

No Exit



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

Jean-Paul Sartre was born in Paris, where he would go on to live most of his life. He studied philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure until 1929, the same year he met the existentialist feminist philosopher and his eventual lifelong partner Simone de Beauvoir. Sartre spent most of the 1930s teaching in the northern French port city of Le Havre, returned to Paris in 1937, and then was drafted into the French army at the outbreak of World War II in 1939. He served as a meteorologist in the eastern border region of Alsace (where his mother's family had roots) but was captured and held as a prisoner of war until 1941. After returning to German-occupied Paris, he participated to a limited extent in the underground resistance to the occupation and wrote many of his best-known works, including his philosophical magnum opus *Being and Nothingness*, the plays *No Exit* and *The Flies*, and the novel *The Age of Reason*. In 1946—at the apex of his fame—he quit teaching and moved back in with his mother. From this period onward, Sartre's work and public image turned far more political and especially anti-colonial in tone. He became an avowed Marxist, although he lost sympathy for the Soviet Union after 1956, and spent much of the 1950s striving to combine his existentialism with Marxism in works like the 1957 *Search for a Method* and the 1960 *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. During Algeria's War of Independence from France, Sartre openly supported the National Liberation Front and cultivated a friendship with the renowned psychiatrist and revolutionary Frantz Fanon. He was awarded the 1964 Nobel Prize in Literature, but he became the first recipient to turn it down, citing the Prize's bias against intellectuals from outside Western Europe and declaring that a writer should "refuse to let himself be transformed into an institution." He spent most of the 1960s writing a monumental biography of the 19th century French novelist Gustave Flaubert, but abruptly retired in 1971 to focus on political organizing and never finished the last volume. Around the same time, Sartre's health began to deteriorate, worsened by his lifetime of smoking and heavy drinking. He was almost completely blind by 1973 and died of pulmonary edema in April of 1980.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Sartre was taken as a prisoner of war by the Germans in 1940. During his nine months of imprisonment, he read Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* and thought extensively about ontology and phenomenology. Shortly after he was released in 1941, he worked as a political activist before beginning to

write. The ideas he encountered as a prisoner reading *Being and Time* fed into his composition of his own philosophical text, *Being and Nothingness*, which in turn fueled the ideas he put into *No Exit* a year later. Interested in the French response to Nazi soldiers, he observed that the Nazis placated civilians by behaving politely in everyday life, thereby coaxing would-be dissenters into passivity. Given that this theory has to do with the ways in which people change in relation to others, it's safe to say that the Nazi occupation of France helped Sartre shape the ontological and existentialist theories that eventually made their way into works like *No Exit*.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

No Exit is a theatrical representation of Sartre's philosophical ideas regarding Existentialism, about which he wrote quite a lot. In particular, the play demonstrates his theories about subjectivity and the human "gaze," which he outlines in his book-length essay *Being and Nothingness*. This text was published one year before *No Exit* and clarifies Sartre's beliefs regarding identity, ontology, and human perspective. These ideas also surface in [Existentialism Is a Humanism](#), a lecture he delivered at The Club Maintenant in Paris in 1945. Furthermore, Sartre's work is often considered alongside books by his lifelong lover, Simone de Beauvoir, whose [The Ethics of Ambiguity](#) draws upon her and Sartre's conception of Existentialism. Sartre's interest in and ideas about ontology also recall other major philosophical works, including Søren Kierkegaard's [Fear and Trembling](#), Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, and Friedrich Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** No Exit
- **Where Written:** Paris, France
- **When Published:** 1944
- **Literary Period:** Modernism, Existentialism
- **Genre:** Drama, Existentialist Drama, One-Act Play
- **Setting:** A drawing-room in hell
- **Climax:** Exasperated by his torturous interactions with Estelle and Inez, Garcin declares, "Hell is—other people!"
- **Antagonist:** Garcin, Inez, and Estelle are all each other's antagonists.

EXTRA CREDIT

In Camera. The French title for *No Exit* is *Huis Clos*, which can be translated as "in camera," a term used to describe interactions that take place privately or secretly.

Pinter. In 1964, the playwright Harold Pinter starred in *In Camera*, a BBC television version of *No Exit*. He played the role of Garcin.



PLOT SUMMARY

Joseph Garcin arrives in hell, where a gracious valet shows him to a drawing-room. The room is decorated with three colorful sofas and a heavy **bronze sculpture** on the mantelpiece. This, Garcin understands, is where he'll spend eternity. "Second Empire furniture, I observe," he says, somewhat off-put by the ornate style. "I dare say one gets used to it in time," he guesses, but the valet says, "Some do. Some don't." As Garcin settles in, he wonders where the torture weapons are, noting that the drawing-room isn't what people envision when they think of hell. "Really, sir, how could you believe such cock-and-bull stories?" the valet asks. "Told by people who'd never set foot here."

After helping Garcin settle in, the valet takes his leave, telling Garcin that he can ring for him by pressing a small bell. However, he admits that the bell is unreliable and rarely works. Once he leaves, Garcin contemplates the bronze ornament before sitting listlessly on the couch. After a moment, he jumps up and rings the bell, but nothing happens. He also tries to open the door, but it doesn't budge. Finally, he gives up and dejectedly returns to the sofa. Just as he sits down, though, the door swings open and the valet enters with Inez. "Did you call, sir?" he asks, but Garcin says, "No." The valet then turns to Inez and tells her that this drawing-room is where she'll be staying. He gives her an opportunity to ask questions, but she doesn't say a word, so he says she can ask Garcin any questions she might have, since he asked so many. With this, he exits.

"Where's Florence?" Inez asks Garcin, who tells her he doesn't know. "Ah, that's the way it works, is it? Torture by separation," she says, assuming Garcin is her torturer, though Garcin quickly tells her that they're in the same position. Having established this, they both note that the drawing-room doesn't have any **mirrors**, and then Inez expresses her disappointment that neither she nor Garcin can ever leave the room, even for a walk. In response, Garcin admits that he too would "rather be alone."

The valet enters once more, this time escorting Estelle into the drawing-room. Garcin is covering his face because Inez has pointed out—with vehemence—that he keeps making involuntarily grotesque facial expressions. Seeing him sitting with his face covered, Estelle shouts, "No. Don't look up. I know what you're hiding with your hands. I know you've no face left." When he takes away his hands, though, she realizes she's made a mistake, telling him she thought he was someone else. Embarrassed, she asks the valet if anyone else will be joining them, and he says it will just be the three of them. She then

laughs at the couches, which she finds hideous. She insists that she can't sit on the only empty sofa, since its color would clash with her outfit. Hearing this, Inez eagerly offers her couch, but Estelle finds this equally unsatisfactory. The only sofa she would like, she says, is Garcin's, so Garcin gives it to her.

Thankful for his willingness to give her his couch, Estelle introduces herself to Garcin. As he bows to say his own name, Inez steps in front of him and introduces herself instead. Once they're through with these introductions, the valet leaves, and Inez compliments Estelle on her beauty. They then discuss how long it's been since they left the living world, and Estelle narrates her own funeral, which is happening as they speak. Able to see what's happening, she says that her best friend isn't crying. Her husband, she says, has remained at home, too grief-stricken to attend. She explains that she succumbed to pneumonia, and Inez says she died because of a gas stove. Garcin, for his part, reveals that he was shot twelve times.

As the group talks about their past lives, Garcin says that he left behind his wife, whom he's watching at that very moment as she makes her way to a "barracks," where she wants to see him, since she doesn't know yet that he's dead. "Those big tragic eyes of hers—with that martyred look they always had," he says. "Oh, how she got on my nerves!" When Estelle and Inez shake him from this vision, Estelle wonders aloud why the three of them have been placed together. When Garcin posits that it's a "pure fluke," Inez laughs, saying, "I tell you they've thought it all out. Down to the last detail. Nothing was left to chance." To determine why they're together, then, they ask each other why they've been sent to hell. Estelle, for her part, claims that she has no idea, suggesting that there must have been "some ghastly mistake." Inez finds this hard to believe, urging Estelle to tell them about her life, so Estelle says that her parents died when she was young, leaving her to care for her brother. Because she was very poor, she married a much older rich man. Two years ago, she explains, she met "the man [she] was fated to love," but she turned down his offer to elope. She died of pneumonia shortly thereafter. After she tells this story, Garcin asks, "And now, tell me, do you think it's a crime to stand by one's principles?" When Estelle assures him that nobody could possibly "blame" a person for this, he says that he ran a pacifist publication. In keeping with his morals, then, he refused to become a soldier when "the war" began.

Tired of listening to Garcin and Estelle present themselves as sinless and moral, Inez breaks in, saying, "What's the point of play-acting, trying to throw dust in each other's eyes?" This causes them all to argue for several minutes until Inez finally realizes why they've been placed together. Calling it "simple," she explains that they're supposed to torture each other. Astounded, Garcin says he'll never torture either of them. To achieve this, he advises everyone to keep to their own sofas and to refrain from speaking. And though Estelle and Inez agree, neither of them manages to remain quiet. After only a

few moments, Estelle complains about not having a mirror to check the way she looks, and Inez—who is attracted to her—eagerly encourages her to look into her eyes to see a reflection. Unfortunately for her, though, Estelle doesn't like what she sees, finding it frightening that she can't control the way she looks. "I'm going to smile, and my smile will sink down into your pupils, and heaven knows what it will become," she says. Desperately trying to appeal to her, Inez says she'll do whatever she wants, promising to tell her exactly what she looks like.

Estelle finds it odd that Inez is so attracted to her and notes that she wishes Garcin would notice her. This infuriates Inez, who yells at Garcin until he breaks his silence. Frustrated, he tries to get the women to be quiet, but Inez insists that it's impossible to block one another out. No matter what Garcin does, she says, she will feel his presence and will know that Estelle is thinking about him. Giving up his silence once and for all, then, Garcin suggests that they all tell each other why they've come to hell, thinking that this will help get their "specters into the open." With this in mind, he tells them that he spent the majority of his married life cheating on his wife, even bringing a lover back to his own home and having sex with her within his wife's hearing. When he and the woman awoke in the morning, his wife made them coffee. Next, Inez explains that she moved in with her cousin and started having an affair with his wife, Florence. She claims to have "crept inside her skin," making it impossible for Florence to be happy without her. Consequently, Florence left her husband, who got hit by a tram soon after. Following his death, Florence crept out of bed one night and turned on the gas stove, killing both herself and Inez.

After Inez and Garcin convince her to tell her own story, Estelle explains that her love affair resulted in a baby. Not wanting anyone to know, she and her lover, Roger, went Switzerland together. Roger was ecstatic when she gave birth, but Estelle drowned the infant in a nearby lake. When they went home, Roger shot himself in the face, and Estelle's husband never suspected a thing. Now that the hell-dwellers have told their stories, Garcin proposes that they "help each other" by acting compassionately, but Inez refuses, saying that there's nothing they can do to keep from torturing each other. After all, she can't stop herself from feeling for Estelle, and so she can't help but hate Garcin.

For a moment, Estelle has visions of what's happening to her loved ones on earth, but she soon realizes that she has "dropped out of their hearts." This makes her want Garcin's attention even more. Once again, Inez tries to attract her, but she spits in her face, hoping to get rid of her. As a result, Inez curses Garcin, who feels overwhelmed and newly apathetic. Not caring what happens, he shrugs and agrees to become romantic with Estelle. As tries to do this, though, he spirals into a vision of his coworker, Gomez, talking about him on earth. He sees that everyone thinks he's a coward for having deserted the

war, and it soon emerges that he didn't take a "stand" against violence, but simply ran away and was caught trying to flee. Still, he wonders if he was truly a coward, not knowing if he fled because of his principles or because he was scared.

As he narrates this thought process, Garcin realizes that he'll never be able to change his coworkers' opinion of him. Because of this, he asks Estelle to tell him that he isn't cowardly. She gladly obliges, but Inez reminds him that Estelle will say anything just to win his favor. Furious, Garcin rushes to the bell and tries to ring it, but it remains silent, so he yanks on the door, screaming for it to open. Much to his surprise, it suddenly opens. For a moment, he teeters on the threshold, but he can't bring himself to leave. Accepting his fate, he calmly closes the door and explains that he's decided to stay because of Inez. This, he says, is because Inez knows "what wickedness is." Because she doesn't care about him, he has decided to convince her that he isn't a coward. Changing her opinion, he thinks, will prove his bravery once and for all. No matter how hard he insists, though, she refuses to reassure him. He argues that he was "judged" for a "single action," but she says, "It's what one does, and nothing else, that shows the stuff one's made of."

Seeing how angry Inez is making Garcin, Estelle tells him to take revenge by kissing her. He agrees that this is a good idea, but as he embraces her, Inez makes sure he knows that she's watching, and this makes it impossible for him to continue. "You will always see me?" he asks. "Always," she says. Exasperated, he separates from Estelle and says, "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!" Furious at having been abandoned, Estelle picks up a "paper knife" and stabs Inez, but Inez only laughs, reminding her that they're all dead and will remain so "forever." This strikes all three hell-dwellers as oddly funny, and they throw back their heads, laughing hard at their predicament until, finally, they fall silent and "slump" into their sofas. "Well, well, let's get on with it..." Garcin says.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Joseph Garcin – Joseph Garcin is a journalist from Rio who arrives in hell after having been shot twelve times for refusing to fight in an unnamed war. When the valet shows him the drawing-room in which he's to spend eternity, Garcin is confused by the lack of torture instruments. Once he moves beyond this initial shock, he becomes angry about not having the bare essentials, like a toothbrush—a concern that strikes the valet as funny, since it's so superficial. A proud man, Garcin warns the valet not to laugh at him, claiming that he's "facing" the "situation" as best he can. When Inez enters the room, he is

polite to her despite her coldness. Similarly, he's courteous to Estelle, who takes a liking to him. Despite her interest, though, he soon chooses to ignore her, since Inez has pointed out that all three of them are intended to be each other's torturers. Not wanting to inflict harm upon his companions, Garcin decides to keep to himself, advising Inez and Estelle to do the same.

However, they make it impossible for him to concentrate on remaining silent. Giving up, he suggests that they all share their stories, eventually explaining to them that he had a wife about whom he never cared. He slept with many different women and even brought one lover back to his home, where he had sex with her within his wife's hearing. Although this is the story Garcin presents as the reason he's in hell, it later emerges that he was killed for desertion, running from the war and getting stopped before he could get away. Accordingly, everyone on earth thinks of him as a coward, and in fact, even Garcin himself isn't sure whether he was morally opposed to the war or just afraid of fighting. This bothers him so much that he tries to convince Inez that he *isn't* a coward, since she's the only unbiased person around. She, however, refuses to reassure him, causing him great torment and pushing him toward the conclusion that hell is "other people."

Inez Serrano – Inez Serrano is an intelligent and stubborn postal worker who has been sent to hell because of the "cruel" way she treats others. When the valet first brings her to the drawing-room where she will spend eternity, she assumes that Garcin—who's already there—is her torturer. He quickly dispels this idea, but Inez soon figures out that she, Garcin, and Estelle actually *are* supposed to torture each other. When she tells her companions this theory, Garcin is appalled and suggests that everyone should remain silent. Inez, however, is too drawn to Estelle to keep to herself. When Estelle wishes for a **mirror**, Inez goes to her and urges her to look into her eyes, saying that she will be Estelle's "glass." To her disappointment, though, Estelle doesn't like being reminded of the fact that Inez is staring at her and making her own interpretations about what she looks like and who she is. When Estelle admits that she wishes Garcin would notice her like Inez has, Inez takes her anger out on Garcin, blaming him for the fact that Estelle isn't interested in her. Shortly thereafter, Garcin suggests that they all explain why they've been sent to hell, so Inez says that she worked her way into the heart of her cousin's wife, Florence. Eventually, she got Florence to leave her husband, which is when he got hit by a tram. Not long after this, Florence crept out of bed one night and turned on the gas stove, killing both herself and Inez. As the three companions continue their conversation, Inez resents Garcin more and more, while making constant appeals to Estelle. When Garcin finally realizes that he wants Inez's approval, he tries to convince her that he's not a coward, but Inez refuses to give him this relief, saying that he'll always be a coward because she "wishes" it to be so. Inez is the only character who immediately accepts her fate in hell, and she eventually succeeds in getting Garcin and Estelle to do the

same.

Estelle Rigault – Estelle is an elegant young woman from Paris who arrives in hell thinking there's been some "ghastly mistake." When the valet shows her to the drawing-room, she sees Garcin sitting with his hands covering his face. This frightens her, since she thinks he is Roger, her former lover who shot himself. However, Garcin looks up and she sees that he isn't Roger. She even develops a fondness for Garcin, mainly because he's a man and because she yearns for him to be attracted to her, since this would help her solidify her sense of self. Garcin is uninterested in giving her this attention, but Inez is very attracted to her, though Estelle doesn't care. When Inez urges her to look into her eyes to see her own reflection, Estelle notes that she doesn't like the way her smile "sinks" down into Inez's pupils, becoming unfamiliar. Instead of using Inez's **glass** in this mirrorless room, then, Estelle focuses on attracting Garcin's attention—an endeavor that upsets Inez, who wants Estelle to herself. When Garcin decides that each of them should explain why they've been sent to hell, Estelle refuses until Inez and Garcin force the story out of her. Unable to avoid the topic, she says that she married an older man after her she was orphaned. Later, she met Roger, who got her pregnant. To keep the pregnancy a secret, she and Roger went to Switzerland for five months. Roger was overjoyed when she gave birth, but Estelle drowned their newborn child. When they returned to Paris, Roger shot himself in the face, though Estelle didn't seem to care or understand how her actions made him miserable. Shortly thereafter, she died of pneumonia. Toward the end of the play, she finally convinces Garcin to make love to her, but he's unable to concentrate because of Inez's gaze. Furious, Estelle stabs Inez with a paper-knife, but this only reminds her that they're all already dead.

The Valet – The valet is a deferential staff worker in hell who never blinks. He shows Garcin, Inez, and Estelle to the drawing-room in which they'll spend eternity together. He also answers their questions, telling Garcin that he sometimes visits his uncle, who is the "head valet" and lives on the "third floor." When Garcin asks about the specifics of hell, the valet chastises him for believing the "cock-and-bull stories" that circulate on earth. In addition, he informs Garcin that he can ring **the bell** if he needs assistance, though he adds that the bell itself rarely works.

Florence – Florence is Inez's lover on earth. Florence is married to Inez's cousin, but when Inez moves in with them, Inez seduces Florence and convinces her to leave him. Florence does this, but she never stops feeling bad about the decision, especially because her husband is hit by a tram and killed shortly after she moves out. Distraught, Florence slips out of bed one night and turns on the gas stove, gently killing both herself and Inez. When Inez first arrives in hell, she asks Garcin—whom she thinks is her torturer—where he's keeping Florence, and when he tells her that he doesn't know who

Florence is, she shrugs the matter off, admitting that she won't miss Florence anyway.

Olga – Olga is Estelle's best friend on earth. When Estelle arrives in hell, she has a vision of her own funeral, where Olga stands dutifully by her sister. In another vision, Estelle sees Olga dancing with a man named Peter, whom Estelle herself sometimes used to see on the side. Although Estelle never cared much about Peter (since she had a husband and another lover, Roger), she finds herself angry that he and Olga are willing to move on from her death and begin their own romantic affair.

Estelle's Husband – Estelle's husband is an older man who marries her shortly after both her parents die. Estelle agrees to enter into this marriage because her husband is rich and she needs to care for her younger brother. After six years, though, she starts seeing Roger. When she secretly gives birth to Roger's child in Switzerland and subsequently murders the child, she returns to Paris, where Roger commits suicide. Despite all this, Estelle's husband never suspects anything.

Garcin's Wife – Garcin's wife is a sad woman he claims to have "rescued" from the "gutter." Throughout their marriage, Garcin cheats on his wife constantly, making no effort to hide his affairs. Despite this, his wife never cries, instead looking at him with the eyes of a "martyr." This upsets Garcin, who finds her sad resilience nothing but annoying. During one of his monologues in hell, Garcin glancingly mentions that his wife has "died just now," though he goes on to clarify that she died "two months ago," as if he couldn't be bothered to note her death when it actually happened.

Gomez – Gomez is Garcin's colleague at the newspaper office. When Garcin dies and goes to hell, he has visions of Gomez and his other coworkers as they sit in the office and discuss the nature of his death, talking about the fact that he was a deserter. Their claim that he's a coward upsets him to no end, and he curses Gomez for speaking badly about him when he's not there to defend himself. By the end of the play, though, Garcin realizes that he'll never be able to change Gomez's mind, which is why he decides to convince Inez that he isn't a coward, since she's the only person whose opinion he can still influence.

Inez's Cousin – Inez's cousin is married to Florence, whom Inez seduces. After Inez finally convinces Florence to leave this man, he gets hit by a tram and dies. Although Inez doesn't clarify the circumstances of her cousin's death, she subtly suggests that he was a heavy drinker, which might mean he got drunk after Florence left him and wandered in front of the tram.

Peter – Peter is a young man with whom Estelle has a romantic relationship. Although Peter is quite taken by her, Estelle doesn't feel particularly strongly for him, since she has a husband and is also in love with Roger. All the same, Estelle is upset when she has a vision from hell of her close friend Olga dancing with Peter. Feeling forgotten by both her best friend

and this former lover, Estelle yearns all the more for Garcin's attention.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Roger Roger is a man with whom Estelle has an affair, which her husband knows nothing about. When Estelle gets pregnant with Roger's child, Roger is delighted. But after Estelle kills the baby in order to keep the affair a secret, Roger is so distraught that he shoots and kills himself.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



HUMAN INTERACTION, CONTROL, AND SENSE OF SELF

In *No Exit*, Jean-Paul Sartre suggests that true misery comes from the human inability to control the nature of one's own existence. To make this point, he portrays hell as a simple drawing-room that accommodates three recently deceased people—Garcin, Inez, and Estelle. As they acquaint themselves with their new surroundings, they recognize the absence of a torturer, wondering how, exactly, they'll be punished. After falling into arguments, though, they realize they've been placed in the drawing-room to inflict agony upon one another, acting as their own torturers. Exasperated that he's forced to spend eternity with Inez and Estelle, Garcin declares, "Hell is—other people!" This sentiment is one of Sartre's most well-known ideas, but it has certain implications many people don't consider. While the idea that hell is "other people" addresses the difficulty of getting along with others, it doesn't simply mean that agony arises from the irritating presence of a person's fellow humans, as some might assume. Rather, the idea suggests that human interaction fundamentally alters a person's sense of self. Determined to see himself in a certain light, Garcin can't stand the idea of Inez looking at him and seeing something other than what he wants to be. In turn, Sartre implies not that "other people" are inherently torturous, but that the nuances of human interaction interfere with a person's ability to conceive of him- or herself in a particular way.

Sartre frames the human impulse to connect with others as nearly inescapable. When the hell-dwellers realize they've been put in the drawing-room to psychologically torture one another, Garcin decides that they should stop speaking. "No, I shall never be your torturer," he says. "[...] So the solution's easy enough; each of us stays put in his or her corner and takes no

notice of the others. [...] Also, we mustn't speak. Not one word. That won't be difficult; each of us has plenty material for self-communings." Going on, he notes that he himself thinks he could spend 10,000 years with his own thoughts. However, his plan to avoid the torture of human interaction fails. First, Inez and Estelle can't keep themselves from talking to each other, and then even Garcin himself gives in and responds to the various things he's heard them say. In turn, Sartre intimates that the human desire to interact with others is quite strong. After all, these three people know that connecting with each other will be torturous, and yet they're *still* unable to resist the urge to communicate.

Since Garcin has tried and failed to keep to himself, he decides that each of the hell-dwellers should explain why they think they've been condemned. This way, he upholds, they'll be able to "bring [their] specters into the open," which he believes will keep them from "disaster." However, this plan backfires, since all three of them end up using their shortcomings against each other. For instance, Inez becomes jealous of Garcin because Estelle—whom she lusts after—has taken an interest in him, so she weaponizes what he's said about his time on earth. Because he was killed for being a military deserter, he's obsessed with whether or not people think of him as a coward—a piece of information Inez uses to upset him. To do this, she refuses to reassure him that he isn't a coward, no matter how hard he tries to convince her. To add to this, Garcin realizes that Inez is the only person whose opinion he cares about, since Estelle will say anything to get him to sleep with her. As a result, he fixates on the way Inez sees him, becoming so consumed by the matter that he chooses to stay in the drawing-room when the door miraculously opens, forgoing the opportunity to escape his tormentors. In this moment, then, Garcin's interactions with Inez keep him from freedom (or at least *some* kind of freedom)—a sign that he endures misery because of his relationships with other people.

Since Garcin suffers (and allows himself to continue suffering) as a result of his interactions with Inez, it makes sense that he associates the misery of hell with "other people." "You remember all we were told about the torture-chambers, the fire and brimstone, the 'burning marl,'" he says. "Old wives' tales! There's no need for red-hot pokers. Hell is—other people!" He utters these words after Inez says she'll never stop looking at him, making it impossible for him to do anything without contemplating how she'll perceive him. In other words, her gaze ruins his ability to conceive of himself the way he wants.

Similarly, Estelle—who is greatly concerned about the way she looks—is distraught that there aren't any **mirrors** in the drawing-room, which means she can't confirm her sense of self. When Inez offers to let her study her own reflection by looking into her eyes, Estelle says she dislikes the feeling that accompanies the experience. "You scare me rather. My

reflection in the glass never did that; of course, I knew it so well. Like something I had tamed...I'm going to smile, and my smile will sink down into your pupils, and heaven knows what it will become," she says. Couched within this sentiment is a fear of losing oneself by engaging in human interaction. Estelle can't control the way Inez (or anyone) perceives her, and this throws her into existential uncertainty. In keeping with this, it becomes clear that both she and Garcin are unable to escape the fact that they can't control how others see them.

This, Sartre implies, is how human interaction and subjectivity influence a person's sense of self, and though Garcin may believe that misery comes directly from other people, it actually comes from his own existential insecurities, which simply arise when he interacts with others. Thus, dealing with others is torturous because such exchanges make it impossible for people to manipulate their own perspectives and identities.



EMPATHY VS. SELFISHNESS

Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit* is a play interested in the interpersonal dynamics of compassion. This is made evident by the fact that Garcin, Inez, and

Estelle all end up in hell largely because of how they conducted their romantic affairs and personal relationships on earth. For each of them, love is one-sided, as they think only about what they want, regardless of what this might mean for other people. In hell, though, they're forced to recognize that anything they do will affect their fellow hell-dwellers and, in turn, anything the other hell-dwellers do will affect *them*. This leaves them feeling "inextricably" bound to one another, their happiness or misery depending solely on the way they treat each other. Acknowledging this, Garcin points out that anything that happens to the hell-dwellers will happen because of their relational dynamic as a group, so he tells Inez and Estelle that they all must treat each other with compassion. Despite this decision, though, they're unable to stop thinking about themselves, finding it impossible to "get on without making people suffer." Accordingly, their failure to genuinely empathize with one another is what makes them such perfect torturers.

When the hell-dwellers tell their life stories, it becomes clear that they're most likely receiving punishment for their failure to love others in an authentic, caring manner. Garcin, for one, reveals that he slept with many women without caring what his wife thought. He even brought home another woman and had sex with her without trying to hide from his wife. "My wife slept upstairs; she must have heard—everything," he says. "She was an early riser and, as I and the girl stayed in bed late, she served us our morning coffee." When Inez calls him a "brute," he doesn't seem to mind the wretchedness of his behavior. "Yes, a brute, if you like. But a well-beloved brute." When he says this, he reveals his unwillingness to feel empathy for his wife, only caring about the fact that he himself is "well-beloved."

Similarly, Estelle cheated on her husband with a younger man,

and when she gave birth to his child, she drowned it, at which point he committed suicide. “It was absurd of him, really,” she says to Garcin and Inez, proving that she has very little sympathy for him. In keeping with this callous sentiment, both Garcin and Inez say at various moments throughout the play that they don’t “regret” anything about what they’ve done on earth. In turn, the audience sees that none of them seem to care about how their actions affect other people.

Forced to spend eternity in close proximity with two companions, the characters’ lack of empathy for others becomes a serious problem. Since each one has been placed in the drawing-room to torture the others with his or her presence, they all come to realize the extent to which their actions affect other people. Trying to convince Inez that the way they treat each other will determine whether or not they suffer, Garcin says, “And now suppose we start trying to help each other.” Going on, he adds, “If you make any movement, if you raise your hand to fan yourself, Estelle and I feel a little tug. Alone, none of us can save himself or herself; we’re linked together inextricably.” When he says that he and Estelle will “feel a little tug” if Inez simply moves her hand, he means that anything—and everything—a person does eventually has some kind of influence on the people around them. This is especially true in the closed environment of the drawing-room, where each person’s fate depends upon the interpersonal dynamic that the hell-dwellers create.

Of course, Garcin, Inez, and Estelle have been placed in the drawing-room explicitly because they’re unable to put others before themselves, so Garcin’s desire to foster a kind and empathetic environment is doomed from the start. Inez makes this clear when she calls herself “cruel,” saying, “I can’t get on without making people suffer. Like a live coal. A live coal in others’ hearts.” This suggests that Inez is unavoidably malicious, as if there’s nothing she could possibly do to avoid hurting the people around her. In keeping with this, Garcin and Estelle also fail to show each other true compassion, so all three of the hell-dwellers inevitably end up tormenting each other.

The seeming unavoidability of this result is worth noting, since it suggests Sartre believes that humans are incapable of transcending their own preoccupations in order to empathize with others. Garcin can’t stop obsessing about his reputation long enough to give Estelle the attention she craves, Estelle can’t stop thinking about whether or not she’s worthy of Garcin’s love, and Inez can’t stop hating Garcin for stealing Estelle’s attention. As a result, they perpetuate the interpersonal dynamics that ensure their own despair, demonstrating the unfortunate difficulty humans have overcoming selfishness.



SELF-DECEPTION VS. ACCEPTANCE

Jean-Paul Sartre’s *No Exit* illustrates how easily human beings deceive themselves. In particular, Garcin struggles to present an accurate representation of himself, claiming that he’s been sent to hell for sticking up for his “principles,” though it soon becomes clear that there are several other (more valid) reasons for his condemnation. In a similar vein, Estelle arrives in hell adamant that there’s been a mistake, refusing to admit that she’s done anything to deserve this wretched existence, though the audience later learns that she not only committed adultery, but murdered her newborn baby. Inez, on the other hand, has no problem admitting her own shortcomings, quickly accepting that she’s in hell and that this aligns with how she lived her life. And though her honesty with herself doesn’t give her long-lasting solace, the only respite from terror that the characters experience comes when she finally convinces them that they’re destined to torture each other for eternity and that this is exactly what they deserve. In this regard, Sartre suggests that those who are doomed might as well acknowledge their circumstances and accept responsibility for their moral failures.

Early in *No Exit*, Sartre spotlights the human tendency to deny unpleasant circumstances. When Garcin refers to himself as “dead,” Estelle interjects, saying, “Please, please don’t use that word. It’s so—so crude.” Wanting to avoid the fact that she’s dead, she suggests that she and the others should refer to themselves as “absentees,” effectively enabling herself to block out the reality of her situation, which is that she has died. Given this practice, it’s rather unsurprising that she also rejects the idea that she *deserves* to be in hell. When Inez asks why she thinks she’s been condemned, Estelle says, “I haven’t a notion, not the foggiest. In fact, I’m wondering if there hasn’t been some ghastly mistake.” In response, Inez smiles mockingly, so Estelle chastises her, saying, “Anyhow, isn’t it better to think we’ve got here by mistake?” This question underlines her desire to believe that she’s a good person, the kind of person who would never be placed in hell. Although this wouldn’t necessarily change her circumstances (since she’s trapped in the drawing-room either way), she clearly wants to deny responsibility for her actions, deceiving herself by insisting that there has been a “mistake.”

Garcin, for his part, doesn’t suggest that he has been mistakenly placed into hell, but he does claim that he doesn’t know *why* he deserves condemnation. “And now, tell me,” he says to Estelle, “do you think it’s a crime to stand by one’s principles?” Going on, he claims to have died for a good cause, saying that he refused to become a soldier because he was a “pacifist.” To the contrary, though, it eventually emerges that he was cruel to his wife and that he didn’t truly take a “stand,” but rather was caught running away from the war. Furthermore, Estelle admits not only to having an affair, but to murdering the newborn infant she had as a result of that affair. Consequently,

the audience sees once and for all that it's absurd for either Garcin or Estelle to think of themselves as innocent people. This, however, is exactly what they think, proving their unflinching ability to delude themselves.

Unlike Estelle and Garcin, Inez makes no effort to hide her moral shortcomings. This rankles Garcin, who doesn't understand her willingness to submit to their terrible circumstances. He even tries to get her to change her behavior, saying that if they band together, they'll be able to avoid torturing one another. However, Inez recognizes that they're in hell and, as a result, knows nothing they do will change the fact that they've been placed here to torment one another. "It's a trap," Garcin insists. "They're watching you, to see if you'll fall into it." This doesn't bother Inez, who merely replies, "I know. And you're another trap. Do you think they haven't foreknown every word you say?" Continuing, she acknowledges that she's in this "trap" for a reason, saying, "And of course there's a whole nest of pitfalls that we can't see [...] But what do I care? I'm a pitfall, too." In other words, she sees that she's in a "trap," but she doesn't do anything to avoid it because she accepts that she deserves to be there. The more she lusts after Estelle, the worse her situation will get, and the more she'll suffer. And yet, she understands there's no way of avoiding this, saying, "There's nothing to be done about it." This is a defeatist attitude, but at least it frees her from being at odds with herself. By accepting the fact that she deserves to be in hell, she circumvents internal conflicts like the ones that afflict Garcin and Estelle as they try to deny their immorality.

Accepting that she can't do anything to change her situation, Inez encourages Garcin and Estelle to stop deluding themselves. When Garcin suggests that he was a good man who was misjudged by a "single action," she challenges him. "It's what one does, and nothing else, that shows the stuff one's made of," she says, expressing the existentialist belief that people aren't fundamentally good or bad. Rather, humans define themselves by how they live their lives. "You are—your life, and nothing else," Inez says. When she finally convinces Inez and Estelle of this, they enjoy a certain kind of peace, no longer trying to persuade themselves that they're good people. Reveling in the situation's morbid absurdity, all three of them throw back their heads and laugh. Given that they're each other's torturers, this is a significant moment, as they share a moment of levity despite their bleak circumstances. Then, when they fall silent, Garcin says, "Well, well, let's get on with it..." indicating that he has finally accepted the nature of his situation—an act of acceptance that is no doubt the reason he was able to laugh in an otherwise cheerless context. In turn, Sartre highlights the value of being truthful with oneself.

Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE BRONZE ORNAMENT

The ugly and distasteful bronze ornament that sits on the mantelpiece in the drawing-room of hell represents Garcin's shifting conceptions of what, exactly, hell is. When Garcin first arrives, he calls the sculpture an "atrocious" and says, "I suppose there will be times when I stare my eyes out at it." This statement indicates how eager Garcin is to anticipate the nature of his torture, though it isn't until the end of the play that he truly understands what it will be like for him in hell. In the final moments of the play, he realizes that hell is "other people," a realization he makes while "strok[ing]" the bronze ornament and saying, "This bronze. Yes, now's the moment; I'm looking at this thing on the mantelpiece, and I understand that I'm in hell. I tell you, everything's been thought out beforehand. They knew I'd stand at the fireplace stroking this thing of bronze [...]" In this brief monologue, he finally grasps that he has no control over his environment. Everything in hell, Garcin understands now, has been thought out before his arrival, and the fact that he has this epiphany while staring at the ugly bronze sculpture suggests that the ornament itself symbolizes his newfound powerlessness. The ornament is too heavy to move, just as Garcin's fate is also impossible to change.



MIRRORS

The drawing-room's lack of mirrors represents Sartre's interest in how perception influences a person's sense of self. Unable to check her reflection, Estelle feels existentially amiss, as if her mere existence depends upon her ability to see herself. She explains to Inez that she usually likes to have a mirror nearby when she's having conversations so that she can look at herself while talking, thereby grounding herself. Otherwise, she's forced to imagine what other people see when they look at her—an experience that deeply troubles her. When Inez offers to let Estelle use her eyes as a mirror, Estelle only gets more uncomfortable; she senses that the version of herself Inez sees will always be different than the version Estelle herself imagines. Because of this dynamic, then, the mirrorless drawing-room becomes a representation of the existential fluidity the trio experiences in hell, ultimately standing for their desire and failure to make peace with the way they present themselves to the world.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *No Exit and Three Other Plays* published in 1989.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and

No Exit Quotes

●● GARCIN [*enters, accompanied by the ROOM-VALET, and glances around him*]: Hm! So here we are?

VALET: Yes, Mr. Garcin.


GARCIN: And this is what it looks like?

VALET: Yes.

GARCIN: Second Empire furniture, I observe. . . . Well, well, I dare say one gets used to it in time.

VALET: Some do. Some don't.

Related Characters: The Valet, Joseph Garcin (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

This is the first conversation that takes place in *No Exit*. When Joseph Garcin enters the drawing-room in which he's fated to spend eternity, he tries to make sense of his situation. He has been sent to hell, and yet he finds himself facing an ornately decorated room. "Second Empire" is a French architectural and interior style popular in the 19th century. It is generally characterized by rather lavish decorations, which is why Garcin is surprised to find the drawing-room of hell outfitted in this manner. "Well, well, I dare say one gets used to it in time," he says, hinting that he doesn't like the furnishings of his new dwelling space. This is somewhat ironic, considering that he's in hell and should have expected to encounter unfavorable circumstances. In fact, it's absurd of him to take issue with something as superficial as the way the room is decorated, but this is exactly what he does. Furthermore, he acts as if he knows what existence is like in hell. His suggestion that "one gets used to" these surroundings illustrates the extent to which he wants to deceive himself, insisting not only that things will get better, but that he has a firm understanding of what, exactly, is about to happen to him. In reality, though, he has no control over his circumstances and no idea what it's like in hell, a fact illustrated by the valet's assertion that he might *not* become accustomed to the room's Second Empire stylings.

●● I won't make a scene, I shan't be sorry for myself. I'll face the situation, as I said just now. Face it fairly and squarely. I won't have it springing at me from behind, before I've time to size it up. And you call that being "romantic"! . . . So it comes to this; one doesn't need rest. Why bother about sleep if one isn't sleepy? That stands to reason, doesn't it? Wait a minute, there's a snag somewhere; something disagreeable. Why, now, should it be disagreeable? . . . Ah, I see; it's life without a break.

Related Characters: Joseph Garcin (speaker), The Valet

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Garcin says this to the valet in an attempt to demonstrate his control over his new circumstances. Although he clearly has no idea what it will be like for him in hell, he insists that he will "face the situation," promising not to let it "spring" up at him "from behind" before he has "size[d] it up." This reveals his prolonged effort to trick himself into thinking he's capable of manipulating his situation in hell. Although the valet has pointed out that his notions of eternal damnation are "romantic" because of how he's elevated the experience in his mind, he continues to obsess over what will happen to him. Rather than simply accepting that he has no control over his situation, he tries to guess what will happen. This, it seems, is why he hypothesizes that his punishment will be to live "life without a break." This is an interesting idea, since it suggests that Garcin sees life itself—existence—as inherently torturous, though he's naïve to think that his only form of punishment will be simply having to remain conscious for eternity.

●● So that's the idea. I'm to live without eyelids. Don't act the fool, you know what I mean. No eyelids, no sleep; it follows, doesn't it? I shall never sleep again. But then—how shall I endure my own company? Try to understand. You see. I'm fond of teasing, it's a second nature with me—and I'm used to teasing myself. Plaguing myself, if you prefer; I don't tease nicely. But I can't go on doing that without a break.

Related Characters: Joseph Garcin (speaker), The Valet

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Garcin tells the valet that he couldn't stand to live "life without a break," insisting that he will tire of his own "company." The language he uses to express this is worth noting, since he suggests he won't be able to "endure" himself, as if having to face himself is truly unbearable. This is an important idea, as it sheds light on his later assertion that hell is "other people." In this moment, the audience sees that Garcin isn't necessarily tortured by other people in and of themselves, but rather by himself. When he says that he won't be able to "endure [his] own company," he gives the audience a way to interpret his eventual scorn for others—because his interactions with other people force him to reconsider his sense of self, they ultimately leave him no choice but to continue grappling with his own identity, effectively sustaining his struggle against himself. In other words, Garcin is tortured not by other people, but by himself *through* other people.

●● GARCIN: I can quite understand that it bores you having me here. And I, too—well, quite frankly. I'd rather be alone. I want to think things out, you know; to set my life in order, and one does that better by oneself. But I'm sure we'll manage to pull along together somehow. I'm no talker, I don't move much; in fact I'm a peaceful sort of fellow. Only, if I may venture on a suggestion, we should make a point of being extremely courteous to each other. That will ease the situation for us both.

INEZ: I'm not polite.

GARCIN: Then I must be polite for two.

Related Characters: Inez Serrano, Joseph Garcin (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation takes place between Garcin and Inez shortly after Inez arrives. Inez has just expressed her disappointment that Garcin will remain with her in the drawing-room at all times. Garcin tells her that he doesn't hold this sentiment against her, as he too would "rather be alone." Although he has recently suggested that he will have trouble "endur[ing]" his own "company," he now upholds that he'd prefer to be on his own to "think things out." All the same, he recognizes that he can't change the fact that Inez is now his companion, so he resolves to treat her with kindness, thinking that they should both be "extremely

courteous" to avoid conflict. However, Inez refuses to do this, admitting that she isn't "polite." This is the first indication that Inez is uninterested in pretending to be somebody she's not. Furthermore, her directness in this moment foreshadows her ability to recognize hell for what it is. While her companions try to deceive themselves about the nature of their circumstances, Inez is able to acknowledge what's actually happening to her and the others, insisting that they've been placed in the drawing-room to torture one another. Her frankness in this exchange establishes her straightforward, unyielding personality.

●● INEZ: Can't you keep your mouth still? You keep twisting it about all the time. It's grotesque.

GARCIN: So sorry. I wasn't aware of it.

INEZ: That's just what I reproach you with. [GARCIN'S *mouth twitches.*] There you are! You talk about politeness, and you don't even try to control your face. Remember you're not alone; you've no right to inflict the sight of your fear on me.

Related Characters: Joseph Garcin, Inez Serrano (speaker)

Related Themes:  



Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

During this exchange, Inez asks Garcin to stop making involuntary facial expressions, pointing out that he's moving his mouth in a "grotesque" manner. This, she says, is a manifestation of his fear, which he has no right to force upon her. Her desire to distance the way Garcin sees the world aligns with Sartre's interest in the ways in which human interaction color a person's general outlook. Inez has decided to embrace hell as best she can, so she balks at the idea of staring at Garcin's expressions of terror, since they do nothing but remind her of the fact that they're both in a scary situation. "You've no right to inflict the sight of your fear on me," she says, trying to protect her subjectivity from the impact of *his* subjectivity. And although Garcin hasn't yet suggested that hell is "other people," Inez's desire to block out his feelings is a perfect example of how human relations can cause a person to uncomfortably reconsider their own interpretations of reality.

●● Please, please don't use that word. It's so—so crude. In terribly bad taste, really. It doesn't mean much, anyhow. 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. Have you been—been absent for long?

Related Characters: Estelle Rigault (speaker), Inez Serrano, Joseph Garcin

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

Estelle says this after Garcin describes himself as “dead.” When she asks him how he died, he says that he was shot twelve times, an answer that upsets her. Seeing this, he apologizes by saying that he isn't very good company around the dead. She asks him not to use the word “dead,” suggesting that she and the others should instead refer to themselves as “absentees.” This underscores just how much Estelle wants to trick herself into denying her current circumstances. Going to great lengths to avoid using the word “dead,” she refuses to acknowledge the fact that she will be in hell for eternity and that there's nothing she can do to return to the living world. The word “absentee” itself implies a certain temporariness, as if Estelle is only taking a short leave before returning to earth. She even goes so far as to say that she's “never been so much alive as now,” an utterly absurd pronouncement that does little more than show just how desperate she is to act like she has control over her situation. By manipulating the language she uses to describe her state of being, Estelle feels a small sense of power in an otherwise helpless context.

●● INEZ: [...] Look here! What's the point of play-acting, trying to throw dust in each other's eyes? We're all tarred with the same brush.

ESTELLE [*indignantly*]: How dare you!

INEZ: Yes, we are criminals—murderers—all three of us. We're in hell, my pets; they never make mistakes, and people aren't damned for nothing.

ESTELLE: Stop! For heaven's sake—

INEZ: In hell! Damned souls—that's us, all three!

Related Characters: Estelle Rigault, Inez Serrano (speaker), Joseph Garcin

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Inez tries to convince her fellow hell-dwellers to be honest with themselves about what has happened. Urging them to admit that they're “damned souls,” she suggests that they stop “play-acting” and keeping up appearances. Garcin and Estelle have both just finished talking about why they've come to hell, but neither of their stories gives legitimate reasons for why they might deserve eternal damnation. Consequently, Inez tries to get them to accept the truth of their circumstances. She, for one, understands that nothing she does or says will change the fact that she's been condemned. Unlike them, she has fully accepted her fate, even if she dislikes it. “People aren't damned for nothing,” she reminds them, since Estelle has suggested that she was sent to hell by “mistake.” By emphasizing the fact that each one of them deserves to be in this place, then, Inez tries to help Garcin and Estelle stop tiring themselves out with ridiculous excuses. This, at least, will enable them to actually “face” their circumstances head-on in the spirit that Garcin talks about but has so far failed to embody.

●● INEZ: Wait! You'll see how simple it is. Childishly simple. Obviously there aren't any physical torments—you agree, don't you? And yet we're in hell. And no one else will come here. We'll stay in this room together, the three of us, for ever and ever. . . . In short, there's someone absent here, the official torturer.


GARCIN [*sotto voce*]: I'd noticed that.

INEZ: It's obvious what they're after—an economy of man power—or devil-power, if you prefer. The same idea as in the cafeteria, where customers serve themselves.

ESTELLE: What ever do you mean?

INEZ: I mean that each of us will act as torturer of the two others.

Related Characters: Estelle Rigault, Joseph Garcin, Inez Serrano (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

When Inez, Garcin, and Estelle argue about why they've been placed together in hell, Inez finally realizes that they've been matched for a very specific reason. Pointing out that there's no "official torturer," she suggests that each of them is supposed to torture the two others. Indeed, their interpersonal dynamic is exactly what will lead them to misery, as each person's various obsessions and frustrations will inevitably exacerbate what his or her companions are experiencing. By figuring this out, she seemingly enables the group to address their difficult situation. After all, there's technically nothing to make them torture each other—acknowledging that this is what's supposed to happen should help them avoid causing each other pain. And yet, it seems obvious that they won't be able to avoid this, since it is the simple act of human connection that will create torment. At this point in the play, though, it's worth noting Inez's ability to discern the true nature of her circumstances, as this is yet another indication that she's the only person in the drawing-room willing to accept the situation for what it is—a willingness that gives her a certain kind of clarity the others lack.

☝ No, I shall never be your torturer. I wish neither of you any harm, and I've no concern with you. None at all. So the solution's easy enough; each of us stays put in his or her corner and takes no notice of the others. You here, you here, and I there. Like soldiers at our posts. Also, we mustn't speak. Not one word. That won't be difficult; each of us has plenty of material for self-communings. I think I could stay ten thousand years with only my thoughts for company.

Related Characters: Joseph Garcin (speaker), Estelle Rigault, Inez Serrano

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Garcin suggests that he and his companions should remain quiet. This, he says, will help them avoid torturing each other. "I wish neither of you any harm," he says, adding, "and I've no concern with you." Although the first half of this comment is kind and noble, the second half is problematic. After all, it is exactly because Garcin has "no concern"—that is, no empathy—for his companions that he will end up torturing them. In this moment, he does nothing but reveal his selfishness, his tendency to think only of himself. Fixating on the fact that he could spend "ten

thousand years with only [his] thoughts for company," he fails to recognize that he's trapped in a room with two other people. Even if he were able to avoid them for ten thousand years, this doesn't mean he'll be able to keep from torturing them *forever*, since they will still be there when those ten thousand years end. The mere fact that Garcin, Inez, and Estelle will be together for eternity makes it quite obvious that Garcin's self-obsessed approach to the situation will fail to do anything, since he'll inevitably break his ruminative silence and, in doing so, torment the others. And though this hasn't yet been made clear, it's also worth noting that silence won't help him at all, since it's his mere presence in the drawing-room that will so destabilize the others.

☝ ESTELLE [*opens her eyes and smiles*]: I feel so queer. [*She pats herself*] Don't you ever get taken that way? When I can't see myself I begin to wonder if I really and truly exist. I pat myself just to make sure, but it doesn't help much.

INEZ: You're lucky. I'm always conscious of myself—in my mind. Painfully conscious.

ESTELLE: Ah yes, in your mind. But everything that goes on in one's head is so vague, isn't it? It makes one want to sleep. [*She is silent for a while.*] I've six big mirrors in my bedroom. There they are. I can see them. But they don't see me. They're reflecting the carpet, the settee, the window—but how empty it is, a glass in which I'm absent! 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. . . .

Related Characters: Inez Serrano, Estelle Rigault (speaker), Joseph Garcin

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis



As Garcin keeps to himself in order to avoid torturing his companions, Estelle fumbles around for a mirror, wanting to see her own reflection. Unfortunately for her, though, there are no mirrors in the drawing-room. What she says to Inez while lamenting the lack of her own reflection is important, since it provides insight into how she conceives of herself. "When I can't see myself I begin to wonder if I really and truly exist," she says, making it clear that her sense of self is

closely tied to her image. When Inez suggests that she can be “conscious” of herself in her “mind,” Estelle voices her lack of confidence that anyone could possibly arrive at existential certainty without consulting external perceptions. This is why she used to constantly check her image in the mirror while talking to other people on earth, a practice that made her feel as if she knew how “others” saw her.

Estelle’s use of mirrors aligns with Sartre’s philosophical ideas regarding the effect of other people’s “gaze” on an individual. When someone notes that another person is looking at her, Sartre believes, she no longer controls the nature of her own existence, since that person could be seeing her in a way that completely clashes with the way she sees herself. By looking at her own reflection while talking to others, then, Estelle grounds herself, reclaiming her image and, thus, her sense of self. In the mirrorless drawing-room, though, this is impossible, which is why her relations with Inez and Garcin become torturous, since their presence destabilizes her existential posturing.

☛ To forget about the others? How utterly absurd! I *feel* you there, in every pore. Your silence clamors in my ears. You can nail up your mouth, cut your tongue out—but you can’t prevent your *being there*. Can you stop your thoughts? I hear them ticking away like a clock, tick-tock, tick-tock, and I’m certain you hear mine. It’s all very well skulking on your sofa, but you’re everywhere, and every sound comes to me soiled, because you’ve intercepted it on its way.

Related Characters: Inez Serrano (speaker), Estelle Rigault, Joseph Garcin

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

Inez addresses these words to Garcin when he once again insists that everyone in the drawing-room should ignore one another. When she tells him how pointless this would be, she outlines why his mere presence is enough to torment her, ultimately suggesting that people can’t avoid relating to one another simply by neglecting to speak. When she says that she can “feel” his very presence, she encourages him to consider the fact that their interpersonal dynamic has become part of the very environment in which they exist. She insists that “every sound” she hears has been “intercepted” by Garcin, since she knows he can hear

everything she herself hears. Because of this, she can’t keep herself from considering what he thinks about anything that happens. If she has a conversation with Estelle, then, she’s forced to think about his perspective, wondering how he perceives their conversation. Simply put, his very presence ruins her sense of subjectivity, profoundly altering the way she moves through the world.

☛ When I say I’m cruel, I mean 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. For six months I flamed away in her heart, till there was nothing but a cinder. One night she got up and turned on the gas while I was asleep. Then she crept back into bed. So now you know.

Related Characters: Inez Serrano (speaker), Inez’s Cousin, Florence, Estelle Rigault, Joseph Garcin

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

Inez says this when Garcin encourages her to explain why she was sent to hell. She says that she seduced her cousin’s wife, Florence, convincing her to move in with her just before the cousin got hit by a tram and died. She calls herself “cruel” for doing this, and then clarifies what she means by this, saying, “When I say I’m cruel, I mean I can’t get on without making people suffer.” This suggests that Inez defines herself by the way others feel about her. Wanting to become a “live coal in others’ hearts,” she works her way into their lives until they are utterly devastated. This, she upholds, is true cruelty. In turn, the audience sees that she’s been sent to hell for failing to care about others. Wanting first and foremost to feel powerful over others, she doesn’t care whether or not she makes people miserable. This is an important personality trait to keep in mind as the play progresses, since Garcin and Estelle are also selfish and have trouble empathizing with others. As a result, it becomes clear that these three people have been put in hell together because they will always prioritize their own desires, making it impossible for them to avoid tormenting each other.

●● INEZ: Well, Mr. Garcin, now you have us in the nude all right. Do you understand things any better for that?

GARCIN: I wonder. Yes, perhaps a trifle better. [*Timidly*] And now suppose we start trying to help each other.

INEZ: I don't need help.

GARCIN: Inez, they've laid their snare damned cunningly—like a cobweb. If you make any movement, if you raise your hand to fan yourself, Estelle and I feel a little tug. Alone, none of us can save himself or herself; we're linked together inextricably. So you can take your choice.

Related Characters: Inez Serrano, Joseph Garcin (speaker), Estelle Rigault

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis


In this back and forth, Inez asks Garcin if he's better off after having forced everyone in the drawing-room to share the story of why they've been sent to hell. Claiming that he "understand[s]" everything a bit more than he did before, he suggests that the trio "start trying to help each other." This is a logical proposal, since Garcin now knows that he, Inez, and Estelle are supposed to torture each other. Now that they know each other's most vulnerable stories, then, they should be able to avoid irritating one another, thereby avoiding misery. However, this will only work if everyone agrees to treat everyone else with empathy—something Inez is apparently unwilling to do. "I don't need help," she says, refusing to participate in Garcin's plan of goodwill and kindness. This frustrates Garcin, who reminds her that this is exactly what whoever put them together counted on them to do. "Inez, they've laid their snare damned cunningly," he says, underlining how important it is that they work together to keep from hurting each other. Going on, he emphasizes the fact that nobody in the drawing-room can do anything without affecting the others. Consequently, Inez's decision to reject Garcin's "help" will have serious consequences, since the trio is "linked together inextricably."

Interestingly enough, it's possible that Garcin is only deluding himself into thinking there's anything he can do to avoid torment. Indeed, it is perhaps the case that Inez understands how impossible it will be to avoid tormenting her companions, so she simply accepts that she's in hell and will inevitably experience misery. As this notion arises in the play, audience members must decide for themselves whether these three people are going to torture each other simply because they're fated to do so, or because they've

made a conscious decision to accept this torture—and, of course, whether or not these two options ultimately amount to the same thing.

●● I want you to do me a service. No, don't shrink away. I know it must seem strange to you, having someone asking you for help; you're not used to that. But if you'll make the effort, if you'll only *will* it hard enough, I dare say we can really love each other. Look at it this way. A thousand of them are proclaiming I'm a coward; but what do numbers matter? If there's someone, just one person, to say quite positively I did not run away, that I'm not the sort who runs away, that I'm brave and decent and the rest of it—well, that one person's faith would save me. Will you have that faith in me? Then I shall love you and cherish you forever. Estelle—will you?

Related Characters: Joseph Garcin (speaker), Gomez, Inez Serrano, Estelle Rigault

Related Themes:  


Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

Garcin says this to Estelle after listening to Gomez and his other colleagues speak ill of him on earth. When he hears Gomez talking about him as if he's a "coward," Garcin's entire sense of self is upended. As a result, he tries to reestablish the way he sees himself by seeking reassurance from Estelle, saying that he'll be saved if even one person has faith that he's not a coward. What's most interesting about this logic is the mere fact that Garcin *did* run from the war. No matter what Estelle says, he will still have fled the war to avoid becoming a soldier. No matter how badly he wants her reassurance, nothing she says will ever alter his past or change him into a different, "brave[r]" person. And yet, he's willing to deny this, instead pleading with Estelle to say anything that will help him ignore his shortcomings. In this way, Sartre shows the audience not only that people are often quite eager to delude themselves, but also that this kind of self-deception can manifest itself in a person's relationships.

●● 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.

Related Characters: Joseph Garcin (speaker), Inez Serrano, Estelle Rigault

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

Garcin says this as he pounds the door, pleading for it to open. He has just asked Estelle to tell him that he isn't a coward, and at first, he's quite happy when she obliges. However, Inez soon interjects and points out that Estelle wants to win his favor and will do anything to accomplish this. Seeing that she's right, Garcin runs to the door, yelling that he'll "endure anything" as long as it isn't the "agony of mind" he has to put up with in the drawing-room. This sentiment underscores just how difficult he finds it to withstand the interpersonal dynamic he's established with Inez and Estelle—a dynamic that ultimately forces him to face his own insecurities. Unable to find reassurance through his relationship with Estelle, he feels the "creeping pain" of self-doubt, struggling unsuccessfully to conceive of himself not as a coward, but as a brave and admirable man.

●● GARCIN: Yes. *You*, anyhow, know what it means to be a coward.


INEZ: Yes, I know.

GARCIN: And you know what wickedness is, and shame, and fear. There were days when you peered into yourself, into the secret places of your heart, and what you saw there made you faint with horror. And then, next day, you didn't know what to make of it, you couldn't interpret the horror you had glimpsed the day before. Yes, you know what evil costs. And when you say I'm a coward, you know from experience what that means. Is that so?

INEZ: Yes.

GARCIN: So it's you whom I have to convince; you are of my kind. Did you suppose I meant to go? No, I couldn't leave you here, gloating over my defeat, with all those thoughts about me running in your head.

Related Characters: Inez Serrano, Joseph Garcin (speaker), Estelle Rigault

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

In this exchange, Garcin explains to Inez why he wants to convince her that he isn't a coward. He has somehow managed to open the door, and though he could escape Inez and Estelle and the torture that comes along with interacting with them, he decides to stay in the drawing-room. By way of explanation, he outlines the fact that Inez knows what it "means" to be a bad person. She has experienced "wickedness" and "shame," and this resonates with Garcin, since he himself is guilty of having run from the war. In fact, his guilt is the exact reason he wants to make an appeal to Inez. She, after all, knows what it's like to be guilty and, thus, knows what it would mean to free one's conscience. "So it's you whom I have to convince," he says, deciding that her approval is all he needs. Unlike Estelle, who will tell him anything just to please him, Inez already dislikes him, meaning that changing her mind would mean a great deal. "No, I couldn't leave you here, gloating over my defeat, with all those thoughts about me running in your head," he says. This is a critical line in the play, since it serves as a precursor to Garcin's later assertion that hell is "other people." Unable to bear the idea of somebody thinking of him as a coward, Garcin devotes himself to winning over Inez. In doing so, he commits himself to the hell of the drawing-room once more, thereby sealing his fate in hell and demonstrating once and for all that he's fated to torture himself via his interactions with others; even an open door isn't enough to let him escape. His relationship with Inez, then, is both what keeps him in hell and what torments him so thoroughly.



●● GARCIN: [...] I aimed at being a real man. A tough, as they say. I staked everything on the same horse. . . . Can one possibly be a coward when one's deliberately courted danger at every turn? And can one judge a life by a single action?

INEZ: Why not? For thirty years you dreamt you were a hero, and condoned a thousand petty lapses—because a hero, of course, can do no wrong. An easy method, obviously. Then a day came when you were up against it, the red light of real danger—and you took the train to Mexico.

GARCIN: I “dreamt,” you say. It was no dream. When I chose the hardest path, I made my choice deliberately. A man is what he wills himself to be.

INEZ: Prove it. Prove it was no dream. It's what one does, and nothing else, that shows the stuff one's made of.

Related Characters: Inez Serrano, Joseph Garcin (speaker), Estelle Rigault

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 43


Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Garcin tries to convince Inez that he isn't a coward. He tells her that he “deliberately courted danger at every turn” when he was still alive. Accordingly, he argues that it's unfair that he was “judge[d]” for just one “action” (his decision to run from the war). Contesting this, Inez points out that he was never forced to truly prove his bravery until the war. And when that moment came, he fled from “the red light of real danger.” This line of thinking suggests that it's easy to delude oneself but harder to actually demonstrate certain values. Garcin, for his part, upholds that “a man is what he wills himself to be,” but Inez rejects this idea, suggesting that “it's what one does, and nothing else, that shows the stuff one's made of.” Sartre borrows this theory directly from his own philosophical beliefs regarding existentialism. In his scholarly work, he argues that nobody is essentially one thing or another. Instead, people define themselves through their actions. Since the defining action of Garcin's life came when he ran from the war, then, it's hard to deny that he's a coward.

●● 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!

Related Characters: Joseph Garcin (speaker), Estelle

Rigault, Inez Serrano

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

Garcin delivers these words just before the end of *No Exit*. Estelle has just tried to convince him to have sex with her as a way of taking revenge upon Inez, who refuses to reassure him that he isn't a coward. As he tries to do this, though, Inez reminds him that she's watching him and will *always* be watching him, and this renders him unable to continue paying attention to Estelle. “So this is hell,” he says, referring to the internal torment he feels as a result of Inez's watchful gaze. Unable to escape the fact that Inez will always perceive him however she wants, he finally realizes that the most torturous thing about hell is his inability to control how other people see him. “Hell is—other people!” he yells, delivering the play's most famous line. Interestingly, though, this exclamation doesn't mean that “other people” are inherently bad, but that the unreliable nature of human interaction can easily become torturous, especially if a person has certain existential insecurities. Garcin, of course, has *many* existential insecurities, so the fact that Inez's feelings about him confirm his worst fears is unbearably terrible.

●● INEZ [*struggling and laughing*]: But, you crazy creature, what do you think you're doing? You know quite well I'm dead.

ESTELLE: Dead?

[*She drops the knife. A pause, INEZ picks up the knife and jabs herself with it regretfully.*]

INEZ: Dead! Dead! Dead! Knives, poison, ropes—all useless. It has happened *already*, do you understand? Once and for all. So here we are, forever. [*Laughs.*]



ESTELLE [*with a peal of laughter*]: Forever. My God, how funny! Forever.

GARCIN [*looks at the two women, and joins in the laughter*]: Forever, and ever, and ever.

[*They slump onto their respective sofas. A long silence. Their laughter dies away and they gaze at each other.*]

GARCIN: Well, well, let's get on with it. . . .

Related Characters: Joseph Garcin, Estelle Rigault, Inez Serrano (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

These are the final lines of *No Exit*. Because Inez has gotten into Garcin's head and made it impossible for him to make love to Estelle, Estelle rushes at her and stabs her with the paper-knife. "But, you crazy creature, what do you think you're doing? You know quite well I'm dead," Inez laughs, taking the knife and stabbing herself several times to demonstrate her point. "It has happened *already*, do you understand?" she says. Once again, she is the only one to fully grasp the nature of their situation in hell, or at least the only person to accept reality for what it is. Now, though, Estelle stops trying to deceive herself. Rather than avoiding the word "dead," she repeats it, and when Inez points out that they will be in hell "forever," Estelle finally comes to

understand that she'll never leave the drawing-room. This, in turn, strikes her as funny, so she begins to laugh. At this point, Garcin, too, gives up his self-delusion and joins the women in accepting their shared fate.

As the trio laughs, the audience sees how worthwhile it was for them to finally embrace—as a group—their predicament. Rather than deceiving themselves, Garcin and Estelle recognize that there's nothing they can do to change their situation, and this leads to a brief respite from their agony. The fact that these three companions are able to laugh together despite the fact that they're supposed to torture one another is significant, for it demonstrates the value of acknowledging what cannot be changed. This, Sartre implies, is the only thing to do in the face of immutable misery, and though the trio will almost certainly soon resume torturing each other, their laughter is a sign that being honest with oneself can inspire at least a fleeting moment of emotional peace.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

NO EXIT

Escorted by a courteous valet, Joseph Garcin enters a drawing-room decorated in “Second Empire style,” with three sofas and a large **bronze ornament** placed on the mantelpiece. Garcin is surprised by his surroundings, saying, “Second Empire furniture, I observe...Well, well, I dare say one gets used to it in time.” In response, the valet admits that some people do grow accustomed to the environment, though others do not. Garcin then asks if other rooms are like this, and the valet says, “We cater for all sorts,” making it clear that each room is tailored to its inhabitant. This causes Garcin to wonder why he has been assigned to a room with Second Empire furnishings, saying that he didn’t expect that. He adds: “You know what they tell us down there?” Before letting him finish, though, the valet chides him for believing “cock-and-bull” about hell.

Garcin agrees with the valet that it was absurd of him to make assumptions about hell. Nevertheless, he wonders aloud where the “instruments of torture” are, but the valet dismisses this as a joke. Going on, Garcin notes that there aren’t any **mirrors**, and though this doesn’t bother him, he becomes suddenly incensed by the fact that nobody has provided him with a toothbrush. This entertains the valet, who tells him that everyone who comes to hell asks him “silly questions.” He then tells Garcin that he won’t be needing a toothbrush. “Yes, of course you’re right,” Garcin replies, trying to accept his new circumstances. All the same, he’s unable to ignore the ugliness of the **bronze sculpture** on the mantelpiece, determining that its presence must be part of his torture. Proud of himself for anticipating what he has coming, he says, “I’m facing the situation, facing it.”

As the valet shows Garcin what his existence will be like in hell, Garcin subtly deceives himself. As if trying to trick himself into liking his new environment, he suggests that he’ll most likely “get used to” living here, effectively ignoring the fact that this room has been specifically designed to torment him. Rather than accepting that what he sees is a manifestation of torture, he makes casual remarks about his surroundings. At the same time, Garcin acknowledges that he didn’t “expect” hell to be furnished with the lavish style of a Second Empire drawing-room, a comment that reveals the deluded notion that humans can have any idea what it’s like in the afterlife. In this opening, Sartre shows the audience the nature of human ignorance, demonstrating just how adept people like Garcin are at denying unfavorable circumstances.



Garcin’s assertion that he’s “facing the situation” is another indication that he is eager to deceive himself regarding the nature of his new environment. Rather than simply giving himself over to the experience of being in hell (since he has no control over it anyway), he takes pride in his apparent ability to withstand what he has coming. The problem with this logic, however, is that he doesn’t know what’s coming. Indeed, he hasn’t even discerned the true nature of his torture yet, but he has already convinced himself that he fully grasps what’s going to happen to him. In turn, the audience sees just how desperate he is to feel in control of his situation, even when control is impossible.



Noticing there's no bed in the drawing-room, Garcin guesses that nobody sleeps in hell. He then waxes poetic about the beauty of sleep, and when he finishes, the valet calls him a "romantic." Frustrated, Garcin reminds him that he's facing the "situation" "fairly and squarely." He then considers why, exactly, nobody sleeps in hell, eventually determining that this kind of existence is a punishment because it forces one to experience "life without a break." In keeping with this idea, he sees that the valet never blinks, a fact that he believes aligns with a sleepless existence. "So that's the idea," he says. "I'm to live without eyelids." Thinking about never sleeping, he asks himself, he wonders how he will "endure" his own company. To explain what he means, he says that he often "tease[s]" himself—so much that he worries about what it'll be like never getting a break from himself.

Garcin asks the valet if it's day or night, and the valet says, "Can't you see? The lights are on." When Garcin asks what it's like "outside," the valet is confused, so Garcin asks what's beyond the door. The valet tells him that there is simply a passageway with many other doors, leading—eventually—to a staircase, beyond which there is nothing. Returning to the topic of lighting, Garcin asks what would happen if he took **the bronze ornament** from the mantelpiece and threw it on the lamp, but the valet assures him that it's too heavy to lift. Nonetheless, Garcin tries and quickly sees that the valet is right—the ornament cannot be moved.

After Garcin stops trying to lift **the ornament**, the valet prepares to take his leave. Before he exits, though, Garcin notices a small bell and asks if the valet will return if he rings it. "Well, yes, that's so—in a way," the valet says. "But you can never be sure about that bell. There's something wrong with the wiring, and it doesn't always work." To test it, Garcin walks to the bell and pushes it, and a small sound rings outside the room. He says that the bell is working, and the valet looks surprised, saying that Garcin probably shouldn't "count on it too much." Just before the valet leaves, Garcin finds a "paper-knife" on the mantelpiece, but when he asks if there are any books to use it with, the valet says there aren't. "Then what's the use of this?" he asks, but the valet simply shrugs before leaving.

Once again, Garcin reveals his desire to be in control of his existence, ultimately tricking himself into believing that he's handling this "situation" as best he can. In reality, of course, he doesn't yet know anything about the nature of his new circumstances, though it's worth noting that this slowly begins to change as he learns that he'll never sleep again. When he worries about never having a break from his "own company," he implicitly acknowledges that having to reckon with his own sense of self is a torturous activity. All the same, he doesn't seem to fully grasp that this existential unrest will factor heavily into his misery in hell.



After learning that he'll be unable to sleep in hell, Garcin immediately wonders if there's some way to turn off the lights. The fact that he has this thought is worth noting, since it suggests that he conceives of sight and perspective as somehow linked to selfhood. After all, his main concern is that he won't be able to "endure [his] own company" without sleeping, and although turning off the lights wouldn't necessarily enable him to suddenly ignore his own consciousness, he seems to think it would. This aligns with Sartre's philosophical ideas regarding the human "gaze," as outlined in his text Being and Nothingness, in which he argues that other people's perspectives fundamentally alter a person's sense of self and subjectivity. Of course, Garcin still thinks he'll be spending eternity alone, so his desire to turn off the lights is quite strange, as if he thinks his own "gaze" will turn on itself and torment him. This fear of the self is worth keeping in mind as the play progresses, since it brings itself to bear on the way Sartre portrays the nuances of human interaction.



In this moment, Garcin continues his attempt to convince himself that he's in a better situation than he's actually in. His questions about the bell illustrate his desire to think of his stay in the drawing-room as some sort of luxury hotel visit. In reality, though, he knows he's in hell, and yet he still acts as if the valet will really accommodate his every need. Through this interaction, the audience sees how unwilling he is to accept the true nature of his new environment.



Alone, Garcin touches **the bronze ornament**, sits on the couch, stands, and presses the bell. Nothing happens. Frantically, he tries it again and again, but it remains silent. He then goes to the door and tries to open it without success. Hitting it, he yells for the valet before giving up and returning to the couch, at which point the door opens and the valet escorts Inez into the room. “Did you call, sir?” asks the valet, and Garcin denies having rung the bell. “This is your room, madam,” the valet says to Inez, asking if she has any questions. When she doesn’t reply, he looks somewhat annoyed, saying that most guests have a lot of questions. Still, though, she remains silent, so he tells her to ask Garcin any questions she might have.

When the valet leaves, Inez turns to Garcin and asks, “Where’s Florence?” Garcin, for his part, doesn’t know what she’s talking about, telling her that he doesn’t know where Florence is. “Ah, that’s the way it works, is it?” Inez says. “Torture by separation.” She goes on to say that she won’t even miss Florence. After a moment of puzzlement, Inez explains to Garcin that she thinks he’s her torturer, so he quickly tells her he’s simply another person in hell. “A torturer indeed!” he says. “I’m Joseph Garcin, journalist and man of letters by profession.” He then asks what he should call her, saying, “Mrs.—?” In response, she curtly informs him that she doesn’t have a husband.

Garcin asks Inez why she assumed he was her torturer, wondering how a person can “recognize torturers.” Inez replies by telling him that torturers normally look “frightened,” and Garcin laughs at this idea, wondering why a torturer would ever be scared. “Laugh away,” she says, “but I know what I’m talking about. I’ve often watched my face in **the glass**.” Changing the subject, she asks Garcin if he’s going to be in the drawing-room at all times, and he informs her that neither of them can leave, since the door is locked. This visibly disappoints her, so he says: “I can quite understand that it bores you having me here. And I too—well, frankly, I’d rather be alone.” He adds that, since they can’t leave, they should be exceedingly polite to each other, but Inez says, “I’m not polite.” Hearing this, Garcin decides to be “polite for two.”

Unlike Garcin, Inez seems less likely to delude herself regarding the nature of her surroundings. Of course, she hasn’t spoken yet, but even her decision to not ask the valet any questions suggests that she has no desire to deceive herself by acting like she has just arrived in a fancy hotel. Rather than asking the valet pointless questions about the drawing-room, she seemingly accepts that there’s nothing to do but surrender to whatever’s going to happen.



Inez and Garcin’s relationship begins oddly, with Inez thinking that he’s supposed to torture her—an idea that isn’t quite as absurd as it might seem. Still, he quickly dispels this notion, laughing at the idea of himself as anything but empathetic and kind. In contrast, Inez seems to have embraced her own coldness, as she says that she doesn’t care whether or not she’s separated from Florence. Considering that she thinks being separated from Florence is supposed to be a torture method, it follows that Florence must have been a meaningful person in her life. And yet, she doesn’t hesitate to call her a “tiresome little fool,” ultimately suggesting that Inez is focused first and foremost on herself, not on the people with whom she’s supposedly close.



Inez’s cryptic assertion that she knows what torturers look like because she has “watched [her] face” in the mirror suggests that she herself has tormented people. This more or less aligns with her later remark that she’s “not polite.” Furthermore, her disappointment regarding the idea of Garcin’s constant presence once again indicates that she cares first and foremost about herself. This, at least, matches Garcin’s feeling that he’d “rather be alone,” though it’s worth noting that this sentiment clashes somewhat with his previous complaint that he won’t be able to “endure [his] own company.” Rather than making it easier for him to withstand himself, Inez’s presence seemingly increases the likelihood that he will be discontented in the drawing-room, an idea that foreshadows Sartre’s belief that human interaction can exacerbate a person’s existential insecurities.



After sitting in silence for several moments, Inez asks Garcin to stop moving his mouth. “You keep twisting it about all the time. It’s grotesque,” she says, though he doesn’t even know he’s doing it. Consequently, he’s unable to stop, so she chastises him for “inflict[ing] the sight of [his] fear” on her. In turn, he asks why she isn’t afraid, and she says that there’s no “point,” admitting that it made sense to be afraid before coming to hell. Now that they’ve arrived, though, there’s no longer any “hope,” so it’s illogical to still fear what’s to come. However, Garcin reminds her that they “haven’t yet begun to suffer,” and she concedes that this is the case. After a brief pause, she asks: “Well? What’s going to happen?”

As Garcin and Inez try to determine what’s going to happen to them, the door opens once more and the valet brings in Estelle. Garcin covers his face with his hands because he’s trying to shield his involuntary expressions of horror from Inez. Seeing this, Estelle shrieks, “No. Don’t look up. I know what you’re hiding with your hands. I know you’ve no face left.” When he looks at her, though, she realizes that he isn’t the person she thought he was, and he informs her that he isn’t the torturer. “I never thought you were,” she says. “I—I thought someone was trying to play a rather nasty trick on me.” She then asks the valet if anyone else will be joining them in the drawing-room, and he informs them that they’ve all arrived.

Learning that she, Garcin, and Inez are fated to spend eternity together in the drawing-room, Estelle begins to laugh, saying that she can’t possibly bear to sit on the only empty sofa, the color of which would clash with her dress. “Would you prefer mine?” Inez asks, but Estelle rejects that sofa, too, admitting that Garcin’s is the only one she could bear to use. “Did you hear her, Mr. Garcin?” Inez asks pointedly, and Garcin jumps up, telling Estelle that she can take the sofa. When she finally sits down, she takes off her coat and introduces herself as Estelle Rigault. Just as Garcin is about to tell her his name, though, Inez steps between them and says, “And I’m Inez Serrano.” As Garcin finally tells Estelle his name, the valet leaves, and Inez tells Estelle that she’s “very pretty.”

When Inez asks Garcin to stop forcing “the sight of [his] fear” on her, she tries to control the way they interact, not wanting to be influenced by what he’s feeling. This desire to control the details of even their nonverbal communication illustrates Sartre’s belief that the mere presence of others can significantly alter a person’s perspective. Not wanting to be afraid of her circumstances, Inez resents Garcin for making “grotesque” faces that show his fear. But the fact that these faces are involuntary indicates that Inez will never be able to fully control the way Garcin sees their shared situation, since even he can’t seem to get ahold of himself. In turn, he will always color the nature of her existence, regardless of what he or she does to try and stop this.



It’s clear Estelle is afraid of encountering someone from her past, since she reacts so strongly when she thinks Garcin is that person. By ordering him not to “look up,” she reveals her unwillingness to accept her situation in hell. Of course, this is only a false alarm, but her attempt to avoid seeing this unspecified person from her past suggests that she thinks she has the power to keep horror at bay. Once again, then, the audience sees how easily humans deceive themselves, as Estelle refuses to acknowledge that she will have no say over the nature of her torture in hell.



It doesn’t take long for Sartre to establish that Estelle is rather self-obsessed. Not only does she put herself before others, but she also focuses on trivial things, like whether or not her dress matches the furniture. This only serves as yet another indication that she—like Garcin—doesn’t fully grasp the implications of the fact that she’s in hell, where she’s supposed to be tortured for eternity. Rather than acknowledging that superficial aesthetic details don’t matter in the context of eternal suffering, she asks Garcin to give up his sofa, fixating on her looks as a way of controlling her surroundings and denying the true gravity of her situation.



Estelle tells Garcin and Inez that she left the earth only yesterday. Since her funeral is currently taking place, she narrates what she sees, apparently capable of presiding over the ceremony. She sees her sister trying to cry as she stands by the grave. She also sees her best friend, Olga, who is looking quite fine as she stands at her sister's side. Estelle explains that she had pneumonia and that she died without much pain. Her husband, for his part, has decided to stay home for the funeral, since he's "prostrated with grief." Having told this story, Estelle asks how Inez died. "The gas stove," she replies. "And you, Mr. Garcin?" Estelle asks. "Twelve bullets through my chest," he says, and when he sees that this upsets her, he says, "Sorry! I fear I'm not good company among the dead."

Estelle asks Garcin not to use the word "dead," saying that it's "in terribly bad taste." She then suggests that she, Garcin, and Inez refer to themselves as "absentees." Turning her attention back to Garcin, she asks where he's from, and he tells her that he hails from Rio. Estelle herself is from Paris, she says. "Have you anyone left down there?" she asks, and Garcin explains that he left behind his wife. Like Estelle, he too is able to see what's happening on earth, so he narrates as his wife waits for him at a "barracks." "She doesn't yet know I'm—absent, but she suspects it," he says, going on to talk about her large eyes, adding that she never used to cry. "Those big tragic eyes of hers—with that martyred look they always had," he says. "Oh, how she got on my nerves!"

Garcin absentmindedly sits on Estelle's couch to think. When Inez calls this to Estelle's attention, she asks him to get up, though she apologizes for interrupting what looked like a deep thought. "I was setting my life in order," he says, and though Inez laughs at him for doing this, he advises her and Estelle to do the same. "No need," says Inez. "My life's in perfect order. It tidied itself up nicely of its own accord." At this point, the three hell-dwellers take turns narrating what they see on earth. It's night, they realize, eventually understanding that the time on earth passes incredibly quickly while they're in hell. Garcin sees the dark newspaper office, Estelle sees Olga getting into bed, and Inez sees the bedroom in which she used to live, noting that it has been "sealed up."

Estelle's narration of her own funeral demonstrates that she's still quite connected to the real world. As she considers the ways in which her loved ones mourn her death, the audience sees how important it is for her to feel missed. What's more, her obsession with what people think of her distracts her from her present situation, allowing her to more or less ignore the fact that she's in hell.



Estelle's harsh reaction to the word "dead" underlines her desire to deny the true nature of her new existence. Rather than acknowledging that she and her companions have died, she tries to deceive herself by changing the way she and the others refer to themselves. On another note, Garcin's remarks about his wife are worth considering, since he admits that she used to get on his "nerves." What upsets him, it seems, is that she has "big tragic eyes," suggesting that her "martyred look" makes him feel guilty about something, though it's not yet clear what, exactly, this might be. All the same, it's obvious that he feels little empathy for his wife, focusing only on the fact that her sadness makes him feel bad.



When Inez says that her life "tidied itself up nicely of its own accord," Sartre implies that she—unlike the others—has accepted her own death. While Garcin and Estelle continue to muse about their past existences, Inez acknowledges that her life is over ("sealed up"), though she still narrates what has happened to her bedroom in the wake of her death. All the same, it's evident that she's more willing than her companions to embrace her new circumstances, since Garcin and Estelle are still trying to distract themselves from their surroundings.



Estelle makes it known that she dislikes seeing men in shirtsleeves, which poses a problem for Garcin, since it's hot in the drawing-room. Nevertheless, he agrees to leave his coat on, though he points out that she would have hated it in his office, where the reporters all hung around without their jackets. When Estelle asks if Inez cares about seeing men in shirtsleeves, Inez replies, "Oh, I don't care much for men any way." This causes Estelle to wonder why she has been placed in the room with these people. "It doesn't make sense," she says, admitting that she thought she'd be placed with "old friends, or relatives." Garcin posits that they've been grouped together randomly, but Inez laughs at this idea, insisting that nothing about their situation has been "left to chance." "I tell you they've thought it all out," she says. "Down to the last detail."

Estelle asks Inez why, exactly, the three of them would be so meticulously placed with one another, but Inez doesn't know. "I only know they're waiting," she says, to which Estelle responds, "I never could bear the idea of anyone's expecting something from me. It always made me want to do just the opposite." Trying to understand why they've been grouped together, Inez suggests that they all say why they've been condemned in the first place. She starts with Estelle, asking what she's done to deserve hell, but Estelle acts innocent, saying, "I haven't a notion, not the foggiest. In fact, I'm wondering if there hasn't been some ghastly mistake." When she sees Inez smiling cynically, she asks, "Anyhow, isn't it better to think we've got here by mistake?"

Inez urges Estelle to be more truthful about why she's in hell, but Estelle insists that she's done nothing wrong. Going into more detail, she explains that she was orphaned as a child, putting her in charge of her younger brother. When an older family friend who was very rich asked her to marry him, she agreed. "My husband was old enough to be my father, but for six years we had a happy married life," she says. "Then two years ago I met the man I was fated to love." Although this man asked Estelle to elope, she refused. Not long after this, she contracted pneumonia and quickly died.

Estelle reveals her naivety when she says that she expected to be grouped together with "old friends" and "relatives." Although she knows she's in hell, she nevertheless assumes that she'll have the luxury of being with close acquaintances, as if she has completely forgotten that people are supposed to suffer in hell. Similarly, Garcin suggests that everything in hell is random, trying to convince himself that his new environment hasn't been specifically tailored to ensure his misery. Once again, Inez remains the only person in the drawing-room who's willing to acknowledge the true nature of hell, which is why she tells her companions that nothing has been "left to chance," trying to get them to stop deceiving themselves about why they've been placed here.



When Estelle says that she can't "bear the idea" of someone expecting something from her, she exemplifies Sartre's idea that others can significantly influence the way a person experiences life. The mere idea that someone might want something from her feels like a challenge to Estelle, making her want to assert her agency by doing "just the opposite." Furthermore, her unwillingness to admit why she's in hell once again illustrates her tendency to deceive herself, as she makes the absurd claim that there must have been "some ghastly mistake." Rather than owning up to and accepting her own moral failures, she acts like she doesn't deserve to be in hell at all—a technique that helps her cope with her situation, though it's clearly an unsustainable method of maintaining her composure, since she'll eventually have to admit that she's in hell for a reason.



Estelle has just insisted that she hasn't done anything wrong, even suggesting that she's been placed in hell by mistake. And yet, she casually mentions in this moment that she cheated on her husband. Although this in and of itself might not necessarily mean that she deserves eternal damnation, it is—at the very least—a hint that she isn't as innocent as she'd like to think. After all, having an affair in this circumstance suggests that she thinks primarily about her own desires, failing to consider her husband's happiness. In this way, it becomes clear that she doesn't have the capacity to recognize her own shortcomings, so she brings up her affair without stopping to consider its implications about her moral compass.



Estelle postulates that the only thing she did wrong was “sacrifice” her youth to an older man. “Do you think that could be called a sin?” she asks Garcin, who answers by saying, “Certainly not. And now, tell me, do you think it’s a crime to stand by one’s principles?” Estelle assures him that sticking to one’s beliefs is an admirable thing to do, so he goes into more detail about his life, saying that he operated a “pacifist newspaper.” “Then the war broke out,” he says. “What was I to do? Everyone was watching me, wondering: ‘Will he dare?’ Well, I dared. I folded my arms and they shot me.” Hearing this story, Estelle puts a sympathetic hand on Garcin and is about to call him a “hero” when Inez angrily interrupts, sarcastically saying, “A hero!”

“What’s the point of play-acting, trying to throw dust in each other’s eyes?” Inez asks. This upsets Estelle, but Inez presses on, insisting that all three of them are “criminals” and “murderers,” reminding them that people don’t go to hell without cause. Again, Estelle vehemently rejects this idea, but Inez continues until Garcin puts his clenched hand in the air and tells her to shut her mouth. “Ah, I understand now,” Inez says. “I know why they’ve put us three together.” She then explains that they’ve all been put in the drawing-room to torture each other. “I mean that each of us will act as torturer of the two others,” she says.

“No,” Garcin says after thinking about what Inez has said, “I shall never be your torturer. I wish neither of you any harm.” To avoid tormenting each other, he says, each of them should ignore the others, remaining silent in their separate areas of the drawing-room. Estelle doesn’t like this idea, but they all agree that this is the only way to avoid torturing each other. Shortly after they fall silent, though, Estelle sings a song to herself about an execution while applying lipstick. When she finishes, she looks in her handbag for a **mirror**, but realizes she doesn’t have one. “Excuse me, have you a glass?” she asks Garcin, who doesn’t respond. “Don’t worry,” Inez quickly says, offering to let Estelle look in her mirror. When she opens her bag, though, she sees that she, too, doesn’t have one anymore.

In the same way that Estelle is unwilling to admit her own moral shortcomings, Garcin appears ready and willing to think of himself as a “hero” or martyr, regardless of whether or not this is accurate. Granted, Sartre has yet to clarify the circumstances surrounding Garcin’s death, but it seems likely that his interpretation of what happened is inaccurate, given that he’s in hell. After all, people don’t simply go to hell for no reason, which is why Inez—the only person willing to acknowledge this fact—bitterly mocks her companions for presenting themselves as innocent.



Inez’s willingness to be frank about her situation enables her to see clearly. While Estelle and Garcin try to trick themselves into thinking that they don’t deserve to be in hell, Inez acknowledges not only that her condemnation makes sense, but also that there’s an underlying logic to the nature of the group’s collective damnation. Observing how aggressively she and the others argue, it dawns on her that they’ve been placed in the drawing-room specifically for this reason: they don’t get along, and so they’re fated to torture each other simply by coexisting.



By suggesting that he and his companions should avoid one another, Garcin tries to evade torture. If he and the others are destined to torment one another, he reasons, they should simply keep to themselves, thereby circumventing any misery that might come their way. This, however, is yet another form of self-deception, as Garcin makes the grand assumption that he has enough power to control the nature of his own suffering. Although it might be the case that he and his fellow hell-dwellers could avoid torturing each other simply by ignoring one another, it seems unlikely that they’ll be able to sustain this lack of communication. After all, it seems clear by now that they’ve been grouped together because of their personalities, which will most likely drive them to each other time and again, making it impossible to escape their torturous interpersonal dynamic.



Upset that nobody has a **mirror**, Estelle says she feels out of sorts when she can't see herself. "I begin to wonder if I really and truly exist," she says. Inez, for her part, says that she's quite "conscious" of herself, though only in her "mind." "Ah yes, in your mind," Estelle says. "But everything that goes on in one's head is so vague, isn't it?" She explains that her bedroom on earth has six mirrors—she can see them now, she says, but she can't find herself in the reflection. "How empty it is, a glass in which I'm absent!" she laments. "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..."

Learning how important **mirrors** are to Estelle, Inez offers to act as her "glass," encouraging her to sit next to her and stare into her eyes to find her reflection. Estelle hesitates, reminding Inez that they'll probably "hurt each other," but Inez ignores this, saying that it's more than likely that Estelle will be the one to hurt *her*, not the other way around. "Still, what does it matter?" Inez says. "If I've got to suffer, it may as well be at your hands, your pretty hands."

Estelle sits next to Inez and peers into her eyes, but she can hardly make out the details of her own face. Inez offers to describe everything she sees, telling Estelle that her lipstick is "smudgy." The more she helps her in this way, though, the more frustrated Estelle becomes, since she feels she can't "rely" on Inez's "taste." In response, Inez assures her that they have the same taste. Inez then urges Estelle to look again, saying, "I'm not so ugly, either. Am I not nicer than your glass?" In response, Estelle says, "Oh, I don't know. You scare me rather. My reflection in the glass never did that: of course, I knew it so well. Like something I had tamed...I'm going to smile, and my smile will sink down into your pupils, and heaven knows what it will become."

In this portion of No Exit, Sartre employs his ideas about the human "gaze," which he explores at length in his philosophical text Being and Nothingness. According to Sartre, another person's gaze threatens any individual's sense of self. He argues that an individual's realization that someone else might see her a certain way can be troubling because it suggests that she isn't in total control of her own existence. As Estelle laments the lack of mirrors in the drawing-room, it becomes clear that she feels uncomfortable because she can't reassert her own conception of herself. The fact that Inez and Garcin might see her in ways that go against the way she thinks of herself is unbearable, so she wants to find a way to look at herself, thinking that doing so would reestablish her agency over her own identity.



Whereas Estelle loathes the idea of giving herself over to others (by letting them look at her when she can't look at herself), Inez embraces the idea of surrendering herself to Estelle. This, however, is because she wants to maintain her agency, since choosing to "suffer" at Estelle's "pretty hands" is still a decision. In this sense, Inez agrees to put herself at Estelle's mercy for the same reason that Estelle wants to see a reflection of herself—they both want to maintain a modicum of control over their existences.



When Estelle says that her reflection in regular mirrors always looked back at her as if she had "tamed" it, she proves her desire to control her own sense of self. By looking at her reflection, she was always able to reaffirm who she was and align this with who she wanted to be. Now, though, the only reflection she can find is in Inez's eyes, and though this gives her an opportunity to see herself, she can't ignore the fact that Inez is watching her. This, in turn, makes it impossible to deny the influence of Inez's gaze, as Estelle realizes that anything she does might mean something different than she intends to Inez. If she smiles, she says, that smile might "become" something different in Inez's mind. Consequently, she finds no relief looking at her reflection in Inez's eyes.



Inez tells Estelle that she would be happy if Estelle “tame[d]” her in the same way that she has “tame[d]” her reflection in the mirror. She also says that she wants them to be incredibly close, but Estelle says she doesn’t “make friends with women very easily.” Still studying Estelle’s face, Inez suddenly points out a pimple, and when this thoroughly unsettles Estelle, Inez admits that she wasn’t being serious. “So what about it?” Inez says. “Suppose the mirror started telling lies?” Inez asks. She also wonders what would happen if she refused to look at Estelle at all, just as Garcin is refusing. But then she concludes that she “can’t help” looking at Estelle. Going on, Inez promises to be “nice” to Estelle if Estelle does the same for her.

Recognizing the gravity of Inez’s interest in her, Estelle asks if she’s actually “attracted” to her. “Very much indeed,” Inez says. After a pause, Estelle admits that she wishes Garcin would take a similar interest in her—a comment that enrages Inez. “Of course!” Inez quips. “Because he’s a Man!” Turning to Garcin, she says, “You’ve won.” When he doesn’t reply, she demands that he look at Estelle, accusing him of hearing everything they’ve said.

Finally, Garcin breaks his silence, but only to say that he wants to be left “in peace.” “I’m not interested in you,” he says to Inez. When Inez asks if he’s “interested” in Estelle, Garcin tells her that he’s trying to hear his colleague, Gomez, who’s currently talking about him at the office. He also says that he’s not interested at all in Estelle, who takes immediate offense. Seeing this, Garcin reminds her that this is exactly why none of them should interact, but Estelle says that it’s Inez’s fault for getting her worked up. “I didn’t ask anything of her and she came and offered me her—her **glass**,” she says. Inez then bitterly observes that Estelle was hoping to get Garcin’s attention the whole time.

Once again, Garcin insists that he and his companions should ignore each other, but Inez says that this will be impossible. “Your silence clamors in my ears,” she says. She accuses him of having taken Estelle from her, since she can’t stop thinking about the fact that Estelle wants to attract his attention. “Well, I won’t stand for that, I prefer to choose my hell,” she says. “I prefer to look you in the eyes and fight it out face to face.”

Although Inez offers to let Estelle look into her eyes as a way of being nice, in this moment she hints at the power she has over her new acquaintance. Since Estelle is already so concerned about her looks, Inez’s comment that she might stop looking at her is actually something of a threat—after all, if Estelle attaches so much existential importance to her image, then what will happen if nobody (including herself) looks at her? As this idea emerges, Sartre begins to demonstrate more clearly how these characters will torture each other, suggesting that their various hang-ups and neuroses are at odds with one another.



When Estelle says she wishes Garcin would notice her, she agitates Inez. In doing so, she sets off a chain reaction, since Inez yells at Garcin, furious with him because he’s stealing Estelle’s attention without even trying. In this way, the group dynamic becomes toxic, since each character is unable to get what he or she wants from the others.



It’s now quite obvious that Inez was right when she guessed that she, Garcin, and Estelle are supposed to torture each other. When Garcin says that he wants to listen to Gomez talk about him instead of paying attention to Estelle, the audience sees how interested he is in how others see him. However, only some people interest him, since he clearly doesn’t care about Estelle’s opinion. Rather, he disregards her and, in doing so, causes her to lash out at Inez, who subsequently turns her anger back on Garcin. In this manner, they all torture each other in a cyclical, never-ending fashion, each one caught up in selfish motivations.



Once again, Inez expresses her desire to “choose” the nature of her suffering, this time wanting to confront Garcin head-on, since she sees him as her primary enemy. It’s also worth noting how utterly incapable these three people are of not interacting with one another. Despite their efforts to keep to themselves, they have found their way into an ongoing conflict, ultimately illustrating the strength of the human impulse to communicate and interact—even when those connections are toxic.



Giving up trying to be silent, Garcin walks to Estelle and touches her neck. “So I attract you, little girl?” he says, but she tells him not to touch her. “Why not?” he says, pointing out that they might as well “be natural.” After all, he says, he used to be quite the ladies’ man. “We’re between ourselves,” he says. “And presently we shall be naked as—as newborn babes.” He then proposes that everyone speak honestly about why they’ve come to hell. Frustrated that he’s missed what Gomez said about him, he tries to focus on the present moment, urging Estelle to be “frank” about why she’s been condemned. This way, he hopes, they will all manage to get “specters into the open” so that they can avoid “disaster.”

Despite Garcin’s insistence, Estelle refuses to say why she’s been sent to hell, so Garcin agrees to go first. In addition to refusing to become a soldier, he says, he was a great philanderer who slept with many women outside his marriage. Once, he even brought a woman home and had sex with her within his wife’s hearing. The next morning, his wife made them coffee. “You brute!” Inez says. “Yes, a brute, if you like,” replies Garcin. “But a well-beloved brute.” He then urges Inez to tell her story, so she explains that she moved in with her heavy-drinking cousin and seduced his wife, Florence. “I crept inside her skin,” she says, “she saw the world through my eyes. When she left him, I had her on my hands.” Shortly after this, she explains, her cousin was run over by a tram.

Inez says that she used to tell Florence that they killed her husband (Inez’s cousin) together. “I’m rather cruel, really,” she says, and when Garcin says that he is, too, she disagrees, saying, “No, you’re not cruel. It’s something else.” Going on, she says, “When I say I’m cruel, I mean I can’t get on without making people suffer. Like a live coal. A live coal in others’ hearts.” She goes on to admit that Florence turned on the gas stove one night and then went back to bed, killing them both in their sleep.

Again, Garcin tries to avoid suffering in hell. Instead of keeping to themselves, he suggests that he and his companions share their stories, no doubt thinking that this will help them avoid tormenting each other. According to this logic, knowing why Estelle and Inez have been sent to hell will enable him to sidestep any topic that might upset them. At first glance, this might seem like a good idea, but it’s worth acknowledging that this might actually be the worst thing Garcin and his companions could possibly do. Considering that they’ve been placed in hell to torture one another, it’s unlikely that talking about sensitive issues will lead to anything but misery, since knowing the intimate details of each other’s lives might simply fuel their arguments. Still, Garcin likes to think that he has control over his environment, and so he insists that treating one another with empathy will save the hell-dwellers from “disaster.”



Both Garcin and Inez are seemingly in hell because of their lack of empathy for others. Garcin was cruel and heartless in his marriage, not caring whether or not his wife knew about his affairs. Inez, for her part, knowingly seduced her cousin’s wife, paying no thought to her cousin’s feelings. Both of these decisions denote a failure to show compassion—a moral deficiency that brings itself to bear on the interpersonal dynamic in the drawing-room. Having lived selfish lives, Garcin and Inez now depend upon each other to treat one another kindly, but it’s unlikely that either of them will be able to show enough empathy to avoid hurting the other. It’s also notable that Inez describes her transgression in terms of forcing Florence to see the world differently, since this uncontrollable change in perspective and sense of self seems to be exactly what Estelle fears.



Inez’s reason for being in hell is somewhat complicated. Although it’s true that it was selfish of her to seduce her cousin’s wife, this in and of itself doesn’t necessarily make her fit for eternal damnation. In this moment, though, she clarifies the nature of her cruelty, saying that “making people suffer” is an integral part of her life. In fact, she says she can’t even live without inflicting emotional harm on others, which is exactly what she did to Florence and her cousin. “When I’m alone I flicker out,” she says, suggesting that she needs someone to pine over her in order to feel existentially grounded. This, it seems, is why she wants Estelle to love her—in the same way that Estelle wants Garcin to notice her, Inez wants Estelle’s romantic attention, since this would help her affirm who she is. In other words, Inez defines herself according to how her love interests feel about her.



Inez and Garcin turn to Estelle and ask her to tell her story, but she continues to claim that she doesn't know why she was sent to hell. Provoking her, Inez says she must know perfectly well why she's here, adding that it must have something to do with the man Estelle was "so scared of seeing" when she first entered the drawing-room. "Why were you afraid of him?" Garcin asks. Estelle refuses to answer, but Inez jumps in, saying, "Did he shoot himself on your account?" Continuing in this manner, Garcin agrees that he must have killed himself because of Estelle. "Don't! Please don't go on," Estelle begs. "Because of you. Because of you," Garcin chants. "He shot himself because of you," adds Inez. Pleading for them to stop, Estelle rushes to the door but is unable to open it, so she rings the bell, which remains silent.

Inez and Garcin continue to guess what happened between Estelle and the man she was afraid of encountering in hell. They hypothesize that she was his "mistress," that she wouldn't leave her husband for him, and that he killed himself as a result. "You've got it all wrong, you two," Estelle finally laughs. "He wanted me to have a baby." She explains that she didn't want to have a child, though she got pregnant with her lover Roger's baby. To keep this a secret from her husband, she and Roger went to Switzerland during her pregnancy. When the baby was born, Roger was beside himself with happiness, but Estelle attached the baby to a heavy stone and cast it into the lake beneath her balcony. When they returned to Paris, Roger shot himself in the face. "It was absurd of him, really, my husband never suspected anything," she says.

Estelle tries to sob, but no tears come. "Tears don't flow in this place," Garcin tells her. "I'm a coward. A coward!" Estelle screams. "If you knew how I hate you!" Inez rushes to her while Garcin takes off his jacket, though he stops when he remembers that Estelle doesn't like men in their shirtsleeves. "Don't bother," she says, telling him to take off his coat. Still, though, he says he doesn't want her to be angry with him. "I'm not angry with you," she says, though she *is* angry with Inez. After a tense silence, Inez turns to Garcin and asks if he feels better after knowing why everyone has been sent to hell. "Yes, perhaps a trifle better," he says. "And now suppose we start trying to help each other."

When Garcin and Inez team up to convince Estelle to tell them her story, it's overwhelmingly clear that the group has already started torturing one another. This is especially obvious when Garcin repeats, "Because of you," as if he's actively trying to upset her—and, in truth, he is trying to upset her, thinking that she'll only tell her story if he and Inez force her to do so. This is somewhat ironic, since Garcin's original reason for wanting everyone to tell their respective stories was so that they could avoid torturing each other. Now, though, he finds himself torturing Estelle in the hopes of learning how to not torture her—an absurd and illogical idea.



Pushed to the edge by Garcin and Inez, Estelle finally tells her story, revealing the real reason she's been sent to hell. The fact that she's so hesitant to tell this tale suggests that she feels guilty about what she did. At the same time, though, she maintains a certain kind of selfishness, as evidenced by her remark that it was "absurd" of Roger to shoot himself. "My husband never suspected anything," she says, failing to see that Roger didn't kill himself because he worried her husband would find out about their relationship. Rather, he killed himself because she murdered their newborn child. However, Estelle is too preoccupied satisfying her own wants and needs to recognize that this is what upset Roger so much.



Now that Garcin and his companions have all revealed why they've been sent to hell, they find themselves in worse shape than before. At first, they were just testy with one another, but now Estelle deeply resents her companions for forcing her to relive a difficult period of her life. As her anger takes shape, she directs it solely at Inez, though Garcin was the one who insisted that everyone should tell their stories. The fact that she takes her anger out on Inez perfectly demonstrates the strange relational dynamic of the drawing-room, since it illustrates Estelle's fondness for Garcin. In turn, this fondness upsets Inez, who takes out her aggression on Garcin. Once again, then, the audience sees why these three people are perfectly fated to be each other's torturers.



After Garcin proposes that everyone in the drawing-room try to “help each other,” Inez insists that she doesn’t need help. “Inez,” Garcin reasons, “they’ve laid their snare damned cunningly—like a cobweb. If you make any movement, if you raise your hand to fan yourself, Estelle and I feel a little tug. Alone, none of us can save himself or herself; we’re linked together inextricably. So you can take your choice.” For a moment, he waits for her to respond, but she isn’t paying attention. Instead, she narrates what she sees on earth, explaining that the room in which she died has been rented. A strange couple has come to her bed and is about to make love, but the lights are suddenly dimming, though she hears them mention that it’s noon. “So I’m done with the earth, it seems,” she says. “All of me’s here, in this room.”

Turning her attention back to Garcin, Inez asks why he wants to help her. “To defeat their devilish tricks,” he says. In response, she asks what he wants in return, and he says he wants her to return the favor. “It only needs a little effort, Inez; just a spark of human feeling,” he says. However, Inez insists that “human feeling” is “beyond [her] range” because she’s “rotten to the core.” Instead of helping Garcin, Inez simply stares at Estelle, admiring her hair. Seeing this, Garcin points out that Estelle is “fated to be [her] torturer.” “It’s through her they’ll get you,” he says.

Inez acknowledges that everything in the drawing-room is a “trap.” “And you’re another trap,” she tells Garcin. “Do you think they haven’t foreknown every word you say? And of course there’s a whole nest of pitfalls that we can’t see. Everything here is a booby-trap. But what do I care? I’m a pitfall, too.” This frustrates Garcin, who points out that they’re all “chasing after each other, round and round in a vicious circle.” If Inez doesn’t “let go” of her obsession with Estelle, he says, she’ll “bring disaster” to all of them. Still, though, Inez doesn’t care, saying she knows that she’s “going to burn” for eternity. “I’ll catch her, she’ll see you through my eyes, as Florence saw that other man,” she says.

By telling Inez that he and Estelle “feel a little tug” if she even lifts her hand, Garcin emphasizes that her actions and decisions will affect everyone in the room. Although Inez might not want to band together with Garcin and Estelle, the group depends upon her to do so. If she doesn’t, Garcin insists, none of them will be able to avoid misery. Of course, it’s not clear whether or not they would be able to avoid misery even if they were able to show each other compassion, but this is perhaps exactly Sartre’s point—these three people will never manage to coexist happily, no matter what they do. Consequently, their failure to relate to each other in a positive manner forms the basis of their hellish circumstances.



Unlike Garcin, Inez has embraced the fact that she’s in hell, clearly believing that there’s nothing she can do to change her circumstances. In turn, she allows herself to give up any effort to be good, welcoming the idea that she’s “rotten to the core.” With reckless abandon, then, she admires Estelle even though she knows that doing so will only cause her pain. Once again, then, she asserts a small amount of control, ultimately choosing the nature of her own torment by accepting and welcoming it.



Again, Inez shows Garcin that she doesn’t care about what’s going to happen to her. This is because she has accepted that there’s nothing she can do to avoid torment. Along with this attitude comes a desire to antagonize Garcin, since he is the only thing (according to Inez) standing between her and Estelle. As a result, she tells him that she’s going to get Estelle to see Garcin in the same way that she, Inez, sees him. This will ruin his chances of ever being happy with Estelle, since he’ll know that Estelle is watching him scornfully. In this sense, Inez uses the idea of perspective to bring Garcin down with her, altering the way he experiences his existence simply by giving him alternative and malicious views of himself.



Garcin takes Inez by the shoulders and tries to convince her to care about what's happening to her. "I'm dried up, too," he says. "But for you I can still feel pity." Brushing him off, she simply reminds him that there are "traps" in the drawing-room for him, too. Saying this, she asks him to leave her and Estelle alone. Dejectedly, he agrees. However, Estelle hears this and lifts her head, asking him to pay attention to her. "You can help me, anyhow," she says. Trying to ignore her, he urges her to seek attention from Inez, but she refuses. As she sidles up to him, she narrates what she sees on earth, explaining that Olga is dancing with a man named Peter, whom Estelle used to see on the side. She didn't care much about Peter at the time, but now she feels strongly that he "belonged" to her.

Estelle complains that there's nothing she can do to stop Olga and Peter from dancing, realizing that there's "nothing left" of her on earth. Piping up, Inez tells her that only what's in the drawing-room matters now. Adding to this, she tells Estelle that she'll be hers "forever"—an idea that only makes Estelle laugh before sinking back into her vision of Olga and Peter dancing. However, her connection to what's happening on earth slowly begins to fade, getting dimmer and softer until it finally vanishes completely. "The earth has left me," she says. Bereft, she turns to Garcin and begs him to hold her, but Inez gestures at him to step away from her. "It's to her you should say that," Garcin tells Estelle, but she grabs him and pleads with him to "gather [her] up," since she has "dropped out of" Peter and Olga's hearts.

Once again, Garcin tells Estelle to give Inez her affection. "But she doesn't count, she's a woman," she says. Hearing this, Inez compliments Estelle and tries to give her the love she craves, but Estelle tells her to stop, eventually spitting in her face. "Garcin, you shall pay for this," Inez grumbles, but Garcin only shrugs and finally goes to Estelle, agreeing to be with her, though he says that he probably won't pay much attention in the long run, since he has other things to think about. Still, Estelle decides to sit next to him and wait for him to notice her, an idea that infuriates Inez. Garcin then "bends" over Estelle, about to make love to her. "You must be going crazy," Inez interrupts, reminding them that they're not alone. "Under my eyes?" she asks. "You couldn't—couldn't do it."

When Garcin talks about feeling "pity" for Inez, he's referring to the fact that the only way for any of them to avoid torturing one another is by behaving empathetically. Because Inez is uninterested in this, though, there's nothing he can do, which is why he eventually retreats. However, he hasn't quite given up yet, since his rejection of Estelle is an attempt to avoid trouble with Inez. Knowing that Inez will actively make his existence more difficult if she sees him courting Estelle, he urges Estelle to seek attention from her instead of him. Estelle, for her part, is too busy thinking only about what she wants, a mindset emphasized by her sudden feeling that Peter—who was clearly not that significant to her when she was alive—should "belong" to her.



Having lost all connection to the earth and the people who loved her, Estelle is especially eager to gain Garcin's love. Once again, though, he tells her to appeal to Inez, knowing that nothing but trouble will arise if he and Estelle become overly friendly, since Inez will surely hold it against him if they become romantic. In this way, the audience sees how treacherous this relational dynamic has become—no matter what happens, at least one of the hell-dwellers will be unhappy.



In this moment, the audience understands the extent to which the trio is doomed. Even if Garcin ignores Estelle, Inez will still take out her anger on him, since Estelle responds to his lack of attention by rebuking Inez. As a result, it's futile for Garcin to continue ignoring Estelle, which is why he finally decides to oblige her. Unsurprisingly, Inez is even more angry about this, and when she says, "Under my eyes?" she emphasizes the fact that she's watching, wanting to make sure Garcin feels the effect of her scornful gaze.



Unable to stop Garcin from having sex with Estelle, Inez tells him that she'll be sitting at the other end of the room and "watching" the entire time. "I shan't take my eyes off you, Garcin," she says. Trying to ignore her words, Garcin tells Estelle to kiss him, but when she puts her mouth to his, he can't bring himself to kiss back. "Didn't I tell you not to pay any attention to her?" Estelle asks, assuming that Garcin is thinking about Inez's gaze. "You've got it wrong," he says, explaining that Gomez and his colleagues are talking about him again. It's been six months since he died, and they're hardly saying anything of importance about him. Because of this, Garcin decides to continue kissing Estelle. Before long, though, he stops again to listen to Gomez.

"Talk away, talk away you swine," Garcin says, referring to Gomez. "I'm not there to defend myself." Turning to Estelle, he tells her how important it is for her to give him her "trust." This annoys her, since she's already giving him her entire body. "My trust!" she says. "I haven't any to give, I'm afraid, and you're making me terribly embarrassed. You must have something pretty ghastly on your conscience to make such a fuss about my trusting you." In response, he says that he wasn't shot specifically because he renounced the war. Hearing Gomez speak badly about him, he says, "I must say he talks well, he makes a good case against me [...] Should I have gone to the general and said: 'General, I decline to fight?'"

Garcin acknowledges that refusing to fight in the war would have landed him in jail. Accordingly, he set off for Mexico, where he intended to start a pacifist newspaper. Before he got there, though, he was stopped and killed for desertion. Having told this story, he asks Estelle what she thinks, and she doesn't know what to say. "Can't you guess?" Inez says from the corner. "Well, I can. He wants you to tell him that he bolted like a lion." Garcin agrees with this assessment, but Estelle tries to soothe him by insisting that he "had" to run. "Of course," he says. "Well, Estelle, am I a coward?" Estelle tries to avoid the question, saying that he has to "decide that for himself." Going on, she suggests that he must have had "reasons" for doing what he did. "But were they real reasons?" he asks.

Garcin's decision to have sex with Estelle doesn't come from a place of passion. Instead, he simply resigns himself to the task, realizing that she won't stop pursuing him and that Inez won't stop resenting him for this. No matter what he does, then, he will feel Inez's wrath, so he might as well make Estelle happy. As he tries to give her attention, though, he finds himself distracted by his overwhelming need to know what others think about him. Tuning Estelle out, he tries to listen to what Gomez is saying about him, an attempt that further solidifies how much he cares about other people's opinions and can't behave empathetically even to those who are right in front of him.



Estelle makes an astute observation when she says that Garcin must have a guilty conscience. He has just asked her to "trust" him, apparently wanting to rely on her to assure him that his idea of himself is accurate. This, she notes, suggests that he's desperate to confirm his sense of self, which in turn suggests that he's insecure about something. Hearing this, he begins to tell the real story of his death, which is obviously what he feels guilty about.



By asking Estelle to assure him that he isn't a "coward," Garcin effectively asks her to help him deceive himself. It's rather apparent that he knows he acted like a coward by running from the war, but he still wants to trick himself into thinking otherwise. As he struggles to do this, he enlists Estelle's help, wanting to control the way she sees him, since this will profoundly affect the way he sees himself. If he can get her to say that he's not a coward, he thinks, he'll be able to make peace with himself.



Garcin admits that, although he told himself that he was acting on his “principles” when he ran from the war, he can’t decide whether or not this is really the case. It’s possible, he says, that he was too cowardly to face war. Inez cuts in at this moment and urges him to pinpoint his “real motive” for running, telling him to be “honest” with himself. Thinking back, he can’t avoid the fact that he “face[d] death” without any courage—a thought that deeply troubles him. Estelle, on the other hand, doesn’t care whether or not he was a coward. “Coward or hero, it’s all one—provided he kisses well,” she says. Still, though, Garcin can’t stop thinking about what his colleagues on earth think about him, understanding that they see him as a coward—a legacy that will remain on earth for a long, long time.

As something of an afterthought, Garcin adds that his wife “died just now,” or roughly “two months ago.” Her death, he says, was of “grief.” “So all is for the best, you see; the war’s over, my wife’s dead, and I’ve carved out my place in history,” he says. He then tries to cry, and Estelle moves to him and urges him to stop thinking about people like Gomez, who will soon die. “They’ll die,” he agrees, “but others will come after them to carry on the legend. I’ve left my fate in their hands.”

Finally paying attention to Estelle again, Garcin asks her to give him her “faith,” saying that he’ll “love” and “cherish” her for eternity if she trusts that he isn’t a coward. Immediately, she assures him that he isn’t a coward, since she loves him and could never love a coward. “Then I snap my fingers at them all, those below and those in here,” he says gleefully. “Estelle, we shall climb out of hell.” Overhearing this, Inez laughs, and when Garcin asks what she finds so funny, she reminds him that he can’t really trust Estelle, since she would say anything to get him to give her the attention she craves. When he asks Estelle if this is true, she admits that she doesn’t know what to say. “Anyhow, I’d love you just the same, even if you were a coward,” she says.

When Garcin takes an honest look at the nature of his death, he can no longer convince himself that he faced the firing squad courageously. This, it seems, is why he needs Estelle to tell him that he’s not a coward—otherwise, he’ll be forced to truly admit his shortcomings.



The depth of Garcin’s selfishness comes to the forefront of the play when he casually mentions his wife’s death. Rather than mourning her, he continues to fixate on what people like Gomez think of him. In addition, Estelle tries to soothe him by pointing out that the people who think he’s a coward will soon die, but this isn’t an effective way of comforting him because it doesn’t do anything to help him think of himself in a positive light. Garcin wants to see himself as a courageous and principled man, so it gives him no relief to hear Estelle say that people will forget about his cowardliness, since this sentiment acknowledges that he is indeed a coward.



Once again, the interpersonal dynamic in the drawing-room is tense and fated for misery. Just when Garcin manages to feel good by enlisting Estelle to help him see himself he’s an admirable person, Inez ruins the illusion. This, of course, is because she doesn’t want him to get close to Estelle. Furthermore, Estelle’s assertion that she would “love [him] just the same” if he were a coward is worth noting, since it will most likely cause Garcin to discount her perspective. After all, she has ruined any sense of objectivity by saying this, meaning that Garcin can no longer rely on her to provide an accurate account of his character. In turn, he can’t use her to deceive himself anymore.



Fed up, Garcin rushes to the door, saying that both Estelle and Inez “disgust” him. Although Inez reminds him that the door is locked, he begins pressing the bell, and then he bangs on the door, demanding that it be opened. Meanwhile, Estelle runs to him and pleads with him to stop, but he casts her away, making it abundantly clear that he doesn’t care about her. “Oh, how mean you are!” she says. “Yes, it’s quite true you’re a coward.” Seeing this, Inez goes to Estelle and tells her that they’ll be better off when Garcin leaves, but Estelle pushes her away, saying that she plans to leave if the door opens. When Inez asks where she would go, she replies, “As far from you as I can.”

Garcin continues to plead for the door to open. “I’ll endure anything,” he says, “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.” As he says this, he grabs the doorknob, and the door suddenly swings open. “Ah!” he yells, narrowly keeping himself from falling. He then peers into the dark hall and considers this new development. “Now I wonder why that door opened,” he says. As he contemplates what to do, Inez urges him to leave. “I shall not go,” he decides.

“And you, Estelle?” Inez asks. “The barrier’s down, why are we waiting?” Then, when she realizes nobody will leave, she says, “But what a situation! It’s a scream! We’re—inseparables!” As she says this, Estelle sneaks up behind her and tries to push her out the door. As Inez pleads, Estelle tries to enlist Garcin’s help, but he tells her to stop. “You’re crazy. She hates you,” Estelle reminds him, letting go of Inez. “It’s because of her I’m staying here,” he says. Calmly, he walks to the door and closes it. He then explains that Inez is now the only person whose opinion he cares about. Because she knows “what evil costs,” he has realized that he has to “convince” her that he isn’t a coward. “I couldn’t leave you here, gloating over my defeat, with all those thoughts about me running in your head,” he says.

Sartre accentuates the toxic relational dynamics between Garcin, Estelle, and Inez in this moment, as each one behaves in a way that torments the others. After realizing that Estelle won’t be able to help him solidify his sense of self, Garcin decides to break out of the drawing-room. As a result, Estelle is distraught, and her desperate need to be with him only exacerbates Inez’s feelings, causing her to redouble her efforts to pursue Estelle. As chaos mounts, then, Sartre illustrates the cyclical and never-ending misery of this unfortunate group of people.



Garcin’s willingness to endure physical pain instead of this “agony of mind” underscores just how torturous it is for him to exist in a relational environment in which nobody will help him deceive himself. Tormented by the notion that he’s a coward, he craves any way to forget about the fact that he died dishonorably. This is perhaps why he would welcome physical torture, which would most likely take his mind off his shortcomings. When the door swings open, though, he stops and reconsiders, most likely realizing that he’ll never be able to cease thinking about whether or not he’s a coward. Now that he’s started being honest with himself (or almost honest) about his true nature, he desperately needs to find someone who will put him at ease once more. Since it’s unlikely that he’d receive this kind of reassurance during the act of physical torture, he decides to stay in the drawing-room. Again, his behavior suggests that meaningful existence depends on connections with others, even if those relationships only create pain.



For Garcin, leaving the drawing-room would be like giving up all control over his self-image. If he left, Inez would think of him as a coward forever, just like Gomez and his coworkers. If he stays, though, he can try to convince her otherwise, thereby manipulating the way she sees him and, thus, the way he conceives of himself. He no longer cares what Estelle thinks because she will tell him anything he wants to hear, which is why he turns his attention to Inez, thinking that winning her favor will prove his worth.



Garcin understands now that there's "nothing left" of him on earth. Because of this, he feels he must persuade Inez that he isn't a coward. To begin, he says that "each man has an aim in life, a leading motive." Throughout his life, he claims, he concentrated on being "a real man." "Can one possibly be a coward when one's deliberately courted danger at every turn?" he asks. "And can one judge a life by a single action?" Inez easily dismisses this argument, saying that he merely "dreamt" he was a "hero" for his entire life. Then, when the moment of truth came, he showed his true colors. Still, he insists that he always "chose the hardest path," adding that "a man is what he wills himself to be." On the contrary, Inez says, "It's what one does, and nothing else, that shows the stuff one's made of."

During this exchange, Inez sets forth one of Sartre's most important ideas regarding Existentialism (as outlined in his essay Being and Nothingness). When she says that "it's what one does, and nothing else, that shows the stuff one's made of," Inez articulates the existentialist idea that no human is born with essential (nonphysical) traits. Nobody, Sartre believes, is born fundamentally good or fundamentally bad. Instead, it's what a person does throughout life that determines whether or not he or she is good. This is an important point when it comes to Garcin's story, since he wants to believe that he was misjudged because of one action, which he argues didn't represent the way he lived his life. If actions are all that matter, though, then his decision to run from danger makes him a coward.



Garcin gives up trying to convince Inez that he isn't a coward, calling her a "poisonous woman." In turn, she says, "You're a coward, Garcin, because I wish it." In response, he launches himself in her direction, but she ridicules him for thinking he could do anything to stop her from speaking, since "you can't throttle thoughts with hands." Interrupting this exchange, Estelle tells Garcin to take "revenge" on Inez by making love to her. "That's true, Inez," Garcin says. "I'm at your mercy, but you're at mine as well." With this, he moves toward Estelle and begins to hug and kiss her. As he does this, though, Inez keeps talking, refusing to let him forget that she's there. She tells him that it's as if a crowd is watching him, chanting, "Coward! Coward!"

When Inez says that Garcin is a coward simply because she "wish[es] it," she acknowledges that he defines himself according to the way others see him. Knowing how much importance he places on her opinion of him, she makes it clear that he is at her "mercy," since she can so profoundly alter his sense of self just using thoughts and words. At the same time, though, she is also at Garcin's "mercy" because of her attraction to Estelle (and because of Estelle's attraction to Garcin). At a standoff, then, Garcin and Inez torture each other by behaving in the exact way that will most hurt the other person.



Unable to stand it anymore, Garcin asks, "Will night never come?" "Never," Inez responds. "You will always see me?" he asks. "Always," she answers. Breaking from Estelle, Garcin walks to **the bronze sculpture** and says, "I'm looking at this thing on the mantelpiece, and I understand that I'm in hell. I tell you, everything's been thought out before hand. They knew I'd stand at the fireplace stroking this thing of bronze, with all those eyes intent on me." Saying this, he whirls around and looks at Estelle and Inez, adding that it felt like more people were watching him. "So this is hell," he says. "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!"

The line "Hell is—other people!" is one of Sartre's most famous ideas. Interestingly enough, though, the phrase itself isn't as simple as it might seem. Although it appears that Garcin is cursing his companions because they torment him (which, of course, is true), what he's really cursing is the fact that his interactions with "other people" rattle his existential insecurity. That is, nothing he can say or do will ever help him control the way people see him, and this upends his sense of self. Consequently, he is the one to torment himself, and this torment simply manifests itself through his interactions with others. Additionally, it's worth noting that Sartre subtly acknowledges the presence of the audience when Garcin says that he feels "all those eyes intent" upon him. Given that No Exit examines the effect of the human gaze on an individual, it makes sense that Sartre would eventually recognize that multiple people are staring at the characters onstage, a fact that reflects and amplifies Garcin's discomfort about encountering other people's perspectives.



Estelle tries to reason with Garcin, begging him to come back to her, but he tells her to stop, saying that he'll never love her because Inez will always be watching. "Right!" Estelle says. "In that case, I'll stop her watching." Grabbing the paper-knife, she runs to Inez and stabs her multiple times, but Inez just laughs, reminding her that she's already dead. "Dead?" Estelle asks. "Dead! Dead! Dead!" Inez chants. "Once and for all. So here we are, forever." Having said this, she breaks into hearty laughter, and Estelle and Garcin join her. "Forever. My God, how funny! Forever," Estelle yells. "For ever, and ever, and ever," Garcin adds. Laughing for a long while, they eventually fall silent and slouch into their couches. "Well, well," says Garcin after a moment, "let's get on with it."

The only form of relief that the characters experience throughout the entire play comes when Inez finally convinces Estelle and Garcin to fully accept their circumstances. After Estelle stabs Inez and fails to kill her, she's forced to admit that she and her companions are already dead and that this will always be the case. As a result, she gives herself over to the sad absurdity of her situation, joining her fellow hell-dwellers in laughter. In this way, Sartre suggests that even people with terrible fates ahead of them should accept the things they can't change, since this kind of acceptance might lend them at least a moment of gaiety in an otherwise endless deluge of misery. Furthermore, if the trio's deranged laughter isn't enough of an indication that they've finally accepted their wretched destiny, Garcin's final remark confirms that he now understands he's fated to argue with Inez and evade Estelle for all of eternity—but rather than rejecting this, he finally embraces the inevitability of his everlasting torment, saying, "Let's get on with it."





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Lannamann, Taylor. "No Exit." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 28 Jun 2019. Web. 14 Jun 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Lannamann, Taylor. "No Exit." LitCharts LLC, June 28, 2019. Retrieved June 14, 2021. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/no-exit>.

To cite any of the quotes from *No Exit* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *No Exit*. Vintage. 1989.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *No Exit*. New York: Vintage. 1989.