The Bald Soprano Study Guide

The Bald Soprano by Eugène Ionesco

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Introduction

In 1948, Eugene Ionesco began writing *The Bald Soprano,* as he later confessed, almost in spite of himself, for by that tune he had come to despise the theater that he had much loved in his youth. What did intrigue him was the banality of the expressions used in an English-language phrase book. These phrases were the inspiration for this anti-play or parody, "a comedy of comedies." Although he set out to show how human discourse had devolved into a collection of empty platitudes and self-evident truisms, something that he believed was very distressing, his friends found his play very amusing, and they encouraged him to find a theater that would stage it One of these friends, Monique Saint-Come, showed the work to Nicolas Bataille, the director of a group of avant-garde actors working in Paris.

It was under Bataille's direction that *La Cantatrice chauve* was first produced in French at the Theatre des Noctambules in Paris on May 11, 1950. In rehearsal, the company had first tried staging the play as parody but had soon discovered that it worked best if presented as wholly serious drama, in the realistic mode of Ibsen. They had also experimented, trying several different endings, for example. Essentially, even after it opened, *La Cantatrice chauve* remained a work in progress.

The first staging was poorly received. Only the dramatist Armand Salacrou and the critic Jacques. Lemarchand praised it. However, the negative responses mattered little to Ionesco, who "suddenly .. . realized that it was his destiny to write for the theatre." He began a series of "anti-plays" that within a decade established his place in the new French theater, the group of avant-garde playwrights that included Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, and Jean Genet. In the 1950s, *La Canta-trice chauve* was translated into various languages and widely staged; by 1960, in the United Stales, where it had been translated and produced as *The Bald Soprano,* it was already being recognized as a modern classic, an important seminal work in the theater of the absurd, which by then was first coming into vogue in America.

Author Biography

Eugene Ionesco (Ionesco) was born in Slatina, Romania, on November 26, 1909, the son of a municipal official and a French mother working as a civil engineer for a Romanian railway company, Ionesco's early childhood was spent in Paris, where in 1912 his father took the family when he began studying law. A quarrelsome, choleric man, Ionesco's father treated his wife badly, leading to her attempted suicide and to Ionesco's life-long distaste for brutal authority figures.

In 1916, when Germany declared war on Romania, Ionesco's father left to return to Bucharest. He lost contact with the family. Without support, Ionesco's mother had to take a factory job, leaving her son to spend lonely months in a cheerless children's home near Paris. However, in 1922, at age thirteen, Ionesco had to return to Romania. His father had secretly divorced his mother, remarried, and gained legal custody of Eugene and Marilina, Ionesco's younger sister. The uprooting was traumatic, for it required that Ionesco learn a new language and once more live with his tyrannical father, whom he despised, both for his familial violence and his devious political fence straddling.

At the age of seventeen, Ionesco fled his father's house, finding work as a French tutor; in 1928 he entered the University of Bucharest to study French literature. During his studies, Ionesco made connections in Romanian literary circles and established a reputation as a poet and a critic. His work focused on novelists, poets, and philosophers rather than playwrights. He claimed, in fact, that the great French classical dramatists held little interest for him, though Shakespeare did. He would later come to writing plays almost by accident.

In 1938, Ionesco and his wife went to France so that he could complete a doctoral thesis on French poetry, and though World War II forced him to return to Romania, in 1942, having obtained an exit visa, he returned to France, living near poverty in Marseilles, At the war's end, he moved back to Paris, where he found work as a proofreader. Three years later, in 1948, the year his father died, Ionesco wrote *The Bald Soprano,* the first of his "anti-plays." The work was inspired by a language primer that Ionesco had used to learn English. At first writing in Romanian, Ionesco set out to parody the inane phrasing of the book's dialogue, but he recast it in French, giving it the title *La* ***Cantatrice*** *chauve.* In 1950, the year he acquired French citizenship, Ionesco was able to have the play produced at the Theatre des Noctambules in Paris before a small, largely unenthusiastic audience.

The work marked the debut of Ionesco as one of the new playwrights of the avant-garde theater centered in Paris and quietly launched a dramatic career that by the 1960s, his most prolific period, brought him world-wide acclaim. In 1970, he was elected to the Academie Francaise. Along with Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, and Arthur Adamov, Ionesco is now honored as a major seminal figure in the absurdist movement in France. He died on March 28, 1994.

Plot Summary

The Bald Soprano, a one-act "anti-play," opens in a "middle-class English" interior, furnished with typically English furniture and a typically English couple, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, whose first names remain unknown. It is an English evening, and the pair is engaged in English activities. He reads a newspaper while she darns socks. The silence is broken by an English clock that strikes seventeen times, prompting Mrs. Smith to remark that "it's nine o'clock."

Mrs. Smith recounts what the pair had for dinner, mentally wandering from the menu to the pair's children while Mr. Smith continues to read and click his tongue. He finally responds when she concludes that one Dr. MacKenzie-King was to be trusted because he underwent a liver operation before performing the same operation on a patient. They start a mild quarrel over the issue because the doctor's patient died, prompting Mr. Smith to conclude that the doctor was not conscientious.

After the clock strikes seven times, then three more times, Mr. Smith announces that Bobby Watson has died, something, presumably, that he has learned from the newspaper's obituaries. In the ensuing dialogue, the couple disclose that Bobby Watson was married to Bobby Watson, and, further, that there is whole clan of Bobby Watsons. Threaded through the Watson discussion are several inconsistencies and contradictions, so it is never clear, for example, whether the first named Bobby Watson had died recently, or one, or two, or three, or even four years before.

The discussion leads into a brief altercation. Mr. Smith accuses his wife of asking "idiotic questions," while she complains that men do nothing but sit around smoking and either powdering their noses and putting rouge on their lips or drinking heavily. Mr. Smith, apparently deaf to what Mrs. Smith has just said, asks her what she would say if she saw men behaving like women, powdering their noses, using rouge on then- lips, and consuming whiskey. When Mrs. Smith complains about his kind of joking, and in a snit throws socks across the room, Mr. Smith tries to placate his "little ducky daddies" with a suggestion that they turn off the lights and "go bye-byes."

Mary enters to explain that she is the maid and has just spent the afternoon with a male companion, and, further, that the guests, the Martins, have arrived. After complaining that Mary should not have gone out, the Smiths leave to dress while Mary greets the Martins. After complaining about the Martins' lack of punctuality, Mary also exits, leaving the guests alone.

The Martins sit facing each other and, after an uncomfortable silence, begin a polite exchange in which, through elaborate, lengthy deduction, they come to the belief that they are, in fact, husband and wife, though neither can actually recall knowing the other. Among other "curious" coincidences are the revelations that they both originally came from the city of Manchester and that they had left just five weeks previously, had ridden the same train, and had even shared the same compartment. Since then they have lived in the same London apartment and have even slept in the same bed. Further, they

are named Donald and Elizabeth, the names of then-respective husband and wife, and have a child named Alice who has one red and one white eye. As the clock strikes one, they embrace, sit in the same armchair and promptly fall asleep.

Mary re-enters to confide a secret to the audience - that the Martins are not really Donald and Elizabeth. She claims that their whole deduction collapses because of a single contradictory detail, that, based on the discrepancies in the color of Alice's right and left eyes, they are not the girl's parents. She suggests, however, that this fact remain a secret, then leaves, confiding that her "real name is Sherlock Holmes."

After the Martins awake, the Smiths enter to welcome them. Mrs. Smith is effusive in her greetings, but her husband ungraciously complains about their tardiness. The Smiths then sit facing the Martins, who have returned to their original seats. They attempt to engage in conversation, but their efforts are punctuated with silences that precede each rather pointless remark. Mrs. Smith is finally able to break the ice by encouraging the Martins to relate what "interesting things" they have seen during their travels. Mrs. Martin then tells of seeing a man bend over to tie his shoe lace, an event that the rest consider rather extraordinary.

The ringing doorbell then interrupts the conversation, but when Mrs. Smith goes to .the door to see who has arrived, nobody is there. That fact leads to an argument between Mr. and Mrs. Smith. After a second ring with a similar outcome, Mrs. Smith takes the position that a ringing doorbell indicates that there is no one there, and when it rings a third tune, she refuses to go to the door. The argument, becoming slightly heated, is interrupted with the arrival of the Fire Chief, who appears when Mr. Smith opens the door after the fourth ring.

The Fire Chief, in uniform and wearing a huge shining helmet, greets everyone and is quickly drawn into the controversy over the significance of the ringing doorbell After conceding that both Smiths are partly right, he sits down, announcing that he has no time to stay. He is under orders to put out all fires in the city. The Smiths deny that there is a fire in their house, prompting the Chief to announce that things are not going well, that fires have been few and minor, limiting profits. After remarking that he has no right to extinguish the fires of clergymen and that naturalized citizens are not entitled to fire protection, he offers to tell the others some stories.

There follows a series of incongruous tales, told in turn by the Chief, Mr. Smith, Mrs. Smith, and the Chief again. The stories provoke both irrelevant and irreverent remarks from the listeners, though none of the stories makes any sense. Because Mrs. Martin loses the thread of the Chiefs last story, she requests that he retell it, but before he can begin, the maid interrupts, asking that she also be allowed to tell a story. The Smiths and Martins are annoyed by her temerity, but the Fire Chief recognizes her, and he and Mary have a joyous but brief reunion. The Chief defends Mary's behavior against the others' disapproval. Mary, over Mrs. Smith's objections, recites her poem in honor of the Fire Chief, even as the Smiths push her offstage. The Chief remarks that the poem was "marvelous," then prepares to leave the party, first asking after the bald soprano. The

question occasions a brief embarrassment before Mrs. Smith confirms that the soprano "always wears her hair in the same style."

After the Chief departs, the Smiths and Martins begin an exchange of increasingly nonsensical and discontinuous statements, full of phrases characteristic of language phrase books. Some of the statements are platitudes, like "charity begins at home,"

but others, like "I'd rather kill a rabbit than sing in the garden," are pure nonsense. As sense breaks down into repeated word fragments - mere syllables - the four characters grow increasing hostile and aggressive, until they are all angrily screaming. Then, after the lights go out and come back on, the play begins again, with the Martins taking the place of the Smiths in the opening moment, speaking the very same lines.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

In this one-act play of just 33 pages, a typical English couple, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, are in their armchairs after dinner. Mr. Smith is reading the newspaper; Mrs. Smith is darning socks. When the clock strikes nine o'clock, Mrs. Smith begins what appears, at first, to be normal chitchat. It is, and yet the playwright has taken it to an extreme. Mr. and Mrs. Smith only sound like they are making sense, but they don't. They contradict themselves and each other without seeming to be aware of it. They have a superficial quarrel and a superficial make-up.

Their maid, Mary, comes in from a day of shopping and announces that Mr. and Mrs. Martin are on the front porch. Mr. and Mrs. Smith had forgotten they invited them over, and for some reason, the Martins didn't ring the bell. The Smiths say they will go to dress for company and ask Mary to let the Martins in. The Smiths exit, and the Martins enter.

While waiting for the Smiths, Donald and Elizabeth Martin seem to have a sweet, romantic conversation. The Martins seem to pretend they do not know each other, and then they act surprised to find that they share the same history, address, bedroom, and a daughter named Alice. It appears that they are pretending to discover each other all over again. The Martins dance as if they have just met, and then fall asleep cuddled in the same armchair.

However, Mary re-enters while they are asleep and tells the audience that Donald and Elizabeth are not themselves and do not have the same daughter. Therefore, they have neither found each other nor themselves. Mary then states that her own name is really Sherlock Holmes, and she exits.

By this time in the play, the clock randomly strikes however many times it wishes. It strikes at that moment and the Smiths return, wearing exactly the same clothes as before they left. The two couples visit, and their conversation is just as nonsensical as all the conversations have been. It starts out like many conversations in mixed company, with lots of awkward silences and talk of the weather. After the four begin to warm up to each other, the speed and volume are like any typical conversation, but there is no content that makes any sense, whatsoever.

The doorbell rings three separate times, but when no one is at the door all three times, Mrs. Smith finally gives up answering it. When the bell rings again, the two couples argue whether the fact that there was no one there before should cause one to conclude that a ringing doorbell means no one is there.

Finally, Mr. Smith goes to the door and greets the Fire Chief, who has come looking for a fire. When Mrs. Smith invites him to take off his helmet and sit, he says he will take off

the helmet, but he does not have time to sit. Then he does just the opposite; he sits and continues to wear his helmet.

Business is not good for the Fire Chief. He is very disappointed not to have found a fire. Mrs. Smith is full of sympathy and asks him to stay. When he offers to tell some stories, since he is not busy, Mrs. Smith gives him the first of several kisses. After the Fire Chief tells a couple of nonsensical stories, Mr. Smith and Mrs. Smith each tell a story. Mr. Martin kisses Mrs. Smith, or not, depending on the whim of the play's director.

The maid, Mary, enters and asks to be allowed to tell a story. At first the Fire Chief is offended, but then he recognizes her, somehow, and the two fall into each other's arms. The Smiths and Martins discuss whether this is proper English behavior and whether Mary has forgotten her place as a maid. Finally, Mary recites a poem while the Smiths push her offstage.

The Fire Chief takes his leave, saying he will have a fire at the other end of town in a few minutes, but it will really just be heartburn. At the door, he pauses to mention another topic of discussion, the bald soprano, and the whole room is embarrassed and silent for a moment. Finally, Mrs. Smith answers that the bald soprano always wears her hair the same way. The Fire Chief says goodbye and exits.

The Smiths and Martins return to their seats. They begin another pointless conversation, but this one degenerates from pointless, but complete, sentences to streams of meaningless words without sentences being formed anymore. They begin to raise their voices and shout vowels, consonants, and train noises at each other. Just at the point that they are all screaming into each other's ears, the lights go out, and all four begin chanting together, "It's not that way, it's over here! It's not that way, it's over here!"

Suddenly, the stage is as silent as it is dark. The lights come back up, and the scene is just as it began; except now the Martins are alone onstage, sitting in the armchairs. Mr. Martin is reading the paper; Mrs. Martin is darning a sock. They begin to say the same lines that the Smiths said at the beginning of the play.

Analysis

In The Bald Soprano, the Eugene Ionesco has used comedy as his method, but the theme of his play is tragic. It is as sad as it is absurd. What makes it so funny and sad, of course, is that the audience members can recognize themselves in the characters of the play. Almost everyone participates in meaningless chatter to pass the time, and most people – at least some of the time – do the very opposite of what they say they will do. Like the Martins, many married couples never really know each other at all.

Because there is no original thought or feeling to distinguish the characters from one another, characterization is achieved only through the status of the characters. The husbands and wives behave in a very stereotyped, middle-class manner. The husbands are patronizing; the wives are petulant.

The couples respond positively to the Fire Chief, or perhaps to his uniform, which he keeps throughout the scene. Perhaps because they are able to pinpoint his role, they are comfortable with him. Mrs. Smith even appears to be flirting with him. However, both couples fail to see the maid, Mary, as a person until the Fire Chief exhibits his great passion for her. The Smiths do not criticize the Fire Chief, but they debate over the appropriateness of Mary's behavior. Finally, because the Smiths are disturbed to see Mary as anything other than their maid, they push her off the stage.

The Fire Chief then leaves, and when he does, it causes the others one more moment of embarrassment when he mentions the bald soprano. There is no reason explained for the embarrassment. It simply illustrates how arbitrary the social rules are. Some things are fine to discuss in mixed company, other things are not. The playwright takes these social rules and stretches them until they break apart into chaos.

It is as though the middle-class Smiths and Martins lose even the semblance of sanity, because they choose not to acknowledge the humanity of people who are different than themselves.

When the scene ends by beginning again, it is clear there has been no lesson learned, no growth, and no hope for any meaning in life. This is why the play, while it may be hilarious, is a tragedy.

Characters

The Fire Chief

The Fire Chief appears midway through *The Bald Soprano,* ostensibly on official business. He is looking for fires, under orders to put out any that he finds. He observes that the fire-extinguishing business is not good, that profits are down. Although a little more brusque than the others, like the Martins and Smiths he is superficially polite. He takes the role of an adjudicator and confessor, trying to restore peace between Mr. and Mrs. Smith, who have engaged in a nonsensical argument over whether or not a ringing doorbell indicates that there is actually someone at the door.

He is also a raconteur, though his stories are wholly nonsensical, without logical continuity, unity, or intelligible point. One of them is a shaggy-dog saga that meanders aimlessly along, confusing everybody. When Mary enters, she and the Fire Chief embrace, revealing that they were engaged in a former relationship. That disturbs the Martins and Smiths who are class conscious and find the affair inappropriate. After Mary recites her cataclysmic fire verse, the Fire Chief, having provided "a truly Cartesian quarter of an hour," departs with his oddly incongruous remarks about a bald soprano.

Donald Martin

Like his host, Mr. Smith, and the two wives, Donald Martin is distinguished only by having no distinguishing qualities at all. When he and Mrs. Martin first enter, they begin their inane exchange of information from which they deduce that they are husband and wife. The two mirror each other in their banal, excessively polite language and their ridiculous inability to make a logical leap to the conclusion that their tediously repetitive banter finally draws them. These are mechanical puppets or interchangeable parts, not pliable humans.

Themes

Absurdity

Absurdist themes are pervasive in *The Bald Soprano.* In fact, the work is often critically mined to illustrate absurdist ideas and motifs. Chief among them in Ionesco's play is the concept of entropy, or the tendency of order to decay into chaos. This collapse is reflected in the speech of the characters, which, in the course of the play, becomes increasingly dysfunctional, resulting in the total breakdown of language as a viable tool of human communication.

Entropy is also conveyed by the characterizations, or, more accurately, the lack of them. Humankind is reduced to the Smiths and Martins, who, at times, behave very much Like some of those contemporary dolls that issue pat, random expressions when their recordings are activated by pulling a string or pressing some part of their plastic anatomy. Like the dolls, the Smiths and Martins are soulless and hollow remnants of character reduced to exhibiting only a sort of vestigial anxiety about their missing or confused identities.

The general breakdown of language-borne sense and logic gives *The Bald Soprano* a facade of nonsense, sometimes even an infantile silliness. The remarks of the characters are often inappropriate, contradictory, or completely devoid of meaning, especially towards the end, when, as language decays into word fragments, the Martins and Smiths become almost manic in their anger. What they reveal is one of the most important absurdist themes: the modern inability of humans to relate to each other in either an authentic or honest fashion.

Language and Meaning

The Bald Soprano is a "tragedy of language" dealing with the gradual loss of its communicative function and its final fossilization into inane phrases and meaningless cliches. At first there is at least a thread of logic in the characters' conversation, but it is often interspersed with contradictory and inconsistent statements, as when, for example, Mr. Smith first says he learned of Bobby Watson's death in the newspaper, then claims that it had happened three years earlier, and that he "remembered it through an association of ideas."

It is, in fact, a sort of free association that takes the characters off on ever-widening tangents, their statements jumping completely off contiguous mental tracks onto barely relevant sidings. For example, in her opening monologue, Mrs. Smith meanders through a series of simple sentences that have no cohesive point at all. She moves cursorily from a description of what the Smiths consumed for dinner towards her pronouncements about Dr. Mackenzie-King's virtues as a physician.

Towards the end of the play, the mental track-shifting accelerates. The dialogue breaks into a series of non sequiturs, suggesting that rational discourse has become impossible, that relevant thought can not even be sustained past a single sentence or two. The Martins and Smiths simply cascade through unrelated and inane phrase-book cliches before breaking into a sort of syllabic babble. Words degenerate into mere objects, thrown about like pies in a comic free-for-all.

Alienation and Loneliness

In his parodist's treatment of his bourgeois non-characters, the Smiths and Martins, Ionesco stresses both the loss of a personal identity and social and familial estrangement. His characters are alienated, not because they are sensitive beings in a hostile or impersonal world, but because they have no individuality at all. They are no longer merely threatened by machines; they have become like them, manufactured on a sort of class assembly tine and engineered to conform to middle-class values as codified in hackneyed expressions and rigid patterns of behavior. They are too similar to have personal identities, thus it hardly matters whether, like the Smiths, they have no first names, or, like the various Watsons, they all have the same one. Their alienation has everything to do with a total lack of a personal identity, which even their language inhibits them from establishing. They have simply been rendered incapable of incisive, individual thought.

Identity

At the opening of *The Bald Soprano,* Ionesco stresses the typicality of his characters in his repeated insistence that they and their surroundings are "English." The first characters encountered are named "Smith," a very common English patronymic also suggesting the couple's conventional nature. These are figures who have no discrete sense of self.

Moreover, Ionesco continually drives his characters' lack of self-awareness beyond even a simple stereotype. The Martins, for example, cannot even recognize each other as husband and wife, and have to go through their distended and repetitive deductive process to establish their relationship. Even then their identities are called into question by what Mary discloses, leaving the audience somewhat mystified. However, the playwright's point is that the truth, if there is any, does not matter, for the Martins can serve as wholly suitable surrogates for the "real" Donald and Elizabeth Martin because they are almost their perfect clones.

The only hints of a different identity are drawn along sexual and class lines, and even these are deliberately blurred. While Mrs. Smith is responsible for homemaking duties, she hints about Mr. Smith's inadequacies as a male, while, he, in his turn, complains about women behaving like men. Throughout the play, the characters' anxieties seem to center on threats, not to their individuality, but only to their roles as determined by gender and class.

sense of progression, act like a neurotic chorus reinforcing the absurdity of the dialogue. Like the words, the strokes participate in the centripetal decay or entropy that describes both the play's basic movement and its central theme.

Time

If language gradually loses all significance in *The Bald Soprano,* time, as measured by the Smiths' English clock, immediately becomes so erratic as to mean nothing at all. Before Mrs. Smith first speaks, the clock strikes seventeen times, prompting her to announce that it is nine o'clock. Thereafter, it strikes as few as one and as many as twenty-nine times, in a random, jumbled order. Finally, according to the stage directions, it "strikes as much as it likes," as if it were an animate or sentient object, entirely out of human control.

Time in the play has lost its purpose - it no longer represents a logical sequence in a spatial dimension. The strokes, rather than conveying a

Gender Roles

Even a reliable identity based on gender is undermined in *The Bald Soprano.* The Smiths and Martins may voice or evidence some commonplace gender-based biases, but role distinctions erode in the course of the play. Early on, Mr. Smith accuses his wife of asking stupid questions, indicating his belief that his mind is superior to hers and that her powers of reasoning are severely limited because she is a woman, an irrational "romantic." However, during the Fire Chiefs visit Mr. Smith concedes that bis wife is more intelligent than he is, and even "much more feminine," suggesting that there is a feminine side to his character and behavior. Mrs. Smith says as much when she complains about men who use rouge on their lips and sit around all day and drink. She also suggests that Mr. Smith lacks the "salt" of the evening's soup, an oblique slur on her husband's deficient masculinity. Further, she is the more sexually aggressive of the two. She flirts with both the Fire Chief and Mr. Martin, suggesting her need to establish a sexual identity denied her by her emasculated husband.

Class Conflict

The Smiths and Martins have a class-consciousness challenged by Mary, the Smiths' maid. Mary presents a threat to them because she is willful and disrespectful, and does not seem to know her place. The couples grow testy and self-righteous when, during the Fire Chiefs visit, Mary requests that she be allowed to tell a story. They find her request presumptuous and inappropriate, and though Mary manages to recite her poem in honor of the Chief, she is forced off stage in the process.

Style

Setting

The setting of *The Bald Soprano* is so typically "English" as to be a reductio ad absurdum. The interior, the furnishings, the characters' dress and manners are all "English," at least in the sense of epitomizing a national stereotype The setting is the modern interior of a middle-class London couple's home, while the characters are a husband and wife who evidence those qualities attributed to the type, a sort of stoic stiffness and reserve and superficial cheeriness and civility.

The actual furnishings may be realistic enough, but the behavior of the Smiths and their visitors most certainly is not. Nor is the English clock, which, from the outset, indicates that the action within the seemingly real surroundings is to be distorted through the lens of a parodist.

Structure

Billed as an "anti-play," *The Bald Soprano* parodies the well-made problem play of the realistic tradition. Rather than develop on a linear, causal path towards a climax and denouement, Ionesco's work progresses haphazardly, and though it becomes increasingly frenetic near the end, as if approaching an emotional climax, it finally folds back on itself and starts all over again. Its cyclical structure suggests that an infinite and tedious replay is possible but is aborted, not because there is an Aristotelian end, but simply from practical necessity. Even an anti-play has to finish.

Although it may be described as a fairly long one-act play, there is no formal division of *The Bald Soprano* into either acts or scenes. The entrances and exits of characters mark episodic changes that do not carry forward any causal or thematic links. Basically, there are five major episodes or "French scenes": first the Smiths are alone, arguing over trivial matters and discussing the Bobby Watsons; next the Martins are alone, tediously discovering that they are husband and wife; then the Martins and Smiths are together, exchanging empty observations and arguing over the significance of the ringing doorbell; next the Fire Chief arrives, visiting with the two couples, telling stories; and finally, after the maid's interruption and the Chiefs exit, the Smiths and Martins are alone again, engaging in a nonsensical verbal ruckus. Thereafter the anti-play shifts into a combination epilogue and prologue, starting all over again.

Anti-Characters

The Bald Soprano is also an "anti-play" because its characters are anti-characters. The Smiths and Martins are entirely lacking distinct or consistent personalities; they are indistinguishable, virtually interchangeable, and essentially characterless. They speak alike, often echoing each other's phrases, as evidenced in the dialogue between the

Martins. They are unable to begin and sustain meaningful discourse, for they are defined by the cliches of their class, from which they can not depart and which they never transcend. They are anti-heroes not because they are physically disabled or have weak minds or experience extraordinary bad luck but because they have no minds at all. None of them serves as a protagonist or main character in any traditional sense.

There are hints of potential character, conveyed in the vague anxiety that afflicts these figures, something lying outside the ability of their language to express it, except perhaps in isolated moments of oblique word play. Characters seem compelled to say things, to cover a silence that would expose their vulnerability. When the Martins and Smiths first sit down to talk, they must overcome an embarrassing silence, an uncomfortable moment in which the realization that they have nothing to say threatens to expose their hollowness. The silence is broken, first with hemming and hawing, then with pointless pleasantries, but the silence keeps returning with its disturbing presence. The silence seems to be a more authentic act of communication than the silly and self-evident comments the Smiths and Martins make.

Nonsense

The Bald Soprano may have a serious theme, but it uses nonsense and buffoonery to advance its idea that language has become denuded of its majesty and affective power. The physical slapstick of classic farce, used to beat the comic stooge, has been transformed into a verbal counterpart, noisy but ineffective.

Words are depleted of force in various comic ways. One way is through tedious repetition. For example, the words "bizarre," "coincidence," and "curious," used in the first exchange between the Martins, are worn down to pointlessness through repetition. Words are also misapplied, such as when the Martins and Smith find the most mundane or trivial act to be "something extraordinary" or "incredible." Words also go limp when they appear in doughy lumps or hackneyed expressions, randomly inserted in dialogue that goes nowhere because it is simply a meandering stream of non sequiturs. Words deprived of meaning become mere objects, to be thrown about like brickbats in a comic but nonsensical free-for-all.

There are also some nonverbal farcical elements in *The Bald Soprano,* although they seem of less importance. Characters sometimes act in ways diametrically opposed to what they say they will or will not do, as, for example, when the Fire Chief announces that he has no time to sit down and then proceeds to do so, or when the Smiths retire to change their clothes but return to greet the Martins without having done so. Buffoonery is also evident in their dress itself, notably in the large, shiny helmet the Chief wears, and in such classic clowning routines as shoving an intruder offstage, as the Smiths do to Mary while she recites her poem, and in Mrs. Smith's repeated trips to the door to find that no one has rung the doorbell. This silliness has a purpose, serving as a visual concomitant to the basic breakdown of sense in language that is the play's central concern.

Historical Context

In the period between 1948, when Ionesco began writing *The Bald Soprano,* and 1956, when Peter Wood directed the play' s first production in English at the Arts Theatre in London, the split that divided the world into two hostile super powers deepened and widened. Ionesco, who obtained French citizenship in 1950, the year the work was first performed, was cut off from his homeland, Romania, which by then was firmly within the Soviet bloc of communist satellite states.

The Cold War arms race began in earnest in that same period. The * 'police action" in Korea, starting in 1950, heated up the war, pitting North Korea and its Communist Chinese allies against South Korea and United States and other United Nations forces. The prospects of spreading hostilities loomed large, prompting fears at home and abroad of a new world war that would employ weapons of vast destruction, like the thermonuclear device that was detonated at the Bikini Atoll m the Pacific Ocean in 1954. America's first hydrogen bomb, the device was hundreds of times more powerful than the more primitive atomic bombs dropped on Japan in 1945.

In the United States, congressional investigations of suspected communists continued, although the excesses of Senator Joseph McCarthy, censured for misconduct in 1954, were slowly turning the tide of public opinion against the investigations. Many felt the inquiries had turned into a hysterical witch hunt, as Arthur Miller had suggested in *The Crucible,* his 1952 drama based on the Salem witchcraft trials of the seventeenth century. It was also in 1954 that, at a conference of world powers meeting in Geneva, Vietnam was divided into two separate states, setting the stage for the Vietnam War.

In France, Ionesco's adopted country, the conservative government fell in June, 1954, bringing to the premiership Pierre Mendes-France, leader of the Radical-Socialist party. Among other leftist policy changes, Mendes-France favored an end to French colonialism in North Africa and Indochina. Algerian nationalists, hoping to hasten their independence, revolted against France the following October, creating a national crisis.

Winds of political and social change were also shifting in the United States. In the momentous 1954 *Brown* v. *Board of Education* decision, the Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional, effectively overturning laws based on the "separate but equal" ruling of a much earlier Court. The landmark decision was the legal basis for the civil rights movement of the next two decades.

By the early 1950s, television had become the principal medium of popular culture in the United States, supplanting the radio and offering a major challenge to the motion picture industry. Prices for black and white television sets with nineteen-inch screens had dropped to an average of $187 by 1954, bringing them within the affordable means of the average family. In that same year, RCA introduced the first color television set, and though the quality was poor and unreliable, within six years, with improved technology, color television began replacing black and white television as the household standard. A "hot" medium, television would soon begin purveying popular artistry, such

as the new and revolutionary style of music known as rock and roll, including the work of Elvis Presley, who cut his first commercial recording in 1954.

In the American theater, the principal playwrights were Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and a rediscovered Eugene O'Neill. Although all three used non-realistic elements in their drama, they largely worked within the tradition of the well-made play and shared a similar focus on social and psychological problems affecting realistic characters. Compared to the Broadway and West End fare of 1954 - plays like Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial* and Terrence Rattigan's *Separate Tables* - Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* represented a new, bold, and highly controversial use of theater. Their influence in the American theater would first be felt in the United States in the off-off Broadway movement of the late 1950s.

Like much of absurdist drama, *The Bald Soprano* seems detached from the real world. It is virtually free of any topical allusions to current affairs. It goes down its own sort of metaphysical rabbit hole, creating a world in which there is no verisimilitude, no link to actuality. It does make reference to several real persons, to Benjamin Franklin, Robert Browning, and Rudyard Kipling, for example, but these are anachronistic names invoked in the muddle of verbal nonsense that dominates the last part of the play. Except in the most abstract sense, Ionesco's purpose is not political. He is not dealing with a social or even an ethical wrong. He is lamenting the death of language, a tragedy of such magnitude that it renders the current state of world affairs trivial and irrelevant.

Critical Overview

At the time Ionesco wrote *The Bald Soprano,* serious French theater was under the domination of writers who wrote very literate plays with serious, intellectual themes. Among them were Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, who, although they shared a philosophical kinship with Ionesco, chose to write in a traditional mode There were a few dissenters, particularly Antonin Artaud. In *The Theatre and Its Double* (1938), he had clamored for something new, an overpowering drama that would have an impact analogous to that of the Black Death on medieval Europe. Few outside small avant-garde circles listened, however, and the new theatrical revolution preached by Artaud, which Ionesco's anti-play helped promote, began far less dramatically than Artaud had hoped. On May 11, 1950, *The Bald Soprano* opened before an audience of three people who sat under a leaky roof at the dilapidated Theatre des Noctambules on Paris's Left Bank.

The audience never grew very large during the play's brief run. The work was simply too different for the established tastes of most patrons, some of whom hooted indignantly, outraged by the audacity of the piece. To them and most reviewers, *The Bald Soprano* was contrary to the very idea of theater. Few saw any merit in the play, and despite the cast and playwright's energetic efforts to drum up new audiences, the house soon went dark from lack of interest.

The chilling reception of *The Bald Soprano* did not discourage Ionesco, however. His fascination with theater rekindled, he continued writing his series of anti-plays, undeterred by the hostile or indifferent welcome of his early French audiences. The reactions even seemed to support the implications of his play, that the bourgeoisie was incapable of fresh judgments. It was the very discomfort of Ionesco's audiences that amused an early supporter, the French critic Jacques Lemarchand, who, in his "Preface to Eugene Ionesco," confessed that he found great pleasure in the "insults" and "grunts and ironic laughter of the notables in the audience "

Because he shared their distrust of rationalism, Ionesco won immediate approval by some surrealists, including the playwright Armand Salacrou, one of the three members of the play's first audience. However, it took the support of establishment critics and writers to break through the barrier of public aversion. The tide of public opinion really began to turn in 1954 with the revival of Ionesco's third produced play, *The Chairs.* It had played to sparse audiences in 1952, when it was first produced, and though it prompted a serious defense in the magazine *Arts,* it fared little better than *The Bald Soprano* had two years earlier. However, the revival became a significant success when France's premier dramatist, Jean Anouilh, openly deemed it a masterpiece, a classic in the avant-garde theater. Ionesco soon found a niche in the front rank of the new French playwrights, some of whom, like him, were expatriates living in Pans, notably Samuel Beckett and Arthur Adamov.

There were those who complained that Ionesco's anti-plays advanced no causes, that the playwright lacked the kind of political commitment of dramatists like Bertolt Brecht. A

major controversy arose after, in translation, Ionesco's plays made their way onto the British stage, starting with *The Bald Soprano* in November, 1956. Within two years, the so-called "London Controversy" started when an extremely influential leftist critic and early defender of Ionesco, Kenneth Tynan, began a celebrated debate with the playwright over what Tynan believed was Ionesco's linguistic nihilism, his distrust of language as a viable tool for human advancement. Several important persons were eventually drawn into the controversy, including Philip Toynbee and Orson Welles. In the intellectual fur flying, Ionesco made it clear that he saw little difference between the totalitarian regimes on the left and the fascist regimes on the right, and he openly attacked leftist apologists, among whom he numbered Jean-Paul Sartre, Bertolt Brecht, John Osborne, and Arthur Miller. To Ionesco, drama had little to do with doctrines, as he had endeavored to show in his early diary entries explaining his purpose in *The Bald Soprano* and *The Lesson,* His aim was to create "pure drama" that was "anti-thematic, anti-ideological, anti-social-realist, anti-philosophical, anti-boulevard-psychology" and "anti-bourgeois."

His was to be a new, "abstract" theater, liberated from any sort of doctrinal adhesion.

Throughout the 1960s, with a growing worldwide reputation, Ionesco remained a prolific dramatist. His achievement, recognized by his election to the conservative Academe Francaise in 1970, was exceptional, but his influence on avant-garde theater was gradually waning. Some of his most ardent earlier admirers were frustrated by his inflexible opposition to didactic drama. Ironically, he had become increasingly partisan in his adherence to non-partisanship, a paradox that he himself pointed out. According to Deborah Gaensbauer in *Eugene Ionesco Revisted,* during the Cold War, many "French intellectuals and critics ... became devotees of Brecht," who had been one of Ionesco's major targets in his debate with Tynan. As a result, he alienated some of his original followers, becoming "cast once more as a pariah in an all-too-familiar irrational discourse."

By the 1970s, Ionesco had simply become too familiar, like an old hat worn too often. Though still honored for his first contributions to the new French theater, he was criticized for lacking the profundity of Beckett, the rebellious zeal of Genet, and the courage needed to take new artistic risks. Ionesco, stung by the rebukes, turned increasingly away from theater to fiction, criticism, and painting.

Ironically, the end of the Cold War helped restore some of Ionesco's diminished reputation as a playwright and thinker, for as Gaensbauer noted, in the 1980s "many of Ionesco's political claims were vindicated," making him a kind of prophet, a "modern Tiresias, shunted aside for seeing uncomfortable truths." Still, as Martin Esshn suggested in *The Theatre of the Absurd,* Ionesco's ultimate place in "the mainstream of the great tradition" remains uncertain, although his plays, including *The Bald Soprano,* have made "a truly heroic attempt to break through the barriers of human communication."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Fiero is a professor of English at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, where he teaches drama and play writing. In this essay he discusses the interrelationship of Ionesco's anti-play elements in The Bald Soprano, including character, language, and structure.

The Bald Soprano (1950) is Eugene Ionesco's first "anti-play," conceived and created as a deliberate spoof or parody of the plays then in vogue in Paris. Ionesco was attempting to create "a new free theatre," one devoid of theme, ideology, social realism, philosophy, and the thin "boulevard" psychology then pervading French drama. His targets were the complacent bourgeoisie and intellectual drones who went to see plays that fed them nothing to challenge their smug certainty that such matters as social injustice could be ameliorated through political convictions and rational discourse. For Ionesco, the very efficacy of language was in question, something far more fundamental and troubling than the passing concerns of political ideologies, no matter what their flavor.

Ionesco's method was to weave together trite expressions pilfered from an English-language primer that he had used while learning English. He translated these for his trenchant caricature of the bourgeoisie, whom he saw as prattlers of an endless stream of mindless expressions and hackneyed slogans. As he confides in *Notes and Counter Notes,* the process proved unsettling. While writing the work, he "felt genuinely uneasy, sick and dizzy," because, perhaps, he glimpsed from the outset that what he was writing "was something like the *tragedy of language!"*

The Bald Soprano may have tragic implications, but on the surface it is pure comedy, almost farce. In fact, Ionesco was aware of the seeming contradiction, for he also dubbed his anti-play a "comedy of comedies." He set out in artistic defiance of the Aristotelian notions of plot, character, diction, and thought - the elements of the "well-made" play - designing a new drama as free of such conventional elements as he could make it. His main characters, the Martins and Smiths, are robotic ninnies, so much alike as to be indistinguishable, either in language or function. Their diction is largely pre-masticated cant, made up of self-evident observations and the various insincere pleasantries that polite but empty civility requires. The Martins and Smiths are middle-class English couples, though they could just as well be of any nationality in Europe or North America.

Hemmed in by their hollow platitudes, these anti-characters never seem to progress much beyond a pre-cognitive ritual of acknowledging the existence of each other. Even that much is resisted by Mr. Smith when, at the play's opening, he reads and clicks his tongue while Mrs. Smith jabbers incoherently. Empty niceties and insincere expressions of awe lock out any understanding or insight, resulting, for example, in the ludicrous discovery by the Martins that they are actually husband and wife. Or so they agree to believe.

These are characters who either cannot think for themselves because they have no selves or have no selves because they cannot think. That is the Ironic implication of Mrs. Martin's farewell thanks to the Fire Chief, with whom she says she has "passed a truly Cartesian quarter of an hour." In essence, the Smiths and Martins have provided the negative corollary to Descartes' famous principle, *cogito ergo sum (* "I think therefore I am"). They do not think; therefore they are not. They have no discreet identities, thus it is no wonder that Mr. and Mrs. Martin cannot recognize each other when they first enter the Smiths' home. The amnesia they suffer is a condition of non-being.

When a real thought threatens to invade the consciousness of these anti-characters, it is usually too evanescent to have any sticking power. It comes and is immediately lost, forcing discourse into a crazy-quilt pattern of incongruous observations, many of which are self-evident or indisputable truisms, like the fact that a week consists of seven days or that the ceiling lies above and the floor below, snippets of inane conversation that Ionesco took from his English phrase book. Still, throughout the first half of *The Bald Soprano,* there are a few occasions in which a sense of anxiety breaks through the barriers erected by the polite platitudes. Angst is revealed in the characters' inability to endure silence and in a few hostile remarks that disclose, at least in the Smiths, fears of sexual inadequacy and the resulting threat to any last remnants of a meaningful identity. It is only at such points that characters, however crudely, use language creatively rather than merely mechanically. There is, for example, Mrs. Smith's early quip that although the soup of the evening meal "was perhaps a little too salty," it was "saltier" than Mr. Smith.

For the most part, as George Wellwarth remarks in "Beyond Realism: Ionesco's Theory of the Drama," the Smiths and Martins use language "as decorative verbiage to cover over the subconsciously felt fear of being in a reasonless void, of being an effect without a cause." Such isolated wordplay as Mrs. Smith's, indicative of an echo of an intuitive ability, is both faint and rare. In fact, in the final moments, just before the play starts over again, the hostile anger that emerges as the play's strongest emotion grows in potency as any semblance of meaning expressed in language breaks down. Discourse simply implodes into babble, word fragments strung together by sounds, not by the association of ideas. Words lose their symbolic value altogether, thus language utterly fails, leaving the Smiths and Martins in frustrated rage. The basis of that rage is completely lost in a torrent of nonsense. At that point, as Richard Coe say s in *Ionesco: A Study of His Plays,* "language is used almost physically, as a kind of bludgeon or blunt instrument" and the audience is "physically assaulted by the barrage of quasi-meaningless sounds emitted by the characters on stage."

Formal logic and inductive reasoning, tools of rational discourse, are also assaulted in the playwright's scathing parody. Like the surrealists, Ionesco had a distrust of rational thought, widely regarded by Western thinkers from Aristotle forward as the principal means to human understanding. Ionesco mimics the rational process even as he mocks it, clearly defying it with highly improbable or random occurrences and contradictions. For example, the Smiths, masking sexual fears, engage in futile arguments built on

ever-shifting premises. Like the clock, which finally strikes whatever it wants, the characters say whatever does or does not move them.

As in dreams, in Ionesco's world a ringing doorbell might announce the presence of someone at the door; then again, it might not. It is a random and arbitrary world, in which causal reasoning is at best unreliable. There can be no certainty. The Martins, having determined through their lengthy and comically tedious deductive process that they are married to each other, are actually deceived, if Mary can be trusted as accurate. Moreover, it makes no difference, for like the proliferated Bobby Watsons, one Mr. Martin or Mrs. Martin is basically the same as the next.

For Ionesco, causal argument badly misrepresents reality by putting too much faith in artificially ordered and focused conscious thought. He targeted the plays of the social realists because they told stories with events chained together in a logical, interlocking pattern that falsified true experience through drastic oversimplification and distortion. To reveal the deficiencies of such a causal pattern, he has the Smiths and Martins attempt to apply its principles to the more chaotic and less predictable world of the inner being. He does it, as Richard Schechner says in *"The Bald Soprano* and *The Lesson:* An Inquiry into Play Structure," by "stripping away" the usual order, "the causative world," and thereby revealing the true "rhythms" of the theater. These more faithfully reflect that same inner being.

The basic structural paradigm for the linear, causally-developed, well-made play is an isosceles triangle, sometimes referred to as "Freytag's pyramid," after the nineteenth-century German writer who devised its schema. It reflects a unified structural pattern in which action rises from a stasis or equilibrium to a climax, then falls in denouement to an end. Theoretically, that sequence describes not only the entire structure but each dramatic "moment" or "beat."

Scrapping this artificial structure, Ionesco had to find a way to bring *The Bald Soprano* to closure. His first working solution, arrived at in rehearsal, was to end the action abruptly, using a sort of *deus ex machina* device in which the performance was closed down by "the Superintendent of Police and his men, who open fire at the rebellious audience" and simply order the theater vacated. The actors and playwright considered other possibilities but rejected them as too problematic. Then they came up with the clever idea of simply letting the play begin again, giving the work its cyclical structure. The play was already up and running when, as a final structural refinement, Ionesco substituted the Martins for the Smiths in the repeated opening.

Perhaps the Ouroboros, a snake devouring its own tail, can serve as the new structural paradigm. It suggests an endless, tedious, and futile cycle. It is, therefore, an appropriate structural symbol for much of the avant-garde drama influenced by Existentialism, representing the absurd condition of man explored by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus.* With variations, it would be used again by Ionesco, in, for example, his very next play, *The Lesson* (1951). Sensing that tedious and pointless labor was appropriate to the absurd condition, Samuel Beckett used a parallel structure in the two acts of *Waiting for Godot* (1952).

As a complement to the infolding or collapsing structure, Ionesco employs a centripetal design in which language seems to go berserk. Everything speeds up. Words proliferate, then break into mere cacophonous fragments just prior to the blackout that divides round one from round two in the interminable main event. That pattern of acceleration and proliferation, whether of words or objects, characterizes most of Ionesco's anti-plays. It remains his indelible artistic signature and a hallmark by which his plays are easily recognized.

Source: John W Fiero, for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

McDermott examines Ionesco's use of inane, meaningless dialogue as a means of criticizing small talk or conversation with very little content. Ionesco felt that such discourse prevented people from thinking and talking about subjects that were truly important.

In his play *The Bald Soprano,* Eugene Ionesco objected to mundane, peripheral talk "to diversions that tempt us to avoid thinking about or talking about the only things that really matter - the meaning of existence and the inevitability of death." Ionesco was agitated because he felt that "words no longer demonstrate: they chatter.... They are an escape. They stop silence from speaking... They wear out thought, they impair it."

In relation to the idea that words no long "mean," Mrs. Martin remarks near the end of the play "We have passed a truly Cartesian quarter of an hour," which implies that those with her all knew that they existed because they were thinking. But since Ionesco parodies to the extreme their so called thinking, they are not truly considering who they are or the reason for their existence; they are not truly living. All they wish to consider is how to pass the time as comfortably as possible.

Picking up on Mrs. Martin's inane remark, the Fire Chief incongruously blurts out the most enigmatic phrase of the play: "Speaking of that - the bald soprano?" The phrase is met with "embarrassment" and dumb "silence" by the Smiths and the Martins. The silence is termed "general," for it is all-pervasive; it is not the silence that speaks. This phrase is lonesco's happy solution to the problem cited by Coe: It is "the phrase whose very essence is meaningless insignificance but which must become significant without thereby becoming meaningful___

It must reveal its own absurdity" [Coe, Richard, *Eugene Ionesco,* Grove, 1961]. And so it does; it is the epiphanic phrase by which Ionesco chose to reveal the complete ^signification of the *word.* In its having no connection to anything spoken heretofore, in its isolation from predication, this phrase is worse than any of the banal platitudes that have preceded it. It is the nonexistent "prima donna" that does not appear in the play, for as Ionesco said when asked why he had given the play this title, "One of the reasons ... is that no prima donna appears in the play. This detail should suffice." And so it does, for the phrase which the playwright liked because of its sound signified his belief that words had become nothing but meaningless sounds.

Following the "general" silence that follows the Fire Chiefs meaningless phrase, Mrs. Smith remarks, "She always wears her hair in the same style." This vapid attempt at humor is not used to cover any embarrassment she may feel over her ignorance of what possible meaning the phrase may have; rather it points up her indifferent attitude toward the idea of *thought,* for in her world words no longer signify anything.

That "the bald soprano" was an inadvertent remark or "slip of the tongue" by the actor who played the part of the fire chief, is an appropriate seed that must have struck

Ionesco in its inappropriate relation to anything else in the play. The phrase served Ionesco's purpose well in signaling the final collapse of the *word* - sound without meaning, without significance - the way of the world.

Source: John V McDermott, "lonesco's *The Bald Prima Donna"* in *The Explicator,* Volume 55, no. 1, Fall, 1996,p 40

Critical Essay #3

In this essay Lamont provides an overview of Ionesco's play, chronicling reaction to its premiere as well as the playwright's motivations and inspirations for writing this masterpiece of farce.

The curtain rises on a middle-class English couple, Mr. and Mrs. Smith: the wife is a non-stop chatterbox who has nothing to say beyond praising the cooking of their maid, Maty, while Mr. Smith is content with clicking his tongue from behind his opened newspaper. He is busy scanning the obituary page where a notice appears about the death of one Bobby Watson. Confusion pervades the exchange between husband and wife as to the gender of the dead person since both husband and wife were called Bobby. The clock strikes seven, three, then five, as Mrs. Smith wonders when the two Bobby Watsons plan to get married. The time is definitely "out of joint." These speculations, which also include the little Bobby Watsons, are interrupted by Mary who comes in to announce the arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Martin. As the Smiths rush out to change, their guests settle in the vacant armchairs. Although Mr. and Mrs. Martin have come down on the same train from Manchester, they do not seem at first to know one another. Step by step they reconstruct their lives, becoming convinced that they are man and wife. Mary, the self-proclaimed "Sherlock Holmes" of the play, blows up their pyramid of evidence by stating that the little girl they assume to be their child cannot be their offspring: ".. .whereas it's the right eye of Donald's child that's red and the left eye that's white, it's the left eye of Elizabeth's child that's red and the right eye that's white." There are no certainties in Ionesco's world. With the unexpected arrival of the Captain of the Fire Brigade, the maid's erstwhile lover, matters disintegrate further. The Fireman's absurdist tales unleash a kind of madness. The play ends with the Smiths and Martins dancing round and round like cannibals, hurling invectives or hissing syllables at one another. At the end, the Martins and Smiths trade roles and places. Everything starts all over again.

When *The Bald Prima Donna* was presented by Nicolas Bataille in 1950 on the tiny stage of the now defunct Theatre des Noctambules, the one-act sketch was received as a witty prank, the kind of show one might expect to see m a cabaret. The title appeared to be a joke since no bald diva was seen on the stage. The audience was unaware that the Fire Chief had slipped up in rehearsal, substituting the words "bald prima donna" for another group of nonsense terms, and as a result Ionesco decided that this chance twist of the tongue would determine the play's title. Such a solution was in keeping with the tradition of Dadaism, a school whose own title came from flipping open a dictionary and choosing a word at random. Ionesco, the admitted heir of Tristan Tzara, welcomed the intrusion of chance as an element of his aesthetic.

Ionesco likes to say that in composing *The Bald Prima Donna* he was not quite certain of what he had produced. He assumed that it was "something like the tragedy of language," and was therefore amazed to hear the audience laughing. Later, when he had had time to reflect upon this non-psychological, apolitical work, he came to see it as pure structure, like a musical composition or an architectural construction. Although

Ionesco claimed the text of the play was "dictated" to him by the characters from a conversation book, *English Made Easy,* a careful analysis reveals that it is crafted with minute precision, that the rhythm of the play gathers momentum and reaches a crescendo. Although Ionesco sub-titles this sketch an "anti-play," pointing out its parodic intent, it must be seen as a lampoon that pays homage to the genre it mocks.

Most French critics made the mistake of considering this comedy to be social satire, a way of poking fun at bourgeois French society by means of a cartoon version of the British middle class. However, Ionesco is quick to declare: "I'm a good bourgeois myself!" If any joke was intended, it was at the expense of boulevard melodrama in the style of Henri Bernstein. Nicolas Bataille claims to have imitated this style in directing his actors, just as he ordered his set designer to recreate the decor of *Hedda Gabler.* Ionesco suggests that his play must be understood to be the satire of bourgeois mentality, not bourgeois customs. He says that he makes fun of a universal petite-bourgeoisie, of men of fixed ideals, who live by slogans, using mechanical language without ever questioning it.

There are six characters in the *Bald Prima Donna.* The Smiths and the Martins are interchangeable, and in the end they do change places. The Maid and the Fire Chief, her erstwhile lover, are no less indistinct, but they are colorful rather than gray, Ionesco's Mary is the Bacchante of Dionysus/The Fire Chief whom she celebrates by reciting a paean to fire. Of course the Fire Chief is enchanted with this celebration of his "conception of the world." It seems that being worshiped in this manner frees his own creative impulses; he manifests a gift for story telling. Both Mary's paean and her lover's surrealist fables constitute the dynamite charge that brings down the walls of convention. The play's rhythm intensifies, grows delirious What becomes obvious is that the flat, cartoon-like characters are made of words, not of flesh and blood.

Ionesco's first play is still his favorite because of its simple abstract quality. It has been running at the Theatre de La Huchette in the Latin Quarter for over 35 years. It is also widely performed in university campuses in the United States. The *Bald Prima Donna* has ushered in the leading dramatic form of the second half of the 20th century, the metaphysical farce.

Source: Rosette C Lamont, *"The Bald Prima Donna"* in *The International Dictionary of Theatre I. Plays,* edited by Mark Hawkins-Dady, St James Press, 1992, p. 47

Adaptations

The only feature film in English adapted from an Ionesco play is *Rhinoceros,* which was released in 1974. An American Film Theatre production, it was directed by Tom O'Horgan and starred Karen Black, Zero Mostel, and Gene Wilder. Ionesco was one of the screenwriters. The stage play did not translate well into film, and most critics consider it a failure. It not currently available on video.

An audio tape of *Rhinoceros,* featuring the same leading actors as the film version, was released by Harper Audio on cassette in 1973. It is out of print, but used copies are sometimes available from such services as Amazon.com.

La Vase (The Slough), a film made at La Chapelle-Anthenaise in 1970, was written by Ionesco and features him in its single role. In 1971, the film played briefly at a Latin Quarter cinema in Paris, but it was poorly received. It is not currently available in the United States.

A reading of *The Chairs* was recorded and released by Caedmon Records in 1963, featuring Siobhan McKenna and Cyril Cussack It was re-released on audio cassette by Harper Audio but is not generally available.

The Martins are so shallow as to be unable to recognize each other when they enter the Smiths' home, even though they have come in together. When the Smiths re-enter, the two couples engage in further pleasantries, a pastiche of non sequiturs consisting of vapid observations and tidbits of very conventional wisdom. All seem to grow excited over the most mundane behavior, such as a man bending over to tie his shoe or reading a newspaper. Their responses seem artificial, their words ludicrously inappropriate to the situation.

Like the others, Mr. Martin also seems utterly without any important convictions. He is timorous and excessively apologetic. He can not even take a side in the silly doorbell argument between Mr. and Mrs. Smith. The only times that he seems in the least genuine in the expression of his feelings are when he airs his class-conscious biases against Mary, some sexist remarks about women, and in the cacophonous exchange of verbal nonsense in which the characters heatedly engage just before the end of the play.

Elizabeth Martin

Like her husband, Elizabeth Martin is a human cipher. In their initial exchanges, her speech, except in the nouns of address, is virtually indistinguishable from that of Mr. Martin. They simply echo each other, using the same phrases and words repeatedly, especially variations on the exclamation "how curious it is." Like him, she also seems at times to have no grasp of the most obvious things, though at other times she finds the most mundane and obvious behavior extraordinary.

For example, she is apprehensive about disclosing that she saw the man who bent over to tie his shoe for fear that she will not be believed. Mrs. Martin cautiously sides with Mrs. Smith in her doorbell argument with Mr. Smith, even though Mrs. Smith concludes that when the doorbell rings it means that there is nobody at the door. Mrs. Martin claims that her husband is also "obstinate," yet when the Fire Chief actually appears the fourth time the bell is rung, she stubbornly maintains that the fourth time does not count because she will not allow experience to invalidate Mrs. Smith's claim that a ringing doorbell means that there is nobody at the door.

Like the other characters, at odd moments Mrs. Martin offers bizarre observations that seem out of character because they glimpse beyond the inane dialogue that generally suggests no intelligence at all. For example, it is she who thanks the Fire Chief for the "truly Cartesian quarter of an hour" that he has spent at the Smiths'. Otherwise, she mirrors the character of her husband and the Smiths, revealing the same social prejudices and rigid ineptitude. That she is almost identical to Mrs. Smith is made apparent when at the end of the play she replaces Mrs. Smith in the repeated opening of the play, using the same dialogue but with the Martins as the prospective host and hostess.

Maty

Mary is the Smiths' maid, which she announces when she first enters, presumably to inform the audience of her role. She has just returned from spending the afternoon at the cinema and having milk and brandy with a male friend. At first she is very matter-of-fact in her manner, but suddenly breaks into laughter, then tears, announcing "I bought me a chamber pot," as if that fact explained her emotional instability. When the Smiths go off to dress for their guests, Mary lets the Martins in, upbraiding them for being late. She then exits, but returns on tiptoe after the Martins fall asleep, exhausted from their protracted verbal voyage on which they have discovered that they are man and wife. Mary then lets the audience in on the secret that despite the extensive logical deduction of Donald Martin, the Martins are not really the parents of their alleged common child and are, therefore, not really who they claim to be. She exits after confiding that she, in reality, is Sherlock Holmes. Mary reappears during the visit of the Fire Chief, requesting, to the chagrin of Martins and Smiths, that she also be allowed to tell a story. She and the Chief recognize each other, overcome with wonder that they should be reunited in the Smiths' home. When he explains that Mary had helped him put out his earliest fires, she tells him, "I am your little firehose." The Martins and Smiths become irritated by Mary's familiarity, but can not prevent her from reading her poem honoring the Fire Chief as the Smiths push her' offstage.

Mr. Smith

Mr. Smith, the host, is a *reductio ad absurdum* parody of a complacent, middle-class British suburbanite and husband, one confident in his ignorance and stupefyingly dull in his observations. In the first part of the play, he merely reads and clicks his tongue while his wife gives her account of who they are and what they consumed at dinner. When he

finally talks, he does so to take issue with his wife, whom he mildly bullies with a ridiculously smug sense of having superior reasoning powers, when in fact neither is capable of logical discourse or even meaningful communication.

Smith and his wife may talk, but neither seems to really listen to the other or even to their own previous observations. In their mostly-quiet, polite game of one-upmanship, they often contradict themselves, oblivious to their illogicality. They share no love or genuine concern for each other, only a mutual shallowness covered with a thin veneer of verbal civility that sometimes breaks down, as, for example, when Mr Smith angrily upbraids the Martins for having arrived so late, and when he calls Mrs. Smith "disgusting" for having interrupted his interruption of Mrs. Martin's aborted account of a man she saw outside a cafe.

Most of the time, however, Mr. Smith is simply boring, incapable of sustaining any original thought or meaningful discussion on any topic broached. Only in his trivial argument with Mrs. Smith over the import of the doorbell does he come close to maintaining a consistent stance. Like his wife and the Martins, he generally makes incongruous, irrelevant, or contradictory pronouncements that frustrate all attempts at rational discourse.

Mrs. Smith

Mrs. Smith, a parody of a stuffy, middle-class British housewife, is the appropriate counterpart to Mr. Smith. Like his, her speech is basically a litany of incoherent trivia often couched in pat phrases and class-reflective cliches. At the beginning of the play, she presents a virtual monologue in which she gives a tedious, detailed account of what she and Mr. Smith consumed for dinner. She also reveals that the couple have children and hints that Mr. Smith lacks sufficient sexual vigor, which she obliquely continues to target m the pair's put-down game.

That she and her husband are otherwise virtually indistinguishable in outlook and temperament is borne home by their discussion of the Watsons, a husband and wife, both named Bobby, who were so much like each other as to confuse acquaintances. Although they take opposite tacks, as in their silly doorbell argument and the manner in which they first greet the Martins, they sound so like each other as to suggest that they take their stances not from conviction but from spite for each other. The spite sometimes erupts, as when Mrs. Smith bares her teeth and hurls some socks across the stage, or when she attacks her husband as a boor. It also takes other forms, flirtation with Mr. Martin and the Fire Chief, for example.

Like her husband and the Martins, Mrs. Smith seems driven by underlying but non-specific anxieties that partly account for the bizarre observations that each of them makes. Her insecurities seem to be centered on sex, health, and mortality; normal concerns, certainly, but ones which remain mostly subliminal in the superficially polite conversation that blocks all attempts at honest communication.

Topics for Further Study

Investigate the basic existential tenets of the French philosophers and writers Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus and their impact on Ionesco's absurdist drama.

Compare the dramatic techniques of an existential drama such as Sartre's *No Exit* or Camus's *The Misunderstanding* with those of *The Bald Soprano.*

Investigate the work of Alfred Jarry and the science of pataphysics, relating your discoveries to Ionesco's anti-plays.

Research the impact of Charlie Chaplin and other film comedians on the absurdists, including Ionesco.

Research surrealism as a movement in art and drama, noting its influence on Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano.*

Compare and Contrast

1950s: There is a growing concern about the misuse and abuse of language, particularly as an instrument of propaganda. Words are used to sway public and political opinion, particularly by the powers waging the Cold War. As communication technology advances, concerns arise over the negative effects on the human mind. Some believe that media advances make a sort of massive brain washing possible, a danger reflected in both nonfiction and fictional works, including George Orwell's *1984* (1949) and Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957).

Today: Many critics argue that in stressing the need for "political correctness" the media and various public agencies are currently engaged in social engineering through the manipulation of language, even if the aim, multi-cultural understanding and tolerance, is praiseworthy.

1950s: In the traditional stereotype of the middle-class family, the roles of husband and wife are primarily limited to the husband as "bread winner" and the wife as "nurturer." World War II temporarily altered this pattern as women replaced military-bound men in factory jobs. After the war, the pattern resumed, but many women discovered they were dissatisfied with a life confined to the domestic sphere.

Today: Women are much more active in the work force. They have also made significant inroads in the military, with many serving in combat roles.

1950s: The Cold War is a global pressure cooker threatening an uneasy peace with heated words and threats. Although *The Bald Soprano* remains free of any reference to the ideological struggle, Ionesco's "anti-play" is the first of several in which he deliberately neglects current affairs for his more abstract ends, leaving the international crisis conspicuous only by its total absence.

Today: With the Cold War over, Ionesco's unwillingness to use drama to promote partisan views seems intellectually justified, as does his concern with the debasement of language.

What Do I Read Next?

Waiting for Godot (1952) is Samuel Beckett's best known play and shares top billing with Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* as the most important works in the theater, of the absurd. It was written at about the same time but not produced until 1953.

The Chairs (1952), Ionesco's third staged anti-play, which many consider his best, also depicts a collapse into nothingness, partly through words but also through the crowding of the stage with empty chairs and invisible characters.

1984 (1949), George Orwell's dystopian study of Oceana, depicts a futuristic society gone amok. Mind control is partly achieved through Newspeak, a diminished version of English which attempts to limit proletariat thinking to government-sanctioned ideas.

Fahrenheit 541 (1953) is Ray Bradbury's science fiction novel of future society in which books, including the great classics of literature, are banned and people are spoon fed verbal and visual images by the government.

The American Dream (1960), by Edward Albee, is the first real foray into the absurdist technique by a major American playwright. It shares Ionesco's concern with the debasement of language.

The Myth of Sisyphus (1942) is Albert Camus's inquiry into the value of hfe in an absurd world— one devoid of purpose or meaning. A major proponent of existentialism, Camus provides insight into the philosophical basis of absurdist drama.

Further Study

Hayman, Ronald. *Eugene Ionesco,* World Dramatists Senes, Frederick Ungar, 1976.

Written in 1973, after Ionesco virtually turned away from theater, Hayman's study concludes that the playwright's best work was written in the 1950s, which he deems superior to that of the 1960s. The work provides a chronology of stage and broadcast pieces through 1973 and a play-by-play analysis of dramas up through *Macbett,* Hayman claims that Ionesco's greatest weakness is structural Includes an interview with Ionesco.

Kilhnger, John. *World in Collapse: The Vision of Absurd Drama,* Dell, 1971.

Aids in the interpretation of absurdist drama, explaining the philosophical base for the structural designs and thematic motifs in the plays of Ionesco and other absurdists

Lamont, Rosette C *Ionesco's Imperatives,* University of Michigan, 1993.

A major resource text for further study, this work reflects thorough research into Ionesco's historical and political milieu. It features valuable aids, including a nch chronology and notes on productions

Pronko, Leonard C. *Eugene Ionesco,* Columbia Essays on Modern Writers, Columbia University Press, 1965 A brief pamphlet, this work provides a quick overview of Ionesco's plays of the 1950s and early 1960s. It provides information about the playwright's techniques and artistic aims in his earliest works.

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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.

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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:

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