

# **Women Behind Closed Doors: Non-normative Femininities in Sartre's Theater**

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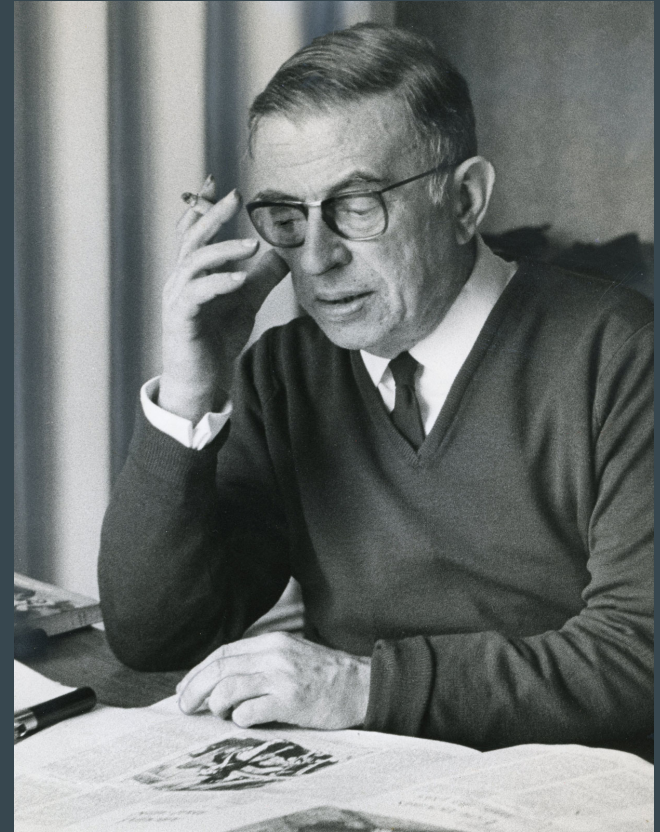
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Advised by Professor Sara

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## Synopsis of my Argument

My thesis analyzes two plays written by French philosopher, playwright, and novelist Jean-Paul Sartre. The paper delves deeper into the existing debate regarding whether Sartre's literary and philosophical works reveal him to be feminist or sexist. More specifically, my examination of the women in Sartre's *No Exit* (1944) and *The Respectful Prostitute* (1946) points towards the playwright's intention to criticize the rigidity of gender roles in mid-twentieth century France.



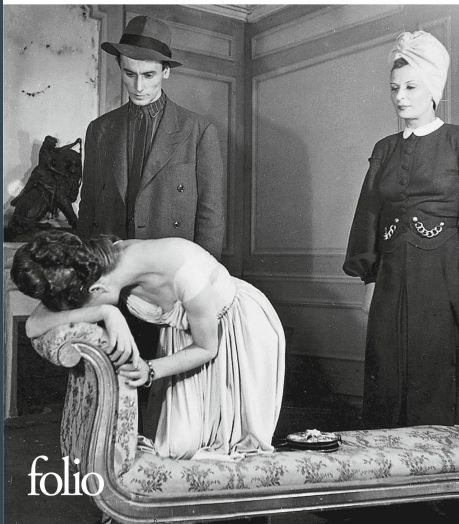
Jean-Paul Sartre, photograph by  
Gisèle Freund, 1968

## Chapter I: *No Exit*

**Jean-Paul Sartre**

Huis clos

suivi de Les mouches



My chapter on *No Exit*, or *Huis Clos*, focuses on Sartre's characterization of the two female characters within the play: Estelle and Inès. Through textual analysis, I illuminate how Sartre's representations of these women stray from normative conceptions of femininity prevalent during the twentieth century. I compare the characters' expressions of femininity to gender norms of the time, according to Claire Duchén's book *Women's Rights and Women's Lives in France 1944-1968*. While Inès rejects the traditional image of the heterosexual woman, Estelle rejects traditional notions of motherhood and marriage. Ultimately, however, these two women are punished in Hell for their "sins." By creating this ending, Sartre critiques the idea that women who do not adhere to societal norms have no place within society.

## Chapter II: *The Respectful Prostitute*



My chapter on *The Respectful Prostitute*, or *La Putain Respectueuse*, similarly provides an analysis of Sartre's depiction of femininity within the work of literature. More specifically, I examine the role of the sole female character within the play: Lizzie, a prostitute living in the United States. Using Duchén's explanation of gender roles once again, I argue that Lizzie uses her non-normative sexuality as a form of female liberation. Nevertheless, Like Estelle and Inès, she is ultimately condemned at the end of the play, as she is completely powerless under the control of Fred, one of her clients.



## Simone de Beauvoir's Influence

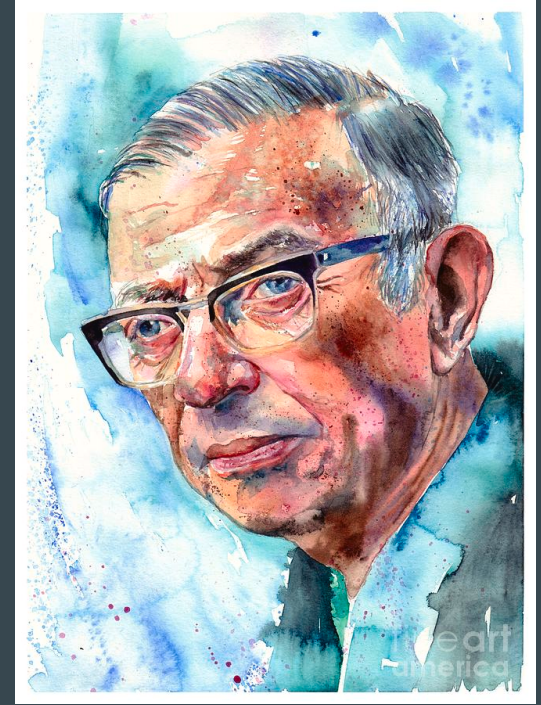
While writing about Sartre's feminist perspective, it was necessary to consider the influence of French writer and first-wave feminist, Simone de Beauvoir. Beauvoir and Sartre were romantically involved for years, although they both agreed upon an open relationship. Nevertheless, Beauvoir's famous text, *The Second Sex* likely impacted Sartre's own views, as well as his depiction of women in *No Exit* and *The Respectful Prostitute*.



Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir

## Sartre the Playwright: A Feminist?

Although my analysis of these two plays suggests the playwright's feminism, other scholars have argued that Sartre's novels and philosophical works are overtly sexist. My conclusion further examines this disjunction, considering the role of theater as a means of giving a voice to women. Ultimately, while we cannot conclude that Sartre was personally a feminist, his plays clearly critique the oppression of women.



**“To act (which is indeed the specific object of theater) is to change the world.” -Sartre, *Sartre on Theater***

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