# The Wall Study Guide

## The Wall by Jean-Paul Sartre

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# Introduction

"The Wall," first published in 1937 and collected in the volume *The Wall and Other Stories* (1939), is the best known of Jean-Paul Sartre's five short stories. Written prior to Sartre's activism in political causes, "The Wall" was Sartre's personal response to the Spanish Civil War; he wrote it during a period when he felt hopeless about the growing forces of fascism in Spain. The story also outlines Sartre's philosophy of existentialism. "The Wall," along with Sartre's existentialist novel *Nausea,* helped solidify Sartre's literary reputation.

In "The Wall," Sartre chronicles the story of a political prisoner condemned to execution by fascist officers. The knowledge of his death prompts the protagonist to give up on life before he is even killed. At the time of its publication, *The Wall and Other Stories* sparked some debate because of the negative content—including graphic sexuality and foul language—of the stories. Critics since have argued that these elements lend credibility to Sartre's philosophical ideas.

Throughout his long career as a writer and philosopher, Sartre produced numerous texts, yet he never again returned to the short fiction format. Critics have paid remarkably little attention to "The Wall." Interested scholars, however, have generally responded enthusiastically. "The Wall," however, remains important to the Sartre scholar as well as the general reader because of its deft exploration of Sartre's philosophies as well as its sheer narrative force. It is a story to be appreciated on multiple levels.

# Author Biography

Jean-Paul Sartre was born in Paris in 1905. His father died when he was only a year old, and shortly afterward he and his mother went to live with his grandfather. He recalled his childhood in his autobiography Les Mots, in particular the passion for literature that his tough grandfather instilled in him.

By the time Sartre finished high school, he wanted to pursue a career as a writer; unfortunately, his stepfather insisted he become a teacher. He attended L'Ecole Normale Superieur as a philosophy student. There he met Simone de Beauvoir, with whom he maintained a lifelong personal and professional relationship. A writer as well, she had a deep influence on all of Sartre's future work and ideas.

During the 1930s, Sartre taught philosophy at a preparatory school for high school students. He also went to Berlin to study the philosophy of Edmund Husserl. Sartre's early philosophical works, such as *Psychology of the Imagination* and *Transcendence of the Ego,* reflect the influence of Husserl's ideas about phenomenology-a method of analyzing the structure of consciousness.

In 1939, Sartre published a collection of five short stories entitled *The Wall and Other Stories*. In these works, Sartre explores his philosophical ideas of "bad faith," or what happens when people deny moral responsibility for their behavior. Bad faith involves lying to oneself, not taking action, or having no real sense of purpose in life.

Sartre served in the French army during World War II. He was taken prisoner by the Germans and held captive for nine months. While imprisoned, he began writing his major philosophical work, *Being and Nothingness,* which outlines the concept of existentialism.

After he escaped from the prison camp, he returned to his teaching job in occupied France. Along with other French intellectuals, he formed a short-lived resistance group. He also wrote articles for underground newspapers as well as the play *The Flies,* which contained a strong anti-Nazi message. In 1945, he quit teaching and founded a leftist journal called *Modern Times*. By this time, he was well known for his philosophical ideas.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Sartre became a Marxist and participated in political demonstrations that condemned capitalism and Western democratic institutions. In 1964, Sartre was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, but he rejected it on political grounds. He supported the Cuban Revolution and a paralyzing uprising of Parisian students in 1968.

By 1977, however, Sartre had forsaken Marxism. He died of a lung ailment on April 15, 1980. Today, Sartre is best known for his philosophical writings and is regarded as one of the most important influences on twentieth century literature and philosophy.

# Plot Summary

The story opens with the narrator, Pablo Ibbieta, attending his own trial. He has been captured by the Falangists and is being tried as an opponent and war criminal along with several of his compatriots. When Pablo goes on trial, the judges demand to know the location of his colleague, Ramon Gris. Pablo claims that he does not know Ramon's whereabouts.

While awaiting the verdict, Pablo shares his cell with two other men: Tom, a member of the International Brigades; and Juan, whose only crime is having an anarchist brother. Pablo and Tom believe that they will be executed, but that Juan will be set free. However, they are informed that all three men will be executed the following morning.

Juan stops protesting his innocence; shocked, he just sits down and turns gray. Tom tries to comfort him but is rebuffed. Tom begins to talk about his experiences in the International Brigades. Pablo realizes that Tom is simply talking to avoid thinking about death.

A Belgian doctor and two guards come to the cell to wait with the men until the morning. Pablo stares at a lamp, but then suddenly comes to, feeling as if he was being crushed under an enormous weight. The doctor asks Pablo if he is cold. Pablo realizes that he is not cold at all, though he should be. When he touches his hair and shirt, he realizes he is sweating.

Juan dreads his execution, but Pablo hardly thinks about that anymore. Pablo feels irritated with Tom's constant talking. Tom urinates on himself without realizing it.

Pablo tries to think about something other than death. He thinks about his past life, but none of it seems important to him anymore. The doctor offers to give a message to the men's loved ones. Nevertheless, he feels utterly alone. In fact, he has begun the process of disconnecting from the world and himself in preparation for his imminent execution.

When the time for the executions arrive, Juan starts shouting that he doesn't want to die. As he cries, Tom points out that daylight is almost breaking. Soon, the men hear shots fired in the courtyard. Then the soldiers come and take Juan and Tom away, but they leave Pablo in the cell for an hour. Pablo wants to scream, but he is determined to remain calm and "decent."

Finally, soldiers take him to a room. Officers try to intimidate him, which Pablo finds absurd and amusing. Once again, they question him about the whereabouts of Ramon Gris. They offer him a deal: give up Ramon and he will be allowed to go free. Pablo decides not to tell.

Later he decides to lie to them and tells them that Ramon is hiding in the cemetery. Thirty minutes later, one of the officers comes back. He orders the guard to take Pablo

to the courtyard and assigns his case to a regular, not military, tribunal. Pablo does not understand why he is not going to be shot right away. He spends the rest of the day with his fellow prisoners.

That evening he sees a baker he knows. The baker tells him that the Falangists captured Ramon. Apparently, Ramon left his safehouse due to an argument and went to hide in the cemetery. The Falangists found him in the gravediggers' shack, just as Pablo told them. Pablo passes out. When he comes to he is sitting on the ground. He is laughing so hard that tears come to his eyes.

# Summary

Narrated in the first person by a prisoner of war, Pablo Ibbieta, the story begins abruptly as he faces his sentencing hearing. He joins other prisoners in a bright room and one by one they are brought up to a table where four military men question them about their name and occupation. Sometimes they ask if the prisoner was involved in the sabotage of munitions, or for their whereabouts during the attack. Ibbieta notes that the men do not seem to be listening to the answers, but write notes on the desk in front of them.

The men ask a man Ibbieta knows as Tom if he has been involved with the International Brigade. He does not deny it because they have already found the papers in his coat. A very young man, known to Ibbieta as Juan, assures the men that his brother was the anarchist and that he himself has never been involved in politics. He reminds them that his brother is already dead before a guard silences him and takes him away.

When it is Pablo Ibbieta's turn, they ask him if he knows the location of a man named Raymond Gris. Ibbieta replies that he does not know Gris' location. The men declare that Ibbieta hid this man in his house for a period of thirteen days. Ibbieta denies it. He is taken into the corridor where Tom and Juan have been waiting with two guards. Tom asks one of the guards whether that was the cross-examination or the sentence and is told that it was the sentence. The guard informs him that their sentences will be read in their cell.

The cell is one of the hospital cellars, a constantly cold and drafty place where the men shiver endlessly. Ibbieta thinks about how he had spent the last five days in a cell in a monastery where he was locked up alone. Juan is silent, but Tom speaks Spanish well. Ibbieta describes the cell, which contains only a bench and four mats. He and Tom discuss the fact that they think they are doomed, but imagine that the kid will escape a death sentence. Tom describes how they kill prisoners in Saragossa by running over them with trucks to save on bullets. He says that they enjoy seeing the men suffer.

Ibbieta notices that he can see daylight coming in through the four air holes with a round opening in the ceiling. He imagines that this was normally covered by a trap and used to unload coal to heat the hospital. On the floor of the cell remains a large pile of coal dust from the time before the hospital was evacuated due to the war. Tom complains about the cold and tries to exercise to warm himself. Ibbieta describes him as carrying too much fat and imagines the bullets sinking into his flesh at execution. He too suffers from the cold.

Two *falangistas* arrive with a major. The major asks the guard for the prisoners' names. The major then informs the men that Steinbock and the others, as well, have all been sentenced to death. He tells them that they will be shot the following morning. Juan speaks up, saying that there must have been some mistake. The major assures him that his name is on the list indicating a death sentence. He then informs the men that a Belgian doctor will be spending the night with them.

Ibbieta admits to himself that though he feels he should pity Juan, he does not like the boy. He describes Juan as suffering and disfigured. He believes that the boy would never be young again even if they were to let him go. Ibbieta describes how the boy's skin has gone gray as he stares at the ground. Juan will not let himself be comforted when Tom attempts to reassure him.

Tom begins to talk, not waiting for anyone to answer. He tells them that he had killed six people. After a while, Tom stops talking and his face and hands go gray like those of the boy's. Ibbieta realizes night has begun. He can see a star through the opening in the ceiling.

The doctor arrives and offers his assistance to them in their time of need. Ibbieta asks him what he has come for. The doctor offers cigarettes, which no one accepts. Ibbieta confronts the doctor about his lack of genuine mercy, and tells him that he saw him with the fascists in the barracks when he was arrested. Ibbieta falls silent then, not caring to continue.

One of the guards brings over a lamp to light the doctor's cigarette. The doctor checks Juan's pulse, then asks Ibbieta if it seems cold in the cell. Ibbieta tells him that he is not cold, as he realizes that he is covered in sweat. He understands that this is his body's reaction to fear, to the knowledge of impending death. He is momentarily furious at the doctor for being so alive.

Juan asks the doctor if it hurts when you die. The doctor assures him that it is all over quickly. Juan asks if sometimes they have to shoot twice and the doctor corrects himself, noting that it only happens when they miss the vital organs. Ibbieta thinks about Juan's fear of suffering in contrast to his own emotions. Ibbieta rises to see the sky through the small holes. He notices that this time it does not evoke memories and returns to his seat.

Tom begins talking in a low voice to no one in particular, each not wanting to look at the other to see his own suffering mirrored. Tom talks about the details of the execution, trying to understand the scenario to gain some control over it. He describes the feelings in detail, standing against the wall, the pains that he has had already where his body anticipates the wounds. Tom describes the difficulty in comprehending the cessation of one's own existence.

Ibbieta notices a foul smell about Tom. Ibbieta confesses that he is glad that he has no connection to either Tom or Juan. If he were to suffer with Raymond Gris, he would perhaps feel more. He describes how days ago he and Tom had nothing in common, but now look like twins because they share the same fate and will die together.

The three prisoners watch the doctor. They do not care to interact with him, but rather stare at him, envying his aliveness. The doctor attempts to comfort Juan, caressing his neck, but the boy grabs his hand away and looks at it strangely before biting into it. The Belgian doctor pulls away in horror. Ibbieta laughs. He describes how he imagines his execution in detail repeatedly throughout the night. He decides not to sleep so that

morning does not take him by surprise. His mind is flooded with memories. He thinks about how he took his life so seriously, as if he were immune to death. He imagines his life like a bag in front of him that has already been tied closed though everything inside it is unfinished.

The doctor offers to send a message back to loved ones. Ibbieta refuses. He thinks about Concha, of whom he had spoken of to Tom the night before. He thinks about his love for her from which he now feels so detached. Seeing Tom touching the bench with peculiar interest, he notices that how everything looks different now, less solid. The Belgian announces that it is three-thirty in the morning.

Juan continues suffering and Ibbieta realizes that he wants to die cleanly. Time slides by quickly and soon it is morning. They can hear shots at regular intervals in the courtyard.

A lieutenant and four soldiers arrive to escort Tom and Juan away. Juan has to be carried under the armpits because he cannot stand. Ibbieta is told to wait for an hour for them to retrieve him. He continues to listen to the shots fired.

An hour later the soldiers reappear and lead Ibbieta to a room on the first floor where two officers sit smoking cigars. They ask him again where Raymond Gris is. He replies that he does not know. One of the officers pulls Ibbieta close and pinches his arm, trying to intimidate him. He asks him again and Ibbieta replies that he thought he was in Madrid. The men decide to give him fifteen minutes to think about his options before asking him one last time. They lock him in the laundry and threaten to shoot him on the spot if he continues to lie. Ibbieta understands the game. He thinks about how Gris is hiding with cousins just outside the city. He is sure that he will not reveal the man's whereabouts unless he is tortured. He remembers how his friendship with Gris died earlier that morning along with his love for Concha and his desire to live. Ibbieta laughs when he realizes that he must be stubborn. The officers return and ask him again. Ibbieta replies that Gris is hidden in the cemetery in a vault or the gravedigger's shack. He thinks about this joke, how they will run around and give each other orders and return even angrier when they do not find Gris. He finds the whole thing incredibly funny.

When the officer returns, he orders Ibbieta to be taken to the courtyard with the others. He informs him that after the military operations, a regular court will decide his fate. Ibbieta questions whether or not they are still going to shoot him. The officer tells him that they will not. The soldiers lead Ibbieta to a courtyard filled with prisoners: women, children, and old men.

After some time he recognizes Garcia, the baker, who is shocked to see him alive. Ibbieta asks why he was arrested, knowing he had nothing to do with politics. Garcia admits that he does not know and then tells him that they got Gris. Ibbieta begins to shake, asking when it happened. Garcia tells him that it happened that morning because Gris messed up. He explains that Gris had gotten into an argument with his cousin and because he did not want to owe anything to anyone, he decided to hide in the cemetery. When the guards found him in the gravedigger's shack, he shot at them

and they got him. Ibbieta's world spins and he sits down on the ground, laughing so hard that he begins to cry.

## Analysis

Pablo Ibbieta, who has been taken as a prisoner of war presumably by the Spanish army, narrates the story in the first person. His voice is very casual and intimate, relating the details of his experience along with many of his thoughts and feelings about it. Because he is able to so accurately and realistically describe each moment of existence, the terror of his imprisonment is shocking in its vibrancy and impact.

With the first sentence, the narrator has been born into this new world, which he describes as large and bright enough to hurt his eyes. This immediately establishes him as being in a vulnerable position. With the description Ibbieta provides of the inquisition, there is no question about the fairness of the proceedings. The officials do not even appear to be listening to the prisoners' replies; there are no lawyers or judges, no jury of their peers.

When asked, Ibbieta indicates that he has no knowledge of the whereabouts of Raymond Gris. The prisoners are then taken to their cell, which is actually one of the hospital cellars. The hospital had been evacuated because of the war and the military seized it for their purposes. It is interesting to note that though the cell is very cold, Ibbieta much prefers this cell to his previous cell at the monastery where he was locked up alone. It is important to recognize the small hole in the ceiling that lets in the sky as the crack through which Ibbieta will slip. The hole is there accidentally because the cage was never replaced.

Though his cellmates are not friends, Ibbieta prefers their company because it allows him to remain hard and detached. In describing Tom, he imagines in detail the way that the bullets would sink into his excess flesh. This strikes Ibbieta as somehow more repulsive than if Tom were a thin man. When the *falangistas* arrive to read the sentence, the major does not even bother to read each man's name, but rather lumps them together and tells them they will be shot in the morning. Neither Tom nor Ibbieta seem surprised by the verdict, but Juan is destroyed. Ibbieta describes the changes that occur to Juan's face and body with disgust, "It wouldn't have been too hard to have a little pity for him but pity disgusts me, or rather it horrifies me" (p.183). When Juan rejects Tom's offer of comfort, Ibbieta implies that Tom was acting more out of a need to distract himself and pass the time than out of genuine mercy.

When the Belgian doctor arrives, the division between the living and the almost dead becomes quite apparent. The doctor makes little effort to comfort the men and they seem uninterested in his services. This night, one of the guards brings over a lamp, so that there is some light that was not there before. This can be seen as symbolizing hope, even though it does not seem to last longer than a moment before Ibbieta is sucked back down into comprehending his impending death. The doctor soon realizes that despite the extreme cold, the prisoners are sweating. Ibbieta interprets this as a

sign of terror and mentally accuses the doctor of performing some scientific experiment on them.

Ibbieta realizes that he is no longer comforted by his memories, as he had been the previous nights in prison. The sky brings him nothing and he finds this lack of emotion a relief. The detail with which the two men discuss their impending execution creates a palpable discomfort. The narrative and pacing of Ibbieta's thoughts are exceedingly naturalistic and realistic. He is disgusted by the thought that these three men who previously had no connection and nothing in common, now strongly resemble each other. He imagines that they are bound together by death.

The men keep their eyes on the Belgian doctor, examining the way he interacted with his body. They began to notice a difference between their detachment and the way the doctor seemed so alive and connected to his physical form. The doctor approaches Juan and puts his hand on the boy's head and neck to comfort him. Juan initially allows his neck to be patted, but then pulls away sharply and grabs the man's hand. Ibbieta describes how the boy hold the hand in his own like a specimen and then pulls it toward his face and sinks his teeth into the doctor's flesh. The Belgian yanks away in horror, while Ibbieta laughs. It is interesting to note that Ibbieta refers to the dying men as vampires, trying to suck the life out of the living.

Throughout the night, and in the brief moments of accidental sleep and in the waking moments of torture, Ibbieta describes how he lives out his death over and over. To keep himself awake, he begins to pace across the cell floor and find memories flooding back to him chaotically. He no longer attaches value to the memories, labeling them good or bad, but rather glances through them searching for reason. Ibbieta thinks to himself, "My life was in front of me, shut, closed, like a bag, and yet everything inside of it was unfinished" (p. 192). He tries to place judgment on his life as a whole, but finds himself unable to because it is too incomplete, too rough: a sketch.

Ibbieta describes how he has lost the illusion of being eternal and how this brings with it an unnatural calm. He feels a detachment from his physical body and his life up to that point. He feels that even if he were released, he would never be the same as he was before. The Belgian doctor announces that it is three-thirty a.m. as if to indicate to the prisoners that they are running out of time.

As day breaks they begin to hear gunshots in the courtyard. When the soldiers come for Juan and Tom, they prevent Ibbieta from going out with them. He is told to wait and struggles hard against the frustration, anger, and angst that are building up inside. He clings to his desire to die cleanly, without emotion. When the soldiers return for him, they lead him to an upstairs room where he is further questioned about Raymond Gris. One of the officers attempts to intimidate Ibbieta, but is unsuccessful because in Ibbieta's mind, he has already lost his life. He has nothing else to lose and therefore there is no way to corner him into complicity. During this process Ibbieta marvels at the men, how obscene and vulgar their movements and facial expressions appear. The men confine Ibbieta to the laundry room, giving him time to think before asking him one last time about Gris. The time in the laundry only solidifies Ibbieta's decision not to give

them anything, though his reasons for this have dissolved. There is no more friendship at stake; his own life has even been stripped of value. It seems to him that there is no reason for anything.

When the soldiers return for him, his sense of humor has returned. He tells them a story he is certain is untrue and the men go out to search the cemetery. Ibbieta has sent them on this wild-goose chase merely for his own entertainment. But when they return and release Ibbieta into the courtyard with the other prisoners, he is completely stupefied. He runs into Garcia, a friend from town who informs him that Raymond Gris had been killed. By a twist of fate, Gris had decided to hide in the cemetery, exactly where Ibbieta thought he would not be. The ending is ironic and abrupt, much like the beginning and very much in keeping with the existential nature of the story.

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# Characters

## Ramon Gris

Ramon Gris is an anarchist and colleague of Pablo's. The Falangists attempt to get Pablo to tell them Ramon's location. Pablo unwittingly tells the Falangists where Ramon is, allowing the Falangists to kill him.

## Pablo Ibbietta

Pablo is the narrator and protagonist of the story. He has been condemned to death for his anarchist activities on behalf of Spain's Republicans during the Spanish Civil War. He deals with his impending death by detaching himself from life. He feels alienated from his own body, from the other condemned men who share his cell, and from his own past.

Pablo has the opportunity to save his own life when the officers ask him to give up the location of a fellow anarchist, Ramon Gris. Pablo chooses not to expose Pablo's hiding place, but instead hopes to make fools of the officers by giving them a random location, thereby sending them on a wild goose chase. However, it turns out that Pablo's "joke" causes Ramon's death, for Ramon ends up at that location by chance. Thus, Pablo's life is spared but he now bears the responsibility for a friend's death.

## Juan Mirbal

Juan Mirbal is a young Spanish man whose brother is an important anarchist. Although Juan has committed no crime, he is sentenced to death. Juan protests that he has done nothing wrong. When he realizes his cause is hopeless, he is fearful of his impending execution. He cries when the men come to bring him to the courtyard.

## Tom Steinbock

Tom Steinbock is an Irishman fighting on behalf of the Republicans. A member of the International Brigades, he has killed at least six men. Like Pablo, Tom is alienated from his own body, even urinating on himself and not feeling it. However, he tries to converse with the other men and come to a common understanding or solace. Tom acknowledges that he will die in the morning, but he cannot truly understand it. By the time the morning of his execution arrives, Tom has accepted his own death.

# Themes

## Death

Death is one of the most important themes in "The Wall." When he is sentenced to death, Pablo looks at life in a completely new way. The people that had once meant so much to him no longer matter. He also views his remaining few hours as the beginning of his death. He even comes to the conclusion that death is not natural, for people lead their lives under the presumption that they will continue to live; as he puts it, people maintain "the illusion of being eternal."

While in his cell, Pablo also takes the opportunity to think about how others react to the inevitability of death. He compares how Tom and Juan deal with their impending executions: Juan is fearful of death and afraid of suffering; Tom tries to imagine what being shot will be like, but he cannot conceive it because he envisions himself as an eyewitness to his own death.

When Pablo is brought in front of the Falangist officers again in the morning, he finds their attempts to intimidate him ridiculous. They fail to realize that their extraordinary power has been overshadowed by the ultimate power of death; they hold no threat to a man condemned to die.

## Alienation

Presented in the theories of the philosophers G. W. F. Hegel and Karl Marx, alienation is described as a state of divided selfhood in which a person is distanced from his or her true being. Pablo experiences a sense of alienation once he finds out he is condemned to death. The first indication of this change in perception comes when he realizes that, instead of being cold in the drafty cell, he is actually sweating. He runs his fingers through his hair, surprised to find it stiff with sweat. He reflects that he must have been sweating for the past hours, yet he "had felt nothing."

Later he comes to view it almost as if it was someone else's body; "it was no longer I," he thinks. As the hours pass, Pablo also grows alienated from his consciousness, which includes the people and ideals that he once found of the utmost importance. He finds that nothing matters to him anymore, not the anarchist movement, not freedom, not his girlfriend. Pablo feels increasingly "inhuman," a state that again denotes his alienation from the other men that surround him, from society, and from his own former self.

## War

Another important theme in "The Wall" is war. When the story takes place, Spain is in the midst of a brutal civil war. Spanish forces that favor a republican form of government are fighting against the fascist Falangists. While the story does not depict any of the

fighting that is going on, it does highlight some of the significant aspects of a wartorn region.

For instance, unjust tribunals, which may dispense arbitrary and extreme punishments, are characteristic in times of war. While some of the prisoners attending the same trial as Pablo are accused of real crimes, such as sabotaging munitions, others, like Juan, seem to be guilty only by association to friends and family. The baker Garcia sums up this state of affairs after his arrest, also seemingly for having committed no crime: "They arrest everybody who doesn't think the way they do."

## Existentialism

A basic understanding of existentialism—an extremely complicated philosophical school of thought that Sartre explored in depth in *Being and Nothingness*—informs any reading of "The Wall." Existentialism is the term coined by Sartre to describe his perception of human existence. His form of existentialism is more properly called atheistic existentialism, and its followers believe that the individual is alone in a godless universe and that the basic human condition is one of suffering and loneliness.

Sartre believed that humans yearned for wholeness and meaning; without it, they live in a state of anguish and futility. Existentialism, however, does not hold that there is no hope for humankind. Because there are no fixed values, individuals can shape themselves and their characters through their own free will, that is, by making choices or by taking action; in essence, humans can create their own values. A person who asserts himself can derive meaning from life by becoming self-defining by his own decisions and actions.

Pablo, Juan, and Tom all exhibit certain characteristics of men suffering an existential crisis, but they face it differently. Juan denies what is sure to happen and refuses to walk to his execution; in forcing the guards to carry him out to the courtyard, he is passively putting his fate in the hands of others. Tom attempts to face his death with honesty and honor. Pablo's sense of alienation from his cellmates as well as from himself indicate his difficulties at creating his own life.

At the end of the story, Pablo chooses to assert his own being by sending the soldiers on what he believes to be a wild goose chase—searching for Ramon Gris. Ironically, he accurately pinpoints Ramon's location, thus his inability to live his life honestly results in a new creation of himself—the murderer of his friend Ramon.

In Sartre's eyes, Pablo bears the responsibility for Ramon's death; as the critic Kevin W. Sweeney writes in *Mosaic,* "Pablo believes that it is within his power to extend or retract his responsibility. . . . he thinks that he can rebuild the 'foundation' of his being, to choose what he will be responsible for."

When faced with the choice of Ramon's life or his, Pablo does not truly make a choice. Instead, he creates an alternate scheme for viewing the decision, one that allows him to

avoid deciding whether he or Ramon will live; but as the events demonstrate, such a project is an impossibility.

# Style

## Narrator and Point of View

Pablo is the narrator of "The Wall." He tells his story from the first-person point of view; readers see and perceive of events through Pablo's consciousness. It is Pablo who decides when to share specific information, such as the fact that he does know where Ramon Gris is hiding.

In addition, Pablo also acts as interpreter. He presumes at times to know what the other men are thinking. When he sees Tom touch the bench, he states that Tom is touching death itself, but clearly he cannot know this to be true.

At times, Pablo appears to be an unreliable narrator. Not only does he hide the information about Ramon Gris at the man's first mention, but he poses unsatisfactory explanations about why he decides to keep Ramon's secret. He merely ascribes his behavior to stubbornness while at the same time asserting that Ramon's life is no more important than his own.

At the end of the story, he does not truly share his reaction to Ramon's death. Instead, he relates that he laughed so hard that tears came to his eyes and ends the story. This abrupt termination—almost like death—leaves readers to wonder whether he had any idea that Ramon might indeed be hiding in the cemetery.

## Symbolism

The primary symbol in the story is the wall itself. On the most basic level, the wall symbolizes imminent death; the accused men will be lined up and shot in front of it the next morning. While visualizing his own execution, Tom imagines that he will want to push himself back against the wall as if he could somehow break it down and thus escape the bullets.

Pablo's clearest vision of the wall is in a dream. In this dream, the soldiers are dragging him toward the wall as he begs them not to kill him. This is his only honest statement about his lack of apathy toward his own death. Thus, for Pablo, the wall also stands for his inner fears, ones that he is suppressing from himself.

The wall also represents his alienation from the world. In a sense, he is placing both a wall around him—and creating a wall within him—as he perceives of his body functioning independently of his senses.

# Historical Context

## Political Instability in Spain

Since the 1800s Spain has experienced several years of economic and political instability. Economically, Spain has lagged behind other western European countries. Politically, the country has been unstable, experiencing violent strikes, assassinations, military plots, and separatist movements throughout the early 1900s. The disorder only grew worse after World War I, when a Spanish general known as Primo established himself as a military dictator.

Primo lost power in 1930; but the Spanish monarchy—led by King Alfonso XIII—had lost the country's respect through his initial support of Primo's dictatorship. In 1931, the king abdicated and Spain became a republic. The new government enacted measures that lessened the power of the Catholic Church and increased conditions for workers. Such sweeping reforms angered Spanish conservatives. Along with their Catholic allies, they united with the fascist Falange (meaning Phalanx) Party. The Falange wanted to preserve the power of the army, landowners, and the church.

In February 1936 a Popular Front government that included Socialists and Communists won a major election. The Popular Front was vehemently opposed to fascism. The new government jailed prominent fascists, and the Falange responded with terrorism. After a Falange leader was assassinated in the summer, the Spanish Civil War began.

## The Spanish Civil War

The Spanish Civil War pitted the Nationalist (fascist) rebels, led by General Francisco Franco, against the Loyalists, or Republicans. This aggression captured the attention of many foreign powers: Germany and Italy, led by fascist dictators, sent the Nationalists weapons, advisers, and soldiers; the Soviet government supported the Republicans.

Approximately 70,000 antifascist volunteers from Great Britain, France, the United States, and other nations fought with the Republican Army and served as medical staff. These men and women became known as the International Brigades. By the time the Spanish Civil War ended, about half of them had died.

France and England feared that the Spanish Civil War might spread to the rest of Europe. In September 1936 the French government suggested that a nonintervention committee meet. This committee agreed to a policy of nonintervention in Spain, which included a blockade to halt the flow of volunteers and supplies to both sides. Germany and Italy did not participate in the agreement and continued to support Franco's forces.

As radical groups came to control the Republican forces, many Spaniards and foreigners came to see the Spanish Civil War as a struggle between fascists and communists. Franco's forces eventually prevailed in 1939.

Franco set up a fascist government that gave him unlimited power. The government permitted the Falange Party to be the only political party in the country, abolished free elections and most civil rights. This victory intensified a feeling of helplessness in the face of fascism for several Western countries.

## France and the Spanish Civil War

Only three months after France's general election of 1936, the Spanish Civil War broke out. Despite appeals from Spain, the new leader of the French government, Leon Blum, reluctantly refused to lend support. Many French citizens were afraid that helping the Republican forces might lead the country into war with Italy and Germany, both under fascist rulers who actively supported Franco. Later, Blum also stated that he believed involve ment in Spain might lead France into its own civil war, for the French people were deeply divided over the issue.

## French Writers and the Spanish Civil War

In *What Is Literature?*, Sartre described the way in which world events of the 1930s—the depression, the rise of Nazism, the war in China— opened the eyes of French writers and intellectuals. The war in Spain jolted many out of their previous state of apathy—which is what occurred with Sartre— as well as energized those who were already politically active. Writers and intellectuals increasingly felt an awareness of history, a change that profoundly affected the literature of the period.

French intellectuals struggled to confront the chaos of the political and social realities surrounding them, and writers increasingly used their work to explore the time in which they lived. Andre Malraux's *Man's Hope,* for instance, which chronicled the first nine months of the Spanish Civil War, was published while the war was still taking place. Many writers, including Malraux, went to Spain to serve in some capacity. French writers also organized the International Congress of Antifascist Writers held in Madrid and Valencia in 1937.

# Critical Overview

When "The Wall" was first published in *La Nouvelle Revue Francaise* in 1937, it introduced Sartre to the French literary world. According to one scholar, Sartre's publisher arranged the publication because he wanted to see if the public would favorably receive a novel Sartre had written, *Nausea* . The public, in fact, embraced both of these works, which quickly established Sartre's literary reputation.

Two years later "The Wall" was selected as the title story for Sartre's only collection of short fiction. Of his fiction, it has been his most popular work over the decades, yet critical reception has been slight as the short stories have been overshadowed by Sartre's writings in other genres.

From the time of its publication, critics and scholars perceived the stories in the collection as merely vehicles for Sartre's philosophical ideas. The renowned French writer, Albert Camus, did not cite the story specifically in his review of the collection published in the *Alger Republicain* . His views on Sartre's view of man, however, aptly reflect Pablo's situation: Man is "alone, enclosed in this liberty. It is a liberty that exists only in time, for death inflicts on it a swift and dizzying denial. His condition is absurd. He will go no further, and the miracles of those mornings when life begins anew have lost all meaning for him."

Some early critics found the subject matter of the collection problematic. The other four stories featured an impotent man; a bourgeoisie who finds refuge in a fascist organization; a man who attempts to commit a heinous crime to escape his mediocrity; and a young woman desperately trying to share her insane husband's world. Critics objected to Sartre's portrayal of deviant characters and graphic sexuality, his negative outlook, and use of obscene language. Camus denied these charges: Sartre's aim, he writes, "is to show that the most perverse of creatures acts, reacts, and describes himself in exactly the same way as the most ordinary."

Camus' overall analysis of Sartre's collection was overwhelmingly positive: "A great writer always brings his own world and its message. M. Sartre's brings us to nothingness, but also to lucidity. And the image he perpetuates through his characters, of a man seated amid the ruins of his life, is a good illustration of the greatness and truth of his work."

The collection was not published in America until 1948. Several American reviewers offered similar criticisms to their French counterparts, noting the disgust that Sartre seemed to display for humanity. A review in the *New Yorker* asserted that the "only remotely normal people involved are to be found in the title piece." Other commentators, such as the *San Francisco Chronicle'*s Vance Bourjaily, found the stories to be "uniformly excellent."

Many critics fault the story's ending. Maurice Cranston wrote in 1962 that "The Wall" was actually the "least characteristic of [Sartre's] works" because of the "ironical twist"

at the end, but some scholars, such as Alexander J. Argyros, dispute this analysis. Others insist on analyzing Sartre's political position on the political events in Spain.

Sartre later recalled that at the time he wrote the story he was "simply in a state of total revolt against the fact of Spanish fascism." Sartre's long-time companion, Simone de Beauvoir, remembers that the events in Spain were the first to shake the two of them from their intellectual isolation and left them feeling "hopeless and desolate."

Overall, many scholars consider Sartre's short stories as excellent vehicles to explore his philosophical theories. While most critics find that Sartre's philosophical arguments are the most important elements in his short fiction, a few scholars have analyzed these stories, including "The Wall," on a narrative level, combining the actual structure of the story with the existential experience of existing.

# Criticism

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# Critical Essay #1

*Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she compares the reactions of the three condemned men to their imminent execution.*

In the 1930s, Jean-Paul Sartre had already published his first major work, a philosophical treatise entitled *Imagination* as well as several critical articles on literary figures such as Jean Giradoux, Albert Camus, and William Faulkner. However, his publication of the novel Nausea and the short-story collection *The Wall and Other Stories* established his reputation as a literary figure.

"The Wall" is set in a Falangist prison during the Spanish Civil War. The narrator of the story, Pablo Ibbieta, relates the last night of his life. Along with two other men, he has been sentenced to death by a military tribunal.

Prior to the publication of this story, Sartre had demonstrated none of his later tendency toward political activities and statements. Unlike many other French intellectuals, Sartre took no part in one of the great political battles of the decade: the Spanish Civil War. While the war was still going on, and as thousands of volunteers from France, Britain, and the United States poured into Spain to support the Republicans, a former student came to Sartre. He wanted Sartre's help in joining the International Brigades.

Although the young man never went to the wartorn country, Sartre was deeply affected by the experience. As he later said, "I was very disturbed because, on the one hand, I felt he didn't have sufficient military or even biological preparation to survive the bad times and, on the other hand, I couldn't deny a man the right to fight." As Sartre continued to muse over the situations that such a young man might face, he came up with the basic premise for "The Wall," which he defines as a meditation on death.

At the time Sartre wrote the story, in late 1936 or early 1937, Spain's fate had already been decided by the Falangists' victory. Sartre's political pessimism informed his writing of the story. He later acknowledged at a press conference that since "we were operating in the context of the Spanish defeat I found myself more sensitive to the absurdity of these deaths than to the positive elements that might emerge from a struggle against fascism."

In the execution of the innocent Juan, Mary Jean Green, writing in *Fiction in the Historical Present, French Writers and the Thirties,* sees Sartre's "severe indictment of fascist policy." Indeed, the story opens with a tribunal so brief that it comes as a surprise when a guard tells the prisoners, "'that was the trial.'"

The atmosphere reflects the unreality and the lack of order seen in the trial—where men are sentenced to death after the briefest of questioning. Even the major who announces the execution orders appears "exasperated" with the confusion as he was expecting to

find three Basques in the cell. He then retires to leave the three men to await the morning, and their deaths, in the cold, drafty cell.

Each of the condemned men reacts differently. Juan, knowing he has committed no crime but not understanding that logic and fairness no longer matter, denies his fate. "That's not possible," he says when the guard reads his execution statement. "'Not me.'" Juan also is "terribly afraid of suffering"; his focusing on the pain is another method of denial.

As a last defense against the situation, Juan collapses when the soldiers come to take him to the courtyard. "He was not unconscious;" Pablo notes, "his eyes were wide open and tears were rolling down his cheeks." Juan's refusal to take action is his way of denying responsibility for his own life and places him, in Sartrean terms, in a position of "bad faith"—that is, choosing passivity as a way of escaping the self.

Unlike Juan, Tom accepts his responsibility— both for the actions that have led him to this situation—and for dealing with his upcoming death. He does avoid the thought of death through a number of tactics—conversing, exercising, comforting Juan—yet he also acknowledges to Pablo that "'something's going to happen to us that I don't understand.'" He talks about his perception of what the execution will be like; he sees his executioners standing in a line before him, shouldering their weapons, and he imagines himself trying to push against the wall as if he can break through it.

"'I say to myself, afterwards, there won't be anything. But I don't really understand what that means . . . there's something wrong. I see my own corpse. That's not hard, but it's I who see it, with *my* eyes. I'll have to get to the point where I think— where I think I won't see anymore. I won't hear anything more, and the world will go on for the others. We're not made to think that way, Pablo.'"

Pablo thinks that Tom is "certainly talking to keep from thinking." In a sense, Pablo is correct. For in refusing to understand how he can imagine viewing his own death, Tom is able to avoid the death itself. In another sense, Pablo is incorrect. For Tom gives voice to what is uppermost in both men's mind: the inability to truly continue living when one's death is foretold.

For his part, Pablo believes that his life is already over. He begins to distance himself emotionally from his life, wanting to undergo what will happen with objectivity. He realizes that he has lived life under "the illusion of being eternal," but that the knowledge of death means that he no longer truly lives. In fact, he feels that he is "dying alive." He begins to feel alienated from his own body, which he comes to view as some sort of "enormous vermin." His body sweats despite the cold air and it trembles, yet Pablo senses neither warmth nor coldness.

As the evening progresses, Pablo tries to disassociate himself from his former life by allowing himself no feelings for his friends, his girlfriend— everything that was once important to him. "I had spent my time writing checks on eternity," Pablo thinks, "and had understood nothing." His rejection of his own past, which he sees as a "goddamned

lie," demonstrates the inability he has to foresee his own death. "I took everything as seriously as if I had been immortal," he realizes. However, his diatribe takes on more of a tone of bitterness than acceptance when he notes that "death had taken the charm out of everything."

Along with the alienation from his own body, Pablo wants to distance himself from the other men. Such a project contrasts sharply with his earlier behavior when the men were still awaiting sentencing. Then, Pablo's hold on life expressed itself in his belief in the ties that connect a person to others. Though he agreed with Tom that they were going to die, he still welcomed the chance to form a relationship with the Irishman. He even preferred their cell to the one he had been in for the past five days because he "had been alone, and that gets to be irritating." Whereas before he found Tom to be a "good talker," now he only wants to be alone.

This detachment project is not possible, however, for Pablo realizes that Tom and Juan are suffering in a similar way. Tom even urinates on himself, and when Pablo points this out, Tom angrily replies, "I can't be . . . I don't feel anything." Pablo also recognizes his own physical condition in them: the gray faces, the sweaty skin; of Tom he says, "we were both alike and worse than mirrors for each other."

Additionally, all three men believe that the Belgian doctor is the only person truly alive. "He had the gestures of a living person, the interests of a living person; he was shivering in this cellar the way living people shiver . . . We, on the other hand, didn't feel our bodies anymore . . . I looked at the Belgian, . . . able to plan for tomorrow. We were like three shadows deprived of blood; we were watching him and sucking his life like vampires." Juan even bites the doctor's hand, which finally convinces the doctor "that we were not men like himself."

For all that Pablo tries to set himself apart from Tom and Juan, this is not a valid possibility. He even recognizes in himself the conscious decision to try not to think about the next day, "about death," though he criticized Tom for this same attempt. Tom, on the other hand, comes to accept the inevitable. Pablo describes Tom looking at a bench "with a sort of smile, with surprise, even. He reached out his hand and touched the wood cautiously, . . . then he drew his hand back hurriedly, and shivered." Pablo realizes that it "was *his own death* Tom had just touched on the bench."

Pablo, meanwhile, sticks to the mode of looking at his life as utterly changed by his death. "[I]f they had come and told me I could go home quietly," he says, "that my life would be saved, it would have left me cold." He believes that even if he were given a reprieve, his future life would be changed irrevocably by the realization that he is not immortal.

Then Pablo is given the chance for a reprieve. The Falangists want his colleague Ramon Gris, and they offer Pablo his life in return for telling them his friend's hiding place. Pablo, who had lied earlier when he said he didn't know Ramon's whereabouts, wants to understand his own refusal to give up his friend even to save his own life. "[H]is

life was no more valuable than mine," Pablo realizes. In fact, he has come to believe that "No life is of any value."

Yet because of his project of the past night— disassociating himself from his past, which includes any emotional ties—he cannot admit to himself that his reason for not giving up Ramon stems from loyalty. To do so would mean that his mechanism for facing death has been taken away from him. Instead, he convinces himself that he will not give up Ramon out of stubbornness.

He decides to send the Falangists on a wild goose chase and he tells them a lie about where Ramon is hiding. He does not explain why he does this, except to allude to a "malicious" streak and his disgust for the Falangist officers' lack of understanding of the "pettiness" of their actions—the pettiness of living when one's death is inevitable.

Pablo, thinking Ramon is hiding at his cousin's house, is thus surprised to find out that the men actually found Gris at the cemetery, where he had gone after disagreeing with his cousin. When Pablo learns this, he sits down on the ground and laughs and laughs. This ending has led many critics to denigrate it as a trick ending or an O. Henry ending.

Others, however, find in the ending an expression of Sartre's philosophical ideas of the meaninglessness of life and its absurdity. Sartre himself explained his ending thirty years later: Pablo "tries to react by an individual action because he thinks it's a farce. It is because he plays with forces he does not understand that he lets loose against himself the forces of the absurd. It is not the result of an absurd 'destiny' that drags men along. . . . It is the result of inadequate knowledge . . . about the real actions to take. He has obtained this result through a childish act."

Pablo only ends in confusion, mirroring in fact, the confusion at the Falangist prison. "The laugh/ cry," writes Kevin Sweeney in his article for *Mosaic,* "marks Pablo's awareness of both the failure of his project of detachment and his responsibility for Gris's death. This achievement of insight underscores Sartre's thesis that there are moral boundaries to human existence and that one of these limits is the responsibility for one's actions. . . . Pablo's flash of insight is Sartre's emphatic pronouncement that responsibility for one's actions is a condition of human existence, a condition from which one cannot escape."

**Source:** Rena Korb, for *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2000.

# Critical Essay #2

*In the essay below, Green asserts that "the Spanish setting of 'Le Mur' serves as a pretext for the evocation of more universal philosophical problems."*

If Drieu uses the war in Spain as an appropriate denouement for his character's life and as a vantage point from which to analyze the European political situation, Jean-Paul Sartre uses it to illustrate the metaphysical absurdity of the human condition. The first written and the first published (in the *Nouvelle Revue Francaise* of July 1937) of the three works discussed in this chapter, "Le Mur" nevertheless reveals a more pessimistic outlook about life and politics than the work of either Malraux or Drieu. Sartre had uncannily anticipated the sense of despair that was to attack all of these writers by the end of the decade. In "Le Mur," in opposition to *L'Espoir,* the reality of the Spanish Civil War does not play a major role in determining characters or plot. Even more so than in *Gilles,* the Spanish setting of "Le Mur" serves as a pretext for the evocation of more universal philosophical problems.

The story reveals, nevertheless, a clear political position. As Sartre later explained, at the time of the composition of "Le Mur," he was "simply in a state of total revolt against the fact of Spanish fascism." Simone de Beauvoir has recorded that the Spanish Civil War was the first political event of the 1930s that succeeded in shaking Sartre and herself from their intellectual isolation: "For the first time in our lives, because the fate of Spain concerned us so deeply, indignation per se was no longer a sufficient outlet for us: our political impotence, far from furnishing us with an alibi, left us feeling hopeless and desolate." Although many of their closest friends, Paul Nizan being a prime example, were actively engaged in the great political battles of the time, Sartre and de Beauvoir had been content to let the left-wing ideals that they shared impose themselves on reality without their own active help. The success of the Falangist generals in Spain provided one of the first real challenges to the validity of their stance of passive onlookers. While de Beauvoir seems to have maintained an early optimism, Sartre, by his own account, had foreseen the Falangist victory in Spain almost from the first. This political pessimism informs his story, as he was later to admit: "Since at that time we were operating in the context of the Spanish defeat [ "Le Mur," was written in late 1936 or in early 1937 at the latest] I found myself much more sensitive to the absurdity of these deaths than to the positive elements that might emerge from a struggle against fascism, etc."

There is a certain political protest in the story of three men condemned to death after a summary interrogation by a Falangist committee. The questioning of the prisoners takes place in the opening pages and is so brief that it comes as a shock when the guard informs them afterwards, "C'etait le jugement" [You have been sentenced (translation mine)]. The few bits of information exchanged seem to bear no relationship to the death sentences later read out in the cell. Two of the three men have, at least, been fighting on the Republican side: Tom Steinbock is an Irish volunteer in the International Brigades, and the narrator, Pablo Ibbieta, is an anarchist militant. The youngest of the three, however, is totally innocent. His only "crime" is in being the brother of a known

anarchist. Nevertheless he is condemned to be shot with the others, a fate that he finds impossible to accept. While Tom and Pablo maintain a façade of stoic resignation, Juan protests, sobs, bites the hand of the doctor, and finally, in a state of total nervous collapse, he must be carried out to his execution by the guards. Although the narrator resists any temptation to sentimentalize over Juan, this cold-blooded execution of an innocent teenage boy cannot help but represent a severe indictment of fascist policy and thus takes up a privileged theme of the antifascist work of Malraux, Bernanos, and others. When "Le Mur" was turned into a film in 1967, Sartre saw this theme— "the horror of death inflicted on man by man"—as the aspect of the story with the greatest continuing political relevance.

The fate of young Juan is also the anecdotal point of departure for the story. Sartre had been asked by a former student who had experienced some problems in his personal life (de Beauvoir identifies him as Jacques-Laurent Bost) to arrange with Malraux for his passage to Spain as a volunteer. Although Malraux ultimately resolved the situation with great good sense by convincing the young man that he would be less than useless to the Spanish army until he learned how to handle a weapon, Sartre had found himself torn between his commitment to the Spanish Republican cause and his fear for the student's fate: "I was very disturbed because, on the one hand, I felt he didn't have sufficient military or even biological preparation to survive the bad times and, on the other hand, I couldn't deny a man the right to fight." Sartre's meditation on the possible reactions to the situations the young man might have to confront gave birth to "Le Mur," which, Sartre claims, is not at all the philosophical study of the absurd that many readers have seen in it but simply a meditation on death.

Whichever of these definitions of the main theme the reader finds more appropriate, it is obvious that Sartre's central concern goes far beyond the Spanish Civil War, which serves as its point of departure. Sartre's first works of fiction, like those of the writers who share his existentialist outlook (for example, Malraux's *Les Conquerants* and *La Voie royale,* Camus's *L'Etranger*), begin by confronting the fundamental problem of human mortality. Only when human life is measured against the fact of its inevitable finitude can its real meaning be considered. Such a confrontation with death can take place only in a situation where the protagonist finds himself condemned—by illness (Garine in *Les Conquerants*), by a mortal wound (Perken in *La Voie royale*) or by a death sentence imposed by other men (Meursault in *L'Etranger* and Pablo in "Le Mur"). The progressive dissolution of all those elements that have seemed to provide life's meaning is in "Le Mur," as in Sartre's previous fictional work, *La Nausee,* an introduction to the absurd.

During the night on which Pablo awaits his execution, he devotes every mental faculty to the effort of understanding the idea of death, but it remains beyond his grasp. As his companion Tom says: "On a tout le temps l'impression que ca y est, qu'on va comprendre et puis ca glisse, ca vous echappe et ca retombe. Je me dis: apres, il n'y aura plus rien. Mais je ne comprends pas ce que ca veut dire" [you always have the impression that it's all right, that you're going to understand and then it slips, it escapes you and fades away. I tell myself there will be nothing afterwards. But I don't understand what it means]. A consciousness cannot imagine its ceasing to be conscious.

In the course of the night Pablo becomes alienated from his physical body, which, he realizes, is separate from his consciousness of it: "Il suait et tremblait tout seul, et je ne le reconnaissais plus. J'etais oblige de le toucher et de le regarder pour savoir ce qu'il devenait, comme si c'avait ete le corps d'un autre" [it sweated and trembled by itself and I didn't recognize it any more. I had to touch it and look at it to find out what was happening, as if it were the body of someone else]. In a characteristically Sartrean image, he sees himself as attached to a "vermine enorme" [an enormous vermin]. As he is alienated from his own physical reality, he is even further removed from the physical presence of the others who share his cell, none of whom he finds particularly sympathetic. He is, however, forced to recognize the extent to which the other bodies—described in terms of excretory odors, sweat, and soft flab— nevertheless resemble his own, and he sees that his own anguish is experienced in similar fashion by his companion: "Nous etions pareils et pires que des miroirs l'un pour l'autre" [We were alike and worse than mirrors of each other]. This realization of a shared human condition does not therefore create a Malrucian fraternity; it simply makes Tom's presence even more intolerable and increases Pablo's feeling of solitude.

The confrontation with death forces Pablo to regard his past life in a new light. He marvels at his ability to have taken his activities seriously, but he did so because he lived as though he were eternal; now that he has definitively lost this illusion of eternity, nothing retains its former importance. He becomes progressively indifferent to his happy memories, to his love for his mistress, Concha, to his political ideals, and even to his friendship with Ramon Gris—in order to protect whom he is nevertheless about to die. Even his spontaneous emotions of resentment toward the Belgian doctor, who provides a graphic illustration of the hostile presence of the Other, are submerged by an overwhelming feeling of indifference.

The story ends with a clever Sartrean twist, which seems to underline the notion of the fundamental meaninglessness of life. After his two companions have been taken off to be shot, Pablo is once again questioned about the whereabouts of his friend Ramon. In the light of his newfound perception of the absurdity of existence, the seriousness with which his captors take their political activity appears ridiculous: "Leurs petites activites me paraissaient choquantes et burlesques; je n'arrivais plus a me mettre a leur place, il me semblait qu'ils etaient fous" [Their little activities seemed shocking and burlesque to me; I couldn't put myself in their place, I thought they were insane]. He can only imagine them as future corpses: "Ces deux types chamarres avec leurs cravaches et leurs bottes, c'etaient tout de meme des hommes qui allaient mourir. Un peu plus tard que moi, mais pas beaucoup plus" [These men dolled up with their riding crops and boots were still going to die. A little later than I, but not too much]. He even tells one of the Falangists to shave off his mustache: "Je trouvais drole qu'il laissat de son vivant les poils envahir sa figure" [I thought it funny that he would let hair invade his face while he was still alive]. Overcome by the feeling that all this is a giant farce, Pablo cannot resist making fun of the overly serious Falangists by sending them off on a wild goose chase to a cemetery he knows is far from his friend's actual whereabouts. As chance would have it, Ramon Gris has, in the meantime, changed his hiding place, and he is shot by the Falangists in precisely the spot Pablo had indicated.

While many readers have interpreted this ending as a striking evidence of the absurdity of life, Sartre—at least the Sartre of thirty years later—sees Pablo's act and its consequences quite differently: "He tries to react by an individual action because he thinks it's a farce. It is because he tries to play with forces he does not understand that he lets loose against himself the forces of the absurd. It is not the result of an absurd 'destiny' that drags men along. . . . It is the result of inadequate knowledge . . . about the real actions to take. He has obtained this result through a childish act." Whether or not the conclusion is a new revelation of the absurd, it fails to add a positive dimension to Pablo's experience. Since the story is a first-person narrative written in the past tense (the *passe simple*), it is clear that the narrator has continued to live. Sartre does not feel called upon to explain how he has managed to construct a life on the basis of the devastating philosophical conclusions to which the experience described has led him.

Strangely enough, Malraux creates a strikingly similar situation in *L'Espoir,* featuring a minor character named Moreno, who is a friend of the doomed liberal, Hernandez. Almost on the eve of the Toledo debacle, Moreno and Hernandez spend an evening together in a Toledo cafe. Moreno, a Marxist army officer who had been captured and condemned to death by the Falangists in the first days of the war, has just managed to escape. Like Sartre's Pablo, he finds his experience has profoundly altered his outlook on life, totally obliterating his former ideals: "'Je ne crois plus a rien de ce a quoi j'ai cru,' dit Moreno, 'a rien'" ["I no longer believe in all I used to believe," Moreno said. "I believe in nothing now"]. His long imprisonment under sentence of death has taught him about the finality of death. Hernandez later reiterates this understanding in classic Malrucian terminology, in a phrase that Sartre, too, would take to quoting: "La tragedie de la mort est en ceci qu'elle transforme la vie en destin, qu'a partir d'elle rien ne peut plus etre compense" [The tragedy of death is that it transforms life into destiny, that from then on nothing can be compensated for (translation mine)]. The image that Moreno retains from his imprisonment is the sound of clinking pennies ("sous"), which had echoed through his prison, as each prisoner had wagered on his chances of survival. The coins evidence the arbitrary nature of human existence and point to the vanity of human effort, which can at any moment be annihilated by death. Thus, like Pablo on his liberation, Moreno sees the frenetic activity of the Toledo soldiers as a vain *comedie*.

Hernandez, however, as disillusioned as he has become, cannot accept this nihilistic vision. Although human progress has proven itself to be slow and painful, he feels there are still some positive results: "On attend tout de la liberte, tout de suite, et il faut beaucoup de morts pour faire avancer l'homme d'un centimetre. . . . Et quand meme le monde a change depuis Charles Quint. Parce que les hommes ont voulu qu'il change, malgre les sous—peut-etre en n'ignorant pas que les sous existent quelque part" [one expects everything all at once from 'freedom,' but for man to progress a bare half inch a great many men must die. . . . Yet the w orld has moved on since then [the time of Charles the Fifth]. Because men wanted it to move on, despite the pennies—perhaps even with full awareness that those pennies were waiting for them in the background.]. Hernandez sets in opposition to Moreno's vision of meaninglessness the meaning inherent in the fraternal effort of the Toledo militias. His statements take on deeper resonance as they are borne out by the scenes in the final section of the novel, where

the long, painful struggle of the Spanish peasants sums up the efforts of "triumphant human will." Malraux in *L'Espoir* cannot allow Moreno's nihilism to remain unchallenged.

When Hernandez himself is about to be executed, he thinks of Moreno's experience, and he, too, feels a sensation of absurdity before his Falangist interrogators, a sensation quite similar to that felt by Pablo: "Que les vivants employaient leur temps a des choses absurdes"[How living people waste time over futilities!]. Like Pablo, he begins to see everyone around him as a future corpse: "Quand l'homme serait mort, le cou serait plus long. Et il mourrait tout comme un autre" [the long neck which would look still longer when the man was dead. And he'd die the usual sort of death.]. Also like Pablo, he must witness the condemnation of an innocent man who struggles against his fate, in this case a streetcar conductor whose jacket, worn shiny at the shoulder by the strap of his money pouch, leads the Falangists to believe that he has been carrying a rifle. Unlike Sartre's Juan, however, Malraux's conductor dies bravely, raising his fist in the Republican salute as he is about to be executed and inspiring others to do the same. The execution scene, which Hernandez at first perceives as absurd, takes on a new seriousness as the humble little man with his raised fist defies his executioners and comes to embody the force of humanity defying its destiny: "Il est enfonce dans son innocence comme un pieu dans la terre, il les regarde avec une haine pesante et absolue qui est deja de l'autre monde" [The little man gazed at them, stolid in his innocence as a stake rooted in the soil, and gave them a look of undying, elemental hatred that had already something of the other world in its intensity].

Moreno, too, survives his despair and goes on to find a new meaning in life. Reappearing in a Madrid cafe in the midst of the bombing, he sums up the hopeless determination of the soldiers and people of Madrid, who pursue their effort in the face of death and defeat. Like the aviator Scali, he has discovered the fraternity of men who have accepted the fact of their death in combat: "Il y a une fraternite qui ne se trouve que de l'autre cote de la mort" [There's a fraternity which is only to be found—beyond the grave]. Moving beyond solitude and beyond the absurdity of the human condition, he has found that new values can emerge from despair.

In "Le Mur," Sartre's Pablo does not go beyond his vivid perception of life's absurdity in the way that the characters in Malraux's later novels are almost all able to do. Surprisingly, however, when in 1940 he was faced with an experience of defeat and imprisonment in his own life, Sartre himself was immediately able to rise to the occasion. As a prisoner of war, he had his first experience with the direct communication of the theater when he wrote an optimistic Christmas play for his fellow prisoners. And he soon returned to Paris full of determination to participate in the Resistance—at a time when most Frenchmen were still despairing over the invasion. In an exchange of roles impossible to predict on the basis of their 1937 Spanish Civil War fiction, an enthusiastic Sartre was in 1941 trying to convince a recalcitrant Malraux of the necessity of creating a writers' resistance network. The lesson Sartre had learned from his own experience in a fascist prison was formulated by the protagonist of his Resistance play *Le Mouches:* "La vie humaine commence de l'autre cote du desespoir"[ Human life begins on the far side of despair]. It comes very close to the last statement of Malraux's Moreno. The Spanish Civil War confronted Malraux and Sartre in different

ways and at different moments in their personal trajectories. Thus despite the evident similarity of their concerns, they tend to draw different philosophical conclusions from it.

**Source:** Mary Jean Green, "The Fiction of the Spanish Civil War: 'Le Mur,'" in *Fiction in the Historical Present: French Writers and the Thirties,* University Press of New England, 1986, pp. 243-51.

# Critical Essay #3

*In the essay below, Sweeny finds "The Wall" more than just a story about fear and death; he asserts that the story "needs to be seen as a developed, philosophical argument."*

Despite the lingering "old quarrel between philosophy and poetry" over the suitability of presenting a philosophical investigation in literary form (Plato's *Republic* 607 B), philosophers regularly use literary genres to present their ideas. Jean-Paul Sartre's short story "The Wall" is an example of such a philosophical project. In the story Sartre offers a counter-example to one of Husserl's views and an illustration supporting his own alternative position. Sartre's particular project is easy to overlook given the vivid, extended descriptions of the central characters' terrified reactions to the prospect of their execution. Critics routinely interpret the story as a phenomenological account of the emotional state of terror in the face of death. They refer to "The Wall" as a story whose "real subject is fear," and as a "classic treatment of the central existentialist motif of confrontation with death" which closes with an "O. Henry" ending. As I will argue, however, "The Wall" needs to be seen as a developed, philosophical argument.

The philosophical character of the story stands out more clearly if close attention is paid to the integrity of the work's four-part structure. In the first section Sartre sets out the central ethical issue; the second section contrasts the protagonist's actions with those of his two companions; the third shows the predicament that results from those actions; finally, the fourth section reveals the consequences of the protagonist's choice and draws a conclusion. If one were to concentrate primarily on the anguished behavior of the main characters, the integrity of the structure might go unobserved. The ending would most likely be seen as a literary device for reducing the tension built up by the prisoners' terror in the middle sections, rather than a resolution of the themes of commitment and psychological escape on which Sartre bases his criticism of Husserl.

The integrity of the story's structure and the story's identity as a philosophical enterprise are more clearly visible if one realizes that Sartre has used some examples from Kant's essay, "On A Supposed Right To Lie From Altruistic Motives." Seen in the context of Kant's examples, instances of lying in "The Wall"—both to others (the theme of commitment) and to self (psychological escape and self-deception) —are foregrounded and show the development of Sartre's thesis.

Kant's essay is a reply to an attack by Benjamin Constant on his position that one has a duty always to tell the truth. In criticizing Kant's position, Constant poses the following situation of moral choice. (Situations of this general sort I will refer to as "Constant situations.") You are entertaining a friend in your home. A murderer intent on killing this friend comes to the door and asks you whether or not the friend is there, threatening to kill him. On the assumption that the murderer forces you either to lie or tell the truth, what ought you to do? Constant argues that anyone in such a position has the right to lie to the murderer. The murderer has no right to the truth; hence, one has no duty to reveal where the friend is. Constant chides Kant that his prohibition against lying would

require one to tell the murderer the truth, a consequence of the position Constant finds ethically outrageous.

In the opening section of "The Wall" Sartre introduces this same general form of moral predicament— a Constant situation. Set during the Spanish Civil War, the story opens with Pablo Ibbieta, the protagonist and narrator, and two other men (young Juan Mirbal and Tom Steinbock, a volunteer in the International Brigade) being brought before a Falangist military tribunal. They face charges of complicity with the Republican side, an offense punishable by death. The last of the three to face the four-man court, Pablo is asked:

"Where's Ramon Gris?""I don't know.""You hid him in your house from the 6th to the 19th." "No."

Ramon Gris is Pablo's friend and, as Pablo later admits, an asset to the Republican cause. Although he denies knowing where Gris is, Pablo is lying. Later, in the third section, he reveals: "Of course I knew where Gris was; he was hiding with his cousins four kilometers from the city." Pablo lies to the court from an altruistic motive. Knowing that the Falangists want Gris' life, he lies to protect his friend and political ally.

It is not apparent to the reader at this point of the story that Pablo is lying. The narrator says neither whether Pablo is lying or telling the truth; nor does he indicate what Pablo's motives are in answering the questions. This lack of narratorial context is augmented by the judges who neither challenge nor react to what Pablo tells them.

The ambiguity of Pablo's exchange is contrasted with Tom's straightforward trial. The International Brigade volunteer faces the court fully aware that the judges know both who he is and what his role in the fighting has been. "They asked Tom," Pablo relates, "if it were true he was in the International Brigade; Tom couldn't tell them otherwise because of the papers they found in his coat." As the narrator implies, Tom is in no position to bluff his way free. He tells the truth, knowing that the court has found his identity papers. This narratorsupplied confirmation of veracity is lacking in Pablo's case.

Juan's situation is different from that of Tom's truthful reply and Pablo's prevarication. Juan believes that his being brought before the tribunal is a mistake. He believes that the soldiers have confused him with his brother Jose. "My brother Jose is the anarchist," he pleads, "you know he isn't here any more. I don't belong to any party. I never had anything to do with politics. . . . I haven't done anything. I don't want to pay for someone else." All he needs do, he believes, is to tell the soldiers of their mistake. Unlike Pablo he is quite willing to inform on the person for whom he believes the soldiers are looking. Nevertheless, Juan's pleading is to no avail. The reader later learns that the Falangists have sentenced him to death even though as Tom says, they "don't have a thing against him."

Led to a cell, the three prisoners learn that they have been sentenced to be executed the next morning. This common sentence and the short and indifferent treatment by the tribunal tend to blur the differences among the three prisoners' behavior. In the second

section the similar symptoms of terror exhibited by the men also create the impression of a certain uniformity. And it is this similarity which is responsible for the view that "The Wall" is concerned with the common physiological and psychological responses to a terrifying event. But the main concern of the story is not to dramatize terror. Rather, Sartre analyzes each character's moral choice in response to his predicament. He presents three different models of how individuals choose to confront an extreme situation.

Sartre offers a preview of these moral choices in the different ways that each of the men reacts to the court in the first section. In the next section each of the three men takes an attitude toward his death much like the one he adopts toward the court. Tom eventually confronts the fact of his approaching death, just as he recognized that he could not bluff his way out of the tribunal's charge; Juan, believing that the court has mistaken him for his brother, continues to deny his fate; and Pablo pursues a strategy of deceiving himself just as he sought to deceive the tribunal. Tom is the model of acceptance; Juan of rejection; and Pablo, the curious combination of both acceptance and denial, is the model of self-deception. Of the three prisoners Pablo receives Sartre's major attention. The other two characters serve to put Pablo's situation in perspective, and after so doing, at the end of the second section, they are eliminated.

In the second section of "The Wall" the psychological condition of the prisoners is presented and developed so as to provide the necessary context for assessing their moral attitudes and choices. Sartre wishes to set out the psychological conditions under which Tom, Juan and Pablo act, as well as to show in what sense the prisoners' behavior is peculiarly moral. To see what philosophical values Sartre attaches to their respective actions and attitudes, it will be helpful to analyze the prisoners's behavior in terms of his contemporary philosophical works. In "The Transcendence of the Ego" (1936) and *The Emotions* (1939) Sartre not only develops his own theories on the emotions and consciousness, but also criticizes Husserl's position on transcendental subjectivity. These same topics appear in "The Wall."

Spending the night in the cell, a coal cellar of a former hospital, awaiting execution, all three men exhibit similar symptoms of terror, appearing "alike and worse than mirrors of each other." A Belgian doctor spends the night in their cell recording their "almost pathological state of terror." He notes their chills and tremblings, their facial distortions and gray coloring, the profuse sweating, the involuntary urinating, and the despondent lethargy alternating with violent reactions to slight irritations.

Although such emotional responses might seem to be merely involuntary reactions, Sartre in *The Emotions* urges a theory according to which such emotional behavior indicates the presence of a conscious, cognitive attitude. Sartre claims that an emotion is "a certain way of apprehending the world." Rather than being merely an affective state, an emotion is a form of consciousness, one frequently unreflective, whose purpose is to bring about a "transformation of the world." Sartre describes this transformational character of emotion in the following passage: "When the paths traced out become too difficult, or when we see no path, we can no longer live in so urgent and difficult a world. All the ways are barred. However, we must act. So we try to change the

world, that is, to live as if the connection between things and their potentialities were not ruled by deterministic processes, but by magic. Let it be clearly understood that this is not a game; we are *driven against a wall,* and we throw ourselves into this new attitude with all the strength we can muster" (emphasis mine). When a person, is driven against a "wall," his fear is a magical attempt to alter the predicament confronting him. In emotional behavior, one consciously—although one may not reflectively be aware of so doing—acknowledges and transforms the relationship between consciousness and the threatening situation. One of Sartre's examples of such an emotion is the fear exhibited by someone who faints when charged by a ferocious beast. Certainly fainting is not an effective way of eluding the danger; yet it is, says Sartre, "a behavior of escape." With the magical act of fainting the person eliminates the dangerous beast "by eliminating consciousness." In summarizing his view, Sartre states, "the true meaning of fear is apparent: it is a consciousness which, through magical behavior, aims at denying an object of the external world, and which will go so far as to annihilate itself in order to annihilate the object with it."

Seen in the context of Sartre's theory of emotions, the prisoners' terror is indicative of a consciousness of their predicament. Yet, despite their similar display of terror, each prisoner adopts a different magical attitude toward his execution. Juan takes up a number of magical defensive postures. At first he moralizes about the injustice of his sentence and in so doing denies the prospect of its being carried out. Confronted with the death sentence, he exclaims: "That's not possible . . . I didn't do anything." He cannot be in mortal peril, he is convinced, since he refuses to accept that he is the one the soldiers want. Yet the "misunderstanding" continues, and gradually Juan becomes absorbed in self-pity. "I could see," says Pablo, "he was pitying himself; he wasn't thinking about death." The posture of self-pity alternates with "a terrible fear of suffering." By focusing on the pain, he avoids confronting the thought of his extinction. If the execution will be painful, at least one has to be alive to suffer from the bullets. Dreading the pain of the bullets is less terrifying than facing the thought of not existing at all.

In all of Juan's ways of magically dealing with death Pablo notices that he "made more noise than we did, but he was less touched: he was like a sick man who defends himself against his illness by fever. It's much more serious when there isn't any fever." Juan's final defense and "escape" is to collapse in terror on being taken from the cell to face the firing squad.

Unlike Juan, who denies any political allegiance, Tom accepts responsibility for his role in the fighting, telling Pablo that he has "knocked off six [of the enemy] since the beginning of August." His first reaction to the prospect of dying is to talk, conversation being a way to avoid thinking about death. Pablo sees that "he didn't realize the situation and I could tell he didn't *want* to realize it." Yet his bodily reactions belie this tactic of avoidance. He then tries calisthenics and the comforting of Juan as ways to avoid the thought of dying. Ultimately, however, these ploys fail and the thought of his death becomes inescapable. Yet he makes a last effort to distance himself from the thought of dying. His death, he blurts out to Pablo, is incomprehensible: "Something is going to happen to us that I can't understand. . . . I see my corpse; that's not hard but

*I'm* the one who sees it with *my* eyes. I've got to think . . . think that I won't see anything anymore and the world will go on for the others. We aren't made to think that, Pablo." Tom's implicit argument is that one cannot imagine oneself being dead since imagining oneself dead requires an inconsistent state of affairs: someone at the same time both actively imagining something and being the inanimate object of the imaginative activity. The argument, however, is specious. It takes a distorted view of the activity of imagining; it conflates the subject of the activity with the imaginary, mental object, and it runs together the present time of the act with the future time of the imagined event.

That Tom is using a specious argument to escape considering his imminent death is suggested by an event that occurs later that night. Pablo notices that Tom "had begun to stare at the bench with a sort of smile, he looked amazed. He put out his hand and touched the wood cautiously as if he were afraid of breaking something, then drew back his hand quickly and shuddered . . . It was *his* death which Tom had just touched on the bench." This glimmering of awareness of his own mortal condition, this coming to terms with his own fate, places Tom in a sympathetic light. Of the three prisoners, he seems, from Sartre's point of view, to be the most authentic: struggling with his fear, accepting responsibility for his past, and confronting the prospect of his death as best he can.

Pablo, on the other hand, takes quite a different attitude toward his extinction. He sets himself the project of disassociating himself from all ties to his past (his memories, values, and attachments) in order, as he says, "to die cleanly." Yet despite this disassociation, Pablo still maintains some ties to his former way of life. At the time of his trial Pablo accepts his Anarchist past; he tenaciously guards the secret of Gris's hiding place. Unlike Juan, he accepts the connection between his sentence and his former life. His continuing to maintain the secret of Gris's whereabouts is evidence that he has not abandoned all his past allegiances. Thus with his decision to disassociate himself from all that has taken place there arises a bifurcation in his character: he both acknowledges his past and denies it.

The project of disassociation is brought on by his facing "the wall" of approaching death. As Sartre would have it, Pablo's project is an instance of magical behavior. In reminiscing about his past, he disparagingly notes his previous tendency to take "everything as seriously as if I were immortal. . . . I had spent my time counterfeiting eternity. I had understood nothing." He had lived, he muses, without fully realizing his mortal condition. His lack of understanding blinds him to his commitments and makes his former way of life seem futile. With his terror he has transformed the positive attachment he had felt toward his former way of life into one of nihilistic rejection. In his emotional state he has changed his relationship to himself and the world he lives in. One can see this in the attitude he takes toward Concha, the woman he loves. "Last night," he says to himself, "I would have given an arm to see her again for five minutes. . . .Now I had no more desire to see her, I had nothing to say to her." Disillusioned, he comments about his life: "'It's a damned lie.' It was worth nothing because it was finished. . . . death has disenchanted everything."

Pablo's calling his past life a "lie" is signifi- cant. He thinks that he has deceived himself by his past unsuspecting attitude toward his pleasures, projects and goals. His rejection

of his past marks a split for him between what he sees as his former, deceptive life and a present, more honest, conscious self. That he might again be deceiving himself with his project of disengagement does not enter his mind.

Pablo's project of separating himself from his past is an emotional remedy for the anguish he feels in anticipating the firing squad. If he can face death free of his past, he will, he thinks, be free from the terror he feels so acutely. He says: "I clung to nothing, in a way I was calm." He is also motivated by his desire to be fully conscious of all his remaining moments of life, especially the moment of execution. By separating himself from his past attitudes and values, he will then be able to face the firing squad fully conscious, rather than unexpectedly suffering his death like a slaughtered animal. He does not want to be groggy with sleep and oblivious to what is happening to him: "I didn't want to die like an animal, I wanted to understand."

Pablo's desire for understanding is quite a different project from Tom's quest for understanding *qua* comprehension. For Pablo, to understand is to be aware and to realize the significance of all that takes place around him. His desire for understanding and for separation from his past express themselves in his taking an attitude similar in important respects to the Husserlian *epoche*. Although he has no philosophical motive behind his project, Pablo does believe that only if he adopts the attitude of a pure observing ego will he be able to witness what happens to him objectively. In taking such a stance he believes that he will no longer perceive his surroundings in his former, natural way, colored by his emotional associations, but will instead observe them with objectivity.

The resemblance between Pablo's disengaged understanding and the Husserlian project of *epoche* is intended to make a point similar to the one Sartre makes in "The Transcendence of the Ego." In that work, Sartre takes issue with Husserl's position that conscious experience requires the existence of a transcendental subject "behind" consciousness. Husserl's argument for transcendental subjectivity depends upon the phenomenological technique of *epoche* —the bracketing or setting aside of one's natural attitude toward the existence of things in the world so as to reduce the objects of one's experience to a presentation of phenomena. This reduction, according to Husserl, allows one to perceive the world objectively. Given this objective, reduced state of the world of experience, Husserl reasons that in order for consciousness to be able to perceive the various phenomena as unified objects, there must be a unifying agent in consciousness which makes possible one's perception of ordinary things in the world. This unifying agent Husserl identifies with a transcendental subject.

Sartre rejects both Husserl's derivation of a transcendental ego and the role *epoche* plays in the derivation. Rather than being *transcendental* (an active, conscious subject manipulating immediate experience into a world), the ego, Sartre holds, is only *transcendent* (an entity not identical with a particular phenomenon but known from a number of phenomena). The ego, Sartre says, "is the spontaneous transcendent unification of our states and our actions." In being transcendent the ego is like any other object in the world that has an existence independent of immediate experience. By holding there to be a transcendental ego, Husserl, according to Sartre, conflates

consciousness with the subject of experience. His mistake is in identifying the conscious subject with an object having the power to unify experience. The transcendent character of the world, not any transcendental, conscious subject, ensures the unity of the things we experience.

Husserl employs the *epoche* in order to separate the subject of consciousness from the world of experience, thereby isolating the subject so as to show its transcendental nature. Repudiating Husserl's theory, Sartre holds that the ego exists in the world and cannot extricate itself. There are various ways of perceiving the world but none of them separates the self from the world, however much one might be convinced that such a separation is possible. Sartre says of Husserl's view of the ego: "Unfortunately, as long as the I remains a structure of absolute consciousness, one will still be able to reproach phenomenology for being an escapist doctrine, for again pulling a part of man out of the world and, in that way, turning our attention from the real problems." Husserl's account of *epoche,* Sartre holds, is actually an escapist theory.

Sartre claims that in his theory of *epoche,* Husserl has also misdescribed an extraordinary, but actual, project of consciousness. There is something like what Husserl labels an *"epoche,"* but as a project bent on separating consciousness from the world of its predicament it is doomed to failure. Far from being "an intellectual method, an erudite procedure," Sartre views the project of *epoche* as induced by "an anxiety which is imposed on us and which we cannot avoid."

In "The Wall" Sartre puts forward an account of how such a project of disengagement might come about and the possible consequences of such a futile attempt to separate oneself from the world. In the guise of Pablo's project of "staying clean," Husserl's *epoche* is presented and reworked so that instead of being part of a philosophical method it is a magical project consciously undertaken in order to deal with a predicament.

Pablo's attempt at disengagement is made to seem credible by devices in the story that encourage the reader to distinguish Pablo in his role as protagonist from his role as narrator. Certain information that the narrator reports is information to which Pablo the prisoner does not have access. Tom, we are told, touches "his death" on the bench, yet he never tells Pablo about this experience. All that occurs in the story is presented from Pablo's point of view—but it is a variable point of view. At times, as in his observations about Tom and Juan, Pablo seems omniscient; at other times, especially when he reflects about himself, he is ignorant or fallible. For example, he says about himself: "Only I would have liked to understand the reasons for my conduct." Pablo's lack of self-knowledge alternating with his acute insight into others' characters tends to divide Pablo as narrator from Pablo the prisoner. That the tale should be told from the point of view of one whom—until the end of the story—the reader believes to be doomed, also encourages this division. Thus, Pablo's status as both narrator and condemned prisoner lends credence to his project of disengaging himself as conscious subject (a role compatible with being an omniscient observer) from his past identity (the role responsible for his being the condemned man).

His project of disengagement is frustrated, however, by a tie that he cannot sever. Remarking on the calm that sets in after he has adopted his attitude of *epoche,* he says: "But it was a horrible calm— because of my body; my body, I saw with its eyes, I heard with its ears, but it was no longer me, it sweated and trembled by itself and I didn't recognize it anymore." His description of the "horrible calm" he feels is faintly reminiscent of Tom's voicing his incomprehensibility of his death. However, whereas Tom balked at imagining his body not being animate, Pablo is aghast that his body exists and behaves independently of his conscious ego. The involuntary reactions of his body infringe on the detached integrity of his consciousness, and he rejects his body as an integral part of his being. Yet the tie still holds between his conscious self and what he considers a bothersome attachment. "Everything that came from my body," he says, "was all cockeyed. Most of the time it was quiet and I felt no more than a sort of weight, a filthy presence against me; I had the impression of being tied to an enormous vermin." His body is something from which he cannot escape. He can try to banish his emotional attachments and his values, and he can steel himself so that on seeing Juan weep he will be able to resist pitying himself and others, but he cannot break free from his body. The existence of his body as a constituent of his being is something that in his *epoche* he cannot deny, however much he struggles to achieve an independence from its effects on his state of mind.

In his desire for understanding, Pablo has ignored what for Sartre is a natural source of understanding— his emotions. Immediate awareness is not the only mode of consciousness: Emotion, he says, "is a mode of existence of consciousness, one of the ways in which it *understands* (in the Heideggerian sense of *Verstehen* ) its 'being-in-theworld'." In rejecting the terrified responses of his body, Pablo rejects the tie that holds him to his predicament; but in so doing he also rejects a form of understanding. He has deceived himself as to the true nature of his project. His desire is not for dispassionate understanding or awareness; it is for escape.

In the second section Sartre has presented three ways in which an individual might deal with "a wall" against which he has been driven. According to Sartre's theory of emotions such actions are conscious and take on the character of moral attitudes for which the agent is responsible. For Tom and Juan the moral implications of their decisions are clear: Tom deals authentically with his fate, whereas Juan by collapsing seeks to abandon responsibility for his actions. But in Pablo's project of disengagement Sartre presents the interesting situation of one who both accepts and denies his predicament. Yet it is not clear at the end of the second section what the moral implications of his actions are. The reader is still not certain that Pablo has lied to the Falangists, although enough about his past is presented to suggest it.

When dawn finally comes, Tom and Juan are taken out to be shot. Pablo, however, is once more interrogated by the soldiers about Gris. He now realizes that the night he spent in the coal cellar has been psychological torture bent on breaking his will and forcing him to reveal where Gris is. Seeing through his captors' "shocking and burlesqued" behavior, he says: "I almost felt like laughing. It takes a lot to intimidate a man who is going to die. . . ." The soldiers offer Pablo his life in exchange for his telling them where Gris is hiding. But Pablo continues to lie, insisting that he does not know

where Gris is. The offer of his life for information about Gris is a shift in the basic Constant situation confronting Pablo. Instead of simply having the predicament of choosing to lie or tell the truth, he now has the choice of his life for Gris's.

Locked in a laundry room to consider the Falangist's offer, Pablo ponders his refusal to inform on his friend. Given his project of detachment his allegiance to Gris should be something that he abandons just as he professes to abandon his tie to Concha. His resistance to telling the soldiers what they want to know puzzles him. He questions himself: "Only I would have liked to understand the reasons for my conduct. I would rather die than give up Gris. Why? I didn't like Ramon Gris any more. My friendship for him had died a little while before dawn at the same time as my love for Concha, at the same time as my desire to live." Pablo attempts to explain his resistance to inform on Gris as being due to obstinacy. Yet this is rather lame conjecture. The thought of being obstinate pops into his mind; he accepts it as if he could make himself have whatever motives he imagines. His off-hand way of arriving at this explanation casts suspicion on its being some deep insight. His puzzlement as to his motive contrasts sharply with his perspicacious seeing through his captors' schemes and his understanding of his companions' emotional responses.

Initially the reader might suppose that Pablo is correct in his judgment, given his past success in perceiving others' motives and plans. But in so doing the reader would be taken in by the narrator's authoritative point of view. Pablo is not infallible; later in the story his sense of understanding will be severely challenged. His deliberations should be seen as an attempt to reconcile a conflict between his misconstrued project of escape and his commitment to Gris. Since he cannot "stay clean" and at the same time preserve this commitment, he achieves a self-serving consistency by deceiving himself into believing that his loyalty is actually stubbornness. His explanation provides a motive which is consistent with his "staying clean," since he views his obstinacy as a spontaneous quirk rather than as the expression of an established character trait.

The soldiers return in a while. Convinced that he is "clean," Pablo fancies the soldiers as so many players in a farce. He responds to their questions by inventing a scenario for himself and the soldiers to act out. He tells them that Gris is hiding in the cemetery. He wants to get the soldiers to search the cemetery and make fools of themselves. "I represented," he says, "the situation to myself as if I had been someone else: This prisoner obstinately playing the hero, these grim falangistas with their moustaches and their men in uniform running among the graves; it was irresistibly funny." What Pablo tells the soldiers is as much a lie as his previous disclaimer about Gris's hiding place. Not believing Gris to be in the cemetery, he gleefully anticipates the satisfaction he will receive from their futile expedition.

As if responding to his cue, the soldiers set off for the cemetery. Prepared for his imminent execution, Pablo waits the soldiers' return, gloating over his imagined victory. But when the soldiers do return, no execution order is given. Instead, he is sent out into the hospital yard to join some other prisoners. Disoriented by such an unexpected turn of events, he wanders around the yard in a daze. While earlier he had struggled to maintain a clarity of mind, he is now confused and oblivious to his surroundings. He

does not understand why he has been spared and does not realize (until the baker Garcia tells him) that the soldiers have found Gris in the cemetery—precisely where he told them to look. Pablo's project of understanding has come crashing down. He had undertaken the task of detaching himself from the impinging world of his expected execution in order to perceive and understand all that took place around him during his last hours alive. He had felt confident in his detachment. Although he had taken, as he says, a "malicious" delight in sending the soldiers off on what he believed was a futile expedition, his detachment was preserved by his imagining the situation as if he had been "someone else." Confronting his captors, he had endeavored to maintain the removed stance of the "transcendental" observer and manipulator of events. Yet with his reprieve, he is thrown into confusion, his "transcendental" project exploded.

With the soldiers finding Gris in the cemetery, Sartre has introduced an elaboration on the Constant situation. This sort of situation is presented and discussed by Kant in his essay. There he presents the following example, intending to show that one can be held culpable if one lies in a Constant situation. I refer to the example as "K-1": "But if you had lied, and said he was not at home when he had really gone out without your knowing it, and if the murderer had then met him as he went away and murdered him, you might justly be accused as the cause of his death."

As a situation in which the decision-maker is claimed to be responsible for the friend's death, Kant's example highlights Sartre's similar assessment of Pablo's actions. In comparing K-1 to the situation of Gris's capture, it is well to keep in mind that the decision-maker in K-1 and Pablo both lie. Even though Pablo and the decision-maker say what happens to be true, both believe what they say to be false and both intend what they say to deceive their inquisitors. In K-1 it is due to what the decisionmaker says that the murderer finds his victim. This connection needs to be stressed in order for the congruence of the two situations to be seen.

If in a purported K-1 situation there is at most a tenuous or non-existent connection between what the decision-maker says and the murderer's finding his victim, then one has a different moral situation. Such a similar sort of situation is assumed by Garcia the baker in his account of how the soldiers found Gris. I will refer to this variation on K-1 as a "Garcia situation." In a Garcia situation nothing that the decision-maker says is causally responsible for the murderer finding the friend. The murderer stumbles on him by chance, or because he happens to look in a place (e.g. a cemetery) that is a likely hiding place. According to Garcia, that the soldiers found Gris is entirely his own fault; Gris chose to hide in the cemetery. "Of course," Garcia says [they "the soldiers] went by there this morning, that was sure to happen." In the Garcia situation, Sartre offers a case in which the decision-maker is not responsible for the death; it is a case that contrasts with the one in which Pablo plays a role and for which he is in Sartre's view morally responsible.

Kant uses his example to argue that if one departs from the duty always to tell the truth one can be held responsible for unforeseeable consequences of one's actions. He states in the article: "Therefore, whoever tells a lie, however well intentioned he might be, must answer for the consequences, however unforeseeable they were. . . ." While

Sartre neither shared Kant's view on truth telling, nor subscribes to Kant's de-ontological ethical system, he is interested in the issue of responsibility for one's actions, responsibility that extends even to unforeseeable consequences of one's actions. And just as Kant claims that the decision-maker is responsible for the friend's death in K-1, so Sartre— by his use of Kant's example (and as his later theory of strict responsibility in *Being and Nothingness* confirms) —implies that Pablo is responsible for Gris's capture.

In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre holds that everyone is absolutely responsible for what happens to him or her. This responsibility is a consequence of what Sartre holds is a conscious being's radical freedom. I am responsible for, in fact I choose, all that I do not stop from happening to me. He says: "For lack of getting out of it [a situation] I have *chosen* it." And in a most significant passage for "The Wall," Sartre says: "the most terrible situation of war, the worst tortures do not create a nonhuman state of things; there is no non-human situation. It is only through fear, flight and recourse to magical types of conduct that I shall decide on the non-human, but this decision is human, and I shall carry the entire responsibility for it." Non-human situations would be those in which we would not be held morally responsible for our behavior. Likely candidates might be battles, tortures, or the terrifying psychological predicament that the three prisoners face. However, Sartre insists that all such situations are "human" ones and that magical attempts to escape such situations are also actions for which we are responsible.

In Sartre's view, Pablo is responsible for Gris's capture. His magical escape instigated the scenario that led the soldiers to Gris. Believing himself "clean," Pablo thinks that he can act with impugnity. However, he is mistaken. "I am responsible," says Sartre in *Being and Nothingness,* "for everything, in fact, except for my very responsibility, for I am not the foundation of my being." But Pablo believes that it is within his power to extend or retract his responsibility. A major fault with Pablo's magical project is that he thinks that he can rebuild the "foundation" of his being, to choose what he will be responsible for. And, ultimately, Sartre's criticism of Husserl is that the project of *epoche* lends credence to the idea that one can select the moral foundation of one's being. Pablo's selective responsibility is illustrated by his deliberations on whether to inform on Gris. He ponders: ". . . I could save my skin and give up Gris and I refused to do it. I found that somehow comic; it was obstinacy." Pablo rationalizes that his refusal is due to a quirk rather than a choice based on a commitment: "Undoubtedly I thought highly of him [Gris]: he was tough. But it was not for this reason that I consented to die in his place; his life had no more value than mine; no life had value. They were going to slap a man up against a wall and shoot him till he died, whether it was I or Gris or somebody else made no difference." Since both lives are worthless, he thinks, there is no rational basis for preferring one over the other. The matter is decided by his obstinacy rather than by his deliberated choice. He realizes that he faces a choice, but he is self-deceived in thinking that he need not choose.

By presenting the consequences of Pablo's self-deceived project of *epoche,* Sartre has attempted to show the folly of such an endeavor. Pablo's project functions as a counter-example to Husserl's thesis that use of the *epoche* allows one both to perceive the world objectively and to witness the separated, transcendental nature of the self. For

Sartre, Pablo's "escape" is an example of a plausible interpretation of *epoche.* Pablo undertakes his magical project in order to free himself from the distortion of emotional reaction and to observe all that happens to him objectively. Instead of awareness, however, all he ends up with is confusion. He is aware of neither his commitments nor his motives for his behavior. Instead of being the detached author of events, he becomes the manipulated one.

In the final section Pablo, dazed and confused, hears Garcia's interpretation of Gris's capture. His reaction to the account indicates that he realizes the truth about what has happened. "Everything began to spin," he says, "and I found myself sitting on the ground: I laughed so hard I cried." His outburst belies his earlier denial of any commitment to Gris; it reveals to him that his explanation of his motive as being due to obstinacy is a sham. His reaction is out of character for someone who has rejected as worthless his own and his comrade's life and is simply acting out of stubbornness.

Pablo's laugh/cry marks, I believe, a flash of insight—not only about Gris's capture but also about there being certain moral boundaries of his life. The confusion of wandering in the yard has been replaced by an understanding: not a detached state of understanding such as he longed for during the vigil in the cell, but a comprehension about his own deception. Perceiving his causal role in Gris's capture makes him aware that what had earlier seemed to him to be the very expression of his detached state of "staying clean"— his sending the soldiers on an expedition to the cemetery—was in fact an action with telling consequences for his previous and continuing commitments.

That Pablo's outburst is a stroke of insight rather than a reaction of ironic surprise is not obvious, given the brevity of the incident. Described in the last sentence of the story, his response has very little context within which to fix its meaning. As an ending to the story, the laugh/cry certainly functions as a release of the tension built up over the course of the story. However, by limiting the interpretation of the ending to a device for the release of tension, one ignores the ending's status as a resolution of the point of this didactic story. Given Sartre's use of Kant's example, the ending serves as Pablo's final understanding of the moral repercussions of his project to "stay clean."

Interpreting the ending as insight is corroborated if one notices Sartre's similar use of the laugh/cry in his contemporary novel *Nausea.* In the novel Sartre provides more textual background with which to gauge the meaning of the outburst. Roquentin, the narrator and protagonist, during the course of the book develops an awareness of "the meaning of 'existence'"; he sees "existence" as an incontrovertible, brute fact which in its "frightful, obscene nakedness" is "the very paste of things"— not something convenient for use but something independent of human manipulation. While dining in a restaurant, he gazes around at the other diners, and breaks into a laugh/cry. The provocation for his reaction is a fantasy he has had. He muses:

What a comedy! All these people sitting there, looking serious, eating. . . . Each one of them has his little personal difficulty which keeps him from noticing that he exists . . . but I know I exist and that they exist. And if I knew how to convince people I'd go and sit down next to that handsome white-haired gentleman and explain to him just what

existence means. I burst out laughing at the thought of the face he would make. . . .I'd like to stop but I can't; I laugh until I cry.

There are a number of significant similarities between the laugh/cry in *Nausea* and in "The Wall." In the novel, the laugh/cry marks both the collapse of Roquentin's fantasy of explaining "existence" to the white-haired gentleman and an acknowledgment of the ridiculousness of such a project. It also indicates a shift from Roquentin's noticing the diners' "seriousness" to his reflexive realization of the futility of his extraordinary attempt at explanation. His reaction is more than a response to something overwhelmingly funny; it expresses an achievement of understanding: he sees the "seriousness" of the diners as a blindness to their own "existence." But as Roquentin later remarks, "nothing that exists can be comic," so the laugh turns to a cry. In recognizing the diners' incomprehension as well as the senselessness of his own remedial response, Roquentin signals his understanding of existence.

In "The Wall" similar conditions precede Pablo's laugh/cry. First, there is the failure of his fantasized scenario. Upon hearing Garcia's tale, Pablo realizes that his fantasy with the soldiers has vaporized. He sees now who has been made to look foolish. Previously brought to the brink of laughter by what he claimed was the soldiers' "seriousness" in their roles as captors, Pablo now sees his own attitude and behavior as having been reality-denying. Whereas he had thought that it was the soldiers who did not realize their participation in some low form of comedy, Pablo now sees that he has been the one acting out the farce. Faced with this failure and reversal, he perceives that his other fantasized project has also failed—he has not "stayed clean." His attempt to sever the ties between his present state of consciousness and his past identity has failed. In telling the soldiers to go to the cemetery he has acted in ignorance and has blundered like the unsuspecting animal he most dreaded becoming. Pablo's laugh/cry is an acknowledgment of his failure and, given Sartre's view on the cognitive character of emotions, a sign of awareness of his self-deception.

The laugh/cry marks Pablo's awareness of both the failure of his project of detachment and his responsibility for Gris's death. This achievement of insight underscores Sartre's thesis that there are moral boundaries to human existence and that one of these limits is the responsibility for one's actions. Husserl's view of transcendental subjectivity, by separating the self from the world, challenges Sartre's view. Sartre seeks to argue against Husserl by presenting through his use of Kant's example a counter-example to Husserl's view. Pablo's flash of insight is Sartre's emphatic pronouncement that responsibility for one's actions is a condition of human existence, a condition from which one cannot escape.

**Source:** Kevin W. Sweeney, "Lying to the Murderer: Sartre's Use of Kant in 'The Wall,'" in *Mosaic,* Vol. XVIII, No. 2, Spring, 1985, pp. 1-16.

# Critical Essay #4

*Pitts finds in the following essay evidence that despite Sartre's conviction of the isolation of indi viduals, "The Wall" conveys "a greater truth" about the solidarity of man.*

# Critical Essay #5

It has now and then been noted that in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre "The Wall" holds a singularly privileged position. First published in 1939, this short story compresses into one vividly rendered situation nearly all the major themes with which Sartre the existentialist philosopher and "engaged" writer has later been concerned. It is thus a veritable epiphany of Sartrean man's predicament in an absurd universe; and as Walter Kaufmann points out in his *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre,* it is the best introduction to the "heart of Sartre's thought" not only because of its classic treatment of the "central existentialist motif of confrontation with death," but because it contains other important themes to be found in such later works as *Les mains sales (Dirty Hands)* and *Les morts sans sepulture (The Victors)*. In these plays, Kaufmann continues, "man's highest value is integrity, and Sartre goes out of his way to point up its utter independence of social utility."

The theme of "The Wall" is indeed integrity— solitary integrity. For the Sartrean hero is the solitary hero—ignorant, up against the wall of annihilation, and "compelled," in his anguish, to choose (and to choose "freely") those values that define for him exactly what it means to be a human being. But from the casual comment quoted above it is not altogether clear how Kaufmann has interpreted "The Wall." Another allusion five pages later, however, leaves no doubt that this critic regards the protagonist, Pablo Ibbieta, as an authentic "hero"—a man of honor and courage who survives his ordeal only because he is saved by an absurd coincidence. "Even in guilt and failure," says Kaufmann, "man can retain his integrity (witness 'The Wall') and defy the world," But although this seems to be the reading that most critics have given the story, there are two other possible interpretations—one of them more consonant, as I hope to show, with Sartre's moral seriousness and attitude of anguished responsibility.

It should be borne in mind that the man who wrote "The Wall" was not merely the still immature philosopher of the later 1930s but a creative artist in the high tide of his young maturity. This is important, since Sartre the creative writer has always been greater (at least for many readers) and more faithful to experience than Sartre the philosopher, and not even the philosopher can be accused of moral shallowness and frivolity, least of all where heroism is at stake. In any case "The Wall" is a haunting and powerful story, deeply imagined in its realism and its astonishing situation—a situation that is both completely credible and yet so frighteningly ambiguous that it calls into question the very meaning of human selfhood and the nature of the universe.

During the Spanish Civil War Pablo Ibbieta, the fictional narrator, is condemned to death and spends the night with two companions—facing the emptiness and pointlessness of existence in the light of summary execution against the "wall" at dawn. The condemned are Juan Mirbal, a lad under twenty, who turns out to be rat-like in the ferocity of his cowardice; Tom Steinbock, a talkative Irishman who is something of a sentimentalist; and the protagonist Pablo, a rather brave "tough." Pablo has led the hard, unreflective life of the average sensual man, but under the pressure of this night of waiting he evinces more than average powers of perception and introspection.

As a purely technical performance the story gains several advantages from Sartre's choice of Ibbieta as narrator as well as protagonist. In the first place, the sheer fact that a man condemned to die has "lived to tell the tale" adds an extra spice of interest to the reader's alertness; it focuses attention, from the beginning, on the element of *situation*. Besides, to have told Ibbieta's story in the third person would have been to rob it of much of its credibility: the narrator vouches, somehow, for every observed detail, including the reasons for his conduct and the changes in his feeling and attitude; the effect is therefore not that Sartre imagined the story but that he heard it from "Ibbieta." Then, too, since the narrative focus is always scenic, "The Wall" gains much in precision and economy from the personal qualities of the narrator. Detached, hard, scornful of his cellmates, Ibbieta sees the symptoms of disintegration in Mirbal and Steinbock (and himself) with a cool objectivity that would have been impossible to the others.

During the night's vigil love, friendship, the very meaning of the Loyalist cause itself—all are emptied of significance for Pablo; and when in the morning he is offered his freedom if he will only betray the whereabouts of Ramon Gris, a comrade he has greatly admired and respected, he spends the quarter-hour of respite given him in the linen-room in a baffled self-inquiry as to *why* he will not betray Ramon. (He takes it for granted—though he sees no reason why not—that he will not be a squealer.) When the time comes, however, he is preoccupied with malicious amusement at the total situation: the prisoner determined to be a hero, however meaningless the role may be; the meaningless causes to which he and his enemies are alike committed; the silly bustling and self-importance of little creatures who are all, sooner or later, going to die. Out of an idle desire to send his enemies on a wild-goose chase he directs them to the cemetery—not to the place at the home of relatives where Ramon is supposed to be hiding. But after a day's waiting in a state of idiotic emptiness he discovers the reason why he has not been executed: all unwittingly, but with deadly accuracy none the less, he has sent the Fascist soldiers to the very place where his comrade has in the last two days concealed himself. At this point he collapses in a fit of wild, hysterical laughter.

Quite rightly, therefore, "The Wall" has been called a metaphysical problem story, since the situation presented is a kind of paradigm of reality itself and permits a wide variety of philosophical explanations. The thing *could* have happened in this way, the reader feels: in fact, given these people in this situation, it almost "had to happen," as Garcia the baker observes at the end of the story. But why? What does it mean? What does it suggest about the nature of reality? These questions are deceptively easy to answer if the story is regarded as a straightforward presentation of Sartrean themes. On the one hand we find the "absurd" world—a world in which anything may happen, even the cruelest coincidence, and in which the void has finally made itself visible; on the other, solitary man—about to die, hoping to die decently, but foiled in his purpose by a bitter trick of chance. Thus at first thought Sartre seems to be telling us something about the universe and the common human predicament, but not about his protagonist—except insofar as we may feel that overnight Pablo is transformed into an existential hero. But once the implications of the situation and imagery are more fully reflected on, we find that beneath the obvious irony of the denouement has suggested, obliquely yet devastatingly, an intensely *moral* condemnation of his protagonist.

If the dramatic situation has seldom been adequately dealt with in critical comment, the reason is fairly clear. Sartre's philosophy has had a powerful and fascinating effect on our time; and the reader can easily see that "The Wall" somehow embodies this philosopher's concepts of "integrity" and the "absurd," as well as the idea that the values we live by, and the persons we are, are always created by a kind of forward-looking, future-oriented attitude. It is therefore easy to assume that this is the story of a brave man who is cut off from life and his fellows by the wall of imminent death, but who maintains his integrity (since integrity does not depend on social utility) in state of that absurd coincidence which transforms him, objectively, into a squealer.

Yet such an assumption ignores, as we shall see, certain basic principles of existentialist theatre and fiction. For what really counts in existentialist writing, at least according to one spokesman, Jacques Guicharnaud, is not the reason for an act *but the act itself*— "its present significance and the significance it gives to the characters and the world." It might be added that what counts *in real life,* also, is the act and its meaning—not its reasons, motives, and causes.

In this essay I am chiefly concerned with the significance of Pablo's act in the situation he is actually in. A word is in order here, however, concerning the imagery of "The Wall"—that subtle aura of linguistic suggestion which lends its own re-inforcement to the theme. It is interesting to note that Sartre seems to have derived the symbol of the "wall" itself from Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*. As far as the "underground man" is concerned, the term "wall" comes to mean various hated aspects of the world—the laws of nature and mathematics, the deductions of science—at which he puts out his tongue in impotent derision. For Pablo, similarly, the "wall" is not merely the physical wall against which he is going to be shot but a number of other things—primarily, no doubt, an abrupt and inconceivable certainty of death, beyond which thought cannot penetrate and which separates him ineluctably from living men. It also means, I think, the hard wall of the ego and its limited consciousness—its narrow personal interest and absorbed concern with its own separate projects— all of which serves as a barrier between man and the universe, between man and man, between man and his own real being.

Taken alone, these suggestions would scarcely indicate that Pablo is an "underground man," although something like this may be what Sartre means. Equally significant, I think, is the interesting constellation of "insect" and "vermin" images in "The Wall"—those metaphors for the body and for other people which echo and intensify the dominant transformation theme in the reveries of the man from underground. At one point in "Notes from Underground," Dostoevsky's spiteful hero tells us that he "could not even become an insect"; elsewhere, that he could be "neither a rascal nor an honest man, neither a hero nor an insect." This transformation image is later to haunt the black meditations of Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov in *Crime and Punishment;* the change is ultimately achieved by the hero of Kafka's *Metamorphosis.* Taken in context, the images of vermin in "The Wall" probably suggest Pablo's degradation to an infra-human level of the spirit.

Thus in more than one way "The Wall" may be regarded as a kind of trap. To begin with (if I may use at this point Denis de Rougemont's celebrated definition of a genuine poem), it is a "calculated trap for meditation." Also, apparently, it is another kind of trap for those unwary readers (preoccupied, like Kaufmann, with what they already know about Sartre) who have ignored much of the story's imagery and underestimated the significance of the *situation* in which the protagonist is caught. And finally, if I have understood the author's intention aright—if "The Wall" is meant to be an image of solitary man's total responsibility in an absurd world—then the very realism and power with which the image is presented may have proved to be a trap for Sartre himself. By a beautiful paradox, in other words, the objective meaning of "The Wall," as literary form, is perhaps a good deal deeper than the author intended it to be.

# Critical Essay #6

Be this as it may, Sartre's own creative intention is of the utmost importance, and to understand it we may need to review his well-known but highly paradoxical conception of man's "total responsibility" in a world that is stigmatized as purely "absurd." Throughout his philosophical career Sartre has always denied that the universe has any ultimate ground or origin—divine or otherwise. In other words it is simply a brute, inexplicable fact; it is simply *there,* the product of irrational energies that are milling around for no reason. And yet, in spite of the assumed groundlessness of existence, Sartre places at the center of his thought an *obligation*—to find one's genuine self, or rather to create it out of nothing.

He is not, to be sure, very fond of Heidegger's word "authenticity," doubtless because the term denotes the kind of authority which a document (or a personality) derives from its origin. Nor does he often use Camus' convenient phrase, "the absurd." But it would seem that for Sartre, as for Camus, the absurd lies in the fact that man desires meaning even though the universe is meaningless—indeed, that man himself is meaningless unless he is creating his own meaning and values. Consequently what Sartre means by finding (or creating) one's genuine self bears no relation to any quest for the Atman, or the "apex of the soul," or any other version of an ideal self that is waiting to be realized. In fact, in spite of a self-evident contradiction in the very words, Sartre has stated with a remorseless effort at self-consistency that humanity has no common essence; in other words, "human nature" does not exist.

To say that "all" men are free and thus condemned to choose their own values—to create their own essence and nature—is of course to say something very definite indeed about a common human essence. But Sartre is passionately affirming that no human being is finally subject to (no human being can be labeled as an example of) any over-riding abstraction masking as a universal law. He is thus committed to a radical pluralism of ends, in other words to a *summum bonum* consisting of empty freedom—the most freedom possible for every individual— the only limitation being that no one by his own freedom shall infringe on the freedom of others. Out of such commitments Sartre's most famous dictum is naturally derived; that existence precedes and governs essence. In other words a man does not act as a hero, or a coward, because some antecedent pattern of his nature has determined his choices prior to all choice, or even prior to his latest choice. On the contrary, as one character says to another in *No Exit,* "You are no more than the sum of your acts." That is to say, your *essence* is created by the succession of your choices.

The heart of this theory of freedom and decision is that each man's role in the universe is to create values—to choose ends—and to commit himself freely to the ends and values he has chosen. Thus only does he create himself; and, simultaneously, only by the acts and decisions involved in the process does he reveal what kind of person he has by now become. (Only in this fluid, changeable sense can the word "essence" be understood in "Existence preceded essence.") And although Sartre uses the words "authentic" and "unauthentic" very seldom, he makes the distinction in other terms. The

unfree man, the man of "bad faith," is unauthentic because he makes himself into what *he* is by means of those values and future projects which he chooses restlessly, halfheartedly, or dully and unclearly. On the contrary, the free man chooses *his* values and future goals and projects *as the situation demands,* committing himself to them with clear understanding and a firm and undivided will—but only *until the situation radically changes*.

Logically, in this absurd universe, there would seem to be no imperative obligation binding upon everyone alike, not even the obligation to be authentic. At this point, however, the moral tensions involved in Sartre's position become quite clear. It is perfectly plain that one profound motive in his total view is the need to assert the individual's freedom in the face of an increasingly totalitarian world situation. When man is everywhere confined by rigid walls of coercion (mechanized technology and mass conformity), freedom is very largely de- finable as the freedom to secede—to secede from the oppressive "we" of all the collectivities. But the danger here is obviously that of seceding from the human race itself, particularly when one has already jettisoned the notion of a common human nature. Sartre has always been acutely aware of this danger. He bases his present involvement in politics and his sympathy with Marxism on the *world* "situation" and his long-range concern for individual freedom.

Yet in spite of his awareness and world-concern, Sartre's essential thought has confronted the lonely ego with an obligation to create values for which there is no justification either in the cosmos or in human association and inter-personal relationships. For the cosmos is meaningless and absurd; and, for each ego, other people would seem to exist—at least a great deal of Sartre's writing has implied something like this—only insofar as they are part of the ego's personal forward-looking "projects." In the late 1930s Sartre was therefore faced with the fact that despite his metaphysical nihilism he was intensely concerned with human values in a more or less traditional sense; that these values were everywhere threatened by the upsurge of something dark and subhuman and destructive of freedom, which he was later to call the "reign of the animal;" and that for him there was absolutely nothing to *justify* his choice of another set of values. Out of this recognition, as the following sentences suggest, came his doctrine of the total responsibility of each solitary ego for the survival of these groundless human values: "My freedom is the unique foundation of values. And since I am the being by virtue of whom values exist, nothing—absolutely nothing— can justify me in adopting this or that value or scale of values."

The exemplary choice is therefore the one that in any situation upholds the human image and refuses the sub-human. That the choice will change with the situation goes without saying. It also goes without saying that very few people are capable of authentic (human) decision—a fact upon which many existential thinkers have dwelt at length. Yet when a burst of hysterical laughter breaks through the wall of Pablo's self-control, we are reminded rather obviously that Sartre is—and was when he wrote this story—the philosopher of the solitary ego in an absurd world. Is he dramatizing here the absurdity of the cosmos or, somehow, the failure of his hero?

# Critical Essay #7

Never, in all his philosophical and political writing, has Sartre taken the "logical" step from the metaphysical isolation of the individual, as he sees it, to the view that the individual has no moral responsibility. Yet at least one critical study implies that Sartre is expressing an attitude in "The Wall" which is fundamentally irresponsible and nihilistic:

But there is a distinction between Pablo and the others condemned to death. Life seems meaningless to him when confronted by the *wall*—by the fact of death; but he refuses to betray Ramon. Why? He calls it stubbornness, but it is more than that. Within the limited span of his existence from now until the time that he will be stood against the wall and shot, he has conceived of a condition which he calls, by implication, dying like a human being ("I didn't want to die like an animal"). . . . Pablo's intention (his choice) is to become hard—to die well. It no longer matters what the doctor represents or what he tells the policemen about Ramon Gris. He does not attempt either to save or to betray his former friend. *That his words betray Ramon is pure coincidence, therefore a subject for laughter, not rage or remorse.* [Italics mine] Actually, Ramon has ceased to exist for Pablo, since he no longer figures in Pablo's future.Actually, then, "The Wall" is an exemplification of Sartre's best-known philosophical statement: that "existence precedes and commands essence." For Pablo to have retained his feelings for Ramon, or for him to have pitied Juan, for him even to have felt pity for himself, would have meant his accepting the view that life was meaningful beyond the *wall,* in terms of something outside his own existence.

This is a fairly accurate account of Pablo's own attitude. But in saying that Sartre's story "exempli- fies" the philosopher's best known idea, the authors of this confusing (and very confused) comment seem to assume that Sartre endorses, or at least condones, a course of conduct which is immorally egocentric. The confusion, like the assumption, may be seen in the shift in symbolic meaning given to the "wall": first it means "the fact of death"; second, obviously, the ego's "own existence." It is true that Pablo intended (or chose) to "die decently"; it is also true that he was focused wholly on his own existence. But to assume that Sartre understands the meaning of this situation as Pablo does is to ignore the profound though quiet irony in the events that are reported.

In other words, beneath Pablo's surface intention to "die decently" the actual events indicate his failure to execute any aspect of this decision. In the first place, it is obvious that his final intention is not, in point of fact, carried out. He does *not* "die decently." Moreover, he is going to go on living very indecently, since in the eyes of the Fascists, at first (and the situation cannot be hidden forever from the Loyalists), he will always be a squealer—a greater coward than Tom or Juan. But even more significant is the fact that he has failed in carrying out his earlier and more human project: "I didn't want to die like an animal. *I wanted to understand."* It is of course true that no one can "understand" death. But in the linen-room Pablo is given a chance to understand what it means *not* to be an animal: that is, he has a chance to see that his project of dying like a man, if that is what he meant, is inevitably linked with *not betraying Ramon Gris*. But somehow or other, "It seemed more ludicrous than . . . anything else; it was stubbornness"—this

refusal to betray Gris; and Pablo fails to see any connection between such a refusal and being a human being.

All this suggests that Sartre is pointing indirectly toward an authentic decision which Pablo did not make but should have made. (Such oblique pointing was his method, for example, in *No Exit:* all three characters in that play are monstrous failures, but through their eternal failure one gets a vision of what ought to have been.) To understand Sartrean fiction or drama, moreover, we must first look not at any psychological analysis it happens to contain, but at the *situation:* it is the act itself that is important, not its discernible reasons, causes, or motives; and to understand the act is to see its meaning in this particular situation, and the meaning it ultimately confers on the characters and on reality itself. (These are not startlingly new dramatic principles: Shakespeare must have understood them very well. What is probably new in the existentialist theater is the abrupt and unexpected quality of some of the actions.) At any rate, "The Wall" is dramatic in this sense and we are primarily interested in *what* Pablo has done—not why he has done it, or why he thinks he has done it.

It is astonishing how simple it all is when we take this approach. Argument dies away. What Pablo has done is to talk, and thus betray Ramon Gris to the Fascists. It is true that when he sent the soldiers to the cemetery he thought he was telling a lie and expected to be shot within half an hour. It is true that in sending his enemies on a wild-goose chase he thought, at least, that he was mocking at their silly pretensions and his own. (For who will not, in the end, be found in a cemetery?) None of this is important. It is not important whether he talked because he hoped to gain an extra half-hour of life, or simply because he was unstrung with sleeplessness, hunger, and anxiety. It is certainly not important that he wanted to "die decently" and that he was proud of being "hard-headed." What is important is that in this situation (where it was his life or Ramon's) he opened his mouth and sent Ramon to his death. This and this alone is the fundamental meaning of his act.

In this situation, moreover, Pablo ought to have made a resolute, lucid, and single-minded decision not to betray Ramon Gris. Only as long as he had no other choice except *how to die,* could a decision to "die decently" mean simply "to be hard." But as soon as he had a chance to live (by betraying a friend and comrade), the new situation required not a casual assumption that he would not betray Ramon, but a responsible and careful consideration of everything involved, including the one-to-a-thousand chance that a stray remark, like a stray bullet, might have fatal consequences. But in the linen-room all he does is to question the "ludicrous" fact that he does not intend to save his own skin by betraying a comrade.

But if betrayal is the meaning of Pablo's *act* in this situation, what must we say about the man himself? Sartre's morality is clearly more profound than some of his critics have supposed it; but at this point one is tempted to sympathize with his confused and weary protagonist, upon whose shoulders the burden of total responsibility has been so cruelly placed. In actual fact, just how guilty is Pablo? He was completely unaware that Gris had changed his hiding-place. Moreover, there can be no doubt that if the soldiers had not found Gris in the cemetery, they would have returned to Pablo on the double; he

would not have lasted another thirty minutes, as he knew very well. Surely then, one thinks, if this far more probable outcome had taken place, it would be impossible to speak of betrayal.

But on this question it is difficult to misunderstand Sartre's position. As a human being endowed with freedom Pablo is guilty and responsible. He may have been *disclosed* as a squealer only by means of an absurd coincidence, but the act of selfcreation had already taken place. He may have surrendered overtly to the sub-human in the act of speech itself—that uniquely human act; but this surrender had been made inevitable by that moment in the linen-room when, *in failing to decide at all,* he made his crucial decision. In other words Pablo obviously did not make at that time the one authentic decision his situation called for—the unwavering decision to die like a man, in loyalty not only to another man, but (more importantly, for Sartre) to what Sartre calls "the human." If he had done so, *he would have kept his mouth shut later*. Coincidence is always possible, as many a true and tragic story has made clear.

Neither Sartre nor anyone else can ever justify by appeals to reason and logic any obligatory, nonegoistic act—including loyalty and responsibility to others. It is therefore not surprising that in the linenroom the desperately harried and only half-conscious Pablo could think of no *reason* why he should die instead of Gris. Apparently, too, Sartre does not wish his readers to attach undue importance to the loyalist cause as such (it was too mixed in character to be, for all men, the perfect cause of freedom); thus in showing that Pablo himself had lost all political faith as well as personal feeling, Sartre is presenting for our contemplation a naked intuition of value—groundless as all values ultimately are, at least for Sartrean thought. Pablo himself acknowledges this intuition even as he distorts and evades it by calling it "ludicrous . . . stubbornness." And it is evident from the way he tells his story that in his own clouded fashion he is aware that he has betrayed it—betrayed it, somehow, by the subconscious cowardice of his "vermin" body. How else explain his defensive allusions to what he had been through? "They figured that sooner or later people's nerves wear out. . . . I felt very weak."

It is part of Sartre's value as a philosopher that he looks so steadily at the void and yet refuses to make the logical deduction of naturalism: he sees that man is *not* just an animal, and he will not permit him to ride the waves of Nature with an animal's indifference. Meanwhile, from quite another point of view, it is part of Sartre's power as an artist that he feels so keenly and renders so vividly the predicament of men who have already lost (exhausted and confronted with death) all sense of life's reality and value, but who are compelled to decide whether they will live like animals, or die like men in the affirmation of what it means to be human. Yet he is a realistic writer. It is therefore not astonishing that his subject-matter in "The Wall" is not the decision of an authentic man. It is rather the confusion and degradation of an unauthentic man who has failed to decide clearly what he meant by that ambiguous cry: "I didn't want to die like an animal."

Of course no one ever decided clearly and firmly to *live* like an animal—to become an "insect" or a bit of "vermin." But all the same, in failing to make the hard yet necessary decision to die like a man, Pablo has created (and revealed) a "vermin"essence. The

metamorphosis is finally complete. What now emerges is a figure that has haunted prophetic minds from Dostoievsky and Nietzsche to Orwell and Sartre—that was spawned in uncounted thousands in the cities and concentration camps of Occupied Europe, that will return in uncounted thousands when the plague returns—the Underground Man of the twentieth century.

Much of Sartre's mature ethical attitude was forged, in action, during the tense and desperate period of the Occupation. "The Wall," of course, was written one or two years before the fall of France; but for people who were at all aware of events and their meaning the revolt of Franco and his Fascists was already casting over Western civilization an unmistakable warning that the plague had spread and would spread further. For a young artist and philosopher in those years it was not enough to read Heidegger, to plumb the metaphysical abyss, to "open up the depths of existence" while merely reading a book. It was also necessary to explore—to try the implications (for action and experience) of the most desperate thoughts. "The Wall" is thus a penetrating investigation of certain questions that must have been crucial for this metaphysical nihilist who is by no means a moral nihilist—who hates, in fact, the moral and political evils that threaten all men. If the universe does not sustain man, to what extent will man himself sustain the human project? Will the line hold? How much can man—this forlorn and solitary nothingness that he seems to be— how much can he be trusted?

Thus behind the quietly terrible irony of "The Wall" the same theme burns that burns more hopefully in the follow-in passage from *What is Literature?* Here is an eloquent tribute to the heroes of the Resistance, in whose silent and solitary re-invention of the human Sartre's anguished ethic of "total responsibility" seems to have received its finest witness. But although written nearly a decade later than "The Wall" (1947), this piece of rhetoric depends for much of its power upon the imagery of the great story:

But, on the other hand, most of the resisters, though beaten, burned, blinded, and broken, *did not speak.* They broke the circle of Evil and re-affirmed the human—for themselves, for us, and for their very torturers. They did it without witness, without help, without hope, often even without faith. For them it was not a matter of believing in man but of wanting to. Everything conspired to discourage them: so many indications everywhere about them, those faces bent over them, that misery within them. Everything concurred in making them believe that they were only insects, that man is the impossible dream of spies and squealers, and that they would awaken as vermin like everybody else.This man had to be invented with their martyrized flesh, *with their hunted thoughts which were already betraying them*—invented on the basis of nothing, for nothing, in absolute gratuitousness. For it is within the human that one can distinguish means and ends, values and preferences, but they were still at the creation of the world and they had only to decide in sovereign fashion whether there would be anything more than the reign of the animal within it. They remained silent, and man was born of their silence . . .

# Critical Essay #8

It is quite possible that the event related in "The Wall" was an actual occurrence—a legend of the International Brigade that came to Sartre by word of mouth. If so, like a good many less sophisticated narrators of such haunting tales, he may have intended at first merely to show his readers how bravado and loose, irresponsible talk could lead inadvertently to a comrade's death. More profoundly, however, as a maturing existentialist facing Fascism and the oncoming World War, he needed to show that *not to make the authentic decision* is inevitably to make the unauthentic one.

This is always true, as a certain amount of honest self-examination will reveal to anyone; and it is true regardless of how the event turns out. It is likewise true that there is never any radical discontinuity between the moral quality of a decision and the moral quality of the act which flows from it. In other words Pablo's act of speaking would have been a morally degraded act even if Ramon Gris had not been found and killed. But within the limits of the story's action there was only one way for Sartre to objectify this fateful moral continuity between an unauthentic inward decision and the act which follows in its wake. Thus whether he invented the tale out of whole cloth or seized on an actual event to serve his purpose, Sartre had to introduce a leap of visible, ironic meaning across the gulf of chance.

Here we come to our final question about the meaning of Pablo's act. We have examined it for its significance in the dramatic situation; we have examined the significance it gives to the character who acted. And in spite of those critics who have misunderstood the story because of their prior assumptions about Sartre, we have found evidence in Sartre's own writing to support the view that those meanings are, respectively, betrayal and degradation. But what light, if any, is shed by this act—or rather by the dénouement that reveals its nature— upon the ultimate character of reality?

In any plot constructed, as this one is, along lines more or less Aristotelian, the final reversal and recognition should constitute a genuine epiphany of the total action and its meaning. To focus upon this particular denouement is to find it rich yet baf- fling—like reality itself in its multiple suggestiveness and susceptibility to diverse readings. Thus we perceive upon reflection that Sartre has constructed here (or found ready to his hand in actuality) a coincidence that symbolizes subtly yet clearly his own belief that onto the screen of meaningless Nature (the *en soi*, as he calls it), man the creator (the *pour soi*) merely "projects" his own groundless and subjective sense of meaning.

In popular speech we take a somewhat paradoxical attitude toward the term "coincidence." On the one hand we rightly assume that it denotes the product of pure chance—of chance, that is, in a sense in which even a determinist might use the word. In other words the events involved may all be causally determined, but the fact that they coincide to form a certain situational pattern cannot be causally related to the antecedent situational pattern in any intelligible way. Obviously in this sense, except for events that fall together as a result of human planning or the purposeful encounters of

animals, a good deal of what happens with some degree of simultaneity might be said to happen by coincidence. But the fact is that we rarely use the word unless the events that fall together (either simultaneously or in a meaningful series that cannot be causally related) seem to form a pattern too signifi- cant to be ignored.

In actual usage, then, we mean by "coincidence" a kind of correspondence between certain events that cannot be causally related—an acausal *fitness* that, in spite of the absence of causality or human purpose, seems to illuminate the final situation with meaning. Yet the notion of "meaning" remains opaque. Often this is unimportant, since the coincidence is too trivial for the meaning to matter one way or another. In certain cases, however, which are either deeply ironic or startlingly signifi- cant in some other way, the problem of meaning can hardly be overlooked. For by definition both causality and purpose are excluded; yet only causality or purpose can be invoked to give intelligible meaning. Causality alone can explain *how* an event has happened. And if any "why" is conceivable to a finite mind, only purpose in some sense can explain *why*. (Language itself suggests that "purpose" and "meaning" are practically identical.)

In the denouement of "The Wall" the reader feels both elements with paradoxical force: ironic significance and brute unintelligibility. So great is the element of ironic appropriateness that if one has understood the story as a whole it seems almost incredible that there should *not* be a purposeful connection between Pablo's words and Ramon's hiding-place. On first reading, to be sure, what creates a shock of surprise is the gulf between Pablo's assumption that he will not betray Ramon and what actually happens. But on closer reading and reflection one sees that it was inevitable, given his failure in the linen-room to make the authentic choice, that Pablo should be sub-human later in his dull, malicious amusement and self-centered indifference to Ramon's fate. This has meaning—the deepening meaning of moral blindness and a clouded sense of reality; thus it would hardly have been our key if Pablo had "ratted" consciously rather than unconsciously. Yet in spite of this moral appropriateness, the event itself remains unintelligible. Unless we attribute it to some form of cosmic meaning or purpose (as Sartre vehemently would not), it is impossible to explain or find objective significance *in the sheer fact that the coincidence occurred*—in the raw, improbable fact, that is, that Pablo's words sped home with such deadly accuracy.

A quasi-causal explanation for the event is that when two minds are caught in similar predicaments they very reasonably may follow a grimly similar train of thought. But what happens here, be it noted, is even on this theory no less a genuine "coincidence." It is true that Pablo's nocturnal meditations on death might well have led him to think about the cemetery. The idea comes to him with explosive suddenness when he is exhausted and on the verge of hysteria ("I felt like laughing, but I restrained myself because I was afraid that if I started, I wouldn't be able to stop"); but although there is no evidence that it had occurred to him before, it is a perfectly natural consequence of what he has already thought and felt. Ramon Gris, on the other hand, was in a different situation. There is no reason to suppose that Ramon had been thinking about death. He was a brave man in a tight spot, looking for a practical hideout. His reasons for choosing the cemetery had to do with survival possibilities, not with any contemplation of the graves themselves. Thus Ramon's choice of the cemetery as a place to stay alive in is quite

unrelated to Pablo's thought of it as the place of death—*if such a thought was indeed the reason for the latter's spontaneous but deadly shot in the dark.* This theory leaves unexplained the fact that Pablo's words match Ramon's whereabouts. In the world of events, that is to say, which can be causally explained, and of actions that derive their meaning from conscious human purpose, this event has no more meaning than any stray bullet against which a responsible officer ought to take precautions for the safety of his men.

If my analysis of the moral significance of "The Wall" is at all adequate, it would seem that Sartre meant the objective betrayal of Ramon Gris as a disclosure of Pablo's inner betrayal of the human. (There is a vivid hint of this intention in the rat that darts out as Pablo goes to his talk with the officers.) Metaphysically, however, the denouement is an epiphany in a further sense: it becomes an image of Sartre's uncompromising view that meanings are not discovered in extra-human reality but projected by man onto the meaningless external world. It is like Sartre's universe, in other words— at once meaningless yet potentially meaningful to the subjectivity of the observer. Or we might com pare it to a Rorschach test in its demand that the reader (or for that matter, Pablo) project upon it his own awareness of significance. On Sartre's terms there is no intelligible relation between Pablo's inner failure and the fact that his stupid words hit the mark; but again, as in the linen-room scene, our moralist is appealing not to the nature of things but to a naked and groundless intuition of value. If we have understood Pablo's failure we project upon the denouement that sense of ironic fitness which in my opinion the author meant for it to evoke. If not, we see it as a piece of absurd chance.

# Critical Essay #9

And there the matter might rest, if Sartre's evident intention could exhaust the meaning of "The Wall." But in the formal structure of the story, and the sensitive accuracy of his description of Pablo's experiences in the death cell and later, the artist has powerfully (though unwittingly, to be sure) suggested a very different interpretation. No doubt because, as a creator, he is subliminally aware of certain realities he cannot accept as a thinker, Sartre has symbolized here not only man's inescapably solitary ego but that profound and inescapable link with others which is equally man's destiny. And instead of the meaningless world of Sartrean thought he conveys to the reflective reader a suspicion that the universe *may* be expressive of stern and sometimes fateful meanings.

One reason why Sartre has fallen into this trap of his own making is to be found in the very nature of literary form. The structure of a literary work is calculated to evoke an intuition of the work's meaning— and not merely the *work's* meaning: signifi- cant form has metaphysical implications and points to the world as the writer sees it. Thus if he wants to express a vision of an irrational or meaningless world, the writer must avoid any conclusion that flows meaningfully from what goes before it—a fact which the dramatists of the absurd and the "Anti-Story" writers seem to understand very well. In this connection one recalls Aristotle's argument (*Poetics* XXIV, 10) that if what is irrational or highly improbable is ever used by a writer, it should either lie outside the action altogether (as in the antecedent circumstances of the *Oedipus*) or else appear so early in the plot, and be so cunningly veiled and succeeded by probabilities, that the reader forgets the absurd link in the chain of events. As the denouement approaches, Aristotle implies, events must seem increasingly probable, so that the catastrophe carries great conviction.

This argument makes good aesthetic sense (for everyone but the most recalcitrant absurdist) simply because experience itself is "probable." But no one who has reflected long on the power of "The Wall" is going to argue Aristotle's point against it. For Sartre has so thoroughly prepared us for his "coincidence" (although it surprises us) that we agree quite literally with Garcia the baker that it "had to happen." This reaction may be instructively compared with the one we would have if Pablo were liberated by an earthquake, or rescued by Loyalist troops. And the upshot is that the denouement has much of the same power and look of cosmic irony as does the revelation of destiny (so often miscalled fatalism) in the *Oedipus*. If so devastating an irony seems inevitable, it is as though the universe itself had spoken—as though what happened were somehow a touch of stern reproof from the *rerum natura,* a revelation from the inner depths of Being.

This brings us to a second, but closely interrelated, reason for the story's curious contradiction of everything the author believes: the psychological accuracy and realism with which Pablo's inner states are described. Pablo is depicted as obviously in a state of dissociation accompanied by a regression of libido into the "unconscious." He loathes his "vermin-body" as if it were wholly alien to himself and finds everything in his past

(and in his present situation) shadowy and unreal. Shock and repressed terror can easily explain this dissociated condition: *repressed* terror, because he is brave and tough, and pride is a powerful censor; shock, because he is facing the starkness of death as a vital creature still full of zest and desire. (And although he is exhausted and sleepless throughout the story, he has not been physically injured in any way.) Therefore all this former libido—all this primitive will to live—does not perish. It simply "regresses"; that is, it drops out of conscious awareness to a level where it can activate (and enlist in the interest of sheer animal survival) his subliminal vital intelligence. In connection with subliminal activation it will be recalled that he has been questioned about Ramon Gris just before he is condemned to death, and this fact too may well drop out of consciousness to serve the same cunning vital purpose.

This seems to be a classically favorable situation for the occurrence of "unconscious" extrasensory knowledge or perception—a spontaneous flash of clairvoyance, perhaps, or telepathy. For there is general agreement that states of dissociation— voluntary or involuntary, normal or pathological— are favorable to the extra-sensory facul ties; and that telepathic communication between minds frequently depends on some powerful bond between the persons—whether of permanent relationship or temporary interest. And meanwhile, in his extremity, Ramon Gris has been thinking of Pablo: how often or how fleetingly does not matter— what matters is the conjunction of their vital interests. "I would have hidden at Ibbieta's," Garcia quotes him as saying (for he had hidden there before), "but since they've got him I'll go hide in the cemetery." No wonder Pablo in the linen-room feels "a strange sort of cheerfulness": this is how a man would feel if some connection had been made and he suddenly "knew" (without having to face it) the way out of his predicament—a way, that is, which would satisfy his vital desire and at the same time get past the censor at the gate of consciousness.

It is difficult to believe that Sartre did not intend to suggest this interpretation of his story. Yet it seems impossible to believe that he did intend it. It is well known that he has categorically rejected the hypothesis of the "unconscious": everything which a depth-psychologist of any school would explain in terms of that marvelously purposeful (and sometimes incredibly creative) inner self Sartre would explain as sheer spontaneity. And as for ESP, a closely related topic, he would undoubtedly reject such para-normal means of knowledge as completely incredible and illusory. This is a perfectly logical position for an avowed phenomenologist to take; it is even more consistent with his basic view of the isolated ego confronting a meaningless world. In fact, although some parapsychologists and many Freudian psychiatrists may call themselves naturalists, no purely naturalistic thinker is going to be comfortable with any explanation based on ESP, at least if he pursues with any rigor the implications of his world outlook.

Yet I believe that if we knew "The Wall" to be a faithful record of someone's actual experience (as it might well be), we should all be forced to choose, regardless of our theological and philosophical differences on other points, between two basic interpretations of the "coincidence" involved. Either what happened to Pablo is a strange case of blind chance in the external world—an event on which we merely project our sense of his inner moral degradation; or it is truly—indeed *literally*—a revelation from the depths of things. To elect the first alternative does not require a

Sartrean vision of reality. Neither Christians, agnostics, nor "atheists" are as such committed to belief or disbelief in paranormal cognition, or the unconscious either, for that matter. Yet the empirical evidence in favor of both is massive and impressive; so that more than a half century of experiment, in this country and abroad, as well as personal experience (the mystery of certain dreams, to cite only the least remarkable factor), has forced more or less unwilling belief on countless minds.

For the benefit of those who believe (or would like to believe) in a spiritual reality transcending the confines of time, space, and causality, the evidence of ESP research suggests a universe quite different from Sartre's picture of it. Hopeless schizophrenics are usually more telepathically receptive than normal people, at least according to Jan Ehrenwald, a psychiatrist who has investigated the subject pretty thoroughly. Lovers seem exceptionally open to telepathic communication with one another; and the verdict of the laboratories at Duke and elsewhere is that experimenters usually get positive results in proportion to their shared interest in the experiments. Moreover, the intensity of extra-sensory experience is quite independent of space—of the distance between the subjects; and perhaps of time as well—since in several well-documented cases a message has been received *before* it was (at least consciously) sent.

Although the saints, mystics, and yogins of every religion are said to be exceptionally telepathic and clairvoyant, it seems clear that in the majority of these mysterious manifestations of ESP faculties there is nothing strikingly "spiritual." For in their periods of dissociation (from momentary absentmindedness and hypnagogic drifting, to mediumistic weakness, states of exhaustion or senility, and the chronic deliriums of schizophrenia) quite ordinary people seem strangely open to accidental invasions from other minds. And in the concentrated concerns and loves of their waking consciousness some of them, at least, seem strangely able to get through to others. People are normally separated from one another by a hard, protective wall of ego. But if the above-mentioned evidence is valid, one conclusion seems almost unavoidable. There must be some literal truth behind Donne's great phrase, "No man is an island"—behind even the great *Tat tuam asi* ("That art thou") which rings through all the Upanishads. In other words there must be some more or less impersonal psychic matrix where under certain conditions the mind of one person may touch the mind of another. The implications here for any genuine ethic of human solidarity stagger the imagination.

"*The Wal*l" seems to be a startling symbolic image of precisely this kind of human solidarity. Why not, Pablo had asked himself, betray Gris? The true answer (which he could not hear because his hard ego could not pay attention to it) seems to have come at the very moment of the question. *Because he is here, he is part of you, part of your life, he trusts you, he touches you even now in the depths of your being*. "That art Thou." But Pablo did not himself break through or over-pass the wall of silly egoistic pride; and the reality he could not face was forced upon him, as if in this situation the wall was tunneled-under by unconscious drives. Had he died, silent, in willed loyalty to what was human in his relationship to Gris, he might have seen—in the lucid moment before death—the fathomless nature of his solidarity with friend and enemy alike. The reality that is in fact revealed to him has become a scourge: knowledge of the depths of his animal will to go on living.

Sartre would reject this view of his story and of human solidarity. But he has spoken so deeply to our time because his world of walled-in egos is the world we seem for the most part to be living in. In such a world, he tells us, the seeker for authentic being must strive (and strive *alone*) to bring to light his own *me*—a quest even Sartre admits is hopeless. And though he never says so, I suspect he knows why it is hopeless. In No Exit , for example, his true subject is the relation—*in this world*—of one egoconsciousness to another. Here the hard, predatory "Look of the Other" is the one essential impact of any personality upon another; and yet these totally unauthentic beings are driven again and again to impale themselves upon that look, seeking selfknowledge and deepened being there because they can never find it in themselves.

We recognize a frightful truth in *No Exit.* Hell is the only perfect image for a world of isolated, alienated egos, who continue to need one another desperately and yet can never achieve a genuine "I and thou" relationship. Yet it was Sartre who invented this image, who found it out, who gave it its true name. In *No Exit* there is of course no exit from this perversion of true Being: this is the eternal human condition. But "The Wall" is an even greater and more significant work because it was written, I believe, out of a deeper concern for the undefaced human image. Like all tragedy, it suggests the author's ideal only by means of failure and defeat. But it also conveys the greater truth which Sartre has always rejected.

**Source:** Rebecca E. Pitts, "'The Wall': Sartre's Metaphysical Trap," in *Hartford Studies in Literature*, Vol. VI, No. 1, 1974, pp. 29-54.

# Adaptations

"The Wall" was adapted into a movie in France in 1967.

# Topics for Further Study

Look at paintings depicting elements of the Spanish Civil War, such as Pablo Picasso's *Guernica,* Joan Miro's *Black and Red* series, or Robert Motherwell's *Elegy to the Spanish Republic.* What do these works of art say about the Spanish Civil War? Is their message similar or different from the views expressed in "The Wall"?

Many noted Spaniards died during the war, including the poets Federico Garcia Lorca and Miguel Hernandez. Read the works of some Spanish writers from the 1930s. How do these writers depict Spain at that time? What were their views on the Spanish Civil War?

Find accounts of the Spanish Civil War in magazines and newspapers from the 1930s. Does Sartre's portrayal of the war seem accurate? Why or why not?

Investigate Sartre's philosophy of existentialism. Then use what you have learned to analyze "The Wall" from an existentialist point of view.

Read another fictionalized account of the Spanish Civil War, such as Andre Malraux's *Man's Hope* or Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls.* Compare that work to "The Wall."

# Compare and Contrast

**1930s:** Spain's government experiences a complete upheaval. After King Alfonso abdicates the throne in 1931, the country becomes a republic. The democratic government, however, is challenged by the Falange Party, or the Nationalists. This struggle for power leads to the Spanish Civil War, which lasts from 1936-1939. Eventually the fascist forces win the civil war and establish a dictatorship.

**Today:** Spain remains a democratic government with a parliamentary monarchy. At least seven major political parties (or party coalitions) participate in the government. Several extremist political groups continue to exist, such as the First of October Antifascist Resistance Group, which uses terrorism to oppose the government.

**1930s:** The 1930s was a decade filled with international aggression and war: Japan invades China in 1931, Italy invades Ethiopia in 1935, and the Spanish Civil War lasts from 1936 through 1939. Under Adolf Hitler, Germany annexes Austria and the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia. Germany also attacks Poland in 1939, the action that starts World War II.

**Today:** Fighting erupts between Muslim Croatians and Bosnian Serbs in the former Yugoslavia. Ireland also experiences violent con- flict as the Irish Republican Army and the Protestants battle. Many other regional conflicts threaten international security.

**1930s:** After several devastating years of civil war, Spain's economy is in shambles. Many years pass before the economy recovers.

**Today:** Spain is one of the leading economic powers of Western Europe and a member of the European Economic Community.

**1930s:** France, like many other European nations, attempts to keep out of international affairs. The government refuses to get involved in the Spanish Civil War or in Italy's invasion and takeover of Ethiopia. Only Germany's aggression in Poland draws France into action and war.

**Today:** In the 1990s the French government makes major military contributions to multinational peacekeeping operations in Lebanon and Bosnia. France also participates in the international coalition against Iraq during the Persian Gulf War.

# What Do I Read Next?

Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls,* first published in 1940, is the story of an American teacher fighting in the Spanish Civil War. The novel chronicles the tumultuous events of a seventy-two hour period.

Sartre's *Nausea* (American translation, 1949) uses the "found" journal of Roquentin to explore one man's metaphysical search for his place in the world.

Sartre's short story collection, *The Wall and Other Stories,* presents five stories that explore aspects of Sartre's philosophy.

Stephen Crane's Civil War novel, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1893), depicts the violent experiences of a young soldier. Crane's writing style challenges the reader to judge Henry's responses to his experiences.

# Further Study

Gerassi, John. *Jean-Paul Sartre, Conscience of His Century: Protestant or Protester?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

The first volume of a two-volume set covers Sartre's early life. It is the only authorized biography of Sartre.

Mangini-Gonzalez, Shirley. *Memories of Resistance: Women's Voice From the Spanish Civil War,* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995.

This well-researched book explores women's role in the Spanish Civil War.

Palmer, Donald. *Sartre for Beginners,* New York: Writers and Readers Publishing, Inc., 1995.

This book provides an accessible yet sophisticated introduction to the life and works of Jean-Paul Sartre. It includes a glossary, bibliography, and biographical section.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness,* New York: Washington Square Press, 1992.

Sartre outlines his philosophy of existentialism.

—. *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, edited by Robert Denoon Cumming, New York: Vintage Books, 1968.

A collection of Sartre's major philosophical works, drawing on texts from throughout his career.

Thomas, Hugh. *The Spanish Civil War,* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994.

Provides a detailed and vivid account of the war years.

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Argyros, Alexander J. "The Sense of Ending: Sartre's 'The Wall,'" in *Modern Language Studies,* 1988, Summer, pp. 46-52.

Bourjaily, Vance. *The San Francisco Chronicle,* December 19, 1948, p. 12.

Camus, Albert. *Lyrical and Critical Essays,* translated by Ellen Conroy Kennedy, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969.

Cranston, Maurice. *Jean-Paul Sartre,* New York: Grove Press, 1962.

*The New Yorker,* December 18, 1948, p. 107.

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**Introduction**

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

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Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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