

NO EXIT

by Jean-Paul Sartre



THE AUTHOR

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) was born in Paris, the grandnephew of Albert Schweitzer. After completing his studies, he taught for fifteen years, traveled widely, and studied the writings of existentialists Martin Heidegger and Edmund Husserl. During the 1930's Sartre gathered around him a fashionable coterie of intellectuals who discussed deep issues in the Left Bank cafes of Paris; included in this group was his long-time mistress, Simone de Beauvoir. When World War II began, Sartre was drafted into the French army. When France fell, he was briefly imprisoned in Germany, then returned home to join the French Resistance, for which he became a journalist. After the war, he became a supporter of Communism - over the years, he supported Stalin and Mao, opposed the French war against Algeria, and even headed up an International War Crimes Tribunal set up by Bertrand Russell in 1967 to investigate United States conduct in Indochina. In the years during and after World War II, Sartre, along with his long-time friend Albert Camus, became the leading voice of existentialism. He promoted the philosophy largely through novels and plays, though he did write philosophical discourses on the subject such as *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (1946). Sartre won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1964, but refused the award as a protest against bourgeois values. His fictional works included *Nausea* (1938) and *No Exit* (1944). Sartre died in 1980.

Existentialism is based on the fundamental belief that life is without meaning. Each individual is alienated from all others. Since his life has no meaning, each person must define himself; as Sartre put it, "existence precedes essence." Since each person is free to define himself, he is also completely responsible for who he is and what he does. Most people, however, refuse to accept responsibility for themselves, instead making excuses such as blaming others or blaming a non-existent God.

No Exit is the story of three people in a room in Hell. Once they have been forgotten on earth, they are free to define themselves, but find that they are unable to do so because of the presence of the others in the room, who define them by what they see and know. Full confession of their sins does no good, since their actions have defined them once and for all. Ultimately, the three are forced to spend eternity with people they detest, leading to Sartre's famous conclusion that "Hell is other people."

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Valet - Escorts the damned to their rooms in Hell.
- Joseph Garcin - Former journalist and man of letters who was shot by a firing squad for desertion. Even in Hell he cannot escape his cowardice.
- Inez Serrano - Former post-office clerk who committed suicide with her lesbian lover after concluding an affair with the woman's husband, after which he threw himself in front of a tram.
- Estelle Rigault - Married to a man three times her age, she fell in love with a younger man, bore his child, and drowned the child. After her lover blew his brains out, she caught pneumonia and died.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

"Ah, I see; it's life without a break." (Garcin, p.5)

"There's no more hope - but it's still *before*. We haven't yet begun to suffer." (Garcin, p.10)

"Somehow I feel we've never been so much alive as now. If we've absolutely got to mention this - this state of things, I suggest we call ourselves - wait! - absentees." (Estelle, p.12)

"I mean that each of us will act as torturer of the two others." (Inez, p.17)

"When I can't see myself I begin to wonder if I really and truly exist." (Estelle, p.19)

"... how empty it is, a glass in which I'm absent!" (Estelle, p.19)

"Open the door! Open, blast you! I'll endure anything, your red-hot tongs and molten lead, your racks and prongs and garrotes - all your fiendish gadgets, everything that burns and flays and tears - I'll put up with any torture you impose. Anything, anything would be better than this agony of mind, this creeping pain that gnaws and fumbles and caresses one and never hurts quite enough. Now will you open?" (Garcin, p.41)

"When I chose the hardest path, I made my choice deliberately. A man is what he wills himself to be." (Garcin, p.43)

"You are - your life, and nothing else." (Inez, p.43)

"So this is hell. I'd never have believed it. You remember all we were told about the torture-chambers, the fire and brimstone, the "burning marl." Old wives' tales! There's no need for red-hot poker. Hell is - other people!" (Garcin, p.45)

NOTES

The entire action of the play is continuous, with no interruptions, and takes place in a drawing room in Hell. Garcin is escorted into the room by the valet, and immediately begins to complain about the furnishings, though he admits he is surprised that there are no instruments of torture present. He then notes that there are also no windows, mirrors, bathroom facilities, or beds - in Hell, one never eats, sleeps, or has to deal with hygiene. He also cannot close his eyes or even blink, and the lights never go off. After the valet leaves, Garcin pushes the bell, but finds it doesn't ring, nor can he open the door.

In a few minutes the valet returns, bringing Inez with him. She has no questions for the valet, but as soon as he leaves demands of Garcin where Florence (apparently her lover) is, thinking him to be the torturer. Garcin tells her that he was a journalist, and she quickly discovers that they are stuck with one another; neither can escape the room, though both would prefer to be alone. When Garcin suggests they be courteous, Inez responds that she is not a polite person, and immediately begins to criticize the way he twists his mouth.

The valet returns and escorts Estelle into the room, completing its occupancy. Garcin has covered his face with his hands to avoid annoying Inez, and Estelle immediately jumps to the conclusion that he has no face, and is quite started to find that his appearance is quite normal. She then begins to complain the the sofas don't match her dress. She then announces to the others that she died of pneumonia. Inez responds that she committed suicide using a gas stove, while Garcin was shot - twelve bullets in the chest. Garcin then notices that it's getting hot and begins to remove his coat, but Estelle objects to the gaucheness of it all and he puts it back on again. They then spend time discussing what their friends and relatives on earth are doing at the time (apparently they can see them), and then move on to discuss why they were put in the same room. Garcin thinks it was merely the chance of death order, but the others doubt that anything in Hell happens by chance. They then try to find out if they knew one another in life, or at least had common friends or acquaintances, but come up empty. The three then come to the conclusion that their presence, along with the arrangement of the room, was designed for a purpose, but they can't figure out what that purpose must be. Each one, they suspect, may be the object of torture by the other two, though they can't imagine how.

They then decide to share what they did that sent them to Hell. Estelle begins, telling the others that she was orphaned as a child, and married a much older man in order to be able to care for her younger brother. Six years later she met a man her own age, fell in love, caught pneumonia and died. Garcin tells the women that he was the editor of a pacifist newspaper who was shot by a firing squad in time of war. At this point, they decide that the only way they can avoid torturing one another for all eternity is to remain silent, each on his sofa, lost in his or her own thoughts. The women, however, can't manage it - Inez soon starts singing and Estelle begins to touch up her makeup, asking Garcin if he has a mirror. Inez volunteers that she has one, but soon finds that it is no longer in her purse. She then offers to be Estelle's mirror. She helps Estelle straighten her lipstick, but Estelle wonders whether she can trust her judgment, certain that their tastes are not the same. Inez then begins to tease Estelle, first telling her she has a pimple, then asking her what would happen if she, too, ignored her, leaving no one in the room to be impressed by her beauty. Inez then accuses Estelle of flirting with Garcin, who professes no interest in her whatsoever (at which Estelle is insulted, of course). Garcin again advocates silence, which again lasts only briefly until Inez speaks, insisting that ignoring one another simply is not

possible. Garcin, giving in, goes over to Estelle and begins to fondle her neck, but she pulls away from him.

Garcin then makes another effort to get the others to tell their stories truthfully, leaving nothing out. After Estelle insists she has no idea why she is in Hell, Garcin agrees to begin. According to him, he is in Hell for mistreating his wife - being unfaithful, coming home drunk every night, hiring a mulatto girl and sleeping with her with his wife's knowledge. Inez then admits to her tangled affair with Florence, her cousin's wife. She had been staying with the couple and sleeping with her cousin. As the two women became attracted to each other, the cousin threw himself under a tram; a few months later, Florence turned on the gas in the middle of the night and the lesbian lovers died together. After being pressed by the other two, Estelle finally admits that the young man, Roger, had been her lover and had gotten her pregnant. They ran away to Switzerland, but she didn't want the baby, so she tied it to a rock and threw it in the lake. When they returned to Paris, Roger blew his brains out.

Estelle, preoccupied with the strain of telling her story, finally agrees to let Garcin remove his coat. He then suggests that they should begin to help one another. Inez, meanwhile, is watching events in her apartment, but soon the scene darkens and she realizes she can no longer see what is happening on earth. Garcin tries to get Inez to help him, but she refuses; Estelle wants Garcin to help her, but he refers her to Inez instead. Estelle looks down on her best friend, the homely Olga, dancing with Peter, a teenage boy she used to flirt with, when suddenly the light fades out and she, too, is cut off from the earth. She turns to Garcin and tries to get him to hold her in his arms, but he refuses and points her again to Inez, in whom she has no interest. Estelle then spits in Inez's face, and Garcin, giving in again, comes over to embrace her as Inez objects vociferously. As he is about to kiss Estelle, he is distracted by his partner Gomez, who is talking about him back on earth. He then admits to Estelle that he was a coward, running from battle and cringing in the face of death. Unlike the others, Garcin can still see what is going on among his former friends because he is still remembered, though what they remember is his cowardice, and he wishes he would be forgotten. He pleads with Estelle to tell him he is brave, asserting that then he could love her forever. Estelle tells him she loves him anyway, but Inez insists she is lying because she wants a man - any man. Estelle admits she's right, and Garcin turns away in disgust. Garcin tries to get the valet to open the door, and each one insists he or she will leave the others if given the opportunity. As he pulls on it, the door flies open, but none of them can bring himself to leave. With no memories of them remaining on earth, they need one another's affirmation in Hell. Inez also refuses to affirm Garcin, reminding him that he is a coward and that she knows it. He turns to kiss Estelle in revenge, but can't do it, knowing it is a meaningless gesture as long as Inez knows him for what he is. Estelle, realizing that the only way Garcin can love her is if Inez is no longer present, takes up a letter opener and stabs her, but nothing happens, of course - they are already dead. After a moment of hysterical laughter, the three settle down to an eternity of misery in each other's presence.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Given what you know about existential philosophy, how does Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit* communicate that philosophy? Choose three key concepts and illustrate them with specifics from the play.
2. When the door opens at the end of Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*, why are the characters unable to leave? Why are they afraid of freedom? Does the same reason apply to each one, or are their reasons different?
3. In Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*, why are there no mirrors in the room? How does this help to communicate the philosophy of the play?
4. Jean-Paul Sartre wrote *No Exit* in 1944; it was first performed months before the liberation of Paris by the Allies. Given the all-seeing eye of the Gestapo to which Resistance fighters like Sartre were continually subject, discuss the extent to which Sartre's Hell exists on earth.
5. Why do the characters in Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*, who are in Hell and have nothing to gain from lying and nothing to lose by telling the truth, lie to themselves and to each other? What is Sartre communicating through the deceitful behavior of his three protagonists?
6. Of the three protagonists in Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*, which one most serves as the voice of the playwright? Why do you think so? Support your argument with specifics from the play.
7. Jean-Paul Sartre believed that most people lacked the courage to be free because they didn't want to take responsibility for their actions. In his play *No Exit*, is any of the characters truly free, or do all demonstrate the playwright's negative judgment of the mass of humanity?
8. What is the significance of the most famous line in Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*, "Hell is other people"? How does this sentence summarize the play? How does it relate to existentialist philosophy?
9. Contrast the characters of Inez and Estelle in Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*. Is it fair to call them foils? Why or why not? How does Garcin influence the relationship the two women have with each other?
10. Jean-Paul Sartre was an atheist, yet he uses Hell as the central symbol in his play *No Exit*. Is the Hell he portrays really an image of life on earth - the life all of us live? If so, what critique of human sensibilities is implied in the plot of the story?