

The Problems of Shame and Guilt in Sartre's *The Flies*

Noelle Panichella

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Shame and guilt are the emotional roots within a person's self-esteem and therefore affect one's relationships with others. Although the two emotions are related and can often be destructive, the emotions are not the same. Guilt is most often attached to one's actions, and occurs when a person reflects upon an act that has somehow harmed another living being, or a misdeed that only he might be aware of (such as stealing or cheating on a test). When one's feelings of guilt are rational and based upon an internal morality barometer, guilt can be productive. It can motivate one to make amends to the people he has harmed - or it can at least inspire him to break free from guilt-producing patterns of behavior in the future. Shame, on the other hand, is more problematic because it is a pervasive feeling of inadequacy or a generalized sense of failure, and can become a deeply-rooted part of one's identity. Rather than thinking one has *behaved* wrongly, one believes he *is* a worthless person. Shame is often irrational, making us feel as though we have done something wrong even if we have not. For example, a person can feel ashamed for choosing a different career path than his parents wished for him. This can lead to self-defeating behavior or, in some cases, complete inertia.

According to Sartre, shame is a feeling that develops when we become aware of the possibility that another person could perceive our actions or appearance. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre explains this concept of the "look of the Other" at great length. When one realizes that someone outside of his own body is able to judge him, he realizes that his identity can be shaken by the Other's opinion. He becomes vulnerable to someone else's perception. When a group of people are very concerned with the look of the same Other, to whom they attribute some form of authority, then the internalization of that

Other's opinion becomes enhanced within a community atmosphere. By the permission of the group members, the perceived authority figure is given the power to control and manipulate them. The group then reinforces this external authority through its education and social rituals.

In Sartre's *The Flies*, shame is a problem for the people of Argos. When Orestes forces the Argives to examine their shame, he is unsuccessful because they identify too strongly with it, despite the fact that it causes pain and powerlessness at the hands of Aegistheus. However, the play itself does not necessarily present a viable option to shame, nor does it show a useful way to channel guilt. The Argives are content to remain trapped and manipulated by shame, while Orestes feels no guilt at all for destroying their society. Neither alternative seems attractive, realistic, or productive. While Sartre may have tried to create an inspiring hero in his Orestes, the play leaves us feeling depressed and impotent.

The play makes use of several of Sartre's most famous ideas. One of these concepts is *bad faith*, in which a person accepts a false value system or refuses to see the truth about himself. Bad faith can occur when a person fails to recognize or integrate his *being-for-itself* with his *being-for-others*. The former is one's own sense of self-definition and identity, while the latter is the self that others perceive. Both definitions of the self are true to an extent, and both need to be considered in order to understand one's identity. It seems that while Orestes focuses his efforts on showing the Argives the bad faith of their shame, he is unaware that his lack of guilt and extremely destructive behavior are symptoms of his own bad faith. The Argives have each lost their being-for-itself, only defining themselves by their being-for-others, while Orestes refuses to acknowledge his

own being-for-others. This study uses Sartre's philosophical works, as well as the research of other psychoanalysts, particularly Erich Fromm, this study will analyze the bad faith of the Argives and Orestes, and attempt to find an alternative to both forms.

Sartre has rewritten the myth of Orestes to fit his idea of an existentialist hero, one who lives by his own moral code, acknowledges his own responsibility and freedom, and encourages the responsibility and freedom of others. After having been jettisoned from the palace and left for dead when his father Agamemnon was killed by his wife and her lover (Clytemnestra and Aegistheus), Orestes returns to his birthplace of Argos. Electra, his only sibling, was kept in the palace and treated as a slave. According to Zeus, the people of Argos did not stop their king's murder, and may have even enjoyed hearing his screams. Zeus' theory is that the people secretly enjoyed the thought that their authority figure was suffering and weak. Their indirect complicity has allowed Aegistheus and Clytemnestra to control them, capitalizing on their rational sense of guilt by turning it into a collective, immobilizing feeling of shame. This shame is physically represented by the flies, or the Furies, who nibble and bite the people to remind them of their evilness. Every year on "Dead Men's Day," the city willingly reenacts the murder of the Agamemnon, and the people believe that their dead relatives rise up to punish them. Orestes wants to free the people from this foolish situation and save his sister from her wretched state, but instead of convincing them to rebel or take back some of their own power, he murders the king and queen. In his mind, he is avenging his father's murder and setting the people free, but none of the Argives support his action. He leaves the city, taking the flies with him, and runs off into the distance, leaving everyone confused.

As an outsider, it is clear to Orestes (and also to the audience) that the

manipulative hold on the Argive people begins all the way at the top of the public hierarchy. Zeus signifies the socialized shame brought on by unquestioned, organized religious training. Aegistheus symbolizes the control of government; in William Empson's review of the play, he argues that Aegistheus uses shame as a means of keeping order ("Sartre Resartus"). Representing the socialized shame taught within the home, Clytemnestra and the Argive adults instruct their children to become members of society by believing that they too are inherently guilty of something just because they were born. Electra is a soul who struggles to break free of these sources in order to accept responsibility for her actions without feeling unnecessary remorse, but she ends up trying to make Orestes feel shameful for not doing her bidding. Each person beneath Zeus is clueless that his situation is his own fault. Each is *willingly* being manipulated by simply accepting the idea that all Argives should experience extreme feelings of shame, and should persist in a perpetual state of repentance because of it.

Shame convinces the people that they have no power to do anything at all. The more power that they attribute to Aegistheus, the less they have for themselves. This also applies to the Argives' relationship with Zeus, or lack thereof. The depiction of religious authority in the play is humorous but surely offensive to anyone who depends on spiritual rules as his main morality gauge. Sartre once defended existentialism when critics argued that it was atheistic and depressing. He explained that "even if God did exist, that would change nothing" because the fact remains that we are still alone on this earth, and must figure out what to do with ourselves (*Essays* 62). Zeus' character in the play is a jokester, a feckless magician whose spells consist of such ridiculous chants as "Poseidon, carabou, carabou, roola" (*The Flies* 82). He followed Orestes and his tutor on their travels, calls

himself “Demetrios,” pretends to merely be a frequent visitor to Argos, and acts as though he does not know who Orestes is. He speaks to the Argives with a hideous lack of respect, eavesdrops on conversation, and thwarts every thought of freedom that the Argives even begin to entertain. When Orestes wants to set things right in Argos and free the people from the Aegistheus’ manipulation, Zeus wants Aegistheus to imprison him. Zeus admits that once men become aware that they do not have to submit to shame, then his hold on them ceases. Sartre employs Zeus as a symbol of the fear tactics used by organized religious leaders, and the panic these figures experience when people begin to question the rules.

According to Sartre’s early philosophical works, we have been “abandoned” by whomever or whatever created us, and are “condemned” to eke out our existence on this earth. We have no choice whether or not we want to be free, yet we are held responsible for the decisions we make of our own free will. Existence itself comes with some level of physical and emotional suffering, which is why the children in *The Flies* complain that they did not want to be born. But this is not an excuse for inertia for Sartre. He argued that complaining “I did not ask to be born!...is a naive way of throwing greater emphasis on our facticity” (*Essays* 66). By “facticity,” Sartre refers to the fact that a person did not literally create his own being or the circumstances of his birth; he did not physically give birth to himself, nor did he decide to be born a male or female, nor whether he would be born, say, in Argos. However, Sartre says that in terms of practicality, one should not focus on this facticity, but on the meaning he will give to his life, either through these circumstances or in spite of them. It makes no difference whether or not we wanted to be born; we *have* been born and here we are, and we have been left to make something of

ourselves. While Sartre uses negative words like "condemned" and "abandoned" to describe the human situation, he also says that this very situation of abandonment is also what ultimately gives us our freedom. Every chance occurrence or event must then be viewed as "an *opportunity*" to be "made use of, lacked, neglected, etc." (68). Therefore, at some point, even the Argive children will be held accountable for living in bad faith and remaining stagnant in such shame ceremonies as Dead Men's Day. They will have to challenge this collective remorse ritual, or they will become just like their parents. In contrast, Sartre gives us the character of Orestes. Certainly, Orestes did not ask to be born in Argos or to be thrown out of the palace and raised by strangers. He makes the choice to come back to try to save his sister and the city's inhabitants. Whether or not his actions were necessary or effective does not seem to matter to Sartre; for him, the sheer fact that Orestes challenges the political and religious authorities is admirable.

Germaine Bree writes that "emotions, as Sartre saw it, were ways of confronting facts that people find too difficult to cope with in a rational manner...people choose their emotions intentionally, though not lucidly, to achieve a given end" (163). Notice that Bree explains that this choice is not necessarily "lucid." Of course, Sartre recognized that most of our emotions are not *consciously* chosen, but they represent patterns that can be analyzed to make us more aware of our subliminal choices. Stuart Charme elucidates this idea further: our subliminal choices determine the attitude we take towards events in our lives. If we are born with a physical disability or develop a debilitating illness, we can choose to wrap up our identity in that problem (*MM* 24-25 ). Likewise, the Argives are told they should feel ashamed, and they choose to act like people who have a reason to be ashamed. In *Essays*, when Sartre writes, "What happens to me happens *through* me," he

is emphasizing that we can never make excuses for our current situation (64). We are responsible for our own behavior, and we should never feel that we are not in control of our lives. Even if we cannot stop something undesirable from happening to us, we can still control our reaction to the event. Shame becomes an excuse in Sartre's play. It allows Zeus and Aegistheus to manipulate the people of Argos, but even *that* is their own choice on some psychological level, and it serves a purpose: they become victims, complacent and irresponsible as they allow Aegistheus to "make" them feel shame, and in turn behave in ways that will please him. They will not challenge him because they are afraid of being in control of themselves.

In *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, Fromm explains that many religions and philosophies actually promote the idea that to be good people, we must feel some level of shame. He specifically speaks of Calvinism and Lutheranism, but even brings up the philosophies of Kant. These belief systems teach us that self-love is sinful because it can make one conceited enough to begin judging others. The premise of this thinking is based on the idea that God is the only true judge and therefore we should not try to do his job; thus, love for oneself is equal to selfishness. Fromm argues that lack of self-love is dangerous, because we deny any sense of our power and try to earn approval from God "by emphasizing (our) own helplessness and worthlessness" (PR 51). Sartre clearly agrees with Fromm that self-denial is unacceptable. The Argives accept the idea that they should not feel self-love, and when Electra rebels and dances at the Dead Men's ceremony, she tries to show them that they will not be harmed for celebrating themselves. This very message is ruined by Zeus, and both Electra and the Argives are convinced not to love themselves.



Different from generalized shame about one's own being, feelings of internally-motivated personal guilt can be helpful in maintaining social structures. For example, most people have been socialized by their parents to feel guilty for breaking a rule, or for hurting someone else, and this usually has the effect of promoting safety and respect for others in society. Organized religion also plays a part in setting up these rules, as do school and sports programs. It is necessary to teach a child right from wrong, but it is also possible to negatively affect the child by creating what Fromm calls an "authoritarian conscience." If the child is taught to make all of his decisions based on what others want, he will believe that he is powerless and will be unable to enjoy being himself (*MFH* 150). As we have grown up, many of us have learned to feel uncomfortable unless we are berating ourselves for something we have either done or failed to do. Shame forms when we become too aware of our being-for-others. Jasper Hopkins explains that shame develops when "condemnation is mirrored toward me from the eyes of the Other" (117). We are raised with the notion that someone in a position of authority is always watching us; this authority figure could be a parent, a teacher, or an abstract deity. Allowing others to unquestioningly set our rules is proof that we have decided to play a socially-prescribed role. In order to become a member of society, we agree that these authority figures are actually superior to us in one way or another, and we want to please them and to emulate their behavior. In his book on Sartre's theories of learned social roles, Charmé says that "one's identity congeals around a fixed set of socially approved behaviors" and those who transgress these rules are subject to "the Other's power to inflict shame" (*VA* 43). One lives in constant fear of being judged as inferior by authority figures, and it is this fear that motivates him to behave in ways that the authority figure

would deem appropriate. Shame goes beyond simply regretting our misdeeds; it is an internalized and “downgraded conception of the total self” (Harvey, et. al. 771).

According to Fromm, a heavy dependence on this authority makes one willing to endure painful punishment rather than face rejection from the authority (*MFH* 146-7). When we do not question this type of relationship, Sartre says that we deny ourselves our own power to create meaning and possibilities within our lives. By acquiescing to a bad faith value system that tells us we are not worthy of making our own choices, we are not using our freedom.

In *The Flies*, we can plainly see that, although the Argives claim to be tortured by their remorse, they willingly inflict this pain on their own children, socializing them to accept debilitating, generalized shame as a normal emotion that belongs within the human psyche. On Dead Men’s Day, one woman tells her child, “Now try to behave properly, and mind you, start crying when you’re told” (73). This woman does not tell her child to cry because he should feel guilty for taking someone’s toy or hitting another child. She is not teaching conscience; she is teaching him that his existence alone is something to feel ashamed of. The children of Argos beg forgiveness for *living*, praying “We didn’t want to be born, we’re ashamed of growing up... We never laugh or sing, we glide about like ghosts” (78-9). These children are taking cues from their parents, who also feel shameful about their own lives. Fromm says that if a parent loves herself, the children will love themselves, and vice versa (*MFH* 132-3). The children of Argos are shown that they are to feel remorse in order to behave appropriately in their society.

This conversation between the mother and the child in *The Flies* represents a socialization process that Fromm described in a 1944 speech. He reinterpreted Freud's

Oedipus complex to encapsulate the fight for freedom from a parent's authority over a child's physical urges, during which a parent attempts to "break the child's will and drive it into submission," a tactic that can cause neurosis to surface once the child has become an adult. Fromm then points out that the majority of people in the world are actually *not* neurotics, even though all children experience this fight for freedom. He uses this very fact to prove that society uses shame to create a collective "defect" in order to make society run more smoothly:

If a person fails to attain freedom, spontaneity, a genuine experience of self, he may be considered to have a severe defect, provided we assume that freedom and spontaneity are the objective goals to be obtained by every human being. If such a goal is not attained by the majority of members of any given society, we deal with the phenomenon of a *socially patterned defect*. The individual shares it with many others... What he may have lost in richness and in genuine feeling of happiness is made up by the security of fitting in with the rest of mankind - *as he knows them*. As a matter of fact, his very defect may have been raised to a virtue by his culture and thus give him an enhanced feeling of achievement (*ISON 382-3*).

In most civilizations, people are raised and taught to give up some level of creativity or spontaneous behavior. This is to ensure that the majority of the people within this civilization will be less likely to harm each other for no reason, or cause problems that would thwart the authority of those in control. In Sartre's play, generalized remorse is actually a virtue within the Argive society, because the "bitchy odor of repentance" reinforces the topmost authority of Zeus and his Furies. Likewise, due to the Argives' socially patterned defect of collective and irrational shame, Aegistheus can rest on his laurels, even though he killed their king and usurped the throne. No one rebels against Aegistheus because everyone is too wrapped up in his own remorse. Aegistheus really feels no guilt because no one is holding him responsible. In addition, the public unconsciously accepts the idea that punishing Aegistheus and Clytemnestra for their crime would mean that the people would also have to be punished for their individual and

collective crimes. The charade of dead relatives visiting from the grave is thus a welcome substitute for real punishment and true responsibility.

As an existentialist, Sartre maintains that each of us makes his own destiny. In other words, there is no pre-determined fate, and we do not have to accept a label just because someone else attaches it to us. As one makes choices and lives through the resulting consequences, he creates his own meaning and purpose. Sartre asserts that because "the coward makes himself cowardly" and "the hero makes himself heroic," one is always able to control his own behavior and has the capability to distinguish between right and wrong (*Essays* 50). The Argives have accepted shame as part of their identity, have used this identity as an excuse, and their continued inertia gives them something else to feel shameful about. During the years since Agamemnon's murder, the forceful trickery of Zeus' magic tricks and the emotionally-aggressive rule of Aegistheus have dulled the acuity of each Argive's conscience; therefore the people's moral barometer has become attached to external authority. Each person has internalized the voices of Zeus and Aegistheus so deeply that he cannot hear his own conscience anymore.

Usually it is considered healthy to admit one's mistakes and transgressions, so that we can unyoke our burdens, apologize, and begin anew. The people of Argos bear their shame in such a passionate and stifling manner that they are making no progress at all. They do not become stronger or better humans because of their verbalized confessions of shameful behavior. Every year, they have the same ceremony and cry out for forgiveness for the same sins, no matter how long ago they occurred or how many times they have asked for forgiveness. The men beg, "Forgive us for living while you are dead," and the women cry that their deceased loved ones "have laid waste our lives"

(*Flies* 78). They choose not to enjoy the lives that they have been given, and instead live as though they are already dead. They are too ashamed to let the light of day into their homes, keeping doors and windows closed tightly, wearing only black, and mourning their existence. In terms of Sartre's existentialism, existence is all that we have.

Bemoaning our existence and leaving it to the control of others removes freedom and responsibility. When Electra tells Orestes: "People will beg you to condemn them, but you must be sure to judge them only on the sins they own to; their other deeds are no one's business," this suggests that recent deeds are not admitted (*Flies* 69). In fact, we do not even know if they have committed any other deeds. From the events of the play, it would appear that since the advent of the Dead Men's Ceremony, nothing new has even occurred in Argos. The people have done nothing at all. With the exception of Orestes, the characters in *The Flies* claim that they are expiating their sins by punishing themselves, but in fact they are only giving themselves an excuse to remove present responsibility for acting in the present times.

Several sociological studies have found that collective guilt, just like individual guilt, can actually help to improve society. For example, guilt over the institution of slavery in the United States has prompted many positive attempts to teach tolerance and equality. However, Brown, Zagefka, Gonzalez, Manzi, and Cehajic, who studied collective guilt in Chile, explain that while group guilt can be "socially progressive," if the reminders are "too frequent and repeated," the outcome is "potentially harmful" (88). Collective guilt can certainly motivate people to make large-scale amends with the ousted group, but in the case of the Argives, their collective guilt (associated with actions) has become collective shame (connected to identity). Instead of apologizing for their actions,

they apologize for being alive, causing them to avoid life and the pursuit of fulfilling or meaningful action. The Dead Men's ceremony is obviously not helpful to the society. The people claim that they want to make amends to the dead they have wronged in the past, but why must they do this every year? What good is apologizing over and over to people who are no longer alive to forgive them? This annual "mummery" shows no sign of progression or resolution. Shame is unnecessary if each person could focus on the acts, why they happened, and how they can be used to help avoid similar ones in the future.

At first, Electra seems different from the rest of the Argives; she appears to be stronger, more rebellious, and aware of the foolishness of her people. Orestes believes that Electra is also willing to challenge society, but if we examine her behavior, we start to wonder about her strength. She claims that she wants freedom, and for her brother to return so they may kill the king and queen, but she vacillates between embracing this freedom and accepting the guilty role her mother and stepfather have taught her to play. Ironically, when the possibility of action becomes available to her, she begins to grow weaker and weaker. Her internal struggle becomes clear when she first meets Orestes. It is hard to believe that she does not recognize her brother when she sees him face to face. Her line of questioning and her personal revelations leave the reader doubting her ignorance; it is more likely that she *resists* understanding that he is the one she has waited for all these years. She postpones this conscious knowledge because she never expected Orestes to actually arrive, and his appearance forces her to act on her intentions.

When Electra appears onstage, she is washing her mother and stepfather's dirty laundry, which is "covered with spots and stains" (*The Flies* 63). The metaphor here is obvious: now a servant in her own mother's palace, she detests her role, yet still plays it.

The stains on the clothing represent Clytemnestra's sense of shame, and this is a physical way for her to force shame upon her daughter. Even as Electra shouts to Zeus' statue that she is not guilty for her father's murder, she physically tries to wash away her mother's shame. This represents the power struggle with her mother which Fromm explained. She must have internalized some of this shame identity, because people whose lives are based on a generalized feeling of shamefulness often "choose a washing compulsion" as a means of attaining atonement (*PR* 31). From the disrespectful tone in which Electra speaks to Clytemnestra in the play, we can assume that as a youngster she rebelled against her mother, who tried to impress Electra with the shame of the society. To punish Electra in a way that would have the most debilitating psychological effect, Clytemnestra demoted the rightful princess and heir to the throne to a mere servant. Not only is this socially embarrassing for Electra, but it also depersonalizes the relationship between mother and child. A mother is supposed to unconditionally love her children and protect them, but Clytemnestra does just the opposite. Every year, Aegistheus and Clytemnestra force Electra to reenact the day her father was killed. It is only during this ceremony that she is allowed to appear before the people as the princess of Argos. Years of this emotional abuse have worn on Electra, and she has unconsciously begun to accept the negative image of herself reflected by her mother and step-father.

After speaking with Orestes, Electra considers what the reaction would be if she rebelled, and decides to try. Instead of taking part in the reenactment of a crime she did not commit, on Dead Men's Day Electra boldly appears in a white dress, dancing, and claims that her father would be proud to see "his daughter...holding her head high and keeping her pride intact" (*Flies* 80). Her white dress is scandalous because it represents

purity, serenity, and life, and the Argives usually don black to symbolize their repentance. The crowd's attitude quickly moves from shocked disapprobation to total agreement, until Zeus uses his ridiculous magic chant to break the cavern stone on the temple steps, enraged that he is losing control. The flies immediately descend upon the people, who also beat each other for abandoning the shame ceremony.

This is when Electra truly begins to struggle with her own bad faith, switching between masochistic and sadistic tendencies. She blames Orestes for her outburst, instead of admitting that her bold statement was premeditated and chosen without his input. When Orestes reveals that he is her long-lost brother, she has a hard time accepting this fact because he is not the angry, violent person she imagined him to be. She has spent her whole life waiting for Orestes to return to Argos, where “the doom of the Atrides must be played out” (86). According to Electra, shame and doom are genetic, and it seems that she almost worships the family's bloody past. This clearly shows that she has wrapped up her identity in shame. Demonstrating her inability to recognize her own folly, she resorts to the methods used by everyone in Argos, and sadistically tries to exert shame upon Orestes by claiming that he is not the image of her brother that she had kept in her mind for all these years. Aware that Orestes desperately wants to belong to a family, she threatens to turn him away because he is too good and innocent to be of any use to her. Because he longs for human connection and love, Orestes gives into his sister. They carry out the murder of Aegistheus as they *both* planned it, but she immediately disowns her own responsibility and refuses to help Orestes kill Clytemnestra. After the second murder, Electra fearfully says, “Something has happened and we are no longer free to blot it out” (*Flies* 105). Claiming that the lights are dimming, Electra can no longer see



her brother, but she can see the “beady eyes” of the flies. Electra’s fear comes from the fact that she has, for once in her life, actually committed a deed for which she will have to accept consequences. She has never really acted upon anything she might have intended, nor are we given evidence that has she ever thought of saving anyone other than herself. She will be judged only on her actions, and she does not know how to handle this reality. The siblings have been completely separated by Clytemnestra’s murder, and Electra is convinced that her involvement is proof that she is shameful.

Electra ignores Orestes when he warns, “You must not loathe yourself,” because this shame is what gives power to the Furies and to Zeus. Orestes tries to explain to Electra that her shame only “comes from within” and “only she can rid herself of it” (113). As explained earlier in the paper, Argos is a society that teaches people to loathe themselves, and that they can only be forgiven by an external authority. So that she may reinforce her sense of shame, Electra first allows the Furies to convince her that she is responsible for her mother's death, and despite the fact that Orestes tried to keep the details from her, she begs the Furies to tell her everything. Zeus then advises Electra to blame the murders on Orestes, and to disown and excuse her former wishes to kill the king and queen. These wishes were only “toys” that she played with because she “had no friends or toys” as a little girl (114). He is capitalizing on her fear of consequence, and reminds her that no one else could possibly know what her intentions were, so she can claim as an excuse that she never really *intended* to hurt anyone. Zeus realizes that he can still control Electra if she denies any responsibility for her choices, and she is willing to give up her freedom so this may happen. She is a lost cause by this point. Instead of choosing a new life driven by her internal conscience, she is so filled with remorse that

the Furies do not even follow her as she runs offstage.

Electra embodies the most frustrating type of bad faith in the play. If we place her behavior within the context of both Sartre's philosophies and Fromm's theories, it becomes possible to consider that she somehow arranged her plans to make herself feel even more shameful. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre describes how each of us has a "project" in life, whether we are conscious of it or not. He uses the example of someone who feels inferior to others. Once I have decided, consciously or otherwise, that my goal is to prove myself inferior, everything I do is "designed expressly to *realize* my project of inferiority... Even if I dream of getting out of it, the precise function of this dream is to make me experience even further the abjection of my state" (611). In other words, if I do not believe that I have any inherent power, I will make the events and relationships in my life reinforce my powerlessness. Even if I plan to act with more power, the only reason I will make these plans is so that, when I cannot make my plans come to fruition, I can confirm how powerless I really am. Fromm claims that psychoanalysis often proves that such relationships allow us to "escap(e) from freedom and from personal responsibility" (*PR* 54). Electra dreamed of a new life and of revenge only so she could remind herself how powerless and shameful her life really was. She never once believed that Orestes would show up or that she would be expected to act on her dreams of revenge. She escaped from her freedom several times after meeting him. Even when she doubted Orestes, she goaded him on until he took charge of the planning. With him in control, she could immediately regret everything and claim that it was all his idea to begin with. Quite possibly, she orchestrated all of these events to reinforce her shame "project." Once Orestes is gone, she gets the added benefit of feeling shame for corrupting what she

perceived as his innocence.

Maxwell Adareth says that “Orestes is a very modern character” who must “vanquish political, spiritual, and personal forces” (157-8). Part of Adareth’s praise is correct. As the existential hero of the play, Orestes’ “outsider” status is what allows him to view the people in a somewhat objective manner. Orestes’ motivations are somewhat admirable, and it is clear that Sartre was using his myth to prove how lonely it is to be a hero. For example, Orestes refuses to believe that all people must feel guilt and constantly punish themselves for past behaviors. His mission becomes an effort to show the Argives that they do not have to act like “guilty people” by showing them that they are already free - that they have always *been* free because they are humans. In his mind, the decisions of his family members cannot be passed down through the blood. In addition, his tutor taught him that there are different ways to approach life, and that some people are actually in control of their own behavior. When Zeus sends him a signal to keep the peace, Orestes realizes that his learned spirituality is impractical, and that he must choose “another path - *my* path”(91). He decides that his life will have meaning if can remove the shame of the Argives. He is aware of what the consequences of killing the king and queen might be, but he somehow believes that the act itself will free the people, and therefore the benefits outweigh the risks.

If the play could be inspiring in some way, it is only up until the point where Orestes decides to murder two people. After this, *The Flies* really falls apart. Unfortunately, the play fails to make us want to rally behind Orestes. There are several issues that the play either glosses over or does not deal with realistically. Orestes is not by any means a *true* hero, although he is perhaps Sartre’s idea of an *existential* hero. His

methods are extreme, his lack of rational guilt for killing his own mother is frightening, and his refusal to understand why the Argives do not support him shows a dearth of perspective.

Historical views of Orestes' message and symbolism have been varied. Sartre wrote and staged his play during the Nazi occupation of France, and he believed that his message was bold and clear: Orestes was a symbol of the Resistance, a person who wanted freedom no matter what the cost. Resistance members would most likely have seen the Argives as representatives of the French people, Aegistheus as Petain and Zeus as Hitler. Sartre intended Orestes' matricide to display just how great the price of freedom from tyranny can be, even though it is absolutely necessary. However, Alan Stoekl suggests that the perceived meaning of the play's symbols would have depended upon which group was viewing it. To some critics, Orestes only sets the example for others to lose all morality and commit similar destructive acts. In this vein, Stoekl summarizes critiques by Dr. Buesche and Gilbert Joseph which say that "liberty is the crucial problem of the play" because the abstract freedom of Orestes cannot be implemented in society (82). Another theory presented by Stoekl is that the play could argue *for* the Nazis, because Orestes can be viewed as an SS soldier who expects no glory but commits brutal acts, wiping them from his memory, operating only for the greater will of the regime. Clearly, Sartre's intended message was misinterpreted by several groups, which is why the play itself is so problematic.

It seems that Sartre was resting on the idea that it is possible to help someone by showing them the errors of their bad faith. In *Essays in Existentialism*, he said that if you are able to "name the behavior of an individual," and help him to see his true self,

“Either he will persist in his behavior out of obstinacy and with full knowledge of what he is doing, or he will give it up” (320). According to this theory, the people of Argos should have allowed Orestes to show them that they were being manipulated, and then they should have wanted to take their own personal power back. They could forgive themselves for wrongs which can no longer be righted, and behave in ways that make them feel like they have some integrity and self-control. Theoretically, a truth about their own nature was supposedly revealed to them, and by refusing to see it, they were still making a choice. However, Orestes did not exactly reveal anything to the Argives, nor did they give them a choice in how they could stop feeling so shameful; instead, he killed their rulers and then ran off into the sunrise.

The Argives were certainly not ready to take control of their own lives by the end of the play. Empson suggests that Zeus did not have to crash the rock against the temple steps to thwart Electra’s white-dress freedom dance because it “would have failed anyway, without this miracle” (“Sartre Resartus”). Likewise, it is nearly certain that even though Orestes removes the Furies, the people of Argos will choose to continue to perpetuate their own bad faith. They do not need the flies to torment and shame them since they have each other. It appears that collective identity of “we” or “us” is important in exacerbating individual feelings of guilt, but instead of collectively motivating them to change behaviors, the characters seem to feel motivated to stay united in shame. Each citizen of Argos felt guilty for something he or she had done, but they almost celebrate these deeds as a means of remaining static and sharing a sense of community, however unproductive they are. In addition, they chose to share the shame for the murder of Agamemnon so they can gain some level of security from Aegistheus. They do not want

to stop feeling shameful, and although Orestes is genetically-linked to the Argives, he was raised elsewhere and is therefore not truly a member of their group. The people cannot understand him, and his actions are not accepted as actions of that group. When he kills the king and queen, claiming to do so in the name of the people, he becomes “the Other, the alien, the suspect, the trouble-maker” and they are more than happy to get rid of him (*CDR 2*). They do not even understand what he was trying to prove.

The only person who comes to save Orestes is his tutor, but even the tutor fears the angry mob of Argives outside. When he opens the door, Orestes does not see the people swarming around him like flies/Furies. Instead he only notices the sun rising, which shows that he has chosen optimism and hope, even as the crowd tries to make him shame him. In his arrogant mind, he simply believes that they are not ready for change. His heroic solution is to take the flies, the “dead men,” and the admitted collective crimes with him, and leaves Argos to start over again. He believes he has saved them all, but he has only removed the external authorities; he does not take their *internalized* shame, which renders his efforts unproductive.

The dramatic ending is where the play fails to teach a true lesson in how to deal with shame effectively. Sartre portrays Orestes as being completely unashamed of the murders, and he does not want to hide anything from anyone. Orestes' lack of remorse frightens Electra, and it frightens the reader as well. It is humorous that he is disrespectful towards the Furies, who he calls “bitches,” and towards Zeus, to whom he refers as “fellow.” But he is too proud of himself to understand that his murderous actions were not necessary. Orestes kills after “methodically, cheerfully” planning it, making his action “a carefree murder, a shameless, sedate crime” (100). He owns his actions, basing

them upon his own morality and dignity, and made them after careful consideration.

According to the play, there is no need to feel guilt when one is truly acting as he sees fit - but two murders are certainly cause for a pang of conscience; yet Orestes feels nothing at all. He admits to feeling “no hatred, but no love either” (87). Orestes refuses to be manipulated by anyone else’s moral values, but he actually robs the Argives of their decision-making power by killing their leaders without even consulting them. He admits to his sister that he has indeed “taken all from” her, but that they can still “make (their) patient way towards” themselves (*Flies* 120-1). What kind of comfort is this? He gives her no security at all, not having any idea where they will go or what they will do next. What he offers her is emptiness. In an article by Timothy J. Williams, he explains that while Greek tragedy often focused on the gap between the gods and the people, Sartre “admits to no possibility of a chasm to be bridged, for nothing lies beyond mankind, nothing but the void” (377).

The Sartre Online website posts that: “Sartre refused to completely recognize that the fact that man is both an individual and a social being” (Decino 2). Human beings, even the rebellious and socially-active ones, cannot live satisfactory lives without developing relationships with other people. While the most advanced human can struggle to free himself from society’s machine, he still feels the need to share some kind of human exchange. According to Fromm, true communication between men may be difficult or incomplete, but none of us can understand our own species without being a part of the human community (Barnes 151-2). In *Man for Himself*, Fromm says that complete alienation from other people is “incompatible with sanity” (58). It is unrealistic for Orestes to be willing or able to detach himself from humanity, yet he leaves the city

without any idea where he is going. Orestes feels a drive to share memories and love with the people of Argos, but he decides that freedom is more important. He even leaves his tutor behind, who dedicated so many years to him.

Unfortunately, if Orestes is supposed to be our alternative to allowing others to manipulate us with shame, then this alternative is not very attractive. Even his inspirational stories of Corinth, a city in which people “do what they like, and, afterwards, don’t give another thought to it” actually make Corinth sound like an immoral place in which people have no consciences (*Flies* 65). Orestes’ idea of existence does not take into account the fact that other people have the right to disagree with him, or that loneliness is not desirable. Is Orestes a logical example of someone who does not agree with generally-accepted rules, who longs to express his freedom? Must we kill people who use shame to manipulate us? Empson argues that Orestes should not have killed Clytemnestra, because once Aegistheus died, she truly would have been powerless (“Sartre Resartus”). Despite the fact that avenging a parent’s murder is a common mythical theme, the outcome of Orestes’ actions is not satisfactory for anyone in the play. Jasper Hopkins says that one of Sartre's downfalls is that he "fails to preserve a distinction between normal and neurotic/ psychotic expressions of emotion" (124). Sartre may want us to believe in Orestes’ purpose and ideas about individual power, but his behavior is not appropriate for expressing these ideas.

Harry Slochower explains that in traditional mythic tales, there are three stages: the hero’s ego develops, he challenges the collective, and then he is assimilated back into society as both the collective and the hero build something new together. Slochower argues that existentialist myth only focuses on the second stage, the revolt, and that the



hero does not feel the need for self-criticism or evaluation. Slochower's point is that Orestes cannot be an effective hero for the community or for himself because he has not gained "awareness of the hubris in his revolt or of the dangers of unqualified repudiation of the old" (43). Why did Orestes believe that he was the only one who could help the Argives? He certainly didn't have to bear the load of their shame, and it was unnecessary of him to do so. Orestes' behavior is too rash and quick for the people of Argos, and he does not offer them love or security in place of their old system. They did not have the time to come to an understanding of the need for change, or to prepare for it.

Orestes also confounds Sartre's own theories of *intersubjectivity*. Sartre explains that because each living person is free and therefore has his own subjective viewpoint, other peoples' perceptions of us are also true to a degree. Our sense of being-for-itself is not the only perception that matters; we also must take into account other people's perspectives. Sartre explains that through his opinions and choices, "man decides what he is and what others are" (*Essays* 52-3). Orestes does not consider himself from the perspective other people. It does not occur to him that his actions were uncalled for when his sister reacts in such a frightened manner after the murders. Because he refuses to see himself through her eyes, Orestes is also guilty of bad faith. He believes that he is the only one in the right, and that murder is acceptable as long as he does not feel guilty about committing it. Orestes does not know how to live within a community atmosphere or within a family setting, and therefore he learns nothing. In the end, Orestes has not really helped the Argives or himself, and he has to go out and search for a community who is "ready" for his knowledge. The play does not leave us with the feeling that he will ever find a home.

It is obvious to the reader that things needed to change in Argos, however. Orestes may have failed in his attempt to give the people a defined alternative, but he attempt to help them see they were being manipulated by external forces. When Zeus asks Orestes what he believes the people will do with their new information, Orestes replies, “What they choose. They’re free, and human life begins on the far side of despair” (*Flies* 119). While this statement sounds depressing, it actually can be seen as motivation for the Argives if they choose to look at it that way. Instead, they will most likely choose to make Orestes the focus of their hate and continue realizing their individual life projects of shamefulness. However, theoretically, they *could* choose to use their freedom and begin to make new decisions. Orestes is not responsible for what they decide to do now.

Even if Sartre was unable to use *The Flies* characters to effectively explain it, Fromm’s theories about psychoanalysis offer a possible midpoint between the behaviors of the Argives and Orestes. If we feel shame for who we are, then we must find the reason why we do not feel worthy of love or happiness. The factors that are missing in *The Flies* are time, communication, and faith in life in general. It is not necessary to fall prey to the manipulative motivations of the powers that be. We do not have to feel ashamed just because we question the attempts that these powers make to keep us orderly and submissive like the people of Argos. Nor are we necessarily doomed to be lonely, alienated and alone like Orestes. In order for Orestes to be happy, he also needs to believe that he is worthy of love, and that it is possible for him to love others. He will only move from place to place if he does not understand how to communicate with others. Fromm believes we can develop a humanistic conscience, which focuses on man’s strength and integrity, instead of an authoritative one. By examining our sources of shame, we can

permit ourselves to sense the living process and to have faith in life rather than in order”  
(*PR* 98). At the very least, we can examine our shame and decide whether we are blindly accepting others’ standards and rules, or using our shame as an excuse to avoid living.

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