QUESTIONS ON “THE WALL” (all classes)

1. The mass media only covers the reason a person is convicted and their sentence. We may see a glimpse of the convict or his family’s reaction to the sentence, but that is all the insight we receive on the thoughts of the convict. However, in this short story we are given a direct view into what goes on inside the minds of those sentenced to death. Ignoring the physical in favor of the theoretical is commonplace amongst the three prisoners. Why is the ignorance of their own sweat, tears, and urine building up so important that it’s referred to multiple times throughout the work? What does this say about the prisoners’ mindsets? When Pablo and Tom first enter the cell, they feel cold and numb. Tom even exercises to warm himself up. What is the significance of Pablo no longer feeling coldness later on and Tom pissing his pants without realizing it? What does Pablo mean when he claims he wants to die “cleanly,” and why does he separate himself from Tom and Juan instead of attempting to find solitude in their shared experience?
2. Instead of a Priest looking after the dead men, a Doctor is sent. He never really helps the men through the mental process of accepting death, like a Priest would; he just observes. What does this switch say about the role of religion in the story? Doctors are traditionally caregivers, nurturers, and healers. Is the Doctor being supportive and trying to ease the discomfort of death, or is he subjecting them to some kind of experiment? Regarding the prisoner’s treatment, a prison is naturally an area enclosed by walls, meant to entrap another person. However, is this the wall that was referred to in the work? What physical or metaphorical objects/concepts could be the wall, or the many blocks that form it? How does the meaning of Pablo’s survival change depending on the meaning of the wall?
3. Pablo’s feelings toward others often end up contradicting each other. How does his failure to make up his mind relate to the environment and situation he was forced into and how does the theme of contradictory emotions continue throughout the piece? Remember: he is a first-person narrator, and readers have to question his reliability. Which statements do you feel reflect his true thoughts? Also, how does having three men in the story but the limit of one point of view function in the reader’s understanding of the prison experience? How does the issue of race/ethnicity affect the way the three prisoners were treated and acted? How do the difference in ages and behaviors among the three prisoners affect their treatment by both Pablo as a narrator, the guards, and the Doctor, as well?
4. Sartre wrote "The Wall" in the late 1930s about the experience of the prisoners of war during the Spanish Revolution of 1936. The cause of the Spanish Revolution largely points to the battle between the people's definition of socialism versus the government's, but Sartre alludes to a broader question concerning the legitimacy of war when Garcia points out that "they arrest everybody who doesn’t think the way they do." Why does Sartre focus on the Spanish Civil War when he could write about something more recognizable to the public, like WWII, and how does a reader’s unfamiliarity with the Spanish Revolution contribute to the absurdist construct? Towards the end, Pablo gains an existentialist view of life and accepts his death; if death was accepted, why would Sartre save Pablo’s life in the end? Is the ending ironic and comical, absurdist, or existential? Explain your answer and connect it to the work as a whole.
5. Ramon Gris is left as a complete mystery throughout the work to both the reader and the characters within. Would the story and/or the fate of the characters have benefitted from additional exposition explaining Gris? Or does the complete lack of explanation aid the absurdist/existentialist nature of the piece? Explain. Pablo spends the entire short story protecting the location of Ramon Gris. As his death looms closer, Pablo realizes he is staying quiet because of stubbornness, not loyalty. In the end, it is revealed that it didn’t really matter what he chose to do. Why does Pablo react the way he does when he learns of the fate of Ramon Gris? What does this say about the meaning of the story as a whole, and about its status as a nihilistic work?