
Huis Clos [In Camera/No Exit]

(1944) Jean-Paul Sartre

One act. A drawing-room in Second Empire style.

Inez Serrano (30s), a former post office clerk and a proclaimed lesbian, has recently died. A valet brings her into an elegant, brightly illuminated room with neither mirrors nor windows. Here she is condemned to spend the rest of eternity with two other recently deceased characters: Estelle an attractive socialite and Garcin a weak womanizer. A bizarre triangular relationship develops between them: Inez is interested in Estelle; Estelle is more interested in Garcin; Garcin is most interested in himself. It is Inez who first realizes that they have been brought together to serve as one another's eternal torturers: in this hell there will be no physical torments, there will just be the three of them – forever together. Inez turns on Garcin in this speech when he suggests their best option is studiously to forget that the others are in the room.

INEZ. To forget about the others? How utterly absurd! I feel you there, in every pore. Your silence clamours 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. Why, you've even stolen my face; you know it and I don't! And what about her, about Estelle? You've stolen her from me, too; if she and I were alone do you suppose she'd treat me as she does? No, take your hands from your face. I won't leave you in peace – that would suit your book too well. You'd go on sitting there in a sort of trance, like a yogi, and even if I didn't see her I'd feel it in my bones – that she

was making every sound, even the rustle of her dress, for your benefit, throwing you smiles you didn't see. . . . Well, I won't stand for that, I prefer to choose my hell; I prefer to look you in the eyes and fight it out face to face.

Translation by Stuart Gilbert

COMMENTARY: Sartre's *Huis Clos* revolves around the tightly woven dissension among the three characters. They are trapped with their passions and desires in eternal conflict. In Garcin's words, 'Hell is other people'. Even when the characters describe irrelevant details, each story and image comes inexorably back to that main point: human misery is occasioned by other people. In death identities are fixed and the past is a closed book with no hope of retribution. Hell offers only the opportunity to reflect on missed opportunities; there is no longer any choice. Each character has an equal share in this claustrophobic, locked-room drama. At any given moment one or the other is the play's centre.

The game being played here is a sexual one. The trio of characters is in such close proximity – hostages really – that Inez can hear the tick-tock of Garcin's mind. He is driving her crazy. His physical presence revolts her because it denies her the hope that Estelle will ever be interested in her. Everything she says is in close-up and the acting needs magnification as well. The tick-tock is also like a time bomb waiting to explode. This speech is loaded with explosive tension and vindictive rage as Inez launches her verbal attack on Garcin. Language is the only weapon and defence that Sartre allows his characters. The only place he can hide is behind his hands. She even denies him that comfort. Each of the characters is vain and selfish but Inez seems even more spiteful and vicious than the others. Her hatred of men is particularly withering and it is this fact that fuels her anger. Inez concludes on a triumphant note as she delights in the prospect of eternally tormenting Garcin by *her* presence and *her* gaze.