Four Plays Study Guide

Four Plays by Eugène Ionesco

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

This collection of short works by French playwright Eugene Ionesco portrays life as defined by the philosophy of absurdism, a belief system which suggests there is no order or sense in the ways of either the universe or humanity. This sense of chaos plays out in the characters, relationships and situations of all four plays in this collection, which also develop themes relating to the use of language and the dangers of passion.

The first play in this collection, The Bald Soprano, focuses on the relationship between two married couples - the Smiths, for whom everything (including the chiming of the clock) is English, and the Martins, for whom everything (including their marital status) is a discovery. Their polite, if nonsensical, evening of conversation is interrupted first by the Smiths' maid and then by the unexpected and unnecessary arrival of The Fire Chief, searching for non-existent fires. After The Fire Chief leaves, conversation between the Smiths and the Martins becomes even more nonsensical, degenerating into shouted argument. At the climax of the argument the lights suddenly black out - and when they come back up again, the Martins are in the same position and saying the same lines as the Smiths at the beginning of the play.

The narrative of the second play, The Lesson, tracks the reversal of roles during the encounter between an elderly Professor and his young female Pupil. Again through the use of nonsensical language and absurd ideas, the story tracks each character's journey of challenge, confrontation, and transformation. Specifically, the Professor moves from submissive carefulness through direct (and impatient) teaching into murderous bullying, while the Pupil begins as confident, articulate and charming, becomes bewildered and vulnerable, and eventually becomes completely submissive, broken, and ultimately dead. As happened in The Bald Soprano, the ending is in fact a beginning - after the Pupil's body is taken away, the doorbell rings to herald the arrival of a new pupil.

In the third play, Jack or The Submission, nonsense language and images are again used to define the relationship between the sullen rebellious Jack and his bossy family, who are desperate for him to honor his agreement (to do what isn't initially clear) and behave like a proper son. Eventually Jack gives in, and his family brings along the Robert family, including Roberta - the girl Jack's family wants him to marry. When Jack sees she only has two noses, however, he refuses to go through with the marriage. Roberta's sister Roberta comes in, and when she reveals she has three noses, Jack agrees to at least spend time with her. After their families leave, Roberta seduces Jack into a more intimate relationship, and the families celebrate the new relationship with a dance described in stage directions as being deliberately grotesque and embarrassing.

The fourth and final play, The Chairs, relies less on nonsense language than on a nonsense situation to make its point. An Old Man and an Old Woman, husband and wife for seventy five years, inhabit a room that is, for all intents and purposes, a lighthouse. Their conversation reveals they are expecting the arrival of some important guests who, when they finally do arrive, are invisible. The Old Man and Woman treat them as though

they're both invisible and real, bringing more and more chairs into the increasingly crowded room as more and more guests arrive. Eventually the Old Couple is crowded right into the wall, where they celebrate first the arrival of the (invisible) Emperor, whom the Old Man believes has come to honor him, and then the arrival of the (visible) Orator, who the Old Man says at first is going to speak for him. The Old Man realizes, however, that after the visit from the Emperor he has nothing left to live for, so he and the Old Woman jump out the window into the sea. The Orator indicates he can neither hear nor speak, writes nonsense words on a chalkboard, and goes. The audience is left with the increasingly loud sound of the invisible guests.

The Bald Soprano

The Bald Soprano Summary

This collection of short works by French playwright Eugene Ionesco portrays life as defined by the philosophy of absurdism, a belief system which suggests there is no order or sense in the ways of either the universe or humanity. This sense of chaos plays out in the characters, relationships and situations of all four plays in this collection, which also develop themes relating to the use of language and the dangers of passion.

The Bald Soprano is subtitled "An Anti-Play." Stage directions describe everything as "English" - the setting, the characters, their actions, clothes and furniture. As the clock chimes "English strokes," as it does irregularly and frequently throughout the play (see "Objects/Places - The Clock"), Mr. and Mrs. Smith, an English couple, sit by their English fire and discuss their English food, their English children, and their English friend Bobby Watson (see "Characters"). Their conversation is interrupted by Mary the English maid, who announces the (very late) arrival of the Smiths' guests, Mr. and Mrs. Martin. As Mr. and Mrs. Smith go out, Mary shows in Mr. and Mrs. Martin, and then leaves.

Mr. and Mrs. Martin speak as though they are strangers to each other. Over the course of conversation, they discover (with increasing surprise) coincidence after coincidence (see "Quotes," p. 16) in their lives, suddenly realize they are husband and wife reunited after a long separation, and fall asleep in each other's arms. Mary returns, telling the audience the Martins are not, in fact, married to each other. She wonders aloud where the real Mr. and Mrs. Martin are, but then asks "Who has any interest in prolonging this confusion?" and resolves to leave things as they are. After she goes, Mr. and Mrs. Martin awaken, and resolve to not lose each other again.

Mr. and Mrs. Smith come back in, and greet Mr. and Mrs. Martin. Initial attempts at conversation are stilted, but liven up when Mrs. Martin tells the amazing story of seeing a man tie his shoe on the street! Conversation is interrupted by the repeated ringing of the doorbell (see "Objects/Places"). As an argument breaks out over whether a ringing doorbell actually means there's someone outside wanting to come in, the Fire Chief arrives, "of course in uniform and ... wearing an enormous shining helmet." He calms the Smiths and the Martins, but when he's invited to sit he says he can't - he's on a mission to put out all the fires in the city, and has come searching for fires in the homes of both couples. When they tell him they have no fires, the Fire Chief calms his disappointment by telling a series of increasingly nonsensical stories, leading Mr. and Mrs. Smith to tell stories of their own, which in turn leads the Fire Chief to tell the most complicated, most nonsensical story of all.

As the Fire Chief prepares to leave, Mary comes in, asking permission to tell a story. In spite of the Smiths and the Martins telling her it's improper, Mary recites a poem about fire in honor of the Fire Chief. Mr. and Mrs. Smith shove her out the door before she's

finished. The Fire Chief then takes his leave, saying he's got to prepare to fight a fire on the other side of town "in three quarters of an hour and sixteen minutes." Before he goes, he asks the Smiths and the Martins about "the bald soprano." Mrs. Smith tells him the bald soprano "always wears her hair in the same style," and he happily leaves.

After he's gone, the Smiths and the Martins take turns reciting cliché sayings ("charity begins at home" and "An Englishman's home is truly his castle") and nonsense phrases ("My uncle lives in the country, but that's none of the midwife's business"). The intensity and anger with which they speak escalates to a point where they're all shouting. At the peak of the argument, lights suddenly black out. The four characters chant "It's not that way, it's over here." Suddenly the lights come back up ... and Mr. and Mrs. Martin are seated in the same positions, doing the same things, and speaking the same lines as Mr. and Mrs. Smith at the beginning of the play.

The Bald Soprano Analysis

Like the other three plays in this collection, The Bald Soprano is essentially a study in tension between order (as defined and supported by the play's structure, as well as the Smiths' stereotypical order-obsessed Englishness) and chaos (as defined in the absurd, nonsensical nature of the dialogue, relationships, and ending). Unlike the other three plays, however, there is a clear sense of satire about this play, satire being a form of comedy in which a characteristic or trait of an individual, object or society is exaggerated to the point of ridiculousness. In this case, the satire is aimed at England - its manners, belief systems, attitudes, and perhaps even a certain kind of British, well made, drawing room comedy. Both tension and satire come together to make the central thematic point of the collection, and the philosophy at the thematic core of each play within it - that life is essentially chaotic and absurd, and any attempt to create and/or interpret order from that chaos (as, this play suggests the English do) is bound to end up in the kind of frustration that gives this play its comically explosive, or explosively comic, climax.

This play's title is perhaps the ultimate expression of the play's comic and thematic philosophy. In structural terms, the reference to "the bald soprano" comes at a high point of the play's action, just as the Fire Chief exits. This particular placement suggests that the question is of a certain importance, but because "the bald soprano", whoever she is, has nothing to do with the rest of the play, the important placement is undermined by the fact that the reference doesn't really matter. In other words, it is an example of the essential nature of the universe - whatever is said or done or wondered about, it neither makes sense, nor matters.

The ending of the play is particularly noteworthy, in that it too makes a suggestion about the nature of reality as perceived by the absurdists. The transformation of the Martins into the Smiths proposes not only that reality is cyclical, but that humanity's attempts (such as those made by the Smiths) to exert order are ultimately overwhelmed by chaos (such as that embodied by the amnesiac Martins) - and in spite of this overwhelming sense, efforts (such as those made by the reinvented Martins) will always be made to

assert control. In other words, the ending of The Bald Soprano suggests that existence is not only infinitely absurd, but infinitely frustrating

The Lesson

The Lesson Summary

This play is subtitled "a comic drama", and is set in the cluttered office of an elderly Professor. A maid lets in the Pupil, an attractive young woman, who sits to wait. Lengthy stage directions describe her appearance, and the transformation she undergoes through the course of the play - from confidence and strength to fearfulness and weakness. The Professor then enters, and equally lengthy stage directions also describe his appearance and his transformation - from weakness and frailty to strength, confidence and bullying.

After formal greetings, conversation between the Professor and the Pupil reveals that the Pupil is hoping to learn enough to pass the doctoral exams she plans to write in three weeks. Before conversation can go any further, the Maid comes in, warning the Professor to behave himself. After she's gone, the Professor discovers that the Pupil cannot subtract, can barely count, and doesn't understand the difference between "larger" and "smaller." The Professor tries to get the Pupil to count, including using matches as counting unites and drawing lines on a chalkboard (the matches, board and chalk are invisible). A sudden, extreme challenge in multiplication results in the Pupil surprisingly being right and the Professor being wrong (see "Quotes," p. 59), but the Professor says her cleverness isn't enough (see "Quotes," p. 59 - 2). The maid briefly interrupts to try to get the Professor to calm down, particularly warning him against lecturing "philology" (the origins of language) which she says always upsets him. After she goes, the Professor launches into another round of bullying interrogation. By this point, the Pupil is becoming more submissive.

The Professor lectures the Pupil at nonsensical, detailed, length about the origins of various languages (see "Quotes," p. 59), about the importance of good speech and good pronunciation ("see Quotes," p. 64), and about the actual anatomy of speaking well. In spite of the Pupil repeatedly protesting that she has a toothache, the Professor speaks with increasingly forceful intensity and increasingly absurd ideas about the importance of language and communication, and about how certain components of language are the same in all languages. As the Professor becomes more and more forceful, and as the Pupil is becoming more and more pained, he resorts to physical bullying and shouting to get her to understand his increasingly nonsensical points (see "Quotes," p. 71). Finally, he calls for the maid to complain to her about how useless the Pupil is. The maid tells him "the symptoms" have started, but before she can explain what she means, the Professor shouts for her to go out again. After she's gone, the Professor grabs a knife ("invisible or real according to the preference of the director") and simultaneously threatens the Pupil with it and tells her to translate "knife" into other languages. In mounting pain and almost as though she's hypnotized, the Pupil says "knife" and then points to a part of her body that hurts. The increasingly frenzied Professor points the knife at those same parts of her body, eventually stabbing her to death.

Shocked by what he's done, the Professor calls for the maid. Stern and angry, she slaps him into calmness, commenting that this is the fortieth time he's killed his pupil, and that he should have listened when she warned him to stay calm. The Professor worries what people might say if they discover all the bodies of his pupils in the basement, but she gives him an armband with a Nazi Swastika on it and assures him that once people see him wearing that, everything will be fine. As he's thanking her for her help and calmness, they put the knife away and drag the Pupil's body out. A few moments later, there is a knock on the door. The maid goes out to answer it, and as the curtain falls, she welcomes a new pupil in the same way as she welcomed the most recent one.

The Lesson Analysis

There are several interesting points to note about this play.

The first is the detailed stage directions introducing each character. The vast majority of plays leave the interpretation and definition of events and relationships up to first the directors and actors and then to audience members. It's highly unusual for the individual, personal transformations of characters in a play to be outlined so fully before the action even starts. Why does the author do this? It seems he wants to create the sense right from the first moment the play is read that its outcome is inevitable. If that's the case, however, then this intention seems to be contrary to the absurdist philosophy at the core of this and the other plays in the collection. In other words, outlining the outcome of the play at its beginning is giving the play's events a kind of order and meaning that absurdist philosophy suggests doesn't even exist.

The second noteworthy element about this play is the transformations themselves. The Professor and the Pupil begin in essentially opposite positions as characters, and then basically exchange those positions - the Professor starts vulnerable and ends up controlling, the Pupil starts out controlled and responsible (albeit a bit naive and stupid), but ends up in the most vulnerable position a person can be in - on the receiving end of an act of murder. Here again it's important to consider the essentially absurdist nature of these plays and this playwright, in that such an extreme transformation is an example of how fundamentally absurd and unpredictable the experience of being human can be.

A third noteworthy element is the treatment of objects - books are real, the matches/chalk/chalkboard aren't, the knife might be real, the Swastika (a symbol of the German Nazi party with connotations of merciless destruction) is absolutely real. On one level, there is the suggestion here of a definitely absurdist randomness at work. On another level, though, the author-defined reality of the swastika does suggest that he does have the intention of making the destructive power of obsession, such as that of the Professor's obsession with language, evil. For further consideration of this subject see "Themes - The Dangers of Passion".

Finally, it's interesting to consider the ending of this play in relation to that of The Bald Soprano. In both plays, the ending suggests a beginning - specifically, the continuation of cycles of rebirth and destruction, and of attempting to assert control giving inevitable

way to the destruction of that control. It's also interesting to consider the ending of both plays in relation to the endings of both Jack ... and The Chairs, both of which are just that - endings, with little or no sense of the cyclical.

Jack, or The Submission

Jack, or The Submission Summary

This play is subtitled "a naturalistic comedy", although stage directions suggest that all the characters (other than Jack) could wear masks (see "Objects/Places").

Jack sits, sullen and silent, in a battered armchair as one by one the members of his family (his sister Jacqueline, his mother Mother Jack, his father Father Jack, and his grandmother Grandmother Jack) berate him for his selfish behavior. After a while, when Jack doesn't respond, they start berating each other. Eventually Father Jack has a tantrum and goes into the next room. After a few more efforts to reach Jack, Mother Jack and Jacqueline go out. Grandmother Jack and Grandfather Jack (who mumbles a little but is mostly silent) linger in the doorway and watch as Jack finally speaks - "Let's pretend that I've said nothing," he says, "and anyway, what do they want of me?"

Jacqueline comes back in, demanding that he both talk and listen to her. When he finally acknowledges her, complaining about the nonsense words she and the rest of the family use, she angrily tells him "the whole thing" is contained in twenty seven words constructed from the letters in the nonsense word "chronometrable." As she goes out, she tells Mother Jack they must wait to see what Jack does to know whether their plan will work. Jack considers, and finally cries out that he adores hash brown potatoes! Mother Jack, Jacqueline, and the Grandparents return in triumph! Jack is on his feet again. As the family celebrates, Father Jack rejoins them. Jack, however, doesn't seem too interested in, or moved by, their happiness. Mother Jack comments that now might be the right time to introduce Jack to his fiancé, and calls in Mother Robert, Father Robert, and Roberta, dressed like a bride and wearing a veil.

As Grandmother Jack repeatedly asks if Jack wants her advice, and as nobody takes notice of her, Mother Robert and Father Robert describe Roberta in increasingly absurd terms (referring to the "green pimples on her beige skin" and "red breasts on a mauve background"). When Jack finally agrees to marry her, the families celebrate by lifting Roberta's veil to reveal she has two noses. Everyone comments on her beauty, but Jack says he wants his bride to have three noses. His family is immediately angry with him, but the Roberts' say there's no problem - they have another daughter who HAS a third nose, and bring her in (she's played by the same actress who played the first Roberta). Jack says she's not homely enough, and his family becomes even angrier with him (see "Quotes," p. 97), with Mother Jack eventually fainting and Father Jack accusing his son of lying when he said he liked hash brown potatoes. Jack says he never liked them, saying "I was born like this ... I am what I am!" This shocks his family and the two Roberts, Mother and Father, to the point where they feel they have to leave the room. Roberta tries to leave as well, but her father makes her stay, telling her to do her duty.

Alone with Jack, Roberta tries to draw him to her by describing herself positively (see "Quotes," p. 101) and then becoming more physically seductive. She awakens his

interest, and he explains that he was born far more aware than his family ever was (see "Quotes," p. 103), and that they tried to draw him into their world and almost succeeded, but he realized the truth and is desperate to leave. Roberta says she understands him and together, becoming more and more intense, they share in the imagination of a flaming, speeding horse taking them away. Eventually Jack collapses, exhausted. Roberta sensuously draws him into a word game based on his cap (which he calls a cat). The game leads him to say how well they understand each other (by reducing the names of everything to one - cat), and to agree to marry her ... an agreement that doesn't change when Roberta reveals that she's got nine fingers on one hand.

As Jack and Roberta embrace, their families reappear and perform an awkward dance of celebration (stage directions suggest the audience should feel embarrassed, awkward, and shamed). After the lights have faded to black on the dance, a spotlight briefly returns to Roberta, squatting beneath her gown, her "three noses quivering and her nine fingers [on one hand] moving like snakes."

Jack, or The Submission Analysis

On one level, the story of this play is fairly simple, almost archetypal - rebellious young man resists what his family wants, meets girl, changes his mind, boy and girl enter into relationship, the end. There are several ways, however, in which this story plays out differently from what is perhaps expected, all of which are ultimately rooted in absurdist philosophy.

The first, and perhaps most obvious, manifestation of absurdism here is in the use of language. Where the other three plays in this collection have a certain degree of realism in the way language is used, the words and images here often come across as being completely at odds with what the characters really mean, an absurdist discrepancy between order (i.e., words with specific meaning) and chaos (the randomness of emotion and desire). The most obvious examples of this are Jacqueline's reference to "chronometrable" (a reference that is neither explained nor followed through on), Jack's shouted response that he loves hash brown potatoes, and Jack and Roberta II's games around the word "cat." Yes there are points at which language and intention come together in a relatively orderly fashion, such as Jack saying "I am what I am." At that point, however, words and actions have become so bizarrely disconnected that it would be perfectly reasonable for a reader to wonder whether even that means what it sounds like.

There is also a clear sense of absurdism in the activities of some of the secondary characters, specifically Grandmother and Grandfather Jack. Both these characters attempt to inject their presence and/or opinions into the action - in other words, to create a sense of order and/or meaning for themselves in relationship to the life going on around them (which is perhaps a definition of what any/everyone is trying to do in their day to day lives). Absurdist philosophy manifests in the way that no-one ever pays attention to either of them, a manifestation of the core absurdist belief that nothing anyone does has any value or meaning. This particular manifestation extends into the

final moments of the play, in which the final image of Roberta essentially warns audience members not to be deceived by appearances, such as those presented by Roberta's veil. What lies beneath is almost inevitably at least distasteful and/or unexpected, and at most sickening. In other words, the surfaces of order are barely able to conceal the roiling, surging, insanity of the chaos beneath.

The Chairs

The Chairs Summary

This play is subtitled "a tragic farce." Stage directions describe a round room with several doors, large windows, a chalkboard, and two chairs. The Old Man looks out at the sea surrounding them, but the Old Woman draws him into the room, encouraging him to play the same games and tell the same stories he's told for the seventy five years they've been married. At first he complains and resists, but then starts his story - of their visit to Paris, which he says ceased to exist thousands of years ago. He and the Old Woman laugh their way to the end of the story, but then the Old Man starts to sob for his mother. The Old Woman eventually manages to comfort him through flattery, reminding him how successful he's been as "general factotum" - flattery she then undermines by reminding him what he could have been if he'd only striven a bit more. She urges him to make a speech for their guests expected that night, but he tells her he's hired an orator to do it for him. The sound of a boat leads them both to the window, where they see someone arriving. They immediately rush out to greet their guest.

The Old Man and Old Woman speak offstage to the new arrival, and soon show her in. Even though The Lady is invisible, the Old Man and Woman react as though she's there and speaking with them, even while a chair is being brought in for her. Soon the Old Man and Woman welcome another invisible guest - a Colonel, who after being shown to a seat next to The Lady begins a flirtatious conversation with her, to which the Old Man and Woman react uncomfortably. More and more invisible guests arrive, and the process repeats - the Old Man engages the guests in conversation while the Old Woman fetches chairs. Action becomes more and more frenzied, with doorbells ringing, doors opening and closing, more and more guests arriving, and more and more chairs being brought in.

The Old Woman distributes programs as the Old Man struggles to make the guests comfortable. The crowd eventually pushes the couple to the wall, where they cry out for each other and encourage each other to remain strong until the arrival of the Orator. The Old Woman's vocabulary begins to deteriorate into echoes of the Old Man's protestations that his work has been perfect. Suddenly a fanfare announces the arrival of the Emperor! The Old Man and Woman greet him with ecstatic enthusiasm, both struggling with the crowd to reach him as the Old Man, claiming to have been humiliated all his life, begs to be recognized for his valuable contribution to the country and the community. When it seems as though the Emperor isn't responding, the Old Man and Woman say the Orator will make him understand more thoroughly.

The Old Man and Woman are terrified when the Orator actually arrives. Stage directions describe him as a real person, but whereas the invisible people are intended to be perceived as very realistic, the Orator is described as being UN-realistic, outlandishly dressed, moving awkwardly, etc. He signs invisible autographs as the Old Man offers effusive thanks to anyone and everyone who made the evening possible, from the

carpenters who made the chairs to the audience to his wife. He then says that because the Emperor has visited, he has nothing left to live for, and turns over the responsibility for explaining his theories of existence to the Orator. The Old Woman agrees, and after proclaiming that their words and deeds will live after them, the Old Man and Woman bid farewell to everyone in the room and jump out the windows into the sea.

The Orator indicates to the invisible audience that he can neither speak nor hear. He struggles to make himself understood, but is only able to grunt. Eventually he has the idea of writing his meaning on the chalkboard, and first writes ANGEL FOOD, then some nonsense syllables, and then ADIEU. When he doesn't get the reaction he hoped for, he leaves sulkily. After he's gone, the sound of a large crowd (the invisible crowd in the chairs) is heard - talking, coughing, laughing, sneezing, etc. The noises get louder ... become weaker ... and then the curtain falls, "very slowly."

The Chairs Analysis

In some ways, this is the most realistic of the four plays in this collection (keeping in mind that in this context, realistic is a relative term).

While the Old Man and Woman still tend to speak in absurdities, the connection between the words they're using and the feelings/intentions they're expressing is closer than in Jack ... and The Bald Soprano. Yes, language and intention in The Lesson are fairly closely connected, but there is relatively little variety or shift in terms of either - the emotional advancement of the Professor and the deterioration of the Pupil are intense, but one dimensional. In The Chairs, however, not only is the relationship between language and intention/situation clearer, but the characters are seemingly multi-faceted and unpredictable in ways that the other characters in the other plays don't. This not only makes for interesting storytelling - it evokes the complications in every human being, taking them into a world that is much less emotionally trite and/or shallow than that of the other plays. They may speak strangely, but the Old Man and the Old Woman are real people. Everything they do, everything they say springs from clearly defined, very human needs, as opposed to the actions and intentions of the characters in the other plays, which seem to function as they do for the sole reason that they're proving the author's absurdist point. As they pursue fulfilling their respective needs, their determination to do so increases in the face of challenges and obstacles - the essence of good, humanist drama. Finally, when their needs are eventually met, they take one last action to define their lives, also a very human characteristic - and yes, the manner of death on some level does define life.

This is not to suggest that the play is without its absurdities - aside from the previously discussed language, there are also the appearances (or disappearances) of the orator, the Emperor, and above all, the invisible guests (for examination of the functions of all three, see "Characters"). All these elements combine to create the sense of a world gone mad, or perhaps a world that has always BEEN mad, a world in which these ultimately quite normal and quite individuals (i.e., the Old Man and Woman) are simply trying to sustain their inner lives and identities. This, then, is perhaps the ultimate

statement of absurdist philosophy, in this collection and perhaps in the philosophy as a whole - all anyone is trying to do in an insane world is create a small space in his/her soul for a little dignity.

Characters

The Bald Soprano - Mr. and Mrs. Smith

The Smiths are the central characters in this play. Both are described in stage directions as being English in every aspect of their lives which, as discussed in the analysis of the play, suggests that the author is making a satirical point about what it means to be English and how English-ness manifests. This sense of satire extends to how the characters in the play are individualized, and in particular these two characters. Mr. Smith is quiet and short tempered, a portrayal of what is often perceived as a typical Englishman, while Mrs. Smith is chatty and gossipy, again a portrayal of perceptions rather than an individual. These characterizations, more than any of the other characterizations in this play or in the other plays in this collection, walk a fine line between being archetypal and/or stereotypical.

Meanwhile, the way the Englishness / rigidness of these characterizations break down into competition and ultimately into screaming conflict is a manifestation of the central thematic point of this play, of all four plays in the collection, and of the absurdist philosophy in which they are all based. This philosophy is grounded in the contention that what is perceived as reality is in fact a thin veneer of civilization barely concealing and/or restraining the chaos at the core of humanity, its place in the world, and in the world itself. In other words, the Smiths as a couple at the beginning of the play are the pure embodiment of that veneer which, the author seems to be suggesting, the English are as a culture.

Mr. and Mrs. Martin

There are several points of contrast between this couple and the Smiths. First, and perhaps most interesting, they are not described as English - a director of this play, in fact, might be reasonably inclined to have the actors play the roles without English accents. Given the exaggerated, veneered Englishness of the Smiths, the (deliberate?) non-Englishness of the Martins suggests that they are intended to be perceived as less rigid, less restrained, and more inclined to connect to the chaos that absurdism suggests is at the heart of existence. This idea is supported by the second point of contrast between the couples. Where the Smiths are absolutely certain of who they are and of their relationship to each other, the Martins are not. Yes, it's possible to see the initial conversation between the Martins as a comic game of the sort that couples of long standing often play with each other. However, one of the key elements of satires such as The Bald Soprano is that the characters take themselves and their actions completely seriously. In other words, the Martins come into the Smiths' home genuinely unaware of their relationship. This, in turn, leads into the third point of contrast between the two characters - that they are embodiments of chaos, as opposed to the Martins who are, at least at the beginning of the play, the embodiment of order. It's interesting to consider, therefore, why the Martins essentially become the Smiths at the end of the

play. For further consideration of this question, see "Topics for Discussion - At the end of The Bald Soprano" ..."

Bobby Watson

"Bobby Watson" is the name of the Smiths' recently deceased friend. It's also the name of Bobby Watson's widow (who may or may not be looking to marry again), as well as his daughter and his son. In other words, Bobby Watson and his wife Bobby Watson had a daughter, Bobby Watson, and a son, Bobby Watson, both of whom are hopefully going to have their educations paid for by elderly family relatives (all named Bobby Watson). This comic repetition of the same name functions on two main levels - to increase the satirical sense that all Englishmen are the same, and to reinforce the idea of the absurdity at the core of individual (or, in this case, non-individual) lives.

Mary and the Fire Chief

These secondary characters are, like the Smiths, archetypal and stereotypical in their initial appearances. Unlike the Smiths, however, they are more thoroughly individualized, with particular goals and purposes. They are no less absurd, however, which makes the thematically relevant suggestion that for the author, even individuals who are defined by a sense of purpose are living fundamentally absurd lives.

The Lesson - The Professor

The facts of this character are that he is male, middle aged, an academic, and apparently a killer. The theory of this character is that he is the embodiment of one of the collection's central thematic premises - that adhering too rigidly to the rules of language is essentially destructive, of the self and of others (see "Themes - Manipulation of Language"). It might not be going too far to suggest that the facts about the character are themselves manifestations of this premise. Maleness is, perhaps stereotypically, associated with control and power. Being middle aged is, again perhaps stereotypically, associated with a rigidness of ideas which, particularly in France where this play was written and where purity of language is practically a religion, is particularly relevant to this theme. Being an academic is relevant in a similar fashion - academia has the (deserved? undeserved?) reputation for being rigid and unforgiving in terms of its perspectives on language and its use. Finally, the fact that the Professor's passion about language leads him to kill makes the (again thematically relevant) suggestion that rigidity in general and rigidity about language in particular is ultimately destructive of what is valuable about existence - not only life itself, but (as embodied in The Pupil - see below) the spirit of investigation, curiosity, and expansion of intellect.

The Pupil

On a technical level, the Pupil is the antagonist of the play, the character that triggers change and transformation in the protagonist (the Professor). On a metaphoric level, as described above, the Pupil is an embodiment of that which is free, curious, and exploratory about human existence - the spirit of impulse which (as the action of the play dramatizes) is often destroyed by a spirit of control and/or rigidity. In other words, the Pupil is an embodiment of the absurdist philosophy, and is perhaps one of the most effective character-embodiments in the entire collection, in that she combines what might be perceived as both positive and negative values. Specifically, her brilliance (i.e., her ability to memorize and multiply) is as random and as brilliant and as unexplained as her inability to count.

Finally, another pupil coming in after the death of this Pupil suggests that the tense relationship between insane, imposed order (i.e., the Professor) and curious, transforming chaos (i.e., the Pupils) is as much of an endless cycle as the attempts of humanity to assume the veneer of order over chaos dramatized in the final moments of The Bald Soprano.

The Maid

The Maid in The Lesson can be seen as an embodiment of wisdom, or of conscience - specifically, the Professor's conscience, which carries with it the wisdom-based awareness that attempts to enforce control (in this case through use and/or understanding of language) are both pointless and destructive. In other words, the Maid embodies the (perhaps paradoxical?) sense that even in absurdity, there is a sense of order - of how absurdity and/or chaos work and/or function.

Jack, or the Submission - Jack

On one level, that of a relatively realistic state of emotional being portrayed in a relatively realistic way, Jack is one of the most realistic characters in the collection (the Old Man and the Old Woman in The Chairs are similarly emotionally and/or spiritually lifelike). Jack is essentially a rebellious teenager, a familiar archetype (perhaps stereotype) from literature and life alike. He doesn't want to do what his parents want him to do, he doesn't want what he once said he did want (i.e., Roberta) - he's a rebel for the sake of rebellion. On another level, because of his essential rebelliousness, he can be seen as another manifestation of the collection's grounded-ness in absurdity - rebellion, by its very nature and purpose, is an act of both creating and perpetuating chaos. Rebellion strives to destroy what is and attempts to replace it with what might be, what it ought to be, or what the individual wants it to be.

Throughout most of the play, Jack doesn't necessarily know what he wants, only what he doesn't want - to be/do what his parents want. In this context, it's possible to see that the second part of the play's title (referring to "the submission") refers to Jack's

submission to not only Roberta but ultimately to the will of his parents and perhaps even the will (conventions?) of society. In other words, this embodiment of chaos and of absurdity ("I love hash brown potatoes!") has submitted to order. This is perhaps why the stage directions for the celebratory dance of his family at the end of the play suggest the audience should be disgusted.

Jack's Family

Jack's family consists of Jacqueline, Mother Jack, Father Jack, Grandmother Jack and Grandfather Jack. Each is, in his or her own way, an embodiment of the desire for control and convention. While they express themselves in absudist language (see "Themes - Manipulation of Language"), their intentions and determinations are essentially those of order, of the determination to impose control over chaos (as embodied by Jack). Even the character of Grandfather Jack, who doesn't really participate in the action directly, is in his apparent madness a manifestation of order, or rather its after-effects. He is the embodiment of the paradoxical suggestion that in a mad world, attempting to attain control is itself an act of madness, which by philosophical (semantic?) extension suggests that even attempts at order are part of the chaotic absurdity that is life itself.

Mother Robert, Father Robert, Roberta I and Roberta II

Like the "Jack" family, the "Robert" family is an embodiment of convention. In their case, or more specifically the case of the two Robertas, the suggestion is that attempting to control existence is in fact something grotesque, misshapen and monstrous. The physicality of the Robertas, the way she seduces Jack into marriage, and especially the descriptions of her final appearance on stage all suggest that Jack is corrupting an independent, chaotic personal existence into something expected, and therefore quite disgusting. Here again, there is a value to consider in relation to the play's final moments - specifically, the grotesque dance of celebration. The thematic implication is that any attempt to impose order on chaos is essentially a distortion of true, chaotic, absurd identity.

The Chairs - The Old Man

The Old Man is the central character of The Chairs, the protagonist. His desires, his feelings, his reactions, his intentions, all motivate and define the action throughout. He, and to a lesser degree the Old Woman, can be seen as archetypal, distilled expressions of a particular aspect of humanity - the desire to be recognized, to be seen, noticed, identified as having value. As discussed in the analysis of the play, however, this perhaps selfish desire (within the context of the absurdist philosophy by which the drama of the plays is defined) is futile and ultimately madness, a state of being which is, in turn, defined by the invisibility of the guests. In other words, there is no one there to provide the affirmation the Old Man and the Old Woman so desperately seek. The Old

Man and Woman can therefore be seen as embodying another sort of archetypal principle and/or state of being - that of desperate hopelessness, the only possible conclusion to which can be death. Is the play suggesting that suicide is the only (just? valid? reasonable?) response to living in such an unjust, invalid or unreasonable world? The point is arguable - nihilism would certainly say yes, it is (and so would the Orator, if he could speak and/or express himself coherently). Ultimately, though, the deaths of the Old Man and Old Woman take them into a third realm of archetypal reality - that death comes at the end of all life, recognized or no. The suggestion, therefore, in the character of the Old Man and in the very nature of the play, is that striving for recognition is ultimately pointless.

The Old Woman

As discussed above, the Old Woman shares a number of archetypal characteristics with the Old Man.She differs, however, as the result of her selflessness (as occasionally caustic and bitter as it sometimes is). Her energy is entirely focused on helping the Old Man achieve what he wants, which arguably makes her the archetypal female (or at the very least, the archetypal wife/spouse-like). This extends even to the point of her eventual loss of individual speech, her being reduced to merely being able to echo the Old Man's words. It could be argued, in fact, that her selflessness is as destructive in its own way as the Old Man's selfishness - in other words, pure giving is as life-destroying as pure taking.

Meanwhile, it's interesting to note that while the Old Man remains nameless, the Old Woman is given the name Semiramis. This may be an effort on the part of the author to give the Old Woman a somewhat stronger sense of identity than the Old Man - ironic, in that the Old Woman's identity is otherwise entirely defined by how she's regarded by the Old Man.

The Orator

The Orator is a manifestation of the absurdist contention that nothing a human being wants and/or expects can or will turn out the way that's wanted or expected. When stage directions portray the Orator specifically as being as unrealistically represented as possible, the author is suggesting that human expectations are themselves unrealistic, that when expectations become reality they are inherently disappointing simply because they're never enough. The irony, of course, is that the Old Man and Woman convince themselves that the Orator is exactly who/what they've longed for and deserve. This is, of course, a delusion, the same kind of thing as their belief in their invisible guests (see below), and also a variation on one of the central thematic points of all four plays - that the veneer of civilization and/or of order is ultimately destructive.

The Invisible Guests

The true nature of the invisible guests is an important dramatic question about The Chairs. On the one level, they can easily be seen as manifestations of the Old Man and Old Woman's delusions. Since the Old Man and Old Woman are, to some degree,, archetypal representations of an essential aspect of humanity (the need to have existence recognized), the invisible guests can themselves be seen as archetypal representations of what the author and his core philosophy (absurdism) suggest is the reality - that individual existence has no recognizable value or meaning. In other words, because the Old Woman and particularly the Old Man believe the guests have come to acknowledge the Old Man, their invisibility suggests that the Old Man's desire for acknowledgment, for having his very existence valued, is a delusion. The biggest manifestation of this is, of course, the Emperor, whose "presence" is seen by the Old Couple as the ultimate manifestation of recognition but which is, in fact, the ultimate manifestation of their delusion - and perhaps a core delusion of all humanity. In this context there is another important point to note about the non-appearance of the Emperor - the idea that power and control, as embodied by at least the idea of the Emperor, are themselves illusions, an idea that reinforces/is reinforced by other variations on the theme in the other three plays.

Another possibility, however, is that the guests are perfectly visible to the Old Couple but not to the audience. This idea is supported by the play's last moments - specifically, its stage directions, which clearly indicate that the audience hears the sounds of the invisible guests (coughing, quiet conversation, etc).This suggests it's the audience's understanding of reality that's flawed, since it's quite likely that everyone watching has assumed that the Old Couple are hallucinating their guests. This suggestion is directly connected to the thematically central absurdist philosophy (which contends that society's interpretation of reality is essentially flawed). For further consideration of this question see "Topics for Discussion - Are the guests ..."

There is yet another level to the reality here - that of the theatre, which is that nothing happening on stage is GENUINELY real, only a theatrical expression of an idea - meaning that whatever the nature of the invisible guests, the playwrights' ultimate point is that it's all an illusion anyway.

Objects/Places

The Bald Soprano - The Smith's Living Room

The "English" living room of the Smiths' "English" home, with its "English" furniture and atmosphere, is the setting for the action of The Bald Soprano. For further consideration of this, and of the settings for all four plays, see "Style - Setting."

The Doorbell

The doorbell, which most of the time (according to Mrs. Smith) rings without anyone actually pushing it, can be seen as a symbol and/or manifestation o key components of the absurdist perspective. Any call to action, to pay attention, or to encounter another individual (all of which are evoked by the sound of a doorbell) is pointless - there is no meaning to any action, there is nothing worth paying attention to, and individual encounters are ultimately meaningless. There is, in existence, only the individual experience of chaos.

The Clock

The random chiming of the clock symbolizes the futility and emptiness of humanity's perception of time. In absurdist philosophy, time is an attempt by a desperate humanity to give at least a kind of definition to an entirely random, ultimately un-definable existence.

The Lesson - The Professor's Apartment

This is the setting for the action of The Lesson - the Professor's home, which doubles as his place of work. Why does he work in his home and not in an institution? Presumably because his apparent habit of killing his students makes it dangerous for him to be employed anywhere. See also "Style - Setting."

The Professor's Knife

The Professor uses this physical (albeit perhaps invisible) weapon to end the bodily life of the Pupil, having already used intelligence and bullying to destroy her spirit. For further consideration of the nature of the knife, see "Topics for Discussion - Do you think the Professor's knife..."

Jack, or the Submission - Masks

In stage directions at the beginning of Jack, or the Submission, the author suggests that all the characters other than Jack might wear masks. In theatre tradition and practice, masks have been used to conceal the visual identity of the actors in order to make it possible for audiences to believe more thoroughly in the lives of the characters. Masks are also used to enable actors to expand more fully and/or deeply into the characters' emotions, vocally and/or physically and/or grotesquely.Description

Jack's Room

The action of Jack, or the Submission, takes place here. Like the settings of the other plays, the sense here is of a constricting, restrictive enclosure (as opposed to a feeling of safety and/or security). For further consideration of the settings of the four plays, see "Style - Setting."

Roberta's Noses and Fingers

The extra fingers (on Roberta II) and the extra noses (on both Robertas) are further representations of essential absurdist philosophy - specifically, the idea that no human being is, or should be, what s/he is expected to be. The descriptions offered by the Jack family (of, for example, her truffled feet and illuminated navel) are also manifestations of this.

Roberta's Veil

In contrast to her body parts and the descriptions thereof, Roberta's veil is a symbol of humanity's need/desire for illusion, for appearance, and for role. The chaos and apparent disorder (ie Roberta's extra noses) revealed when the veil is lifted suggest that beneath humanity's illusions and determination to believe in those illusions is a grotesque reality of which we should, like Jack, all come to accept and even think of as beautiful.

The Chairs - The Round Room

The structure and placement (on the sea) of this setting for The Chairs suggests the interior of a lighthouse, which in turn gives the sense that the Old Man and Old Woman are lighthouse keepers - guardians of safety for those at sea. For additional consideration of this particular setting, see "Style - Setting."

The Chairs

Depending on whether the Old Man and Old Woman's invisible guests are real (see "Characters - The Invisible Guests"), the chairs that are brought in for them take on different metaphorical/symbolic values. If the guests are real and just imperceptible to audiences, the chairs are simply a natural extension of the Old Couple's need for recognition and/or valuing from other people. If the guests are imaginary, they are symbols and/or manifestations of the play's absurdist theme - that the desire of value from others is empty and perhaps even insane.

Themes

The Absurdity of Existence

The characters, situations, and story in each of these four plays is grounded, to varying degrees, in the philosophy of absurdism (see also "Style - Point of View"). This philosophy suggests that there is no order, no purpose, and no reason to/in existence - everything is chaos. Certain aspects of the plays are grounded, at least to some degree, in what is commonly perceived as reality, or at least variations of it. The relationships of the two central couples in The Bald Soprano, for example, particularly that of the Smiths, are to some degree grounded in "realistic" understanding of what "husband" and "wife" mean, while the central relationship in The Lesson starts out to be what humanity would probably see as a realistic representation of the student/teacher relationship. The same point could be made of the family relationships in Jack or the Submission, and the Old Couple's relationship in The Chairs - despite the means by which communication takes place (see "Manipulation of Language" below, the basic outlines of "realistic" relationships are maintained.

But then the playwright turns the audience's understanding and expectations of those relationships, and therefore of reality, on its ear. He portrays the Martins (in The Bald Soprano) as strangers, by exaggerating the status differences between the Professor and the Pupil (in The Lesson), by portraying the families in Jack as grotesquely unreasonable, and by suggesting the Old Couple are perhaps as delusional about who they are to each other as they seem to be about their guests. In other words, in the same way as what the audience assumes it understands about the characters is turned inside out by the action and language of the plays, so absurdist philosophy turns humanity's understanding of itself and of reality completely around. This is accomplished, in all four plays, through language.

Manipulation of Language

In all four plays, language is used in unusual ways - nonsense juxtapositions of word and image, intense emotions described in unlikely terms, meaning conveyed through words that have no apparent relationship to what is being discussed, etc. This functions on several levels. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is the thematically relevant suggestion that words are ultimately a failure as a means of expressing reality - that words are at best artificial representations of the truth, and at worst they are clumsy masks for that truth. In other words, in these four plays absurdism's core truth (that there is no sense, no reason, and no order to existence) is made manifest in the nonsensical, unreasoned, strangely ordered language used by their characters.

The second level of function to this use of language is directly related to the plays' relationships with the audience, and indeed absurdism's relationship with the world. The language of the plays is intended to shake the audience out of its preconceptions of

what language means and/or is used for, and therefore to shake that same audience out of its perceptions of reality. Finally, in all four plays the language is also used for simple comic effect - for example, Jack's intense emotional capitulation to the will of his family (in Jack, or The Submission) in his cry of "I love hash brown potatoes!" is very funny, because it's so unlikely and so ridiculous. What's important to note, however, is that also in all four plays, the absurdity of the various linguistic manipulations eventually becomes more intense, suggesting that perhaps humanity's understanding of itself is no joke either. In other words, even though life is essentially absurd and pointless, it's still serious business.

The Dangers of Passion

The sense of warning implied by the evolution of language usage in the four plays is also evoked by what takes place emotionally. In each play, what starts out as an essentially comical situation evolves into something more intimately related to so-called serious emotions - enraged frustration in The Bald Soprano, murderous desire for control in The Lesson, seductive manipulation in Jack..., despair in The Chairs. In other words, passion gets out of control in all four plays, with events triggered by that passion eventually resolving, in each play, in a kind of destruction. The lives of the Smiths are taken over by the Martins, the Pupil's emotional life and then her physical life are both ended by the Professor, Jack's independence is consumed by Roberta's emotional voraciousness, and the Old Man and Woman's realized passion for recognition results in their suicidal deaths. Here, the question of theme comes full circle - the path of action traced in all four plays suggests that passion, as unpredictable and as overwhelming as it is, is in fact a manifestation (perhaps the ultimate manifestation) of the chaotic, absurd nature of existence. In each play, strong feeling leads to randomness and upheaval, the essential components of an absurdist reality - which has, of course, as its ultimate end the most apparently meaningless, the most random event of all ... death.

Style

Point of View

Point of View

Essentially, the point of view of all four of these plays is that taken by the philosophy of absurdism (see "Themes - The Absurdity of Existence"), the belief that the universe and everything that exists within it is governed by principles of randomness. A key component of that belief is the contention that in the midst of the chaotic randomness of day-to-day existence, attempts to create and/or perceive any kind of order or meaning are futile and delusional. This particular aspect of absurdist theory (the desire to assert control) manifests in all four plays in this collection. The Smiths in The Bald Soprano attempt to assert conversational control over their guests, the Professor strives to assert control over the Pupil in The Lesson, Jack attempts to control his destiny in Jack ..., and in The Chairs the Old Man and Old Woman strive to achieve the recognition they both feel the Old Man deserves. Efforts in all four plays ultimately end in failure, thereby manifesting the absurdist point of view - and as described in "Themes - The Absurdity of Existence" all efforts at control result in eventual destruction, of one sort or another. This too can be seen as a manifestation of an essentially absurdist point of view - that ultimately, destruction in the form of various aspects of death (spiritual, physical, emotional) is, perhaps paradoxically, the only certain thing that can be counted on to be consistent in a chaotic world.

Setting

All four of these plays are set within a certain set of physical, visual confines - essentially, within a single room (see "Structure" below for additional values of these single environment settings). Each, according to the stage directions provided, is characterized appropriately for the play and its story. The Smiths' tidy "English" living room is the ironically perfect setting for the untidy breakdown in manners and communication in The Bald Soprano, while the Professor's academically equipped study in is the perfect atmosphere to support the tyranny of language that unfolds in The Lesson. Jack's gloomy and oppressive apartment in Jack... is effectively evocative of the oppressive will of his family that Jack eventually gives in to, while the circular, lighthouse-like setting for The Chairs is profoundly effective in suggesting the various levels of desperate isolation (emotional, intellectual spiritual) in which the Old Man and Woman find themselves living out their lives. It's important to note that all four settings are, to varying degrees, suggestive of entrapment, of isolation, and of constriction. Where some settings, and indeed some rooms, are evocative of comfort and safety, the rooms here have a strong sense of closing in on the characters, a sense that is in turn evocative of the struggles against being closed in (emotionally, intellectually, socially, ethically) they all, to varying degrees, are forced to face.

One last note about setting. With the exception of The Bald Soprano (which is quite purposefully set in England), the plays in this collection are defined solely by their immediate environments. There is no sense of nation, of province/state, even of city in the other three plays. This suggests the author was/is striving for a kind of universality, that the truths about the human condition he's exploring are ultimately archetypal, common to everyone in every circumstance. The Englishness of The Bald Soprano, on the other hand, suggests that his satirical and/or thematic target in that play is quite particular - the staid, uptight rigidness of the English. Such specificity, however, can also serve to evoke more general attitudes - in other words, he's not just satirizing the English, but in a typically absurdist way he's satirizing anyone who believes in, and lives according to, a specific set of rules and sense of order.

Language and Meaning

The first thing to note about this collection of plays is that they have been translated from the original French, so analysis of the use of language and its meaning is as much about the way in which the translation interprets the original as it is about the original's ideas. That said, there is the very clear sense that the use of language, in both dialogue and in the extensive stage directions, is evocative of the individual tone and action of each play. The conversations in The Bald Soprano are vividly suggestive of (perhaps stereotypical) polite, chatty exchanges in upper-middle class societies everywhere, not just in England (where the play is ostentatiously set). The language usage in The Lesson is particularly intriguing, in that discussions of word usage and origin are the primary motivator of the conflict. Tone and emotion is the most noteworthy characteristic of the language in Jack ... which, in spite of the absurdity of the actual words and images used, still manages to convey relationship and intention quite clearly. The same can also be said of The Chairs, in which the language used by the Old Man and Woman, again in spite of the frequent absurdity of the images, is quite clearly evocative of their desperate emotional state.

The second, and perhaps most important, key element of the language usage here is the consistent absurdity of the words, phrases and images used - in many ways using phrasing and content that sounds like utter nonsense to convey simple, universal human intention and emotional condition. The word and image choice is clearly evocative of absurdism (see "Themes - The Absurdism of Human Existence" and also "Point of View" above). It's also interesting to note, however, that while he throws traditional meaning to the wind, the author retains traditional sentence structure. Where some absurdist writers would use simple words and/or sounds to make their philosophical point, the author explores absurdity and randomness within traditional sentence and/or paragraph structure. Is he betraying his won philosophy by utilizing a form of order where he in fact thematically suggests there is none? Or is he merely compromising his principles just enough so he can make his point?

Structure

Each of these short plays is structured in a similar way - after a period of introduction, conflict develops and escalates, and is eventually resolved, with the result that life resumes a kind of normalcy (as far as so-called normalcy is even possible in an absurdist play). In other words, they are perhaps surprisingly constructed along the traditional lines of effective, tried-and-true storytelling. This is something of an incongruity for works and a writer that are, in so many ways, evocative of profound DIS-order.

This incongruous juxtaposition between thematic anarchy and narrative order carries through in other ways as well. Specifically, the setting of each of the four plays within a single room (see "Setting," above) is a manifestation of one of so-called "classical unities," traditional elements (rules?) of theatrical storytelling that have been in place since the Ancient Greeks defined the art form. In addition to unity of place (the action unfolds in a single place), there are the unities of time (events taking place in an unbroken, linear flow) and of action (the action and/or plot also unfold in a single, unbroken, linear flow). All four plays can be seen as adhering to all three unities, again a possible inconsistency between the theme and the practice of the plays and their author - the unities are a form of order, the linguistic and ideological perspectives of both are profoundly DIS-ordered. Taking into consideration the author's similarly inconsistent reliance on traditional sentence structure (see "Language and Meaning," above) is he perhaps suggesting that for chaos and its influence to be fully understood, or even for effective communication at all, there has to be at least some sense of order and structure? If so, what happens to the theories of absurdism, which upon consideration now seem to not in fact be entirely absolute.

Quotes

"A conscientious doctor must die with his patient if they can't get well together. The captain of a ship goes down with his ship into the briny deep, he does not survive alone."
"The Bald Soprano," p. 11.

"Men are all alike! You sit there all day long, a cigarette in your moth, or you powder your nose and rouge your lips, fifty times a day, or else you drink like a fish."
Mrs. Smith, ibid, p.14

"It is indeed possible; that is, not unlikely. It is plausible and, after all, why not!"
Mrs. Martin, ibid, p. 16

"They'll kiss each other tomorrow. They have plenty of time."
Mr. Martin, ibid, p. 27

"One always gets mixed up in the hands of a priest."
Mr. Smith, ibid, p. 34

Mrs. Martin - "This morning when you looked at yourself in the mirror you didn't see yourself." Mr. Martin - "That's because I wasn't there yet."
Ibid, p. 36

"It's not enough to integrate, you must also disintegrate."
The Professor, The Lesson, p. 55.

"Not being able to rely on my reasoning, I've memorized all the products of all possible multiplications."
The Pupil, ibid, p. 59

"... the thing that counts is, above all, understanding ... it is by mathematically reasoning ... that you ought to arrive ... at any result."
The Professor, ibid, p. 59

"...that which distinguishes them ... is their striking resemblance which makes it so hard to distinguish them from each other ..."
The Professor, ibid, p. 61

"That is why it is so useful to pronounce carefully, and to avoid errors in pronunciation. Pronunciation itself is worth a whole language. A bad pronunciation can get you into trouble."
The Professor, ibid, p. 64.

"How do you account for the fact that, in speaking without knowing which language they speak, or even while each of them believes he is speaking another, the common people

understand each other at all?"
The Professor, ibid, p. 71

"I'm going to punish you. Never again will I bring over my little playmates so that you can watch them make peepee."
Jacqueline, Jack or the Submission, p. 82

"Jack, wicked son! If I had known I'd have strangled you in your last cradle, yes, with my maternal hands. Or I'd have aborted you! Or not have conceived you! I, I who was so happy when I was pregnant with you...I showed your photo to everybody, to the neighbors, to the cops!"
Mother Jack, ibid, p. 97

"I am the gaiety in sorrow ... in travail ... in ruin ... in desolation ... I am the gaiety of death in life ... the joy of living, of dying."
Roberta, ibid, p. 101

"When I was born, I was almost fourteen years old. That's why I was able to understand more easily than most what it was all about."
Jack, ibid, p. 103

"...the further one goes, the deeper one sinks ..."
The Old Man, The Chairs, p. 114

"Colonel, as I've often observed to you, one must take the truth as one finds it."
The Old Man, ibid, p. 133

"...pure logic does not exist ... all we've got is an imitation."
The Old Man, ibid, p.145

Topics for Discussion

What do you think the playwright meant by calling "The Bald Soprano" an "anti-play"?

At the end of The Bald Soprano", the playwright suggests that the Martins have become the Smiths. Considering the differences in the characters throughout the play (see "Characters - Mr. and Mrs. Smith" and "Mr. and Mrs. Martin") and the absurdist philosophy grounding all four plays in this collection, what point do you think the playwright is trying to make with this transformation?

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What do you think the playwright meant by calling "The Lesson" a "comic drama?"

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What do you think the playwright meant by calling "Jack, or the Submission" a "naturalistic comedy?"

What is the "submission" that gives the play the second part of its title - Jack's submission to the will of his parents? Roberta's submission to hers? Jack's submission to Roberta? Roberta's submission to her physical deformities? What other possibilities are there?

What do you think the playwright meant by calling "The Chairs" a "tragic farce?"

What is the symbolic meaning of having "the chairs" remain empty? the Emperor remain invisible? The deaf-mute Oracle NOT be invisible?

Are the guests in "The Chairs" real and just invisible, or are they products of the imaginations of the Old Man and Woman? In forming your answer, consider the play's final moments, in which the sounds of the "invisible" audience are heard. What does this moment do to your perception of what's happening in the play? To your understanding of the play's meaning?

What is your response to the philosophy of absurdism? In what ways does it make sense? In what ways might the philosophy be as nonsensical as the philosophy itself says life is?