Marat / Sade Study Guide

Marat / Sade by Peter Weiss

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

“Marat/Sade” by Peter Weiss is an examination of narrative authority, human nature, identity, the exercise of power within the social hierarchy, and the ambiguity of meaning. The story is told as a play within a play, so that the actual audience is presented with a depiction of another audience watching a play performed within the famous Charenton lunatic asylum, founded in 1645 in Charenton-Saint-Maurice, France. The play, written by the Marquis de Sade, an inmate at Charenton, focuses on the life and death of Jean-Paul Marat through an examination and narrative of the events of the French Revolution. The performance, which is the play’s main event, takes place on July 13, 1808, after the Revolution and during the reign of Napoleon. The narrative of Sade’s play takes place in mid 1793 during the Revolution, ending with the assassination of Jean-Paul Marat on July 13, 1793.

The multiplicity of narratives and voices in the play creates a destabilizing force that undermines the concept of ultimate truth. The audience constantly has to discern between Sade’s play and Weiss’s play, taking into account their different characterizations. Elements of Sade’s play include historical events, so it is unclear if the incidents he depicts are accurate, or if he has taken artistic license with them. Marat voices the ideologies of the French Revolution in the play, which rely totally on the concepts of essentialist truth. However, in the descriptions of the Revolution included in the play it is revealed that the revolutionaries, in ridding their country of the upper classes, have also turned on one another. On several occasions, the patients of the hospital chant at Marat to give them their revolution and their freedom now. The fact that the revolutionaries did not see an immediate change in their circumstances and society led them to turn on one another. However, Marat advocates this cleansing of the revolutionary forces. Clearly the motivating forces of the Revolution, which claim to be equality, brotherhood, and freedom, are not of as much concern as power and money. The ideologies of the Revolution, therefore, are themselves undermined.

The Director of Charenton, Coulmier, objects to the performance whenever he thinks that the ideologies of the Revolution are being advocated by Sade or when he believes the current political structure is being insulted or threatened. Coulmier insists that men are far more civilized, enlightened, and advanced than they were during the time of the Revolution. However, Coulmier’s assertions are totally undermined when, at the end of the play, he participates along with everyone else in a battle that serves as a reenactment of the Revolution.

While the philosophy of Sade is closely aligned with the kind of moral and textual ambiguity developed in the play, even his ideas are undermined. Sade’s belief in anarchistic nihilism and the elevating nature of pain are never fully supported or endorsed. The narrative of his play and his speeches are often interrupted by physical altercations or the distracting interjections of the inmates. The inmates of the asylum are also the play’s actors and the nurses and supervisors are constantly being forced to step in and restrain them when they suddenly lose control of their faculties. . Weiss’s stage directions suggest that the inmates constantly develop a chaotic background to

the dialogue by hopping around or rolling or fighting or performing some kind of odd and unexplained action. Marat, Coulmier, and Sade believe in the ultimately spiritual nature of man, although their conceptions of this nature vary. At one point it seems as if Sade attempts to reach a higher realm of understanding and expression; he orders one of the female inmates to brutally whip him as he relates the events of the Revolution to the present circumstances. However, even this idea of the primacy of spirituality in the nature of man is undermined by the physicality of the inmates and the physical illnesses or corruptions that affect each of the characters of the play. Marat is affected by a degenerative skin disease which makes him appear deformed and he spends almost the entire play in his bath. The destabilization of reality and essential truth throughout the text reveals to the audience the complications of human nature and history. By the end of the play, , Weiss successfully conveys the idea that there is no simple or wholly favorable solution to the failings and temptations of human nature.

Act 1, Scenes 1-10

Summary

A bell rings behind the stage and the curtain rises to show the bath hall of the asylum. A circular arena takes up the center stage and to the right is a dais for Marat's bath and to the left is a dais for Sade's chair. To the left at the front of the stage is a raised area for Coulmier and his family. Coulmier gives a prologue of the play, citing the author as Sade and introducing the characters.

The herald knocks the floor three times with his staff and opens the play by noting Marat's place on the stage and the yellow tint of his skin due to his skin disease. The actor portraying Marat is a paranoiac. Simonne Evrard waits upon Marat, changing his bandages. Charlotte Corday waits at the side of the stage in her pretty clothes. The actress portraying Corday is a narcoleptic affected by melancholia. Duperret, played by an incurable sexual deviant, stands near Corday, furtively pawing at her. Jacques Roux takes an antagonistic stance and says one word: "Liberty." The herald notes that the actors are from a variety of places in society and that the singers in the play are from the slums and gin cellars. Sade is introduced as a gentleman from high society and the date is noted as July 13, 1808.

After the introduction, there follows an homage to Marat, detailing his dedication to the Revolution. At the beginning, Marat is removed from his bath by the singers and a laurel wreath is placed on his head; at the end, Marat is put back in his bath and the wreath is removed as the singers demand rights and revolution. The herald concludes that "The Revolution came and went / and unrest was replaced by discontent" (11). The actor/patients talk about the deprivations they still face after the Revolution. Corday comes to the forefront of the stage recalling that she and Marat both wanted a better world with peace, equality, and simplicity. Now, however, she believed that Marat has simply murdered everything and everyone in his way. Marat tyrannically demands that Simonne tend to him and insists that more need to die. He obsesses over his call to the people on the 14th of July and claims that he is the Revolution.

Corday comes to visit Marat for the first time but is not admitted by Simonne. She carries a dagger in her shirt and imagines stabbing Marat. She approaches the tub and almost kills him then, but Sade stops the actress, reminding her that she has to come two more times. The singers sing about Corday's arrival in Paris as a seemingly young, naive girl who is actually bent on murder. She passes a cart carrying the condemned, hears the sound of the guillotine, and smells the dead bodies , but she never turns her head. Corday wonders what kind of world could allow such atrocities to occur.

Analysis

The illnesses of the actors portraying Marat and Corday reflect and illustrate the characteristics of the two figures. Marat, depicted by the paranoiac, preaches the slaughter of the aristocracy, yet he also advocates the purging of the Revolutionary forces by killing off the weak or less determined members. According to Marat, all of those not wholly dedicated to the cause should be killed.

The laurel wreath placed on Marat's head upon his removal from the bath is a symbol of his status as a champion of the Revolution. He is a strong and determined leader who envisions a revolution of the social structure where that the existence of all men will be equaled to reflect the equality of their nature.

The paranoia of the actor playing Marat illustrates this characteristic just as Marat's skin disease is a physical symbol of the madness and fever of his mind. He tells Simonne that there is a rioting mob inside of him and that is why he is the Revolution. He is unable to rest or recover because of the chaos in his mind and in his blood. He is feverish in his determination to see all of his opposition wiped from the face of the earth. This fever emphasizes the madness that seized Marat when he first developed the idea of creating chaos in order to restructure the world. He risked the chance that the chaos would never be replaced by order or that order would come in the form of a dictator. The removal of the laurel wreath from his head as he is placed back in his bath is representative of his ultimate failure. His descent into illness and madness prevents him from seeing his plan through to the end. He is never able to accomplish the structure he dreamed of. All he is able to accomplish is the chaotic destruction of a society and the slaughter of an entire section of society.

The actress portraying Charlotte Corday is afflicted with melancholia and narcolepsy. Corday herself has nothing left. After all that she knows is destroyed by the Revolution, she has only her religious fervor. She is so depressed that she can hardly function. She can not work up the energy to turn her head or speak as she walks through the streets of Paris. Nonetheless, she hears and smells the destruction from the guillotine, which serves to further her determination to assassinate Marat. Although she knows that if she kills Marat, she herself will be killed, she is ready to embrace the sleep of death. Corday wants to do what she can to make the world a better place before escaping into death.

Vocabulary

dais, tribunal, ceremonious, tolling, delectation, rehabilitation, unprecedented, phenomenally, pulchritudinous, zest, persecuted, mocking, unbearable, stifled, tumbrel

Act 1, Scenes 11-20

Summary

Marat revels in the torture and death of a man onstage, insisting that the Revolution is unstoppable and blaming everything on the selfishness and cruelty of the aristocracy. Coulmier objects to this type of speech, but Sade simply smiles, and the herald intervenes with an explanation that these are historical events. A conversation ensues between Marat and Sade regarding Sade's view that the basis of all life is death, as death is a commonplace occurrence. Sade says that he hates Nature's unreachable disinterest in human existence. He recalls the tortuous public deaths of the past, which he holds up as far more significant and important than the current impersonal slaughterings by the guillotine. Sade disagrees with Marat's actions because of this lack of passion in his executions. Marat says that people must change themselves; there must be a revolution of the self in order to achieve a revolution of society.

Marat recalls the naive, discouraged acceptance of oppression by past generations and the encouragement of such oppression on the part of the clergy, who abolished the rights of the poor so that they wouldn't be able to object or have their voices heard. Coulmier objects again. The herald replies once more that these things happened long ago. A patient interrupts the play to deliver the Lord's Prayer but instead he prays to Satan. The herald apologizes for the interruption. The conversation between Marat and Sade continues as Sade ruminates on the total depravity which is at the base of all human natures. A patient interjects, calling all men animals. Marat complains about his skin. Sade says that the only reality is the world inside of him, the world of imagination, and that all men have the equal right to kill one another. The singers become a mob as they sing about their poverty.

Corday comes forward during a biographical sketch by the herald. Corday laments her powerlessness in a conversation with Duperret. Duperret tries to convince Corday to return to her convent, but forgets his lines as he tries to kiss Corday. Duperret tells Corday to look forward to the defeat of Marat's revolutionaries, when France is once again able to pursue freedom. Sade says that all revolutionaries are insane and after blood. Sade declares that, since he believes only in himself, he cares no more for France than he does for any other country. Marat bemoans the fate of the people who "always lose the lottery," simply replacing one system of oppression with another.

Roux comes to the front of the stage and calls for a revolution. He tells the patients to grab their arms and fight. Roux says that neither side of the battle is noble nor glorious but that they are each trying to earn a place in the world that will allow them a modicum of autonomy and freedom. Coulmier objects and Sade insists that it is just a play, just the mad, defeated Roux speaking. Sade explains his journey to the position of revolutionary, saying that, discovering himself in a criminal society, he became a criminal in order to understand the times. He asks Corday to beat him with a whip as he talks about the Revolution. As he is being beaten he says that he cannot agree with the

Revolution because of the impersonal and mechanical assassinations of its opponents. The removal of choice and individuality and the move towards uniformity is something Sade cannot condone.

Analysis

Sade self-centeredly believes in the individual identity. He hates Nature because it removes individual identity in the universal destiny of death, which will eventually find every man. For Sade, Nature is simply an impersonal force of doom that makes him long to distinguish himself in the face of its lack of interest. Because death is so commonplace, Sade thinks that pain is the only thing that distinguishes individuals and creates climactic moments in life. Pain to the point of death is a refusal of death and of the natural order. It makes Man into something of a god. Sade disagrees with the actions, which occur in the final stages of the Revolution because the deaths of the aristocrats and traitors are not violent enough for him. The murders of the aristocrats at the hands of the guillotine are quick, routine deaths that occur one after the other. He wants deaths that mean something. Deaths that are preceded by long, drawn-out torture. Deaths that create meaning in the face of Nature's total disinterest.

In Sade's opinion, the revolutionaries are the sadists because they are all after blood. They might preach about freedom and equality but all they really want is revenge and death. He is a purist who recognizes and embraces his desire for revenge and death. He knows that the Revolution is ultimately doomed because there can be no true alliance between men. He believes in a universe of individuals who will turn on each other in a moment if the need or inclination arises. The only thing that distinguishes him in this mass of barbarians is his emphasis on pain rather than death.

Vocabulary

looted, massacre, bourgeois, barbarous, perversion, immortal, indifference, villainy, extinguished, alter, injustice, scourged, clumsy, souvenir, calamity, caress, anarchy, forbidden, vicious, exquisite, withering

Act 1, Scenes 21-26

Summary

Marat wonders why it is getting to dark and requests Simonne to bring him his papers and call a man called Bas to whom he will dictate his call to the people of France. Simonne tells him that the darkness must have been a cloud over the sun or smoke from burning corpses. The Singers express how far Marat has fallen; how he is no longer a hero of the Revolution but an object of revenge, as freedom has still not been delivered. Corday speaks to Duperret in the aria style and looks forward to a day when all men will live in harmony. Duperret agrees envisioning a society in which each person defends every other and all individuals live in unity so that they do not need a ruler. Corday completes his thought by imagining a society in which each man governs himself.

Marat comments on their musings by insisting that an ideal society like this would never come to pass, because the rich will never give up their property. He says that the nobility cannot be beaten without force. Laughing, Sade mocks Mara, amused that, even while lying in the world of his bathtub and suffering from a disfiguring skin ailment, he still insists that all men are equal, that justice is possible, and that no man wants to be greater than the others.

Sade scoffs at the idea of uniting mankind, seeing those who once joined together in the name of harmony now killing one another. Marat defends his fellow revolutionaries' actions, saying that it is necessary to weed out the weak and the uncommitted in a revolution. The four singers opine that the revolutionaries are now just like the kings.

Corday comes to visit Marat for the second time and Simonne again refuses to admit her to his room. Simonne tells her that the convulsions and complaints of the Revolution have made him ill. She sees the revolution as nothing more than a tax on her lover's strength by people complaining about the small discomforts and injustices of life. The four singers intone that all of Marat's efforts have been in vain because the Revolution cannot succeed without him, and yet he is locked away.

A cart draws up containing faces from Marat's past and from the social institutions that he despises. Marat's schoolmaster relays that even as a child he had his schoolmates line up and attack each other with wooden swords, drawing real blood. Marat's mother complains about all the trouble he caused her with his bad behavior. Marat's father says that the boy stood up to him whenever he was beaten. The schoolmaster claims that Marat insisted he was smarter than anyone else. A military representative laughs at Marat's insistence on equality after he writes one book under the name of a count and the other under the name of a prince; he suggests that Marat turned on the aristocrats because they wouldn't accept him into their world. A scientist condemns Marat's erroneous conclusions to his scientific studies. A member of the newly rich laughs at the fact that the formerly inspirational leader is now a boor and his words are empty.

Voltaire declares that Marat's writings and his idea that the soul dwells in the brain is so ridiculous that it is not even laughable. The scientist Lavoisier condemns Marat's scientific conclusions and discoveries. Roux interrupts the litany to state that any man who tries to stretch the imagination and break down barriers will be mocked.

Analysis

The darkness outside foreshadows Marat's ultimate demise, and just as Marat is unable to interpret this sign he also has no idea that he has become so hated by the people of the Revolution. The Revolution so far hasn't brought the freedom it promised, and as the people clamor for the immediate delivery of their rights, they also clamor for revenge on Marat for his false promises.

Corday and Duperret agree with Marat about the fact that a revolution needs to occur and that each person is equal. However they do not agree with Marat that people need a leader. They believe in total autonomy for each individual. They look forward to a day when the people will rule themselves. Each will live as they choose to live, but they will be united and in their unity they will find peace. Corday and Duperret believe that men are inherently good and can control themselves without the necessity of a leader or ruler of any kind. Their beliefs are undermined by the fact that during this dialogue Corday is constantly fighting off Duperret's aggressive sexual advances. They espouse the ideal that men should be allowed to rule themselves, yet Duperret cannot control himself physically and Corday is unable to defend herself.

As Marat condemns their ideas and insists on the realism of his revolution, Sade argues that Marat has no idea what is going on in the world outside. He is restricted to the world of his bathtub and doesn't realize that his illness is causing the demise of the Revolution. He doesn't realize that the revolutionaries have become just as oppressive as the aristocracy.

Roux's speech illustrates Marat's preoccupation with realism and the mind. Marat, desiring enlightenment and warmth after the difficulties of his youth, studies their literal representations: light and heat. He wonders how forces could be controlled and s studies electricity to learn their movements. He wants to know the purpose of mankind, and thus he contemplates the definition of the soul. Because of his own preoccupation with intellectualism, he has concluded that the soul resides within the brain. For Marat the human soul is nothing but a practical tool of rule and the mastery of life. This suggests his reasoning behind the beheading of his enemies. Marat is not just executing his enemies, he is removing their souls, their power, and their ability to control the world around them.

Vocabulary

clarified, intriguingly, sensual, inequalities, varied, tableau, paternal, satisfaction, valuable, trifles, lurk, seize, promenading, vain, pilfered, frivolities, tirades, charlatan, mangled

Act 2, Scenes 27-30

Summary

Marat imagines himself speaking before the National Assembly of France and gives a speech telling them who should be tribune. The four singers rise up and shout conflicting insults and praises on the leaders of the Revolution: Marat, Robespierre, and Danton. Marat speaks about the dangers facing France, such as the outside forces, who are looking for a way to conquer France, and the members of the Revolution, who are turning traitors. Coulmier defends these "traitors," saying that the world has moved on and that the accusations against these men have been eradicated by the Emperor. Marat warns about the counter-revolution that threatens civil war. Marat says that the freedom envisioned by the revolutionaries has not yet been achieved. He attempts to rouse the people again. He condemns the corrupt forces within the Revolution who do not advocate the equal distribution of wealth and those who consider certain elements of the soldiers to be rabble. He says that the first step in a revolution is to create chaos and to then choose a leader and ruler but not a dictator. The chorus calls for the death of Marat and the long life of freedom.

The four singers warn Marat about his impending doom. Marat tyrannically demands that Simonne tend to him and fetch him his pen and paper. Sade interjects the story of his lost masterpiece, which he lost when he was imprisoned in the Bastille and it fell. He states that everything written, thought, and planned will eventually disappear. Marat says that he always writes with purpose in mind, knowing that thinking and writing are simply preparation for action. He recalls how a thousand men of the National Guard once surrounded his house and how he still fears the sound of a knock and the sight of a bayonet. Marat wonders why everything has become so confusing. The four singers reply that his "words have turned into a flood / which covers all France with her people's blood" (85).

Corday dreams of being killed by the guillotine and vividly describes the experience. She talks about how people say that the head is still supposed to be alive when it is held aloft by the executioner. Duperret tries to change Corday's mind about assassinating Marat. Corday recalls "The Book of Judith" on her nightstand at the convent and this gives her renewed determination. She recalls Marat's cruelty and lack of humanity in his wanton destruction of life. She wonders about the world, how it could allow such things to happen. She wonders about the children who play with toy guillotines and toy victims. Corday is determined to kill Marat and approaches his door. Sade tells Marat that there is nothing beyond the body. Upon hearing the knock, Marat demands to know who is at the door. He tells Simonne to let the girl in and Sade creates sexual images of the nuns at convents. The four singers begin a copulation mime. Sade says that during his thirteen years in the Bastille he learned that this is a world of bodies and that the cells of the inner self are far worse than any dungeon. He insists that Marat has to let loose his inner cells and be unimaginably sadistic in order to win a revolution. Corday makes her way to Marat's bath and leans over him.

Analysis

Marat still believes that the Revolution can be accomplished and that his visions can be fulfilled. He says that the scenario is going according to plan: chaos has been created and now a leader must be chosen to subdue it. He still has not realized that chaos will continue to reign until a very strong hand takes over the rule of the people and that this hand will be just as oppressive as the rule of the kings. He doesn't realize that chaos is not easily controlled or subdued and that freedom is not easily born out of chaos.

Sade's story of his lost masterpiece suggests the idea that meaning is ambiguous and cannot be easily grasped. The efforts of man to make sense of the world around them are in vain. Textual, vocal, and personal meanings are all relative due to the individuality of each person. We cannot understand one another and we cannot be united. We can only dominate one another, finding pleasure through the use of extreme pain. This is why Sade asserts that there is nothing beyond the body and that Marat will have to remove all restraint from his ideas, character, and actions in order to win the Revolution. He will have to give the darkest parts of his soul free reign, giving himself over to sadistic pleasures in order to gain dominance over others. Marat, however. is far too preoccupied with regulation and the systematic restructuring of society to give this idea any consideration.

Corday recalls "The Book of Judith," the Biblical story of a widow who killed an enemy general through subterfuge, in the same way Corday goes into Marat's room in the guise of a harmless and attractive supplicant. Marat admits her into his room because all he sees is a beautiful young woman. But like Judith, Corday has a dark purpose that she is entirely determined to see fulfilled in order to rid the world of a great force of evil. Marat's fear of the knock at the door and the bayonet foreshadow his death, which will arrive with a knock on the door and be accomplished by Corday's knife in his chest.

Vocabulary

polemic, flourish, quarrel, integrity, espionage, confiscated, dispossessed, rouse, incorruptible, abolished, suppressed, oppression, writhes, savage

Act 2, Scenes 31-33

Summary

The herald interrupts the performance once more to create greater drama and increase the climax of Marat's final demise. To let Marat know how the world will continue after his death, the four singers sing a history of the events of 1793-1808. They sing about the deaths of all the leaders of the Revolution and the starvation and deprivations of the poor. They sing about how the generals of France take control of Paris for the sake of the people. They sing about the rise of Napoleon and victories over the armies of much of the world. The four singers quit their song just as Corday stabs Marat and he hangs over the tub with his pen in his right hand and his papers in his left. The play has ended.

Coulmier addresses the "enlightened ladies" and "pious gentlemen" of the audience. He calls for a return to the modern world, which is far more civilized, he claims, than the world of history, the world described in this play. The four singers pronounce that the debate and the battle are over because there is now one man to speak for all. The fighting is finished because the soldiers have been subdued. The entire cast marches on the stage chanting: "Charenton, Charenton ./ Napoleon, Napoleon / Nation, Nation / Revolution, Revolution / Copulation, Copulation" (101). The chant grows into a roar, and a struggle between the nurses and the herald breaks out. The nurses begin to beat the patients with their batons and Roux jumps into the fray. The patients are unable to stop their march-like dance and Coulmier incites the nurses to extreme violence. Sade stands up in his chair, laughing triumphantly as Coulmier desperately motions for the curtain to fall.

Analysis

Typical of Sade's cruel tendencies, the play is paused at the moment before Marat's death, allowing him to be informed of the failure of his Revolution. The Revolution has been in vain: the people are still starving and the poor are still poor. The lives of the populous are in such chaos that they are willing to be led by the didactic and strict generals. By the time of the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte, the citizens of France are resigned to their fate. They have no motivation for another uprising and they have no revolutionary leaders left to guide them. As Marat dies with his papers and pen still in hand, the meaninglessness of his ideas and ambitions are sharply illuminated. His final address to the people of France, his final attempt to rouse their passions, is prevented by the actions of a young girl. As he was not able to see the Revolution through to its end, all he did successfully was create chaos. His attempts to change the way of the world, to alter the lives of thousands, and to create a Revolution were all vain. He sees how pointless his actions were in the moment of knowledge of his certain death. He realizes the future destruction of his Revolution with the arrival of a new dictator. The Marquis wants him to know this; he takes sadistic pleasure from Marat's unhappy knowledge. The Revolution accomplishes no change.

Coulmier's insistence that the world has become too enlightened and civilized to repeat the events of the Revolution is totally undermined by the final events of the play. As the cast breaks into battle with certain groups representing certain actors in the events of the Revolution, it becomes obvious that man is never far removed from that dark inner cell so precious to Sade. Even here in this asylum, which advocates art and education, the inmates are easily tempted to violence. Coulmier, the director known for his peaceful policies and careful attention to his patients, is the one who incites the nurses to extreme violence. This violence and destruction is exactly what Sade delights in and desires. While Marat creates chaos in order to develop a new structure, Sade creates chaos for the sake of chaos because he believes that all thought, planning, and contemplation are futile in light of the rigid certainty of death and the cold disinterest of Nature.

Vocabulary

climax, grotesquely, shortage, glorious, abolish, resumed, precisely, pious, unclouded, squalls, brawl, destitution, gesticulating, invincible, rhythmic, tempest

Characters

Marquis de Sade

The Marquis is sixty-eight years old and an inmate of the asylum of Charenton. He is corpulent, moves slowly, and often has difficulty breathing. The Marquis takes part in the French Revolution and is known for his sadistic pleasures, but he doesn't agree with the impersonal, methodical murders advocated by Marat.

Jean-Paul Marat

At the age of fifty, the character of Marat is portrayed by an inmate of Charenton. He suffers from a skin disease and spends all of his time in a bathtub. He is draped in bandages to soothe his fever as he rants and raves about the Revolution. Marat advocates the death of the aristocrats and then wants the revolutionaries to turn on one another, weaning out the less dedicated and weak amongst them.

Charlotte Corday

Charlotte is a twenty-four-year-old beauty and former resident of the town of Caen. A former aristocrat, most of her friends and relatives were killed in the Revolution and Charlotte now plots to murder Marat. Charlotte eventually assassinates Marat by stabbing him in his bath and although she plots his death and eventually kills him, she moves like a somnambulist in the play, as she is portrayed by an inmate suffering from narcolepsy and melancholia.

Simonne Evrard

Marat's misterss, Simonne tends constantly to Marat while he is in his bath. She nervously changes his bandages and bathes his fevered skin as she bemoans Marat's illness. She sees the Revolution only as the instigator of Marat's decline.

Duperret

Duperret is a Girondist deputy, so he advocates republican policies but not the murder of the king or the aristocracy. Duperret is Charlotte's lover in the play. He is also a dandy, and portrayed by an inmate who is a sexual deviant.

Coulmier

As the director of Charenton, Coulmier both authorizes and censors Sade's play. He objects strenuously throughout the dialogue as Sade includes portions that he has censored from the play. Coulmier insists that men are far more enlightened and civilized now than they were during the Revolution and that these events could not reoccur.

Jacques Roux

A Socialist, former priest, and member of the Revolution, he acts as a champion for the Revolution and Marat. The actor portraying Roux is confined in a straitjacket.

The Four Singers

Kokol, Polpoch, Cucurucu, and Rossignol, the four singers, sing and mime both in the background and the forefront of the play's plot. They act as a classical chorus, often commenting on the other characters and providing narration. Rossignol is the only female role and is played by a former prostitute.

Patients

The patients of Charenton perform a similar role to that of the four singers. However, they are more often in the background of the scenes, miming and singing as directed. They create a background of chaos and insanity for the play.

Herald

The herald is dressed as a court jester and often makes odd noises with the instruments draped over his person. He narrates much of the play and introduces scenes.

Male Nurses

The male nurses are supposed to look like butchers and carry batons in the pockets of their aprons. They control the patients and are often forced to subdue them or drag them back from the forefront of the stage.

Sisters

Like the male nurses, the sisters of the asylum are often called on to subdue the patients and attempt to maintain order. Two of the sisters also generally support and guide Charlotte throughout the play. The sisters are played by athletic men.

Objects/Places

Charenton

The French lunatic asylum, Charenton, is the location of the play and holds within its walls t the chronically mentally ill, the criminally insane, and the socially unacceptable.

Caen

Caen is the home of Charlotte Corday. Corday says that anti-Revolutionaries are gathering in Caen to plot the assassination of Marat.

Declaration of Human Rights

The Declaration of Human Rights is a document that defined the cause of the French Revolutionists, that defined the individual and stated that the rights of men and citizens must be universal.

Bastille

A fortress and prison in France, the Bastille was stormed during the French Revolution and adopted as a symbol of republicanism. The Bastille was used as a state prison by the kings of France.

Guillotine

The guillotine is a device used in the execution of aristocrats and traitors during the Revolution and it becomes a symbol of the Revolution. The guillotine is composed of a wooden structure holding a blade suspended over the neck of a victim, which is released with the pull of a rope.

Laurel Wreath

A circular wreath composed of interlocking branches of laurel, the laurel wreath is placed on the heads of champions in the Olympic games and becomes a symbol of victory and prestige. At the beginning of the play, a laurel wreath is placed on Marat’s head as he is taken from his bath and carried on the shoulders of two patients.

Dais

The dais is a raised platform that often indicates the importance of a dignified personage who occupiesit. In medieval times, a dias was a portion of the floor set higher than the rest of the room and was used by the lord of the manor to indicate his lordliness. Both Sade and Marat occupy a dais on either side of the stage.

The National Assembly

The National Assembly is the lower house of the French Parliament that was developed under the fifth republic of France.

Bayonet

A bayonet is a sword-shaped weapon made to fit over or under the muzzle of a rifle that makes the rifle into a gun and a spear. The Bayonet is used in close-quarter combat.

“The Book of Judith”

“The Book of Judith” is a book included in the first seven books of the Bible by the Eastern Orthodox Church. It tells the story of a beautiful Jewish widow named Judith who decapitates the enemy general Holofernes to encourage her fearful countrymen.

Themes

Class Conflict

The French monarchy totally collapses three years after the start of the Revolution. The Enlightenment ideals of liberty, equality, and universal brotherhood are the supposed motivation behind the Revolution. During the Revolution aristocrats are hunted, arrested, imprisoned, and executed. The impersonal, mechanical slaughter of thousands of people makes the guillotine a universal symbol of terror. The play suggests that all of this effort is for naught as rule of France is eventually gained by Napoleon, who is just as oppressive and tyrannical as the previous kings of France. The poor are never able to obtain more money or food even though they are the ones who feel the burden of the Revolution the most. There is ultimately no gain after the Revolution for any of the poorer classes. These poor rise up to seize control of their country and attempt to make the rights of the aristocracy universal human rights; however, once they are able to overthrow the aristocracy, they find themselves unable to unite or decide on a leader. They also find themselves unable to trust one another after the betrayals and murders that occurred during the Revolution. Although class struggle is a major theme in the play, the revolt of the poorer classes is presented as brutal and unsuccessful.

Human Nature

“Marat/Sade” poses a question about the inherent qualities of human nature. Corday and Duperret clearly believe that man is inherently good. While they agree with the sentiments of the Revolution, they do not agree with the practices of the revolutionaries and the brutality of their overthrow of the government. They believe that a time will come when men will be able to rule themselves; when they will be able to unite with one another for the cause of peace and equality while also governing themselves individually so that total parity and freedom are possible.

Marat seems to believe that the morality of man is determined by the amount of autonomy and equality he is given. Marat believes that the revolutionaries need a leader so that they will remain united and be able to further their cause. He doesn’t believe that man is inherently evil, but he does believe that men need supervision. However, in Marat’s view, this supervision should not interfere with equality. In his opinion, the revolution of society is necessary for the revolution of the self, which represents the truest and highest form of revolution. Only through this metamorphosis of self will there be a lasting revolution of society.

In Sade’s opinion, man is inherently evil. He believes that in the deepest part of a man’s soul, the part that is not ruled by reason or societal regulations, there is total darkness. Rather than being horrified by this thought, Sade revels in it. He embraces all of the horrors that human nature is capable of enacting. His objection to Marat and the

Revolution is that they kill their enemies with impersonal, mechanical efficiency rather than protracted torture and pain. He also objects to chaos.

Passion

Sade says that he hates Nature because of her passionless removal from the fate of the human race. This kind of passionless spectatorship goads him on to greater and greater acts of depravity. In Sade's opinion, death is given too much importance in the minds of men. Death is the end of all animals and organisms throughout the world. There is nothing singular or spectacular in death. For Sade, the only thing that lends importance to life is the survival of an individual through extreme pain. Death is simply a fact of life, but extreme pain represents a climax of sensation and existence. For Sade, the passion of pain is the only thing that creates remarkable moments in life.

Sade's ridicule of Marat stems from his belief that Marat is without passion. It is stated several times throughout the play that Marat believes that the human soul is located in the mind. He believes, therefore, that passion or feeling of any kind is a lesser emotion and indicates a base nature. Sade and Marat represent totally different schools of thought. For Marat, the highest goal of man is to live through the mind because all meaning and importance flows out of the mind. For Sade, the greatest part of human nature is its most base and degenerate appetites. In Sade's opinion, the most depraved inclinations of the human condition are what set men above and beyond the natural or animal world.

Style

Point of View

The audience in the theater observes a play within a play that includes another audience already present on the stage. The play is a story within a story and is narrated by multiple individuals. Most of the narration is done from a third-person view by the herald and the choruses of the play. However, none of the narrators are totally removed from the play and they are often called on to participate. The play includes various speeches in first-person form, but there is never a moment where the thoughts of any of the characters are revealed in real time. The various narratives and narrators of the story compete for the audience's attention and compete in their claims of accuracy and truth. There is not one single point of view and there is not one single accurate interpretation of events or characters.

Setting

The play is set in the Charenton asylum, a lunatic asylum known for its humanitarian treatment of patients. Charenton is the setting of both "Marat/Sade" and the play written by Sade and performed by the patients of the asylum. One of the directors of Charenton, a man named Coulmier, who is a character in the play, is especially known for his humanitarian treatment and his belief that art and education are cures for madness. The nurses, sisters, and patients provide a setting for the play that suggests the madness of the revolutionaries and the ultimate failing of the revolution. The constant chaotic movements of the patients in the background of the scenes of the play serve to enhance this sense of madness and utter chaos.

Language and Meaning

While the play is divided into two acts and multiple scenes, the individual narrative and lines within the scene are without punctuation of any kind. Although different speakers are identified, their sentences run together so that the beginning and ending of their thoughts are not easily distinguished. This linguistic structure serves to enhance the sense of madness and chaos prevalent throughout the play. The speeches and narratives are difficult to make sense of structurally so that at times the meaning of individual thoughts becomes obscure. The speeches of Marat are generally high-minded and self-righteous, indicating his total dedication to his cause and his sense of the irreplaceable importance of his role in the Revolution. Sade's speeches are far more direct and simple. They are also full of satire, sarcasm, and irony. The tone of his speeches indicates the darkness of his temperament and his embrace of the most depraved elements of human nature. For Sade, the simple, base element of evil that he believes lies in the depths of every human being is the most important element of the

human character. His simple sentence structure and unembellished observations reflect this fact.

Structure

The play is divided into two acts. Act 1 serves to create a background for the characters and create a foreboding tension, which foreshadows the final assassination of Marat by Corday. Act 1 presents the historical background of the character of Marat and creates the fictionalized present circumstances and characterization of the Marat of the play. Through the reminiscences, observations, and comments of the various actors, Act 1 also develops a vision of the historical events leading up to the Revolution and occurring during the Revolution. Act 2 is the climax of the play. Act 2 describes the third and final visit of Corday at the door of Marat. It also develops the history of the Revolution and provides the narrative of its end. Through a long narrative song, the four singers describe the historical events of the years 1793-1808. During this time, the Revolution falls apart as the revolutionaries turn on one another and Bonaparte eventually comes to power and takes the place of a king. The historical events described lead full circle from the overthrow of kings to the installation of an emperor. The Revolution does nothing to destroy tyranny. The final moments of the play describe the death of Marat at the hands of Corday and the reenactment of the events of the Revolution by the patients, the heralds, the actors, the nurses, and Coulmier.

Quotes

We're modern enlightened and we don't agree / with locking up patients We prefer therapy / through education and especially art / so that our hospital may play its part / faithfully following according to our lights / the Declaration of Human Rights. (Act 1, Scene 2)

Now Marat you are talking like an aristocrat / Compassion is the property of the privileged classes / When the pitier lowers himself / to give to a beggar / he throbs with contempt / To protect his riches he pretends to be moved / and his gift to the beggar amounts to no more / than a kick. (Act 1, Scene 12)

Neither side is glorious / On either side they're just frightened men messing their pants / and they all want the same thing / Not to lie under the earth / but to walk upon it / without crutches. (Act 1, Scene 19)

To the withering of the individual man / and a slow merging into uniformity / to the death of choice / to self-denial / to deadly weakness / in a state / which has no contact with individuals / but which is impregnable. (Act 1, Scene 20)

Marat Marat it's all in vain / You studied the body and probed the brain / In vain you spend your energies / for how can Marat cure his own disease. (Act 1, Scene 25)

For to you the soul is a practical thing / a tool for ruling and mastering life / And you came one day to the Revolution / because you saw the most important vision / That our circumstances must be changed fundamentally / and without these changes / everything we try to do must fail. (Act 1, Scene 26)

Your words have turned into a flood / which covers all France with her people's blood. (Act 2, Scene 28)

Now they talk of people as gardeners talk of leaving for burning / Their names are crossed off the top of a list / and as the list grows shorter / more names are added at the bottom / I stood with them / and we waited / for our own names to be called. (Act 2, Scene 29)

Marat these cells of the inner self / are worse than the deepest stone dungeon / and as long as they are locked / all your revolution remains / only a prison mutiny / to be put down / by corrupted fellow-prisoners. (Act 2, Scene 30)

And if most have a little and few have a lot / you can see how much nearer our goal we have got / We can say what we like without favour or fear / and what we can't say we can breathe in your ear. (Act 2, Scene 33)

Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

What is the philosophy of the play? What schools of philosophy are represented by Marat, Sade, Coulmier, and Corday? What role does Coulmier play in the story? What does he represent?

Topic 2

What is the historical background of the play? How does the historical background affect the plot of the play? What role do the fictionalized elements play in the story?

Topic 3

Why is the play set in an asylum for social degenerates and the insane? What does this say about the historical figures portrayed in the play? What does their rejection by society imply about society?

Topic 4

What role do speeches and writing play in the story? Do they have any major effect on the events of the play? What does this say about the impact of words on history? What does this say about the power of words and the strength of human nature?

Topic 5

Does the play suggest that anything is changed by the Revolution? What is the explanation for this change or lack of change? What does this say about human nature?

Topic 6

What are the physical and mental illnesses of the actors portraying Corday and Marat? How do the symptoms of the actors playing the parts of Corday and Marat relate to the historical characters they portray?

Topic 7

What elements of the play make the play uncomfortable or difficult to read? Why do you think Weiss included these elements? Why do you think Weiss structured the play as he did? Is Weiss advocating Marat's philosophy and actions or not?

Topic 8

What is the ultimate conclusion of the play regarding human nature? Is there a definite conclusion regarding the philosophy, science, history, and psychology discussed in the play?