

Hell Being Other People in Jean-Paul Sartre's Play No

Sanaa Mohammed Mahdi ¹

¹ Department of English Language, College of Arts, Al-Mustansiriyah University, Baghdad, Iraq

ABSTRACT

In modern world, hell is not the punishment but the society in which we live and the people who surround us. Through their interference in our affairs, those people make our life miserable and look like hell. This research deals with Jean Paul Sartre's play No Exit (1944) illuminating the afterlife of the others. He used three dead characters that are punished by being imprisoned into a room together for eternity. He symbolizes the room as a hell in order to represent the real world around us. Their coming into this small hell shows their indispensability to one another. They represent the essential idea of the play that others are torture for us. By emphasizing on the notion of hell being other people, Sartre shows that man's pain, suffering, depression are due to others. By repeating his prominent line 'Hell is Other People', Sartre concentrates on the relation of people that is always conflict; meaning that other people just being annoying. For him, the mere presence of another person will definitely trouble the others due to his interference in private matters. For that reason, Sartre portrays hell as a room with no torture or flames as the real torture is the presence of others. Through concentrating on the nature of man's existence, Sartre can reveal the problems of both man and society as well.

KEY WORDS: Conflict, Hell, Mirrors, No Exit, Punishment, Torture.

1. INTRODUCTION

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) was a French philosopher, playwright, novelist, political activist, biographer, and literary critic. He was considered as a creative writer whose name was associated with the idea of the absurd which seems to be a contradiction between the idea that life is meaningless and the active life that he actually led. "The conflict between oppressive, spiritually destructive conformity, bad faith, and existence precedes essence, nothingness, hell is other people, situation and every positional consciousness of an object is a non-positional consciousness of itself"

(Brown, 1937, p. 7) are Sartre's main themes which embodied in his principal philosophical works. Sartre is one of the leading figures in the 20th century as his works have affected not only sociology, critical theory, and post-colonial theory but also literary studies as well (Charles, 1970, p. 11). Therefore, his aim is to influence these disciplines. He considers his imaginary works as a medium through which he can reconnoiter his philosophical ideas.

Through his famous line "Hell is Other People," Sartre wants to shed light on the important relations with others that are always relations of conflict. Man needs other recognition meaning used other people like mirrors to tell him what he looks like. In other words, man can see himself through the eyes of other people. By repeating this line "hell is other people," Sartre insists that other people simply being annoying. He contends that the mere presence of another person will trouble the others since subjectivity is competitive. Here, man feels like an object rather than a subject. Hence, according to Sartre, people are often annoyed by each other through looking down or frustrating, defeating, compelling,

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Corresponding author's e-mail: dr.sanaa_mohammed@yahoo.com

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dissatisfying, irritating, and distorting others as McCall avers (1969, p. 4).

Sartre is concerned to diagnose the problems of man and society as well to prevent them. Therefore, he examines the nature of man's existence and from what sickness he suffers. For him, it is a distorted view of what man is like but he used to it, meaning "bad faith" which is "an attitude toward the human condition that we freely maintain and that we would be better off without" (McCall, p. 7). This attitude destroys the relation with one another on both personal and social level. Bad faith creates hatred and makes love futile. "Our relations with other people are always poisoned" (Danto, 1975, p. 22) by saying this, Sartre means that when relation with someone becomes cruel then that person can be only hell. As a matter of fact, hell is neither metaphysic of man's existence nor too much concern with his image in the eyes of others.

2. HELL IN NO EXIT

The one-act play *No Exit* (1944) was one of the Sartre's finest plays. Its French original title was *In Camera*. It was written and first produced late in World War II when France was occupied by Germany. Therefore, it was regarded as a social clarification on Paris during the war and the German occupation was considered hell.

No Exit is a depiction of the afterlife, in which three deceased characters are punished by being locked into a room together for eternity. The setting is hell to represent the real world around us. Three characters, Garcin, Estella, and Inez, are died and come together in this miniature of hell in a way which shows their indispensability to one another. They involved in each other's stories, and they signify the fundamental idea of the play, namely, that other people are torture for us.

For Sartre, the vital question of "the others" dominates most of his works. He describes "over and over how other people can condemn us, define us, withhold love from us, murder us - in short, take the power away from us to live life as we wish" as Bentley points out (1962, p. 76). Then, he adds that the others cannot take our freedom. "Nausea" is the main suffering and torment that one feels when he challenges the meaningless world. Hence, man can use his freedom of thought, choice, and action to fight this sickness. However, once man has chosen and acted upon his choice, there is no turning back. This choice stands as a stamp on his essence forever. This idea is clearly used in *No Exit* to illustrate how the torture of looking back on the past is like a hell, especially when man lost the chance of doing something in the present (Bentley, p. 75). In life, man has the opportunity to reorder his life, but when he dies, his life actions are frozen into a mold that can never be broken. Hence, the three characters are condemned to the unallowable truth of their past actions

(Bentley, p. 81). They admit their sins to each other and want others to judge them which prevent their acting freely.

Sartre considers life as absurd, the universe is irrational and meaningless, and death is the ultimate absurdity. He concentrates on the need for others to define the essence. From the beginning, Garcin depends on Valet, the man who pushes them into the hot room, a symbolic hint of what is to come. Garcin wants to know how life develops in hell. This reflects the central idea of the play that other people are our hell. The look of others and the everlasting struggle caused to see man like an object from the view of other people (Danto, 1975, p. 5). Thus, the main conflict in *No Exit* is human versus human.

Sartre is concerned with the meaning and the role of the others which affects man in his community. According to him, what man does is only to satisfy the others. As a matter of fact, most people try to hide their freedom from themselves for they are afraid of holding responsibility for their actions. Such kind of people pretends that their behaviors are done due to some circumstances trying to justify them and this is what Sartre named bad faith.

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The setting of the play is hell where the three characters live. Sartre portrays hell as a second empire drawing room with no torture or flames. It is a hell in which they will spend eternity together. Later, they realize that their real torture is the presence of other people. They start to tell the reason for their coming to hell (Sartre, 1952, p. 27). Estella said that she has been damned for adultery. She married a rich old man for the sake of looking after her brother but later she begins to love another man. For Garcin, this is not considered a crime and he starts to tell his own story which is away from truth since it contains many lies. He was an editor of a pacifist newspaper, but he was fired due to his true ideas that he does not want to change them wishing to live and die according to his own true principles. Hence, both Estella and Garcin believe each other and begin to live in bad faith. Unlike them, Inez admits that she is condemned because she is a damned bad woman. She is attracted toward Estella (Sartre, 1952, p. 137) who is charming, but Estella is not interested.

The three characters decide to reveal the true cause of their being damned. Inez is the first one who begins to

tell her true story. She is a hard, cold woman whose experience in life has brought out the animalistic instincts in her. She will stop at nothing to get her own way. She said that the true reason of her coming into hell is that she is responsible for making a woman, Florence leaves her husband by seducing her and when he died she convinced her that both of them are responsible for his death "Yes, my pet, we killed him between us" (Sartre, p. 151). Hence, the wife becomes desperate and frantic that makes her turned on the Gaz and killed herself and Inez.

Estelle is a beautiful blonde shallow woman, younger than the other two characters. She is very interested in being feminine, in pursuing the affections of Garcin who is interested in Inez and not her, and in attending to her physical attractiveness. Estella said that she was married, but she has a lover who wanted a baby from her, but she disliked to have a child. Unfortunately, the baby came and she drowned him. When her lover knows that she killed the baby, he committed a suicide "blew his brains out" (Sartre, p. 142). She admits that she is guilty for being the main reason that her lover killed himself. It is obvious that her crime is not only the vanity but her illegal relationship with a young man in a time she married an old man not out of love but out of greed and killing her baby that causes the suicide of the father.

Estelle's only desire is to have a mirror to see her reflection all the time since her only concern is her appearance. She believes that through looking at the mirror, she feels her existence "When I can't see myself I began to wonder if I really and truly exist" (Sartre, p. 19). When she wishes to see the reflection, she realizes that there is no mirror in this hell so now she will spend her eternity reflected in the eyes of Inez who says, "I am your lark mirror, my dear, and you can't escape me" (Sartre, p. 21). Here, Inez plays the role of society as she judges Estelle. Moreover, Estella comprehends that she has become an object through the look of the others.

On contrary to them, Garcin of middle age, intelligent and politically leftist, tries to conceal the main reason of his being condemned. Garcin is the first one who enters hell. He is surprised when he sees that the surroundings do not include hellfire and do not stop the torture. He wishes to be alone so he can arrange his life and handle eternity. When Inez enters hell, he realizes the impossibility of loneliness as no one can sleep so he will be in view of Inez and Estella who come later (Sartre, p. 140). Then, he starts to reveal his true storytelling them that he is damned due to his cruel and bad treatment to his wife who loved him too much. He also needs a mirror to see himself and not rely on what others think of him. He wishes that they help each other, but it is impossible as each one of them is meant to be a torture for the others since they lost all human feelings and

cannot pity anyone. However, finally, he decides to expose the truth that he is "a coward man, was hunted down and shot dead" (Sartre, p. 167).

Garcin wants others call him brave and not coward as Inez calls him coward for his past. Hearing the word of coward from other people makes him loses his self-confidence. "They won't forget me, not they! They will die but others will come after them to carry on the legend. I've left my fate on their hands" (Sartre, p. 39). He wants someone to support him and have a faith on him.

Garcin finds other people to be hell because Inez refuses to confirm his self-image and prefers to conscript Estelle. She threatens not only his self-image, but his favorite picture of the world and thereby his excuse for his own behavior. This leads to shake Garcin's confidence in his outlook. His realization that his hell is other people is developed as he begins to understand his problem (Routledge, 2009, p. 16). This exposes Sartre's idea that relations with other people are hellish when they are poisoned or bitter in some manner just like Garcin's sin that poisoned his relationship with other people and makes him dependent on others. "You are your life, and nothing else" (Sarter, p. 141), this statement shows the offensive ways of man in which he treated the people around him just like Garcin and Estelle devilish way.

Inez as a diabolical and sadist woman likes to judge others. She always interferes in Estelle affaires preventing her from achieving her desires. She is the only character who feels at home in hell. She takes some pleasure as she knows that the people around her will join in her depression and sadness. She admits that she needs others to occupy in her violent act.

Despite her suffering, Inez accepts her hell saying that "she is rotten to the core" (Sartre, p. 170). She does not accept anything from Garcin, neither his help nor his appeal to decrease her suffering for she lacks human feeling, having nothing to give. However, Garcin argues that they are inextricably linked together and if they do not cooperate, they will suffer. On the other hand, Estelle becomes upset and sad when she sees her lover is dancing with another woman, and Inez tries to comfort her. It is obvious that each one needs nothing from the others but according to Sartre's system, nothing can happen without influencing everything else; this is a part of their hell (Aronson, 1980, p. 12).

The characters have now unveiled their reasons for being sent to hell. The damnation period is suspended for a moment while they restore peace. It comes in fits and starts. This proves Sartre's theory of freedom; if they wish to create something unhellish for themselves, they can do so. However, by dwelling on the past, harmful, and sordid aspects of their lives, they deprive themselves of calm. Their past actions matter only

insofar as their present choices are concerned. They are now becoming more and more aware of their need for one another (Gerassi, 1989, pp. 18-19).

When each one of the characters tells his true story to the others, we find that Garcin and Estella try to make a compromise and look at each other on the contrary; Inez who refused this act and shattered what is called faith. They realize that "Hell is other people" (Sartre, p. 166), meaning that each one makes a hell for the others two. Sartre is an imaginative and creative dramatist, he personifies hell as a place devoid of hellish fires and any kind of torture instruments to make the characters the main cause of possible suffering to the others, "The idea of their spending eternity together is both quite unbearable and completely possible. This is exactly the effect Sartre wanted to give" (Thody, 2002, p. 83). Through this unbearable possibility, Sartre has been able to reveal his philosophical intentions.

The absence of a mirror is significant as it prevents the characters from being able to see themselves with an object. Thus, they are forced to see themselves through other people's impressions about them. Sartre use of no mirrors in hell is to illustrate his psychological view when man looks at himself and at his behavior, he has a specific meaning, but when others look at him, their meaning is completely different. This makes man to be an object through the look of others as Gerassi points out (1989, p. 22). In this play, the others refuse to see the image that each character wants to be noted. Therefore, the look becomes the instrument of torture for each one. According to Sartre, the experience of torture makes people realize that they are completely alone and responsible for any decision they may take.

Estella requires Inez to tell her that she is beautiful, so Inez accepts to be her mirror and tells her what she wants. The others know carefully that Estella neither the "glancing stream nor the crystal girl as she purports to be" (Sartre, p. 148). Dorothy McCall observes that, "Each is at the mercy of another who will not give him what he wants and can get only from that person. Inez wants Estella whereas she wants Garcin who wants the reassurance of Inez" (1969, p. 114).

For Estella, the death of her lover is of no use because her husband never suspects her. She said what others think of her. Furthermore, the Garcin's disclosure becomes of no value due to his truth saying that "on earth he was able get the adoration of women. It was actually the adoration of men that he craved for and that he could not get" (Sartre, p. 171). It is clear that for this reason Sartre chooses a hell for Garcin where there are no men.

In contrast, Inez realizes that there is an important purpose for their coming in such a hell. She is the embodiment of the others. On earth, she wants to possess the consciousness of the object, but in hell she

cannot possess Estella since the latter is attracted to Garcin and both of them are ready to form an alliance in bad faith. Here, Inez becomes Estella's victim as her wish to Estella inflames the latter desire to Garcin.

When Garcin describes himself as a coward man, Estella refuses to believe that but for Inez, he does not have the ability to leave the room in hell when the hell's permanent door opened for a second. Furthermore, he cannot leave the two women with his coward image in their minds. Inez who represents the spokesperson of the dramatist comments on his act:

One always dies too soon or too late and yet one's Whole life is complete at that moment, with a line drawn neatly under it, ready for the summing up.

You are – your life, and nothing else (Sartre, p. 163).

This is the cruel reality that each person must face that man according to his act.

By choosing three dead characters, Sartre wants to show the existence precedes essence. Those characters had their existence on earth and now in hell they become an essence of their lives, having no ability to act or change this essence. Bentley remarks that Sartre concentrates on the notion of eternity when he makes hell a place where they never close their eyes to emphasize the idea that the look of others will be constantly and endlessly judging one without a breakdown (33).

Sartre makes the furniture and other objects that are supposed to give comfort of no purpose such as the paperknife with no papers to cut to represent his philosophy and enforce his idea that now even objects are like human beings cannot act as they do on earth. Moreover, he used the bronze statue that placed on the mantelpiece. It symbolizes the being as it tells Garcin that he cannot change his appearance just like this statue. Hence, he must accept his being forever in hell as Bauer points out:

He is now aware that he is unable to act upon the Objects that surrounds him or to create object He wishes to be. He can only look at the statue Which represents being unaffected by the eroding Look of another person (1969. p. 59).

Each character speaks to convince the others so only through their speech they hope to escape the vicious circle in which they find themselves entrapped. Finally, they realize that there is no escape. Other people are our torture, and once a person is dead, there is nothing to be done about changing others and the attitudes of living. Sartre stresses the negative, ugly, and cold side of this hell. It is not something to look forward, but it can be avoided by following Sartre's system. The hell of life, that is, "nausea" can be opposed through freedom of choice, action, responsibility, and a life in good faith (Aronson, p. 12). In *No Exit*, Sartre focuses on the

negative human emotions, removing the positive, pleasing, and happiness-producing effects. Hell as a bleak, horror, and isolated place is devoid of any fun and good intentions compute nothing as Inez said, "It's what one does That shows the stuff one's made of" (Sartre, p. 172). Due to the competitive subjectivity, hell is other people. They fight for being the subject and not for being the object. The presence of others threatens man subjectivity and freedom as the torture of this threat creates hell.

It is obvious that Sartre emphasizes to represent the common situation of man covered in a set of traditions, habits, and customs with which he is unhappy. The most worse is that he does not try to change them. He has no other choice but to continue and be a victim of many judgments passed on him by other people, and this is the "living death" (Sartre, p. 200).

3. CONCLUSION

Sartre emphasizes on man who is at the mercy of other people's opinions, meaning the hell and the torture of the others. He despises such man unless he acts definitively and this is the principal message of *No Exit*. In a historical sense, hell is a symbolic of France during World War II and the others represent the Nazis.

No Exit shows that mental suffering is worse than physical torture. Those three characters are trapped together in hell which is a locked drawing room with three couches and of no mirrors. Being unlike the tradition conception of hell, they realize that they will act as tortures for each other.

It is obvious that there are no torture devices or hot flames because Sartre's main idea is that hell simply other people. At the beginning of the play, the three characters want to be alone, and then, they change seeking to join others. They are alone in their fears, feelings, and ideas but later, they ask other people to offer their past lives and present death meaning. Hence, they are condemned to ask the others to give meaning to their lives. They even cannot leave the room to exit and prefer to be together. They feel that without other people, they do not exist.

It is clear that each character depends on the other's view. Garcin wants someone to tell him that he is not a coward. Inez needs Estelle's love and, on the other hand, Estelle wants passion. According to Sartre, due to others, there are continual suffering, torturing, and disappointing which is a real hell.

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