

Sartre's No Exit

Primary Sources:

Sartre, *No Exit*, in *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, pp. 3-46

Background:

From Wallace Fowlie's *Dionysus in Paris*:

Jean Paul Sartre's *No Exit* was first performed at the Vieux-Colombier in May 1944, just before the liberation of Paris. Three characters, a man and two women, find themselves in "hell", which for them is a living-room with Second Empire furniture. Each of the characters needs the other two in order to create some illusion about himself. Since existence, for Sartre, is the will to project oneself into the future – to create one's future – the opposite of existence, where man has no power to create his future, is hell. This is the meaning of the Sartrean hell in the play *No Exit*. Garcin's "sin" had been cowardice, and here he tries to use the two women, who are locked up forever with him in the same room, under the same strong light, as mirrors in which he will see a complacent and reassuring picture of himself.

This play, an example of expert craftsmanship so organized that the audience learns very slowly the facts concerning the three characters, is Sartre's indictment of the social comedy and the false role that each man plays in it. When the picture a man has of himself is provided by those who see him, in the distorted image of himself that they give back to him, he has rejected what the philosopher has called reality. He has, moreover, rejected the possibility of projecting himself into his future and existing in the fullest sense. In social situations we play a part that is not ourselves. If we passively become that part, we are thereby avoiding the important decisions and choices by which personality should be formed. [*This is bad faith, according to Sartre.*]

The game a man plays in society, in being such and such a character, is pernicious in that he becomes caught in it. The viscosity of such a social character is the strong metaphor by which Sartre depicts this capital sin and which will end by making it impossible for man to choose himself, to invent himself freely. The drawing-room scene in hell, where there is no executioner because each character tortures the other two, has the eeriness of a Gothic tale, the frustration of sexuality, the pedagogy of existentialist morality.

Questions:

- Garcin says "Hell is other people". What does he mean? How do some of the interrelations between Estelle, Garcin, and Inez develop Garcin's notion.
- How is each of the characters in bad faith with respect to human temporality? That is, how do they refuse to accept the idea that "I am not what I am and I am what I am not"?