

Some readings of symbols in Sartre's "The Wall" from students in English 30-1 (Semester 2, 2011)

One general note: Several students' responses have focused on the motivations and discoveries of the prisoners in the cell (as perceived by the narrator, Pablo Ibbieta). And while these students haven't necessarily misunderstood the characters' conditions and reactions (and indeed have made, in this regard, some good observations), they have nevertheless missed, in part, the point of the assignment, which is to discuss how the characters' conditions and reactions are symbolic of the conditions and reactions of all humans in the ordinary world. Most (not all) of the sample responses below do *not* miss the point. That is, they *do* speak mainly of ways in which the characters' circumstances relate to the lives of real people.

1

"'That was the trial,' the guard said. 'So now what? What are they going to do with us?' The guard answered dryly, 'The verdict will be told you in your cell'" (339).

Original response (1)

The trial signifies your birth into a class structure. The pre determination of your identity before you define it yourself. The way the world sees you is all judged by the name you are born into, the country you are born in, and your economic status. Afterwards you are placed on a certain path "the cell." The cell represents the system, where you are expected to be educated, then find a job, then die. From the cradle, to a desk, to an office, to the grave. The majority of lives seem to have this outline in modern society. Whether one would be able to live a comfortable life without such structure is debatable. Your verdict may appear to vary from the verdict of the others, but you will always be trapped in the cell.

Edits (1)

~~The trial~~ This passage signifies suggests your one's birth into ~~a class~~ an artificial, illusory structure.

Critical voice (in contrast with personal voice) calls for a relatively formal tone, one that will suit with the critic's generally serious purpose and sense of objectivity. For this reason, the writer should avoid words and phrases that can be considered too casual, too cozy. Second-person references (*you, your, yours*), for example, and first-person singular references (*I, me, my*, and so on), should be avoided because they suggest informal conversation. Prefer third-person references instead. The formal pronouns *one* or *one's*, for example, are better than *you* and *your*. Though, of course, the writer has to take care not to overuse *one* or *one's*, as they can quickly cause a text to take on a fussy and pompous tone.

To speak in this context of a "class" structure limits unnecessarily the discussion that might otherwise follow. Here the writer could just as well refer to other kinds of human or artificial structures too—for instance, political or economic structures, cultural or ethnic structures, and familial, professional, or philosophical structures—none of which, an existentialist might argue, emerges out of a supposedly divine design or has any inherent meaning. Such structures, he would contend, are arbitrarily established human arrangements meant to give the illusion of meaning to a meaningless world.

The ~~pre-determination~~ **predetermination** of your identity before you define it yourself.

1. This is a sentence fragment. It *looks* like a sentence because it begins with a capital letter and ends with a period and because it expresses a subject. But it lacks a predicate. Every complete sentence must have both a subject and a predicate.

For information on sentence fragments and exercises in avoiding them, see the file "Grammar-Punctuation" in the website folder "Writing Skills."

2. The phrasing should be revised for the elimination of second-person references.

To repair the problem of the fragment, you might connect this passage (removing, incidentally, the second-person pronouns "your," "you," and "yourself") to the preceding sentence—like so:

This passage suggests one's birth into an artificial, illusory structure—into a world, that is, where a person's identity is determined by other people before he has a say in defining it for himself.

My incorporation of the idea of *having a say* is in keeping with the existentialist tenets of personal freedom and people's responsibility to invest their lives with meaning for themselves.

The way the world sees you is ~~all judged by~~ **based on** the name you are ~~born into~~ **given**, the country you are born in, and your economic status.

While first-person singular references (as noted above) should be avoided, first-person *plural* references can be effective (though they should not be overused). This passage, with its inappropriate second-person pronouns, might be revised in this way:

The way the world sees us is based on such accidents as the names we are assigned by our parents, the countries we are randomly born into, and the economic statuses we inherit willy-nilly.

Afterwards ~~you~~ **we** are placed on a certain path, **which in this passage may be equated with** the prison cell. The cell represents the system, ~~where you are~~ **in which a person, having just been born, is now** expected to be educated, then find a job, then die. ~~From~~ **to trudge obediently, mechanically from** the cradle, to ~~a~~ **the school** desk, to ~~an~~ **the** office desk, to the grave.

Notice that one purpose of the editing in this passage has been to eliminate a fragment.

~~The majority of~~ **Many** lives seem to have this outline in modern society.

To say that "the majority" of people in modern society conform to the "outline" described in the preceding sentence is not defensible. One could legitimately say, however, that it is a *common* pattern.

Whether one would be able to live a comfortable life ~~without~~ **outside of** such **a** structure is debatable. ~~Your~~ **One person's** verdict may appear to vary from the verdicts of ~~the~~ others, but ~~you~~ **all individuals** will always be trapped in the cell.

Revision (1)

This passage suggests one's birth into an artificial, illusory structure—into a world, that is, where a person's identity is determined by other people before he has a say in defining it for himself. The way the world sees us is based on such accidents as the names we are assigned by our parents, the countries we are randomly born into, and the economic statuses we inherit willy-nilly. Afterwards we are placed on a certain path, which in this passage may be equated with the prison cell. The cell represents the system in which a person, having just been born, is now expected to be educated, then find a job, then die—to trudge obediently, mechanically from the cradle, to the school desk, to the office desk, to the grave. Many lives seem to have this outline in modern society. Whether one would be able to live a comfortable life outside of such a structure is debatable. One person's verdict may appear to vary from the verdicts of others, but all individuals will always be trapped in the cell.

2

"The daylight came in through four air vents and a round opening that had been cut in the ceiling, to the left, and which opened directly onto the sky. It was through this hole, which was ordinarily closed by means of a trapdoor, that they unloaded coal into the cellar. Directly under the hole, there was a big pile of coal dust; it had been intended for heating the hospital, but at the beginning of the war they had evacuated the patients and the coal had stayed there unused; it even got rained on from time to time, when they forgot to close the trapdoor" (340).

Original response (2)

Light streaming into the cellar from the ceiling enforces the idea of a prison. The dark room directly contrasts the bright room that the trials were done in. the dark room is the polar opposite of the bright room, the dark room helps to enforce the feeling of impending doom. The bright light from the ceiling could represent the free world that they came from before they were plunged into their dark prison. The dark light also represents. The gaps in the ceiling would be frustrating to the individuals trapped within freedom so close but just out of reach, similar to the circumstances that the prisoners find themselves in, they are being charged with crimes so slight that no normal court would convict them, but the freedom that they should have is being withheld along with the basic human rights that they should have. The cellar is described as cold, which is ironic due to their proximity to a supply of coal dust, which could be used to heat the room, it is described as being enough to heat the entire hospital, but they are being left to freeze in their prison.

Edits (2)

Light streaming into the cellar from the ceiling ~~enforces~~ **reinforces** the idea of a prison, **in that prison is a place into which light—with its symbolic associations to freedom, free will, and understanding—must be imported, for in symbolic terms a prison has no light of its own.**

Having referred to the "idea of a prison"—which indicates that the prison in Sartre's story has a symbolic value—the writer is now obliged to explain just what that idea is. My insertion is meant to do that, and does it by negation—that is, by saying what the prison symbolically is *not*. It is *not* a place of light.

The dark ~~room~~ **prison cell** directly contrasts the bright room ~~that in which~~ the trials were ~~done in~~ **held.** ~~‡~~ **The darkness of the room** is the polar opposite of the bright room. ~~the~~ dark room helps to ~~enforce~~ **reinforce** the feeling of impending doom. The bright light from the ceiling could represent the free world that ~~they~~ **the men** came from before they were plunged into their dark prison.

1. Notice in this passage the repetitiveness of sentence structures, each one beginning and progressing in the same pattern and producing an annoyingly halting rhythm. The passage could be made more fluid if the writer were to blend elements of separate sentences into a single sentence. Something like this would work:

The dark prison cell, standing in polar contrast to the bright room in which the trials were held, reinforces the feeling of impending doom, while the light entering from the ceiling vents can represent the world from which the men came before the thought of trials and prisons had even occurred to them.

2. A comma splice appears in "The darkness of the room is the polar opposite of the bright room. ~~the~~ dark room helps to reinforce the feeling of impending doom." The comma-spliced construction is a significant error, and it must be avoided, especially in critical responses. **For information on comma splices and fused sentences, along with exercises in avoiding them, see the file "Grammar-Punctuation" in the website folder "Writing Skills."**

3. The last sentence of the passage uses the pronoun "they," but "they" has no antecedent. This means that the pronoun has nothing to refer back to. Just whom "they" indicates must be made clear.

The dark light also represents.

This unfinished line is probably the result of the writer's having neglected to delete an aborted sentence. And perhaps it was aborted when he or she noticed the absurdity of the phrase "dark light." My drawing attention to this obvious error is meant to emphasize the importance of careful proofreading.

Note, too, in the next passage that closer proofreading was needed to eliminate the equally obvious problem of writing "within" where "with" was wanted.

The gaps in the ceiling would be frustrating to the individuals trapped, ~~with~~ **freedom** so close but just out of reach. similar to the circumstances that the prisoners find themselves in, they are being charged with crimes so slight that no normal court would convict them, but the freedom that they should have is being withheld along with the basic human rights that they should have. The cellar is described as cold, which is ironic **due to**, ~~given their~~ **its** proximity to a supply of coal dust, which could be used to

Another comma splice appears here at the underlined section. **Again, look up comma splices and fused sentences in "Grammar-Punctuation," and learn how to eliminate them from your writing.**

heat the room, it is described as being enough to heat the entire hospital, but ~~they~~ **the men** are being left to freeze in their prison.

Yet another comma splice. AAARGGGHHH!

This paragraph is a reasonably good response to the quoted passage in question, but it needs to speak more pointedly of ways in which the details of the passage suggest conditions *outside* of the story—that is, in the real world. The following responses, written by former English 30-1 students, are to the same passage. They speak of the broader symbolism of key details.

Student Response #1: In symbolic terms, daylight is wisdom or understanding. It is clarity. It is the sometime sense that things *make* sense. But daylight in the prisoners' cell can enter only slightly and occasionally, through small, distant openings. In our case too, wisdom comes upon us only faintly and fitfully. The coal referred to in the passage is symbolic of mind and its power to reason. But here in the cell the coal is wet, useless. In the same way, our minds, which might and should be useful, have been numbed. They have been made as useless as wet coal dust.

Student Response #2: The light that is learning or enlightenment or understanding filters in through air vents. And a round opening in the ceiling serves as the means by which coal (symbolizing personal energy) is unloaded into the hospital. Incidentally it is ironic that the prison cell is part of what used to be a hospital, a place originally meant for healing and living but which is now a place for decaying and dying. The coal was supposed to heat the whole hospital. Similarly, individual human energies might be supposed to enrich the whole world. But the coal is now useless, and so, it seems, are we.

Student Response #3: The daylight that creeps in through the air vents and the round opening in the ceiling is a symbolic image of hope and happiness. Although it seems misplaced in such a dismal environment, hope, like the light, still remains in slight measures. The hole in the ceiling was for loading coal into the hospital, coal that now sits in a useless pile. Its purpose had been to heat the hospital. Now, however, it is just a black mound that "[gets] rained on from time to time." The useless coal (considering especially its color) represents waste and the loss of hope.

Revision (2)

Light streaming into the cellar from the ceiling reinforces the idea of a prison, in that prison is a place into which light—with its symbolic associations to freedom, free will, and understanding—must be imported, for in symbolic terms a prison has no light of its own. The dark prison cell, standing in polar contrast to the bright room in which the trials were held, reinforces the feeling of impending doom, while the light entering from the ceiling vents can represent the world from which the men came before the thought of trials and prisons had even occurred to them. The gaps in the ceiling would be frustrating to the individuals trapped, with freedom so close but just out of reach. The gaps are similar to the circumstances that the prisoners find themselves in, for they are being charged with crimes so slight that no normal court would convict them, but the freedom that they should have is being withheld along with the basic human rights that they should have. As well, the cellar is described as cold, which is ironic, given its proximity to a supply of coal dust, which could be used to heat the room. It is described as being enough to heat the entire hospital, but the men are being left to freeze in their prison.

3

"I wasn't exactly cold, but I couldn't feel my shoulders or my arms. From time to time, I had the impression that something was missing and I began to look around for my jacket" (340).

Original response (3)

In most pieces of literature, the protagonist undergoes change. This change can be noticeable and involved, or discreet and progressive. The coldness in the room felt by Pablo is discreet, progressive change occurring. He says that he feels like something is missing. At first thought, it seems reasonable that he reaches for his jacket. That something is more abstract than that. It is the baggage of life that one carries around that protects the mind and soul from what is perceived as harm. Pablo is being a raw, unvarnished human being. A jacket, or any other material object, cannot quench this feeling.

Edits (3)

In ~~most many pieces of literature~~ narratives, the protagonist undergoes change.

1. Strictly speaking, for the writer to assert with justification anything about "most pieces of literature," he or she would have to have read all pieces of literature that ever existed. And if my hunch is correct, the writer of this paragraph hasn't had time to read every text ever written. The assertion in this sentence, therefore, is not defensible. Certainly, though, the writer can defensibly say something about "many" pieces of literature.

2. The word "literature" covers all genres of writing—novels, short stories, poems, songs, plays, newspaper articles, computer manuals, and postcards from the beach. But the term "protagonist" applies only to *narrative* works—works that tell a story (though, of course, stories can be conveyed in several genres).

This change can be noticeable and involved, or discreet and progressive.

The adjectives here need to be more precise.

The word "noticeable" can refer to any condition or action that can be registered by the senses, whether it is registered with ease or difficulty. For the purpose of the statement, a more precise adjective would be the word *obvious*.

The word "involved" can mean what the writer here means it to mean: elaborate, intricate, byzantine (wow!). But because "involved" has so many other uses, the reader may have to pause to consider which use of it is intended in this context. A more immediately understandable adjective would be the word *complex*.

The word "discreet" is conventionally used to describe the behavior of a person who attempts to act in a non-obvious way, sometimes in order to be deceptive, sometimes to be tactful, sometimes unobtrusive. What is needed in this context is a more neutral word and one that describes the object observed (i.e. the change in a protagonist) rather than the behavior of a person. The word *subtle* (which contrasts neatly with *obvious*) would be a good choice.

The word "progressive" speaks (in this context—for the word can be used in other contexts too) of that which is ongoing, whether it goes on in obvious, subtle, complex, or non-complex ways. The word *simple* (a good contrast for *complex*) would serve.

The revision (using the adjectives I've suggested above) would read so:

This change can be obvious and complex or subtle and simple.

But the revision is still not quite right, given that the pairings of "obvious and complex" and "subtle and simple" are not necessarily natural. An obvious condition can be simple just as well as it can be complex, and a subtle condition can be either simple or complex. The more natural pairings (paired because they stand in contrast) would be "obvious"/"subtle" and "complex"/"simple." Now the revision would be this:

This change can be obvious or subtle, simple or complex.

The coldness ~~is~~ of the room felt by Pablo is discreet, progressive change occurring.

The phrasing here is confusing. Judging by the preceding sentences, we can see that the writer means to say that the change in Pablo occurs discreetly (i.e. subtly) and progressively (i.e. simply). But the syntax of the sentence indicates that "discreet, progressive change" refers to the "coldness [of] the room." To make his or her intention clearer, the writer might say this instead:

The change in Pablo, which occurs subtly, is first registered in his response to the coldness of the room.

Noticing the chill, he ~~He~~ says that he feels ~~like~~ as if something is missing. ~~At first thought, it seems reasonable that he reaches for his jacket ,~~ namely his jacket, and so he reaches for it. In symbolic terms, however, what he reaches for is not a jacket. It is, rather, ~~That~~ something ~~is~~ more abstract than that. It is the baggage of life that one carries around that protects the mind and soul from what is perceived as harmful. Pablo, ~~is~~ being an ordinarily raw, unvarnished human being in need of comfort, naturally seeks protection. ~~A~~ But a jacket, or any other material object, cannot quench this ~~feeling~~ desire for protection from a universe that is, according to the existentialist, random and meaningless, and indifferent, therefore, to the suffering of humans.

Regarding the writer's use of the word "like" in this sentence, take note of item #19 in the writing-skills file "Don't Do This, Don't Do That, and Don't Do the Other Thing."

Don't use the word *like* where you mean to indicate a supposed condition or an imagined situation. Instead use the phrase *as if* or *as though*. For example, don't say, **It is like the stars above the young captain are not only alive but also focused on and judging him.** Instead say, **It is as if the stars above the young captain are not only alive but also focused on and judging him.** Or say, **It is as though the stars above the young captain are not only alive but are focused on and judging him.**

This paragraph, in spite of some imprecision in diction and phrasing, does address the assigned critical-writing task, but it does so somewhat sketchily. My additions to the text are intended to stress more clearly the connections between details of the quoted passage and ideas of existentialism. Here again are responses to the same passage written by former English 30-1 students.

Student Response #1: Pablo's saying that he "couldn't feel [his] shoulders or [his] arms" suggests the experience of feeling detached from one's own self, of feeling formless, abandoned, unanchored in life. Faced with this sense of alienation, Pablo begins to "look around for [his] jacket," an action that may be read as an analogue for any person in our world who impulsively seeks comfort (however false) in outward identification—this as opposed to identifying the self from *within*. It is an attempt to define oneself by adopting a pre-fab persona, which is what some people seem to be doing when they sample new religions or philosophies, newly affiliate with political or social groups, or plunge into untried or novel activities.

Student Response #2: We are constantly in search of a version of life that does not exist. But search as we will, we will never obtain the security blanket we want. We will never find the jacket to relieve us of the shivering cold that has numbed us to our own lives. We are left, rather, to warm ourselves as best we can.

Revision (3)

In many narratives, the protagonist undergoes change. This change can be obvious or subtle, simple or complex. The change in Pablo, which occurs subtly, is first registered in his response to the coldness of the room. Noticing the chill, he says that he feels as if something is missing, namely his jacket, and so he reaches for it. In symbolic terms, however, what he reaches for is not a jacket. It is, rather, something more abstract than that. It is the baggage of life that one carries around that protects the mind and soul from what is perceived as harmful. Pablo, being an ordinarily raw, unvarnished human being in need of comfort, naturally seeks protection. But a jacket, or any other material object, cannot quench this desire for protection from a universe that is, according to the existentialist, random and meaningless, and indifferent, therefore, to the suffering of humans.

Finally, here are a few more model responses to the other passages that you were assigned to write about.

"'I'm the doctor,' he said. 'I've been authorized to give you any assistance you may require in these painful circumstances.'

He had an agreeable, cultivated voice.

I said to him, 'What are you going to do here?'

'Whatever you want me to do. I shall do everything in my power to lighten these few hours.'

'Why did you come to us? There are lots of others: the hospital's full of them.'

'I was sent here,' he answered vaguely. 'You'd probably like to smoke, wouldn't you?' he added suddenly. 'I've got some cigarettes and even some cigars.'

He passed around some English cigarettes and some puros, but we refused them. I looked him straight in the eye and he appeared uncomfortable" (342).

#1

The doctor's claim that he can "lighten" the prisoners' hours is ludicrous. He is the all-purpose authority figure, a symbol of institutional "truth." Ultimately, however, he has no real authority and certainly no real truth. He can provide no answers, no comfort, no light in the dark. Searching for answers is the task of the one who is himself in the dark.

#2

The doctor represents a supposed higher power, whether of human or divine proportions. He promises hope and help, but he will never deliver. He is something, perhaps, like the entity Godot for whom Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon are waiting. Faith in higher powers is the greatest of humans' self-deceptions. Our condition, finally, is a hopeless one, and putting our trust in others to take care of us in life or in an alleged afterlife will lead to nothing. The doctor's proffered cigars and cigarettes are brief, meaningless comforts. They will burn away quickly and leave behind only the ashes of death.

"Pedro went out and came back with an oil lamp which he sat on the corner of the bench. It gave a poor light, but it was better than nothing; the night before we had been left in the dark. For a long while I stared at the circle of light the lamp threw on the ceiling. I was fascinated. Then, suddenly, I came to, the light circle had paled, and I felt as if I were being crushed under an enormous weight. It wasn't the thought of death, and it wasn't fear; it was something anonymous. My cheeks were burning hot and my head ached" (343).

The "poor light," this pale force, is symbolic of the forces of civilization that attempt honestly, sometimes semi-successfully, to light our way but that in the end provide no brilliant illumination and do not last—as, for example, religion, philosophy, reason, art, science, business, and busy-ness serve as *our* pale lights. Still, we feel—sometimes rightly, sometimes wrongly—that they are "better than nothing."

"Tom kept on muttering, in a kind of absent-minded way. He was certainly talking to keep from thinking. Naturally, I agreed with him, and I could have said everything he was saying. It's not natural to die. And since I was going to die, nothing seemed natural anymore: neither the coal pile, nor the bench, nor Pedro's dirty old face. Only it was disagreeable for me to think the same things Tom thought. And I knew perfectly well that all night long, within five minutes of each other, we would keep on thinking things at the same time, sweating or shivering at the same time. I looked at him sideways and, for the first time, he seemed strange to me. He had death written on his face. My pride was wounded. For twenty-four hours I had lived side by side with Tom, I had listened to him, I had talked to him, and I knew we had nothing in common. And now we were as alike as twin brothers, simply because we were going to die together. Tom took my hand without looking at me" (346).

#1

This is a passage that bespeaks paradox, for it is about the experience of feeling desperation and hope simultaneously. In one sense, it refers to the idea that human-to-human communion is impossible, the belief that every man is an island. In another sense, it refers to the idea that human-to-human communion is possible inasmuch as we all share the condition of being human together, an affirmation of the religious ideal that *no* man is an island.

#2

"Talking to keep from thinking," Tom is an image of all people who are utterly terrified by life but manage somehow to convince themselves that they are not. This they achieve by filling their days and ways with trivial utterings and actings, thereby keeping at bay the recognition that life is an absurdity that meanders pointlessly onward until it falls off the edge of the earth.

"I didn't understand what had happened to me, but I would have liked it better if they had ended it all right away. I heard the volleys at almost regular intervals; at each one, I shuddered. I felt like howling and tearing my hair. But instead, I gritted my teeth and pushed my hands deep into my pockets, because I wanted to stay decent" (351).

This passage suits well with a famous quotation regarding the philosophy of existentialism and the concept of freedom. It is Sartre's own assertion that "freedom is what you do with what has been done *to* you." In spite of the impulse to howl and tear his hair, Pablo wants and chooses to "stay decent," and in this choice he is kin to the most inspiring of tragic heroes. Through Pablo, Sartre says that even in the face of the absurdity and indignity that the world forces on us, we may yet have dignity by being creatures of free will.

"Everything went around in circles, and when I came to I was sitting on the ground. I laughed so hard the tears came to my eyes" (354).

The narrator's punctuating remark is symbolic of our perpetual return to the physical, the world, "the ground." It is also paradoxical in that it is concerned with the experience of simultaneous tears and laughter in response to the absurdity and the horror of existence. The tears are those of a victim. The hero laughs.