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The Wall and the Changing Perception of Death in Confinement

Farah Al-Shamali

Student, Department of English Language and Literature,
Kuwait University, Kuwait

Abstract:

*The short story *The Wall* by Jean-Paul Sartre complicates and changes the perception of mortality as the reader peers into the futility of life from the vantage point of the main character. Pablo Ibbieta, in what is likely to be his last night on earth, wades through the little hours left of his existence, pondering the beginning of death within life. The Sartrean notion around essence and how it precedes existence is central to the plot, in addition to how the soul is imprisoned by the body, which has its mental faculties degraded in an ever-tightening spatiality. This paper discusses, through key events of the narrative and the articulations around them, how the mind comes to perceive death in a space of incarceration, the creation of a dualistic reality in that situation and death as the great equalizer. What begins to emerge is the concept around the theatricality of life, with the reader gleaned with more immediacy the meaning of moral consequences and what the narrator must likely do as far as either accepting his present being or liberating himself from it.*

Keywords: Jean-Paul Sartre, existentialism, existence and essence, prison literature, freedom

1. Introduction

Stepping into the constricted space of a prison cell immediately shifts any perception that one might have of the phenomenon of being and effectively warps it. This becomes so colossal a change that the condition of nothingness, usually thought of as the absence of life, is inverted, and man now comes to the realization of free consciousness. It very well might, and expectedly, be that the layman wonders how there can possibly exist in confinement such a radical overturn of all that life is meant to represent. The truth, however, is that it had always been sustained, but humanity never cared to grasp it, only being pressed to do so in the presence of an abrupt threat. A concept of this nature is the central preoccupation of *The Wall*, a short story by French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, delving into the devolving mental state of a prisoner of conscience. This paper seeks to clarify how the human attitude that is exhibited towards impending death throughout the jarring experience of imprisonment is distinct from the person who has freedom. It will show how the sensation initially starts in the mind before beginning to affect materiality. Through the thoughts and actions of the main character, it will be argued that he creates a dualistic reality surrounding death, with the first being his metaphysical demise as soon as his spatiality is altered and the second how the nonchalant mindset that emerges changes his reaction to physical death.

The methodology to be used is made up of the exposition of three essential points which revolve around the actualization of this dual existence when the inmate is locked away and hence dehumanized prominently featured in the tale. Before all else, and in direct correlation with what a Sartrean conceptualization is, there is stripping away of the essence once the prospect of creating oneself is no longer a possibility. Everything greatly changes afterwards as the sense of meaning that he held at one point in time becomes fragile. Next comes conceding and thereby losing sight of the illusion of timelessness peddled in everyday life by those who are enamored with the ecstasy of being on the other side of prison walls. The realities that are persisting on either end are suddenly equal to the extent that society which supposedly lays claim to autonomy is nothing more than a detention center. Lastly, an acceptance of the inevitability of death takes hold regardless of where a person finds himself, forming a connective thread with those who are not in his predicament. No matter who someone is, the bitter end will catch up to the subject, and what is able to console the person who is persecuted for non-violent expression is that he died for a worthy cause. Something that is important to draw attention to connected to this triad of aspects is the level of urgency becoming automatically heightened when the prisoner is killed and not just incarcerated. It thrusts him into a different mental state, thus generating a condition that allows him, at a much more accelerated pace, to reach the ability to discover and harness inner strength in addition to gaining wisdom. Knowing that he will imminently taste death can conjure many other ideological manifestations emerging out of that solemn understanding. Being aware of this detail is key to rationalizing what Sartre has taken place in this account of prison writing and why it is punctuated with an existential sensibility, causing the protagonist to question all.

2. The Wall by Jean-Paul Sartre's Short Story Synopsis

Set during the Spanish Civil War that started in 1936 lasting for three years, the short story begins with the dilemma of three prisoners who are being held captive by Falangist forces under the control of Dictator Francisco Franco. An interrogation is carried out in haste, resulting in the sentencing of death by firing squad for the group of which only one of them is intimately known to the reader. He is a member of the International Brigade Pablo Ibbieta, and the narrator proceeds to recount the last night of his life. Before he is left to confront his fate, the judges at the trial demand to know the whereabouts of their fugitive colleague Ramon Gris, but he claims to have no idea whatsoever. The long night is an eventful one, with his fellow captives, Juan Mirbal and Tom Steinbock, darting back and forth between various dispositions. It is the latter who exhibits signs of utter dread, proclaiming his innocence and appearing terrified of what is to come at the break of day. Constantly talking is what keeps Tom preoccupied, and Pablo surmises it is to make light of his predicament and avoid the subject of death. The protagonist, in the same vein, tries to think of something other than his approaching doom, briefly getting lost in the past; however, it is devoid of meaning. Gradually, as he prepares himself for the end, he becomes increasingly disconnected from the world and who he was living in it. His comrades are soon summarily executed, and he wants to act out but resolves to remain composed. Officers come into the picture and take him to a room just as death is edging closer, offering to let him go if he reveals where Ramon is still, but he refuses. Finally, he decides to lie, telling them that his friend is hiding in the cemetery. This commutes his case to a regular tribunal. The associate he tried to protect is found in a twist of fate, having sadly left his safehouse due to an argument to take cover in the very location Pablo said he would be in. A baker whom the narrator knows sees him that evening and breaks the incredible news. He passes out and is sitting on the ground when he comes around, laughing so uncontrollably at this stunning event that tears come to his eyes.

3. A Changed Outlook on Death in the Incarcerated Mind

Discussing the first point means comprehending that something is altered in the mind of the prisoner the moment he is made to confront the reality of a looming death. The very first step that materializes as he moves closer to his fate is the obvious shock of it all and how this mishap befell him. After this sentiment wears off and with the passage of time, what will consume the convict is the feeling that nothing seems to or ever did matter. This is what the short story refers to in the Sartrean tradition and is illustrated in several instances of poignancy when the miserable protagonist declares that the life he had lived was deeply deceitful. Being thrown into the world, he was fed the lie that perhaps identity or any sort of value was inherent in the fact of his being, but that narrative unraveled behind bars. While there, he quickly realizes that "I had spent my time counterfeiting eternity, I had understood nothing...at that moment I felt that I had my whole life in front of me and I thought, it is a damned lie. It was worth nothing because it was finished" (Sartre 9), so he ceases to believe in his supposed inward essence. A falsity of this sort cannot be sustained henceforth because existence, the prerequisite to be able to stage this fashioning of self over time, will end by daybreak. The absence of this grand philosophy of sorts clears the path towards the descent into mental chaos that ensues. Any fear that he usually would have harbored when it came to the grim matter of death turns into indifference since well before he perishes physically, he had already crossed over to the afterlife. He had succumbed to the psychological change stirring inside of him. What it has done is ever so swiftly move the prisoner from a place of life to metaphysical death. He is no longer part of the living, and this affects how he encounters mortality as the physical ending of his time on earth is not new but a pointed continuation of what had begun in his mind. It is thus not surprising that apathy ceases to be an emotion he expresses.

The reason why this loss of self is so very quickly accelerated has everything to do with the limited spatiality that impresses the inmate when the stable social arrangements and familiarity that defined his life are violently taken away. It is sociologically destabilizing to the point that registering this new normal never truly comes to fruition. The objective held by the facility is not to allow him the mental capacity to embrace a different character that can perhaps grapple with the harsh realities at work. Quite the reverse, it is to create such an incredulous cognitive shift by at once erecting a barrier between him and the outside world that the absolute only possible response is devolving into madness. It is seen that Pablo has even less time to take in this brutality, so his impasse is all the more cruel and causes him greater detriment. An answer is given by Erving Goffman, who discusses the impact that the total institution will have on the incarcerated individual fenced in a regimented way of life for "he begins a series of abasements, degradations, humiliations, and profanations of self" effectively destroying inner strength and "his self is systematically, if often unintentionally, mortified. He begins some radical shifts in his moral career, a career composed of the progressive changes that occur in the beliefs that he has concerning himself and significant others" (14). A linkage can be traced between the downright debasement of a moral career, and the realization that essence thought to once characterize a life is mere trickery when he crosses over the threshold. The space that he finds himself in is founded upon the tenets of dehumanization, and he overtly practices it because it is not in the interest of the jailer to be impartial. This is an affirmation of the worthlessness of the subject. The power that is exercised by the oppressor in this sense of colonizing the mind is so great that not a mere portion but the entirety of his life is discredited. He reaches back into his past, every relationship, be it familial or otherwise, small victories and occasional transgressions, only to recognize that he never ought to have lived. The constrictions of the total institution housing Pablo, if only for a day, not only comprise the spatial reality that tells him of his triviality but cement it with the sentence condemning him to death. So his mind works at an even faster pace than the hours until his untimely end, and he figuratively hands himself over to the hereafter before shots are fired.

So, the reality of existence is seriously challenged when the essence is found to be of little to no consequence, and this leaves no other possibility than belittling death itself. It has always been a perplexing philosophical question, and here, Sartre presents a character who approaches it with relative nonchalance. The purpose is fairly simple to a degree, as far as Pablo is concerned, and it is that the pomp and circumstance of being was a farce, including what it constituted of the

search for the self. This is another manic quest that many a philosopher may have regarded as Western culture being obsessed with itself and exhibiting a steady rise in narcissism. Within the central space of the short story, that being the prison cell, is the ability to lay this deception bare because there is an inability to run away from it quickly. Everything else is disconnected there; all of the empty luxuries and frivolities of life do not make an appearance. He is free and clear to ponder the very legitimacy of being before finally concluding that it holds no importance. Such is the argument made by Debosmita Biswas, who speaks of his sharp mental decline, "but it is this nothingness which is also nourishing his personhood as he is trying to meditate upon the meaning of his existence. Death, thus, is not a mere physical death that Sartre is describing through Pablo. However, he is portraying the collapse of Pablo's ideas about the very nature and essence of existence, time, and relationship with the other and oneself in the face of physical death" (132). Therefore, death and existence can be considered one and the same so much that transitioning from one to the other is seamless. It is simply going from a metaphysical to physical death. So it most certainly follows that this would culminate in his changed perception as morning creeps closer and brings the inevitable. He is dying once more and thus will not react as if this were new.

4. Life is Nothing but a Horrid Dream in a Dualism That Ensnares the Living

The second point portraying the dualistic reality of the existential hero shows him fully losing sight of the delusion that is life and the many ways in which it is, in fact, shallow. Nothing is to be gained from engaging with it, and the prisoner of conscience, in the process of his mental breakdown and as part of the psychological portrait drawn, internalizes the hatred he now has for the supposed gift of being. Closed off as he is in the surrounding environment of the prison cell only serves to facilitate and exacerbate that dismissal. The space and spatiality around him make his presence on this earth from then on until he is no longer a committed image of pure rejection and repudiation of the outside world. As he works through his evolving thoughts on the state of existence, he says it outright, not mincing words, as is his custom that "several hours or several years of waiting is all the same when you have lost the illusion of being eternal. I clung to nothing; in a way, I was calm. 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" (10) and this is due to successfully disassociating his mind from the body that pathetically lingers waiting for physical death. His brain is privy to the great illusion that he mulls over and hence has a disposition of virtual calm, but the same cannot be said for his body, which hangs in the balance. However, his awareness of the illusion that confounded him for many years after the tribulations of confinement is enough to take him over the edge between the world of the living and the dead. He realizes that his beating heart and blood coursing through his veins are part of a lowly peripheral existence so death will not numb and alarm him, acting instead almost like a relief. Knowing that the totality of his life had fed him the fantasy of living forever altered his view of the sting of his coming demise by mentally preparing him for it.

Combining the desolation of the total institution with the coming certainty of death was fruitful as far as allowing him to see through to the absurdity of life that may not have been as philosophically rendered if his stay was a prolonged one. It is a statement that cannot be made conclusively but nonetheless encompasses a crux of truth at the very least. There exist prisoners of conscience who emerge on the other end of that traumatic experience with their sanity somewhat intact in the sense that they can slowly be reintegrated into society. Time, though, is a fickle friend for most as this weaker group falls under the crushing power it retains, and soon enough, they are case studies in mental deterioration. When the reader considers Pablo and his situation, there is considerable sympathy, to be sure, but also a degree of ease because of the clarity that he is able to reach by separating his mind from his body. This idea can be clarified by reacting to a central tenet of Foucauldian thought when the philosopher spoke of the imprisoned man of good intent whom the general public is invited to free, except he "is already in himself the effect of a subjection much more profound than himself...the soul is the prison of the body" (30) so the tightening spatiality of the prison does nothing to jolt the inmate. There is, of course, truth to his tracing of the origins of discipline, granted what Sartre brings to bear with the interplay of being and death can be said to objectively dispute the totalizing and dehumanizing impact of internment. In his reference to the modern system of discipline, it is vital to note what Michel Foucault calls the shift of punishment from concentrating on the body to giving greater attention to the soul. Then again, the short story introduces a character who does not need to contend with this attempt at control, given that his psyche and consciousness are freed from his physical makeup. The structure that has made the body a prison for the soul is a historical reality and the effect of relations of power, but the conversation decidedly shifts when death is brought into the fold. It is a singularly exceptional situation that, in a moment of certain foreboding, is tinged with an equal amount of clarity, if not more so. The soul cannot at all be pinned down when the rush of that awakening is experienced by the convict, and he is carried off into another place as a result. It creates a continuity of death, and before he is led off to meet his fate, his body confines nothing, becoming a hollow shell.

Having lived life as if he were immortal in the past, it is clear that the protagonist is very overwhelmed by the fact of his own wretched mortality and what it carries. Time and space in prison are nothing if not elements that are conducive to the shrinking of the capacity to emote and perceptively reason. It basically takes away any semblance of an identity. Looking into and surmising the inner workings of how Pablo even came upon the revelatory notion of his existence being an illusion is surely telling. His dwindling mental state may take up the hours leading up to his death, but what is important to remember is that it begins and is tied to his body in a causal relationship. This is a process that has everything to do with the placing of a boundary on and restricting the movement of the incarcerated. When the body that is constantly in motion suddenly confronts a carceral lifestyle, it must concede to the mind that overcompensates for radical development. The mental state descends into a place of nothingness; however, this is not the reason for lamentation as far as the protagonist is concerned. It is clear the narrative means it as an act of liberation, and the cycle is

finally complete when the mind now circles back to the affected body, completely numb to what will soon befall it. He is able to converse with and talk sense to himself, leaving behind his fellow inmates, and in so doing, realizes that he wants to understand his life given that he has not died yet. A key point is made by Alexander J. Argyros, illustrating his dilemma by calling attention to a pivotal view by the author as "Sartre argues that although one's death is, in principle, non-experienceable and consequently not something that can be anticipated, an exception is possible in a number of special cases, among them that of one condemned to death" (47) and this condemnation changes his outlook. It opens his eyes to the illusion that has plagued him, and he is consequently able to experience death in life. Realizing that existence, which he thought would have no end soon, would afford him the agency to cut it short and perceive mortality as an opportunity to rid himself of the idea of being in which he has terrible faith.

5. What Death as the Great Equalizer Makes of the Fragility of Life

With the third point comes the contemplation of death as the great equalizer, no matter how hierarchical the relations of power seem to the prisoner of conscience, and this perception is arguably what allows the narrator to grasp the theatricality of life. The cold and dark cell that holds him is central to this consideration for what it accomplished as a paradoxical space, at once isolating him and providing philosophical lucidity. It, on the one hand, institutionalizes him by taking away every role he held in his past existence and reducing it to that of a subjugated convict in addition to, on the other, filling the void of what is now absent essence with the assuredness of human frivolity. Deliberating the element of time, it may have only been for a night. However, his entire arc of growth is packaged into those hours, not to mention the period before his imprisonment that he, in retrospect, discredits. It is part of the past that cannot be corrected, yet he takes comfort in adopting an attitude that paves the way for the death of the ideas and frame of reference that constituted it. In that sense, the end of these aspects of his life does not limit but actually frees his being that can be nourished and enlightened by new paths from which he eventually grows. Back in the present, having had this epiphany, he sees the officers who were interrogating him as to the whereabouts of Ramon and concludes, "These men dolled up with their riding crops and boots were still going to die. A little later than I, but not too much. They busied themselves looking for names in their crumpled papers; they ran after other men to imprison or suppress them..." (13). Despite this, it would be for nothing. There are no distractions that will bar him from taking in these men for what they actually are, miserable examples of continuing to believe in the grand illusion. Death is going to cripple and fill them with fear, but he is a different reaction since physical demise means for him the fulfilment of his selfhood and sensations.

Death as an anticipated occurrence is a major phenomenon that sees the main character releasing whatever little freedom he has left and doing so with unbounded glee. He does not need it any longer, certainly, to say nothing of the fact that it was a lie masquerading as truth. Letting go further maximizes his ability to acknowledge that all of humanity is exactly the same as that deception his jailers cling to will sooner or later be no more. The distinction that can be made between them, one that Pablo latches on to the greater his existential awareness has to do with authenticity as human beings. Confinement has made it painfully apparent. It is a fixation that is communicated by Aziz Al-Muttalibi, arguing that "Sartre would describe Pablo's as the human mode of being, the man which realizes man as a free being, the antithesis of which state is the being of things which manipulates man as an object or thing – the latter mode being exemplified by the living: the Belgian doctor, the officers and the guards" (84). His deep realization of their continued shortcomings and acceptance of death, unlike them, after looking upon it differently, makes him liberated even though he is confined. Prison has been a freeing experience in many ways, to the point that he conceivably feels pity for their pathetic lives. So, as part and parcel of the dualistic reality he lives out, his mind is not only disassociating itself from the baseless fear of death that used to haunt him but is elevated even more by being set free. The last moments of his existence are tangibly his most content, with the sole regret of not reaching it sooner.

So, the short story utilizes the arresting environment of a prison cell to amplify how time and space can jumpstart the process of questioning oneself until there is finally deliverance and the ability to die with decency. The reader is being asked to learn from the example set by the brave Pablo, who leans into the emptiness he has so far avoided. However, what not to do in this case is also presented in the characters of Juan and Tom, who want nothing to do with the project of finding themselves choosing instead of wallowing in apprehension. It does not serve them well and ensures that their deaths are as painful as possible. The changing perception of mortality is, without a doubt, the seminal theme at work and is shown through the choice that the protagonist makes upon entry into confinement. It is a decision ultimately leading to success in coming to terms with who he is and should have been and making peace with the past. His deterioration from a mental standpoint does take place, although it is imbued with sound judgement and a feeling that he is collected. He will cross over into the afterlife, eradicated of a sizable lifetime load.

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