The Insect Play Study Guide

The Insect Play by Josef Čapek

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Introduction

Karel and Josef Capek's *The Insect Play* is one of the pair's best known and well-received collaborations. Also known as *The Insect Comedy, The World We Live In,* and *From Insect Life,* the play was published in its original Czech in 1921 as *Ze zivota hmyzu-* The play was first performed at the National Theatre in Brno, Czechoslovakia, on March 8, 1922 (some sources say February), running for about one hundred nights. *The Insect Play* made its American debut later in 1922, and its London premiere the following year. The play has been performed only intermittently since that time because of the demanding staging it requires.

The brothers Capek began work on the play in 1920. Their first collaboration after an eight-year hiatus, it would also be one of their last. *The Insect Play* was a combination of many forms, including fable, revue, and satire. All but a few of the characters are insects that are anthropomorphized (given human qualities). The brothers commented on human society in their place and time period (Czechoslovakia in the post-World War I era) via these insects. Many critics believe that the Capeks were inspired by other animal plays and short stories, including Jean Henri Fabre' s *La vie des insects* (The life of insects) and *Souvenirs entomologiques,* and a story by Russian author Vsevolod Garsin, *What Never Happened.* Though *The Insect Play* has been problematic for critics from the beginning, many have found much to praise over the years. As Lucia Mauro of the *Chicago Sun-Times* wrote, when commenting on a 1999 production of the play, "their keen observations of the life cycle and poignant visions of war's futility remain relevant to this day."

Author Biography

Born in Male Svatonovice, Bohemia (later part of Czechoslovakia), the Capek brothers were the sons of Antonm Capek, the village doctor, and his wife, Bozena Capekova, an intellectual. Josef Capek was born in 1887, and his brother Karel followed on January 9,1890, nearly three years later. The brothers were extremely close as children. Karel was always sickly; Josef was a strong influence and his brother's protector. Karel would be ill most of his life.

While Karel was attending boarding school, the family moved to Prague in 1907. Karel joined them there to finish high school. Despite his family's protests, Josef entered art school. The brothers began writing stories for newspapers together, especially after Karel entered Charles University in 1909. There, he studied art history, aesthetics, and philosophy, and earned his doctorate in 1915. During this time, both brothers spent some time abroad: Karel studied at universities in Paris and Berlin while Josef went to Paris. The brothers published their first book, a collection of short stories entitled *The Luminous Depths,* in 1916.

In Prague, the Capek brothers became leaders in the avant-garde movement. While Josef was on his way to becoming a renowned Czech painter, Karel worked as a journalist, began writing novels, and continued to write short stories of some renown. The brothers still collaborated, but primarily in plays. They wrote ten plays together over twenty years. The first was *The Fateful Play of Love.* This play was written in 1910 but not performed until 1919. While neither brother served in World War I, both were outspoken supporters of the burgeoning Czech nationalism.

By the 1920s, most of the brothers' work was done separately. From 1921 to 1923, Karel worked as a stage director and the dramaturg, or specialist in dramatic composition, at Prague's Vinohrady Theatre. Josef designed sets and costumes for a number of theatrical productions, and often illustrated his brother's books. Aside from their best known play, *The Insect Play* (1921), the Capeks mostly wrote their own theatrical works. In 1921, Karel's seminal play, *R.U.R.,* depicted humanity as served to the brink of subjugation by "Rossum's Universal Robots" and gave him international fame. Josef also wrote several plays on his own, with less success, including *The Land of Many Names* (1923).

Their last dramatic collaboration was *Adam the Creator* (1927), though they continued to produce several more plays individually after this date. Karel did not write plays again until the mid-1930s. Anti-fascism became the focus, especially in his 1937 play *The White Plague.* For most of the early 1930s, however, Karel wrote important novels (including the acclaimed *War with the Newts,* 1936) and travel books, returned to work as a journalist, and was involved in politics. Josef continued to share his brother's left-leaning political beliefs.

Because of Karel's illnesses (including calcification of part of his spine), he did not marry his long-time girlfriend Olga Scheinpfugova, an actress and novelist, until 1935. The

Capeks' political beliefs led them in public attacks against the Nazis after the Nazis occupied Czechoslovakia. The pressure might have contributed to Karel's death in Prague. He succumbed to pneumonia on December 25, 1938, on the verge of being arrested. Josef was arrested by the Nazis and taken to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp where he died in 1945 (probably of typhus) after being held for six years.

Plot Summary

Prologue: In the Woods

The Insect Play opens in the woods where a drunken tramp sleeps on the ground. Butterflies flit near him. His slumber is interrupted by a lepidopterist who is collecting butterflies for his scientific collection. The scientist is annoyed that the tramp's movements have scared off the insects. After the scientist leaves to continue collecting, the tramp laments that all the world is paired off into couples.

Act I: The Butterflies

The tramp finds himself in a place that caters to butterflies. As the tramp makes himself comfortable on cushions and dozes, butterflies enter. Felix, a shy poet butterfly, is looking for Iris. She comes in, followed by another male butterfly, Victor. Answering her question, Felix tells Iris that he is not in love with any female butterflies, and has not been since he was a caterpillar. In fact, Felix loves Iris, but has only watched her from a distance and written poems.

Iris flirts with Felix. Victor tries to embarrass him by reciting part of a poem that Felix has recently published about sex. Iris gets rid of Victor, and continues to toy with Felix's feelings. She accuses him of loving Clytie, another female butterfly. Felix admits that he is in love with Iris. She asks him to quickly compose a poem for her, which he does, much to her pleasure.

The moment is interrupted by the appearance of Clytie and Otto, a male butterfly who is chasing her. Victor also returns. Iris embarrasses Felix by quoting the poem about sex for those present. Yet Iris also calls Felix "clever" when she reports that he has found a rhyme for her name. A few moments later, Iris is flirting with Victor and leads him on a chase.

Clytie asks Felix why he loves Iris. Felix denies that he does. Clytie insults Iris and flirts with Felix, then asks him to be friends, "like two girls." Felix recites the beginning of a new poem for her, but she is unimpressed. Clytie's attentions turn to Otto, who begs for her love. Clytie now leads Otto away on a chase. Felix leaves alone.

The tramp feels sorry for Felix. Clytie returns to primp in the mirror. Though she does not know what a man is, Clytie tries to get the tramp to chase her. The tramp will not play her game. Clytie returns to the mirror after the rejection. Iris enters, out of breath and tells Clytie a funny story about Victor being eaten by a bird. Otto nearly met the same fate. Felix comes in and tries to read his new poem to the women. They only care about their appearance. Otto enters, and both Iris and Clytie lead him on a chase. Felix tries to get them to wait, but to no avail. The tramp calls him a fool and shoos him away.

Act II: Creepers and Crawlers

This act takes place in a sandy hillock. The tramp is half-asleep nearby, but a chrysalis interrupts his repose. It is excited because it is about to be born. It expresses this sentiment regularly throughout the act.

The action shifts to a pair of beetles, Mr. and Mrs. Beetle. They are rolling a huge ball of dirt and dung, which they call their "capital." They have worked very hard to collect the ball, and are immensely proud of it. Mr. Beetle wants to immediately begin work on their next pile. Mrs. Beetle is more concerned with protecting what they already have. Mr. Beetle goes to look for a hole in which to bury it.

While he is gone, Mrs. Beetle thinks she has found a hole in an ichneumon fly's lair and enters. In the meantime, a strange beetle takes the unguarded capital. The tramp questions him, but does not prevent him from taking it. Mrs. Beetle returns and accuses the tramp of taking the pile. The tramp denies it and describes the beetle. Mrs. Beetle believes that it is her husband and goes looking for him.

The ichneumon fly returns with a dead cricket for his daughter, a larva. After feeding his daughter, the fly turns his attention to the tramp, asking if he is edible. The tramp says he is not, and the fly proceeds to regale him with the wonders of children.

Mr. Beetle returns looking for his wife. He has found a hole. The tramp tells him that his wife is looking for him and that another beetle stole their capital. Mr. Beetle is more concerned with the loss of it than his wife.

Mr. and Mrs. Cricket enter. They are moving into the home vacated by a cricket eaten by a bird. Mr. Cricket leaves to introduce himself to the neighbors. After he goes, Mrs. Cricket, who is pregnant, and the tramp talk about children. Mrs. Beetle returns and gets into an argument with Mrs. Cricket over what is more important: a dung pile or a home. Mrs. Beetle leaves again.

The fly returns, kills Mrs. Cricket, and takes her to his lair. A parasite enters, and sympathizes with the tramp's horror over the murder. The parasite believes that the fly is bad because he just stores most of what he kills while others starve. The fly considers eating the parasite, but finds him inedible. When Mr. Cricket returns, the fly quickly kills him, then leaves to look for more food. After he exits, the parasite enters the lair and eats much of what is in there, including the larva. The tramp is disgusted by all the killing.

Act III: The Ants

The chrysalis is growing more excited about being born. The tramp realizes he has sat on an ant heap. He asks the blind ant, who is counting time for the worker ants, what he has stumbled upon. The blind ant does not answer, but the chief engineer does. He is in

the Ant Realm. A second engineer enters. He has come up with a more efficient way to count and get more work done.

The engineer ants have never heard of humans and inform the tramp that ants are the masters of the world ruled by a she. These ants have defeated the black and brown ants, conquered the grey ants, and are now trying to beat the yellow ants. They are doing this to rule the world and master time. The engineers are concerned with the speed of work.

An inventor ant enters. He has come up with a new war machine that will kill quickly. A messenger comes in. The southern army has had some men captured by the yellow ants, who have declared war on the Ant Realm. The ants call for arms as the yellow ants invade. The ants become soldiers led by the chief engineer, now the commander in chief and dictator. He organizes forces and readies the battle plan.

The messenger returns regularly with progress reports. The Ant Realm is losing badly to the yellow ants. Wounded ants return. The tide of the battle turns, and the yellow retreat. The chief engineer orders their destruction, and proclaims himself emperor. The tide changes again and it is the Ant Realm who retreats. The yellows invade and are victorious. The tramp kills the yellow leader.

Epilogue: Death and Life

The tramp is sleeping in the dead of night. Voices of all the insects can be heard as morning nears. The tramp strikes stones to make a spark, which lights up the forest. Moths come into the light and die. The chrysalis breaks open to reveal a moth, who dies soon after she is born. The tramp is upset by her death, and moments later is struggling with his own death.

After dawn, a woodcutter comes upon the corpse of the tramp. A woman with a baby finds both of them. The woodcutter covers the tramp, while the woman places a flower on his makeshift grave. Children sing as they go by on their way to school.

Characters

Mr, Beetle

Mr. Beetle appears primarily in Act II. He is married to Mrs. Beetle. He is very proud of his "capital," the ball/pile of dung and dirt that he and his wife have worked for some time to gather. After getting the first ball done, Mr. Beetle wants to make another, then another. Mrs. Beetle decides that they should find a deep hole to bury their first pile in so that they do not have to worry about it while making the second pile. Mr. Beetle becomes infuriated when the strange beetle steals the ball under his wife's nose. Mr. Beetle is more concerned with the location of his capital than his wife's whereabouts. Mr. Beetle represents greed.

Mrs, Beetle

Mrs. Beetle appears primarily in Act II. She is married to Mr. Beetle, and shares his enthusiasm for their "capital." It is she who suggests that they have to protect the dung ball while working on the next one. When her husband goes off to look for a hole to bury it in, Mrs. Beetle wanders in the lair of the ichneumon fly. When she looks inside for a moment, the strange beetle steals the capital. Mrs. Beetle goes looking for her husband, believing he has taken it. When she returns briefly to her original location, she argues with Mrs. Cricket over what is more important, a dung ball or a home and children. Mrs. Beetle believes the former. Like Mr. Beetle, Mrs. Beetle is greedy.

Blind Ant

The blind ant appears primarily in Act III. He continuously counts to four to keep time for the worker ants throughout the act. The quickness of his words determines the pace. The ant ignores the tramp's requests for information and only continues counting. He continues to count even after the yellow ants invade and conquer.

Chief Engineer

The chief engineer is an ant who appears primarily in Act III. He runs the Ant Realm for the mysterious "she," receiving information from the inventor and the messenger and acting on it. It is the chief engineer who answers the tramp's questions about the operation and tries to put him to work. The chief engineer directs the operation against the yellow ants, the Ant Realm's last enemy. He is power hungry, adapting his words to fit the situation and to his benefit. The chief engineer appoints himself dictator and emperor when war breaks out between his ants and the yellow ants. While he tries to win without mercy to his enemy or his men, he fails. The chief engineer only thinks in terms of work, control, and victory: nothing else matters.

A Chrysalis

The chrysalis makes her first appearance in Act II and appears though the epilogue. She is a moth waiting to be born. She looks forward to her birth, for the chrysalis believes she will do something great. She is sure the world will change because of her. However, when the moth finally emerges from the chrysalis, other moths are dying after entering the light that the tramp creates. Like her fellow moths, the chrysalis, as a newborn moth, dies only moments after she was born. The chrysalis represents the whole of the life cycle, hope in birth and suddenness of death.

Clytie

Appearing primarily in Act I, Clytie is a female butterfly. She enjoys being chased by male butterflies, especially Otto. She is also jealous of Iris, another female butterfly, and speaks disparagingly of her when she is not present. Unlike Iris, Clytie does not like poetry, even the poem Felix writes for her. She is more concerned with her appearance and flirtation. She tries to get every male, including the tramp, to chase her. Clytie is very superficial.

Mr. Cricket

Mr. Cricket appears primarily in Act II. He is married to the very pregnant Mrs. Cricket, whom he has moved to a sandy hillock. They are to take over the home of another cricket who was eaten by a bird. Mr. Cricket is loving and worried about his scared wife's well-being. When he leaves his wife to let others know where he is, she is killed by the ichneumon fly. Mr. Cricket returns himself and suffers the same fate.

Mrs. Cricket

Mrs. Cricket appears primarily in Act II. She is pregnant and married to Mr. Cricket, with whom she has moved to a sandy hillock. They are to take over the home of another cricket who was eaten by a bird. She wants to have a nice home for her new family. Mrs. Cricket is very frightened of something from the moment that she enters the hillock. After debating the merits of home versus dung heap with Mrs. Beetle, Mrs. Cricket is killed by the ichneumon fly. When her husband returns, he suffers the same fate.

Felix

Appearing primarily in Act I, Felix is a male butterfly. Unlike the other butterflies, Felix is shy and not flirtatious. He is a published poet and thinks a lot. Felix is in love with Iris, and tells her he has really only been in love one previous time. Then he was a caterpillar and only admired his love from afar. Felix tries to please both Iris and Clytie

with poems. While Iris appreciates them, at least at first, Clytie does not. Felix is stymied by both butterflies and continues on as the frustrated poet.

Ichneumon Fly

The fly appears primarily in Act II. He has a lair where his daughter, the larva, lives, and where he stores the many insects he kills. The fly is only concerned with killing other edible insects and feeding his daughter. After he realizes that the tramp is inedible, the fly shares his enthusiasm for his daughter and children in general with him. The fly has no real conscious. He kills Mr. and Mrs. Cricket in front of the tramp without hesitation, and would kill both the tramp and the parasite if they were edible. The fly is despised by the parasite, who enacts a measure of revenge at the end of Act II. The parasite eats both his larva daughter and much of his store of food while the fly is off hunting for more prey.

Inventor

The inventor is an ant who appears briefly in Act III. He is proud of the fact that he has invented a war machine that can kill thousands of men continuously. He is considered a scientific genius by his fellow ants.

Iris

Appearing primarily in Act I, Iris is very flirtatious female butterfly. Like Clytie, she enjoys attention from the other male butterflies, primarily Victor and Felix, but later, Otto as well. Iris toys with Felix's feelings for her, asking him about other women he has been involved with and making him write poems for her. Iris is rather insensitive to Felix, and by the end of the act, she is brusque towards him when he tries to read a new poem to her. Iris's coldness also shows itself when she is amused that a bird eats Victor after he asks her to love him. Iris is arguably the most superficial butterfly.

Larva

The larva is the daughter of the ichneumon fly, appearing in Act II. She is bored in the lair, constantly being fed by her doting father. She is killed and eaten by the parasite at the end of the act.

A Lepidopterist

In the prologue to *The Insect Play,* the lepidopterist is collecting butterflies for his scientific collection. He is angry at the tramp for making him lose potential specimens. The lepidopterist vows revenge on the tramp, but is really more concerned with

acquiring butterflies for his collection. The lepidopterist claims to love nature, but represents man's indifference to the beauty of nature.

Messenger

The messenger is an ant who appears in Act III. He reports to the chief engineer about the declaration of war by the yellow ants and continues to update him as the situation develops.

Otto

Appearing primarily in Act I, Otto is a male butterfly. He is in love with Clytie, primarily, but also flirts with Iris. Otto repeatedly tells both of them that he loves them and wants to be loved by them. He will do whatever they want him to. Otto is proud when he comes up with a rhyme for his own name, and begins to write his own poem. Otto is nearly eaten by a bird, though avoids the fate of Victor. Like most of the butterflies, Otto is superficial.

Parasite

The parasite appears primarily in Act II. He shares the tramp's distaste for the regular killings of the ichneumon fly. But the parasite is angrier about the amount of food the fly hoards while others go hungry. After the fly leaves to continue the hunt, the parasite enacts his revenge by going into the lair. The parasite eats the fly's daughter and much of his stored food. The tramp is appalled by the parasite's actions. The parasite is an opportunist.

Second Engineer

The second engineer is an ant and appears primarily in Act III. He is second in command to the chief engineer, and is his superior's "yes man." They share the same beliefs about work, war, and victory. The second engineer assists in the direction of work and war. He is wounded in the attack by the yellow ants.

Strange Beetle

The strange beetle appears in the second act. He takes Mr. and Mrs. Beetle's dung heap, their "capital," when Mrs. Beetle has entered the ichneumon fly's lair. The strange beetle is never seen again.

A Tramp

The tramp is the main character who ties the whole of *The Insect Play* together. At the beginning of the play, he is trying to sleep after drinking alcohol. He is awakened by the lepidopterist, who is collecting butterfly specimens for his collection. The tramp is the only human to observe and be a part of the action that takes place in the three acts of the play. First, the tramp dozes in the butterflies' cafe, overhearing their flirtatious, though empty, talk. He does not like their superficiality. Then the tramp witnesses the harshness of insect life through the actions of the ichneumon fly, who kills Mr. and Mrs. Cricket, and other insects, to feed his larva daughter. A parasite kills the larva and eats the fly's store of food. The tramp also witnesses the greed of Mr. and Mrs. Beetle with their pile of dung, and how this scenario ends badly. Finally, the tramp comes across an ant realm, and a war between these ants and yellow ants. The tramp kills the yellow leader after he declares victory. At the end of *The Insect Play,* the tramp worries about his death after the chrysalis, who is waiting to be born throughout the play, dies soon after her birth as a moth. This predicts the tramp's death. His body is found in the morning by the woodcutter and the woman. The tramp represents man's conscious.

Victor

Appearing primarily in Act I, Victor is a male butterfly and a lady-killer. He is primarily interested in Iris and enjoys embarrassing Felix. Victor recites a poem that Felix has recently published in front of Iris knowing that he would be uncomfortable. Victor does not like poetry. Victor's enthusiastic chasing of Iris leads to his demise. After he asks her to love him, a bird eats him. Iris is very amused by how he dies. Like most of the butterflies, Victor is superficial.

A Woman

The woman appears only in the epilogue. She is carrying her sister's baby to the infant's baptism when she comes upon the woodcutter. She believes the corpse is bad luck. Still, she places a flower on the makeshift grave the woodcutter arranges for the deceased tramp.

Peter Wood

See A Woodcutter

A Woodcutter

The woodcutter appears only in the epilogue. He is the one who finds the corpse of the dead tramp and covers it up so the school children will not see it.

Themes

Cycle of Life

Underscored throughout *The Insect Play,* sometimes brutally, is the cycle of life. From birth, to maturity, to reproduction, and to death, all of the high points on the human life cycle are represented in the play. The chrysalis contains a female moth that cannot wait to be born. She believes she will do wondrous things for the world after her birth. However, the moth dies soon after she emerges from her chrysalis in what is a mass death of moths. During the epilogue of the play, a woman is taking her sister's newborn baby to its baptism. The butterflies in Act I represent the maturation process. They flit and flirt with each other, pairing off only temporarily. Nothing is permanent for them yet. The ants in Act III are the opposite: they are about work and being part of the community. This is a different part of the maturation process. There are several examples of reproducing adults, concerned with responsibilities. The ichneumon fly is a doting father whose only goal in life is to feed his daughter and increase the amount of food he has stored. Mr. and Mrs. Cricket are expecting baby crickets. While Mr. and Mrs. Beetle are not interested in having children, they do have their "capital" (a ball of dung and dirt) that is very precious to them and their future.

By far, the harshest part of the life cycle depicted in *The Insect Play,* however, is death. Many of the deaths are sudden and murderous. The fly kills the crickets to feed his daughter. The parasite kills the fly's larva and eats her partially as revenge, but also because he seeks food. Victor, the butterfly, comes to a nasty end. A bird eats him, much to Iris's amusement. Even the Lepidopterist collects butterflies to kill for his collection. The tramp is horrified by all these senseless deaths, but he cannot abide the yellow ants' victory over the Ant Realm. He grinds the yellow ant leader into pieces. After all the moths die perhaps because of the light the tramp struck he, too, takes his last breath. The Capeks depict the life cycle as endless and cruel, with moments of hope. Though the tramp has died, a baby is being baptized, children are going to school, and two adults move forward. Life may be short, but it is worth living.

Morals and Morality/Ethics/Vice

In their depiction of the insect world, the Capeks comment on human vices, morals, and ethics. All but one of the butterflies in Act I lack any depth or compassion. They tease and try to manipulate each other, worrying only about their appearance. Though Felix, the shy sensitive poet butterfly, is not as superficial as the others, he also has his weakness. Felix only cares about his poetry and what effect it might have on female butterflies. He does not write for himself, but to lure them to him. Mr. and Mrs. Beetle are the epitome of greed. They are only concerned with their " capital" (the ball of dung and dirt), and acquiring more of it. When Mrs. Beetle and the capital are missing, Mr. Beetle is more concerned with the capital than his wife. The ichneumon fly shares their obsession to a lesser degree. He kills whatever he has to so that his larva daughter is

fed, and stores the rest. Though the parasite claims to sympathize with the tramp over the brutal murder of the Crickets, he too is an opportunist. As soon as the ichneumon fly leaves his lair, the parasite goes in, kills the fly's larva, and eats her as well as the rest of the fly's store of food. Those in the Ant Realm are most concerned with doing work more quickly, even though it kills one of their own. The chief engineer ant says whatever is necessary at the moment to get what he desires. He most wants power and declares himself dictator and emperor when battle breaks out between his realm and the yellow ants. The human characters also have their own moral lapses. The scientist is more concerned with capturing and killing the butterflies than how he woke the tramp up from his sleep. Though the tramp is horrified by the harsh behavior of the insects he encounters, he too kills by the end of the play. He rubs out the yellow ant leader with his heel. The Capeks use the insects' characters to illustrate negative behaviors of humankind and how these behaviors affect others.

Nature and its Meaning

Implicit in *The Insect Play* is a critique of nature and its meaning. Though the Capeks use the insects as symbolic humans, with all their problems, the meaning of nature also comes into play. The ants, for example, have some of the characteristics of real ants. Real ants have a strict division of labor, and seem to work nonstop in a certain kind of pattern. The Capeks take what they observed in nature and added human characteristics. A similar thing could be said for butterflies and the way they flit around; parasites, who live off the work of others; and so on. The Capeks seem to be saying that the ways of nature and human life are not always far apart. Nature has much to show humans about their existence.

Style

Setting

The Insect Play is a revue-like fable/drama set in the woods of an unspecified place and time. While the action of the prologue and epilogue takes place in "reality" with only human characters, the three acts are interlinked sketches that occur only in the mind of the tramp. Act I is set on a hill, but with cushions and a table or bar where the butterflies gather. Act II takes place on a sandy hillock with many holes for the insects to go in and out of. Act III is set inside an ant heap, where the ants work, strategize war, and fight. These settings emphasize the play's dichotomy: the tramp's reality and his fantasy, as well as the link between man and nature.

Symbolism/Characters

Nearly every character in *The Insect Play* is a symbol or has symbolic meaning. The only character that appears in each section of the play is the tramp, who represents humanity. He is the one who observes the faults of humanity as symbolized in each insect character. Though the tramp is upset by what he sees, he does not directly intercede until he kills the yellow ant leader at the end of Act III. The tramp dies soon afterwards. The insect characters are also symbolic. The butterflies symbolize the shallowness of youth or society. The ants represent, among other things, the unquestioned loyalty to one's state, an important issue in post-World War I Europe. Some of the insects in Act II symbolize various human characteristics, especially faults. Mr. and Mrs. Beetle, for example, are greedy. The strange beetle and the parasite are opportunists ready to take advantage of another's misfortune. The ichneumon fly shares this characteristic, but is also a cold-blooded murderer.

Anthropomorphism/Fable

Anthropomorphism means to give animals, objects, or anything non-human, some of the characteristics of a human. As the previous section suggests, the Capeks have given these insects human qualities for symbolic value. But the anthropomorphic traits serve other purposes in the play as well. By using anthropomorphic characters, *The Insect Play* becomes fable-like. That is, it has some of the qualities of a fable. A fable is a fictitious story with a moral lesson that often features animals. This play touches on many moral issues and ideas greed, the blind following of leaders, the brutality of murder, the harshness of death using the insects, but does not have an obvious moral. Instead *The Insect Play* focuses on the implications of actions without clearly stating that one action is definitely good, while another is clearly bad, as a fable would. The authors leave the interpretation (good, bad, or a mix of both) of what is depicted up to the audience. Fables are usually written to instruct, while this play is more concerned with being thought-provoking as well as entertaining.

Historical Context

In the aftermath of World War I, Central Europe was a mess. World War I (1914-1918) had torn the area apart, and borders and countries changed. Before the war, there was a movement to create an independent state for the Czech and Slovak people. At the time, the land and people that eventually formed Czechoslovakia were a part of Austria-Hungary. Czechs shared the land with Germans, who supported the war and the Central Powers. The Czechs were generally opposed, though the opposition took time to become coordinated. Czechs were pressed into military service by Austrians to fight on the side of the Central Powers. But those that served on the Eastern Front often defected to the Russian side. At home, the Czech press was censored, and no public meetings were allowed. Those considered disloyal to Austria-Hungary's interests were often put in prison.

After 1917, when the United States officially entered the war and the Russian Revolution took place, Czech leaders sought to increase their autonomy within Austria-Hungary. A Czechoslovak army was formed to fight on the side of the Allies (including the United States and Russia). These troops participated in high-profile operations that gained sympathy for their cause. Independence now seemed possible, with the help of the Allies. Before the war ended, Czech leaders got recognition for their Czechoslovak National Council from Allied countries. This Council officially represented Czech interests at the peace conference, and declared itself a provisional government. After the Austria-Hungary Empire fell apart in October 1918, a republic was declared.

The early years of the Republic of Czechoslovakia were not easy. Immediately after the war, while the new government was being formed, borders had to be determined in the postwar peace conference. The new government got in a dispute with Poland over the partition of the Duchy of Teschen, for example. Still, Czech leaders formed a National Assembly that drafted a new, democratic constitution. This constitution was adopted on February 29, 1920. While many Czechs and Slovaks were pleased to finally have their own country, there was internal opposition to the republic. One group in particular, the Sudeten Germans, protested the constitution. They did, however, vote in elections and form political parties. Some Slovaks also had aspirations towards their own autonomous state, though others supported a close alliance with Czechs. The first strong political party in Czechoslovakia was the Social Democracy party for the first several years. After an internal split in 1920, the Republicans became the leading political party. One Republican, Antonm Svehla, was prime minister of Czechoslovakia from 1921 until 1929.

As the newly formed Czechoslovakia began to define itself internally and externally, problems in Europe were on the horizon. Though Czechoslovakia was loyal to the League of Nations (formed in the wake of World War I), and had an alliance with France and treaties with Yugoslavia and Romania, Germany proved to be the biggest stumbling block to the country's future. Though relations were somewhat cool, one event in the Germany of the early 1920s proved important: Adolf Hitler was elected chair and dictator for life of the relatively new Nazi Party. Hitler's rise to power in Germany in the

late 1920s and early 1930s would eventually spell the end of Czechoslovakia in 1938. Germany occupied the country, and split it up during World War II. Later, Czechoslovakia would rise again.

Critical Overview

Since the premiere of *The Insect Play* in 1922, the play has not been performed often, but it does appear every couple of decades. The demands of staging the Capeks' insect world are the primarily reason that it is only occasionally produced. Critics' reaction to the play has changed over time.

When the play was first produced in the United States in 1922 (as *The World We Live In*), John Corbin of the *New York Times* discussed the contemporary parallels that it was meant to evoke. Corbin included the impact of World War I and how Central European writers like the Capeks were perceived at the time. While Corbin believed that "the impression persists that it is all rather a libel on the insects," later in the review, he stated "the insects who thus represent the world are ... but a travesty conceived in the spirit of the wartime."

Robert Allerton Parker of the *Independent* shared Corbin's mixed feelings about this production. Calling the play "puerile," Parker believed *The Insect Play* was only staged because of its Central European origins. Writers from that part of the world were in vogue, leading Parker to speculate that if an American had written it, no producer would have touched it. Parker faulted the Capeks for "this failure ... to organize their theme with any notable dramatic efficiency. This failure, it seemed to me, was the inevitable result of a confusion of thought and intention. Were they aiming to expose the human traits in insects? Or were they revealing the entomic vices of humans?"

*The Insec*t Play made its London debut in May 1923 under that name at the Regent Theatre. Francis Birrell of *The Nation [and] the Athenaeum* shared some of Parker's concerns. Though Birrell called the production "rare and refreshing fruit" as well as it one of the best plays he had seen in London, he had problems with it as well. He wrote, "They have, up to a point, sympathetic minds.... There is a gritty disillusion about their reactions which has enabled them to produce a far more healthy entertainment than is usually seen on the London stage. But one cannot help feeling they have got muddled about their aims."

The Insect Play did not have the same impact in the post-World War II period as it did in the post-World War I era. In 1948, another production was put on in New York City under the name The Insect Comedy, which also received mixed reviews. A *New York Times* critic wrote "what seems to have struck another generation as powerfully interesting theatre, as profound wisdom and searching analysis, now seems only interesting.... What it had to say probably matters more than how it said it and its sentiments could easily have echoed in the minds and hearts of a world attempting to recover its balance."

Harold Clurman of the *New Republic* and John Gassner of *Forum* echoed these sentiments. Clurman believed the play's sources the post-World War I era and its problems were key to understanding *The Insect Play.* Clurman wrote, "It represents the combination of despair and fury without any foundation in specific social understanding

that inevitably paves the way to another war. The play is nevertheless justified by the fact that it does reflect an atmosphere created by a painfully real historical situation." Gassner was one critic who believed the play was still "timely," arguing that "this strangely moving, devastatingly satirical drama, born of postwar disillusionment, a play as timely today as it was in 1921 when the world felt the same dismay over a war fought and a peace won only to be lost."

The Insect Play was produced again in 1979 in New York City as the *The Insect Comedy* and 1999 in Chicago as The Insect Play. Lucia Mauro of the *Chicago Sun-Times* wrote of the latter production in contemporary terms while commenting on what many critics have talked about since the earliest productions. Calling it "a work of operatic proportions," Mauro wrote, "In this early feminist study and dark comedy, female butterflies assert their independence and acknowledge their burning passions. The Capeks also call into question the overriding belief that humans have mightier ambitions than other species." Mauro believed that *The Insect Play* was still relevant at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

In this essay, Petruso discusses the important role the character of the Tramp plays in The Insect Play.

Many critics have noted that Karel and Josef Capek's *The Insect Play* (1921) consists of three one-act playlets. Others have called the play a revue, a show comprised of different sketches that comment on recent events. However these critics describe the nature of *The Insect Play,* everyone agrees that one character ties the disparate acts together: The Tramp. Introduced in the prologue, the tramp could be interpreted as dreaming the play's action or as merely a device the Capeks use to link the three stories they are telling. In either case, the tramp plays a key role in *The Insect Play.* He gives the audience a human character to identify with. The tramp guides the audience through the action, commenting on it. As the play progresses, he becomes part of it. This essay looks at the crucial role the tramp has in the play, and the effect of his character on the play's tone and content.

The tramp is the only human character to appear in each part of *The Insect Play.* When he is introduced in the prologue, he is asleep with an empty bottle, implied to be liquor, at his side. The tramp is awakened by the lepidopterist, who is collecting butterflies for his scientific collection. The scientist is trying to nab a butterfly that is resting on the tramp's nose. After the scientist leaves to continue his pursuit, the tramp addresses the audience directly. He tells them that he was not drunk, but that he fell from a tree while rehearsing "the fall of man." Further, the tramp declares "I'm a man, that's what I am a lord of creation! A great thing to be I tell yer! Now then, pass along there, my man! That's what they say to me."

Thus, from the beginning of the play, the tramp's role is established. He identifies himself as "man," not just in one way but several. The tramp may be a human man, but to his fellow human men and women, he is less than them. He is pushed aside by them. He has no home to sleep in, no job or family. Yet the tramp also claims to be "a lord of creation." The tramp is a man who created these insect worlds in the woods, away from civilization. They are, perhaps, his interpretations of or perceptions of the reality of human life. This duality makes the tramp a Christ-like figure: both complex man and god. The tramp represents the human conscience, a definer of values.

Each of the three one-acts (or sketches, depending on the definition preferred) defines an aspect of human morality for the tramp. The fact that the pieces use insects makes them small morality plays: they illustrate human vices and define meritorious behavior. The human audience can see these morals more clearly because they are presented in a palatable form. They are not seeing themselves on stage, but a version thereof. Each act is like an animated cartoon. The tales reflect an aspect of society, exaggerated to reveal a deeper message. While the goal of most cartoons is to elicit a humorous reaction, the acts of *The Insect Play* define what the tramp thinks is wrong and right with the human world.

In Act I, the tramp shows a society that has rejected him. The butterflies vain, shallow creatures only concerned with attracting the opposite sex and outmaneuvering those of the same intrigue him at first. But as he watches the superficial mating dance unfold, the tramp becomes disgusted. Towards the end of the act, Clytie, a female butterfly, tries to induce the tramp into chasing her. He becomes annoyed by her false interest, calling her a "'ussy" and a "'arlot" before exclaiming "Go get a move on. I 'ate the sight of yer." The tramp sees past skin-deep beauty and empty relationships. While the act begins with him believing he has found paradise, it ends with him disparaging their lifestyle and motivation.

The tramp shows both what he respects and despises in Act II. This act is more complex than the first, with several story lines. One concerns a Mr. and Mrs. Beetle, who have worked very hard to collect what they call their "capital." This is a ball of dirt and dung, what they consider their life's savings. The tramp respects the fact that these insects actually labor. He says: "Them butterflies was gay / And foolish, yer might say: / But these 'ere beetles lumme, / They *do* work, anyway!" Later in the act, he makes fun of their obsession with their capital after it is stolen. The beetles care more about the capital than each other.

The tramp is more troubled by the actions of the ichneumon fly. The fly kills other insects to feed his daughter, a larva. While the tramp respects the right of the fly to feed his children, he also sympathizes with the fly's victims. The tramp exclaims in the middle of the act: "That fly destroys / The cricket jest to feed 'is girls and boys; / But that pore 'armless cricket found life sweet, / Same as 'e does No! Nature 'as me beat!" But later in the act, after the tramp observes and becomes friendly with a Mr. and Mrs. Cricket, he finds the fly's actions murderous. The fly kills them both in cold blood in front of the tramp. The tramp blames himself for not trying to help these innocent victims. The tramp expresses his horror over killing with a parasite who happens along. The parasite further condemns the fly for storing large amounts of food when other creatures are starving.

After the parasite exacts a certain amount of revenge by eating the parasite's stored food as well as his daughter, the tramp remains upset by the murders. Near the end of the act, while the parasite is in the fly's lair eating his fill, the tramp speaks three verses that explicitly compares humankind to these three kinds of creatures (beetles, crickets, and ichneumon fly), as much as he dislikes the parallels. The last line of these verses states "'oo can think straight on gin?" The tramp, as a conscience, does not always like what he sees.

The tramp still has confidence in Act III. At the beginning of the act, he exclaims, "Insec's won't work together. Man / Will. 'E can form a general plan. There's something great in 'im what fights / And perishes for the nation's rights." The tramp goes on to laud those that give up their lives for their country. His opinion changes once he sees what goes on in the Ant Realm. This sketch is about the negative effect of blind devotion to the state and to work. The ants are only concerned with how to work more quickly and efficiently for the good of the state. Unlike the insects in other sketches, some of the

ants are defined by work titles: chief engineer and second engineer. (The butterflies have names, while the insects in Act II are defined by species.)

The ants want to work faster so they can take over the world. The chief engineer declares himself dictator as soon as a war has begun with their last remaining enemy, the yellow ants. The tramp takes the Ant Realm's side and hopes they win their war. But when he sees the slaughter from the battles and the injured ants, the tramp changes his mind. He identifies more with the soldiers of the Ant Realm, rather than its self-proclaimed dictator. Finally, when the yellow ants overrun the Ant Realm at the end of Act III, the tramp can no longer remain a passive observer to slaughter. He kills the yellow leader, grinding the ant with his boot. Everything the tramp has seen in *The Insect Play* has led to this moment. It is one thing to moralize through example; it is quite another to take action for one's self. His conscience has driven him to murder.

One reason for the tramp's evolution, especially after the end of Act I, might be the introduction of the chrysalis at the beginning of Act II. The chrysalis is an insect about to be born. She is excited about her forthcoming birth, and tells the tramp (and whoever else is listening) about the great things she will accomplish. While the tramp grows tired of hearing her plans, she does give him one thing none of the other insects can: hope. Her hope touches him when all the other insects disappoint him with their actions. She is possibility. She is the future. One interpretation could be that the chrysalis is the tramp's foster child. He laments his childless state several times in the play. It is as if they adopt each other as father and daughter. But like the other father-daughter relationship depicted in *The Insect Play,* it ends badly.

In the play's epilogue, it is night and the tramp is yelling in his sleep. He already fears death in the dark and seeks light. The light that comes draws and kills moths. When the chrysalis finally opens, a moth emerges, only to die a few moments later. None of her hopes or dreams are realized. Before she is born, the tramp asks "Butterflies, beetles, moths and men why can't we all live 'appy together? The world's big enough, and life could be 'appy for everythink if we 'ad a bit o' sense." After her death, the tramp realizes that he is going to die, though he tries to deny it. He wants to live because he knows more about what it means to be human now. But like the chrysalis/moth, he will not get the chance.

In *The Insect Play,* the tramp serves as a symbol of optimism for humankind. Despite the problems he sees exemplified by the insects, the tramp does not lose hope until he is near death. The hope that is lost is only for his future, not the rest of humanity's. The tramp wants the world to be a fair place, though his frustrations do lead to his murdering the yellow ant leader at the end of Act III. The ending of the play shows this change. Though the woodcutter who finds the tramp's corpse dismisses him as "Only a tramp," he also states that "I hope he' 11 be better off than we are." The woman, carrying a newborn baby, yet another symbol of a hopeful future, places a flower on his makeshift grave. Unlike the beginning of The Insect Play, when the scientist is angry and dismissive of the tramp, the end shows other humans being kind to their fellow man.

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

Critical Essay #2

Hart, a former college professor, is a freelance writer. In the following essay, she focuses on the play's main author, Karel Capek, and investigates the political theory that lies beneath the veneer of humor in The Insect Play.

Although *The Insect Play* was an immediate hit on Broadway in the early 1920s, Robert Wechsler states, in *Capek in America,* that the Capeks and their play were viewed mostly as a novelty. " [Karel] Capek was from a brand new country [that] some reviewers didn't even seem to know about." According to Wechsler, the Capeks' play appealed to an audience that was "taken with the scenery and the special effects." In the 1920s the audience found the Capeks' play entertaining; they were unable, or unwilling, to go beyond the surface meaning of the dialogue. It was viewed as a comedy something that was supposed to be taken lightly.

With the passing of time, as well as another world war, the development of the nuclear bomb, and the degradation of the environment by an industrialized world, Arthur Miller, an American playwright, has a different take on the Capek play and sense of humor. Miller believes that Karel Capek was so far ahead of his time that his contemporaries missed the point. They thought Karel's ideas were too improbable to ever come true. In his introduction to a study of the Capeks' works titled, *Toward The Radical Center,* Miller writes that while the audiences in the Capeks' time responded to the play with charming curiosity, more modern audiences view the Capeks' portrayed world as far less outrageous and far more frightening. "We have evolved into [Karel's] nightmare," Miller says, and now "when our science, shorn of moral purpose, is gradually enclosing our planet in unbreathable gases, it is time to read Capek again for his insouciant laughter, and the anguish of human blindness that lies beneath it."

The Insect Play is a play about scary things; and the least scary things in the play are the insects. The play is not about bugs, per se, but rather about the bugs in humanity: the problems, the faults, the mistakes. Karel Capek, having been an avid gardener, uses insects as an extended metaphor, expressing the foibles of humanity by giving insects a voice and exaggerating their likeness to mankind. It is the scary things in *The Insect Play* that Karel masks with his deceptive sense of humor. As Peter Kussi puts it in *Toward the Radical Center,* Karel Capek "has the gift of expressing weighty matters in the simplest of terms, while his most casual, humorous articles and stories contain something of real substance."

The overall theme in all of Karel's works, says Kussi, is a "search for man." If this is true, then *The Insect Play* begins with what appears to be a rather shabby example of man, a tramp: unshaven, rumpled, and wobbly. But it is off this tramp that the Capeks bounce all the underlying political and social commentary. The tramp observes the other characters in the play and reflects on the absurdity of their communications and actions. Although he appears drunk, it is the tramp who has the clearest thoughts. "P'raps I am screwed," he says, but ". . .that ain't the only reason why I see everythink double.

What is double in this play is not the tramp's vision, but rather the double-talk, or nonsense, of its characters. The first character that the tramp meets is the scientist, who represents one of Karel's central worries about the world. Karel was very concerned that scientists were not aware of the potentially catastrophic consequences of scientific investigations and subsequent inventions. He wrote several science fiction novels about the possible misuse of technology. So *The Insect Play* begins with a lepidopterist, or someone who studies butterflies. This scientist appears more benign than a nuclear physicist might in today's world, but Karel nonetheless presents this seemingly safe butterfly man as a cold, unemotional person who seems to be defying his own scientific end. When asked by the tramp what it is that he is doing, the lepidopterist responds: "The butterfly must be carefully killed.. .pinned, and.. .dried." And what is this all for, the tramp wants to know. "Love of nature," says the lepidopterist, then he adds, "if you loved nature as much as I did, my man ...," trailing off without finishing his statement, leaving the audience to fill in the blanks.

It is also in this opening scene that the tramp voices Karel's deepest concern: the eventual destruction of humanity. The tramp turns to the audience and says: "I know what you think ... you think I'm screwed. . . You didn't catch me staggering, did you? I fell like a tree ... like a hero! I was rehearsing ... the fall of man!" This sets up the premise, and from this point to the end of the play Karel postulates the various combinations of events that might lead to mankind's eventual destruction.

The next scene is dedicated to the butterflies, a somewhat superficial and frivolous group, possibly reflecting the upper-class dilettantes of society. The act begins with poor Felix who resembles the fourteenth-century Italian poet Petrarch, who constantly wrote of his love for an unattainable woman. Felix has his own unattainable woman, Iris. Part of this scene revolves around Felix's attempts to tell Iris of his love, but the words he uses are grossly misinterpreted. Iris mistakes Felix's subtle emotional pronouncements as insults. She calls him a "rude little man" and a "cynic." "Oh, Iris," Felix says, "every one disparages the thing that he loves best." Iris' reply is: "Do you mean dark women?" In another exchange Felix tells Iris that woman is a riddle. Iris again confuses his meaning and says: "Guess it then. But not too roughly, please." Love is the first of two issues that the butterflies flit around, stopping briefly to touch, but never investing full emotion. The second topic is death.

The fatality of Felix and Iris' relationship is obvious, but it is not the only fatality in this scene. One of Iris' other, more superficial suitors is eventually eaten by a bird. He is caught in a bird's mouth much like the butterflies in the first scene were caught in the lepidopterist's net. His demise is swift and, like the lepidopterist, Iris shrugs death off lightly. In fact, death makes her laugh. She eventually flies off, leaving Felix with the tramp to listen to his poetry that, by the end of this scene, reflects the brevity not only of love, but also of life. Brevity of life is a concept that will reoccur in the play, linking one scene to the next.

The creepers and crawlers enter the stage in the next scene. They represent various forms of political systems, most obviously capitalism and communism. "Philosophically as well as politically," says Kussi, "[Karel] was a man of the center.. .The center he was

aiming for was not a lukewarm middle ground between extremes. It was a radical center, radical in the original sense of the word: at the root of things." Karel did not believe in collectivism, or any type of social organization in which the individual is seen as subordinate to a social collectivity such as a state or nation. Communism, Fascism, and Nazism are all based on a type of collectivism philosophy. Neither did Karel support selfish individualism that is the underlying philosophy in extreme capitalism. Karel was a "passionate democrat and pluralist," says Kussi. "He disliked single vision and preferred to look at everything from many sides."

Some of the most obvious as well as most absurd capitalists in the third scene are the beetles. Their main goal in life is centered on gathering their precious little pile. These beetles are like dung beetles who gather cow dung in small balls and roll them into their holes in the ground. The tramp says the little pile smells, but the beetles are willing to protect their little pile with their lives. They will roll it around with them forever for they fear someone may steal it. Once they find a good hiding place, they will go find another pile that they will roll around again. They talk about this pile as if it were their child. They' ve watched it grow. They refer to it as a blessing from heaven. Their whole life is consumed with taking care of the pile. They care for nothing else, not even for one another. All they want is to accumulate more piles. When the unthinkable happens another beetle steals the pile the first beetle despairs: "Rolled it away? My pile? ... All my little lot. All I've saved. They've killed me ... Who cares about my wife? It's my pile they've taken."

There is also the ichneumon fly in this scene who spends his life gathering food for his larval daughter. She is spoiled and eats only the tasty parts of the crickets that her father brings home. He, on the other hand, is proud of her and does not mind all the work that she requires. As a matter of fact, the fly's whole life is consumed with work. "Up early, home late, but as long as you're doing it for some one worth doing it for, what does it matter?" says the fly.

The tramp sees that it matters. He can't figure out nature. "This 'as me fairly beat. That fly destroys but that pore 'armless cricket found life sweet, same as' e does... No! Nature' as me beat!" This is the Capeks' comment on capitalism. One capitalist nation feeds off another. To provide economic growth, a capitalist nation must find ways of making a profit, even if it is at the expense of another nation.

In contrast to capitalism is the parasite, whom the tramp calls a "Bolshie." The Bolsheviks, to whom the play is referring, were the forerunners of communism in Russia. The parasite is two-faced and at one point yells: "Down with work," but then steals from the fly who has worked to build his larder. "Down with larder," says the parasite. "Hoarding shouldn't be allowed. Eat your fill and 'ave done with it... Storing things is robbin' those who haven't nowhere to store. Eat your fill and have done with it and then there'd be enough for all, wouldn't there?" Later the parasite says: "why should I work when somebody else has more than he can consume?" Then a few lines later, the parasite contradicts himself with: "That's the third cricket [the fly has] had already, and me nothing. And that's what we poor working men are asked to put up with."

By the end of this scene the poor tramp is very confused. He tries hard to define man, thinking that man is better than the insects. But every time he comes up with a definition of what man is, he is reminded of the beetles, the crickets or the flies.

But man man's diffrent. Folks like me an' you Work 'ard, real 'ard, and makes our little pile... Blast! I'm all mixed. That's what them beetles do...

... Bold that's what man is; resolute, yer might s'y, If 'e wants more, 'e does 'is neighbour in ... O 'Ell! That makes 'im like this murd'rous fly ...

The war machine comes in the next scene as seen through the lives of the ants. Anticipating these insects, the tramp begins this act with a commentary on how men need to work together, and surrender their own, selfish desires (such as the capitalists have) to the greater good of the State. This act is Karel's reference to the worst of communism. The ants' values emphasize world power, reason, law and the interests of the whole. Everything that the ant colony does is for "Her." This "Her" is the queen ant that Karel uses as a metaphor for the State. She is "the one who orders." At first the tramp likes this concept, a kind of one for all and all for one philosophy. Unfortunately, the "all" in this anthill excludes anyone outside the given race of that particular colony. Therefore the ants believe that enemies surround them. The enemies are the black, brown, gray, and yellow ants. When the Chief Engineer declares war on the yellow ants, it is proposed that his ants are "fighting the battle of peace."

Karel inserts an inventor in this scene, taking on the scientist again. This time the scientist is the creator of the war machine. The inventor glorifies his invention: "A war machine. A vast machine, a huge one. The swiftest, most effective crusher of lives. The forefront of progress, the acme of science ... Two hundred thousand dead ..." When the tramp asks the ants why there must be war, the ants reply: "Because we shall have a new war machine."

The play ends with a summary of Karel's observations about life from the viewpoint of death. In the end, Karel cries out for the use of common sense. Kussi says,

[Karel's] work radiates a firm belief in common sense.. .praise for simple folk wisdom. [Karel] counters nonsense by steadfast adherence to good sense. Such an attitude could easily become boring; [but] it is one of the glories of [Karel] that he makes the voice of reason sound lively, amusing, totally fresh ... he writes [from] a deep-rooted center that includes reason yet reaches beyond reason to deeper springs.

The Epilogue of the play is titled "Death and Life." In this scene the tramp sees his own death coming in the form of two snails. Before leaving, the tramp reflects on all the lives, as well as the deaths of the insects:

"Life and death seems they're both good if we know how to treat 'em... why can't we all live 'appy together? The world's big enough, and life could be 'appy for everythink if we 'ad a bit o'sense."

Source: Joyce Hart, in an essay for *Drama for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture, specializing in film studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in the history of American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses the allegorical meaning of the play.

In *The Insect Play,* insect society, so to speak, is represented as an allegory for human society. In particular, in Act II, Capek and Capek address their concerns with the economic struggles of, and competition between, humans through their characterization of different species of insects. Thus, the dung beetles represent the working class, the Ichneumon Fly seems to represent the entrepreneurial, or petit-bourgeoisie, middle class, and the butterflies represent the upper classes, or bourgeoisie. The play presents a highly cynical perspective on the workings of human society, made up of lives characterized by meaningless existence, greed, and hard work in the name of family.

The dung beetles represent the working masses who toil their lives away for no other reason than to amass a pitiful life savings for which there is no real purpose. The dung beetles are obsessed with their "little pile" a ball of dung which represents their life's work. They refer to it in terms commonly used by people to describe their hard-earned savings. The Male Beetle calls it, "Our capital. Our nest-egg. Our stock-in-trade. Our all." The Female Beetle concurs with similar descriptions, which further indicate that these two value their "pile" of dung above all else in life, although it in fact serves no purpose, except to represent an abstract notion of amassed wealth: "Oh, what a lovely little pile, what a treasure, what a beautiful little ball, what a precious little fortune." And the Male Beetle adds that it is "our only joy." The beetles further describe the lifetime of labor they have devoted to amassing this "pile." The Male Beetle continues, "To think how we've saved and scraped, toiled and moiled, denied ourselves, gone without this, stinted ourselves that ," and, the Female Beetle adds, "worked our legs off and drudged and plodded to get it together." Capek and Capek represent this "life's work" of the beetles as an allegory for the "life work" of humans, who spend their entire lives working in order to save a "nest-egg," of money. But the beetles' "nest-egg" is merely a ball of dung, and the implication is that the life savings of a hard-working human amounts to little more than a pile of dung, and has no intrinsic value. But the beetles value their pile of dung simply because they own it, just as humans tend to value their amassed life savings simply because it represents an abstract concept of wealth, or ownership, regardless of whether or not this wealth actually adds any value to the quality of human life. The Male Beetle states that, "it's fine to own something. Your property! The dream of your life! The fruit of your labors!" Not only does this amassed pile of dung smell bad and seem to have no intrinsic value, but also it brings with it a world of fear and anxiety. Once this wealth has been amassed, it serves no purpose, except as a basis for amassing more wealth. The Male Beetle states that he is "going off my head with sheer worry"; and continues, "Now we' ve got our little pile. I've been so much looking forward to it, and now we've got it, we'll have to make another one. Nothing but work, work, work." The Female Beetle asks, "Why another one?" to which her husband replies, "so that we can have two, of course.... Ah, just fancy, two of them. At least two. Let's say even three. You know, every one who's made one pile has to make another." It seems

that, for the beetles, and, allegorically, for humans, the purpose of work is to amass wealth, and yet this only leads to more work in the service of amassing yet more wealth. The implication is that a human life, filled with hard work for the sole end of amassing more and more wealth, is ultimately meaningless.

Furthermore, the acquisition of wealth only adds more worry and anxiety, lest it be lost or stolen. The Female Beetle says "I'm scared. Suppose someone was to steal it from us." Their life's work of amassed wealth brings them no joy or pleasure, but merely fear, anxiety, and the prospect of more work. The beetles continue to describe their pile of dung in terms which humans use to describe their life savings. They call it, "Our little pile. Our joy. Our all," and "Our precious little store. Our life. Our whole concern." The pile of dung clearly represents money, as the Male Beetle refers to it as "Our precious gold," and suggests that they "invest it." When the Strange Beetle comes along to steal the "pile" of dung left by the Male and Female Beetle, he too describes it in terms which humans use to describe a life's fortune, calling it "my pile. Capital. Gold.... My treasure. You lovely nest-egg. My jewel. My all." The Vagrant (The Tramp in other versions) points out that this "gold" is actually a pile of dung when he comments that "That gold of yours smells." Capek and Capek here clearly criticize the value of material wealth, and criticize a human society that attaches such importance and worth to something so inherently worthless, and even distasteful, as money or "gold." The Strange Beetle further represents the materialism of a human society that values "possessing" material wealth, just for the sake of "owning" something. The Strange Beetle replies that, despite the fact that the pile "smells," as the Vagrant put it, "it's nice to own something."

The materialism and greed of the beetles is so extreme that the Male Beetle even values his pile of dung more than his own wife. While he speaks of the pile with the greatest of affection, his references to his wife are full of disdain and insult; he agrees with the Vagrant's description of his wife as "that old harridan.... That ugly chatterbox.... That bad-tempered, dirty rag-bag." The Male Beetle is completely unconcerned that another beetle may have taken his wife, but becomes hysterical at the idea of losing his pile. He tells the Vagrant, "I don't care what he did with my wife. But where's my pile?" When he is told that the pile has been taken, he cries, "My pile? God in heaven! Catch him! Thief! Murder! (Flings himself to the ground.) My hard-earned fortune. They've killed me. I'd rather give up my life than that ball of golden manure." Capek and Capek are here criticizing the ways in which human society values material wealth over other humans, as well as one's own life. The Vagrant sums up the allegory in which the beetles represent the working masses, whose only wish is to work hard in order to acquire material wealth, no matter how valueless. Comparing them to the butterflies, who represent the leisure classes, the Vagrant observes:

These others at least smell of honest labor. They don't want to enjoy, they only want to possess. Something.

The Vagrant then observes the concept of the "family" as a justification for a life of meaningless labor in the service of amassing material wealth.

You labour for others, and if you're stingy,

Well, stinginess is a virtue, when it's for the family.

The family has its rights, the family sanctifies everything,

Even theft, if need be, for after all, there are children. That's how it is, I tell you, and that's the whole point: A man will do anything to preserve his kindred.

The view of family and children, and the role of family and children in the economic structure of human society, allegorically represented here by Capek and Capek, is extremely cynical and critical. Through the Vagrant's comments, and the examples of the Ichneumon Fly and the cricket couple, the purpose of children is presented as merely an excuse for hard work, greed, and selfishness in the service of amassing material wealth. According to this perspective, as the Vagrant comments in the quote above, "stinginess," and even "theft," are justified on the basis that it is for the children, since "the family sanctifies everything."

The first species encountered by the Vagrant who justifies greed in the name of children is the Ichneumon Fly, whose sole purpose in life is to procure food for his larva. As represented in the play, the Fly's life would be meaningless if he didn't have a child whose need for food justifies his every act. He tells the Vagrant, "When you have them, you do at least know who you're working for. If you have a child then you must strive, work, struggle. That's real life, eh? Children want to grow, to eat, to feast, to play, don't they?" The Fly even kills other insects, such as the crickets, in order to feed his larvae. Because this selfishness, greed, and stinginess is justified by the importance of the child, the Fly must constantly remind himself and others of the importance of the child. The Fly comments to the Vagrant, "Children are a great joy, aren't they?" He goes on to justify his life of hard work by expressing his "pride" in his child: "I'm proud of her. Really proud. Just like her daddy, eh? ... and I'm gossiping here, instead of getting to work. Oh, the fuss and running about. But as long as we do it for somebody, what does it matter? Aren't I right?"

The cricket couple expecting a baby are another example representing the ways in which human beings use family as an excuse to justify a life devoted to meaningless material acquisition. The cricket couple, rather than amassing a pile as their life's work, like the beetles, or spending all of their time and energy working to feed a child, put all of their efforts into their dream of owning a home in which to house their expected child. Capek and Capek, however, are making a similar social critique of human life spent in pursuit of acquiring such material possessions as a house, especially at the expense of others. The Male Cricket and Female Cricket take over the home of the cricket that has been tied up by the Fly, to be preserved for food for his larva. The cricket couple are concerned only with acquiring their own home, as the Male Cricket says, "Our little nest, our villa, our own little place, our, ha, ha, our residence." Meanwhile, they merely look in and laugh at the cricket who has been captured and tied up, interested only in their own good fortune in taking over the poor cricket's home. The Male Cricket even refers to the captured cricket's demise as a "godsend" for him and his wife. The materialism of the cricket couple in their dream of acquiring their own home is further expressed through the middle-class cliche of hanging curtains as a symbol of successful homemaking. The

Male Cricket tells his wife, "We'll furnish this place beautifully. And as soon as we can manage it we'll put up some " at which point the Female Cricket finishes his sentence with, "Curtains." Later, the Female Beetle and the Female Cricket debate the relative value of a life spent amassing a pile, and a life spent acquiring and furnishing a home to house a family. Although each values her own approach to life, they are both completely preoccupied with a life devoted to material acquisition.

Female Beetle: And aren't you making a pile? Female Cricket: What for?

Female Beetle: A pile, that for the family. That's the future. That's your whole life.

Female Cricket: Oh no. My whole life is to have my own little house, my nest, a little place of my own. And curtains. And children. And to have my Cricket. My own home. That's all.

Female Beetle: How can you live without a pile? Female Cricket: What would we do with it?

Female Beetle: Roll it about with you everywhere. I tell you, there's nothing like a pile for holding a man.

Female Cricket: Oh no, a little house. Female Beetle: A pile, I tell you. Female Cricket: A little house.

The Fly represents the most aggressive type of materialist, the entrepreneur. The Fly describes himself and his aggressive approach to obtaining food for his child, in terms similar to how successful business people are described. After he murders the pregnant Female Cricket and feeds it to his larva, he calls his act "A fine piece of work." He brags that such an accomplishment takes "expert knowledge. Enterprise. I ni tiative. And foresight. And love for work, let me tell you." The Fly continues in this vein: "if you want to keep alive, you've got to fight your way. There's your future. There's your family. And then, you know, there's a certain amount of ambition. A strong personality is bound to assert itself. Aren't I right?" The Fly goes on to describe such aggressive work as the stuff of a "useful life": "Make your way in the world, use the talent that's in you, that's what I call a useful life." The Fly further extols the value of such work, which involves killing and eating other insects: "And how it cheers you up, when you fulfil your duty like that. When you perform your job. When you feel that you're not living in vain. It's so elevating, isn't it?" Capek and Capek are here criticizing the aggressive nature of capitalist enterprise as based on the selfish sacrifice of other humans beings in the service of one's own economic success.

The Vagrant concludes Act II by attempting to assert that the lives of human beings are devoted to some higher purpose than that of the cruel and meaningless lives of the insects, who selfishly and greedily kill and watch each other suffer for the sake of acquiring their own material wealth, in the name of supporting a family. But the Vagrant ultimately finds himself asserting that human beings are no better than such insects, looking out only for their own material self-interests, without regard to any higher

purpose or meaning in life. He concludes with a cynical message about the baseness of human endeavors, no better than those of the insects:

Do you not hear

How throughout the world feverish jowls are working,

Chew-chew-chew, the blood-stained, sated smacking of lips

Over the still living morsel. Life is the prey to life.

In other words, Capek and Capek imply, human beings merely prey upon one another in the pursuit of their own material gain, and without regard to the value of human life, other than their own and that of their families.

Source: Liz Brent, in an essay for *Drama for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Topics for Further Study

Research the history of Europe in World War I and the immediate postwar years. How do these events relate to the world the Capeks portray in Act III? Do the actions and attitudes of the Ant Realm predict subsequent events?

Read the fables of Aesop, which often use animal characters to make their point. Compare and contrast these fables with the Capeks's play.

Pick one of the insect species depicted in *The Insect Play* and do research into its entomology (the scientific study of insects). How do the real behaviors of insects compare to the way the Capeks depict them?

Compare and contrast the anthropomorphized insects in *The Insect Play* with the human-like robots in Karel Capek's seminal play *R.U.R*. (1921). What does each depiction of nonhumans with human-like characteristics reveal about the authors' take on humankind?

Compare and Contrast

1920s: Czechoslovakia is a single, newly formed country, trying to define itself. While most Czechs support the republic, there is a Slovak independence movement.

Today: The Czech Republic and Slovakia are now two separate countries. The countries split amicably on January 1, 1993, when the federation was dissolved.

1920s: Czech writers, like Karel Capek, are in vogue throughout the literary world.

Today: A Czech writer of some acclaim, Vaclav Havel, has served as president of Czechoslovakia, as well as the Czech Republic.

1920s: Czechoslovakia, and much of Central Europe, is recovering from the effects of World War I.

Today: The Czech Republic, Slovakia, and much of the Eastern Bloc that was previously under the rule of the Soviet Union are recovering from the effects, economic and otherwise, of communist rule. The Czech Republic is trying to become part of the larger European Economic Community.

1920s: In 1921, Adolf Hitler is elected chair and dictator of the Nazi Party. He will eventually lead Germany into World War II. Hitler's rise to power in Europe leads to the end of Czechoslovakia. The United Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) is also declared, creating one of the largest communist powers the world will ever see.

Today: While communism is on the wane in Europe, the Soviet Union has broken up and become a democracy and the Czechs and Slovaks have their own independent countries, Nazism still has a hold over some German-speaking peoples. In Austria, a controversial politician with ties to Nazism was elected.

What Do I Read Next?

Gulliver's Travels, a novel by Jonathan Swift written in 1726, is also a social and political commentary on his era. Like The Insect Play, it uses fantastic characters to underscore its themes and ideas about human vice.

Animal Farm, a novel by George Orwell written in 1945, also anthropomorphizes animals to comment on human society.

Fables and Would-Be Tales is a collection of narrative fiction written by Karel Capek between 1925 and 1938 and published in 1946. Many of the pieces are fables that take on an animal or inanimate object's point of view.

What Never Happened is a story written by Vsevolod Garsin in 1882. Many critics believe that it is a direct influence on The Insect Play.

The Fateful Game of Love, a play written by Karel and Josef Capek in 1910, is a one-act *commedia dell'arte* on the facade of real life. It is not unlike Act I in *The Insect Play.*

Further Study

Bradbrook, Bohuslava, *Karel Capek: In Pursuit of Truth, Tolerance, and Trust,* Sussex Academic Press, 1998.

This critical biography considers Karel Capek's career in terms of each area he wrote in, including drama, novels, and short stories.

Harkins, William E., *Karel Capek,* Columbia University Press, 1962.

This critical biography covers Karel Capek's life, both as a writer and a person. It also includes information on Josef Capek and the brothers' collaboration.

Makin, Michael, and Jindrich Toman, eds., *On Karel Capek,* Michigan Slavic Publications, 1992.

This collection of essays considers the whole of Karel Capek's work from different perspectives.

Thomson, S. Harrison, *Czechoslovakia in European History,* Archon Books, 1965.

This history of Czechoslovakia includes information on how the country came to be formed and the problems it faced in the era in which the Capeks worked.

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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.

BOOKRAGS

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

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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.

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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.

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

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