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The Human Condition

Jean Paul Sartre reinvents hell in his one act play *No Exit*. He puts the protagonist Garcin in an unconventional type of hell, specifically designed for Garcin or rather by Garcin. Garcin, a particularly indecisive man, finds himself in a peculiar hell after he is executed military style because he was unable to make a decision to fight. He is then served with the poetic justice of hell: in life he failed to make up his mind and decide now in death his hell is in the mind forcing him to make a decision. This type of just punishment is traditional of literature about hell, reminiscent of Dante's *Inferno*. Understandably Dante inserts his own Christian religious beliefs into his text to build on previous works. So why does Sartre, as an existentialist who deals in atheism, set his play in hell, a religious literary tradition? Perhaps Garcin didn't die at all. Perhaps his hell is a fabricated dream detailing the mental thought process of a man confronted by a life threatening decision like war draft. This more aptly fits within Sartre's existentialist agenda, in the same way that authors before him applied their own religious beliefs to the tradition of hell he removes all the religious elements and replaces them with his philosophical beliefs. Garcin's entire experience in hell can actually be considered a representation of Sartre existential perspective on the human condition: "man is condemned to be free." Garcin experiences what Sartre refers to as the "anguish" of choice and struggles to escape his "anguish" through a technique Sartre considers "self deception. No exit showcases through the

drama of theatre, Sartre's claim that we, as people, cannot escape free choice. He goes on to claim that the value in human action is only because it was chosen from a "plurality of possibilities." Thus through our actions and choices we create our own identity and self image. So it is rather than attempt a futile escape from making choices it is our responsibility to overcome the feeling of anguish that is inherent in choice.

Sartre sets his version of the classic tradition of hell, entirely in the mind of a single man. However this entails more than that just hell is a place of the mind, rather it means the mind is a place of hell. He writes in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, "It is anguish pure and simple, of the kind well known to all those who have borne responsibilities" referring to the process of making a decision. He goes on to use the example of "a military leader takes upon himself the responsibility for an attack and sends a number of men to their death, he chooses to do it and at bottom he alone chooses." This is almost precisely Garcin's war draft scenario. His anguish is derived from being alone, being pressured, and being trapped. He must make his decision alone, no one is able to help him. He tries to look for answers within other people, and wants Estelle, Inez, and the valet to help him face his fears and not be a coward, but as only projections of his own thoughts they cannot help him any more than he can himself. He also experiences anguish in the form of mild heat acting as a constant reminder of the pressure he is under. Lastly, trapped by his obligation to make life decisions, he tries to escape this feeling rather than over come it.

Garcin tries to escape his mental anguish, by deluding himself into believing there is an escape. Sartre mentions this as one way some people try to cope with the mental anguish. "[One cannot] escape from that disturbing thought except by a kind of self-deception" he says in *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Garcin's experience in hell is all stimulated by his mental anguish

in an attempt to deceive himself that he can escape his choice to fight. The bell in the room does not work on his command. In a way, because the bell will only work sometimes, it is the bell that is making the choice to call the valet, it is not up to Garcin's choice. With this bell "you can never be sure about that bell. There's something wrong with the wiring, and it doesn't always work"(No Exit 4). The truth is that the bell never works for Garcin. It won't ever work because one cannot invent something to make choices within one's own mind. As long as the creation, in this instance the bell, is within the mind it cannot act independent of the persons thoughts.

Therefore, Garcin's attempt deceiving himself that he can have exterior things make decision for him will not work. Garcin "goes to the bell-push, and presses the button. The bell remains silent. He tries two or three times, without success."(No Exit 5). Each time Garcin presses the bell's button hoping one time it will decide to work, however it won't. Similarly the door creates the illusion of an escape possibility from his mental woes. It seems escape from hell is as simple as walking out the door. Garcin "tries to open the door, also without success. He calls the valet several times, but gets no result. He beats the door with his fists, still calling. Suddenly he grows calm and sits down again. At the same moment the door opens"(No Exit 5). At first he wants to accept the delusion and refuses to accept the door won't open. He becomes angry with the futility of his actions because at first he believes that he might be able to open the doors by banging hard enough to get the attention of the valet to open the doors for him. Then he changes his mind and accepts the futility of his actions, he becomes calm, and sits down, then and only at the exact moment he accepts that he's not going to be able to force the door open then the door opens. This irony is a clear message of what Sartre thinks is the correct approach is, the door opens when he accepts that it won't. His final attempt at escape after Garcin feels he's suffered enough he begs

and pleas, “Open the door! Open, blast you! I'll endure 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. Now will you open? (THE DOOR FLIES OPEN: a long silence.)”(No Exit 42). Garcin is confronted with the ultimate choice: to stay or to go. He is not trapped there by the door or the windowless walls. He decides not to walk out those doors. He is his own jailor, and that is why he cannot escape his mental anguish, because it is within himself. Garcin, is in real trouble now, and instead takes a different approach and try to escape by distracting his mind with companionship of a beautiful woman. Estelle is understandably another fabrication to satisfy his lust and desire for companionship. At first Garcin plays it cool, and acts disinterested in Estelle, however Inez his realistic persona “saw through [his] game” and his nonchalant behavior (No Exit 21). He is conflicted, again unable to fully deceive himself of reality, Inez reminds him that it is not real. Estelle flirts with Garcin as he would want her to do. He tries to ignore her because part of him knows that she won't really satisfy him, then she tries even harder to get his attention and affection. She pleas, “Listen! I've dropped out of their heart like a little sparrow fallen from its nest. So gather me up, dear, fold me to your heart--and you'll see how nice I can be.”(No Exit 34). Garcin succumbs to her pleas, really succumbing to his own desire, and gives in to her temptation. But Inez interferes “Estelle! Garcin! You must be going crazy. You're not alone. I'm here too”(No Exit 35). This is Garcin's own reason interfering with their impossible relationship. His hopes and desires are shutdown by his sense of realism, that it is all a fantasy and he can't actually be with Estelle. In a way he prevents himself from fooling himself into a delusion. Much like any person who wants to believe in a fantasy but can't bring themselves to actually believe, because of the voice of the realist in their their head. Thus Sartre shows with multiple examples

that “self deception” is not a viable solution to ones own disturbing thoughts. So what are his other options?

Choices are derived from the plurality of options. Sartre demonstrates the power of choice to change the world around a character only because of his choice of interpretation. Furthermore the magnitude of this power is displayed by the disparity between the experience resulting from different interpretive possibilities. According to Sartre, “action presupposes that there is a plurality of possibilities, and in choosing one of these, they realize that it has value only because it is chosen, far from being a screen which could separate us from action, it is a condition of action itself.” Sartre notes the significance of the plurality of choice, in other words choice relies on the existence of different options. Situations and behaviors can be interpreted in different ways meaning different things depending on how the viewer chooses to look at them. In *No Exit* the valet’s mild manner behavior could be considered polite or it could be interpreted as phony and almost sarcastic. “So you haven't yet got over your--what-do-you-call-it?--sense of human dignity? Excuse my smiling.”(*No Exit* 2). The valet really patronizes Garcin with his seemingly gentlemanly behavior, and at first it is interpreted as genuine. Yet after the valet reveals himself casually as an agent of satan, his “uncle on the third floor.” Garcin reevaluates the valet’s banter as rude. In the mind of Garcin the valet now represents deception and lies, particularly the kind that on the surface seem comforting, then with time and deeper understanding are actually cheeky not comforting. Because of the duality in the valet’s manners it can be understood as genuine or actually quite crude depending on how you choose to look at it. Also the valet’s words are filled with subtle hidden messages that more than foreshadow what will happen. The valet drops clues to what lies ahead for Garcin which could be considered a

warning or a taunt. By cleverly hinting to whats in store for Garcin, but not giving enough detail for Garcin to pick up on the clues, he could be messing with Garcin or he could be offering some sort of. When Garcin asks a question to the valet, on more than one instance, he condescending replies, "Can't you see?" (*No Exit 5*). This could be a taunt or just a common phrase. Maybe because the valet knows Garcin can see, he is forced to see, he cannot blink and the lights are always on. So when the valet says, "Can't you see?" he could be poking fun at Garcin, or it is merely just a common colloquialism. His hospitality can be seen as unsettling and suspicious. "Did you call sir?" pretending to not have heard Garcin banging on the door. Is he pretending or did he not hear? We can't know but one can choose to believe one way or the other. Episode twenty-eight, season one of the twilight zone: *A Nice Place to Visit*, has a comparable realization at the last seconds of the episode. Mr. Valentine a crook who was gunned down by the police in a dark alley only to be awakened by his "guide" he supposed was his guardian angel because he granted him any and all he wished. After a while Mr. Valentine becomes bored to tears with always winning and having so much excess he says to his guardian angel with a catch in his throat of desperate sincerity, "If I gotta stay here another day I'm gonna go nuts! I Don't belong in heaven see, I wanna go to the other place." At the moment the guardian angel turns to Mr. Valentine and sadistically says, "Heaven? What ever gave you the idea you were in heaven Mr. Valentine. This is the other place!" thus revealing himself as not an angel but the devil. Up until that point both Mr. Valentine and the audience are led to believe he is actually in heaven. This exemplifies how ones choice of interpretation defines the reality, to him it was heaven, then once his understanding of the place changed he began to experience hell. Both Garcin and Mr. Valentines perspectives of reality changed dramatically as a result of the choice of interpretation.

Sartre goes as far to say that not only do the choices people make effect the world around them, they effect and sculpt the person himself.

Garcin has no help of mirrors to construct an image of himself. Sartre believes that “all the actions a man may take in order to create himself as he wills to be, there is not one which is not creative, at the same time, of an image of man such as he believes he ought to be.” Garcin should create an image of himself through his own decisions and action but instead he thinks that he can create an image of himself through the reflection of others. Garcin grapples with this idea in his mind, in the form of the two woman arguing, while they are really simulating his own thought process. At first Inez claims there is a pimple on Estelle’s face to mess with her for fun, however its exactly this kind of behavior that breeds distrust. Finally she admits, “There isn't any pimple, not a trace of one. So what about it? Suppose the mirror started telling lies?”(*No Exit* 20). Garcin realizes through the woman’s squabble that he cannot rely on exterior interpretation of himself. Only mirrors tell the objective harsh truth barred of any judgement or opinion whatsoever. But without them he must choose to create his own image of himself, and his own identity of himself. But what kind of identity does Garcin want to create? Sartre claims people create images of themselves through choice of how people believe they “ought to be,” but who determines who they ought to be? Garcin at first lets others determine the image he ought to have. He chooses to leave his coat on for the sake of illusion of his appearance to others and suffer from the reality that it is too hot in the room to be wearing a coat. “Whew! How hot it is here! Do you mind if—”(*No Exit* 11). How dare you! No, please don't. I loathe men in their shirt-sleeves.”(*No Exit* 11). Estelle represents Garcins concern for the superficial and charade of social convention. Appearances are an illusion, by valuing social appearances over the very real and

impactful temperature situation, Garcin forces himself to suffer. Garcin is conflicted over the decision, “[He] (Takes off coat.) [then] (Puts it on again.)”(No Exit 29). He knows that its hot and he wants to take off his coat to relieve his discomfort, and it would be that simple if not for artificial social etiquette. Senejani says, “Existentialism does not support [...] [the notion that]social values [should] control an individual.” The reason for this is that one is free to make his own choices about himself for himself not to delude himself with invented illogical social etiquette. Garcin’s delusions are falling apart and with every revealed illusion Garcin comes closer to accepting the existentialist outlook and behavior, overcoming his anguish, making decisions, taking responsibility for his actions, and creating his own self image.

Finally in the last lines of the play, after doing the exact opposite of what Sartre’s existentialist point of view would advise, Garcin has an epiphany and the play ends and in a way so does his intellectual nightmare. He recognizes that he is in hell, or rather he recognizes the human condition of being “condemned to be free” and the anguish that it entails. He is no longer afraid “So this is hell. I’d never have believed it. [...] Well, well, let's get on with it...”(No Exit 47). He welcomes the anguish and embraces, after he tried nearly every other option. He is done with deluding himself and trying to escape a place with no exit. According to Sartre its okay to feel the anguish but one should not let it prevent action: “In making the decision, he cannot but feel a certain anguish. All leaders know that anguish. It does not prevent their acting, on the contrary it is the very condition of their action.” This also relates back to Camus’ concept of Sisyphus. Even though Sisyphus is suffering the mental anguish of forever working at a futile goal, Camus says that we should imagine him as happy. How can this be? Sartre explains that when one understands that anguish does not prevent one’s actions it is merely a condition of

one's action than one can overcome this anguish. Camus' example of Sisyphus is an example of this idea in the same way Sartre explains this idea through Garcin in *No Exit*. Through Garcin's drama and misadventure in his own mind to his epiphany at the end we as viewers can Sartre's existentialist perspective can be applied to Garcin's journey of drama and misadventure in his own mind. Garcin's psychological trip in Sartre's one act play acts as a microcosm for Sartre's entire existentialist philosophy. From Garcin's numerous faults to his eventual enlightenment Sartre sews in his own beliefs on what is proper human behavior and lifestyle in a similar way to previous authors of hell literature in the way that they applied their religious agenda.

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