

No exit by jean-paul sartre essay sample

Philosophy



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How does Sartre establish a concept of Hell?

Far from the traditional perception of life after death, Jean-Paul Sartre's conceptual Hell is based on the Existentialist theory revolving around how one is possessed and controlled by the 'other', as the 'other' defines one's actions and exterior being. Jean-Paul Sartre, a French philosopher, novelist and playwright, was a leading Existentialist who dealt with the nature of human life and the structures of consciousness in his philosophies. His play 'No Exit' clearly illustrates the conflict of otherness and the underlying argument established throughout the play is that "Hell is other people". Using only three characters and a single room, Sartre evokes a new concept of Hell, and concludes that Hell is not a physical place, but that it is in fact all around us; a man made concept driven by our choices and actions. This concept is further underlined through Sartre's use of visual set construction, the characters' dependency on one another, their internal conflict and the idea of competitive subjectivity.

Sartre uses various aspects of visual set construction to create a version of Hell that greatly differs from the traditional perception of it, to enhance his theory that Hell exists all around us. According to Christian beliefs, Hell is a place for sinners who have been judged and condemned by God. Sartre, who considers faith in God to limit freedom, is opposed to the concept that God has the ability to decide one's fate. Through Garcin's realization that Earth is "down there", suggesting that Hell is above Earth, Sartre reverses the belief that Hell is below, as stated in the Bible: "...thou shalt be brought down to Hell". Sartre thereby inverts one of the most essential beliefs about Hell to establish the difference between his concept of Hell and that of traditional

Christian beliefs. Sartre reverses the placement of Hell to suggest that his concept of Hell is psychological instead of physical.

When Garcin first enters Hell, he exclaims: “ Can’t one turn off the light?” The Hell that Sartre has created is constantly illuminated, which means that the characters are always exposed to each other’s gaze and judgment. The characters are thus constantly confronted with their wrongdoings and are stripped of their ability to define themselves. Sartre thereby expresses his view, that the ‘ other’ “ freezes” ones freedom by simply looking at them. The distinctly human atmosphere of Sartre’s Hell, created by the use of Second Empire furniture and the absence of “ torture-chambers and brimstone”, not only provides a stark contrast to the idea of Hell being a “ lake of fire” as described in the Bible, but also leaves the characters nowhere to hide, again leading to constant exposure. This distinctly human atmosphere and the use of set construction to highlight the characters’ exposure, help define the concept that Hell is determined by the gaze of the ‘ other’.

The internal conflict within Garcin and Estelle further determines Sartre’s concept of Hell. Garcin claims to live the life of a hero, and believes that his actions in life were courageous. When Garcin first enters Hell, he claims: “... I’m facing the situation.” He wants to seem courageous, but is in fact only pretending to face Hell. Contrary to his beliefs, the other characters are able to see him for what he really is: a coward. Inez, who is Sartre’s voice in the play, makes Garcin realize that his actions define him as a different person than he thinks he is. Sartre further emphasizes this fact by expressing the Existentialist idea: “ You are- your life, and nothing else.” When Garcin

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becomes aware of the freedom and responsibility that comes with this, he flees into “ bad faith” by beginning to rely on others to define him.

Thus Garcin believes that it is Inez whom he has to convince that he is not a coward, as he will otherwise be defined as one, unable to escape the ‘ others’ judgment. Estelle, like Garcin is unwilling to see herself objectively. She does not want to accept that she is in Hell, and claims: “ I tell you I haven’t a notion [why I’m here].” This shows the disunity within her character, as she acts innocent but is in fact a murderer. Sartre uses this disunity to show that without ‘ the other’, the characters are unable to judge and comprehend their actions in life objectively. Sartre’s concept of Hell consists of forcing the characters to be confronted with the objective view of their actions and mistakes in life.

Sartre develops the idea of competitive subjectivity to further substantiate the concept of Hell. If you are looking at a person, they become an object and you become the subject. However, as soon as there is another person in the room, they reduce you to an object and become a subject as well. You lose your subjectivity as soon as another person is looking at you. The characters do not want to be treated as objects, and therefore the act of being objectified is torture for them. Sartre defines the relationship with the ‘ other’ as follows: “ I either try to make the ‘ other’ into an object that I can possess and manipulate, or I make myself into an object so that I can be possessed and used by the ‘ other’.” For example, any feelings of shame or guilt Garcin has for his actions are due to the other characters reducing him to an object under their gaze. Garcin says to Inez: “ If you’ll have faith in me I’m saved.”

He has become the object, and due to his life in 'bad faith' begins to believe that he needs the 'others' approval to save himself. When Garcin starts looking towards others to define him, he is left unable to leave Hell, as he is trapped there by Inez's thoughts of his cowardice. The other characters inflict pain on him; but are also able to put him out of his misery by showing acceptance and understanding. Nevertheless, absolution is never found in the text, as the characters choose not to leave Hell, imprisoned by the 'others' judgment. The last stage cue of the text: "they gaze at each other", shows how the gaze of the 'other' has imprisoned them, leaving the characters doomed forever. Sartre has created a Hell that cannot be escaped from through the use of his theory that one is trapped and tortured by the 'others' opinion.

Sartre uses the nature of his characters and their dependence on one another to establish his theory of 'being for others' and how this highlights his concept of Hell. According to Sartre, 'being for others' is experienced in the form of possession: "[The other] makes me be and thereby he possesses me." All three characters are selfish and are unwilling to give or to care for anyone. Yet they are entirely dependent on the others' judgment. Inez proclaims that Garcin is "at [her] mercy" as she says: "You're a coward, Garcin, because I wish it..." Garcin's attempts to change Inez's opinion about him become torture for him. Sartre states that one: "needs the 'other' in order to realize fully all structures of [ones] being." It is therefore the 'others' opinion that shapes the characters actions and makes them confront their true nature. Estelle unlike Garcin, who prefers to be left alone, seeks attention from everyone around her and relies on others to

define her. She confesses: "...it kept me alert, seeing myself as the others saw me." As the gaze of others is Estelle's biggest concern, it is also the one thing that can torment her. Sartre utilizes the characters' dependency on company to express that they are powerless against 'the other' and the fate of being objectified.

Throughout the play, the characters realize that everything they do, think or feel, is shaped by the gaze of 'others'. What it means to be a hero, villain or coward cannot be defined internally, but only by the external actions and judgment of others. While people are able to escape objective self-reflection in life, Sartre's Hell is a place where this cannot be avoided. Sartre proclaims in one of his works that, "Man is only what he does. Man becomes what he chooses to be." While Inez has accepted that her actions and choices in life have defined her as a bad person, Garcin and Estelle need the 'other' to define them objectively, as they have lived their lives in 'bad faith'. The presence of the 'other' is what makes up Sartre's concept of Hell. The characters in Sartre's play let themselves be defined by means of the 'others' judgment, which will eventually become their own. The concept of Hell is thus established through the inability of the characters to then surpass this 'arbitrary image'. Although Sartre concludes that 'Hell is other people', he also believes that only a man in 'bad faith' is at the mercy of 'the other'. Sartre's concept of Hell can be combated through freedom of choice, action and accepting one's responsibility in life.

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