

**EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY IN HILARY MANTEL'S
NOVEL BRING UP THE BODIES
Sneha P.V.**

Research Scholar, DOSR in English, Karnataka State Open
University, Mysuru.

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ABSTRACT:

Contemporary literature is increasingly shaped by existential concerns such as uncertainty, freedom, moral responsibility, and the instability of meaning. The paper examines these trends through the historical novels of Hilary Mantel. The Tudor trilogy redefines historical fiction as an existential mode of inquiry, rather than presenting history as a coherent narrative governed by causality. Mantel foregrounds subjective consciousness, contingency, and ethical ambiguity as cardinal doctrines of her writings. Through the interior perspective of Thomas Cromwell, Mantel dramatizes the existential condition of the individual acting within oppressive political and ideological systems. Her use of narrative technique is apparently unique; the narration, psychological depth, and revisionist historiography align her work with existential philosophy, particularly its emphasis on lived experience over abstract moral frameworks.

The paper aims to read the novel *Bring Up the Bodies* encapsulating the historiographic metafiction, narrative interiority, and moral uncertainty, while demonstrating how her fiction transforms the past into a space for reflecting on modern anxieties about agency, power, and responsibility. Mantel's work ultimately suggests that history, like existence itself, is shaped by choice, risk, and irreducible uncertainty. Although Hilary Mantel is best known as a writer of historical fiction, her work participates fully in this existential turn. Her Tudor trilogy—*Wolf Hall*, *Bring Up the Bodies*, and *The Mirror & the Light*—rejects deterministic history and instead portrays history as lived experience shaped by fear, choice, and moral risk. The paper argues that *Bring Up the Bodies* can be productively read through the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, particularly his concepts of freedom, responsibility, and action under contingency. Mantel's Cromwell embodies Sartrean

existential agency: he acts without guarantees, constructs meaning through choice, and bears responsibility for outcomes he cannot fully control. By foregrounding interiority, ethical ambiguity, and the burden of decision-making, Mantel transforms historical fiction into an existential mode of inquiry, using the Tudor past to confront modern anxieties about power, agency, and moral responsibility.

Hilary Mantel exemplifies new trends in contemporary literature by transforming historical fiction into an existential exploration of agency, power, and responsibility. Through Cromwell, Mantel articulates a deeply modern vision of existence: individuals act without certainty, construct meaning through choice, and bear responsibility for outcomes they cannot fully control. In doing so, Mantel situates the past as a powerful medium for confronting the existential anxieties of the present.

KEYWORDS:

Contemporary Literature, Existentialism, Historiographic Metafiction, Historical Fiction, Moral Ambiguity, Subjectivity, Power.

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“There are no endings. If you see beyond the present moment, there are only middles”

–(Mantel 115)

Existentialism, particularly as articulated by Sartre, rejects the idea that human actions are governed by predetermined essences, divine plans, or historical inevitabilities. Sartre’s foundational claim that “existence precedes essence” (Sartre, 1946/2007) asserts that human beings are not born with fixed meanings or moral scripts. Instead, individuals define themselves through action. Freedom, in existential philosophy, is not a privilege but a burden: to choose is unavoidable, and every choice entails responsibility not only for oneself but also for the values one affirms through action. Sartre emphasizes that individuals act in situations they did not choose—political systems, social hierarchies, historical moments—but they are nonetheless responsible for how they respond to these conditions. This concept of “situated freedom” is especially relevant to historical fiction. While history may constrain action, it does not eliminate freedom. Rather, freedom exists within limitation, and it is precisely this tension that generates ethical anxiety. Mantel’s *Bring Up the Bodies* dramatizes this existential tension. Cromwell operates within an oppressive and dangerous political system, yet he is never portrayed as a mere instrument of historical forces. Instead, Mantel emphasizes his awareness, calculation, doubt, and moral unease. History, in this novel, is not a deterministic structure but a field of risk where action is necessary and certainty impossible.

One of Mantel’s most distinctive narrative techniques is her use of interiority. The novel is written largely in a close third-person perspective that aligns the reader with Cromwell’s consciousness. This narrative choice is crucial to its existential dimension. Rather than offering an omniscient historical overview, Mantel immerses the reader in Cromwell’s perceptions, memories, and anticipations, emphasizing how history is experienced moment

by moment. Cromwell does not possess full knowledge of events as historians do. He operates in uncertainty, assembling partial truths, reading silences, and anticipating danger.

Early in the novel, Mantel writes: “He is not thinking of the past; he is thinking of the future, which is where danger lies” (Mantel, 2012, p. 15). This forward-looking anxiety reflects the existential condition: action is always oriented toward an unknown future, and meaning emerges only retrospectively. Sartre insists that consciousness is temporal and projective; individuals are always “ahead of themselves,” acting toward possibilities that are not yet realized. Cromwell’s consciousness mirrors this existential temporality. He must act without certainty, knowing that hesitation may be as fatal as error.

Mantel’s narrative thus resists the illusion of historical coherence and instead presents history as a sequence of lived decisions, each shaped by fear, hope, and moral risk. In Existentialism, there is no external authority—God, ideology, or History—that can absolve individuals of responsibility for their choices. To act is to choose, and to choose is to define oneself. These philosophical premises have found renewed relevance in contemporary literature, particularly in fiction that foregrounds moral ambiguity, contingency, and subjective consciousness. Modern historical fiction, rather than reaffirming national myths or providential narratives, increasingly interrogates how individuals act within coercive systems of power. In this sense, history becomes a privileged space for existential inquiry, dramatizing freedom under pressure and responsibility without transcendence. It is within this Sartrean framework that *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012), the second novel of the Tudor trilogy by Hilary Mantel, can be read as a profoundly existential work. Although set in sixteenth-century England, the novel aligns closely with Sartre’s philosophy.

Thomas Cromwell is not defined by ideology, religion, or moral essence; he is defined by what he does under political

necessity. He acts without certainty, chooses without moral guarantees, and bears responsibility without redemption. Thomas Cromwell, as depicted in *Bring Up the Bodies*, is neither hero nor villain in conventional terms. Mantel refuses moral simplification, presenting him instead as an existential agent navigating a world where every action has ethical consequences. He is acutely aware of his responsibility, even when acting in the service of royal power. Cromwell's role in orchestrating the fall of Anne Boleyn exemplifies Sartrean responsibility. He does not merely obey Henry VIII's will; he actively interprets, shapes, and executes it. Mantel emphasizes this agency repeatedly. Cromwell understands that he is choosing a course of action that will destroy lives, yet he also knows that refusal would likely lead to his own destruction. This is not moral neutrality but existential dilemma. At one point, Cromwell reflects: "If you cannot speak truth at a beheading, when can you speak it?" (Mantel, 2012, p. 321). The irony of this statement underscores the existential absurdity of moral action within violent systems. Cromwell is aware that truth itself is compromised by power, yet he must still act. Sartre argues that existential ethics does not offer moral comfort; it demands action without absolution. Cromwell's choices are irreversible, and Mantel never allows him—or the reader—to escape their weight.

Bring Up the Bodies exemplifies Sartrean existentialism through its emphasis on action, situational ethics, historical contingency, existential anxiety, and the burden of responsibility within oppressive power structures.

Existence Precedes Essence: Cromwell as an Existential Subject

Sartre's most radical claim—that existence precedes essence—finds a compelling fictional embodiment in Thomas Cromwell. Cromwell's identity is not inherited or fixed; it is continually reshaped through action. As a blacksmith's son who rises to the centre of royal power, Cromwell embodies the existential subject who defines himself through what he does rather than what he is supposed to be. Mantel

articulates this principle explicitly: “What is a man, when you come down to it, but what he does?” (Mantel, 2012, p. 98). This formulation closely echoes Sartre’s assertion that human beings are nothing other than the sum of their actions. Cromwell is neither essentially virtuous nor inherently corrupt. His involvement in Anne Boleyn’s downfall does not arise from ideological conviction but from pragmatic calculation within a hostile political environment. Identity, in Mantel’s novel, is provisional and contingent, shaped moment by moment by decision.

Freedom Under Constraint: Sartrean Choice and Facticity

A frequent misunderstanding of existentialism is that it celebrates unlimited freedom. Sartre, however, insists that freedom always operates within facticity—the concrete conditions of history, society, and material circumstance. Cromwell’s freedom is precisely of this constrained kind. Mantel observes: “He is a man who does not get to say no” (Mantel, 2012, p. 21). This statement does not negate freedom; rather, it intensifies Sartrean responsibility. Cromwell cannot escape action by appealing to obedience or necessity. He chooses to act within constraint, knowing that refusal would also constitute a choice. His freedom is experienced as burden, not liberation—an existential condition Sartre describes as anguish, the awareness that one is wholly responsible for one’s actions.

Bad Faith and Lucidity

Sartre defines bad faith (*mauvaise foi*) as the denial of one’s freedom by pretending to be a mere function of social role or authority. Significantly, Cromwell is not a character in bad faith. He does not deceive himself by claiming that the law, the king, or God absolves him of responsibility. Mantel writes: “You do what you must, and you live with it” (Mantel, 2012, p. 312). This sentence encapsulates existential lucidity. Cromwell does not seek moral refuge in ideology or obedience. He knows that Tudor justice is constructed, that truth is instrumental, and that he is personally

implicated in violence. This refusal of self-deception aligns him with Sartre's ideal of authenticity, where the individual accepts freedom and responsibility without illusion.

Situational Ethics and Sartrean Responsibility

Sartre rejects universal moral laws, arguing that values are created through action rather than discovered as eternal truths. Ethics, in existentialism, are situational and grounded in lived experience. *Bring Up the Bodies* operates precisely within such an ethical vacuum. Mantel notes: "In a moral vacuum, the question is not what is right, but what is necessary" (Mantel, 2012, p. 173). This formulation reflects Sartre's insistence that moral decisions cannot be validated by abstract principles. Cromwell's choices are not justified by moral certainty but by political necessity. His responsibility is absolute because no external framework—religion, law, or tradition—can justify his actions. Each decision creates a value through action, a core Sartrean principle.

Contingency and the Rejection of Historical Determinism

Sartrean existentialism is fundamentally anti-deterministic. History, like identity, is not governed by destiny. Mantel's novel consistently dismantles teleological narratives of the past. She writes: "History is not made by heroes. It is made by men who are frightened" (Mantel, 2012, p. 226). Anne Boleyn's fall is not inevitable; it results from fear, rumor, and political calculation. Cromwell recognizes the instability of historical truth: "A story is only true for as long as everyone agrees to believe it" (Mantel, 2012, p. 91). This aligns with Sartre's rejection of historical necessity. History does not absolve; it records actions after they have been taken. Meaning remains provisional, contingent, and human-made.

Interior Consciousness and Existential Anxiety

Mantel's use of close third-person present-tense narration immerses the reader in Cromwell's interior consciousness, foregrounding existential anxiety. For Sartre, anguish arises from the

awareness of total responsibility combined with uncertainty. Cromwell reflects: “You think you know what you are doing, but you are always guessing” (Mantel, 2012, p. 144). Despite his political authority, Cromwell is existentially isolated: “There is no one he can ask. There never is” (Mantel, 2012, p. 199). These moments exemplify Sartre’s claim that individuals must choose alone, without moral reassurance. Responsibility cannot be shared or delegated.

Power, Surveillance, and Existential Constraint

Tudor England in *Bring Up the Bodies* is a space of constant surveillance, where language itself becomes dangerous. Mantel observes: “In this place, words are weapons” (Mantel, 2012, p. 57). Power does not liberate Cromwell; it entangles him more deeply in violence. His authority only heightens his responsibility, reinforcing Sartre’s insistence that power increases ethical burden rather than diminishing it.

Death, Finitude, and the Limits of Meaning

Existential philosophy treats death as the horizon that gives urgency to choose while denying final meaning. Mantel’s novel is saturated with mortality. She writes: “The axe falls for everyone, in the end” (Mantel, 2012, p. 381). Anne Boleyn’s execution reveals the fragility of identity and the arbitrariness of power. Cromwell’s awareness of death intensifies his actions but offers no consolation. There is only consequence, no redemption.

Although set in the sixteenth century, *Bring Up the Bodies* resonates strongly with contemporary anxieties: surveillance, bureaucratic violence, unstable truth, and ethical compromise. Cromwell’s Sartrean condition—acting without certainty within coercive systems—mirrors modern experiences of governance and institutional power. *Bring Up the Bodies* emerges as a rigorously existential novel. Cromwell exemplifies the Sartrean subject: free yet constrained, responsible without absolution, defined by action

rather than essence. Mantel rejects deterministic history and moral certainty, transforming historical fiction into an existential exploration of choice, anxiety, and responsibility. In doing so, she demonstrates that existentialism is not confined to twentieth-century philosophy but remains a vital framework for understanding both contemporary literature and the enduring human condition.

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