No Exit As A Great Existentialist Work

No Exit is a great existentialist work because it highlights the importance of choices and freedom in life by positing a situation where those fundamentals of existentialist philosophy seem as if they no longer an option. It explores how people's ability to make choices is vitally linked to their sense of self. Put in a situation where they cannot continually make choices to support that self-image, they torment each other to try to reassure themselves since they can no longer act with a full range of options that let them define themselves in real time. However, as time goes by, Garcin goes through a subtle process of realization about his choices and identity.

Garcin and Estelle's goals are simple, yet they are fueled by the same force. Sartre's description of abandonment is a fitting explanation of why Garcin and Estelle want to be reassured. Without some higher power (or even their equals) telling them what defines them, they must decide that for themselves. Since they cannot change the broken image of themselves that remains on Earth, their struggles are without reward. They are forever left with no exit to the harsh realities of Earth.

Garcin wants Inez to reaffirm his belief that he is not a coward, because he was killed for being a deserter. He does not want people to think of him as a coward, and he does not want to be a coward, but he cannot decisively say himself that he is not a coward. Thus, Inez must tell him to make up for his lack of certainty. Similarly, Estelle wants Garcin to show her physical affection to reaffirm her belief that she is attractive. Estelle doesn't have a rugged enough sense of self to feel secure without a mirror to confirm that she is as beautiful and charming as she desires. On Earth there was a young man who called her "his glancing stream, his crystal girl" (Sartre), which explains that she wants herself to look beautiful; for her the interior holds no weight. That superficial desire pushes her to go after men so that they give her the praise she so craves. As Estelle has an image of herself that she wants reaffirmed, she has the same problem as Garcin, only on a different subject.

Inez is vital in motivating their Garcin's reflections, as she doesn't have the same issue with her identity as he does. She serves as a reality check and propels everyone, somewhat cruelly, toward discussing their true actions on Earth. Inez first expresses the idea that "You are-- your life, and nothing else" (Sartre), and that fits with an existentialist view of Garcin's internal journey. Some existentialists would say it is almost as if she is leading him by the hand toward self-discovery.

Garcin cannot change other's opinions of him on Earth because his time there has already passed. He had thought of himself as heroic, yet he deserted and after he did, others changed their opinions on him. His problem lies in that people gain an image of another because of their choices, and sometimes their image doesn't fit the image that person wants.

It seems like existentialism would offer an easy solution to all their problems, because although they cannot change the image they left on Earth and they must live with that image, they are still controlling their own actions in "hell". They can still decide what they want to be- the difference is that there will not be any receptive audience. If they defined themselves without caring about other opinions, perhaps there would've been a different hell awaiting them. If Garcin had

thought that perhaps people are more complex than a simple label, realizing that some people can be cowards sometimes and heroes at others, then maybe he would better come to terms with his situation. At the end Garcin seemed to move forward by showing courage as he resolutely concluded, “Well, well, let's get on with it...” (Sartre). He decided to just live and move forward as best he could, making his sense of identity as dynamic as himself.

This interpretation argues in more generalized terms that accepting one’s sense of self as dynamic instead of static is a way to become more at rest with one’s identity. Such a conclusion would suggest that people can make mistakes that go against what they see themselves as, but since identity is dynamic over some period, they can push forward and try to be what they believe in. Any identification of qualities such as bravery or cowardice are thus debatable and hard to concretely identify in the context of self-identity, but they are understandable as a context of an action. This would mean that identity itself is eternally being defined so long as one’s existence remains, therefore making identity as simple as acting true to ourselves in the moment so long as we persist.

Garcin struggled with his identity throughout the play, always asking “can [one] judge a life by a single action?” (Sartre) The challenge presented is understanding the link between three major factors- the ability to make choices, time, and self-identity. No Exit seems to advocate similarly to Existentialism is a Humanism that choices define self-identity. One objectification of Garcin’s self-identity describes his cowardice as a deserter, but an alternative describes his courageous attitude to keep moving forward. It is therefore possible for opposite attributes to exist in one person, they are just shown at different points in times. Who’s to say that we are truly the same person in our youth as we are in our twilight years? The matter which composes us is different, the way we act is different, our worldview is different, but we are called by the same name.

Sartre would say that “existence precedes essence”. People can make choices, and those choices have an essence inherent to them. Some choices are cowardly, some heroic, some sweet, some cruel, but every choice is the decision of the person making it. The essence of an action does not necessarily equal the essence of a person’s identity, and indeed an identity is not given completely to any attribute, as essence is preceded by existence, and therefore not always clearly defined. Essence is something to be created as one goes, so all self-identity is in that regard is a consistent pursuit of certain attributes of character. After death, this pursuit ends with existence, but if, like the three in No Exit, they still have consciousness, then a large step in living with this philosophy in mind is divorcing existence and identity from legacy. Divorcing legacy does not mean to say it does not matter, or that it is not true, but just to say that the legacy left in the past does not define the character of someone in the present, nor does it necessitate their future actions. Although legacy springs from one’s self, it is not the same thing. What someone does one day does not define their entire lives. In accord with that, Existentialism is a humanism contends that the only agent making choices for us is ourselves. By accepting that, it is easier to live with the idea that current choices are the determinate of self-identity.

This means that since each choice we make leads to eventual outcomes, we carry responsibility to ourselves to make the best choices available. No Exit portrays three people stuck together in hell, and they are stuck in a loop where they torture each other due to their choices and desires, eventually prompting Garcin to say that “hell is other people” (Sartre). But the responsibility they feel towards their desires are heavy enough that it leads them to not leave “hell” even when the doors open.

Existentialism in this frame of mind is a very optimistic philosophy, as it says that no matter what, a person is always left to decide the direction they shall take. Even for those who have sinned in the past, with life it is possible to work toward good ends even if one views oneself as foregone down one path. Perhaps future action does not absolve one of past action, but it contains the chance of pushing toward brighter horizons- which is not a pessimistic outlook. As Garcin resolves to simply put forth the notions he loves through action, he moves closer to untying the knot in his heart. Maybe the characters thought it was hell, but for existentialists it is just an inescapable part of the struggle of life: the process of self-realization.

As everyone in life attempts to put into action what they believe, they are making history for good or bad with decisions that are solely theirs. All that matters for each person is if they are satisfied with the choices that sum up their life- and for those still alive, we should seek to be satisfied with the choices that constitute the lives we lead, because we are the final arbiter of our worth amidst a near infinite span of time and space.

Bibliography

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2. Sartre, Jean-Paul. “No Exit.” 1944.