

Existentialist philosophy in sartre's "no exit"



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Though brief and comedic, Jean-Paul Sartre's play "No Exit" offers great insight into the basic ideas of his existentialist philosophy. The commonplace setting of the work and the diversity of the basic character types allude to the applicability of the themes to reality. The main principles behind Sartre's philosophy are detailed through the three main characters and the transitions that they undergo as the play progresses. The setting seems purposely ambiguous in the exposition of the play, allowing Sartre to establish an atmosphere and relate to his audience before delving into his main ideas. The entire play takes place in a single room, which is initially described as "a drawing-room in Second Empire style," with "a massive bronze ornament stand[ing] on the mantelpiece" (3). In the opening, the main character, Garcin, walks in "accompanied by the room-valet," and begins to make casual small talk with him about the style of the furniture and where his "toothbrush" might be (3-4). If it were not for Garcin's abrupt inquiry about the location of "the racks and red-hot pincers and all the other paraphernalia," the audience would assume that the setting is merely a drawing room in a normal upper- or middle-class household (4). The audience is eventually informed that the room is a representation of hell, with the Valet presumably exemplifying the devil. However, exposing the audience to the ordinary room before revealing its significance allows Sartre to create a relatable, earthly, and casual atmosphere, suggesting that "hell" can be present in real life. His setting also directs attention to the exchanges between the characters because the room is so normal, further implying that "hell" can be found within the minds and relationships of human beings. Garcin's statement at the end of play that "hell is - other people" is in line with this view (61). The atmosphere is maintained throughout the rest of the

play, with references to common items like the "sofa" and "the fireplace" (18, 60). In addition, the main characters - a frank older man, a middle-aged, ostentatious woman, and a lower-class lesbian - are diverse in many of their outward character traits, possibly implying that the situation portrayed could just as easily happen to any of the audience members. According to existentialist philosophy, for human beings "existence precedes essence." Certain objects (like inanimate objects) are defined simply because they exist as a particular item; for instance, a table is defined as a table. Sartre called an object defined in this way as a "being in itself." On the other hand, human beings must be defined in two ways - first, as an object that simply exists (a human being), and then as the essence that they decide upon. Sartre called an object defined in this way as a "being for itself." This idea is the central concept behind Sartre's play. As this second category of beings, the characters in the play are initially defined as existing simply because they are objects that are present on the stage. It is the formation of each character's essence that establishes the conflict in the work. Left in a simple drawing room, without the presence of continuous action and cultural expectations, the characters must find a way to define their essences to one another and to themselves. Garcin, a pacifist who is in hell for having run from military duty, has trouble defining his essence because he has not assumed the responsibility for doing so. Instead, he lets others define his essence through their subjective characterizations of him. For Sartre, this is an example of "bad faith" - self-deception and lack of personal responsibility for one's essence. Garcin's reliance upon others is foreshadowed in the very beginning of the play. When the valet states that he is leaving the room, stage directions say that "Garcin makes a gesture to

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detain him" (9). When the valet actually does leave, Garcin instantly becomes frantic, pressing the call button for the valet and even "beat[ing] the door with his fists" (9). After the second character, Inez, arrives, Garcin looks around the room and proclaims: "How beastly of them! They've removed everything in the least resembling a glass" (11). Thus, it is apparent that Garcin is lost without a third-person view with which to define himself, either in the form of another person or a mirror. The lack of mirrors in the room reinforces the idea that the characters will only have each other and their own consciousnesses to define their essences. Though Garcin sometimes makes statements suggesting that he desires more personal responsibility for his persona, he is never able to act upon it. He at first tries to ignore the women in the room, saying that they all will "work out [their] salvation" by "looking into [themselves], never raising [their] heads" (23). However, Garcin is unable to do so, and he instead listens to conversations about him on earth. Garcin later states that by his absence he has "left [his] fate in their hands," again demonstrating how he lets others define him completely (52). Throughout a large portion of the play, Garcin attempts to convince Estelle (the third main character) and Inez that he is not a coward for having abandoned his civic duty to enlist in the military. He tells Estelle: "If there's someone, just one person, to say quite positively I did not run away...that I'm brave and decent and the rest of it - well, that one person's faith would save me" (53). Thus, it is apparent that he is reliant upon the faith of others rather than himself. When he realizes that Estelle does not really understand what he is asking, he turns to the more experienced Inez for confirmation of his character, telling her: "It's you who matter; you who hate me. If you'll have faith in me I'm saved" (57). Garcin's anachronistic

references to salvation further suggest that he has not accepted responsibility for his own character and the consequences (like condemnation) that have resulted from it. In addition, like Garcin's statement that his acquaintances on Earth now have his "fate," it represents a bit of Sartre's opinion of determinism - that it is a form of bad faith, because it denies individuals the freedom of taking responsibility for their own actions. Estelle represents a character that similarly has bad faith and relies upon external things to verify her essence and existence. Like Garcin, she initially lies to both herself and the others about why she is in hell, demonstrating a lack of responsibility for herself and her actions. She is particularly alarmed at the absence of mirrors, saying: "When I can't see myself I begin to wonder if I really and truly exist" (25). She further states: "When I talked to people I always made sure there was one near by in which I could see myself. I watched myself talking. And somehow it kept me alert, seeing myself as the others saw me" (25). Estelle's dependence upon a third-person view of herself, like Garcin's, reveals that she has not learned to define her own essence and is consumed by her reliance upon others; she has "bad faith." Inez capitalizes on Estelle's need for a mirror, offering her eyes as Estelle's mirror. Estelle looks into Inez's eyes and exclaims: "Oh, I'm there! But so tiny I can't see myself properly," to which Inez replies: "But I can. Every inch of you" (26). The references to views of Estelle's physical appearance symbolize the responsibility for her consciousness: Estelle is unable to define herself and instead lets others - in this case Inez - define her. On the other hand, Inez represents a character that depends upon her own judgment for the formation of her essence. While the others lie about why they are in hell, Inez is honest and bluntly states: "What's the point in

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play-acting, trying to throw dust in each other's eyes? We're all tarred with the same brush" (21). Thus, it is hinted at early in the play that Inez sees through the self-deception and favors honesty and responsibility for one's past. When Estelle wonders about her existence in the absence of a mirror, Inez replies: "I'm always conscious of myself - in my mind. Painfully conscious" (25). Inez's essence therefore does not come from outside of her own consciousness. When Garcin attempts to sit quietly and ignore the others, Inez exclaims: "To forget about the others? How utterly absurd! I feel you there, in every pore...you can't prevent your being there" (29). Angry about Garcin's ignorance of her and Estelle's attention to Garcin rather than to herself, Inez continues: "I prefer to choose my hell; I prefer to look you in the eyes and fight it out face to face" (30). A statement made by Inez later helps tie these exclamations to Inez's internal struggle. She tells the others: "I can't get on without making people suffer. Like a live coal. A live coal in others' hearts. When I'm alone I flicker out" (34). Garcin and Estelle's weaknesses lie in their subjectivity to the judgment of others, whereas Inez is the one who must judge and affect other people. When the others ignore her, Inez becomes just as frantic as when Garcin was left by himself. In the same way that Estelle feels she doesn't exist without a mirror, Inez feels she doesn't exist when she can't control and prey upon other people. Inez has taken responsibility for her actions and the formation of her essence. Unfortunately, Sartre seems to be warning his audience that assuming responsibility for one's essence may lead to realizations about oneself that cause suffering, such as Inez's frustration with her own reliance upon torturing other people. "No Exit" is ultimately a play about the struggles that individuals face with regards to assuming responsibility for their own

essence. As a "being for itself," human beings have the freedom to choose their own personality traits. This requires dependence upon one's own judgment rather than that of third parties. However, it may also lead to realizations about one's weaknesses that cause suffering.