Freedom and Determinismin *Les Jeux sont faits*

*Les Jeux sont faits,* scarcely ever mentioned by critics[[1]](#footnote--1), is considered to be one of Jean-Paul Sartre's slighter works and of little real importance except to those who are studying it as part of their A-level syllabus. The first judgement is undoubtedly sound, particularly if one measures it against *La Nausée*or*Flaubert, L'Idiot de la famille, I, II and III.*The second takes the apparent simplicity and melodramatic quality of the screenplay at face value. In fact, *Les Jeux* raises important issues which are central to Sartre’s work and philosophy.

*Les Jeux sont faits* is a screenplay: one of a number written by Sartre for the Maison Pathé from 1943-47.[[2]](#footnote-0) According to Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Delannoy, he completed it towards the end of 1943, the year that he produced his *magnum opus*, *L'Etre et le néant*.[[3]](#footnote-1) Written at the same time as the highly successful ***Huis clos***, it resembles that play in both content and message.[[4]](#footnote-2) It also takes up again themes treated in the short story from his collection *Le Mur*, 'La Chambre'. For various reasons, however, it was not published by Nagel until 1947. In that same year, on 19th September, Sartre gave a lecture to filmologues at the Sorbonne on cinematographic language before a showing of the film of *Les Jeux sont faits*, which had been produced by Jean Delannoy.[[5]](#footnote-3) It was presented at the Cannes film festival of 1947 and was reasonably successful both with the critics and the public.[[6]](#footnote-4)

It could be described as a mixture of love story, revolutionary thriller and cautionary moral tale. But, as ever with Sartre's works, most readers focus on its ideas. In consequence it tends to be interpreted as a radically existentialist piece: it was written by Sartre, so it must be existentialist. In an interview given in 1947 however, he discouraged such views and said the film was deterministic rather than existentialist and that anyway he was only playing around.[[7]](#footnote-5)

While taking account of that remark, I want to argue that *Les Jeux sont faits*, while dealing with the central existentialist theme of freedom, is neither solely concerned with the individual, nor is it deterministic. A close examination of the structure of the screenplay is a useful starting point in helping us understand the complexities of the text. The most striking aspect of this structure is the use of the device of death and the afterlife, a feature it shares with *Huis clos*.

**The Importance of Death in *Les Jeux sont faits***

The device of allowing the two central characters to die, meet in a kind of afterlife and then return to life has a number of important effects[[8]](#footnote-6), either structural or thematic.

***Death as Structure***

Death functions as the dramatic device that allows the main characters to see and discover what they would not otherwise see, both about society and about themselves. For example Pierre and Eve are able to meet, talk and get to know one another. The implication is that, were it not for death, they would never have met. Their meeting only serves to emphasise how different, and how mutually exclusive, their social backgrounds are.

Death also structures the action by setting up the twenty-four hour trial of love. Significantly it brings together two central members of the opposite sides of society at the time.

Death brings fantastic, non-realistic and humorous elements into the film, thus making it less heavy and serious.

Being dead allows for reflection in the midst of action. Pierre and Eve can consider their lives, and particularly the disparity between their intentions and their achievements.

***Death as Thematic Structure***

Being dead also heightens Pierre and Eve's awareness of the need to act on this earth when they have the chance to do so, and presumably is intended to have the same effect on us: 'Only one life, 'twill soon be past ... '. It underlines one of the main moral messages of the film (and of existentialism), that of the importance of choice. It suggests that, following Martin Heidegger, we should consider our lives in the light of death, our *Sein zum Tode*.

Death is also shown, and this is particularly stressed since both characters are murdered, to be something that removes freedom. This, of course, is the ultimate illustration of the negative look of the *pour-autrui*[[9]](#footnote-7), the capturing the freedom of the other.

Being dead accentuates how pleasant life is. In the film there is a scene where Pierre sits with his arm round the shoulders of a blind flute-player. He may be a beggar, but at least he is alive. He can act in the world. He can make a difference. And Pierre is jealous of his life.

Both Pierre and Eve die again, reinforcing our awareness of death's inevitability. One could argue that this double second death strengthens our awareness of destiny. Pierre and Eve have done what they have done and they are not able to change what has been done. Man is only the sum of his acts, what he makes himself, and one can only find out what he has made of himself when he is dead. Death makes moral choices destiny. It therefore stresses the importance of life and doing what one has to do.

And it reveals the absurdity of life and of moral choice. Both are arbitrary in nature. And failure would appear to be guaranteed:

Tout le monde rate sa vie ... (les morts tous ensemble)

- On rate toujours sa vie du moment qu'on meurt. (le vieillard)

- Oui, quand on meurt trop tôt, s'exclame Pierre.

- On meurt toujours trop tôt ... ou trop tard.

Eh bien, pas moi, vous entendez? pas moi! (42)[[10]](#footnote-8) ... Je n'ai pas raté ma vie (43).

Yet Pierre's moral choices are shown to have been in vain, twice. Even the moral life is absurd.

In short, in *Les Jeux sont faits***,** death is the dramatic device which enables readers to examine Pierre and Eve's moral choices and their consequences, illustrates the imperative nature of moral choice and also, thematically, functions as the metaphysical context of all our actions. A world is depicted which, although it is worthwhile, is all that we have and is ultimately absurd, for it is implied that death is the end. No-one could possibly sustain the view that Sartre believes in an after-life. In addition, by examining death as structure and theme our attention is drawn to the fundamental antitheses of the film: between life and death, values and absurdity, individual choice and social concern, freedom and determinism, the downtrodden working class and the privileged bourgeois.

**Social and Political Concerns in *Les Jeux sont faits***

Individual freedom is obviously central to the plot as it is Pierre and Eve's love, to the exclusion of all other considerations, which is being tested by the choices they make when they are 'resurrected'. While reading or watching we tend to focus on the main issue: will they be able to love each other for the period of twenty-four hours? In consequence, dramatic tension surrounds the two individuals as the hours tick away. It is easy to become absorbed in the emotion of the romance and hope that they will succeed in their love.

One possible critical perspective on their fate is that Pierre and Eve do not realise that they can be free. They both fail to see that freedom is there for the taking and therefore do not grasp it, thus allowing their previous choices to dictate their actions. I would suggest that, if we read the book carefully, it is clear that this judgement is inadequate. In one way this is surprising, as has already been noted, Sartre wrote it in 1943, the same year that he published his major existentialist work *L'Etre et le néant* in which he described the primacy of individual freedom and the obligation of the individual to be free.

However, throughout the action, social and political rather than individual concerns seem to predominate. But this should not surprise us. Sartre had already written and produced *Bariona ou le fils du tonnerre***,** championing resistance, in a German prison camp three years earlier, had just composed *Les Mouches,* which not only dramatised the freedom of the individual but put it into the context of political involvement and was, because of his sympathetic involvement with the resistance, becoming more concerned with social and political issues. In addition, he had been attempting to write an existentialist morality from as far back as 1939, even before he had begun work on *L'Etre et le néant*[[11]](#footnote-9)**.** At the time of the film's appearance in 1947, he was very much involved with left-wing concerns and expressed this commitment in the concept of '*littérature engagée*' which he outlined in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*(1947-48). In 1945 he had been one of the founders of *Les Temps modernes*, a literary and political journal and in 1948 became a major force, for a time, in the unsuccessful political movement, the *Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire*. At no time during his primarily existentialist period (1941-50) was he unconcerned with social or political problems.

A detailed examination of the text confirms the centrality of social and political concerns. We should not forget that the setting is that of a revolutionary uprising. The action takes place over a period of roughly 24 hours of an important insurrection. The régime in place is authoritarian, oppressive and one of which the author clearly disapproves. The scene in the Regent's palace makes this particularly clear. In the film version his preening of himself in his uniform in front of the mirror emphasises this disapproval (pp. 38-39). This right-wing, fascist regime functions as a police state, hence the emphasis on intelligence, spying and betrayal in the person of Lucien. The régime's oppressiveness is illustrated in its infiltration of the revolution.

It is a régime in which unprincipled people like André Charlier are able to amass vast sums of money. Charlier is the secretary of the militia and therefore at the centre both of the oppression and of the intelligence gathering. Those who have power seek to hold on to it by whatever means they can for their own ends, whether it be out of greed or vanity. The Regent holds on to political power for his own vanity; André uses his power over Eve to murder her and gain Lucette's dowry to satisfy his greed.

9It is a régime which causes people to be poor (hence the visit to the rue Stanislas) and which does not care about their plight.

Although the setting is not explicitly France it is clear that this is intended as a resistance film and one is meant to think one is in Paris. The whole script is clearly a critique of right-wing dictatorships and draws on Sartre's war-time experience. The régime is meant to represent the Nazis. The scenes in the film of the militia marching in Nazi-style uniforms make this clear. In this respect *Les Jeux*is reminiscent of resistance plays such as *Bariona*, *Les Mouches*, and *Antigone*.

Within this political context, social class and the prejudice it brings is a major concern of the script. There are a number of examples that could be provided:

There is the worker and the rich woman in the street. As he walks past her in the street she is totally unaware that he is there. She lives in a different world.

Pierre, when he is in the 'immeuble': 'se sent dans un terrible état d'infériorité' (82); he feels awkward throughout. The richness of the surroundings of this bourgeois building unsettle him. Eve and Pierre's upbringing and habits are so different: 'Qu'est-ce que nous avons de commun?' (90) he says as they walk together in the park. And he feels great uneasiness about her transformation of his room.

The existence of two mutually exclusive social worlds is strongly emphasised in the scene in the 'laiterie': 'qu'est-ce qu'elle fait avec ce type?' (91) cry out Eve's snobbish friends. The unpleasant fracas that develops because of their behaviour is an illustration of the social strife that lies behind the planned insurrection.

And of course the revolution is a revolution of the working class. Those involved are all working men, and Pierre, their leader, is a foreman. The poverty of their surroundings contrasts strongly, in the film, with the opulence of the homes of the leaders of the régime.

Power is a very important theme in the screenplay. The powerless are seeking power and those in power are seeking to retain it by all possible means. In short the context is one of a class war, which is portrayed in an almost simplistic manner. Indeed the structure is that of two parallel plot lines on either side of the class war. The two protagonists are enabled to meet in a fantastic middle, in death, and to stay together in life almost to the end of the allotted twenty-four hours, until the magnetic attraction of events and their past commitments draws them back to their respective origins.

**Individual Freedom and Social Constraints**

Not only are social and political concerns seen to be important, but both Pierre and Eve seem to be determined by their previous lives and social concerns. It is significant that, when they meet, they talk about going back. It is only then that their love begins to blossom. It is on the basis of their shared concern about what they have left behind that they are initially interested in life. As events unfold, it is clear that when they return to the situation created before, the same emotions and desires guide them. Eve goes to the apartment to help her sister, and Pierre feels morally obliged to warn his comrades: 'Demain ils seront tous morts ou arrêtés. Et ce sera ma faute' (48).

Moreover their new love seems to ruin all possibility, as the plot unfolds, of their success. It sets previous events running against them. It seems structurally inevitable that they will fail:

Pierre's manner of recovery arouses suspicion in his companions which leads to their following him.

Their suspicions about him are confirmed when he goes into Eve's apartment, causing his comrades to think that he is a traitor and informer. It is hard to blame them for assuming this. Eve, as socially different from him as she could be, is on the other side in the class war and, even more important, is the wife of the secretary of the militia.

Pierre, in going to Eve's, puts Eve's moral position with regard to Lucette in jeopardy, rendering void her later attempt to let the truth be known. It also lets André off the hook.

Pierre, in going to rue Stanislas, throws around money he did not have before, further arousing suspicion, and deprives a mother, however feckless, of her child. He behaves like an upper class person, using money as a means of exercising power and threatening the poor with the police.

Pierre, in admitting his love for Eve to his comrades, out of the blue, cannot easily be believed. The fact that they met in death, not in life and that their liaison could only arouse the wrong kind of suspicion shows the extent of the social division highlighted by the screenplay.

The same point applies to his discovering the plot against them. He only knows because he was dead and is now alive again and, of course he is unable to tell them how he knows.

His going back to his comrades after being with Eve gives the game away and plays into the hands of the militia.

One could argue that these points only show that neither Pierre nor Eve can change the direction of events; that their contrasting social backgrounds have entrapped them. In short they cannot change their situation; they must live within it and continue as before.

This suggests an antithesis between freedom, the belief that they can choose their future, and determinism, that their choices are governed by their pasts. The fate of the two protagonists seems to point to a pessimistic conclusion. Individuals seem unable to succeed against the pressure of events and society.

**The Moral Context of *Les Jeux sont faits***

Not only are social and political concerns prominent and events seemingly determining their socio-political response, it would appear that Sartre has clear social and political sympathies. Certain moral beliefs seems to be accepted as normative, not as matters of individual choice, which is Sartre's basic existentialist doctrine.

For example the film clearly opposes dictatorship as well as the oppression and exploitation that goes with it.

- The murder of a wife by her husband is seen as evil.

- The treachery of the cowardly and immature Lucien Derjeu is seen as wrong.

- The portrayal of the upper class snobs at the *Laiterie* suggests that class prejudice is wrong.

- On the other hand, revolutionary action for justice and against oppression is viewed positively. The admirable nature of Pierre's goals is assumed throughout.

- Love is positive. So is helping the poor. Pierre and Eve are seen to be virtuous in taking the little girl away from her mother and her stepfather; child-beating is clearly wrong.

Indeed the moral structure of *Les Jeux*is rather melodramatic: simple moral antitheses are set up between obviously good and obviously evil characters. Pierre is an admirable character (though headstrong) compared with André or the Regent. Likewise Eve is sympathetically treated. Pierre's social concern in seeing the need for revolutionary change and in seeking to help his former comrades even when they have rejected him and the need Eve feels to protect her sister are viewed very positively. One could argue, at this point, that the dialectic in the text between individual moral freedom (pleasing oneself and falling in love) and moral obligation (helping those in need) seems to be resolved in favour of moral obligation. This is curious from the existentialist point of view. If one is free to choose whatever value one likes, how can there be moral imperatives of this sort?

**Freedom and Determinism**

Is it true then, that 'Les morts sont libres' (32) as Pierre and Eve are told at the rue Laguénésie, and that therefore the living are not? The dead are supposed to have 'une liberté totale' (55). But the living are portrayed as being situated, *'engagés'*, as *'êtres-dans le-monde'*. Pierre and Eve's social background and previous experience do seem to determine what they do to a large extent. There is both a contrast and a similarity between the freedom they had to think of what they might do when they were dead, even though they were impotent, and the limitations of the living, when they seem to be hemmed in by events.

This suggests an early preoccupation with the themes of *La Critique de la raison dialectique*(1960) in which Sartre's argues that socio-economic factors severely restrict the exercise of individual freedom. Moreover, much earlier, in the interview with Paul Carrière in *Le Figaro* of 29th April 1947, to which we have already referred, he denies that *Les Jeux sont faits* is straightforwardly existentialist:

Mon premier film, Les Jeux sont faits, ne sera pas existentialiste. [...] Tout au contraire l'existentialisme n'admet point que les jeux soient jamais faits. Même après la mort, nos actes nous poursuivent. Nous nous survivons en eux, dussent-ils se développer souvent à contre-courant, dans des directions que nous n'avons pas voulus. [...]

Mon scénario baigne dans le déterminisme, parce que j'ai pensé qu'il m'était, moi aussi, permis de jouer. [...][[12]](#footnote-10) poursuivent. Nous nous survivons en eux, dussent-ils ne développer souvent à contre-courant, dans

In other words he suggests that the screenplay is determinist but then says he did not mean it seriously. However such interviews should always be taken with a pinch of salt, particularly when they run counter to the development of the author's own ideas and the evidence of the text.

For, despite all this evidence about the social and deterministic elements, the existentialist elements are clear. Pierre's past actions are projects which he has freely chosen and become committed to in *engagement* and action. He has founded the league, he is its leader, he has planned the insurrection and he is seeking to overcome the government. He is in situation. His world is one of social and political concerns. He cannot avoid that. His liberty has been expressed in 'choix' and 'engagement'. His 'choix initial' of revolutionary activity has been crucial. It has led to other 'choix en situation'. Therefore it is entirely in keeping with his earlier choices that, at the end, he freely reaffirms his choice of helping his comrades. It would surely be more accurate to talk of the weight of previous choices than of his being determined by them. His fate could best be seen to be an example of existentialist destiny rather than of determinism. Thus Pierre speaks like an existentialist when he says, although it turns out to be ironic: 'Et puis, l'essentiel, c'est d'avoir fait ce qu'on avait à faire (28).' It reinforces the belief *of L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* that 'L'homme n'est rien d'autre que ce qu'il se fait'[[13]](#footnote-11) and that his destiny becomes evident o*nly* at the point of death.[[14]](#footnote-12) Similarly Eve shows her continued love for Lucette by trying to prevent André from exploiting her. Even though she tries harder than Pierre to make their relationship work before returning to her apartment, she does go back and therefore dies again.

**Existential Freedom and Moral Certainty**

So, although freedom sits ill with the moral certainties of the film, it is clear that there is a genuine moral dilemma between freedom for oneself and freedom used sacrificially for others, particularly. When Pierre and Eve have been rejected, they stress their freedom and self-concern.

Pierre says: 'Ce n'est pas pour les autres que nous étions revenus' (100)

And again: 'Nous ne devons plus rien à personne' (122).

And Eve: 'Nous sommes seuls au monde ...' (122).

Yet it would appear that they both recognise the greater importance of others than of their own happiness, even though they have been rejected. They implicitly recognise that love is a pleasant desirable state, but not when others need you. Helping the worker's child, a product of their love, was a significant moral act. Throughout the film, murder, oppression, totalitarian government, social prejudice and selfishness have been called in question. In harmony with those values, they are free at the point of choice: they choose in freedom. They could be said to choose to act selflessly rather than selfishly; as Pierre says: 'Mais je n'ai pas le droit de lâcher les copains' (138). They seem to have been faced with the kind of genuine moral dilemma which is very similar to the one which confronted Sartre's young student in *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*[[15]](#footnote-13). In his case he had to choose whether he should stay with his mother, who needed him, or join the Free French forces in England. The failure of their love suggests a preference for the moral rather than the individual road.

Further, although they ultimately fail in their quest for love and fail when they return to their respective settings, they almost succeed, and do love each other for a time. Indeed their intention is not to fail, but, on the basis of the love they have already found, to help others. Remember the failed assassination attempt? Pierre believes that those who were going to shoot him 'sont repartis parce que nous avions gagné le droit de vivre' (121). The action of the film is such that the tension depends on their nearly succeeding. The feeling is, therefore, that of a genuinely free choice at the end rather than the mechanical actions of individuals determined by external forces.

**Existentialism and Marxism**

It is well known that Sartre moved towards Marxism later in his career. And there is no doubt that *Les Jeux* is an early example of his preoccupation with class-based politics. However questions such as: 'Is *Les Jeux sont faits* existentialist or marxist?' or 'Does it advocate freedom or collective action?' are overly simplistic. What a close examination of this text has shown is that there is a dialectic between the individual and the social. Sartre's *Les Jeux sont faits*shows his characters wrestling ambiguously with the implications of a belief both in individual freedom and in collective action, with the added complications of implicit moral norms in an author who says they do not exist. It is this ambiguity that makes the piece effective. And Sartre continues to wrestle with these dilemmas throughout the rest of his career. That ambiguity is underscored by the last scene. Eve says to the Marquis: 'Les jeux sont faits, voyez-vous. On ne reprend pas son coup (141).' The pessimistic, determinist conclusion. Yet just after, Eve and Pierre give the young couple the advice: Essayez, conseille Pierre. Essayez tout de même, murmure Eve (143).

The advice of optimism, hope and freedom. Which is it? The reader must decide. Sartre himself was to give different answers at different stages of his career.[[16]](#footnote-14)

1. See the very short bibliography, for instance, provided in *Les Jeux sont faits*, ed. B.P. O'Donohoe, Routledge, London, 1990, pp. lxi-lxii. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. *Les* Ecrits *de Sartre*, ed. Michel Contat et Michel Rybalka, Gallimard, Paris, 1970, pp. 29; 486. It was, however, initially turned down by Pathé: see Ronald Hayman, *Writing Against: A Biography of Sartre*, Weidenfield and Nicholson, London, 1986, p. 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. *Les Ecrits de Sartre*, p. 156; although Annie Cohen-Solal seems to suggest a slightly later date, see *Sartre 1905-80*, Gallimard, Paris, 1985, p. 282. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. *Les Ecrits de Sartre,* p. 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
5. *Les Ecrits de Sartre*, pp. 31;156. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
6. *Les Ecrits de Sartre*, p. 487. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
7. See below pp. 6-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
8. For instance Philip Thody has said that 'the principal theme of *Les Jeux sont faits* is death'. B.P. O'Donohoe, in his edition of *Les Jeux sont faits*, disagrees, and then spends a number of pages outlining how important death is in the text (pp. xlii-xlvi). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
9. See 'Le Pour-Autrui', part 3 of *L'Etre et le néant***,** Gallimard , Paris, 1947, pp. 275-484, and in particular pp. 310-368. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
10. All page references are to the Methuen edition of *Les Jeux sont faits*, edited by Mary Elizabeth Storer London, 1956 and to the more modern (and well-researched) edition published by Routledge in 1990, edited by B. P. O'Donohoe. The pagination of the text is exactly the same in both cases. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
11. This work, which was not completed, was mostly written in 1947 and 1948 and was published posthumously as *Cahiers pour une morale*, Gallimard, Paris, 1983. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
12. *Les Ecrits de Sartre*, p. 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
13. *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme,* Nagel, Paris, 1946, p. 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
14. See *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme***,** p. 57: 'Un homme s'engage dans sa vie, dessine sa figure, et en dehors de cette figure il n'y a rien'. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
15. *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*, pp. 39-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
16. See Philip Thody, 'Sartre and the Concept of Moral Action: The Example of His Novels and Plays' in Paul A. Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, Open Court, Lasalle, Illinois, 1981, pp. 422-437. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)