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Research Article

The Inconceivable God in Lagerkvist's *The Sibyl*

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The brief essay explores the coexistence of “matter” and “consciousness” within the character of Sibyl’s son in Pär Lagerkvist’s novel, *The Sibyl*. It draws on the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre’s theory of being, which suggests that this fusion forms the crux of humanity’s concept of God. Nevertheless, Sartre also argues that such a combination is fundamentally unattainable. That leads us to the conclusion that Sibyl’s son represents the unimaginable God that Sartre imagined.

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Introduction

The character of Sibyl’s “imbecile son” (1)¹ in Pär Lagerkvist’s novel, *The Sibyl*^[1], has not received adequate attention from scholars despite being an intriguing presence in the narrative. Most studies have only offered surface-level insights into his delineation. For example, Shattan describes the son as “mute, likely an idiot” who could be “a Goat God”^[2]. Bloch delineates him as “imbecilic... whose enigmatic smile reflects the animal side of the archaic matriarchal goddess who had been worshipped at Delphi before being supplanted by the male deity, Apollo” (50)^[3]. Eric W. Johnson, however, stands out as a notable exception. In his 1966 dissertation, “Pär Lagerkvist, religious atheist,” Johnson dedicates several pages to exploring the theme of “meaninglessness” in the divine through the son’s character. He portrays the son as an “ironic foil” of Christ because while “Christ is the embodiment of God’s light — the promise of redemption, the answer to man’s questions about his destiny — the son... brings not light, or hope, or promises” (38)^[4].

The present study intends to provide a fresh perspective on the son’s character, accentuating the concomitant presence of two contrary states of being — “matter” and “consciousness” (Spade 90, 98)^[5] — within him. Jean-Paul Sartre (1905 – 80), the French thinker who was a contemporary of Lagerkvist, interprets this coexistence as emblematic of divinity. However, because Sartre also dismisses the possibility of such coexistence, the article will demonstrate how Sibyl’s son embodies the inconceivable Sartrean God. While it may be speculative to suggest a direct influence from Sartre on Lagerkvist’s portrayal of the son, the parallels between the son and Sartre’s notion of God are strikingly evident. The analysis will delve into the specific attributes of the character that reflect divine coexistence.

Pär Lagerkvist (1891 – 1974)^[6] was a towering figure in 20th-century Swedish literature, renowned for his novels, poetry, plays, short stories, and essays. His contribution to literature was recognized with the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1951. *The Sibyl* stands out among Lagerkvist's works, showcasing his proficiency in intertwining complex ideas into a compelling narrative that enlightens readers.

Sartre's idea of God

In his seminal work *Being and Nothingness* ^[7], Sartre delves into the impossibility of God's existence through an exploration of "matter" and "consciousness." He defines matter as all tangible objects in their innate state, constituting the world. Matters are "self-contained" (Spade 90). They exist in themselves perpetually as inert, "timeless," and "changeless" entities (Daigle 33)^[8]. Moreover, matters exist "without [any] reason for being" what they are and as dissociated from the human world (Sartre 20 – 22). All this renders the matters incoherent, something beyond meaning.

Consciousness, alternatively, allows individuals to perceive and ascribe meaning to matters, concurrently facilitating self-awareness and situating oneself within the world. The two roles performed by consciousness direct Sartre to render it equivalent to humanity – "To be human is to be conscious" (Sartre 124). Consciousness, by nature, is contrary to matters. Whereas matters are self-situated, consciousness is located in the object it is aware of. Hence, it remains outside itself. In itself, consciousness is empty. Being outside itself, consciousness transforms by freely shifting from one object to another. Thus, unlike matters, consciousness is active and temporal.

For Sartre, as Manser observes, God is "the impossible synthesis" of the two contrasting modes of being (71). According to human conception, God is self-contained and timeless. Hence, He is akin to matters. The affinity to matters necessitates His being unconscious and so inert. But God is conscious, traditionally believed to pivot all consciousness. Consciousness entails His being outside Himself, and so His being active and temporal. Again, God's entity is culturally deemed independent of the human world. He is thought of as existing beyond any humanly conceivable reason or meaning². Here, He resembles matters once more. However, because God is conscious, it becomes necessary that His being is also conditioned in relation to His awareness of the world of matters like humans. Therefore, God becomes subject to human reasoning. God is, then, both self-contained and externally oriented, both unconscious and conscious, both inert and active, both beyond and belonging to the human world, both timeless and temporal. His being is a logical contradiction. "Sartre finds Him impossible because [He is] inconceivable" (Manser 71)^[9].

The story of *The Sibyl*

The contradiction in God's notion that prompts Sartre to deny His existence is incarnated in the very attributes epitomizing Sibyl's son in Lagerkvist's novel. Before expounding on the son's character, however, let us provide a brief overview of Lagerkvist's novel to aid our comprehension of his role in the narrative.

The narrative of *The Sibyl* is divided into two interconnected stories, one following a "Wandering Jew"³ (1) and the other following Sibyl, a prophetess from the ancient oracle of Delphi.

The Jew visits Sibyl to know his “destiny” (10). The man tussles with guilt and a sense of sin, recalling his past life. Sibyl, endowed with the gift of prophecy by the gods, is cursed as her gift provides her with no joy or peace. Her revelations are often devastating since she is compelled to articulate the truth, which brings despair to those who seek her wisdom.

Sibyl recounts to the Jew how she became a prophetess against her preference. As a blooming lass, she attempted to escape her fate but was seized and taken to Delphi to become a mouthpiece for the god Apollo. She vocalized prophecies that she could neither comprehend nor flee from. Her life in isolation is woeful, as she is revered but not loved, dreaded but not understood. Her sole companion is her witless son, whom she has believed for most of her life to be the fruit of her love with a young veteran she came across near a “spring” in her youth (79). It is only at the novel’s conclusion that she discovers him to be begotten by God⁴ in the dark pit of Delphi (41).

The Sibyl encourages readers to reflect on their individual beliefs regarding the interplay between destiny and the autonomy of choice in life.

Coexistence of the contrasting traits in the son

Let us now probe into the son’s character. Although Sibyl’s certainty about his being “God’s child” (136) does not materialize until the end, the son’s divinity is unfolded through the concurrence of matter and consciousness in him right from the narrative’s outset. The concurrence is first evinced by his “inexplicable” appearance (28). Having entered Sibyl’s shack, the Jew discerns in the son “a grey-haired man” with a “face that was like a child’s” (28). He is uncertain whether to call the son “a man or a child” (28). This uncertainty stems from his encounter with two radically opposite attributes in the son’s appearance. The son’s grey hair suggests his old age. Descrying the hair, the Jew can assume the son was born long ago. The assumption turns out to be true as we realize that Sibyl conceived her son when the “very old” blind beggar dwelling “in the poorest quarter” of Delphi was only a child (8 – 10, 112). Now, the son’s growing old with time bespeaks his temporality. This aspect of the son’s appearance the Jew finds pretty natural. He can easily relate the son to other humans who, like their consciousness, are subject to ceaseless change⁵. What, however, he finds beyond comprehension is how, despite his advanced age, the son’s face has stayed unaltered, “like a child’s.” The same remains a mystery even to Sibyl. “I reflect,” she says, “that his face is unstirred by all that people call life – that it has remained the face of a child” (138 – 39). That the son’s “face,” which can well be claimed as referring both to his physical face and the seemingly childlike naiveté reflected on it, is untarnished by “life,” that is, by time and experience, is a perspicuous cue to a trait in him that is immutable and beyond any reason humanity can grasp. The face, then, symptomatizes proximity to matters. Overall, the son’s being a “grey-haired child” (139) pinpoints the inconceivable amalgamation of changelessness and temporality that typifies God for Sartre.

The concurrence finds an even more subtle expression in the son’s smile. Notwithstanding Bloch’s characterization of the smile as a reflection of “the animal side of the archaic matriarchal goddess [of] Delphi,” the smile is another revelation of matter-like attributes in the son. Like matters, the smile is incoherent. The Jew is unsuccessful in deducing whether the smile is “good” or “wicked” (28). Failing to grasp its essence, he calls the smile “enigmatic” (28). The smile is also incoherent because, like matter, it seems to exist “without reason” – “He [the Jew] could see no reason for it” (28). Later on, when Sibyl

delineates the smile as “vacant” (139), she alludes both to the smile’s lack of property and ostensible cause. Of course, Sibyl is once seen speculating whether her son is “a god,” with his smile evoked by “his temple, his Delphi, and the whole world of men” (139). However, she is pretty uncertain about the validity of her supposition. “I don’t know,” she says, “I know nothing” (139). The smile is like matter, furthermore, because, despite lacking inherent property and reason, it persists without varying in nature or degree. Both Sibyl and the Jew find it “unchanging” (28, 139). The matter-like attributes in the smile place it far from a typical human smile, making it seem otherworldly. The Jew aptly sums up the smile as something “remote, at once meaningless and inscrutable” (146).

Nevertheless, the smile also exhibits the son as a conscious being. A smile, it may be claimed, can be the behavioral manifestation of an inner delight or a tender emotion evoked by someone or something, the sign of approval of a proposal, the exhibition of ridicule at some issue, or even at an individual, and so on. Whatever a smile is, it always articulates one’s thoughts or feelings about the object that engenders it. Hence, a smile is a conscious act. Obviously, then, the son’s smile also reveals a particular mode of consciousness about some object, which probably, as Sibyl surmises, is “Delphi and the whole world of men” or even something else. Therefore, the son’s smile, like his face, is constituted by the “synthesis” of matter and consciousness. It conveys his godly attributes. Johnson is correct in claiming, “it is the smile of a god... because it suggests the inexplicable dualism” (41). That the son’s smile is God’s becomes manifest when the Jew realizes it as being indistinguishable from the one he had witnessed the day before on the face of “an ancient image [of] god... down in the temple at Delphi” (146).

Lastly, the concurrence is conveyed by the antithetical facets of the son’s comportment. The way the son presents himself renders him both inert and active, unconscious and conscious. First, he is found squatting listlessly in Sibyl’s shack for almost the entire novel, never altering his posture. He also remains utterly non-responsive to the activities and conversations of Sibyl and the Jew. Such non-responsive torpor lends to the son the inertness of matter. Secondly, the son neither speaks nor seems to comprehend human language. “He’s,” Sibyl says to the Jew, “never shown any sign of understanding human speech and has never been able to say anything in it” (140). She also assures the Jew, “You can speak quite freely before him; he understands nothing” (28). For Sartre, language characterizes humans (consciousness), whereas matter is devoid of this quality (Manser 55). Therefore, the son’s inability to speak and apparently even comprehend human language typifies him as matter.

The son’s matter-like inertness and ostensible distance from human language are, however, contradicted by the ceaseless movement of his eyes. The Jew is bemused on espying the son’s eyes attentive to his and Sibyl’s “every move” (28). This eye movement bespeaks conscious activity on the son’s part, likely evoking in the Jew the suspicion that contrary to Sibyl’s assumption of the son being “an ever-leering idiot” (136), the son is aware of their actions and articulations. His initial inkling turns out to be true when, in the end, the son retreats to heaven. Sibyl apprehends that he has done so on being “hurt” by the “bad things she said about him” (140). He “understood” everything (140). The act of ascending to heaven and, prior to that, climbing up the “steep” mountain following an obscure “animal track” in the “misty moonlight” (141) demonstrates the son’s physical agility and mental alertness. These acts, therefore, in stark contrast to the son’s initial listless detachment, accentuate his conscious existence.

Conclusion

The above discussion explains how Sibyl's son embodies the paradoxical amalgamation of matter and consciousness, making him the quintessential God of Sartre. The coexistence of opposing traits in him renders him both "meaningless and full of... meaning" (148). Lagerkvist uses him to demonstrate that God is a puzzle not meant "to be solved but to exist and trouble us all" (148). Johnson, who refers to the son as an "intimation of [some] enigmatic power beyond man's reach or understanding" (38), echoes this idea.

Notes

¹ Only page numbers are mentioned while referring to *The Sibyl*.

² For example, Theism claims God's being is objective and independent of human thought^[10]. In Hinduism, God is believed to exist as the Supreme Reality or "Brahman," who, though manifested in various deities, is unfathomable by human intelligence. He "is unthinkable, because unconditioned" (*Kena-Upanishad* 99)^[11]. *The Quran* (Islam) delineates God as "a single and absolute truth that transcends the world; a unique and invisible being who is independent of the entire creation" ("Transcendence")^[12]. According to Christianity, God's existence is transcendental of all creation. The 13th-century Italian philosopher and Christian priest St. Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 74) stated, "the mode of super eminence [in God] cannot be signified by the names imposed by us... we cannot take in of God what He is" (Aquinas 58)^[13].

³ His name is Ahasuerus. According to Christian mythology, he is known for mocking Jesus *en route* to the Crucifixion and was subsequently doomed to roam the earth "until the Second Coming"^[14]. This very narrative is recounted by Ahasuerus himself to Sibyl within the current book.

Nonetheless, the proper name Ahasuerus is not mentioned in *The Sibyl*. It is in the sequel, *The Death of Ahasuerus* (1960), that the name is found. For the purposes of our conversation on *The Sibyl*, his anonymity is preserved.

⁴ The God in question is linked to the Dionysian aspects of revelry, euphoria, and disorder. He is sometimes referred to as the "Goat God" (91) in the novel and was originally created by Lagerkvist to summon up the primordial and mystical, encouraging readers to engage with the intricacies of the divine.

⁵ Sartre, as we saw earlier, equates consciousness with humans. In that respect, the ever-changeable facet of consciousness has been paralleled with human somatic temporality.

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