

Sartre, “The Wall” and “Existentialism and Human Emotions”

Sartre comes later in the ‘existentialist tradition’, and was a contemporary of Camus. The two are said to have run in the same circles until Sartre joined the Communist Party in France.

“The Wall” can be said, I think, to invite the reader to actually experience the psychological transformation of a man into an ‘absurd hero’. Consider the following key passages:

He had a terrible fear of suffering, it was all he thought about: it was his age. I never thought much about it and it wasn’t fear of suffering that made me sweat. (7)

There’s a suggestion that *some* kind of fear may account for Pablo’s sweating. Notice that it will be very difficult to articulate what that fear is... (fear of *nothing*?)

(Tom) “I tell myself there will be nothing afterwards. But I don’t understand what it means... I’ve got to think... think that I won’t see anything any more and the world will go on for the others. We aren’t made to think that Pablo. Believe me: I’ve already stayed up a whole night waiting for something. But this isn’t the same: this will creep up behind us, Pablo, and we won’t be able to prepare for it.” (8)

The recognition of mortality serves as the catalyst for the transformation of each of the three prisoners (Pablo, Tom (the Irishman) and Juan (the innocent brother)). Here it seems that Tom is aware of the tension between objective and subjective perspectives that Nagel discusses in his writing. It’s incredibly difficult, and perhaps even impossible, to actually imagine the world without your subjectivity in it.

(F)or the past 24 hours I had lived next to Tom, I had listened to him, I had spoken to him and I knew we had nothing in common. And now we looked as much alike as twin brothers, simply because we were going to die together. (9)

Although revolted, Pablo recognizes death here as the ‘great equalizer’. He has a similar moment of recognition later, when he is brought before the cigar-smoking officials. He knows now that we all share the same fate. It is this fate that simultaneously leads him to conclude that none of his previous life’s experiences or concerns are meaningful any longer.

How madly I ran after happiness, after women, after liberty...I took everything as seriously as if I were immortal. At that moment I felt that I had my whole life in front of me and I thought, “It’s a damned lie.” It was worth nothing because it was finished... death had disenchanting everything. (11)

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In the state I was in, if someone had come and told me I could go home quietly, that they would leave me my life whole, it would have left me cold: several hours or several years of waiting is all the same when you have lost the illusion of your being eternal. (12)

Here the narrator seems fairly committed to the claim that openly and honestly recognizing your mortality will necessarily involve a component of despair—a loss of meaning. This is in keeping with Sartre's broader views. But remember that Sartre thinks that this is the only way that a *really* meaningful life can emerge. The 'illusion of your being eternal' gets in the way of honestly recognizing your freedom, of honestly recognizing your own responsibility for your life.

I wanted to scream and tear out my hair. But I gritted my teeth and pushed my hands in my pockets because I wanted to stay clean. (14)

This motif is repeated a few times. I think that this may mark the turning point where Pablo becomes the absurd hero. He decides to embrace his situation, and respond in a manner of his own choosing. He has no illusions that he can change his fate, but he does seem hell-bent on remaining true to his *response* to that fate.

These men dolled up with their riding crops and boots were still going to die. A little later than I, but not too much... Their little activities seemed shocking and burlesqued to me; I couldn't put myself in their place, I thought they were insane... All his gestures were calculated to give him the look of a live and ferocious beast. (15)

Note the *freedom* that comes with Pablo's recognition of his mortality. He can no longer take seriously the 'authority' of his oppressors. Their tools of oppression (whips, boots, etc.) seem silly and calculated. Pablo sees them as sharing his won fate—with respect to death, they are in no position of power whatsoever. This leads to his mocking them moments later.

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... Yet I was there, I could save my skin and give up Gris and I refused to do it. I found that somehow comic; it was obstinacy. I thought, "I must be stubborn!" And a droll sort of gaiety spread over me. (16)

Here Pablo has fully become the absurd hero. His fate is his own—he has chosen it, even though he didn't have legitimate options to do otherwise. Like Camus' Sisyphus, Pablo's stubbornness enables his to laugh in the face of his inevitable demise.

Still, the same question lingers with me as the one I have when I read the Myth of Sisyphus: What is Pablo to do *now*? What kind of a life will this be? A life defined by obstinacy? Is this what we really *want*? Is it some sort of consolation prize (quite literally, in this case)? Is Sartre committed to the view that this is really the best we can hope for?

“Existentialism and Human Emotions” suggests that the answer is yes. Here Sartre says that the recognition of our responsibility for our own choices leads to ‘anguish’. Since “man *is* anguish” (my italics), this is no little thing. We can’t become fully human until we experience this. We must recognize that our “existence precedes essence”, however painful it must be to do so. While other objects come into being only after their purpose has been established (I have the idea of a stapler first, and the *then* I make the stapler), we come into existence with no externally-determined purpose at all. Even if we take a theistic view (which Sartre does not), we are faced with the same anguish. Of the claim, “God has a plan for me”, I am inevitably faced with the question, “How do I know?” The leap of faith required here *is* my moment of choice, and I must embrace it in the same spirit, and with the same anguish.