



## No Exit, by Jean-Paul Sartre

### In A Nutshell

Jean-Paul Sartre was a French philosopher famous as an existentialist (for definitions and more see "Genre"). Throughout the course of his life (1905-1980), he wrote treatises, plays, essays, and novels. His fictional work was generally intended as a medium through which he could explore his bigger philosophical ideas.

*No Exit* is one literary exploration of his philosophical concepts. Written in 1944, the play focuses on three individuals trapped together in hell. Sartre portrays hell as a locked drawing room with three couches. This doesn't sound like the traditional conception of hell and it isn't. But trust us, this version of hell is, well, hellish. As the three characters try to determine why they are in hell and how they are to be tormented, they soon come to the conclusion that they will act as torturers for each other. The play famously concludes with one of Sartre's most-quoted lines of all time: "hell is other people."

This line, however, goes far beyond the concept of other people simply being annoying. *No Exit* is running with one of the big ideas Sartre put forward in his famous philosophical treatise, *Being and Nothingness*, published in 1943, just one year before *No Exit*. In it, Sartre argues that the mere presence of another person will torment an individual because subjectivity is competitive. In other words, person #2 makes person #1 feel like an object rather than a subject. This sounds more complicated than it is – we talk all about subjectivity and objectification in our section on "Characters." The play also explores Sartre's idea of "bad

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faith" – the refuge we all seek in lieu of facing the anguish and terror of existence. (Again, not as complicated as it sounds. Don't worry.)

The point we're making here is that *No Exit* is about more than three people trapped in hell. (As if that weren't enough!) Some critics even argue that, in addition to acting a pulp for his pet philosophy, *No Exit* functions as social commentary on Sartre's environment – Paris during World War II in the midst of the German occupation. When you read about the "Setting" of *No Exit*, you'll notice that Sartre's hell sounds a lot like... Paris... in the 1940s. It is possible that Sartre thought of the German occupation as hell, but if so, this commentary remains secondary to the play's philosophical significance.

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## Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 Sartre delays in revealing the location of Garcin and the other characters. At what point does the reader begin to suspect that they are in hell? At what point are we certain?
- 2 Does *No Exit* function effectively as a pulp for Sartre's philosophical ideas?
- 3 If we didn't know anything about Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, or existentialism, would *No Exit* still be a valuable piece of fiction?

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