The Chairs Study Guide

The Chairs by Eugène Ionesco

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Introduction

Eugene lonesco's *The Chairs* is one of the playwright's most popular plays. First performed in Paris on April 22, 1952, *The Chairs* was only the third of lonesco' s plays to be produced. At the time, lonesco was still a struggling playwright.

Most critics and audiences did not know what to make of *The Chairs*. In the play, an elderly couple sets up chairs and greets invisible guests who have come to hear the Old Man's message to the world. The message is left in the hands of an Orator after the couple commits suicide, but he is deaf-mute and cannot relay it.

In the program for the original production, lonesco writes, "As the world is incomprehensible to me, I am waiting for someone to explain it." As the idea of a theater of the absurd a literary form that explored the futility of human existance evolved, *The Chairs* came to be seen as a seminal example of the genre, highlighting the loneliness and futility of human existence.

By the time the play was revived in Paris in 1956, most critics and audiences lauded lonesco for his unique staging and profound sense of humor. Since these early productions, *The Chairs* is still regularly performed worldwide.

Author Biography

Eugene lonesco was born on November 26,1912, in Slatina, Romania. When he was still an infant, his family moved to Paris, France, where lonesco spent much of his childhood.

When lonesco was thirteen years old, his family moved back to Romania. He attended the University of Bucharest, graduating with a degree in French. It was at this time he began to write poetry and literary criticism. After graduation, he became a teacher of French.

During the 1930s lonesco moved to Paris on a grant to study contemporary poetry. Instead of working on his proposed thesis, he went to work for a publisher and became a French citizen. During World War II he worked a variety of different jobs.

lonesco wrote his first play, *The Bald Soprano*, in 1948. A one-act work, it was not produced until 1950 and was initially considered a failure. Still, his reputation as a playwright began to grow.

In 1952 lonesco wrote *The Chairs*. Critics were confused about the meaning of the play, but its run was relatively successful. In 1954 lonesco's reputation as a playwright was cemented in France with the success of *Amedee*, his first full-length play. Within a few years, his work was known worldwide.

As a playwright, lonesco was extremely prolific, writing twenty-eight plays over the course of his career. He was a prominent proponent of the theater of the absurd, a literary form that explored the ridiculous nature of the human condition.

In the 1980s and 1990s, lonesco stopped writing plays, instead focusing on his love of painting. He died in his Paris home on March 28, 1994.

Plot Summary

The Chairs opens with the Old Man sitting on a stool looking out the window. His wife, the Old Woman, worries that he will fall out of the window. Finally, she pulls him in and drags him towards two chairs. The Old Man sits on her lap.

The Old Woman works to calm him, reminding him that he has a message to deliver. The Old Man is excited when he remembers this. He gets up and starts to pace. The Old Woman tells him how talented he is and that he must tell the world his message.

It is revealed that the Old Man will reveal his message to many important people that evening. The doorbell rings and the first guest arrives.

All the guests are invisible. The first guest is The Lady. The old couple makes small talk with this invisible woman and gets her a chair. Another guest arrives. It is a Colonel, who is seated next to the Lady.

The doorbell rings again and two more guests arrive: Belle and her husband. The Old Woman makes grotesque sexual gestures towards Belle's husband; the Old Man intimates that he had been involved with Belle in the past.

More invisible guests arrive. The Old Woman fetches more chairs, but she cannot keep up. She gets frustrated by the Old Man's demands. The Old Woman does not even know who the guests are, but the Old Man is too busy to explain them to her.

Other invisible guests arrive, some bringing children. This upsets the old couple, but they try to seat them just the same. As more invisible guests arrive, the Old Woman's hunt for chairs becomes comical.

When the Old Woman runs out of chairs, she begins to sell programs and food treats. The invisible guests without chairs are forced to stand against the wall. The crowd is so massive that the Old Man and the Old Woman have to shout to locate each other across the room. They continue, however, to make small talk among their guests, assuring them that the message will be spoken in a few moments.

The Emperor arrives. The old couple is shocked that such an important man is in their house. The invisible crowd gives the Emperor the best seat in the house.

The Orator arrives to announce the Old Man's message. Unlike the other guests, he is a real person and dressed in the garb of a nineteenth-century artist. The Orator mounts the dais, and the Old Man directs the invisible audience to ask the Orator for autographs. He signs them.

The Old Man thanks his guests for coming. He tells the Emperor that his life will not have been in vain after his message has been shared with them. Finally, the Old Man thanks his wife. Then, after one last praise of the Emperor, the Old Man and the Old Woman jump out the window and commit suicide.

The Orator begins to speak, but he is a mute as well as deaf. He can only make throaty noises. To communicate the message, he writes a few meaningless words on a chalkboard. He finally leaves and the noise of the invisible audience marks the end of the play.

Summary

The Chairs is a one-act play featuring a husband and wife, both in their late 90s, who host an event to which people will come to hear the old man's wisdom. The people are invisible but the man and woman can be seen and engage in conversations with them. The setting for the play is a bare stage with a circular wall at the back that contains several doors and windows. Two chairs sit side-by-side facing the audience. As the lights go up, the old man is seen looking out a window and his wife implores him to get down from the height because it is dangerous.

The man and woman live on an island and the man loves looking out to the sea. He reluctantly agrees to join his wife and takes a seat on her lap. She encourages him to entertain her with his old stories, as she has done for many years. Although his profession is not one of a high position, he is a very learned man and his wife bolsters his self-esteem by reminding him of his mental prowess.

The man's mental state is volatile and he weeps for his mother as he thinks about the missed opportunities in his life. Comforting him like a child, his wife assumes the role of mother and reminds her husband of his special role on earth and the importance of tonight's meeting. This reminder is all the man needs to compose himself, for the time has come to share his special message with the world.

The imminent event strikes some terror in the old man and he wonders if he will be competent enough to deliver the message with authority. He then remembers that he has hired a professional Orator for the evening and his temper improves.

Incredulous that the important evening has finally arrived, the wife reminds her husband of his genius for thought, not necessarily details. A list of those invited soothes her anxiety as he reels off all the important people from all the physical and spiritual realms who will attend. Thanks to his wife and the Orator, all the joy and suffering of the man's life will soon be revealed.

The first guest to arrive is a young, well-dressed woman who is guided to one of the chairs already in place. The old man and woman engage in pleasantries with the invisible young woman. An intense ringing of the doorbell, announcing the arrival of the Field Marshal, who is also invisible, interrupts their conversation.

Soon after the introductions, it becomes clear that the Field Marshal is making inappropriate overtures to the young woman. Their embarrassment at his behavior prompts the old man to stop the Field Marshal's behavior with a gun if it should come to that.

Once more, the doorbell announces more guests, this time the Fabled Beauty and her ugly husband. It is soon obvious that the old man had had a relationship with this woman at one time and the feeling is still there. The arrival of the Offset lithographer

counterbalances the old man's indiscretion, when it is revealed that the old woman had had an affair with their latest guest.

The old woman's behavior dips into an area, which is beyond coquettish, and it is clear from her vulgar actions that she and the Offset lithographer are sharing some inappropriate behavior in view of the other guests. The old woman soon drops this fazade and shares with her ex-lover the indignities she has suffered as the wife of a janitor who now thinks of her as his mother.

At this point, the old man and the old woman answer questions put to them by their guests about any children they may have had. According to the old woman, their son ran away when he was only seven; the old man says they never had any children, which is regrettable because his wife has such wonderful nurturing instincts.

Regretfully, the old man admits to being a terrible son and having let his own mother die in a ditch. The memory of her pleas still haunts him and he could never find the place of her burial when he returned. The experience left him with an excruciating pain that he can feel when others cannot.

At this point, more guests begin to arrive. Overwhelmed by the noise from arriving boats and the incessant doorbell, the old man directs his guests while the woman scurries to find more chairs.

The scene takes on an almost carnival-like atmosphere, with the old couple hawking candies and programs. Everyone awaits the Orator so that the evening can begin and the old man's thoughts can finally be shared. Suddenly, trumpets sound and a bright light signals the arrival of the Emperor, His Majesty the King of Kings.

Weeping with emotion, the old man is humbled to have such a noble guest at his home for this event. Pushing through the crowd to reach the divine presence, the old man grumbles about the sycophants delaying his paying homage to the most important guest of all. Proud yet humble, the old man shares some of his life's anguish and is relieved that the Savior has honored him with His presence and the hope of forgiveness of his sins.

At last, the din stops as the Orator, who is a "real" person, appears in the room. Well aware of his worth, the Orator moves to assume his position of importance at the rostrum, stopping briefly to sign autographs for the audience that has now swelled to standing room only.

Overwhelmed by the presence of the Orator, the King of Kings, and all the other people who have gathered, the old man begins to thank those who have been a part of his life. His profound gratitude reaches even to those who poured the foundation for the very house in which they now sit.

At last, the old man finishes and calls upon the Orator to continue, the old couple having come to the end of their journey. Thanking each other in turn, the old man and woman bemoan the fact that they cannot be buried together but at least they have the comfort

of knowing that they die at the same time. With one last plea to the Orator, the old man and his wife jump to their deaths from separate windows into the water below.

Now the Orator moves to address the crowd, and it is obvious that he is a deaf-mute able to mutter only guttural sounds. Unable to communicate verbally to the crowd, the Orator uses the blackboard to share his message: "ANGELS WEEP." Frustrated by more of his guttural sounds, the Orator is able to write "GOD IS GONE." The audience does not respond in the manner he had expected, so the Orator petulantly leaves the room. Soon after his departure, the sounds of human voices are heard, the volume gradually increasing as the curtain falls on the scene.

Analysis

The theme of the inevitability of the passage of time is at the core of this play. The old couple realizes that their lives are nearing the end and the event they have planned symbolizes the recounting of their days and the people who had been in their lives. Isolated by age, as symbolized by the island where they live, the old man gazes longingly out the window for the sight of any boat or sign of their former life to punctuate the monotony.

The ravages of age have taken its toll on their bodies as well as their minds, as evidenced by the old man's calling out for his mother and the old woman behaving vulgarly and totally out of character when in the presence of her ex-lover.

The guests symbolize phases of their lives: the young woman becomes the old woman who once wore fine clothes and attended parties; the Field Marshal represents the old man's military career; the Fabled Beauty and the Offset lithographer represent the conglomerate of all the women and men the couple has loved romantically.

As the old man and his wife share their stories independently of each other, it is clear that they have viewed some things differently but each has experienced joy and pain and wants to share their experiences so that others may benefit.

The climax of the piece is the arrival of God as characterized by His Majesty, the King of Kings, who has come for the accounting of the couple's lives. The old couple is brought to tears now that they can share the joy and angst of their lives with the hope of grace and forgiveness. Content that everything is in order, they leave the message of their lives in the hands of the Orator, confident that he is equipped to impart the wisdom.

The great irony is that the deaf-mute Orator cannot successfully either verbally or through the messages on the chalkboard. The author's message is that everyone searches for the meaning of life, yet there is no one perfect version of it and no one who is equipped to deliver the message appropriately. Finally, the human voices rise in volume to symbolize the life questions that continue unanswered.

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Characters

The Old Man

The Old Man is ninety-five years old and married to the Old Woman. He works as a handyman on the unnamed island where they live. He has waited forty years to unveil his profound message to the world; to that end, he and his wife have invited many important guests and even hired an orator to announce the message.

Yet the Old Man seems confused on the big night: he almost falls out of the window; he sits on his wife's lap; he calls for his mother at one point; and he directly contradicts some things his wife says.

After the Orator arrives, the Old Man commits suicide with his wife, confident that his message will be heard. It is an absurd twist that the Orator is a deaf-mute and cannot express it to the crowd.

The Old Woman

The Old Woman is ninety-four years old and married to the Old Man. A supportive and mothering presence, she believes that her husband is brilliant and could have been much more than a handyman. She is also demanding, making the Old Man repeat stories he has told over and over again.

Although she is supportive of the Old Man, she also can undermine him. Just as the first guest is about to arrive, the Old Woman admonishes him when he shows a moment of insecurity. When she is introduced to an attractive man, she makes inappropriate sexual advances.

Yet in the end, she remains loyal to him and commits suicide with him.

The Orator

The Orator has been hired by the Old Man to deliver his message to the invisible crowd. When arrives, he is silent and signs autographs for the guests. He is dressed like a nineteenth-century artist and makes grand gestures with his arms.

After the couple has jumped out of the window, the Orator unsuccessfully tries to speak. Unable to talk because he seems to be mute, he writes words on a chalkboard. The only identifiable words are "Angelfood" and "Adieu." When it becomes clear that he cannot communicate, he leaves.

Themes

Absurdity

Many of the events in *The Chairs* are absurd, underscoring the loneliness of human existence and the hunger for human contact. The Old Man acts like a child, calling out for his mother as he sits in his wife's lap. The Old Woman makes bizarre sexual gestures as she flirts with one of the invisible guests.

The guests are invisible, though the Old Man and Old Woman talk to them as if they were real. The Old Man is desperate to relay his profound message for the world; yet his invited audience including the Emperor is invisible.

The Old Man hires an Orator to relay this profound message. After the couple commits suicide, it is revealed that the Orator is a deaf-mute he cannot communicate the message to the invisible audience. He tries to write it on the chalkboard, but can only manage a couple of comprehensible words. These absurdities underline the ridiculous nature of human life.

Human Condition/Isolation

Like all humans, the Old Man and Old Woman are isolated from each other and the rest of the human race. They live on an island and seem to have little contact with others. When they finally receive guests in their home, their guests are invisible, emphasizing their isolation.

Only the Orator is more isolated than the elderly couple he must face the invisible crowd alone. Even more symbolic of his isolation is the fact that he is a deaf-mute. He can only speak in guttural noises, and his attempts to write on a chalkboard yield only a few nonsensical words. Every character in *The Chairs* tries to make contact with other people and overcome their isolation; tragically, these people are invisible.

Communication (or the Lack Thereof)

The play revolves around the Old Man's attempts to broadcast his message to the world. To that end he has invited many important people into his home to hear it. His wife, the Old Woman, tries to discourage him from holding his meeting that night thus putting off communication with the outside world for another day but the guests have already begun to arrive.

Yet the guests are invisible; there is no one to hear the Old Man's message. The couple goes through the formalities with these invisible guests but in reality, they are communicating with no one. They do not even communicate with each other.

The Orator also underscores this theme. A deaf-mute, he communicates with noises and gestures that the invisible crowd does not understand. He tries to communicate through writing, but he can only write nonsensical words. When his attemptsto communicate fail, the Orator becomes upset and leaves.

Style

Setting

The Chairs is a "tragic farce" (as Ionesco describes it), which takes place on a remote island. The play is not set in a particular time or place.

All the action of *The Chairs* takes place in a room with a circular or semi-circular shape. Along the wall are two important elements: a window that overlooks the seas and eight doorways.

The window frames the action of the play. When *The Chairs* opens, the Old Man is leaning far out the window. By the end, both the Old Man and Old Woman have committed suicide by jumping out of the window.

Irony

Many of the elements of *The Chairs* are ironic, which means that the intended meaning is different from the actual meaning. This sense of irony contributes to the absurd atmosphere. The Old Man has a very important message to give to the world, yet all of his invited guests are invisible.

The Old Man hires an Orator to broadcast his message. Yet the Orator cannot effectively communicate because he is deaf and mute. These and other uses of irony in *The Chairs* underscore the play's thematic concerns.

Sound Effects

Although the guests in *The Chairs* are invisible, sound effects are employed to make their presence known. The sound of boats announces the arrival of guests. The sound of waves reminds the audience of the isolation of the island. The doorbell rings to signal the arrival of guests.

Some sound effects provide a clue to what kind of guest has arrived. For example, when the Colonel appears, a trumpet sounds. There are gate-crashing noises when the Emperor appears. Furthermore, the stomping of feet is audible when the Emperor is announced by the Old Man and Old Woman. When the elderly couple commits suicide, the sound of their bodies hitting the water is heard.

After the Orator leaves, frustrated that he could not make himself understood, the stage is empty but the audience can hear the sounds of a large crowd talking. These sound effects emphasize the absurd elements of *The Chairs.*

Lighting

The use of lighting is an interesting aspect of *The Chairs*. In the opening scene, the Old Woman lights a lamp that emits a green glow. When the Emperor arrives, a powerful light announces his presence. The lights dim after the couple commits suicide.

Historical Context

In 1952, France was still recovering from the devastating impact of World War II, which had ended less than a decade earlier. There was a lingering sense of political, social, and economic uncertainty.

During the German occupation of France during World War II, Germany had exploited much of France's raw materials, food, and severely disrupted their transportation system. There also had been severe restrictions on French citizens and their civil liberties.

After the war, many reforms were put into place. For example, a social security system was implemented.

Governmental instability led to uncertainty in France. For example, in 1952 there were three French leaders: Rene Pleven, Edgar Faure, and Antoine Pinay. There were also economic problems including high inflation, an increasing cost-of-liv-ing index, and tax increases. The government asked shops to lower prices in an attempt to halt rising inflation.

While industrial production increased significantly in 1952, it was not until the mid-1950s that the foreign aid from the United States began to facilitate new levels of growth. France also had problems converting from an exclusively private economy, based on independently run businesses, to a deficit-ridden public economy in which certain types of businesses were run by the government.

France's economic problems were compounded by its involvement in the Korean War (as part of the United Nations) and in Vietnam. Vietnam was one of several countries where France still had colonial interests.

After World War II, half of Vietnam was taken over by Ho Chi Minh, a communist. A war resulted, but France's poor economic situation limited its ability to intervene. By the mid-1950s, Vietnam was divided in half.

Critical Overview

When *The Chairs* debuted in Paris in 1952, many critics did not know what to make of the play. A few praised the production. Renee Saurel (quoted by Rosette C. Lament in her *Ionesco's Imperatives: The Politics of Culture*) believes the play is "hauntingly beautiful and perfectly structured under its surface of incoherence."

Most critics were not as kind. Some regarded it as too strange. Others were just confused. A contemporary critic quoted in Ruby Cohn's *From Desire to Godot: Pocket Theatre of Postwar Paris* wrote, "Since the guests are represented by chairs, I didn't understand whether this was a symbol of the author, a dream of the Old Man or a financial economy."

Because of such reviews, audiences stayed away. Sometimes Ionesco, his wife, and daughter were the only spectators in the theater. Still, he was pleased. Allan Lewis quotes the author as saying "If my failures continue on this scale I will certainly be a success."

The critics changed their opinion as the concept of the theater of the absurd became widespread and popular in Europe and Paris. When *The Chairs* was revived in Paris in 1956, many critics praised Ionesco's work.

As quoted by Cohn, French playwright Jean Anouilh wrote in the Paris publication *Figaro*, "I think that it's better than Strindberg because it's dark in the fashion of Moliere, sometimes madly funny, it's frightful and ridiculous, poignant and always true."

English-speaking critics were divided on *The Chairs*. The unnamed critic in *Newsweek* contended: "There are two articulate schools of thought about Eugene Ionesco. One regards him as a gifted charlatan and a practical joker. The other agrees with Kenneth Tynan, the London critic who classifies 'the poet of double-talk' as 'a supreme theatrical conjurer.'"

An anonymous critic in *Time* concurred, maintaining that Ionesco's "work has been about equally hailed for its meaning and hooted for lack of any" Moreover, the critic asserted: "Providing playfully humorous touches and some remarkable stage affects, *The Chairs* is at times both engaging and lightly evocative, but calls for greater imaginative pressure, has no really tragic underside to its surface drolleries."

Many critics shared these divergent opinions. For example, *The Nation's* Harold Clurman contended: "The point of all this is supposed to be that none of us can communicate with another, but I am not convinced that that is the point. There is a strange humor in the play; it presents an arresting theatrical image. Though weird, it is not depressing. There is about it a light, poignant poesy."

Henry Hewes of the *Saturday Review of Literature* countered, "Eugene Ionesco has, I think, theatre importance that extends beyond his ability as a writer. The technique is

simple. The characters are general types. The situations are usual. But the action and dialogue follow whatever course will amplify the absurdity inherent in the contradictions of each immediate moment."

Since these original productions, *The Chairs* has been performed worldwide. While most critics believe the themes have resonated over time, a few disagree. Stefan Kanfer in *The New Leader wrote*: "Irrational response to a crazy world was de rigueur in the postwar period. Today it seems as adolescent as acne and obsolete as a 1952 Renault."

Such critical division existed even into the late 1990s. Most share the opinion of Adrian Tahourdin of the *Times Literary Supplement.* He asserted that " *The Chairs* is a sparkling piece, full of wit, pathos and theatrical invention."

John Simon agreed: "The exact meaning of every detail is debatable, but the outline is clear enough. We live in terrifying isolation, companioned mostly by imaginary others. We cannot even voice our final justification."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

In this essay, Petrusso considers The Chairs *a play about self-delusion.*

Eugene Ionesco's play *The Chairs* lends itself to many different interpretations. For example, Allan Lewis asserts in *Ionesco*, "The Old Man seeks certainty and truth in the midst of the absurd."

The Chairs explores the lack of truth in the Old Man and Old Woman's life, reflecting the lies humans often tell themselves. Many critics also believe the play is about communication between people. This essay argues that *The Chairs* is about people's deluded communication with themselves, which reflects their innate isolation.

The Old Man is the most delusional of the three characters; his needs direct the course of the play. His delusions are evident from the beginning. After the Old Woman pulls him away from the window, Ionesco writes in the stage directions that "the Old Man seats himself quite naturally on the lap of the Old Woman." The Old Woman treats the Old Man as a child and he acts like one.

A bit later, he calls for his mother and says that he is an orphan. He talks in baby talk, then, as the Old Woman calms him down, he turns back into an adult, claiming "I have a message, that's God truth, I struggle, a mission, I have something to say, a message to communicate to humanity, to mankind."

He is ninety-five years old, with what he believes is an important message to save the world, yet he acts like a child. A child would not have the insight or feel the responsibility to formulate such a message.

Once the Old Man starts acting like an adult again, his untruths are compounded. He tells the Old Woman, "I'm not like other people, I have an ideal in life. I am perhaps gifted, as you say, I have some talent, but things aren't easy to me." These are the statements of an adult rationalizing their life.

Sometimes there is a grain of truth to his deception. He tells the Old Woman, "I have so much difficulty expressing myself, but I must tell it all." To that end he tells his wife he has hired an Orator to relay his message to his invited guests.

The deception becomes physical when the invisible guests arrive to hear his "scientific lecture." The Old Man believes a roomful of guests come to hear his message: women and men of all classes; old friends; and important people like colonels and the "Emperor" (of uncertain origin because France had no royalty at the time of the play's performance). Because the guests are invisible, the conversation is one-sided, mostly of subjects of concern to the Old Man and the Old Woman.

The whole situation is controlled and imagined by the Old Man as well as his wife. This becomes evident when the Old Man talks "to" Belle, a woman from his childhood. In his

mind, like many people, he wants to communicate. The Old Man does not talk to Belle as if she, too, is elderly, but much younger. The Old Man has a similar conversation with the Colonel.

The Old Woman encourages the Old Man's delusions. She repeatedly tells him that he could have done more with his life. At one point, she declares, "Ah! yes, you've certainly a fine intellect. You are very gifted, my darling. You could have been head president, head king, or even head doctor, or head general, if you had wanted to, if only you'd had a little ambition in life."

During one of these incidents, the Old Man tries to demure, saying "Let's be modest, we should be content with little." Yet he is not. He believes he is so important that dignitaries must come to his house and hear his message.

Later, the Old Woman reinforces these beliefs, claiming "It's a sacred duty. You've no right to keep your message from the world. You must reveal it to mankind, they're waiting for it-the universe waits only for you."

When the invisible guests begin to arrive, the Old Woman makes polite conversation, but, more importantly, serves her husband's delusion by fetching chairs, chairs, and more chairs. She runs herself ragged making sure that all the guests he has "invited " have chairs.

When the Old Man believes the Colonel has insulted him, the Old Woman defends him, saying "My husband never lies; it may be true that we are old, nevertheless we're respectable." Also, when Belle and her husband bring the elderly couple a gift, the Old Man has to tell her what it is. This is concrete evidence that *The Chairs* is mostly a figment of the Old Man's imagination.

The Old Woman also tries to bring the Old Man back to Earth. She tells him that "You've quarreled with all your friends, the directors, with all the generals, with your own brother." He replies simply, "It's not my fault Semiramis, you know very well what he said."

The Old Man doesn't want to hear the truth. The Old Woman tries to postpone the meeting just before it is to begin. Guests arrives before he can change his mind.

The Old Woman also has her own delusions. When the Old Man acts like a child, she does too. She demands that they play make believe and that he "imitate the month of February." Then she demands that he tell her the story of how they arrived on the island seventy-five years ago.

During the story, the Old Man contends that they were in a "village" called Paris, but the Old Woman, switching back to her maternal role, says, "Paris never existed, my little one." Her conversations with invisible guests are polite but fantastic. Shockingly, she tries to seduce Belle's husband in a bizarre sexual display.

One scene illustrates just how delusional the whole situation is. When talking with Belle and her husband, the elderly couple contradict each other many times: the Old Woman tells Belle's husband that she has a son who abandoned them, while the Old Man tells Belle that he and the Old Woman had no children; the Old Man tells Belle that he killed his mother, while the Old Woman informs Belle's husband that the Old Man took wonderful care of his family. There is no truth each believes what he or she wants to believe.

There is no real evidence that the Old Man actually has a real message to convey. The play implies that the Old Man hired the Orator sometime before the play began and gave him the information necessary. Yet the Orator is a deaf-mute, according to lonesco's stage directions, so the Old Man had to have been aware that the Orator could never speak his message.

Yet when the Orator appears, the Old Man and Old Woman act somewhat surprised. The Old Woman has to touch the Orator before she believes he is really there. The Old Man says, "He exists. It's really he. This is not a dream!" then, according to the stage directions, he "clasps his hands, lifts his eyes to heaven [and] exults silently."

It is only because the Orator is a real man that the Old Man's delusions became real and truly pathetic. The Orator could be interpreted as a physical manifestation of the delusion because he allows the couple to believe the Old Man's lie.

Now that his life's work is almost complete, the Old Man is ready to die. Yet the delusions continue: he thanks everyone who has ever helped him, though the island's isolation has been emphasized throughout the text. What is evident in the last few moments of the Old Man's lie is that he believes that because his message will be heard, his life has not been in vain.

Many people want to believe such things, though few ever really accomplish this. Yet this is the final delusion. After the couple commits suicide, the Orator is incapable of relaying the Old Man's message. The few words the Orator manages to scribble on the chalkboard are nonsense.

At the end of the play, all the audience is left with is the chairs and the sound effect of a noisy crowd. The chairs remain as empty symbols of the Old Man's hopes and dreams. Ultimately, the Old Man wanted to find and understand his own message himself, and killed himself when he thought, incorrectly, that he had accomplished it.

Source: A. Petrusso, for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Lahr reviews a 1998 revival of Ionesco's play in this essay. The critic offers a highly favorable appraisal of the play, labeling it as one of the great dramatic pieces of the twentieth century.

Once, contemplating the survival of his plays, the French-Romanian playwright Eugene Ionesco said, "It takes a few decades for a work to become brilliant when it's no longer written by the author, but rewritten by the generations who come after him." Britain's Theatre de Complicite has restaged Ionesco's one-act *The Chairs* nearly half a century after it was written, in 1952, and has established finally and forever the indubitable poetry and genius of the play, which Ionesco subtitled "a tragic farce." Here, at the Golden, superbly directed by Simon McBurney and aided by the Quay Brothers' water-stained gray-plank surround of towering doors and cornices, Ionesco's ontological void takes the shape of a floating, threadbare island world "on the edge of nothingness," in which two nonagenarians played by the English comic veterans Richard Briers and Geraldine McEwan act out the folly, fulminations, and fierce solitude of their dwindling days. The production plunges the audience into a vivid, contradictory world of light and darkness, proliferation and absence. Ionesco originally saw an image of ever-increasing chairs on an empty stage what he called "present absences" as a vision of "total absence." The great accomplishment of the Complicite's production is to capture the pulse of the feverish anxiety out of which he wrote the sense of a metabolism gone haywire, and of what Ionesco referred to as a whirlwind of accumulating emptiness.

A large part of the play's new shine is a result of the fine playing of Briers and McEwan, who know all there is to know about comic timing. At the opening of the show, Briers, white-haired and feeble, stands at the window, casting a hangdog look at the water vastness just outside his front door. The play's first words establish the corrupted world they inhabit: "Please poppet shut the window. You're letting the stench of stagnant water in." The Old Man thinks he's seeing boats "like sunspots" in the distance. "There aren't any little boats," the Old Woman says. "There isn't any sun. It's night-time, popsey." The Old Man counters, "There's still the afterglow." It's a terrific joke. They can't agree on what is in the world; nonetheless, nostalgia for it prevails. This is the precise emotional affliction that inspired Ionesco's plays. "I write out of anguish; out of nostalgia ... a nostalgia which no longer knows its object," he once said. The Old Man and the Old Woman tell each other stories to agree on their history and to keep their insubstantial selves intact. "Your story is my story too," the Old Woman says to the Old Man, and at one point she suggests, "Why don't you 'be' something to cheer us up?" The Old Man replies, "Whydon'tyow 'be' something it's your turn," and they fall into a vaudeville of recrimination:

OLD WOMAN: Oh no it's not.

OLD MAN: Oh yes it is.

OLD WOMAN: Isn't.

OLD MAN: Is.

Their folderol exudes the distinctive perfume of despair. Later, after being told that he "could've achieved something in life," Briers ends up on McEwan's lap, regressing. "I want my mummy," he says. "Where's my mummy? I'm an orphan." The air is full of regrets and abdications. Grandiosity vies with self-loathing. The Old Man feels compelled to give the world his message; the Old Woman, always the supportive wife, says, "Mankind is waiting. The universe hangs on your lips." A party to broadcast his views is called for that night. An Orator is hired to insure the proper delivery of his message, and before you can say "Hey, Feydeau!" the event, and what Ionesco called "the mechanics of proliferation," gets under way.

Chairs are brought into the room for the imaginary newcomers, and Ionesco's fun machine goes quickly out of control. McEwan turns into a roadrunner, skittering around the stage with chairs in her hands, over her head, collapsing hilariously with her body slumped against the door. Chairs are shoved through the doors, dropped from the ceiling, popped onto cornices. As the old couple go through their social paces with each guest, including the resplendently invisible King of Kings Himself (a spotlight follows His Invisibleness around the auditorium to the place where he resides, beside a pair of white gloves on the balcony railing), their badinage compounds clutter with cliche. The play, well translated by Martin Crimp, is a virtual encyclopedia of dead phrases, which has the weird comic effect of turning language, too, into emptiness. "You can find yourself looking at things that seem to be mere appearances, expressions of nothing, faces with nothing behind them," Ionesco said, and this proliferating nothingness is what the play both literally and symbolically achieves.

At a certain speed, all things disintegrate: in *The Chairs* the exhausted old couple, separated by the crowd, finally commit suicide by jumping into the sea out of opposite windows. It's left to the ghostly Orator (Mick Barnfather) to deliver the message; inevitably, words escape him. He's deaf and dumb; he speaks in sign language and, finally, in frustration, writes the following punning statements on the doors: "ANGELSWEEP" and "GOD™ISAGONE." In the final coup de theatre, McBurney actually stages Ionesco's "whirlwind of emptiness." The house appears to be blown away: the doors collapse, the scrim flies up, and the set becomes a gray, skeletal shell, like some bombed war ruin. But Ionesco has one last, chilling laugh. After a few moments of silence, the sound of murmuring laughter and conversation wells up underneath the chairs. As the lights fade, a stationary chair turns in our direction. In that startling moment not scripted by Ionesco the production teases one final caprice from oblivion: a theatrical illusion within a universe that to Ionesco was all illusion.

Source: John Lahr. "Present Absences" in the *New Yorker*, Vol. 74, April 13, 1998, pp. 78-80.

Critical Essay #3

In the following brief essay, Brown discusses the manner in which certain meanings in lonesco's play can be misconstrued due to differences in language and translations.

Willis D. Jacobs' comment on *The Chairs* of lonesco (EXP., Feb., 1964, XXII), is certainly very interesting and probably valid for the English text; but his attempt to find a positive message in the orator's writing on the blackboard must be doomed by a consultation of the French. The English translation "angelfood" stands for the French *Angepain*, which is the two words *angel* and *bread* placed side by side. This construction in French does not give adjectival force to the word *angel* as it does in English. The effect might be carried into English better if it were written "angel; bread." Yet as a single word, *angepain* might suggest the adjective *Angevin* just by the sound. Such an adjective in this place would have the value only of an absurdity. The most that could be made of it is that the orator has replaced the phoneme *vin* by *pain* wine by bread. This scarcely has positive implications.

Next follows the series of letters: NNAA NNM NWNWNW V. These letters were probably chosen because they most resemble pure nonsense scribbling. But if one attempts to pronounce them they suggest the negative "ne" or "non" more than anything else.

Finally the orator writes AADIEU ADIEU APA. The inverted V is there to obfuscate. The message is Adieu Dieu goodby God. (I have no explanation for the final P; pronounced *pe* in French, it probably would *not* suggest the French *word pet*, pronounced *pe*, meaning the breaking of wind.)

That the play is meant to end on a negative note is indicated by the fact that in its first performances the blackboard was not used, only the nonsense mumbling of the orator being heard.

Source: James L. Brown. "lonesco's *The Chairs*" in the *Explicator*, Vol. XXIV, no. 8, April, 1966, pp. 73-74.

Critical Essay #4

Jacobs discusses the nature of absurdity as it applies to drama. He argues that The Chairs, *rather than being an example of theatre of the absurd, is actually "straightforward and obvious good sense."*

Absurd, absurd, absurd. It's time to put this silly misrepresentation of avant-garde playwrights to rest. As for Samuel Beckett, he is melancholy, hopeless, pessimistic, pejoristic, and this is not absurd. It's a conviction of man's brutality and life's difficulty. Living through obscene poverty and the ferocity of Hitler's Germans, Beckett came to conclusions that are intelligent and sensible, not absurd.

But the case most at point is Eugene lonesco' s brilliant play *The Chairs*. Rather than absurd, it is at least for the vast majority of our population straightforward and obvious good sense.

The old couple has just died. The Orator strives to speak. His words are not understood. Then he writes the message left by the old people, and which he himself absolutely believes, upon the blackboard. There it faces us with clarity and force. He capitalizes the words to emphasize their meaning, to make them loud and strong. And the message is incorporated in two words of great obviousness. One is ANGELFOOD. The other is ADIEU. Neither of these words is gibberish. Both are words of meaning all the more meaning in their context of the death if an aged man and woman. The Orator writes: ANGELFOOD. Where have these two dead old people gone; what has become of them? *They have gone to heaven. They are the stuff out of which angels are made. There is divine love and divine reward.* But the audience, like Mr. Esslin, Mr. Coe, and Mr. Glicksburg, have not yet understood. Impatiently the Orator writes ADIEU ADIEU. These are not nonsense syllables, they are valid words. They mean, literally and emphatically, TO GOD TO GOD. The aged couple have gone to their Creator and Redeemer *There is God, there is heaven, there is divine love and reward.*

The Orator knows that he has delivered an understandable and joyous message. No wonder he looks with stupefaction, then with anger, at an audience too blind to read, too obtuse to understand simple words. For here indeed is a message that can command equally the attention of all people janitors, bishops, chemists, bankers, intellectuals a message to which even the Emperor, even God himself, would rightfully lend his presence.

What explains the willful refusal by so many able people to see the joyous, affirmative, profoundly devout declaration by lonesco is, I suppose, the conventional opinion that all advanced contemporary writers are dark, gloomy, atheistic. Even the Orator stammers in word and in writing as he attempts to speak in other words to our times. But that conventional opinion is wrong and it destroys our understanding of many writers. lonesco is a religious man. He is a believer. He is orthodox in faith. In *The Chairs* he affirms that there is a consolation to even the meanest life, that even the humblest have something worthy to be heard by any and all of mankind, and that what they have to say

is that God exists, the soul exists, immortality exists, heaven exists. We are of the stuff of Angels and we shall all be received within the love of God. God loves and rewards us. Not absurd, maybe; not pleasing to the cynical modern ear, no doubt; but there it is in Ionesco. We are angelfood, all of us, and we shall one day go to God.

Source: Willis D. Jacobs. "Ionesco's *The Chairs*" in the *Explicator*, Vol. XXII, no. 6, February, 1964.

Topics for Further Study

Compare and contrast *The Chairs* with *Waiting for Godot*, an absurdist play written by Samuel Beckett in 1952. What does each play express about human existence? Which one do you identify with and why?

Research the rates of and reasons for suicide among the elderly. How do your findings relate to the Old Man and Old Woman's decision to kill themselves at the end of the play?

What do plays like *The Chairs* say about society at the time it was written? Is the play still relevant? Why or why not?

Reseach the philosophical writings of Albert Camus (such as *The Myth of Sisyphus*) and Jean-Paul Sartre (such as *Being and Nothingness*), two authors that greatly influenced Ionesco's work. Are there direct parallels between the ideas of those philosophers and *The Chairs!*

Compare and Contrast

1952: Television is very popular. In fact, 42% of American households own a television set. In the United States, color television is introduced. There are four major networks.

Today: At least one television can be found in nearly every American home. With the advent of cable and satellite television, there are hundreds of networks available. The average citizen can gain access to the television medium through public access programming.

1952: Numerous countries in the world place restrictions on media and their ability to gather information.

Today: The Internet and cable television changes the way people get news and information from around the world.

1952: While the American economy is very strong, many countries, including France, suffer from severe inflation and relatively weak economies.

Today: While the American economy is very strong, the economies of many other countries in the world, especially in Asia, are weakening.

What Do I Read Next?

No Exit (1944), a play by Jean-Paul Sartre, is an existentialist drama that explores the meaning of life.

Contact: Human Communications and Its History (1981) is a collection of essays edited by Raymond Williams. It includes numerous essays on the history of human communication.

Written in 1956, *The Balcony* is a play by another absurdist playwright, Jean Genet. In the play, clients of Madame Irma get their lifelong wishes fulfilled.

The Loves of the Subway (1952), a play by French avant-garde playwright Jean Tardieu, also concerns a couple and the futility of human communication.

Further Study

Coutin Andre and Rosette C. Lamont. "Culture Dreams: A Conversation," in *Grand Street*, Summer, 1998, p. 166-75.

An interview with Eugene lonesco.

Dolamore, C. E. J., "Adam at Odds with Eve: lonesco and the Woman's Mission," in *Journal of European Studies*, December, 1993, pp. 409-26.

Discusses the female characters found in lonesco's plays, including *The Chairs*.

Gaensbauer, Deborah B. *Eugene lonesco Revisited*, Twayne/ Prentice Hall, 1996, 177 p.

Biographical and critical study.

lonesco, Eugene. *Present Past/Past Present: A Personal Memoir*, translated by Helen Lane, Grove, 1971, 192 p.

Autobiography of lonesco.

Lamont, Rosette C. and Melvin J. Friedman, eds. *The Two Faces of lonesco*, Whitston Publishing Company, 1978,283 p.

This collection of essays includes original writing by lonesco as well as criticism of his work.

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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.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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