The Balcony Study Guide

The Balcony by Jean Genet

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Jean Genet's *The Balcony* (*Le Balcon* in original French) is considered by many to be the one of his masterpieces, though it was written after he said he would give up writing plays altogether. *The Balcony* was his first commercially successful play. Like many of Genet's works, the play was inspired by Genet's contempt for society and obsession with topics such as sex, prostitution, politics, and revolution. Set inside a brothel where common men play men of power in their sexual fantasies, *The Balcony* reflects on the emptiness of societal roles. Reality and illusion feed off each other in the difficult play. Dreams may make reality tolerable, but when they come true, as when the customers are forced to live the roles they play, it is not as satisfying.

The Balcony was first published in 1956, and was first produced in London on April 22, 1957, at the Arts Theatre Club. Genet did not like the production because it was done in a way that was too tasteful and realistic. His protests led to his banishment from the theater during the production. The play made its American debut in March 1960 at the Circle in the Square Theater, in New York City. There *The Balcony* ran for 672 performances and won an Obie Award for Genet. It was generally well received, though some critics thought it was hard to understand because of its complexity and reliance on illusion. The first French performance of *The Balcony* took place in May 1960. Since these initial performances, the play has been produced on a regular basis. As Donald Malcolm of the *New Yorker* wrote, "M. Genet's vision of society is both perverse and private, and his play is a species of Grand Guignol arresting, horrific, and trivial."

Author Biography

Genet was born on December 19, 1910, in Paris, France. He was the illegitimate son of Gabrielle Genet, a prostitute, and an unknown father. He was abandoned at birth, and did not discover the name of his mother until he was twenty-one years old. Genet spent his early years in a state-run orphanage, before being sent to the country to live with foster parents at the age of seven. Caught stealing from the purse of his foster mother, Genet was labeled a thief. He embraced the label, and any subsequent accusations of criminal activity. By the time Genet was a teenager, he was a confirmed juvenile delinquent, and confined to a reform school.

When Genet was twenty-one years old, he ran away and signed up for the French Foreign Legion. He deserted the military in short order, and spent the next ten years wandering Europe including Nazi Germany committing crimes. He continued to steal, as well as work as a male prostitute, pimp, and smuggler. Genet was arrested, imprisoned, and expelled from several countries.

When Genet returned to France during the German occupation in 1941, he was jailed for theft. It was while he was in prison that he began writing. Genet garnered the attention of Jean Cocteau, a leading French writer and artist, for his poem "Under the Sentence of Death." The piece was written about another prisoner who was being executed for murder. Genet's poetry was collected and published in 1948 under the title *Poemes*.

Still a prisoner, Genet began work on a novel. His first pages were confiscated and burned, but Genet began again. The book, *Lady of Flowers*, was published in 1942 and made Genet a literary sensation. Genet wrote several more novels over the course of his life, including *The Miracle of the Rose* (1946) and *The Thief's Journal* (1948). Many of his novels had an autobiographical element and concerned the seamier side of life.

In the mid-1940s, Genet turned to writing plays. The first two, *Deathwatch* and *The Maids,* were also about criminals. When *The Maids* based on a true story of murdering sisters was produced in 1947, Genet received some acclaim. Despite his success as a writer, Genet had not given up his life of crime. He was again convicted of theft, and it was only through a petition signed by France's leading writers and artists that he avoided a life sentence in prison.

Genet wrote his most celebrated and commercially successful plays in the late 1950s: *The Balcony* (1956) and *The Blacks* (1957). Both black comedies played well in Europe and the United States. In 1960, Genet wrote *The Screens*, which was not produced until the late 1960s in France. *The Screens* was ambitious: a five hour epic, a cast of at least forty was needed to perform it.

Towards the end of his life, Genet also wrote nonfiction, though he produced nothing in his final decade. Genet died of throat cancer on April 15, 1986. Upon his death, he was

celebrated as one of the most important and colorful figures in twentieth-century French literature.

Plot Summary

Scene I

The Balcony opens in a brothel, The Grand Balcony, that caters to the fantasies of its male clientele. Irma, the owner of the whorehouse, is arguing with a customer over a fee. He is dressed as a bishop, and is only interested in the revolution that is going on outside and the truthfulness of the sins the woman who serviced him has confessed to. Irma tries to hurry him, but he will not be rushed. He enjoys his role and continues to play it. He does not leave despite the fact that his safety is at risk outside.

Scene II

Inside a room in the brothel, a client plays out a fantasy as a Judge. His whore plays a thief who is about to be executed by the executioner, played by a male employee of the establishment named Arthur. The Judge also relishes his role-play. Every outside noise, however, upsets him. He worries about the revolution, sharing the latest information with the other two. When he returns to his role, he can enjoy it too much, scaring the woman. Mostly, the Judge is the one who is humiliated by the other two for his pleasure.

Scene III

In another room, Irma arranges the setting for the liking of a client who plays a General. Though he is concerned about his safety, he is equally obsessed about the details of his fantasy, and wants them followed to the letter. The General's whore is nearly naked and acts like his horse.

Scene IV

Another client acts out his fantasy as a tramp. He looks at his reflection in three mirrors, and is very happy when his whore hands him a wig with fleas to wear. Sounds of machine gun fire are heard in the background.

Scene V

Inside Irma's room, she is going over accounts with her bookkeeper Carmen, who used to be one of her whores. Irma worries that her lover, George, who is also the Chief of Police, has not shown up yet. She notices that Carmen has changed recently. Carmen tells her she is not happy. She did not like the rules that Irma set up for the women that work at the brothel. They cannot talk about what they do or laugh. Carmen also misses her daughter.

While they talk, Irma checks in on her clients via a device similar to a closed-circuit monitoring system. Irma is rather callous towards Carmen's feelings. She only cares about her business and her material possessions. Carmen tries to explain her problems with the roles she has been required to play, but Irma does really care. She is preoccupied by the revolution going on outside, and the imminent appearance of George.

Irma attempts to appease Carmen by offering her a role as Saint Theresa for a nice client. Carmen is flattered, but only sees the futility of their work. Irma talks proudly about the power of her "house of illusions" and tells Carmen that she is one of the best of her employees. Sounds of fighting between the rebels and the army grow louder. Irma worries about what will happen if the rebels win. She wants Carmen to die with her, but Carmen only wants to flee and find her daughter.

Carmen reports about the other girls to Irma. Irma asks particularly about Chantal, who left the brothel to join the rebellion. Irma worries that her brothel is being watched. Their conversation is interrupted by Arthur, who plays the Executioner. His work is finished, and he wants money to pay for silk shirts he has ordered. Irma says she will give him funds if he goes and looks for George at his headquarters. She also wants to know what is going on in the streets. Arthur goes, despite his fears.

Just after Arthur leaves, the George (Chief of Police) shows up. George reports that the palace is surrounded and the Queen is in hiding. He is ambivalent about that situation because he is more concerned about the fantasies being acted out in the whorehouse. He wants to know if anyone has wanted to imitate him. He becomes angry when the answer is negative, though Irma tries to soothe his ego. George vows to prove his worth as a leader and keep killing so that clients will want to be the Chief of Police in their fantasy.

Irma confides to George her fears about the rebellion and what the rebels might do to her studio. He assures her that he has taken every precaution. Irma passes on information obtained from Chantal, who apparently has left the brothel for the rebellion. Irma reveals that her former plumber, Roger, is a rebel, and he and Chantal took off together. Arthur finally returns, and reports about the increasing violence outside. His speech is interrupted by a bullet entering from the outside that kills him.

Scene VI

Near the Grand Balcony, Chantal and Roger express their love for each other among the rebels. Roger is a bit jealous that Chantal has become a female symbol of the rebellion. Several men want to remove her from Roger to use when the revolution takes the palace. Chantal is enthusiastic, but Roger is more reluctant. She goes, despite his pleas to stay.

Scene VII

Inside the brothel, Irma, George, and Carmen are gathered in the Funeral Studio, with the corpse of Arthur. Everything and everyone is in tatters, except the Court Envoy who is unharmed. Explosions rock the building. The Envoy is enigmatic in his description of the Royal Court, most of whom are dead or injured, including the Queen. The Envoy wants Irma to play the Queen for the populace so that they will feel safer and remain loyal. George is jealous that Irma might be above him, even if she is just playing a role. Irma accepts it.

Scene VIII

Irma appears at the balcony of the brothel, accompanied by the clients who played the General, the Bishop and the Judge, as well as George. Chantal appears and is shot by an assassin.

Scene IX

In Irma's room inside the brothel, the Bishop, the Judge and the General met. They talk about having to live their roles, and their recent public appearances. Photographers are present to take their pictures for posterity. The three men do not know how to act like their roles for the photographs. The Envoy and Irma, who is still playing the Queen, enter. The Envoy questions the men on their official decisions. Irma asks the kind of questions a queen would ask of her men.

George comes in. He wants to appear in the form of a phallus to impress the masses. The men continue to take their roles too seriously, and believe they have more power than George does. Irma and George try to put them in their place. They talk of Chantal who has been made a martyr for their cause. Irma, as the Queen, is still jealous, though she, too, is worshiped. Their ruminations over their future are interrupted by the entrance of Carmen.

Carmen reports that a man has come to the brothel, and he wants to play the role of the Chief of Police. George is ecstatic. They all go to the Mausoleum Studio, which was specifically designed for George. Roger, the plumber, has donned the outfit. After saving a slave (played by the man who was the beggar), the Chiefs praises are sung. When his fantasy has been fulfilled, Roger will not leave. Instead, he castrates himself.

Irma is upset at the damage Roger's act does to her brothel. George decides to spend eternity in the tomb that has been constructed for him. He locks himself inside, as machine gun fire starts again. Irma dismisses the men who played that Bishop, Judge, and General. Even the Envoy leaves. Irma has Carmen lock up and she vows to start all over again at a later time.

Scenes 1, 2, 3, and 4

Scenes 1, 2, 3, and 4 Summary

Scene 1 - In a room with an unmade bed, a Bishop sits and declaims his philosophy of faith. He is larger than life, wearing robes with exaggerated shoulders, standing on stilts and wearing garish makeup. A Young Woman in lace and Irma, an older woman in a black suit, attend him. As the Bishop rejoices in the beauty of his clothes, Irma repeatedly reminds him to honor their agreement. The Bishop repeatedly insists that the Young Woman confess her sins, asking if they were real. Both the Young Woman and Irma insist that they were. Ignoring the Bishop's protests, they remove his robes. When the Young Woman continues to insist that her sins were real, the Bishop speaks in a completely different voice and says he hopes she didn't really do the evil things she said she did. Irma reassures him and starts to say that here - The Bishop interrupts, saying that "here" there's no way of telling what's evil because they live in evil, making believe and acting. He then tells Irma to leave, saying that he wants to be by himself. Irma tells the Bishop he's already been there twenty minutes longer than the agreement, but he angrily insists. Irma and the Young Woman go out.

The Bishop speaks to his reflection in the mirror, questioning himself at length about the how and why of his becoming a bishop. At one point Irma looks back in and asks whether he's finished, but he insists he needs more time. Irma goes out, and the Bishop loses complete control, fantasizing about having sex with a woman he refers to by several derogatory names like bitch and slut. Irma comes back in and insists that he leave. The Bishop says she only wants him to go because she needs the room for someone else, adding that it's dangerous for people to be out in the streets with all the violence going on. Irma and the Young Woman forcibly finish undressing the Bishop, who's now revealed to be a normal looking, normally dressed man. He complains that the Chief of Police has let the revolution get out of control and then looks at himself in the mirror one last time. He speaks to his reflection about the power of his robes, how they protect him and enable him to perform deeds of great charity and great power. As he goes, the set changes, and we're in the next room.

Scene 2 - The bed remains. A nearly nude female Prisoner kneels on the floor, chained. A muscular male Executioner stands over her. A Judge, larger than life in the same way as the Bishop (on stilts, exaggerated makeup and clothes), is on his hands and knees before the Prisoner, who demands that he kiss her foot. He nearly does and then stands and goes to his chair. The Executioner tells the Judge all the things the Prisoner has stolen, and the Prisoner confesses that she's a thief. The Executioner tells her that she has to plead not guilty and get beaten again before she can confess. The Judge's voice changes, in the same way as the Bishop's did, and he asks the Prisoner whether she's new. The Executioner says she is, and then the Judge resumes his formal voice and talks about how the Prisoner is necessary to him. The Judge can only fulfill his purpose if there's a prisoner and a crime. When noises from offstage distract him, he goes back

to the different voice and asks the Executioner if the situation outside the room has changed.

The Executioner says that the rebels have advanced. The Judge complains about the Chief of Police, and the Executioner says he's expected at any moment. The Judge resumes his more formal voice, and the Executioner asks permission to beat the Prisoner. The Prisoner pleads with the Executioner, calling him Arthur. The Executioner tells her to call him the Executioner, and the Judge continues his interrogation of the Prisoner. He compares himself to the King of Hell, with the power to decide the fate of souls. At the sound of machine gun fire from outside, the Prisoner talks about the Revolution. The Executioner tells her to be quiet. The Judge tells her to continue her confession, and the Prisoner talks about the places she stole from. The Judge talks again about the way the three of them compliment each other's roles in life, and then he demands again that the Prisoner confess. The Prisoner refuses, and the Judge pleads. The Executioner tells the Judge to crawl, and we're back at the beginning of the scene with the Judge crawling towards the Prisoner.

Scene 3 - The bed remains. As a timid-looking man called the General removes his outdoor clothes. He and Irma discuss the risks he took to get there and the dangers caused by the revolution. The General hands Irma some money, asking whether details like spurs and the right kind of mud-spattered boots will be ready for him. A Girl in a black corset comes in with the General's uniform. The General inspects the uniform and then reminds Irma of something she's forgotten. She goes out to get it, and the General locks the door behind her. A moment later the Executioner knocks and asks for Irma. The Girl tells him she's in another room, and the General insists that he be left in peace. The Executioner goes, and the General and the Girl begin to pretend that she is his horse. The Girl dresses the General in his uniform and narrates a story told in poetic language about approaching death and grieving women. He stops her before she can finish, saying there will be time for that later. At this point fully dressed, he looks at himself in the mirror. His voice suddenly changes as he asks the Girl what the Chief of Police has been doing. She says nothing, and then they resume their roles as General and horse, with the General climbing aboard the kneeling Girl's back and riding off to his death. The Girl narrates the journey, but she is interrupted by machine gun fire from offstage.

Scene 4 - The bed remains. A frail Old Man and an Angry Girl wait. There is a knock on the door. The Angry Girl opens it, and Irma passes her a whip and a dirty old wig and then closes the door. The Angry Girl roughly shoves the wig onto the Old Man's head, and when he asks whether the lice are in it, she tells him they are.

Scenes 1, 2, 3, and 4 Analysis

Several important elements in this section are repeated from scene to scene. One is the way that the characters, with the exception of Irma, are all participating in role playing scenarios in which everything is artificial. This sense of artificiality deepens when the action reveals that the Bishop, Judge and General are all small, ordinary people with

ordinary frailties, as illustrated by the way they all react so nervously to the outside world as represented by the sounds of gunfire. A second important element is the way that each of the scenarios involves the assumption and/or the denial of power - the Bishop's spiritual power, the Judge's moral power and the General's military power. In each case, that power is used over others and then taken away. The fourth scene is somewhat different, in that the Old Man is completely dominated from his first appearance, but ultimately his position is the same as the others in that he is utterly powerless. A third element is the way in which the power of the Bishop, the Judge and the General is completely exaggerated, both in their own minds and in the way each character is visually portrayed.

The principal function of these combined elements is to illustrate and dramatize the play's theme, that all power is illusionary and empty. Right from the beginning, the action and relationships make this point in several ways. The scenes with the officials make this point. The use of contrast in the character of Irma also makes this point. She is clearly different from the "officials," in that she has actual power and is unafraid to use it. That being said, the proceedings of the play reveal that she's not immune from the attractions of greater power as evidenced by her later assumption of the role of Queen. This aspect of her character and situation reinforces the play's theme by suggesting that what power an individual does have is never enough because on some level, they realize that it means nothing. This realization comes to Irma in the second half of the play when her place of business, the place in which her power is centered, is destroyed. She no longer has any power. She wants power and has to find it somewhere else. This is why she chooses to become the Queen, who has more power, at least in theory, than Irma ever had.

Technically, these scenes are written in such a way as to generate intense curiosity about what exactly is going on. If the constant presence of an unmade bed doesn't make the point clear, the conversations in the next scene between Irma and her assistant do. This play is set in a whorehouse, a place that's ultimately all about games of power. Who has how much power? How much are they willing to pay, or how much must they be paid, to use it or be used by it?

Scene 5 Part 1

Scene 5 Part 1 Summary

Irma talks with her assistant Carmen, who's counting the income from the evening's activities. Their conversation reveals that Irma insists upon referring to the people who come to her as visitors instead of clients. Carmen used to work as a prostitute, but she has been promoted. She and the other prostitutes sometimes feel powerful emotions as a result of the roles they play. Carmen also says the real reason she's thoughtful and sad is that she's thinking about her daughter. As she talks, Irma sits at a panel of monitors and loudspeakers that enables her to watch and hear everything that goes on in each of the rooms in the house. As she checks up on her visitors, she comments that the Chief of Police is late. Carmen tells her about getting spiritual pleasure out of dressing up like the Virgin Mary to accommodate the fantasy of a bank clerk and making him happy. She then says that living in Irma's world of illusion ultimately makes her unhappy. Irma talks about the rebels having it in for everything that represents the established order, including madams of whorehouses, and she says that they'll all end up dead.

Irma is distracted by something she sees on one of her monitors. She's concerned about the way that one of the prostitutes is behaving, and she might end up like Chantal. Irma then asks Carmen if she's heard anything from Chantal, and Carmen says she's heard nothing. Irma watches one of her visitors leaving and comments that he seems to have had a positive experience. She adds proudly that "The Grand Balcony" has a worldwide reputation for excellence. She then offers Carmen the chance to fulfill the fantasy of a man who wants to be with Saint Theresa. As she gives the details, Carmen tells Irma she's very thoughtful to provide such an important experience for such lonely people. Irma says the reason that such experiences are important is that they remain pure, whereas the people who really live the lives of the Bishop, the Judge and the General have to dirty the purity of their ideals by functioning in the real world.

Irma confesses to Carmen that she feels a kind of tenderness towards her. Carmen says she's been aware of that, but then Irma changes the subject, speaking in poetic language about her pride in her business. She talks about the beauty of the individual rooms and about the beauty of the prostitutes. Carmen compliments her on how beautifully she speaks and then says again that she experienced real beauty when the man who wanted to see the Virgin looked at her. Irma tells her she's doing the right thing by finding joy and pride in her work. She urges Carmen to continue doing so and offers to help in any way she can, including loving her. She says that she has to love her in secret because of Arthur, who then knocks on the door. Before she opens it, Irma insists that Carmen answer about playing Saint Theresa. Carmen again says her daughter is more real, and Irma calls her a fool.

Scene 5 Part 1 Analysis

The conversation between Irma and Carmen examines the thematic question about the emptiness of power from a couple of different angles. First, when Carmen talks about her experiences in portraying the Virgin Mary, even though she speaks of a rush of spiritual feeling, what she's really talking about is another kind of power. Even though she's portraying a saint, she's still in a position of control and gains a sense of fulfillment from being in that position. It's a different kind of fulfillment from that experienced by the "officials," but its source is the same. Like them, Carmen essentially has no power, but in certain circumstances such as portraying the Virgin she gains a little power for a little while. Her situation in this scene, in which she reflects upon having had power taken away, foreshadows the situation in which Irma finds herself at the end of the play. Both women are presented with an opportunity for new power, but while Irma takes her chances, Carmen refuses to. This suggests that Carmen, of all the characters in the play, has transcended the need for power and control and moved into a place of accepting life for what it is. In other words, she's the play's sole realist, an aspect of her character that appears again later and makes her a vivid contrast to the other, more power-hungry characters around her.

At the same time, Irma seems to have at least the beginnings of understanding about how empty her power is. This is indicated when she says she'll end up dead like everybody else in authority as a result of the revolution. Her lack of response to Carmen's comments about her kindness also supports this idea. This suggests that to her what she's doing is nothing but a business. On the other hand, the relationship between Carmen and Irma appears to go nowhere, mostly because Carmen refuses Irma's offer to portray Saint Theresa. This, combined with Irma's acceptance of the powerful role of Queen, suggests that she has accepted power as the dominant force of her life, and there's no turning back.

The references to Chantal and the Chief of Police both foreshadow important characters and elements of the play's story. Both characters play important roles in the development of the action and themes later in the play.

Scene 5 Part 2

Scene 5 Part 2 Summary

Arthur (the Executioner) comes in, now dressed in a business suit. His conversation with Irma reveals that they're lovers. The screaming heard earlier was the authentic screaming of the Prisoner as she was being whipped, and Irma has difficulty replacing prostitutes when the things they're asked to do become too much for them and the lines between illusion and reality become blurred. It's also revealed that Arthur is about to go on a mission for Irma into the rebel territory and that he's got another session to do that night in which he's to pose as a corpse. Irma refuses to tell him who the visitor is, and Arthur goes out, teasingly calling her a bitch.

During the conversation Carmen has finished the accounts, and when she tells Irma they've earned over three hundred, Irma comments on how people keep coming in no matter how violent the revolution gets. She says if the rebels win she'll be out of business. Carmen says it won't be long before they discover the joys of debauchery, but Irma tells her she's wrong. She tells Carmen that in every revolution an ex-prostitute is held up as the symbol of freedom. In this revolution it might very well be her, except she's planning to leave. Carmen says again that she wants to be with her daughter, but Irma says that her daughter is dead, killed as a result of the revolution. She goes on to say that yes the rebels have hordes of people on their side, but the Chief of Police does as well. The rebellion, she says, will be crushed. She notices on her monitors that one of the prostitutes is getting too friendly with the visitor and comments on how disastrous it would be if love arose between the two of them. She then tells Carmen to help her get dressed for the visit of the Chief of Police.

As Irma puts on a sexy negligee, she asks Carmen what she knows about Chantal. Carmen tells her that there's nothing new to tell her, adding that no one knows whether she's dead or alive. They talk about the jewels Irma wants to wear, and she says her jewels are the only things that are real to her, as real as other women's little daughters. She then asks which girls are double crossing, communicating with both the police and the rebels. Carmen tells her that none of the girls think of her as a real friend anymore, knowing that she tells Irma everything and Irma tells the Chief of Police. She concludes by saying that in the whorehouse, everything is unreal.

Scene 5 Part 2 Analysis

The question of what's real and what's fantasy inside the walls of the whorehouse plays an important role in this scene, illuminating from another angle the play's theme about the illusory nature of power. This begins with the comments from Arthur about the Judge's demands for realism. Since it's already been established that the Judge is living out a fantasy, the realism he demands is actually a part of that fantasy, which in turn suggests everything that appears to be real in this play is actually artifice, wishful

thinking or a deliberate lie. As a result, the authenticity of Irma's relationships with Carmen, Arthur and the Chief of Police are all called into question. This section illustrates the way that everything that goes on inside the whorehouse is empty and artificial.

This point is made in another way through the juxtaposition of Irma's comments about prostitutes falling for clients and her dressing up for the Chief. As the conversations in the next scene reveal, the Chief and Irma have done exactly that. In other words, Irma is a hypocrite, someone whose public values are different from her private ones.

Scene 5 Part 3

Scene 5 Part 3 Summary

The Chief of Police, in a large coat and hat that makes him resemble the officials from the first few scenes, finally arrives. He greets Irma, who says she's been nervous waiting for him. Then he says the situation is worsening and that the Queen is in hiding. He soon changes the subject, asking for details about what scenarios have gone on in the whorehouse. He is disappointed when he hears that nobody wants to pretend to be him. He says his power is becoming considerable and his image is becoming huge, so he can't understand why nobody wants to pretend to be him. He vows that one day, someone will, perhaps when he's put down the rebellion. He asks Carmen what she thinks of his ideas. Carmen says that even though the fantasies they bring to life in the whorehouse are ultimately empty, the gleam that the girls see in the eyes of the men participating in the fantasies is actually hopeful innocence.

The front doorbell rings. Irma sends Carmen to answer it. When she's gone, Irma confesses to the Chief that she used her monitor device to ring the doorbell so she could talk to him alone. Their conversation reveals that they both know the rebellion is a game, but Irma is concerned that the rebels are taking the game too seriously. Chantal revealed to Carmen, and Carmen told Irma that the rebels will be occupying the power station that night. She explains that Chantal became friendly with the plumber, Roger, who's a member of the rebel movement and who convinced her to leave the house and join the rebellion. The Chief comments that Chantal's "tender feelings" towards the plumber are fortunate, which leads Irma to remember a time when there were tender feelings between her and the Chief. He tells her to forget them and asks whether she could give up Arthur. Irma tells him that the only reason Arthur is around is that he (the Chief) insisted that there be a man around. She says that Arthur's not as strong as he looks, adding that the Chief is so obsessed with building and keeping power that he has forgotten her and her needs. The Chief tells her that he wants to be with her again and that she should fire Arthur, but Irma says she needs him. She mocks the Chief when he says he's jealous. The Chief slaps her and orders her not to cry. He demands to see the receipts for the evening's business and then says that once the rebellion is over he'll be moving back in.

Carmen rushes in with the news that the Queen's Envoy has arrived. Arthur runs in with news that he's accomplished his mission. The rebellion is getting worse, though. Then, a bullet comes through a window and kills him. The Chief realizes he's trapped. Chantal asks where the Saint Theresa costume is, and Irma goes downstairs to meet the Envoy.

Scene 5 Part 3 Analysis

Power and the hunger for it are revealed as not only empty but also foolish in this scene, as we are finally introduced to the often-discussed Chief of Police. The fact that

he is already a figure of power is illustrated by his physical resemblance to the "officials" from the first section, an aspect to his character, which also illustrates how artificial his power is. The key point here is that while the officials knew they were playing a role, the Chief takes himself and his power very seriously. This makes his obsessive desire to have someone play him in the whorehouse even more foolish. Both the character and the play move into the realm of satire, a style of comic theatre that makes fun of human foibles, frailties and vices by exaggerating them. Even though the Chief's power has aspects of reality, as indicated by his physical and emotional power over Irma, the overall impression is that because he's unaware of the emptiness of his power he's the most deluded, and the most dangerous, character in the play.

Once again the important role that Chantal is about to play in both the rebellion and the play is foreshadowed. Another aspect of foreshadowing is the reference to the Chief's tomb and Arthur's death, which foreshadows the play's final scene in which someone actually does come to the whorehouse with the fantasy of being the Chief.

Scene 6 Part 1

Scene 6 Part 1 Summary

In a cafy, Roger, Armand, Luke and Mark work in the background as Chantal finishes bandaging a Wounded Rebel. Another woman, Georgette, takes over, saying that Chantal's thinking too much about what she's doing. As Georgette pins his bandage, the Rebel asks how the battle is going, and in particular about the Bishop, the General and the Judge. Georgette tells him to stop worrying. The titles don't mean anything; they're just men. She gives the Wounded Rebel instructions about how to avoid getting shot and sends him out. She then apologizes to Chantal for being hard on her.

Roger comments on how foolish vanity is as Armand admires his appearance in a mirror. He pretends to be the Chief on a poster and talks about how this is an important day in the revolution. Roger tells him there are still battles to be fought, and they'll arrange activities celebrating their victory later. As Armand pretends to machine-gun the cafy, another Wounded Man comes in. Georgette hands Chantal the first aid implements, but the Man complains of her rough treatment. Chantal suggest that the Man is soft, but Georgette tells her that being too rough is as false to the job as thinking about it too much. Again Georgette takes over. She finishes the job and sends the man out with the same instructions that she gave the Wounded Rebel. Roger tells Chantal that Georgette is right and that they have to act with simple honesty and integrity. Otherwise, they become as false as the people they're fighting. He, Armand and Luke argue about the philosophy behind the revolution. They are interrupted by the arrival of Louis, who brings news that rebellion is gaining even more ground. He has heard about a close shave Armand had, and Armand tells him how he escaped being machine-gunned when the gunner was himself shot by one of the rebels. Louis tells him to rest, and Armand goes out.

There is a brief conversation about how the Palace may be taken that night and how the rebels' central committee is discussing the formation of a provisional government. Then, Luke says his group of rebels needs something to spur them back into action. He and Louis argue over whether Luke can "borrow" Chantal. Louis says that Chantal performed well in the early stages of the rebellion, but now its up to the rebels to inspire themselves. This leads to an argument between Roger, Louis, Georgette and Luke about whether the bravado of young rebels like Armand is good or bad for the cause. Roger argues that people have to start taking the rebellion seriously. Otherwise, the people in authority are going to win and use their victory to gain even more control than they already have.

A Third Wounded Man comes in. Chantal tells Georgette to treat him. Roger asks Chantal if she's given up, and Chantal says she's not cut out to be either a nurse or a rebel, adding that all she wants to do is sing. Roger tells her that being a singer is nothing different from being a prostitute and that she has to learn to serve her people properly. The Third Man recognizes Chantal and asks why she isn't out inspiring the

men with her voice as she did earlier. Georgette shows him out. When he's gone, Luke asks again to borrow Chantal, saying that the women in the other two sections aren't available. Chantal says that neither of those women could do what she does. She adds that all she is and all she has to offer are her voice and kindness. Luke offers to pay, and when Chantal asks how much, Roger can't believe she's serious. Louis wonders what would happen if she got killed, saying she's irreplaceable. Luke offers to trade ten women for her. The others can't believe what they're hearing, and Roger asks whether Chantal is really that special. Chantal describes her life by saying all she can do is enchant the people and make them want to fight. She adds that she may have learned her technique in a whorehouse, but that doesn't mean she's useless.

Scene 6 Part 1 Analysis

In the same way as the previous scene finally introduces the Chief of Police, this scene introduces the much foreshadowed Chantal. What's particularly interesting is that while the Chief actually does have power and influence and is in some ways worth waiting to see, Chantal is nothing special. An unskilled and unenthusiastic nurse, an unwilling and unknowledgeable participant in the rebellion, she is only what people have made her into. In a sense, she's no different in this situation than she was when she was a prostitute. She's still being seen and used, as people want to see and use her. This makes her someone very different from the Chief, who is so focused on his own sense of identity that he's convinced people will want to adopt it, at least temporarily and for somewhat less than ideal purposes. As the saying goes, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, and the Chief so wants to be flattered. It is, after all, a way of manifesting power and influence. In other words, he has a lot of ego.

Chantal appears to have no ego and is apparently more than willing to go along with what people want her to be. This makes her a victim of the revolution more than an actual rebel, and it also makes her a vivid contrast to almost every other character in the play. The other characters all seem to be willing to do anything for at least some kind of power. The only other character who doesn't seem to want power is Carmen, and it's interesting to note that the people who want power the least are the ones who would normally have the least, the prostitutes. This, paradoxically, gives them more self-power than anyone else in the play. They know who they are, and they don't need to have control over anyone else to prove it. They are content. Here again is another illustration of the play's theme relating to the emptiness of power and its pursuit.

The way that Luke and Roger argue over whether Luke can "borrow" Chantal, juxtaposed with their arguments in the scene following, introduces and illuminates the idea that the rebels are just as hungry for power as the people they're fighting. This is another aspect of the play's theme, discussed in relation to the following section, and relates to the corrupting influence of power.

Scene 6 Part 2

Scene 6 Part 2 Summary

Mark speaks with someone on the phone and then tells the others that news has come from the Central Committee. The rebellion has entered its final stages. He issues the Committee's instructions that Chantal's image is to be put on posters inspiring the people to continue the fight, saying that the authorities are planning to follow the usual pattern of using the rebellion to enhance their own power. He says the Central Committee is determined to keep that from happening, adding that once the Palace has been captured, Chantal will go out onto the balcony to sing and inspire the people.

Roger says he doesn't want Chantal to go because he loves her and is afraid for her. Chantal says that when she sings for the crowd, she'll actually be saying "I love you" to him. She adds that the whorehouse taught her well how to say one thing and feel another. Roger says he didn't take her from the whorehouse to be an idol for the people, but Chantal says that nothing will change. She'll come back. They kiss, and Chantal goes out with Luke. Georgette then goes out, saying she's got medical supplies to prepare.

Louis suggests that Roger is "dreaming," imagining an ideal revolution carried out reasonably and efficiently. He goes on to say that any man who enters into a violent fight believes in his own self-righteousness and that reason and efficiency don't come into it. He then says that Roger should love Georgette instead of Chantal, since Georgette embodies everything that he believes in more than Chantal.

The room is shaken by a huge explosion. Mark quickly calls for information and discovers that the palace has been blown up. The Queen's staff has managed to get to The Grand Balcony. Armand rushes in, excited about having seen the palace explode and asking what's going to happen to the Queen and others in authority. The others tell him that the Central Committee will be running things, and Mark tells him to grab a weapon, get out onto the streets and fight. As Armand is leaving, Mark tells Roger to get Chantal's face on posters and billboards, her voice on speakers and her words, forged if necessary, into poems and stories glorifying the rebellion. Roger starts dreamily talking about the ideals of the revolution, but Mark sternly tells him to ground everything he says in reality, according to the orders of the Committee.

Scene 6 Part 2 Analysis

There's an old saying that "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." This section illustrates that point by showing how Mark and his superiors on the Central Committee have become as hungry for power in their own way and for their own purposes as those they have overthrown. Specifically, the way the Committee, through Mark, orders Roger to place Chantal as the figurehead of the rebellion shows that the

Committee has a clear idea of the way it wants things done and will not accept any other alternatives. Their goals may be grounded in noble ideals like Roger's, but the way Mark treats everyone's ideals with such disrespect dramatizes the way that ideals mean nothing when power is within reach.

This point is further illuminated by Louis' comments to Roger about how ideals are transformed when the person holding those ideals also holds a gun. His comments suggest that for either side, fighting for what they believe to be the truth ultimately becomes a fight for power, which then becomes a fight to preserve power at all costs. This idea is reinforced by the action in the later part of the play, in which Irma and the false officials create illusions of power to preserve what little power the establishment has left. Meanwhile, Chantal shows a lack of belief in the rebellion. She claims that she learned to make people believe her masquerades in the whorehouse, but the rebels decide to use her anyway. These factors combine to reiterate the idea that the power being seized by the rebels is as illusory as every other form of power in the play. This is another illustration of the play's thematic point.

The meaning of the play's title becomes apparent in this scene when Mark refers to Chantal singing on the balcony of the palace. Later, the surviving authorities are said to have taken refuge in The Grand Balcony, which we already know is the name of Irma's whorehouse. Both balconies represent authority, places of power and influence. However, the fact that one of them is a whorehouse, a place where everything including power is an illusion, suggests that both of them are in fact homes of empty and artificial power. This symbol again points out the play's theme.

Scene 7

Scene 7 Summary

In one of Irma's rooms, now ruined by explosions, Irma, Carmen and the Chief meet with the Envoy, who talks about the safety of the Queen. The Chief asks what's happened to her, and the Envoy tells a deliberately confusing story about how she's being kept hidden and occupied. He says she is nevertheless still doing what she does best, wearing the crown. Irma and the Chief ask about the revolution, commenting on the destruction of both the palace and the Balcony. The Envoy starts to talk again about the Queen, but the Chief says he needs to see a real Queen, not some idea of one. The Envoy says the attack on the palace has been stalled by guards who are willing to die to protect the Queen and adds that she is moving from room to room within what's left of the palace to keep from being captured. The Chief asks what has happened to the General, the Judge and the Bishop, and the Envoy says they've either been killed or have disappeared.

Another explosion is heard and felt. The Envoy and the Chief fall to the floor while Carmen and Irma remain standing. As the Envoy and the Chief get up and dust themselves off, they realize the explosion was at the palace, and the Chief fears that the Queen has been buried under the rubble. The Envoy assures him she's safe and compliments Irma on her steadfastness and courage. Then, he bows to her and hints that she should assume the role of Queen. Irma has several doubts about whether she can do it, and the Chief is concerned about her safety. The Envoy convinces Irma that she can be trained to play the part. He tells the Chief in great detail about a beautiful tomb that's being designed and constructed, hinting that it could be his. This flatters the Chief into agreeing to the Envoy's plan. Irma sends Carmen out to get the "officials," who returned to the Balcony when the violence of the revolution prevented them from returning to their homes.

The Envoy has one last thing to report, that the revolution has mobilized around images of Chantal. The Chief dismisses her influence, saying that when he and the authorities win the battle they'll use her for their own purposes. Irma agrees to impersonate the Queen and then realizes that she and the Chief won't be able to be together. The Envoy moves away, as the Chief and Irma discuss that the roles they're about to begin to play, Hero and Queen, will prevent them from being themselves. They confess that they love each other, but they agree that from that moment on they will have to be strangers. They move apart, and Irma asks the Envoy whether as Queen she'll be treated as such. As machine gun fire is heard offstage, the Envoy reassures her. Irma and the Chief go out.

Alone for a moment, the Envoy pins a row of ribbons to his chest. Carmen and the Bishop come in, and the Envoy introduces himself as a man who has come to the Balcony to play a role just like the Bishop. He then says he's going out to attend the Queen. When he's gone, Carmen convinces the reluctant Bishop, who says he's just a

gas man, to play the role of the Bishop in public. She explains that the other officials, the General and the Judge, are putting on their robes as well. When they're all done, they'll appear on the balcony and do honor to the Queen and the Chief. She hints that there's a possibility the rebels might kill him. Just as he's fearfully refusing, the Young Woman who played the scene with him earlier appears with the Bishop's robes. As she and Carmen dress him, the Bishop gradually becomes seduced by the power the robes represent, and he prepares to play his private fantasy role in public.

Scene 7 Analysis

The key point about this scene is the way the action reveals how seductive power can be, even if the people seeking it know that it's completely empty. This is shown by the way that Irma, the Chief, the Bishop and the other officials all fall victim to the appeal of power and influence, even though they know they're only playing roles. The point is made further through the conversation between the Chief and Irma, which illustrates what people are prepared to give up in the name of gaining power. The way that the Bishop, even when faced with the possibility that he'll be killed, finds the lure of power, represented by his robes, too strong to resist also carries the theme. It could be argued that Irma, the Bishop, the Chief and the other officials choose to do what they do for the good of the country. However, Irma's main concern appears to be how people will react to her, and the Bishop's main concern is how he looks. The Chief's main concern is the size of the tomb promised him by the Envoy. It's doubtful they have motives higher than their own glorification.

An interesting contrast to all the power-mongering going on is provided by Carmen, who simply does her job without agenda or ulterior motive. This raises the possibility that she represents the common people, individuals who go about their daily lives without really knowing or caring who has what power and why. If this is in fact her function in the play, she illustrates another way in which power can be defined as artificial.

Throughout the play, Carmen illustrates that no matter who is in power or who is fighting for power, it ultimately makes no difference to the way that everyday people function. Ordinary mortals still have to eat, still have to have clothes and shelter and still need to work. Her focus on her job demonstrates how ultimately, whether the Queen or the Bishop or any authority figure is real or worthy, life goes on. This is also the point made by the end of the play, when Irma has finally realized the foolishness of both pretense and hunger for influence and returns to her day-to-day life.

Scene 8

Scene 8 Summary

The General, the Judge, the Bishop, the Chief and the Queen (Irma) all appear on a balcony. All are dressed and made up to appear larger than life. A Beggar appears and shouts, "God Save the Queen!" Chantal appears. The Queen bows to her. Chantal is shot dead. The Queen and General carry her off.

Scene 8 Analysis

This brief scene illustrates graphically how ultimately all power is the same. Chantal, because of how she's been described and set up by the rebels, is larger than life in the same way as the other authority figures. The fact that she's shot represents the ultimate end faced by anyone in authority, death. Setting the scene on the balcony, which as we've seen symbolizes the emptiness of power, reinforces the point further.

Scene 9 Part 1

Scene 9 Part 1 Summary

The Bishop, the Judge and the General come in from the balcony. They discuss the reactions of the crowd, and the Bishop comments that his grocer bowed to him. The Judge worries about whether he was visible behind the Queen. The Bishop and the Judge talk about how they're going to become the people they're pretending to be, issuing orders and making policy. The General says it's not as easy for him and then refers to the Chief and his powers. The Bishop comments that having someone pretend to be him at the whorehouse hasn't yet solidified the Chief's power. Until someone actually does, their position is perilous.

Three Photographers burst into the room, ready to take pictures of the officials. The officials assume what they think are the appropriate poses, but the Photographers move them around and tell them how to compose their faces so they can get the definitive pictures. As the pictures are taken, the Queen comes in with the Envoy and watches the Photographers work. She says that she won't tolerate the people being presented with contrived images. The Envoy tells her that the image is the most important message. The Photographers leave, and the Queen discusses with the officials the state of the rebellion. They talk about how the rebels are being slaughtered and how the Chief is being regarded as a savior. The Queen asks about the progress on the Chief's tomb, saying that it will be the symbol of how his power is greater than anyone else's. She speaks in poetic language about how the followers of the other officials are being used to create the tomb, but the officials tell her they're consolidating their own power so that the Chief's won't overwhelm them. She angrily tells them their power isn't real, but the Bishop tells her it's not likely that they'll be satisfied with the illusory power represented by their clothes forever.

Scene 9 Part 1 Analysis

The point of this section is to illustrate a way in which power is created and maintained, through the shaping and portraying of an image. This takes the illusion created by the clothes worn by the three officials even further, presenting it in controlled and stylized fashion for public consumption. This aspect of the play's theme, the emptiness of image, has clear resonances with today's contemporary society in which image and "spin" are far more important than actual substance, in the minds of both the people who create it and the people who observe it. This contrast between image and reality is pointed out by the Queen. This is an ironic point because she herself is all image and no reality. The irony is made even more obvious by her comments about the Chief actually doing things to earn his power, meaning that his power is more valid than that of the others who merely wear their power and do not earn it. The repeated irony of this last remark aside, her comment is perhaps a trigger for the increased determination of the Bishop

and the other officials to increase their power. This determination drives the central conflict in the play's next section.

Scene 9 Part 2

Scene 9 Part 2 Summary

The Chief comes in and looks at the others as though asking a question. The Envoy tells him that nobody has yet come into the whorehouse asking to pretend to be him, but the Queen says that everything's ready for when someone does. The Chief complains that all the ideas the Envoy has had for improving his image have been failures, particularly the last one - appearing in costume as a giant phallus. The officials comment that they've waited for years to assume the power they've finally achieved and that perhaps the Chief should be patient a while longer. The Queen angrily tells them again that they should recognize that the Chief has real power, but the Bishop reminds her that that's because he and the other officials have made the Chief credible. He delivers a long poetic speech about how he and the other officials have given up their safe, comfortable, happy fantasies to support the Queen and the Chief in their dangerous crusade for power.

The Queen urges the Chief to not be intimidated and then accuses the Bishop of engineering Chantal's assassination. He protests that it was just a stray bullet, but the Chief says it doesn't matter. He's heard from several sources that the rebels shot Chantal because she was working for both sides. The Chief says that there's another rebellion starting against the rebels. He says that's the reason why he's sure the officials will continue to play their roles. They want to keep the power they've got. He adds that as soon as someone comes into the whorehouse asking to pretend to be him, there will be no more rebellions. Then, the officials can go back to their lives because at that point he will have enough presence in people's minds that they'll be afraid to rebel. He then tells the officials that their power is overruled by the Queen's, whose power is in turn overruled by Chantal's, whose image he plans to place on a flag and fly over the palace.

The Bishop says that above the Queen is God, and the Chief asks who's above Him. The Bishop has no answer for that. The Chief says that all the officials are good for is serving him and his goals of promoting his own power. Otherwise, they will be sent back to their ordinary lives. He asks for their commitment to supporting him, but before they can answer, the Queen steps in. She reminds the officials that when they first came to the whorehouse they had some small seed of the power they sought truly living in them. She tells them it's time to let go of their dream of growing that seed into full-flowering fruition. The Judge suggests that they express their desires for power in different ways, but the General says that once they start they won't be able to stop. The Chief agrees and then reminds everyone that they're still in a whorehouse, essentially telling them that no matter how they decide to act, their power is an illusion, while his is real.

The Chief comments that the three officials seem relieved at not having to live their roles anymore. He says he understands, adding that he himself feels the occasional urge to let go of his real power and live a life of illusion. The Bishop tells him that because the rebels have fought so furiously against authority, his continued authority

will inspire them to fight even more. He suggests that in that sense, the Chief is performing the same function as Chantal. The Queen, who has become angrier and angrier at any suggestion that her power is less than what she thinks it is, loses her temper, saying that she is the reason the people fought the rebellion. The Envoy tells her that she's just a figurehead, but the Queen says she wants real power. The Envoy tells her that nothing about her is to be real ever again, and she reacts with fear, calling her situation death.

Scene 9 Part 2 Analysis

This scene is essentially a dramatized debate about the nature of power. Who has it and who doesn't? How much of it is an illusion? The Chief argues that his is the only real power, and the Queen insists that she deserves real power. The comments by the Bishop and the Envoy point out that nobody's power is real. The Queen seems to understand this, but the Chief is so far gone in his obsession that he doesn't, can't and won't see the point of what the Bishop says. There are two levels of irony to this situation. The first is that we know the Chief's power is just as much of an illusion as everybody else's, partly because the rebels are continuing to fight and partly because the nature of the play, its themes and action, tells us so.

The second irony is illustrated by the action of the following section. The Chief finally gets his wish of someone coming into the whorehouse wanting to be him, but in a scenario that represents his death. Since the Queen has referred to her life as a figurehead without real power as death, the fantasy represents the way that the Chief has also become a figurehead. He has therefore died the same kind of death - become an empty, utterly powerless, costume. Note that one aspect of power is that, if you are powerful, others are jealous of your power. Those who come to the whorehouse to imitate the powerful desire power for themselves.

A phallus, referred to earlier in the scene, is a grotesquely sized artificial erect penis. In many ancient cultures, a phallus was used as a symbol of power to either be worshipped or to be mocked. In this context, the phallus functions on both levels, as a symbol of the Chief's power and of how ridiculous his ambitions to have such power truly are.

Scene 9 Part 3

Scene 9 Part 3 Summary

Carmen appears and whispers a secret message to the Queen that makes them both run out of the room. After a moment, the Queen comes in with the news that someone has at last come into the brothel wanting to fulfill a fantasy about being the Chief. The Chief can't believe it, and the officials react with dismay. The Queen assures them all that it's true. She finds them a place from which to watch, and the room where the fantasy will be played out appears. It is a representation of the Chief's tomb.

Roger, the intellectual rebel who loved Chantal, appears in a costume that resembles both the Chief and the exaggerated clothes of the officials. Carmen comes in with him and says he's the first person to visit this room. She adds that the themes of all the rooms can be summed up in a word, death. She calls out the Beggar, the one who hailed the Queen in Scene 8, and tells Roger that the Beggar is the slave Roger requested. Roger comments that there are sounds filtering in from outside. Carmen comments that life is starting up again as before, and Roger agrees, adding that it's sad that the people keep talking about how wonderful the rebellion was. He and the Beggar begin role-playing, with the Beggar saying that his life and death are nothing without "the Chief." Roger says that he has no reality without the things "the slave" says, but the Beggar says that *all* things and all people serve him. The Beggar then disappears. Roger asks where he's gone, and Carmen tells him he's gone out to sing about "his" glory. She then tells him it's time to go, but he tries to stay. Carmen reminds him that he's got nothing left, out in the real world or there in the room. Roger asks whether she knew Chantal, and Carmen tries to drag Roger out of the room. She becomes confused trying to find the right door. Roger takes out a knife and castrates himself. The Queen panics, worried about her new carpets, and rushes out the door.

The Chief checks himself and, reassured that his testicles are still in place, pronounces that his image and power are still intact. He says that Roger was a fool. The Queen comes back in, saying that everything is a mess and that Carmen is trying to keep order. The Chief talks about how he and his power will last forever because of his tomb and because he's been immortalized at the brothel. The Queen tries to convince him that they can love each other again, but he pays no attention, indicating he's gotten all he ever wanted. The Queen tries to get him to pay attention to machine gun fire from outside, but he goes out, full of himself and laughing. There's more machine gun fire, and the Queen turns to the officials, saying they are free to go. The officials go out. There's more machine gun fire, and the Queen wonders which side is firing. The Envoy suggests that the gunfire is the result of someone trying to live their dreams. He bids the Queen good night. Irma tells him to call her Irma. The Envoy leaves.

Irma talks in soliloquy about how she's going to have to start from scratch and rebuild her business. She then tells us to be ready to resume the roles we left behind when we came into the theater, adding that they'll be as false as the roles played in the

whorehouse. There's another burst of machine gun fire, and Irma says morning has come.

Scene 9 Part 3 Analysis

The earlier developed thematic point that people with power are desperate to hold on to it at any cost is illustrated by the surprising appearance of Roger as the man who wants to live out the fantasy of being the Chief. Earlier action has revealed that Roger, as the intellectual leader of the rebellion, had little real power. The implication of his appearance, therefore, is that as a result of the rebellion's success he has even less power than he started with. He has come to the whorehouse in the hope of capturing at least a portion of something he never really had. The way that Carmen controls the scene leads him to the conclusion that he has no hope of power even in the whorehouse, which in turn leads him to an act that for many men is the ultimate act of despair, the ultimate symbol of powerlessness - castration.

The contrast between Roger's act and the Chief's careless belief in his own power is vivid, but pointless given that the Chief's pride is juxtaposed with machine gun fire, a sure indication of further rebellion that means his power isn't what he thought it was. The possibility exists that as he leaves, he's gunned down. The play doesn't make this statement outright, and we, as the audience, are left with our imaginations, which is after all a secondary theme of the play, that the power of the imagination is far more real than any worldly power.

The play's final moments, as suggested earlier, indicate that as a result of everything that's happened, Irma has accepted that living day to day life has a greater point than trying to maintain the power she had, albeit temporarily and artificially, as Queen. This reinforces the play's thematic point about the emptiness of power, as does the whole idea of rebellion starting again. It's never exactly clear what specifically the rebels are fighting, only that they're fighting to gain control and power. The point made by the restarting of the rebellion is that there is always going to be someone or some group that's discontented with what they have and that fights to get more. By juxtaposing the restarted rebellion with Irma's comments about the illusions in our lives, the play hints that we are no different from the characters we've been watching. We play games in order to create gain when no gain is really possible. The play's final few moments urge us to let go of our illusions and live life as Irma does - day to day, honestly, doing what has to be done, letting those who crave power fight amongst themselves and leave us in peace.

Bibliography

Genet, Jean. "The Balcony." Trans. by Bernard Frechtman. Grove Press Inc. New York. 1958.

Characters

Arthur

Arthur (also known as The Executioner) works at the whorehouse, playing the Executioner and other roles in the male clientele's fantasy. Irma was forced to hire him by George, the Chief of Police. Though she was reluctant at first, she came to rely on him. Arthur cares solely about his own interests and money. He goes to find George for Irma, only because she will give him money for silk shirts he has ordered. Arthur survives the rebellion in the street, only to be shot dead by a stray bullet when he returns to the Grand Balcony. He is laid out in the Funeral Studio inside the brothel.

The Bishop

The Bishop is one of the clients at the Grand Balcony. He is not actually a bishop, but a customer who plays one in his fantasy. As a client, he is rather fussy, concerned that the details of his fantasy are perfect and that he will survive in the streets after he leaves. Later, when Irma plays the Queen at the Envoy's request to hold onto the loyalty of the people, the Bishop plays his role for real for a short time. He enjoys the power that comes with it, though he is totally unprepared. He is dismissed by Irma when the Chief of Police decides to entomb himself and the revolution heats up again.

Carmen

Carmen is Irma's most loyal and favorite employee. At one time, Carmen worked as a whore in the brothel, but now only keeps the books and assists in preparing the studios for the clients' fantasies. Carmen realizes the futility of the fantasies and can no longer do it, though Irma offers her a choice assignment. Carmen has a daughter who lives in the country. She desperately wants to see and be with her child, but she cannot. Carmen stays at the Grand Balcony to the end, even after it is bombed and the Chief of Police locks himself in his tomb. She regards this place as her lot in life.

Chantal

Chantal worked as a whore at the Grand Balcony at one time. She left the brothel with Roger to join the rebellion. Chantal and Roger became lovers. In scene six, it is revealed that she has become a symbol of the rebellion. Though Roger does not want her to go, Chantal is chosen to represent the revolution and goes with some men to be present when the Royal Palace falls. Later, Chantal is assassinated at the Grand Balcony when Irma makes her appearances as the Queen on the brothel's balcony. In death, Chantal is made to be a martyred saint for Irma as Queen.

Chief of Police

The Chief of Police (also known as George) is Irma's lover and protector. Rather self-centered, his primary focus is increasing his own power and importance. He does arrange to ensure the safety of the Grand Balcony. But he is upset through most of the play because no one who has come to the brothel has wanted to play him. George regards this as the ultimate symbol of his prestige in the eyes of the world. He has Irma build him a tomb, a preeminent symbol of honor for the kind of conqueror he aspires to be.

George does play a key role in putting down the rebellion, though he is annoyed that Irma, as the Queen, has a higher place than him. He is even more peeved that the men who play the Judge, the General, and the Bishop take their roles too seriously when they are forced to play them in real life as well. All these people cut into his "more real" power. After Roger comes in and asks to play the Chief of Police, George is satisfied, even though Roger castrates himself at the end. He decides to be locked in his tomb for 2,000 years, as the revolution begins again.

The Court Envoy

A hard-to-understand character, the Envoy appears in Scene Seven enigmatically describing the situation in the Royal Palace. It finally becomes clear that the Queen is dead, and the Envoy convinces Irma to take on that role as a symbol the people can rally around. When Irma plays the Queen, the Envoy makes certain that court etiquette is followed as much as possible. After the Chief of Police entombs himself, the Envoy accepts that this act is over and leaves.

The Executioner

See Arthur

The General

The General is one of the clients at the Grand Balcony. He is not really a general, but a customer who plays one in the fantasy he acts out. As a client, the General tries to take charge, but he is very self-involved and pompous. Later, when Irma plays the Queen at the Envoy's request, the General plays his role for real for a short time. He enjoys the power that comes with it, and tries (and fails) to act like a general should. He is dismissed by Irma when the Chief of Police decides to entomb himself and the revolution heats up again.

George

See Chief of Police

Irma

Irma (also known as The Queen) owns and runs the brothel, The Grand Balcony. She is first and foremost a businesswoman, concerned with keeping costs down while making customers happy. Irma is rather callous towards the feelings of her employees, as long as they are in fine physical form for their work. Her favorite employee is Carmen, who used to be a whore but now only does bookkeeping and handles details. Carmen is a source of information and reliable ally for Irma.

Irma becomes increasingly worried about the bloody revolution that is going on in the streets. She is worried that it will affect her business, if not shut her down entirely. Her protector and lover, George, the Chief of Police, promises to protect her and her business, but employees are killed and the Grand Balcony is damaged.

Because the Queen is dead, the Court Envoy calls on Irma to play the Queen to appease the masses. She takes on the role, and some of her clients continue to play their lofty roles. Though this seems to quell the rebellion temporarily, the revolution flares up again. After the Chief of Police decides to lock himself up in his tomb, Irma realizes this role is over and closes up the brothel, and will start it up again later.

The Judge

The Judge is one of the clients at the Grand Balcony. He is not actually a judge, but a customer who plays one in his fantasy. As a client, the Judge is very into his role to the point that he scares the whore who plays the thief though the revolution-related events outside clutter his conscience. Later, when Irma plays the Queen, the Judge plays his role for real for a short time. He enjoys the power that comes with it, though he is flustered and unsure of himself. He is dismissed by Irma when the Chief of Police decides to entomb himself and the revolution heats up again.

The Queen

See Irma

Roger

Roger was employed at the Grand Balcony as a plumber at one time. He became involved with Chantal, and is now part of the revolution. Though he supports that cause, he does not want Chantal to be the greater symbol of the rebellion. After she is

assassinated and the revolution quelled (at least temporarily), Roger appears at the Grand Balcony. He wants to play the Chief of Police in his fantasy. He does so, but clumsily. He does not understand how he should act. When the fantasy is deemed over by Carmen, Roger refuses to end it and leave. He wants the destiny of the Chief of Police and himself to be intertwined. Roger castrates himself and is dragged out by Carmen.

Themes

Illusion and Reality

The primary theme in *The Balcony* is the tension between the illusions that rule inside the brothel and the intrusion of reality that rules on the outside. Common men pay money to live out their fantasies in The Grand Balcony. They primarily choose to be men in power (a judge, a bishop, a general), though some who are rich chose to be poor (a tramp). Details are important to these men: their costumes must be perfectly realistic for their fantasies to be enjoyed. Irma, the brothel owner, is concerned that everything meets their specifications, but within reasonable costs.

Irma goes to great lengths to keep reality out of The Grand Balcony. The walls and windows are somewhat soundproof, though the sounds of the revolution that is going on in the streets cannot be fully excised. The exclusion of the outside world is reinforced by the number of mirrors and screens that emphasize the illusion created for the customers. Eventually, though, the reality of the revolution marches into the brothel and takes it over. When the Queen and the Royal Palace are taken over, some of Irma's clients are compelled by the Court Envoy to play their roles for real, while she plays the Queen. This is to keep the status quo in tact in the face of the rebellion, and works for a short time. But the desire for illusion conflicts with the realism of reality, and the experience is not satisfying for everyone concerned. For Genet, illusion is superior to reality, though the latter is necessary for illusion to exist.

Death

An undercurrent of death permeates *The Balcony.* Though only two minor characters (Chantal and Arthur) actually die in the course of the play, death is used as a symbol of immortality. Irma's clients often discuss its power. Chantal, a former prostitutes who leaves The Grand Balcony to join the rebellion with her lover, is chosen as a figurehead or symbol for the revolution, and she is assassinated on the balcony at the brothel. Upon her death, she is co-opted by the side of the royals and made a symbol of martyrdom for their side. Arthur's death is by a stray bullet, though inside the brothel proper. He is laid out in the funeral room there.

Death is used slightly differently in *The Balcony* for the Chief of Police, George. He becomes upset during the course of the play when he learns that no one has asked to play him in their fantasy. He believes that when one is imitated, one becomes immortal. His memory and importance will live on because his role has become part of the canon. After the first man has chosen to play him Roger in scene nine George descends into the mausoleum that has been built for him by Irma. He intends to spend 2,000 years there. The mausoleum and the fact that customers will pay to play him are symbols of his greatness in life and death.

Value of Rituals and Symbols

Throughout *The Balcony*, rituals and symbols are depicted as both important and perverted representations of values. The clients of The Grand Balcony brothel insist that the rituals and symbols of the people they are depicting in their fantasies (judge, general, etc.) are as realistic as possible. In this sense, rituals and symbols are respected. Irma spends money to insure that these things are as accurate as possible. Rituals and symbols provide the realism needed to insure that illusion has substance.

When the Queen and the Royal Court are presumed dead, Irma and the clients who play the Judge, the General, and the Bishop assume these roles. They become symbols for the masses to rally around and believe in, yet they do not really know how to be these people. When photographs are taken of the Bishop, for example, he has no idea how he should really act. He finds the role too demanding, as do the others. Here, rituals and symbols are more empty and meaningless. They are used as a tool to manipulate people into remaining loyal to the royal side. When divorced from their fantasy element and forced into more realistic uses, rituals and symbols become perverted.

Style

Setting

The Balcony is an absurdist play set in no specific time or place. Nearly all of the action of the play takes place inside The Grand Balcony, a brothel that serves the fantasies of its male clientele. The brothel has different rooms, or studios, that are set up to fulfill these fantasies. The studios shown in

The Balcony include the Funeral Studio, where Arthur is laid out after his death, and the Mausoleum studio, which was specially built for the Chief of Police and those who wish to act as him in a fantasy. Irma also has her own room, with a video monitoring system so she can supervise action in the other rooms. Scene eight takes place on a balcony attached to the Grand Balcony. The only action that takes place outside of the Grand Balcony is scene six, which occurs in a public square held by the rebels. It is within viewing distance of the brothel.

Props, Costumes, and Scenic Decor

Key to the construction and themes of *The Balcony* are the props, costumes, and scenic decor, especially, the mirrors. To fulfill the fantasies of the clients and emphasize the illusionary element of the play, these costumes and other props must be as realistic as possible. Irma complains of the cost of creating such detail, but later, when she is pressed into service to play the Queen for the public and her clients assume their fantasy roles as well, they seem to have been accepted as the real thing. The studios shown in *The Balcony* include the Funeral Studio, where Arthur is laid out after his death. Props, costumes, and mirrors underscore the tension between illusion and reality in the play.

Play-within-a-Play

In the course of *The Balcony*, there are several smaller playlets that are acted out. These are the fantasies of the clients, with the men directing the course by their words and actions. The man who plays the Bishop had his whore confess her sins to him. The client who assumes the role of the Judge has his prostitute play a thief who must confess to her crimes and be struck by an executioner. After much pompous talk, the Judge is forced to crawl by the executioner. The General has his woman act like a horse, and rides her to what he hopes will be his heroic death.

Many such minidramas take place within the Grand Balcony, all monitored by Irma. The most important play-within-a-play occurs in scene nine, when Roger asks to assume the role of the Chief of Police. As the chief, a hero, Roger is exalted by a male slave, who is one of many who has worked on his tomb. When the fantasy is deemed over, Roger refuses to leave and give up the illusion of power. He wants his destiny to merge with

that of the chief, but when he is refused, he castrates himself. Such playlets emphasize the illusionary nature of the play, and, in a bigger sense, reality.

Addressing the Audience

At the end of *The Balcony*, after the revolution starts up again and the Chief of Police descends into his mausoleum to live for 2000 years, Irma and Carmen clean up the tattered brothel. As she does so, Irma breaks the illusion of the play and says a few lines directly to the audience. She promises to rebuild her house of illusions, but also tells her listeners that what they will find in their home is even more false than what they found here. Genet attacks bourgeois social values, pointing out how fake he believes they really are.

Historical Context

In the mid- to late-1950s, France was still recovering from World War II. During the much of the war, the country was occupied by Nazi Germany. While there were those who collaborated with the Germans including the Vichy government, which ruled France under the direction of the Germans an underground movement also existed. The French Resistance worked against the Germans. Under these conditions, France suffered greatly politically, socially, and economically.

After the end of World War II, France returned to freedom and held free elections. When the so-called Fourth Republic came into existence in 1946, immense political change took place. The prewar government was rejected, in favor of parties that leaned to the left. Though the structure of the government remained generally the same, there were some reforms and the French people were more invigorated. By the mid-1950s, economic recovery came into its own, soon becoming the biggest economic boom in Europe. Despite inflation problems, France's stature had increased in Europe and throughout the world.

One area that France had been playing a leading role in for many years was culture. The Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus came into vogue in the postwar period. Simone de Beauvoir was a leading novelist and philosopher, publishing *Les Mandarins* in 1954. In France, a new type of novel emerged in the mid-1950s, nontraditional in forms and ideas and philosophical in nature. Theater had been subsidized by the French government in the provinces since the late 1940s. Absurdism came to the fore at this time, with Eugene Ionesco and Samuel Beckett being two of the best playwrights in this genre. There was also a new movement in poetry, the so-called poetry of resistance.

France did have political problems, primarily related to their colonial holdings in Algeria and Vietnam. The situation in Vietnam had been heating for many years, and would get worse. Fighting in Vietnam began in 1946, with the advent of a nationalist movement headed by communist Ho Chi Minh. In 1954, the country was divided into north and south parts, as a temporary measure to end conflict. However, this eventually led to the Vietnam War, which would engulf much of world through the mid-1970s, when the communists won. France itself got out of the Vietnam War in the mid-1960s.

Another French colony was even more problematic. Algeria, located in North Africa, was a bigger and more immediate threat. In 1954, Algerian nationalists began rebelling against their French colonial overlords. Within four years, nearly 500,000 French soldiers had been sent there to keep the motherland's hold on Algeria. The situation in Algeria led to two other North African colonies of France getting their freedom in 1956, Tunisia and Morocco.

The Fourth Republic fell in 1958, primarily because of the situation in Algeria. That year, Charles de Gaulle, a French war hero and political leader, came back into power in the so-called Fifth Republic. Again, the face of the French political landscape changed. By

the early 1960s, war with Algeria ended. Most of France's colonies in Africa, including Algeria, achieved self-rule within a few years. For the moment, France was involved in no real conflicts.

Critical Overview

Though *The Balcony* was Genet's first commercially successful play, the playwright was intensely critical of its first production in London in 1957. Genet believed it was not true to his text; that it was too ordinary and small, whereas his text called for big, theatrical, and bawdy. Martin Esslin, in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd*, called it "a brave attempt in a small theatre and with modest means." Genet was never happy with way the play was produced.

When *The Balcony* debuted in New York City in March 1960, critics were mixed in their reactions. While many believed that they were viewing a play with deep meaning and implications, they were somewhat confused by its complexities. As Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* wrote, "It would take a committee of alienists to define all the abnormalities contained in this witches' cauldron, and a committee of logicians to clarify the meanings. But anyone can see that M. Genet is a powerful writer."

Correctly guessing that *The Balcony* would have a long run in New York (it ended up being 672 performances at the Circle in the Square Theatre), Donald Malcolm of the *New Yorker* argued that the play "satisfies to a degree hitherto unknown our contemporary dramatic appetite for violence, perversion, and squalor ... [T]hese qualities emerge, in the most natural way imaginable, from the story." But Malcolm did not believe that Genet's commentary on every day society was completely correct. He pointed out that judges, for example, did not wield the kind of power that he claimed.

Others, including *New Republic* critic Robert Brustein, saw Genet's social commentary as relevant, deep and complicated. He wrote "Fashioned by a genius of criminality and revolt, the play is absolutely stunning in its twists and turns of thought, and (despite occasional thefts from [Ugo] Betti, [Jean] Cocteau, and the Surrealists) highly original in its use of the stage. In its interpretation of history, it is both provocative and scandalous." *New York Times* critic Atkinson also commented on the play's symbolic complexities, calling them "a riddle wrapped in an enigma" and noting that "Everything means more than the author or the characters say."

Harold Clurman of *The Nation* generally concurred with Brustein and Atkinson's assessment of *The Balcony's,* complexities, but attributed them to Genet being more than an playwright. In Clurman's estimation, Genet was an artist. Clurman wrote "*The Balcony* has its obscurities no explanatory gloss will elucidate its every metaphorical twist but in this it resembles every true work of art; true art always retains a certain elusiveness because the emanations of the artist's unconscious project beyond the control of his will."

Other critics also saw *The Balcony* as more than just a play. Lionel Abel in a 1960 article in the *Partisan Review* believed that with *The Balcony* Genet wrote an excellent example of a metaplay. Abel argued that "[I]n a way Genet shares the weakness of his revolutionaries in *The Balcony*; he too would like to create something other than the

kind of play he can make so magnificently; this master of the metaplay would like to create tragedy."

Scholars began analyzing *The Balcony* from the beginning. Many compared it to other writers or theatrical movements (for example, the Marquis de Sade and Greek traditions), giving Genet's work a context. One such scholar, RimaDrell Reck, argued in her 1962 article in *Yale French Studies* "Jean Genet deliberately and drastically creates plays which revolve about ritual and theatrical illusions designed at once to suggest the Attic theatre and point out the distance between it and our own age."

Over the years, *The Balcony* continued to be performed and analyzed. Commentators often focused on the play's shortcomings, many of which were the same as those criticized in 1960. For example, in Esslin' s book *The Theatre of the Absurd,* written in 1980, he noted its unevenness and lack of a coherent plot. Esslin wrote, "in *The Balcony* Genet is faced with the need to provide a plot structure that will furnish the rationale for his mock-liturgy and mock-ceremonial. And he has not quite succeeded in integrating plot and ritual."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Annette Petruso is a freelance author and screenwriter in Austin, TX. In the following essay, Petruso explores the complex depiction of women in The Balcony.

Of Jean Genet's *The Balcony*, Robert Brustein noted in the *New Republic* that "Genet is less interested in the titillations of pornography than its philosophical implications; and the erotic scenes are merely a prologue to his theaticalized version of society, of life, and of history." Though *The Balcony* is absurdist, it is revealing in its contradictions about women and their place in the world. Genet's version of women's role in society is complex and paradoxical, as it was in the reality of his time and still is today. This essay explores these contradictions and the powerful role women play in *The Balcony.*

There are three major female characters: Irma, who runs and owns the brothel, the Grand Illusion; Carmen, Irma's bookkeeper and former whore; and Chantal, another former whore in the brothel. There are also other various brothel prostitutes, who act the fantasies with the clientele. An interesting aspect of the play is that the actual implications of sex are minimal in the play. The prostitution at the Grand Illusion seems to be more about acting out men's power fantasies than the actual sex act. This ever-shifting balance of power between men and women is a key to interpreting the role women play in *The Grand Balcony.*

On the surface, the women that are the least powerful seem to be the actual whores who service the Grand Illusion's clients. There are several specifically depicted in the play and a few others talked about, only three of which are discussed here. Each of these three women plays a role for a male customer. The variety of roles reflect a spectrum of power. It is also important to note that the women work for another woman, Irma, who is discussed later in the essay.

In scene one, the prostitute has just played the role of a sinner who has confessed to a client who plays a Bishop and received his blessing. The Bishop is concerned with her honesty: he wants her sins to be real so that he has the power of forgiveness. She tells him what he wants to hear, though he knows the sins are probably not true. The women are there to help him believe he has power. Though subservient, the prostitute does have his vulnerabilities under her control. The possibility exists that she could hurt him. However, she is paid to be positive, and she does not do anything to really ruin the illusions he paid for.

Another whore plays a thief who is appearing before a judge in scene two. Also part of the fantasy is an executioner, played by a male employee of the brothel, Arthur. This scene contains a more overt power tug of war. The Judge is subservient at one moment wanting to lick her foot then domineering the next. She is new to the brothel, and does her best to support the reality he wants to create. He wants to be both a hero and a man who decides the fate of a woman. The Judge asks the executioner to hit her hard, so that he can intervene. Yet by the end of the scene, she is humiliating him again, making him crawl. As in the first scene, the woman plays what she is paid for, though she has a

measure of control over how the Judge feels about himself. She could easily ruin his illusion of power.

In scene three, the whore does not even get to be human. She is a horse for a General, who rides her to his death and certain glory. Throughout the scene, he refers to her as if she is a horse and he is in complete command of her. Like the Judge, he also wants to be a hero. When he hears another woman scream, he wants to save her, but the demands of his fantasy take all his attention. Yet even the woman who plays the horse has some measure over power. She is the one who brings the general's uniform in and dresses him in it. She directs the flow of his fantasy. Though all three of these women appear to be objectified by these men, they do have power over them. They ultimately run their fantasies. Without them, there would be no fantasies.

One woman who lives a fantasy for herself in the course of *The Balcony* is Chantal. She has recently left the brothel with Roger, the plumber, and joined the rebellion that is going on outside. Chantal has much power. First, Roger is in love with her and would do anything for her. Chantal's feelings for him are not as specific, giving her the upper hand in that relationship. With his reluctant consent, she leaves him and his unit to become a symbol and figurehead leader for the rebellion at large. As a whore, she was used to playing the role of a symbol and cannot resist playing it on a bigger scale.

Chantal becomes a rallying point for the movement. Chantal's power in this sense is short-lived. She is assassinated (perhaps by the Bishop) when she visits the balcony of the Grand Balcony, where Irma has taken on the role of the queen. When Chantal is killed, the power of her image is further increased. She is co-opted by the other side and made into a saint. It is as if what Chantal stood for is both pure and sinful, a contradiction commonly ascribed to women. She could not live a long life as both a woman and a symbol because she might hold too much "real" power. By being killed, she (and her illusion) could be controlled.

Carmen is one of the only whores to see the problems with playing roles. She no longer plays subservient roles in the clientele's fantasies, and is now the bookkeeper to Irma, the brothel owner and manager. No specific reason is given for Carmen's choice, though she often played the Immaculate Mother. It seems that Carmen wants to play a real life role: as mother to her young daughter who lives in a nursery in the country. In an attempt to control Carmen, Irma emphasizes that such a role does not really exist for her. Carmen already accepts this by herself. She realizes that she has chosen her fate and will not leave the "house of illusions." Reality will probably be worse, if not deadly. It is as if Genet is emphasizing that society believes that a woman's place is in the home, even it is a brothel.

But this idea is turned on its head by Irma, the ultimate contradiction of women's roles and power. The Grand Illusion is *her's* in most every way. Irma controls how long fantasies are. She tells the Bishop in scene one that they are only two hours long, and gets peeved when he wants more. She oversees the purchasing of the costumes and props, makes sure the details are to her client's liking, but arguing points when she feels

she is correct. She puts off their complaints about the rebellion that is going on outside, appeasing the rebels but only to a point.

Irma also controls her workers. Carmen criticizes the fact that they always have to be serious. They cannot smile with clients, or have any hints of love because it would ruin the illusion that they are trying to create to keep the men happy. Irma will not let them talk about their work once it is done. She responds to Carmen's criticisms by trying to further control her, and warning her not to cross her. Irma is rather cruel and callous, and will not compromise to make her employees happier in their work.

The only thing that Irma does care about is money and her jewels, though she does not perform in any of the fantasies to further her business. She worries about protection and management and the like. In this sense, she is very masculine. She even has a male body to rely on. Her former lover and current business partner the Chief of Police forced her to hire Arthur, the man who plays the executioner. At one point, Irma describes Arthur to George, the Chief of Police, in these terms: "I'm his man and he relies on me, but I need that rugged shop-window dummy hanging on to my skirts. He's my body, as it were, but set beside me." However, Arthur is killed soon after she says this.

Therein lies the biggest contradiction about Irma. Though she is obviously in charge, she relies on the protection and support of the Chief of Police. Irma worries when he does not show up on time, and does much to feed his ego and his illusion of power. Yet, like Chantal, she also becomes a public symbol of power, greater in many ways than even George. When the Queen becomes incapacitated, Irma is asked by the Court Envoy to take her place, a physical symbol for the people to rally around. Though George is momentarily jealous because she would be above him, he accepts her decision to play the role because it might benefit him. Irma succeeds for a short time, though her power is undermined by the three customers who take on the real roles of Bishop, Judge, and General, and by the resumption of the rebellion. Irma's role as queen is short-lived, but she survives her moments as a symbol intact and stronger. If nothing else, Irma is a survivor.

In *The Balcony,* women often seem in power. A Queen runs their unnamed land. But she seems to be nothing more than a replaceable figurehead. Chantal plays the same role for the rebels. The whores play seemingly interchangeable roles for their clients. Even Irma, strong and powerful as she may be, is, in many ways, no more than the brothel's figurehead for the Chief of Police. Women have no real control in Genet's play. Like everything else in *The Balcony*, it is a (profitable) illusion.

Source: Annette Petruso, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

In this excerpt from "Society as a Brothel: Genet's Satire in 'The Balcony,'" Bermel explores the implementation of imagination to portray satire.

Genet's plays, like Pirandello's, have become a treasure house for the rococo critical imagination. As the visitor basks in the heady atmosphere the mirrors, the screens, masks, grandiose costumes and *cothurni*, the role-playing, verbal efflorescence, and paradoxes he burbles about the undecipherable nature of levels, dimensions, contexts, multiple images, loci, ritualism, and infinities of reflections....

Genet takes for granted [in *The Balcony* the] confusion between sexual and social obsessions. In the brothel's studios the devotees abandon themselves to sexual consecration; the house of pleasure is a house of worship. In it each man finds a contrary, double satisfaction: he acquires a feeling of potency from the clothes and the role he puts on; at the same time he abases himself in that role. Or rather, he abases the role and its clothing in order that it may serve his sexual satisfaction. There is then an element of masochism in each of the aberrants' personalities....

From the first Genet intermingles sexual and religious ceremonies. Scene One sets the tone by introducing us to the Bishop in a studio set that represents a sacristy. He wears robes of exaggerated size so that he looks larger than human, like a principal in a Greek tragedy....

Now, although we are led to believe that this Bishop is played by a gas man, we never see the gas man, only the Bishop. There may be a gas man in the story but there is none in the action; and if a gas man in Bishop's apparel differs dramatically from a bishop in bishop's apparel, Genet declines to show us the difference; if we insist that this is a gas man *metaphorically* wearing a bishop's mask, that mask then has the same lineaments as the face behind it or else it is transparent or else it is not a mask any longer but has become a face....

[The other patrons of the brothel] seem to don roles the way some tribesmen assume charms, as a plea to heaven for virility and safety. But Genet shows us only the roles. These roles *are* the characters. ...

In [Pirandello's] *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the six characters are actually in search of an audience. An author may dream up the Father, but it takes a spectator to recognize him as that character....

Genet introduces something like this reciprocity into the action of *The Balcony.* To be the Bishop, the character needs an "opposite," a penitent, somebody who will confess to him and whose sins he will absolve, somebody who will certify him as the Bishop.. . . But if the function of the opposites is to take the kinkies seriously and attribute roles to them, the girls seem unable to take themselves seriously *as opposites*. They keep breaking out of their parts and virtually winking at the audience: in the Judge's scene the

Executioner does "exchange a wink with the Thief." These girls are never anything but whores.

Later in the play the opposites become dispensable. When the Envoy asks the kinkies to drive through the city in a coach as the "real" Bishop, Attorney-General, and General, they feel nervous about abandoning their brothel scenarios and translating themselves from private images in Irma's studios into public images in the world at large.... When their public performance begins, the only doubt that arises is whether they will sustain their parts convincingly or look like kinkies.

At this point, in the absence of the brothel girls, the task of being a collective "opposite" or role-confirmer falls to the general public. We do not see this public, but we do learn subsequently that it accepted the Bishop, Judge, and General for real, without question. Possibly the public was blinded by the "gold and glitter" that surrounded the dignitaries. In any event, it responded favorably; it threw flowers and cheers at them; it even blew them kisses. And why not? We, the other "general public," have already attributed these roles to the kinkies; to us they have *become what they pretended to be....*

Irma is another case in point. The Envoy asks her to stand in for the missing queen. . .. Irma is not impersonating the queen, but extending her own personality. She is playing *herself*, and the Envoy, who later says she made a first-rate queen, functions as her opposite. As though to underscore this conclusion, at a certain point in the text Genet drops her name and starts calling her the Queen; it is the most natural thing in the world for this procuress to assume royalty.

What does Genet mean by this demonstration? That life is all pretext, appearances, theatre? I think he is driving us toward a narrower, sharper, and more satirical conclusion: bishops, judges, and generals are kinkies; queens are procuresses; opposites (the public) who take these figures at their dressed-up value and serve them are whores: revolutionary slogans and symbols (Chantal) are whore-mongering.

Genet likens this state of affairs to the performance of a play. But Irma's much-quoted final speech, which compares her brothel with a theatre, has been frequently misunderstood:

In a little while, I'll have to start all over again... put all the lights on again... dress up.... *(A cock crows)* Dress up ... ah, the disguises! Distribute roles again ... assume my own.... *(She stops in the middle of the stage, facing the audience.)* ... Prepare yours ... judges, generals, bishops, chamberlains, rebels who allow the revolt to congeal, I'm going to prepare my costumes and studios for tomorrow... You must now go home, where everything you can be quite sure will be even falser than here....

She is not saying that life is less "real" than Genet's theatre (or her brothel) is. To claim this on his behalf would be to deprive the play of its application to life. She is insisting that there are more disguises and pretense in life than in the theatre, and that in life the disguises are harder to discern. A play can show us, more clearly than a scrutiny of life can, what life is really about. It can reveal kinks and shams for what they are. It can do a

sorting job, bring life into focus. It can make us laugh at these characters ... until we realize that we are laughing at ourselves. For if we have accepted what the play says, we are the people who make bishops, judges, and generals out of kinkies, and queens out of whore-mistresses.

Most of the criticism of *The Balcony* fastens on to other aspects of it, in particular the rituals, disguises, and mirrors, which are constantly held up as prima-facie evidence of Genet's contempt for reality: his masks beneath masks, reflections within reflections, screens behind screens, and other infinite recessions....

What is a ritual? It is a prearranged ceremony. A church service is a ritual; so is a public parade. They go according to form, according to plan. There are no serious hitches, no divergences from the timetable or program. If a horse in a parade kicks an onlooker or if one of the ceremonial figures passes out, that part of the ritual resembles theatre. But ritual is the opposite of theatre, just as the girl who plays the Penitent is the opposite of the Bishop. She defines him, and ritual defines theatre; it marks one of theatre's boundaries by being what theatre is not: predictable, self-contained, formal....

[The screens, disguises and mirrors] are part of a device that Genet uses theatrically, not ritualistically. And far from telling us that nothing is real, they tell us that in the brothel, as in the playhouse, everything is adaptable....

Irma thoughtfully provides a mirror for each studio. The Bishop gazes into his and is smitten with his image.... Up to now he has not tasted the power of being a bishop; he uses the image in the mirror for erotic stimulation, yet even as he does he appeases his power-lust by profaning the robes and "destroying" their "function."

The Judge, too, has a mirror available to him, but does not use it. Instead he looks at beefy Arthur, the male whore, and talks lovingly to him as though to an idealized version of himself, heavy with tangible musculature....

The mirror in the General's studio has the same purpose again. Admiring his image in it, the General sees shining back at him an historical validation: he is the hero of Austerlitz, Napoleon vanquishing the Austrians. ... As in the two previous scenes, the kinky loves his image in the mirror because what he sees there is *himself transfigured.*

As an element in the stage design, the mirrors have a further purpose, suspense. Each one is angled to reflect to the audience part of Irma's room. We will not see that room until Scene Five, but the mirrors forecast it. They alert us to Irma's omnipresence as the brothel's grandmistress, and they hint at the immensity of the premises. .. .

By reflecting the studios and Irma's room to each other, they enlarge the brothel and unify the scenes. They also enlarge the studios: mirrors make a room look artificially bigger.

Genet's language serves as another means of enlargement and ratification. The Bishop says, "We must use words that magnify." And most of the characters do. Their speeches move effortlessly out of conversation and into clusters and imagery. Genet sometimes

handles images the way a writer like Shaw handles logic, with comic hyperbole. By exalting the dialogue, raising it beyond simple meanings, he frees it from the constraints of everyday banter and attains a language that can cope with complicated states of consciousness.

The brothel ... seems to resemble a vast, rotating movie lot with the sound stages distributed around the hub of Irma's office. Genet does not provide a full list of the studios, but if we visualize each one as a miniature of some activity outside the theatre and brothel, the brothel is a miniature of society as a whole. The mirrors in each scene reflect the world to itself....

As a satire of society, *The Balcony* laughs at men in authority as they seek for images of themselves that they can love. It laughs more bitterly at men without authority who defer to those images (attribute them) and even worship them. Both groups are taking part in a game. X names himself a judge or bishop or general. He drapes himself in an awesome outfit, grows confident from the feeling of being dressed up and from the sight of his magnified reflection, and so enlarges himself artificially in the eyes of other men. His old self or personality fades away.

These games are what gives the play its unity of tone, games such as i'll-be-bishop-and-you-be-penitent. But they are games played in earnest; games propelled by desperate intentions; games that are liable, because of their peculiarities, to invoke the unexpected; games of life and death.

Now, games are play and the gerund *playing* has two principal meanings: it means enjoyment, as in a house of pleasure; it also means mimesis. ... The Bishop begins by masturbating or "playing" with himself; he ends by wishing to play with other men's lives, to move them about like pieces: "Instead of blessing and blessing and blessing until I've had my fill, I'm going to sign decrees and appoint priests."…

Theatre, as an arena for games, plays by heightening its effects. In his playhouse-brothel Genet takes this heightening to a personal extreme. He pours into his drama a sumptuous language, bulks out his conceptually big characters with padded costumes; and seizes other theatrical opportunities, such as keeping visible that token of the post-Renaissance, indoor theatre, the chandelier.

As part of the heightening procedure he plants contradictions in the characters' desires: they feel pulled between playing games of sex (the mastery of themselves) and games of authority (the mastery of others). Genet marries the contradictions, without trying to resolve them, in an ingenious way: he implies that power over oneself and power over others can be achieved simultaneously by playing games of death.

In the early scenes he seems to show us the brothel as a theatricalization of life, of real life, with a real bishop, judge, and general giving rein to their all-too-real kinks in order to live at the top of their bent. But there are plenty of hints that death is a more attractive game for them to play than life is....

At last it is the turn of the gaudiest character in *The Balcony* to play the game of death. He is the Police Chief, Georges by name, the ultimate provenience of power in the state....

Genet's exquisite irony intensifies. Georges decides that his ideal memorial, his death-in-life, would be for somebody to impersonate him in the brothel. While the impersonator mimics him, he will mimic death by disappearing to "wait out the regulation two thousand years," the equivalent of the Christian era. The two millennia will sanctify him, much as the Church (the Bishop), the Law (the Judge), and the Military (the General) have been sanctified by the two millennia since the death of Christ and the decline of Rome. He will, we assume, mimic resurrection too when he feels like it, and re-emerge as top dog in the state....

Fortunately for Georges, Roger the defeated revolutionary comes into the brothel expressly to impersonate him. No sooner is he inside a studio (which is got up to look like a mausoleum) than Roger is awarded his "opposite," a slave, to attribute to him the role of Police Chief. But Roger is still secretly a rebel. And in him the revolution twitches its final, futile defiance.

He ends his scenario by making "the gesture of castrating himself." With this gesture he hopes to mutilate the image of the Police Chief as a man of power.... For the purposes of the play, he is dead. And his gesture has gone awry. Trying to discredit Georges, he has succeeded only in becoming Georges' opposite, an impotent, and in confirming Georges....

Georges, Genet's most savage portrait in the play, is so unmanned that he cannot play out his own fantasies. He must wait until somebody does the job for him by proxy anybody, no matter who, an avowed revolutionary if necessary just so long as he does not get hurt. Now he can go into his two-thousand-year hibernation. A studio has been prepared. It is a mocked-up replica of a tremendous piece of architecture still in the planning stage. It incorporates law courts, opera houses, railroad stations, pagodas, monuments. ... But this edifice is no less than a magnification of the brothel, right down to the mirrors. Like the brothel, a floating balcony, it will "sail in the sky" on top of its mountains. Here Georges's image will live on with its wound, while he plays the game of death in a brothel mausoleum. The image will evoke the images we retain of other symbolically castrated heroes: the shorn Samson, the blinded Oedipus, Philoctetes and his rotting foot, Christ crucified.

A magnified image in a magnified brothel. So much, says Genet, for your saints and heroes....

Source: Albert Bermel, "Society as a Brothel: Genet's Satire in 'The Balcony,'" in *Modern Drama*, September, 1976, pp. 265-80.

Critical Essay #3

In this excerpt, David I. Grossvogel relates "The Balcony" to "a house of illusions."

The balcony [in Genet's dramas] is a stage upon Genet's stage, a place of sumptuousness, triumph, and make-believe.

The Balcony is a conscious stage from the first.... But this stage is also ... "the most artful, yet the most decent house of illusions." A house of illusions is the traditional French name for a brothel, a place for the creation and enjoyment of intimate fancies. ... No problem, says Genet, should be resolved in the imaginary realm, especially since the dramatic solution is an indistinct part of the closed social structure. It is rather the play that should bring its reality to the spectator. And so Genet has placed a mirror on the right-hand wall of his set which reflects an unmade bed that would be, if this stage room had a normal extension, in the midst of the orchestra's spectators. The playgoer does not enter into *The Balcony* with impunity once the curtain is up, he is in a bawdy house.

But he is also in the theater. The set *appears* to represent "a sacristy," formed by three folding screens of blood-red cloth: The sacristy is where the priest puts on the holy vestments, the alchemist's kitchen (in *The Maids*, the scullery was referred to as the sacristy). Note that the setting merely appears to represent; this is a stage, not the real thing. The spectator must not attempt to fool himself; if he makes of this a real sacristy, it loses its virtues of staginess and mystery, and the wellspring of ritual turns into a dressing room. It is made of folded screens [a later play is called *Folding Screens*], those tenuous walls that are suggestion, not substance. And finally, the set is blood red, the color of the sacrificial and the sexual acts the sacred ritual of death and rebirth as life, or as beauty, according to its moment. . . .

[There are in *The Balcony*] moments of illusion ... for the private enjoyment of certain people on stage who are not so very different from the spectator that participant watching the proceedings from behind a peephole that has the full dimensions of the proscenium. The half-naked girls in the sadistic sex play are exhibited to the spectator as well as to the actor in his role as brothel customer bishop, judge, general, and so on. The world which these create in the stage privacy of their own mind is just as much the spectator's; the objective stimuli are the same.

To this dimension which incriminates him, the spectator is asked to add another for which the evidence is less explicit: it is that of the revolution [taking place outside the brothel], echoed in the gunfire and the concerns of the principals on stage. The contaminated spectator participates immediately in only one level of the actor's reality, for the actor on stage plays a role concerned with events other than merely those of the brothel....

[Genet] contrasts with the sealed world of the Balcony the world of the revolutionaries. These are by definition the ones who don't play; they are ... the reality of their action.

The brothel is their symbolic enemy since its life principle esthetic distance that separates the performer from his act would be their death; for them, "hand-to-hand fighting eliminates distance." These priests of factuality are solemn. The danger to their revolution does not come from want of strength; it comes from lack of purity. The moment their solemnity is in doubt, the moment their action takes on the appearance of a game, they will find themselves defeated even in victory, having merely replaced the old order by another image of itself. Theirs is the struggle of the purposeful against the purposeless; when they have won, they will *organize* their freedom and their relaxation, their festivities and their ritual. Their greatest victory has been won not in the streets but through conversion: one of the revolutionary leaders, Roger, has brought over to their side a prostitute from the Balcony the singer Chantal. And it is out of that victory that defeat will spread to the revolutionary camp. Chantal becomes the illusion which even the revolutionaries now require in the fire of action, the myth a symbol singing on the barricades. The revolutionary image must die, confused with the image of that against which it was directed, in order for the revolution to succeed....

The Balcony is largely an expository play, a commentary upon the nature of reality and illusion and upon the function of the stage. *The Blacks*... is the play based on that theory.... In *The Blacks*, Genet demands a public of whites. He is insistent upon this to the extent of asking for at least one ceremonial white spectator if the play were performed for an audience of blacks, in which case the entire performance would be addressed to that single figure. Lacking even that single sacrifice, the blacks would have to wear white masks. "And if the blacks refuse the masks, then a dummy will have to be used." Thus the magic object has now moved beyond the footlights into the hitherto privileged realm of the spectator. This play forces implementation of Genet's admonition: "Let no problem be resolved in the imaginary world."

The stage of Genet is more important than the spectator since it requires a specific spectator and, barring that, a spectator disguised. (If the stage should have to settle for a dummy white, Genet will have succeeded in inverting completely the order of things: the performers will then be playing for only themselves.) The play is first of all a game, a diversion whose full meaning will be made clear later on; on stage, it is a performance put on by blacks for the benefit of other blacks dressed and masked as whites. It will be, as conceived by blacks, a definition of blacks by whites for the benefit of an exclusively white audience. Its paraphernalia will be the customary flowers and a coffin, the sacred objects in a ritual concerned with beauty and death.

Genet begins this act of play by eliminating the stage. The curtain does not come up mechanically, but is drawn the human hand, portent of human mystery, replaces the machine. Thereafter, Genet adds the aspect of reality that ultimately defiles the mystery of the figureheads in *The Balcony* by making the reality of their first vision dependent upon the vision of someone else: these blacks are played by Negroes. At this level of reality, the spectator cannot detach himself from the stage....

Having stated the primacy of the stage-as-reality, Genet proceeds to subvert that reality in order to make of the stage the place of magic and mystery which it must also be if it is to sustain a genuine ritual; something is going on somewhere beyond this stage an

emissary occasionally breaks into the play with news from a world alien to the one of the play. The pseudo-whites on the dais are obviously actors, and not very good ones. Those who are below, performing for them, although they are ostensibly actors and spectators in a yet unspecified ritual are likewise learning their parts as actors and spectators. On each of these levels, the actual reality is being transformed into an artifact something which will acquire a dimension other than that of its immediacy as existence.

The "whites" upstairs have come to witness the ritual murder of one of their number. The "organizer," who is a central performer in every one of Genet's plays, is a black by the name of Archibald, and he begins the ritual. This is built around a catafalque on center stage which supposedly contains the remains of a white savagely murdered by the blacks. The play is defined by Archibald as ritual: tonight again, the play goes on, the scene is to be enacted once again. The theater is asserting its own reality; these blacks are *ideas* of blacks white pictures interpreted by the blacks themselves. Although they are Negroes, they now exist at their own level of the stage. In addition to being the generic reprobates, the outcasts that people each of Genet's stages, they are the shoeshine blacks, bad-smelling, lustful, murderous, childish and, withal, exotic symbols because of these nonwhite attributes and because of their physical power and beauty. The whites are similarly mental images, though less complex. They are the black's notion of white authority....

These "whites" try to see themselves as a necessary radiance; they are the born masters whose being legislates and justifies. The blacks, in addition to their own definition of themselves, are able to legitimate their personal feelings by this view of the "whites": their "black" hatred, their desire to possess and kill, rape, and obliterate those who need not justify their own rule over them, returns the stage gradually to the reality of that which encompasses even the stage. Genet is transferring to these blacks the prerogatives of the criminals, the perverts, and the inverts of his plays and novels. They are automatic forces attempting to become more consciously and more hugely *themselves*, in order to "deserve [the whites'] reprobation ..."....

The ritualistic killing . . . (for what is in the coffin is of little importance, "an old horse will do, or a dog or a doll"), that symbolic gesture, must thus not only destroy an individual, aiming at the destruction of a historical moment, but also the mask which that individual wears the black hatred worn by the white. . . .

This grisly tribal dance of passion and murder is suddenly broken short by Genet; the esthetic and voodoo object is cast aside. News comes from the outside which all the blacks gather about to hear, including those on the dais who remove their false white faces. ... [An emissary announces that a] congress has elected the one who is on his way to organize the fight: "Our aim is not only to corrode and dissolve the idea they'd like us to have of them, we must also fight them in their actual persons, in their flesh and blood." The Negroes on stage were real as "blacks," not as actors in their various roles. Now Genet actualizes even the roles which they were playing. Not only were the blacks representing to the symbolic whites on the dais the metaphor of an off-stage reality, but it turns out that the real plot is being performed beyond the theater. Blacks

are rising the world over ..., while these blacks on stage were providing a screen with their ritualistic actions . .., with whites drowsing in the illusion of a play as blacks rise to action before their sinking figures....

This drama is fraudulent. The white spectator (any spectator) who has seen *The Blacks*, or any play by Genet, has been deceived. He has seen a conjurer, or what Sartre calls an elegant ballet which is the orchestration of those inter-reflecting mirrors. At the moment of his most intense perception, that which he derives from the human revelation of the magical object, he has been concerned with only a small part of man, the part giving the illusion status as an essential human perplexity. But the human perplexity is far more complex. Man does not live by any single anguish nor, incidentally, by the raptures of an esthetic experience. ... [A] single fiber, however vibrant, does not define man.. . .

Source: David I. Grossvogel, " 'Jean Genet: The Difficulty of Defining' and 'Postscript,'" in *Four Playwrights and a Postscript,* Cornell University Press, 1962, pp. 135-74,175-99

Adaptations

The Balcony was adapted as a film in 1963. This version was produced by Lewis M. Allen, Ben Marlow, and Joseph Strick, and directed by Strick. It starred Shelley Winters as Irma.

Topics for Further Study

Research the theories of Antonin Artaud and the Theater of Cruelty. Analyze *The Balcony* in this context.

Compare and contrast *The Balcony* with Jean-Paul Sartre's play *No Exit* (1943). Especially focus on the characters of Irma in *The Balcony* and Inez in *No Exit*. How do the two women try to control their situation?

Do sociological and psychological research into women who become prostitutes. Why do women like Carmen chose to stay at the brothel instead of going to find their daughters? Is the portrayal of prostitution in *The Balcony* accurate?

Compare and Contrast

1956: A nationalist movement has been tearing apart the French colony of Algeria for two years. France has sent a significant number of troops there to hold on to the colony and quell the rebellion.

Today: Algeria has been a free, independent country since 1962, but has suffered economic crises in the late 1980s and 1990s.

1956: France is a center of the intellectual world, with leading philosophers such as Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir internationally recognized for their writing.

Today: France's stature in the intellectual community is greatly diminished. No French writer has come close to making the same impact Sartre and the like made in the 1940s and 1950s.

1956: France had a number of colonial holdings, including the troubled Algeria. Many countries, like Algeria, wanted their freedom from the motherland.

Today: France has few remaining colonial holdings.

1956: Television is just coming into its own as an entertainment medium. Video security does not really exist as a viable business.

Today: Television can be found in nearly every home in the United States. Video security is commonly found in many places of business. With the advent of the cheap, portable web camera, images can be recorded and seen over the Internet, any time, any where.

What Do I Read Next?

The Blacks (Les Negres) is a play by Genet that was first published in 1958. In the play, there is also tension between the status quo and a rebellion. Here, the rebels, black actors, mock white colonial society and, to some degree, win some measure of revenge.

The Visit, a play by Friedrich Durrenmatt that was first performed in 1960, concerns topics similar to *The Balcony.* The anti-capitalist play focuses on a woman who runs a brothel.

Our Lady of the Flowers (Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs) is a novel published by Genet in 1943. It concerns the importance of criminal activity in society and its rituals.

Tonight We Improvise is a play written by Luigi Pirandello in 1932. Here actors play roles in the play as well as in the play-within-the-play. The audience must play an active role, at least mentally, to separate the illusions.

The Chairs is an absurdist play written by Eugene lonesco in 1952. The very theatrical play concerns a couple whose world is constructed around an illusion, not reality.

Further Study

Jacobsen, Josephine, and William R. Mueller, *Ionesco and Genet: Playwrights of Silence*, Hill & Wang, 1968.

This study of absurdist theater focuses on the plays and themes of Genet and Eugene Ionesco.

Sartre, Jean-Paul, and Bernard Fechtman, trans., *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr,* Pantheon Books, 1963.

This biography, by one of France's leading intellectuals and friend of Genet, created and perpetuated many of the myths about Genet's life. This book allegedly gave Genet writers block for several years.

Thody, Philip, *Jean Genet: A Study of His Novels and Plays*, Stein and Day, 1968.

This book is a critical work which includes commentary on Genet's life and frequent themes in his works, as well as extensive criticism of each of his major plays and novels.

White, Edmund, *Genet: A Biography*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1993.

This in-depth biography of Genet tries to separate the fact from the myths that Genet and others created about himself.

Bibliography

Abel, Lionel, "Metatheater," in *Partisan Review*, Spring, 1960, pp. 324-30.

Atkinson, Brooks, review of *The Balcony*, in *The New York Times*, March 20, 1960, section 2, p. 1.

"Work by Genet Opens at Circle in Square," in *The New York Times,* March 4, 1960, p. 21.

Brustein, Robert, "The Brothel and the Western World," in *The New Republic*, March 28, 1960, pp. 21-22.

Clurman, Harold, review of *The Balcony,* in *The Nation,* March 26, 1960, pp. 282-83.

Esslin, Martin, *The Theatre of the Absurd,* Penguin Books, 1980, pp. 215-23.

Genet, Jean, *The Balcony,* Grove Press, 1966.

Malcolm, Donald, "Now Go Home," in *The New Yorker*, March 12, 1960, pp. 117-19.

Reck, Rima Drell, "Appearance and Reality in Genet's *Le Balcon*," in *Yale French Studies,* Spring-Summer, 1962, pp. 20-25.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Drama for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Drama for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535