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## Exploring Existential Themes in Sartre's "The Wall": An Analysis

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### Abstract:

Literature, often referred as a reflection of life, truly embodies the intricacies of the human psyche and the realms of imagination it conjures. Every fleeting emotion that arises within the mind finds its expression in literature. It can be likened to a sorcerer crafting a world of illusions where, for a fleeting moment, these illusions are embraced as reality. The evolving trends of the late 1950s ushered in the philosophy of Absurdism, which emerged alongside existentialism and nihilism, both prominent ideologies of the 20th century. Absurdism delves into the fundamental queries of human existence, grappling with the perceived meaninglessness of life. It juxtaposes the stark and indifferent cosmos with the clarity and purpose found in human life. This paper primarily delves into Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist concepts within the context of his work "The Wall," which immerses the reader in the psychological evolution of an ordinary individual into an "absurd hero." Existentialism is often associated with decadence or a passing trend, entwined with themes of death, anguish, fear, anxiety, and illusion. It gained traction post-World War II due to the profound sufferings endured by men and women during those times. Philosophers such as Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Camus, and Kafka are closely linked with this philosophy. Sartre, a key proponent of existentialism, grounded his philosophy in the essence of humanism, presenting existential humanism through the lens of human freedom. These philosophers prioritize the presence of humanity over the presence of a divine being.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, Absurdism, Nihilism, Decadentism, Faddism, Humanism

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### Introduction:

The concept of existence holds profound significance in philosophical discourse, spanning across various geographical and cultural contexts. As per the Oxford English Dictionary, existence is defined as "the state or fact of being alive as a person, animal, or plant, manifested through certain activities such as breathing, growth, and reproduction; the state of being alive as a human being; an individual person's existence." The philosophy of existence has been a dominant theme since the era of Plato and the early Greek philosophers up to contemporary thinkers. This notion of existence laid the foundation for critical thinking within Western civilizations, especially in Western philosophy.

"Most people who use the word existentialism would be embarrassed if they had to explain it, since, now that the word is all the rage, even the work of a musician or painter is being called existentialist. A gossip columnist ... signs himself The Existentialist, so that by this time the word has been so stretched and has taken on so broad a meaning, that it no longer means anything at all." (Gupta 33)

Existentialism, as a philosophical stance, focuses on the existence of man, his freedom, and his value system. While the term "Existentialism" is often attributed to Kierkegaard, it was Sartre who

first embraced it as a philosophical framework. Central to Sartre's philosophy is the doctrine that "existence precedes essence." In essence, this signifies that individuals craft their own destinies rather than being defined by predetermined essences ascribed to them by others. As Sartre said in his lecture Existentialism is a Humanism: "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards". The more positive, therapeutic aspect of this is also implied: a person can choose to act in a different way, and to be a good person instead of a cruel person." (Baird)

Sartre's intellectual development was significantly influenced by his primary mentors, the German phenomenologists Husserl and Heidegger. Beyond merely identifying as an Existentialist, Sartre also embraced roles as a moralist and a humanist, dedicating his life to the cause of human freedom. Born in Paris in 1905, he pursued a career in philosophy, gaining prominence from 1936 with the publication of his work "La Transcendance de l'Ego". As the world plunged into the turmoil of the Second World War in 1939, Sartre enlisted in the French army and subsequently became a prisoner of war. It was during this period of captivity that he began composing plays such as "The Flies" and "Nausea", while also delving into his magnum opus, "Being and Nothingness", which was published in 1943. Being one of the foremost modern existential

philosophers, Sartre's comprehensive humanistic philosophy garners significant attention. His humanistic perspective places immense confidence in humanity, with his seminal work "Existentialism is a Humanism" encapsulating his central theory. Sartre posits that philosophical discussions should prioritize the individual over any divine entity. Throughout the 20th century, Western philosophy was predominantly preoccupied with humanity's struggle to grasp the significance of its existence and the inevitability of death. In Sartre's "The Wall," the character Pablo grapples with the harsh realities of existence, epitomizing the anguish and agony inherent in confronting one's mortality. Set against the backdrop of the Spanish Civil War, "The Wall" portrays three prisoners awaiting their execution, symbolizing the stark inevitability of death represented by the wall. Death, as explored by Sartre, intrigues human existence and has been a central theme in philosophical discourse throughout history. Philosophers like Søren Kierkegaard, regarded as the father of existentialism, delved into the concept of death, contemplating its profound implications on the meaning of existence.

Jean-Paul Sartre's short story 'The Wall' serves as a contemplation on the interplay between death and individual identity. In this narrative, the "wall" serves as a symbolic barrier delineating the boundary between life and death, or between "being" and "nothingness". The essence of the self, portrayed as this "being", is depicted as constantly in flux. When Pablo expresses, "I took everything as seriously as if I were immortal," he grapples with reconciling his perception of reality with the inevitability of his own mortality. Confronting death prompts a profound transformation in Pablo's consciousness, altering his thoughts and fundamentally reshaping his perspective on life.

**He says-**

"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. I wondered how I'd been able to walk, to laugh with the girls: I wouldn't have moved so much as my little finger if I had only imagined I would die like this. My life was in front of me, shut, closed, like a bag and yet everything inside of it was unfinished. For an instant I tried to judge it. I wanted to tell myself, this is a beautiful life. But I couldn't pass judgment on it; it was only a sketch; I had spent my time counterfeiting eternity, I had understood nothing. I missed nothing: there were so many things I could have missed, the taste of manzanilla or the baths I took in summer in a little creek near Cadiz; but death had disenchanting everything". (Westacott)

When introduced to Pablo Ibbieta in the story, readers encounter a man traversing from nothingness towards nothingness, confronted with

the looming specter of an unknown future called death. Pablo emerges as an enigmatic figure grappling with the quest for meaning amid the uncertainties of existence. As he awaits his impending execution, Pablo reflects on his life, lamenting, "I wondered how I'd been able to walk, to laugh with the girls: I wouldn't have moved so much as my little finger if I had only imagined I would die like this. My life was in front of me, closed, shut, like a bag and yet everything inside of it was unfinished" (Sartre). Sartre's philosophy, deeply influenced by Nietzsche's insights on death and existence, asserts that death does not impede one's freedom; rather, the essence of life lies in human freedom. This philosophical perspective is mirrored in the character of Pablo, who ponders the existential implications of his impending demise without succumbing to despair. Despite the certainty of his impending death, Pablo remains resolute in his commitment to face his fate "cleanly". Sartre's rejection of the concept of an afterlife is evident, as he denies the notion of posthumous achievements. With the metaphorical "wall" dividing him, Pablo transcends to the other side, where all his human capacities—love, anger, friendship—cease to exist, leaving behind a profound contemplation on the nature of existence.

Another prominent theme explored in "The Wall" is that of human agony, which pervades the experiences of the three prisoners awaiting their death sentences. Pablo, facing his own mortality, undergoes a profound transformation, as he confronts the realization that his entire life lies before him as a lie. This confrontation alters his outlook on life, memories, and desires. Despite the impending specter of death, Pablo finds that his senses remain acute, as he continues to experience warmth, hunger, fear, and agony. Alongside Pablo, his companions Tom and Juan grapple with their impending executions in different ways. While Juan fears the pain and inevitability of death, Tom attempts to mentally prepare himself by imagining the act of being shot. Pablo experiences a detachment from his own body, repeatedly reminding himself of its presence, which symbolizes a societal detachment from humanity under the oppressive Fascist regime. Sartre employs vivid language to depict Pablo's deteriorating state, illustrating how he becomes increasingly disconnected from his physical and mental faculties as death draws nearer. Through these poignant depictions, Sartre offers readers insight into the dehumanizing effects of authoritarian rule, wherein individuals lose their sense of humanity and society descends into treating others as mere objects, exemplified by the treatment of prisoners in the narrative. Sartre's significant contributions to 20th-century philosophy through existentialism advocate

for societal change and serve as a call to action against oppressive systems.

According to Sartre, physical death is an inevitable aspect of human existence, but it does not impede one's freedom. His existentialist perspective suggests that underlying motivations for actions stem from an individual's consciousness, which inherently desires existence. This freedom is exercised autonomously, without losing sight of one's existence. Sartre posits that while societal norms may dictate physical death, it is the demise of ideas, thoughts, hopes, and desires that truly marks the end. However, such death does not constrain one's being; rather, it presents opportunities for spiritual growth. For Pablo, his individual freedom loses meaning, as he perceives himself as becoming "cold" even if set free, having relinquished the illusion of eternity where time becomes insignificant. He demonstrates his understanding of individual freedom by refusing to disclose Roman Gris's exact address, recognizing the peril faced by nationalists who lack identity and face execution. In "The Wall," the symbolic representation of the wall can be interpreted either as a barrier inhibiting Pablo's pursuit of enlightenment or as a gateway facilitating self-confrontation and realization. Death, depicted metaphorically, signifies the continual process of shedding fixed notions about life, paving the way for regeneration. Through Pablo's character, Sartre explores evolving notions of existence, time, death, birth, and relationships. Each character serves a purpose, with the three prisoners potentially symbolizing a holy trinity, seeking guidance, protection, and divine intervention as they await their impending deaths.

Sartre employs his existential approach to elucidate various perspectives on death, aiming to unravel concepts of existence and the true essence of self to readers. Through his exploration of "being," he delves into the internalization of ideas intertwined with the concept of death, where death symbolizes not merely physical demise but the cessation or loss of the constructs that define one's identity. Through his existentialist ideas, Sartre advocates for unity against fascist regimes, urging individuals to embrace their inherent freedom and live authentically for themselves. His literary works, such as "The Wall," "Nausea," "Being and Nothingness," and "No Exit," serve as windows into his innermost complexities and reflections on life's uncertainties and perplexities.

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