intended character achieves this: both Agnis and Wavey face a part of their past they have long since ignored, while Buggit, after a near-death experience, reconciles with his son. Even little Bunny accepts her mother's death, but Quoyle himself spends more time helping these people deal with their emotional grief rather than devoting time to dealing with his own. One might gather that through helping those around him, Quoyle is making his own realization, which comes at the movie's weirdly cut-off ending.

Quoyle in the time period of just a few days loses his wife and both of his parents, left only with a confused daughter named Bunny. Everything changes, however, when a distant aunt (Dench) appears on his doorstep and invites him to go with her to their homeland, Newfoundland. He accepts the offer and leaves at once, taking Bunny with him. As soon as they are submerged in this faraway place of beauty and solitude, Quoyle's emotional wounds begin to heal but his demons still haunt him. The Shipping News is mainly about recovery: it's about having to confront your fears and face your past. It's about losing everything -- including hope -- and winning it all back. Quoyle thus emerges from being in itself in negating his past to being for itself in embracing his future as we will read with the later section on Blade Runner. Quoyle overcomes his damaged past as he negates it as an in itself to become being for itself to embrace his future with Wavey.

The novel Norwegian Wood is thus about the burden that the dead exert on their survivors and the fact that life is meant to be spent caring for the living rather than the dead. Naoko is unable to overcome Kizuki's suicide while Watanabe eventually realizes life is wasted spent pining after the dead and overcomes Kizuki's and Naoko's death and moves on into a new lasting love relationship with Midori who in her lively and vivacious ways is a refreshing respite

from the mentally perturbed Naoko and whom Watanabe finds warmth and healing. Watanabe thus moves from being drowned in the past as an in itself to reinventing himself with Midori in the future as being for itself.

The figure of Deckard is also seen to evince a growth from the in-itself to the for-itself. The society at large in the film is one that has been dehumanized in the dystopian surroundings of futuristic Los Angeles (a quintessential post-modern society) where technology has infiltrated almost every aspect of existence and the population in general is seen to lead more or less mechanical and unreflective lives, blending in perfectly with the impersonal backdrop of machinery and technology. There is an overwhelming sense of stasis, inertia and unquestioning compliance on the part of society in most of the scenes, where the crowds seem undifferentiated, aimless and either resigned to the dreariness and drudgery of the status quo, blindly conforming or engaged in mindless hedonism in club scenes; a scenario which is likely to invoke 'nausea' on the part of any Sartrean existentialist protagonist. Deckard may be seen to exemplify his lifeless surroundings in the blasé and resigned attitude which he takes towards his life, occupation and duty initially, if 'bad faith' may be seen to be the modality of existence in his society as most people are passive cogs in the machinery of a clockwork society, and unaware and indifferent to their condition (e.g. Chew, the eye-manufacturer for instance is solely occupied with his function, i.e. producing artificial eyes and ignorant of the larger project of creating Replicants); Deckard doubtlessly falls into this category as well initially. The whole of Los Angeles society it seems, has been reduced to a state of being rather than existing with the malaise of a widespread vapidness and absence of values and self-reflexivity or consciousness that has

accompanied the invasion of technology and capitalism. It is ironically Deckard's encounter with the replicants that raises his awareness of the human condition, he is alerted to the transience of life and mortality's fleeting nature in the scene where he terminates Zhorra and shows signs of feeling sorry for her, and then confronted by Leon who thrashes him and informs him that it is 'painful to live in fear'; here he learns of the anguish that accompanies the awareness of leading an over-determined existence where once has the capacity to surpass and nihilate that empty role. It is also the realization of his relationship with Rachael as well as the ironic rescue of his life by an expiring Roy Batty that leads Deckard to question the moral legitimacy and meaning of his role as he identifies and empathizes with the humanity and love of life that impels the replicants to rebel against the harsh reality of their determined condition or facticity. By the film's end we find him abdicating the meaningless, savage and ethically obscure role of blade runner which has defined him, as he realizes the sterility and empty nature of that socially tailored in-itself role, and rejects the hollow and unjust system of values in his society. Thus in good faith, he flees the inner disintegration of his being prompted by this new awareness towards the in-itself (or ideal as the lover of Rachael) which he should be (since it fulfils and authenticates him) and is not. He thereby initiates a new project for his existence by creating a new world for himself, imbuing fresh meaning on his

situation by centering it around his genuine feelings for Rachael as he apprehends the multiplicity of possibilities and the transcendent projection of will and passion that he may seek as being-for-itself. He redefines his life by negating the static facticity and actuality of his **past** and transcends it towards self-conceptualized *possibility* in the form of a newly constituted telos, in order to realize the fulfilment in 'becoming' or assuming the mode of being/self-definition that is now more meaningful for him, that of a lover. One must note however, that his essence as being-for-itself is constituted in his freedom and capacity for choice and change, he is not merely the being or role of lover towards which he now flees, should his love wither he may create a new identity or choose a new authenticating roles as consciousness in its nothingness and capacity for negation is dynamic and renders being-for-itself fluid. Deckard is not his past, ego or emotions as the crevasse of nothingness in being-for-itself separates him from these objects of consciousness and enables him to transcend them through nihilation and the exercise of volition.

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