

# Identity in no exit



In “ Metafictional Characters in Modern Drama,” June Schlueter contrasts the metafictional character with the dramatic character. According to Schlueter, “ drama presents a fixed identity, which in real life is a misnomer” (9).

Metatheater differs from traditional theater because metafictional characters do not have fixed identities. The metafictional character is dual; it is both real and illusory, both actor and character. This rift between real and illusory extends to incorporate not just the duality of character and actor, but also the duality of the inner and outer self. In Sartre’s *No Exit*, the essential self (which in metatheater represents the actor) represents the inner self, and the role-playing self (which refers to the character in metatheater) represents the outer self. As the three sinners attempt to determine the proper balance between inner and outer self, they confront an existential crisis common to human nature: the search for an identity. In *No Exit*, this rift between actor and character is apparent when Inez asks Garcin and Estelle: “ what’s the point of play-acting?” (17). (The characters are already in hell, so what is the point of pretending to be innocent?) Sartre’s use of the word “ play-acting” reminds the spectator that actors play the characters. More importantly, however, the characters in *No Exit* are twofold because of the duality between inner and outer self. Inner self refers to the identity the characters imagine themselves to have. Outer self refers to the identity created by other people. According to Schlueter, “ individual identity appears dependent upon individual perceptions, and since such perceptions vary among individuals, and even the perceptions of a single individual are inconsistent, so also does the identity of the person or character perceived vary” (10-11). The identities of the three sinners in Jean-Paul Sartre’s play, *No Exit*, are true to Schlueter definition — or rather the lack of these three

characters' identities is true to Schlueter's definition of the metafictional character. Inez, Estelle, and Garcin depend on one another to the point where they are no longer individuals. Inez strives to maintain an independent identity yet is unsuccessful because Garcin judges her. Garcin and Estelle consciously shy away from identity; Estelle looks to others to determine her appearance; and Garcin allows others to determine his soul. Inez values her inner self over her outer self. She tells Estelle, " I'm always conscious of myself — in my mind. Painfully conscious" (19). She cannot maintain her own identity because she strives to be an individual. She is bothered by the fact that other people view her identity differently than she views it herself. Her frustration is evident when she accuses Garcin of " stealing" her face. Garcin can see her face, but Inez cannot because there are no mirrors. The fact that Inez accuses Garcin of " stealing" leads one to infer that she believes she is supposed to judge herself, not to be judged by other people. Inez's pursuit of an identity is futile. What's the point of attempting to maintain one's own identity if others control it anyway? Unlike Inez, Estelle and Garcin decide against maintaining their own identity. They encourage others to determine their identity for them and thus place a higher priority on the outer self. Estelle lacks appreciation for the inner self; she says that " everything that goes on in one's head is so vague, isn't it? It makes one want to sleep" (19-20). She views herself in accordance with other people's physical image of her. She says, " when I can't see myself I begin to wonder if I really and truly exist" (19). When Inez acts as her mirror, Inez is able to convince her she has a pimple, when in fact she does not. Through Estelle, Sartre emphasizes the mysteriousness of identity. If one depends on other people for one's identity, how can one know whether they are lying?

Ultimately, it does not matter whether one's identity is true or false. Reality is different from truth. An unreal illusion is often more true. For instance, Schlueter argues that the fictive dramatic character is truer than the realistic metaphysical character. Garcin's identity is also mysterious. It is mysterious to him because he is not in control of it; he allows Inez to determine it for him. When Inez says his mouth looks grotesquely frightened, Garcin apologizes. He accepts Inez's impression of him without question. Garcin is unwilling to decide whether or not he is a coward. Throughout the play, he asks Estelle and Inez if he is a coward for fleeing the country. He does not leave the room when the door opens because he waits for Inez to determine whether or not he is a coward. He tells her, "If you'll have faith in me, I'm saved" (44). Garcin has the opportunity to choose freedom when the door opens, yet he chooses to remain in hell because he chooses to avoid his problems. Garcin, Estelle, and Inez all lack identities, as shown by the rift between their inner and outer selves. The quest for identity is futile. Jean Paul-Sartre's *No Exit* leaves the spectator in an existential crisis. Inez strives to be an individual but she cannot because others control her identity. From Estelle, the viewer learns that one's identity may be based on lies that become true. From Garcin, one learns the freedom of identity comes with responsibility. Ultimately, this freedom of identity seems futile because of Inez's failure to achieve her desired identity. Does identity even exist?