

## The Mind in Motion: Hopper's Women through Sartre's Existential Freedom

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**Abstract:** This is a study of the cross-cultural influence of Jean-Paul Sartre on American painter Edward Hopper through an analysis of his women in solitude in his oil paintings, particularly the analysis of the mind in motion of these figures. Jean-Paul Sartre was a twentieth century French existentialist philosopher whose theory of existential freedom is regarded as a positive thought that provides human beings infinite possibilities to hope and to create. His philosophy to search for inner freedom of an individual was delivered to the US mainly through his three lecture visits to New York and other major cities and the translation by Hazel E. Barnes of his *Being and Nothingness*.

Hopper is one of the finest painters of the twentieth-century America. He is a native New Yorker and an artist who is searching for himself through his painting. Hopper's women figures are usually seated, standing, leaning forward toward the window, and all are looking deep out the window and deep into the sunlight. These women are in their introspection and solitude. These figures are usually posited alone, but they are not depicted as lonely. Being in outward solitude, they are allowed to enjoy the inward freedom to desire, to imagine, and to act. The dreaming, imagining, expecting are indications of women's desires, which display their interior possibility or individual agency. This paper is an attempt to apply Sartre's philosophy to see that these women's individual agency determines their own identity, indicating the mind in motion.

**Keywords:** Being-in-itself, being-for-itself, solitude, mind in motion

### 1. Introduction

Edward Hopper (1882-1967) is one of the major Realist painters of twentieth century America. Hopper was believed to be motivated by an interest in the human condition. Being an artist of sharp and precise observation, he found problems or symptoms of this universal condition in the specific world of his day and age. At this historical and cultural moment in the postwar era, Americans had to experience what Europeans had during the war, the absurdity and contingency of the nature of the world. Hopper was concerned with similar problems as the European existentialists. Hopper depicts his single women alone in solitude. Some critics have described this as demonstrating the pessimistic mood of loneliness or alienation (Baigell, 2001; Taggart, 1993). However, this paper argues that they are portrayed the way they are so as to demonstrate exterior loneliness, yet interior contemplation. These women figures sitting at the window or standing turned toward windows in the sunlight have a strong yearning for freedom. They are dreaming of a liberating self outside the window into the vast forest or

sea, wishing to start a life of their own. The women's inward capacity to think, to desire, and to decide for themselves is said by Wieland Schmied (1995) to resonate with Sartre's existential freedom. The human being has an undefined nature, and is always projecting his/her own future, being able to expand and open his/her heart toward the possibilities. Sartre's existential freedom as an approach will be applied in this article to uncover the existential ideas hidden in Hopper's women figures, particularly their minds in motion.

## 2. Sartre's Influence in the US and Hopper's Affinity with Sartre

### 2.1. Jean-Paul Sartre

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) was a key figure of twentieth-century philosophy and literature. As the icon of existentialist philosophy, Sartre presented numerous writings, rich in ideas, both to his contemporaries and to the generations that followed. His famous phrase "Existence precedes essence" claims that the human being is fundamentally free and no other being or God controls him, and he makes his own world through his project. Sartre proposed a view that centered on the notion of absolute freedom and choice. Conceiving each individual as empowered with this freedom and choice, this view was no doubt highly demanding and required not only private but also public engagement. Existentialism is a philosophy for the actual individual in the real world, a concrete practical philosophy (Daigle, 2009, p. 1; Craib, 1976, p. 4).

Sartre was a complete intellectual who wrote vast literature that contributed to philosophy, literature, drama, and cinema. In 1938, his most famous philosophical novel *La Nausée* (*Nausea*) was published by Gallimard. *L'Être et le Néant* (*Being and Nothingness*), the first important philosophical text, was published in 1943. The two important plays are *Les Mouches* (*The Flies*) in 1943, and *Huis Clos* (*No Exit*) in 1944, which make the audiences think about the human condition and reflect on important ethical problems, and which are an occasion for Sartre to revisit his philosophical ideas in a different form. His other philosophical and literary essays include *Reflexions sur la Question Juive* (*Anti-Semite and Jew*) (1946) and *L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme* (*Existentialism Is a Humanism*) (1946).

When Sartre first visited the US in 1943, he was not warmly welcomed. His philosophy was regarded only as a French vogue and later described by the magazine and newspaper reporters as despair. The title of the report "French and American Pessimism" by Albert Guerard (1945) in Harper's Magazine expressed clearly the leitmotif of pessimism (p. 276). Sartre strongly denied this negative charge by the critics and commentators; however, Oliver Barres (1947), a Yale Divinity School student in a review of Existentialism declared that "no matter how Jean-Paul Sartre tries to wriggle out of the accusation, his existentialism is a philosophy of despair" (p.14). The first article on Sartre in *Life* magazine, "Existentialism: Postwar Paris Enthrones a Bleak Philosophy of Pessimism", impressed the readers with a list of words describing the man in Sartre's philosophy, a very sad, hopeless man with no future. Bernard Frizell (1946), a novelist and Paris correspondent for *Life*, wrote, "man is fearful, impure, hesitant, evil, guilty, egotistical, self-enclosed, unapproachable, tragic and worried" (p. 59).

Barres (1947) deplored Sartre's emphasis on individual isolation: "This is man's world, says Sartre, and no one can help him out of it. Here on this mysterious sea of drowning swimmers, arms trash the water in panic and voices cry out for help, but all in vain" (p. 14). John Lackey Brown, a professor of French at the Catholic University of America before the war, who was a Paris correspondent for the *New York Times* between 1945 and 1948, argued in his article "Paris, 1946: Its Three War Philosophies" that "Few mortals can live the courageous and hopeless despair preached by Sartre" (cited. in Fulton, 1999, p. 29).

Like the magazine and newspaper reporters, many professional philosophers viewed Sartre's philosophy as an evanescent postwar mood that revealed no universal truth. His thought was viewed to be only a literary movement, being philosophically naïve, antiscientific, failing to place the individual within the world of sense data, away from American analytical philosophy. However, there were some voices that reminded people of this new thought from Europe. Columbia University professor Justus Buchler (1947) felt it necessary to remind colleagues: "To call it a mere reflection of modern confusion, [...], seems at best an oversimplification." Buchler also found value in the attention Sartre paid to the moral categories of despair, absurdity, and the choice of oneself (p. 449). William Barrett was one of the few American philosophers of this period who actively encouraged colleagues to consider the merits of existentialism. He said that Sartre's philosophy's "very somberness went against the grain of our native youthfulness and optimism" (Barrett, 1961, p. 9). This old theme surfaced once again in the response to Sartre. As the editorial board member of *Partisan Review*, Barrett was eager to introduce Americans to new currents circulating in Europe, and he himself wrote "What Is Existentialism?" and *Partisan Review* published it as a separate pamphlet in 1947. The American philosophers William Barrett (1961), Justus Buchler (1947), and Marjorie Grene (1948), though they revealed disagreements on different points at different times, all highly praised Sartre's reinforcement of the idea that the individual had a certain freedom to choose and an obligation to choose responsibly. They also positively responded to his effort to understand social interaction through the vantage point of the individual. They praised Sartre for recognizing that increasingly bureaucratic and technological societies tended to produce a sense of social alienation and loss of personal identity. They applauded his attention to the difficulties of mass society for the individual. Buchler (1947) praised particularly the fact that existentialists "have caught forcefully the great fact of tragedy in modern life," that is, the sense of purposelessness of meaningful activities as common contemporary problems in complex industrial societies (p. 449).

In the 1950s as the popularity and fashion of existentialism increased, the American thinkers slowly moved away from the popular view of it and "demonstrated its relevance to American culture" (Cotkin, 2003, p. 104). By the end of 1940s, New York City became the intellectual and cultural center of the United States. These thinkers started to regard Sartre's thought as a philosophical endeavor to be taken seriously.

Many aspects of an existential perspective among New York artists can be detected. Novelist Saul Bellow's first novel *The Dangling Man* (1944) showed existential themes and had affinity with Sartre's *Nausea*. The aesthetician Van Meter Ames (1951) applauded Sartre's vision of art "as a creative activity in the service of freedom and control for a good life" (p. 256). Catherine Rau (1950), also praised Sartre for presenting art as an engine for democratic social progress (pp.146-47). The American scholars particularly appreciated Sartre's emphasis on individual freedom, personal responsibility, and

authenticity, which are interlocking concepts in Sartrean morality. The drift of American philosophy away from a priori ethical values meant that Sartre's central moral premise would find resonance in the United States, and they acknowledged that the moral ambiguity of Sartre's universe mirrored the situation in which many people in the mid-twentieth century Western society found themselves.

Marjorie Grene's *Dreadful Freedom: A Critique of Existentialism* (1948) helped to popularize existentialism in America. She described existentialism as a "penetrating statement of our old disheartenment, a new expression of an old despair" (p. 149). She especially appreciated its emphasis on revolt and responsibility. She decided Sartre's main contribution was precisely his correction of philosophies that found values emerging from factors largely independent of human choice: "It is the attempt to show the genesis of human values from the core of humanity that makes some of Sartre's ethical analysis—if not valid, at least terribly interesting" (p.10). She also noted that "What the existentialist admires is not the happiness of a man's life, the goodness of his disposition or the rightness of his acts, but the authenticity of his existence" (Grene, *Philosophy*, 1976, p. 50).

Hannah Arendt published her monumental work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951. In 1964 she published two essays "What is Existenz Philosophy?" and "French Existentialism" in *Partisan Review* and *The Nation*. She found French existentialism courageously refused to turn to the past for inspiration or nostalgia and engaged the problem of the world heroically and rebelliously, yet she detected a hint of nihilism in French existential philosophy. Similarly, John Wild (1955) stated that existentialism concerns the individual's "freedom and dignity" (p.25)

In 1956, Walter Kaufmann's anthology *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre* was published in America. This anthology became the course reading material for undergraduates in universities and it indicated that the interpretation of existentialism shifted from mere philosophy to both philosophy and literature. Kaufmann voiced high praise for Sartre's thought, personality, and versatility. It became known that existentialism had come to the attention of a wide international attention through the work of Jean-Paul Sartre. "Even Heidegger's great prestige in Germany after the second World War is due, in no small part, to his tremendous impact on French thought" (Kaufmann, 1956, p. 40). Sartre was a philosopher in the French tradition, and it was hard to imagine how much attention he would receive in philosophical history in later years; however, there was no doubt that he would be remembered for his "unprecedented versatility: he is much more interesting than most of his contemporaries ..." (p. 41).

William Barrett's *Irrational Man* (1958) was one of the most popular books of existentialism penned by an American and became a "bestseller" in its field. Barrett explored not only the historical context of existentialism but its sociological significance as well. In his book he stated that "the essential freedom, the ultimate and final freedom that can not be taken from a man, is to say *No*. This is the basic premise in Sartre's view of human freedom: freedom is in its very essence negative, though this negativity is also creative" (p. 215). He treated Sartre as a man in a moment of heroism.

Hazel E. Barnes discovered French existentialism with fascination. She entered in 1948 on "her life quest to make French existentialism central to the discourse of American intellectual life" (cited. in Cotkin, p. 151). Moreover, in her memoir *The Story I Tell Myself* (1977), she showed her French existentialism in a new light that gave great emphasis to the "optimistic aspects of Existentialism" (Barnes, p.162). Barnes translated Sartre's fundamental work *Being and Nothingness*, which was

a great success. Not only did she translate the language, but also the style of Sartre. She had the intention to translate the mood of French existentialism into something that Americans were familiar with and felt useful. Barnes intended to transform the pessimistic elements of existentialist doctrine into a humanistic perspective. She asked readers to think about the commitments of Sartre to greater freedom. With her translation of *Being and Nothingness* into English in 1957, Sartre's philosophy was introduced to the English world, and he gathered a reputation in the intellectual world. His name was increasingly becoming popular.

It is reasonable to claim, as Bernard-Henri Lévy did in the title of his book *Le Siècle de Sartre* (2000), that the twentieth century was "Sartre's century." Again as Benedict O'Donohoe and Roy Elveton titled their book *Sartre's Second Century* (2009), the twentieth-first century is very possibly "Sartre's second century," because his works of philosophy and literature continue affecting the minds of people and the world.

## 2.2. Edward Hopper

Hopper was born on July 22, 1882, in Nyack, New York. He made three trips to Europe between 1906 to 1910, stayed most of the time in Paris to study art and experience life there. His artistic style was most influenced by Monet and Degas. Coming back to the US, Hopper set his studio in NY.

Gail Levin's biography of Hopper told us some of his personality. Hopper's friend Guy Pene du Bois remarked in a letter to Hopper's Paris girl friend Enid that Hopper preferred "able dissection of the human species" to romance (Levin, 2007, p.73). Hopper was believed to be more interested in human mind and the human world rather than romantic relationships with other people, being isolated, mostly in solitude, and in deep contemplation. His personality aided him with a vision in observing this lonely world in modern age when people were alienated from each other. Hopper's thought was perfectly revealed on his canvas. Hopper depicted in his oil paintings mostly "the crisis of an alienated world, the loneliness of the human condition in the modern age." He was the person feeling within himself this loneliness, which was not able to be altered even by his marriage in 1924. The deep sense of alienation was with him (Schmied, 1995, p. 19). *Automat* (1927) was one of his urban paintings in which Hopper captured the loneliness of the modern world, the existential ache of alienation (Cotkin, 2003, p.88). Around the end of 1940s and early 1950s, Kierkegaardian existential anxiety in the US was pushed into the background by the new form of existential philosophy, the French existentialism associated with Sartre, the atheism. Sartre visited the US three times and delivered lectures on his trip Jan. 1946 in New York and other major cities. Though Hopper was not that sociable to join the crowds in lectures, he was often informed about Sartre and his philosophy by his friends of New York artists and intellectuals who attended the lectures and cocktail parties. Marcel Duchamp, a French American artist in New York, had introduced what he knew about Sartre to Lionel Abel, the New York playwright and Sartre's authorized translator. Marcel himself attended Sartre's lecture in one of the first rows of Carnegie Hall on new tendencies in the contemporary French theater, organized by Charles Henri Ford, the editor of Surrealist magazine *View*. Also present at the Carnegie Hall that evening, William Barret, a professor of philosophy in New York University, and an editor of *Partisan Review* and

later Atlantic Monthly would write innumerable articles on Sartre. His most notable book *Irrational Man* is on European existentialism. Irving Howe, a New Yorker, writer, and public intellectual, was particularly interested in the extraordinary appeal of the Sartrean image: “the independent intellectual, outside of all institutions, free of all determinism,” (Cohen-Solal, 1991, pp. 269-277). In this time and age, the New York artists and intellectuals including Hopper directly or indirectly were affected, thrilled and fascinated by the existential ideas, very popular on university campus and intellectual circles. This influence of ideas could be seen from Hopper’s attention to the human being himself and especially the individual’s inward power in the form of solitude, and contemplation. Actually he had been searching for himself through his own expressions of his work.

Edward Hopper wrote: “Great art is the outward expression of an inner life in the artist, and this inner life will result in his personal vision of the world ... The inner life of a human being is a vast and varied realm” (*Reality*, 1953, p. 8). Hopper believed that great art was something not consciously produced by the artist, it was an unconscious creation. It was all about the artist’s thought and feelings inside him. “Most of the important qualities in art are put there unconsciously, and little of importance by the conscious intellect” (Hopper, 1939, n.p.). It had to do with what Hopper called “personality.” He believed that “personality” was unalterable and it was his one certainty. Regarding the view that “the inner life results in his personal vision of the world,” he quoted Goethe on “reproduction of the world that surrounds me by means of the world that is within me, all things being grasped, related, re-created, moulded and reconstructed in a personal form and an original manner” (Rodman, 1957, n.p.). When the artist is reproducing a world that surrounds him, the world that is within him gives him the sense of feeling and understanding. Everything he has grasped, remolded, re-created is produced in a personal form and an original manner. “Every artist has a core of originality, and that is a core of identity that is his own” (Hopper, 1933, n.p.). Thus, his reproduction is his own creativity and identity, a very personal representation. When talking about the world within him, he characterized it as a “vast and varied realm,” much of which was unknown to him. This world within him, the identity of that self, is revealed only through that world reproduced, or that is to say he can only know that self through his work, which “returned to him some reassuring echo” (O’Doherty, 2004, p. 86). Therefore, Hopper’s work, according to himself, is a search for a definition of that self. He believed in this self quite fervently, however, he had imperfect knowledge of it (i.e., his self). And this imperfect knowledge provided vast possibilities for him to search, continuously into the unknown. When he was asked by Brian O’Doherty what he was after in *Sun in an Empty Room* 1963, he responded “I am after ME” (p. 86). He was painting on canvas his own personalities, the “definite personalities that remain forever modern by the fundamental truth that is in them” (Hopper, “Notes on Painting,” 1933, n.p.).

In Hopper’s paintings, lonely figures, quiet empty spaces, far distance roads, and single buildings are the most frequently depicted subjects, for which he is often mistakenly understood as presenting loneliness, isolation, alienation, and solitude. In an interview with Katharine Kuh, in response to the question: “Is there any social content in your work?” Hopper replied: “None whatsoever” (Kuh, 2000, p.140). And in an answer to another question, he added: “I paint only for myself ... I never think of the public when I paint — never” (p. 141). Hopper once expressed that the loneliness was overdone. His best friend Brian O’Doherty (2004) believed Hopper was a searcher, a lonely searcher for his own



identity (personality) through his art. Hopper sought out those ignored places in which to pursue self-knowledge. It is an isolated task of the artist rather than loneliness. The mystery of those city paintings proceeds from the search for an identity that is unknowable. Those paintings, the single women at their windows, the gas stations, the empty rooms, are all the cumulative self-portrait, if we believe his declared intention (O'Doherty, 2004, p. 86). His work, as suggested by Hopper, is in exact consonance with an interior life that to the artist himself remained mysterious and partly inaccessible, and the work itself reveals phases of a self-investigation. Hopper can be regarded as a lonely figure who is doing an isolated task, but he is pretty much comfortable in his isolation.

Hopper is a silent searcher, and he has the power of silence. His close friend and contemporary Lloyd Goodrich said: "He had no small talk; he was famous for his monumental silences; but like the spaces in his pictures, they were not empty. When he did speak, his words were the product of long meditation" (Lloyd, 1989, pp. 85-87). Hopper admires the state of individual being, a man who seeks for isolation and self-contemplation. If he is in a place with crowds of people, he may find himself going against the grain and feel uncomfortable. He would like to look for a quiet place, which is characterized as an open door for pursuing peace. Lack of a clear distance between people in society brings too much pressure and suffocation, when there is no way for a person to think, to wonder, and to act individually. He must escape out of this worldly place and find himself. Staying out of the worldly place is not the purpose however, and the purpose is to be able to pursue individual feelings and thoughts. He would seek that interior world, full of sunlight, exuberance, and life. Hopper's rooms, like the interior world, may look to the ocean, to freedom, to rediscover and regain. Different from alienation, or loneliness, which is usually a passive state, this is a positive move toward knowing oneself, and this is a process with aim and quest.

### 3. Scholarly Research on Edward Hopper's Oil Paintings

When his six close friends recollected the 20<sup>th</sup>-century American painter Edward Hopper and his art, they all appreciated the uniqueness of his works. Hopper created his own form and design: light played a principal role in all of his works. Hopper's female figures represented a state of mind of solitude in the age of alienation. At the same time their eyes looking outside the window represented the yearning for breaking away the frame of the room (Goodrich, Clancy, Hayes, et al. 1981, pp. 125-127). In the same year of 1981, Linda Nochlin wrote on Hopper's depiction of alienation. Her title "Edward Hopper and the Imagery of Alienation" itself told us the theme of Edward Hopper's oil paintings, alienation. Edward Hopper's *Gas* (1940), for instance, depicted an image of a typical condition of American alienation, a "thoroughgoing kind of rootlessness." Hopper in his painting employed the rhetorical device of synecdoche, "the substitution of a concrete part for an equally concrete whole" (p. 136).

The locations for Hopper's alienation images are particularly the working field *Pennsylvania Coal Town* (1947), spaces of urban recreation *The Automat* (1927), and the urban work scene as well as the city night spot *Office at Night* (1940). Hopper's images often revealed to us the sense of the impotence and disconnection of the human figure in the field; the isolated female figure sunken into her world of reverie, with the bleak space around her; the hollowness of the office with no possibility

that the figures may come together to talk or make contact. The alienation of Hopper was more than the alienation of human beings from each other, and it was that of individuals from themselves as depicted in *Morning Sun* (1952), *City Sunlight* (1954), and *A Woman in the Sun* (1961). Empty room pictures, *Rooms by the Sea* (1951) and *Sun in an Empty Room* (1963), were based on the simplest ingredients: space, walls, air, light, and water. As Hopper says "I'm after ME"; in these pictures, he was pursuing "an authentic sense of isolation and impending nothingness" (Nochlin, 1981, p. 141). Hopper is telling much more than the state of alienation on his palate, and he has been courageously pursuing something that could overcome this anxiety by grasping his free will to find what he really is.

The characteristics of simplicity and stillness of Hopper's painting were revealed in the analyses of Troyen's "Edward Hopper and Ryder's House" (2006, p. 5) and Jackson's "'To Look': The Scene of the Seen in Edward Hopper" (2004, p.135) as well as in other critics'. Simplicity is the representation of modernism and stillness, the loneliness of the modern age. These techniques assist the portrayal of the state of alienation of the age.

Some works have argued that Hopper depicted in his paintings the psychological aspects of himself and his figures with the use of rooms, windows as the constraints and frames to lock them in, isolating them from contacting each other. They were unable to walk or move, being reduced to an inanimate object (Baigell, 2001, pp. 49-59; Taggart, 1993, p. 1-24). The tonality was pessimistic. Hopper's figures were often in a state of "withdrawal." They did not communicate, and even the harmless relationship might overwhelm them in some way. The postures, attitudes, even the compositions all suggested the mood. The light and shadow used by Hopper were even believed to be oppressive. What they said about the isolation, alienation and muteness of the figures was true. However, the author of this study agrees with Schmied (1995) that they are portrayed in the way they are to demonstrate exterior loneliness, yet interior contemplation. Those women figures sitting at the window or standing toward windows in the sunlight have a strong yearning for freedom, wishing any moment to be able to break away from this room, the centrality of the control. They are dreaming of a liberating self outside the window into the vast forest or sea.

Wieland Schmied (1995) stated that not only were the actual subjects presented, the issue of perception was also addressed. For instance, they included the viewer's eye, despite the fact that the figures appeared entirely self-absorbed and unconscious of being observed. They did not realize that they were seen and we the viewers remained outside their lives, looking in; for them we were non-existent and what they perceived remained hidden to us, beyond our field of view. The clear compositions of a woman at a window showed us that she gazed into a space that was either concealed from the viewer or outside the picture entirely. She might be looking into nothingness. She might be so preoccupied with herself that she was oblivious of everything going on around her (p. 74). Again regarding women figures at a hotel or room window, apparently awakened by the sun, they gazed musingly out the window as if wondering whether this might be the first day in a new life: *Morning in a City* (1944), *Morning Sun* (1952), *City Sunlight* (1954), *A Woman in the Sun* (1961). Hopper's women were vulnerable, yet they still seemed to harbor hopes and expectations. It can be sensed that there was something undefined, perhaps unnamable. In *A Woman in the Sun*, the woman has reached the borderline. Hopper has put her in a situation beyond which she could not go. She has let the sun take



possession of her. She has forgotten herself. Hopper's figures lowering their eyes seemed to be looking at themselves, and pursuing their own thoughts and dreams (p. 76).

What Schmieid states about Hopper's women figures and the sun light in a room resonates with Sartre's existential freedom. The human being has an undefined nature, and he/she is always projecting his own future, being able to expand and open his/her heart toward the possibilities. The next section will investigate existential ideas hidden in Hopper's women figures, particularly the movement of their minds.

#### 4. Key Concepts of Sartre's Existential Freedom

Atheistically speaking, man is free in the sense of not being determined. He will be what he will have made of himself, and be responsible for what he is. Ontologically speaking, man is free in the sense of possessing nothingness within himself. He is propelled by nothingness to make himself into something.

Sartre presents two modes of being in one world to demonstrate the freedom embedded in each individual being. They are being-in-itself (*en soi*) and being-for-itself (*pour soi*). **Being-in-itself** is its own foundation. It is founded upon itself and not upon any other thing. It is self-sufficient, uncreated and unchanging. It has always been and will always be. Being-in-itself is an object which has the determined essence, like mountains, stones, or chairs, "all this is not human" and "unconscious being" (Busch, 1990, p. 23) and it is "solid and massif" (Warnock, 1970, p. 94). It is characterized as what it is, as being subjected to the principle of identity. Sartre claims that being-in-itself is full, a fullness of being without lack that makes changes possible, and it is "as full [...] as an egg" (Sartre, RP, p. 62)<sup>1</sup>. Being-for-itself is not its own foundation. It does not exist fundamentally. It borrows its being from being-in-itself and is entirely dependent on something other than itself (Cox, 2009). It is not an object with a determined nature. It is the subject or human consciousness like the stream, winding its way toward possibilities, a human being making himself in whatever way he chooses. He won't cease to open and expand himself toward a possibility of being; he will never be able to fully achieve that possibility, for new possibilities always arise before a man dies. Therefore, as long as he is alive, a human being is never subjected to the principle of identity.

The discussion of two modes of being demonstrates to us how man exists in this world. While being-in-itself is an object always being what it is, being-for-itself is a subject, as a totally free being, never being what he is, and in being what he is not he continues to open, expand and create himself toward future possibilities. This freedom is absolute, and man (a human being) is condemned to be free.

#### 5. Edward Hopper's Artistic Style

##### 5.1. Form, Design and Light

Hopper had a natural gift for operating on solid forms. His forms are massive, severely simplified, and without unnecessary details. The natural strength of the paintings are there striking you when you first

see them; however, the strength is not on the surface, but in the elements of form, space, color, and design. They make the entire picture so much more powerful.

His design has certain marked characteristics. It is built largely on straight lines. The overall shape is quite often a horizontal rectangle. Horizontals provide the foundation of the structure and they are crossed and interrupted by strong verticals. The horizontals and verticals are interacting with each other to create the design. The angularity is typically evident and pronounced. As Alfred Barr has written, these horizontals “are like the edge of a stage beyond which drama unfolds” (cited in Museum, *Edward Hopper*, 1933, p. 14). The outstanding example of this horizontality is *Early Sunday Morning* (1930). A more complex kind of design is the horizontal wedge form, constructed in three dimensions, cutting across the picture and receding in depth, and the clearest example of the wedge design is *Nighthawks* (1942). Another development is in the use of diagonals. He selected a viewpoint from above the center of interest and at an angle with the central mass to produce a basic diagonal composition. *Office at Night* (1940) is a good example, and it develops further. The viewpoint is from above, and the main structural lines are all diagonal to the four edges of the picture, and the angles are all oblique or acute instead of right angles. The picture is a closely knit diagonal design, still based on straight lines and their interactions, but avoiding obvious rectangularity. Hopper’s design is a great achievement, the strongest, the most thoughtfully planned, and most fully realized in modern painting (Goodrich, 1979, pp. 141-143).

Over the years, Hopper’s style softened not at all, but it became more solid and powerful. *High Noon* (1949) is almost pure geometry, with dominant straight lines, acute angles, the emphatic sunlight and shadow, the extreme simplification and utter clarity. *Rooms by the Sea* (1951) is even more geometric: an empty room with an open doorway looking out on blue water, sunlight falling in a diagonal pattern on the wall and floor. Then later he produced a more vigorous angular work *Second-Story Sunlight* (1960). Hopper said “What I wanted to do was to paint sunlight on the side of a house” (Goodrich, 1989, p. 31; Levin, 1979, p. 2).

Light plays an essential role in Hopper’s paintings. Light is from outdoors and from indoors, natural and artificial. It is an active element in the pictorial concept. As Sheena Wagstaff analyzes, Hopper’s own depiction of light can be roughly grouped into three categories: the golden reflections of radiant sunlight, paintings such as *Cape Cod Morning* (1950), *Morning Sun* (1952), *Hotel by a Railroad* (1952), *Office in a Small City* (1953), and *New York Office* (1962); the unyielding brightness of electric light, paintings such as *Hotel Room* (1931) and *New York Movie* (1939); and the dazzling rectangular lightfalls matching each of the two figures in *Summer in the City* (1949) and its companion piece *Excursion into Philosophy* (1959) (Wagstaff, 2004, p. 26). Each appears increasingly as a geometric form. It takes the shape of a rectangle, parallelogram, rhomboid or trapezoid that always invokes an imagination of a window or a door – the aperture that separates inside from outside.

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<sup>1</sup>RP, in this paper is the abbreviation of the novel by Jean-Paul Sartre *The Reprieve*.

Sunlight that shines on the city's stone and concrete structures simplifies the stone and structures themselves; it turns them into a kind of "massive monoliths"; it casts heavy shadows that have a somber, brooding effect. The patterns of light and shade created by Hopper are definite, taking the shape of rectangle and parallelogram, acting as an integral element of design. "Light is never allowed to break up forms, [...] rather, it defines and models them" (Goodrich, 1989, p. 113). It is shining and moving within the borderlines. Light in shapes reveals the strength of an inner world, the strength of existence, the power of thought and contemplation.

Light in Hopper's night scenes becomes a principal actor. The interplay of lights from various sources, in various colors and intensities creates pictorial drama. In *Office at Night* (1940), Hopper used three sources of light: "indirect lighting from above, the desk light and the light coming through the window." The cool lighting from above pervades the room; the light through the window is a warm secondary light from a street lamp. It falls on the wall in the back, it is almost painting white on white, and it also makes a prominence of the edge of the filing cabinet by the girl. The light on the wall emphasizes the wall's "angular thrust" (Levin, 1980, p. 60), which creates a very oddly shaped room and makes the viewer unable to position himself and locate his view. Here, the viewer confronts the players' psychic intensity.

Light falling on figures in the rooms reveals and at the same time isolates them. The shapes of rectangle, parallelogram, rhomboid, or trapezoid on the walls, on the floors, and on beds invoke the windows or doors. This architecture aperture is set between the inside and outside, literally and metaphorically, representing the relations of emptiness and possibility, of within and without (Wagstaff, 2004, p. 29). These compositional figures of abstract forms of light share the occupancy of a room with the human characters. They interact with each other. In *Summer in the City* (1949) and its companion piece *Excursion into Philosophy* (1959), the light shines on them, reveals them, and at the same time intensifies their self-meditations.

The self-meditations of Hopper's figures in oil paintings indicate the search of the inner capacities of human beings, the nothingness in Sartre's existential freedom that gives infinite possibilities for them to think, to act, and to project to the future identity. They may never cease to open themselves to the opportunities that arise always before they die.

## **6. Women's Inward Desires, the Individual Agency as Being-For-Itself**

### **6.1. Hopper's Women, the Mind in Motion**

The poet and critic John Hollander has pointed out, "light playing inside a room is an ancient metaphor for thought in a human head" (cited in Wagstaff, "The Elation of Sunlight," 2004, p. 26). Hopper's figures of light interacting with the figures of human beings in the light within the space of a room reveals the flow of human consciousness, and the motion of human thought. He depicts the inward reality rather than the outward reality of the subject. He is concerned with the state of mind of the figure in his paintings, which yearns for the longed-for satisfaction and brilliance of inwardness that cannot be found in interaction with most

people. Wagstaff states that “Edward Hopper offers us a modern metaphysics, a philosophy of being and knowing” (Wagstaff, 2004, p. 27). What Hopper pursues in his paintings is always the inward motion of the human being. While his figure is waiting, reading a book or a tourist guidebook, looking deeply out the window into sunlight lost in thought, or dancing on the stage, she is expecting someone to come, arriving at a new town, longing for new possibilities outside the room, anticipating certain changes, and walking across the borderline to the unknown. Hopper loves the feeling of moving on, of stepping into the uncertainty, of seeking the knowledge of himself, the self of whom he has imperfect knowledge, and he desires to search for the identity of this self.

## **6.2. Silent Spaces – The Sense of Moving on**

Artistically, Hopper’s design of paintings has distinctive characteristics: his application of straight lines, the horizontal rectangle as the foundation of the structure, the interaction of the verticals and horizontals, the evident use of angles, oblique and acute, extreme simplification and clarity, all bring the sense of silence and stillness. His figures in the paintings are speechless and frozen, enhancing silence and stillness. J. A. Ward (1985) describes Hopper’s paintings as silent and still. Hopper has given more emphasis to buildings that are formidable and uniquely silent. That he likes the massive lighthouses, exceptionally large houses, and the thick masonry of turn-of-the-century doorways, walls, and window frames intensifies the stillness. However, his “silence is more active than passive,” suggesting tenseness and strain rather than “calmness, tranquility, or placidity” (p. 169), suggesting motion rather than quiescence. David Anfam came to an understanding from W.H. Auden’s remark in Henry James’s *American Scene* (1907), “Outside of fairy tales, I know of no book in which things so often and naturally become persons” (cited in Anfam, “Wholeness,” 2004, p. 41), “buildings even speak”. Hopper gave his fundamental assertion “I was always interested in architecture, but the editors wanted people waving their arms”. By Hopper’s words, Anfam believed that “Architecture, not people, should have a voice. Architecture has been envisaged as a model of human space since at least the time of Vitruvius, the Roman architect” (p. 41). Hopper’s architectural spaces of blank walls, vacant windows, and dramatic facades can be seen as the organs of human beings, and buildings are silent, but they actually convey messages. Hopper’s people in these spaces seem frozen and speechless while reading, waiting, and expecting; however, they are in deep contemplation, dreaming, and their thought is moving. To Hopper “silence is action” (Anfam, 2004, p. 45). Outwardly, these silent spaces and human figures are silent and still, but inwardly, they are in motion. The analyses of the following paintings of Hopper will seek to find the state of mind in motion of the portrayed women figures in the silent spaces.

## **6.3. Outwardly Still, Inwardly Active**

### **6.3.1. Women Figures, Seated, Standing, Leaning toward the Window**

Hopper’s women figures in their silent and still spaces, are usually seated, standing, leaning forward toward the window, all are looking deep out the window and deep into the

sunlight. Placed in different places, in different poses, nude or half dressed, these women are in their introspection, meditation, and solitude. They are dreaming of the exhilaration of active life in a new town, perhaps expecting the excitement of seeing the man they saw in a dream last night, imagining the beautiful life out there, or projecting their future. These figures are usually posited alone, but they are not depicted as lonely. Being in outward solitude, they are allowed to enjoy the inward freedom to desire, to imagine, and to act. The dreaming, imagining, expecting are indications of women's desires, which display their interior possibility or individual agency. Desire is an act that turns women from being an object to being a subject, connoting women's ability of self-determining and self-possession. Artistically, Hopper's women figures are often painted with "curiously bland and anonymous facial features," as if it is the artist's intention to remove from the face its predictable centrality (Tomasic, 2001, p. 41), the means to express the unfulfilled desires and possibilities that are uncertain. Hopper's type of women was identified in 1948 by James Thrall Soby, a curator and trustee of the Museum of Modern Art, as "the hard, muscular girl, sturdy of leg and breast, bulging in her clothes... forthright in her sexy reality" (p. 38). This suggests the ability of solitude, freedom, aggressiveness and being undefined.

In *City Sunlight* (1954), a woman is seated in a room alone (see Figure 1). There are three large windows, with no visible glass, only window shades rolled up high, leaving the window wide open. They are in clear geometric shapes of squares. The room is on an upper floor. Through the open window, the blue sky is seen toward the far left of it. The outside and inside of the room is rather quiet. The lone woman with blond hair, wearing a pink slip, is seated beside a table, turning herself toward an open window, gazing musingly out the window into the sunlight, contemplating and introspecting. Full of wonders, she might ask herself whether this might be the first day in a new life. An empty chair suggests that she is living alone, no longer with a partner. Her life will have a total change in this new city, a city of hope. She believes that in this city there is something that awaits her and she will step into this unknown place, but with possibilities, to explore for signs of light for life by herself.



Figure 1. *City Sunlight* 1954 Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C

Another seated woman is in *Morning Sun* (1952). Hopper puts this seated woman in the center of the canvas, on a single bed near the window (see Figure 2). The roofs of the buildings outside the window on the left are in red bricks and in geometrical shapes of rectangle, and the window, the sunlight on the wall, and the bed of the room are in parallelogram, which create stability and stillness. The city is still early in the morning and no noise of cars and buses has started yet, so that the city is in extreme tranquility. The woman is in her pink slip, obviously the night gown, with her blond hair

tied up in a bun, sitting up in a bed, gazing out the window in meditation. The unframed window is getting larger and clearer, allowing more sunlight into the room, onto the woman. Morning is a time that renders more opportunities and possibilities to people. The viewer has the impression that the woman harbors great hope, and expectations. Her bland eyes are focusing on something that is far beyond the window realm, something that is undefined and unnamable, to which she wishes to surrender. She may ask the same question as the City Sunlight woman asks: Is this the first day of her new life? This woman is directly facing the window, and sunlight has shown more assurance of her desire of stepping out into the exciting and adventurous life in this new city.



Figure 2. Morning Sun 1952 Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio

*Western Motel* (1957) portrays a woman sitting on the motel bed waiting, with her packed suitcase by the bedside, her overcoat on the sofa arm, herself dressed up ready to leave (see Figure 3). Visible through the window, there are the low range of hills and higher plateau lying in shadows, which look stationary. Everything about the room seems hermetically silent and massively stable. The plate glass window is just one piece in the shape of a large rectangle, and the orange curtains are straight down. The double bed and the sunlight on the side of the wall are in the other geometrical shapes of parallelogram and trapezoid. The colors are deep and strong, red, purple, brown, yellow, and green. The entire picture is an impeccable organization of Hopper's vertical and horizontal style, and it achieves its sense of weight and monumentality. Within this silent, stationary space, the woman figure sits straight up very formally and appears a little stiff. However, her outward pose and stare demonstrate a strong inward act, the imaginative future of being a subjective self. Her pose is different from other of Hopper's women gazing outside the window into the distance. This woman stares back toward the hidden viewer, the implied woman's companion or possibly the artist himself. Her stare is open, vigorous, positive, and interactive. Her command of herself and her retrospection connote a self-determination that Hopper appears to admire.



Figure 3. Western Motel 1957 Yale University Art Gallery



Women in the following pictures are posed standing. Two women are inside the room and they look deeply out the window in introspection, and solitude, and two are standing at the doorway and they look far into the distance, into the sunlight longing for new possibilities.

*Morning in a City* (1944) portrays a woman figure standing in a small hotel room, facing the cool morning sunlight (see Figure 4). The single bed in the corner is unmade, so obviously it is early in the morning. The morning sunlight on the wall is still pale, and the blue sky is still in thin mist. The building outside through the lower window of the room shows part of its top floor and two windows that are in exact shapes of rectangles. There seems to be no one living in there or people in there have not got up yet. The building sends out the message of stillness and quietness and this morning city is extremely tranquil. The standing woman looks like she is just out of the bath holding her towel in front of her, a little frightened, yet with more assured determination to look for new possibilities, and in the silent space, she is gazing out the window toward the sunlight in complete contemplation, entirely absorbed in her self-meditation. She has light brown hair over the shoulder line, nude. As in *Morning Sun*, the woman is portrayed alone, and the viewer has a sense of sharing the scene with an unseen figure. This is the understood voyeur. However, the woman is not aware of being seen, for she is totally sunk into an imaginative dreaming and longing for a probable new life in the new city. The act of dreaming and longing is the strong inward desire that the woman is willing to fulfill, and the freedom to act displays her interior possibilities or individual agency. Her curiously bland facial expression, hard body and big breasts add the power of her ability of solitude.



Figure 4. *Morning in a City* 1944 Williams College Museum of Art

*A Woman in the Sun* (1961) like *Morning in a City* shows us a standing woman in a room facing the window (see Figure 5). This woman is a bit closer to nature than the big-city woman as the top of rolling hills can be captured through the left open window and the fresh air breezes in through the front window. This moment unable to fall asleep, she gets out of the bed to smoke a cigarette. She holds the cigarette, but she forgets to light it as she forgets herself in meditation and introspection. The natural environment provides the silence, the power for action, the ability to grasp the freedom to act and imagine. Facing the sunlight, she is lowering her gaze a bit as if looking into herself, pursuing her thoughts and dream, which leads her far from here and now. The nude lady is completely not aware of being voyeuristically observed since she is totally immersed in future projection. The hard, muscular girl, with sturdy legs and breasts, has a strong inner desire, but this desire goes beyond sexual desire, and the way her body is portrayed by Hopper indicates the desire for the ability of self-determination and self-possession.



Figure 5. A Woman in the Sun 1961 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

The following two standing women wearing red and blue sexy long dresses step out of their rooms, the enclosed spaces, and look out into the larger spaces for their dreams and fantasies, looking far into the blue sky and vast land which embodies various opportunities and possibilities.

The lady in *Carolina Morning* (1955) has a sexy curved figure, protruding breasts, fleshy arms and sturdy legs, and pretty pink face (see Figure 6). She is wearing a large red sun hat, matching beautifully with her long red skirt. She is holding her arms crossed, quietly leaning on the wooden doorframe. Her eyes are drawn into the far distance, into the vast blue sky and the clear land. She is standing alone, dreaming, and fantasizing what life is waiting for her. She is not passively waiting and accepting what is to come, but positively searching for her new life, and a new identity. Her beautiful, happy, and cheerful life is all in the future projected by herself alone. The lonely figure is demonstrated together with this lonely house, which stands in the middle of the large empty space, under the clear blue sky, conveying a message of peace, silence, and stillness, free from disturbance. The horizontal line at the bottom of the sky coupled with the vertical lines of the house achieves the sense of stability. Silence is action for Hopper. The larger silent space foresees the red lady's eager move inside her desirable body and free mind. Early morning in Carolina, the red lady is waking up fresh and confident, ready to walk out of the old life and welcome the new one. All possible wonderful events, activities, and hopes are gestated in future uncertainties.



Figure 6. Carolina Morning 1955 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

The next lady, standing in the doorway in a long blue dress, is integrated amazingly with the entire painting, the blue sky, the white house, and the red chimney (see Figure 7). Isolated, the house is standing in the middle of the vast land in great solitude. The isolated figure in the isolated house is matching the state of the house, being in her solitude. This is Hopper's famous painting *High Noon* (1949). Its style is solid and powerful. *High Noon* is mostly pure geometry, with dominant straight lines, acute angles, the emphatic sunlight and shadow, the extreme simplification and utter clarity. As

blue, deep and vast as the ocean, the sky is cooling down the entire space, and the white house against the blue sky and under the high noon sunlight looks even whiter, and the purity and clarity add to the stillness of the painting. The red chimney, however, is a touch of fire beautifully decorating the blue space, and delicately sparkling in the cool air, pretty much reflecting the active thought and wild dream of this young blond in blue. The color blue of the dress and of the high heel shoes correspond to the color blue of the sky, delivering the sense of quietness and solitude of the girl. Yet her heart is as open and free as her open robe, and as her gesture of the hand touching the exposed breast. Standing out in the doorway and tilting her head toward the sunlight demonstrates a welcoming attitude of her new beginning of the day. Her inward yearning for moving forward and engaging herself into the community life seems irresistible.



Figure 7. High Noon 1949 The Dayton Art Institute, Ohio

Hopper's women sit, stand, and then lean forward. He had the woman in *Cape Cod Morning* (1950) leaning forward toward the large bay window (see Figure 8). Part of the lone white house is revealed by the side of the forest, and the densely lined up trees on the left are standing solemn and still against the blue sky, with no gleaming of the fields but some strip of light across the grass and on tree tops. It is a new silent morning at Cape Cod, and in her silent house the woman is looking out the window to the far distance dreaming and expecting. No one knows exactly what she is looking at, for the object of her attention is out of our sight, and we can witness only its effects, and how the woman's pose manifests her attraction to it. That the woman leans toward the window and gazes looks "as if at the prow of a ship" (Tomasic, 2001, p. 26), steering to a destination beyond the picture. Hopper quite often locates his "focus on something out of sight" (Marker, 1990, p. 19), which is confirmed by Mark Strand who added that "it seems there is always something beyond the picture that works its influence on those within the picture" (1994, p. 34). The external events beyond the picture stir up the internal events of imagination, meditation, and future dreaming. Her thought is transported, and her soul transcended. Hopper once said he loved the feeling of moving on when traveling. It is believed that this moving on itself takes him to meet things unfamiliar, unexpected, unknown, and uncertain. Rather than the fear that these unknowns might have brought to him, they brought surprises, exhilaration, thrill, and hopes. This leaning forward, gazing out the window is signaling an urge of moving on as well as a state of moving on. Josephine Nivison (Hopper's wife) noted in her diary that Hopper believed this Cape Cod Morning (Bay Window) would be better than High Noon. And later he mentioned this painting as one he liked "very much" (Levin, 2001, p. 334). Hopper told Katharine Kuh in an interview:

“It comes nearer to what I feel than some of my other paintings” (Kuh 2000, p. 134). Hopper expressed the same thought to Morse in 1960 that: “It comes nearer to my thought about such things than many of the others...” (Morse, p. 63). Hopper’s paintings are a search for his inner life, and this inner life results in his personal vision of the world, of which he has imperfect knowledge. Therefore, the state of moving himself on to the unknown world sounds rather exciting and fulfilling. Edward Hopper, as stated by Wagstaff, offers us “a philosophy of being and knowing” (2004, p. 27). The state of moving on makes the search for new knowledge and new self possible.



Figure 8. Cape Cod Morning 1950 National Museum of American Art  
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

## 7. Conclusion

Edward Hopper, as an artist with a lone personality, has a great interest in human condition in this modern age. Around 1940s, when Sartre came to US giving lectures in New York, he was quite informed about this man’s existential ideas by his New York circle of artists and intellectuals. The atheist Sartre’s doctrine is to make human life possible, to make it possible not through the power of God or any other superpower, but through human beings themselves, who are absolutely free to make their choices and decisions. The affinities and influence can be revealed through Hopper’s oil paintings of women, searching for human being’s inner strength, the power that pushes themselves forever forward. Hopper’s women figures are seated, standing, and leaning forward in their contemplation or solitude, all looking deeply out the window or into the far distance, focusing on something beyond the picture, and they move forward in their active desiring, dreaming, imagining, and longing for future possibilities. Their outward silent spaces foresee and reinforce their inward action.

Women figures who are seated, standing, or leaning forward are looking out the windows toward sunlight into the far distance in retrospection. They are performing much more than just imagining or anticipating the future activities they might get involved in. They are demonstrating their strong desires (sexual and beyond) for self-determination through their own perceptions and actions, exhibiting their ability of solitude, freedom, aggressiveness and the undefined. This ability is the individual agency of a human being, as Sartre calls in his existential term, the being-for-itself, the continuous inward capability to move oneself forward and project oneself far into the future. These women’s minds are in great motion.

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