Ubu Roi Study Guide

Ubu Roi by Alfred Jarry

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Introduction

The plays of Alfred Jarry are considered by many to be the first dramatic works of the theatre of the absurd. They are credited with a great number of literary innovations and are seen as major influences of the dada and symbolist movements in art. *Ubu Roi* (translated as *King Ubu* and *King Turd*) is Jarry's most famous work. Ubu Roi eliminates the dramatic action from its Shakespearean antecedents and uses scatological humor and farce to present Jarry's views on art, literature, politics, the ruling classes, and current events.

Ubu Roi first saw life as schoolboy farce, a parody of Felix Hebert, one of Jarry's teachers. Co-authored with his friend, Henri Morin, the skit was transformed into a marionette play through several versions. In 1891, Jarry published a story, "Guignol," reminiscent of the Punch and Judy performances popular throughout Europe, which showcased a vile and murderous Pere Ubu. A two-act version of *Ubu Roi* with songs for marionettes, *Ubu sur la Batte*, appeared in print in 1906.

The opening night of December 11,1896, caused quite a stir according to Roger Shattuck in his work *The Banquet Years*. Actor Firmin Gernier stepped forward to speak the opening line "Merdre!" (translated as "Shitter!"). The audience erupted in pandemonium. It took nearly fifteen minutes to silence the house and continue the play. Several people walked out without hearing any more. Fist fights broke out in the orchestra. Jarry supporters shouted, "You wouldn't understand Shakespeare either!" Those who did not appreciate Jarry' s attack on theatrical realism replied with variations of *le mot Ubu*.

The stage manager startled the audience into silence by turning up the house lights and catching several screaming patrons standing on their seats and shaking their upraised fists. Gernier improvised a dance and the audience settled back down long enough for the action to proceed to the next "merdre," when the audience exploded once again. The interruptions continued throughout the play until the curtain fell. One audience member, a stunned and saddened William Butler Yeats, remarked "[W]hat more is possible? After us the Savage God."

In his book *Jarry: Ubu Roi*, Keith Beaumont detailed three accusations that were made against *Ubu Roi* by spectators and critics in the aftermath of the outrageous performance. The first focused on the play's "alleged" vulgarity and obscenity. Secondly, perhaps in view of the political atmosphere of the time, critics condemned the play and its performance as the theatrical equivalent of an "anarchist" bomb attack and as an act of political subversion. The third accusation leveled against the play and its performance was that they in no way constituted a "serious" piece of literature or of theater but rather a gigantic hoax.

Author Biography

Alfred Jarry, considered by some to be the father of the theater of the absurd, was born in Laval, France, on September 8, 1873. His father, Anselme, represented a wool factory as a traveling salesman, and his mother (nee Caroline Quernest) was the daughter of a judge. As a youth, Jarry won scholastic prizes in foreign languages and science. But the rebellious spirit and biting wit that marked his adult life were already making themselves known. With his school friends, Jarry mounted productions that made fun of his physics teacher, Felix Herbert. These parodies of Herbert were rewritten as *Ubu Roi* (1896; translated as *King Turd* in 1953).

The Ubu saga continued with *Ubu enchaine* (1900; translated as *King Enslaved* in 1953) and *Ubu cocu* (1944; translated as *King Cuckolded*). Jarry also wrote two novels. *Le Surmale: Roman modeme* (1902; translated as *The Supermale: A Modern Novel* [1968]) tells the story of a man who has a love making contest with a machine. The other novel, *Gestes et opinions du Docteur Faustroll, pataphysicien* (1911; translated as *The Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician* [1965]) defined "pataphysics" as the science of imaginary solutions.

In his later years, Jarry demonstrated outrageous behavior; he mimicked the monotonous speech and the jerky walk of Pere Ubu; his abuse of ether and alcohol distorted his ability to distinguish himself from the characters he had created. Jarry died in a charity hospital in Paris on November 1,1907. He was just thirty-four years of age.

Plot Summary

Act I

Pere Ubu, along with Mere Ubu and Captain Bordure, plot the killing of the King of Poland. Pere Ubu poisons Bordure's men, who have assembled at a sumptuous feast, by providing an excrement covered toilet brush for all to taste. The act ends with Pere Ubu demanding that Mere Ubu, Captain Bordure, and the other conspirators "swear to kill the king properly."

Act II

Pere Ubu attacks and kills King Venceslas of Poland. Queen Rosemonde and her youngest son, Bougrelas, escape to a mountain cave, but the Queen dies. The dead ancestors appear to Bougrelas and demand vengeance, giving him a large sword.

After some prompting from Mere Ubu about sharing some of his newly ill gotten wealth, Pere Ubu throws gold coins to the crowd. Several are trampled in the mad rush. Pere Ubu's response is to provide more gold as a prize to whoever wins a footrace. Afterwards, Pere Ubu invites the assembled multitude to an orgy at the palace.

Act III

Pere Ubu and Mere Ubu discuss what to do now that they are the sovereigns of Poland. Pere Ubu has decided, now that he no longer has any need of Captain Bordure, not to elevate him to the rank of Duke of Lithuania. Bordure ends up in Pere Ubu's dungeon but escapes to ally himself with Czar Alexis. Meanwhile, Pere Ubu executes all of Poland' s nobles so that he can then lay claim to their properties. Then, he follows suit with the magistrates and the financiers, claiming a reform in both the law and financial dealings of the government. When he realizes that all of the government workers have been killed, Ubu shrugs and simply says that he himself will go door to door to collect the taxes.

Bordure sends Ubu a letter in which he reveals his plans to invade Poland and re-establish Bougrelas as the rightful King. Ubu weeps and sobs in fear until Mere Ubu suggests they go to war. Pere Ubu agrees but refuses to "pay out one sou" for its expense. With the cardboard cutout of a horse's head around his neck, Ubu leads his army off to battle against Bordure, Czar Alexis, and Bougrelas.

Act IV

Mere Ubu searches the crypt that holds the remains of the former Kings of Poland for the Polish treasure. She discovers it among the bones of the dead kings but cannot

carry it all out at once. When she says that she'll come back tomorrow for the rest of the treasure, a voice from one of the tombs shouts, "never, Mere Ubu." Bougrelas advances to Warsaw and wins the first battle. Mere Ubu escapes amid rifle shots and a hail of stones. Meanwhile, Pere Ubu and the czar do battle in the Ukraine. The tide shifts, first one way, then another. Finally, Pere Ubu and his army are bested. They escape to a cave in Lithuania. A bear attacks while Ubu is in the cave with two of his soldiers; Ubu climbs to safety on a rock, and, when asked for help, responds by mumbling a Pater Noster ("Our Father, who art in heaven ..."). After the soldiers kill the bear, Ubu falls asleep, and the two men decide to escape while they have the opportunity.

ActV

After crossing Poland in four days to escape Bougrelas and his army, Mere Ubu arrives at the cave where Pere Ubu is sleeping fitfully. Unseen by her husband, Mere Ubu pretends to be a supernatural apparition to make Pere Ubu ask forgiveness for his "bit of pilfering." Instead, Mere Ubu is treated to a litany of her faults. When he discovers that it is Mere Ubu in the cave, Pere Ubu throws the dead bear on top of her. Not taking any chances that it might still be alive, Pere Ubu climbs up on the rock and begins the Pater Noster routine again. Angered that Mere Ubu laughs at him, Pere Ubu begins to tear her to pieces. But, before he can do much damage, Bougrelas and his army arrive and soundly beat the Ubus, who just manage to escape to a ship on the Baltic Sea. Pere Ubu plans to get himself nominated Minister of Finances in Paris so that the whole sordid series of events can begin again.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

This play tells the story of an ambitious but cowardly man's rise to power, and his subsequent fall. Told in an eccentric and idiosyncratic style, its clown-like characters and inventive use of language take it beyond the realm of straightforward narrative theatre and into something that's equal parts surreal nightmare and satirical social commentary.

Conversing in very crude language laced with idiosyncratic curse words and epithets, Ma Ubu berates Pa Ubu for his lack of ambition and struggles to convince him to murder King Wenceslas of Poland and his family so that Pa Ubu can become king. Pa Ubu veers back and forth between sudden spasms of verbal violence and equally sudden spasms of complete cowardice. Finally, he has enough and runs out. Ma Ubu speaks in soliloquy, saying that she thinks she has almost persuaded him, and hopes that soon she will be Queen of Poland.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

The story of this play is relatively simple - the greedy Pa Ubu is manipulated into an evil act in order to acquire power and money, loses both, and escapes punishment for his crimes. There are clear echoes here of several other plays, particularly Shakespeare's *Macbeth.* Like Macbeth, Pa Ubu is nudged into realizing his ambitions by his manipulative wife, slaughters a king and his sons, and is forced to fight to defend his stolen throne. Other references to *Macbeth*, and to other Shakespearean plays, will be commented upon as they appear.

There are echoes of other plays, or more specifically other forms of theatre, in this play's central relationship between Ma and Pa Ubu. It's interesting to note that in an earlier version, *Ubu Roi* was performed with puppets. This fact combines with Ma and Pa's argumentative and physically abusive relationship to awaken resonance of Punch and Judy shows, a traditional British puppet show based on European puppet shows in which the central characters were a bickering, physically violent man and wife. Specifically, Ma and Pa argue in the same way as Punch and Judy, threaten to beat each other up like Punch and Judy, and work out their plans in the same way as Punch and Judy - that is, Judy/Ma makes the plans and Pa/Punch messes them up. This resemblance creates the sense that the Ubus are more caricatures than they are genuine characters. That being said, just because their essential characteristics are exaggerated to an extreme degree doesn't mean the play's thematic point is any less relevant. In fact, the heightened reality of the characters reinforces the play's themes.

Ubu Roi is essentially a satire, a style of comedy in which a characteristic of an individual or group is exaggerated to point out its foolishness or emptiness. The target

here is ambition. The exaggerated characteristics of the Ubus and other characters are making a comment on the foolishness and emptiness of excessive ambition. A similar point was made in *Macbeth*, which points out the dangers of ambition rather than its foolishness, but nevertheless suggests, like *Ubu Roi*, that too much ambition is not a good thing.

The play's most noteworthy element is the manner in which its story is told, particularly its use of language. Written originally in French, the dialogue throughout the play contains eccentrically phrased and very blunt curses (there are several remarkably inventive variations on the word "shit," for example), oaths (Pa Ubu often swears by his "green candle," which may be a phallic symbol), and expressions of feeling (Pa Ubu occasionally speaks in very poetic, almost Shakespearean imagery). This chaotic style makes one of the play's key thematic points - that life and relationships are at their core chaotic and idiosyncratic, unique to each individual who may or may not be excessive in the way he or she lives.

A soliloquy such as Ma's speech at the end of the scene is a device used to reveal a character's inner thoughts. Usually spoken while a character is alone onstage, it allows us greater insight into a character's situation and motivations. In this case, the soliloquy reveals the depth of Ma's ambition which seems to be for something other than success for Pa. As such, it foreshadows later developments when Ma goes off on her own searching for treasure. On another level, the soliloquy functions as another reference to *Macbeth*, in that Lady Macbeth, like Ma, has a soliloquy in which she reveals her plans and intentions.

Act 1, Scenes 2, 3, and 4

Act 1, Scenes 2, 3, and 4 Summary

Scene 2 - As Ma and Pa Ubu prepare for a dinner party that they are hosting, Pa jokes about how ugly Ma is and starts eating the food Ma says is being saved for the guests. Ma says she can see the guests coming, and then becomes angry when she sees Pa eating. Pa threatens her ...

Scene 3 - ... and at that moment the guests, led by Captain Manure, come in. Pa suddenly becomes much more friendly to Ma, they welcome their guests, sit down, and as Ma shows Captain Manure the extensive and extravagant menu, Pa complains about how much it's all going to cost. Ma tells him to shut up, they all pass the food around, Pa goes out to get more food, Captain Manure and the other guests cheer Ma, and then Pa comes back with another dish, described in stage directions as "an unmentionable brush," suggesting something along the lines of a filthy toilet brush. He hurls it at the guests, indicating that he's trying to get rid of them so he can talk with Manure. When nobody moves, Pa throws handfuls of food at the guests and swears violently at them. As they rush out, they complain about what an awful host he is.

Scene 4 - Pa, Ma and Captain Manure discuss plans for the assassination of King Wenceslas, with Pa offering to make Manure a duke if he agrees. Manure does agree, saying Pa can count on both him and his men. When Pa, in his happiness, tries to embrace Manure, Manure complains about how badly he smells. This leads the volatile Pa to lose his temper, and Ma to try to calm him down. Finally, Pa dismisses Manure, repeating his promise to make him a duke.

Act 1, Scenes 2, 3, and 4 Analysis

This section contains another reference to *Macbeth*, as both plays set important points of action at a banquet. The banquet here, however, is clearly a parody, an even more extreme version of satire in which characters, manners and situations are caricatured and mocked with extreme, clownish intensity.

The name "Captain Manure" is another reference to excrement, and combines with Pa and Ma's frequent usages of the word "shit" and its variations to create the impression that the world of the play is FULL of shit. In other words, there is the sense that the play is making the thematic point that life is not only chaos life is ... well, shit.

In the final moments of the scene, variations on the play's thematic statement come into evidence. Specifically, Pa's attempts to embrace Manure (literally, embrace shit) represent his giving in to the awfulness of the world and the nastiness of ambition. In short, ambition stinks. Meanwhile, the fact that Manure pushes him away because he smells so bad suggests that Pa has already been steeped in the world's nastiness to the point where he's already as awful as the life he is attempting to take in his arms.

Act 1, Scenes 5, 6, and 7

Act 1, Scenes 5, 6, and 7 Summary

Scene 5 - A Messenger gives Ma and Pa Ubu the news that they're being summoned to a meeting with King Wenceslas. Pa has another attack of cowardice, fearfully saying that he believes the King has discovered the plot to kill him. Ma tells him to not be so stupid, they swear at each other, Pa goes to see the King, and Ma follows him.

Scene 6 - In the King's throne room, Wenceslas waits with his courtiers and his three sons, Boleslas, Ladislas, and Buggerless. Pa runs in, shouting that "it was the old woman and Manure." The implication is that he's referring to the assassination plot that he thinks Wenceslas knows about. Wenceslas, however, says that in recognition of Pa Ubu's service to the army and to the country, he's being made a Count. Pa expresses his gratitude, Wenceslas reminds him to be present at a military parade the next day, Pa says he will, and then presents Wenceslas with a silly gift. Wenceslas passes it on to Buggerless, who says Pa is a fool. Pa says he's going to "fuck off," turns to go, falls and injures himself, and then as he limps away, vows to kill the king no matter what.

Scene 7 - Pa Ubu, Ma Ubu, Manure, two soldiers named Heads and Tails, and several other soldiers make plans for killing Wenceslas. After arguing over which method would be best, and after Pa has another attack of cowardice, the group agrees that when Pa gives the signal, Manure will use his sword to slice Wenceslas in two. Pa makes them swear an oath of loyalty to him, and they all go out.

Act 1, Scenes 5, 6, and 7 Analysis

Once again the action draws parallels with *Macbeth*, in that both Pa and Macbeth receive honors from the king they're about to assassinate. A second parallel can be found in the fact that both Wenceslas and Duncan, the king in *Macbeth*, have sons. The parallel is taken further later in the play as Buggerless, in the same way as the princes in *Macbeth*, escape death at the hands of their father's killer. A third parallel lies in Ubu's cowardice, a highly exaggerated version of Macbeth's uncertainty. Meanwhile, Pa's clumsy exit defines him as more hopelessly incompetent than had been previously indicated.

Act 2, Scenes 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5

Act 2, Scenes 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 Summary

Scene 1 - King Wenceslas punishes Buggerless for being so rude to Ubu, telling him he won't be able to attend the military parade. Queen Rosamund tries to convince him to change his mind, saying the king needs as many loyal people around him as possible, but Wenceslas remains adamant. Buggerless says he'll do as he's told. Rosamund expresses her concern for Wenceslas' safety, saying she had a dream in which she saw him dead and the crown placed on the head of Pa Ubu. Wenceslas says he has complete trust in Ubu. Both Rosamund and Buggerless tell him that he is being foolish. Wenceslas tells them that he is going to attend the parade without armor or a sword, and then goes out with his other two sons. Rosamund asks Buggerless to come with her to the chapel to pray for Wenceslas and the others.

Scene 2 - Wenceslas, his two sons, Pa Ubu, Manure, Heads and Tails, and other soldiers watch the military parade. After some strange comments by Pa, he gives the signal and Manure and the other soldiers attack Wenceslas and his sons. Pa Ubu grabs the crown.

Scene 3 - In a room in the castle, Rosamund tells Buggerless she feels much safer, but at that moment Buggerless sees his brothers being pursued by Manure and the other rebels. He and Rosamund fall to their knees, praying that they be kept safe. As they pray, Buggerless speaks angrily about how he'd like to kill Pa Ubu.

Scene 4 - Pa Ubu comes in, having overheard Buggerless' comments and followed by Manure and other rebels. Buggerless prepares to defend himself and Rosamund, Pa Ubu runs away in terror, Buggerless fights with Manure and overpowers him, and then slaughters the other rebels as Rosamund gets away. Pa Ubu tries to overpower him, but Buggerless stabs him and follows Rosamund out.

Scene 5 - Buggerless and Rosamund arrive in a cavern in the hills where Buggerless believes they're safe, but Rosamund quickly falls ill, saying she's overcome by shock at everything that's happened. As she dies, Buggerless collapses into despair, proclaiming his hatred of Ubu. The ghosts of his ancestors appear, urging him to take revenge and presenting him with a huge sword. Buggerless rejoices.

Act 2, Scenes 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 Analysis

References to another Shakespearean play, *Julius Caesar*, appear in this scene - Caesar and Wenceslas both have wives who foresee the deaths of their husbands, and both Caesar and Wenceslas refuse to heed the warnings and attend public events unprotected, choices that result in their deaths. Meanwhile, a previously discussed parallel with *Macbeth,* the fleeing princes, appears here, along with another parallel with *Macbeth* - the ghosts that appear to Buggerless are reminiscent of the ghosts that,

twice, appear to Macbeth. The first is the point at which he is foretold of his ascendancy to the throne, and the second is when he is told how short his time actually on the throne will be. Finally, the death of Rosumand is reminiscent of the death of Macbeth's wife, who is also overcome with shock and despair.

A structural element of note in this section, and indeed throughout the play, is the device of the "French scene," a phrase describing a technique by which the beginnings and endings of a scene are defined by the entrances and exits of characters. In this play, for example, even though the final two scenes are set in the same room and follow a continuous line of action, they are divided into two scenes at the point at which Ubu comes in. It's sometimes interesting to look at French scenes to discover the dramatic or thematic reasons behind the division of the scene in those terms. In this instance, the division of the scenes reinforces the idea of the importance of the encounter between Buggerless and Ubu, particularly the fact that after the encounter, both their lives are drastically changed.

Act 2, Scenes 6 and 7

Act 2, Scenes 6 and 7 Summary

Scene 6 - Ma Ubu and Manure struggle to convince Ubu to have a feast and distribute money among the people as part of the celebration of his success. At first Pa refuses, but when Manure tells him that if he doesn't give the people gifts, they'll refuse to pay their taxes, he changes his mind and issues orders for both a huge feast and gifts of money for every person in the kingdom.

Scene 7 - After Pa Ubu is crowned, he throws handfuls of money into the celebrating crowd, saying it's not his idea but his wife's. Ma Ubu comments on how disgusting the people are, fighting over the gold. Manure suggests that the people race to win a chest full of gold, Pa agrees, the race is run, the winner expresses his gratitude for the gold, and Pa announces that the other peasants can each take a gold coin out of the other chest of gold. He then invites everyone into the palace for a feast, and there is the sound of a loud and very crowded party.

Act 2, Scenes 6 and 7 Analysis

The play speaks mostly in its own voice in this brief section, rather than in a voice resembling Shakespeare's and therefore making its own thematic points, becoming less a parody and more a satire on the foolishness of greed and the shallowness of ambition. This defines how Pa is entirely motivated by a desire for money, how he's even prepared to spend some of his precious gold in order to get even more from his taxes. This means that Ma Ubu's comment on how disgusting the people are as they fight over the gold is also a comment on how disgusting Pa Ubu is for doing exactly the same thing - not that he sees it that way at all, the point is clearly intended to be a comment on the situation for our benefit.

Act 3, Scenes 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6

Act 3, Scenes 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 Summary

Scene 1 - Pa complains to Ma that he feels ill after eating so much. Ma tells him that even though they're ruling the country, they still have to be careful with their money and with what they eat, adding that they owe Manure a great debt of gratitude. Pa speaks dismissively about Manure, saying that there's no way he's going to become a duke. Ma warns him that he'd better live up to his promises, or else face the anger of the people who helped him become king. She also warns him about Buggerless, saying the way to win him over is to be generous. Pa dismisses all her concerns, complaining about how much money he's lost because of her and finally chasing her away.

Scene 2 - In the palace throne room, Pa and Ma Ubu greet the nobles of the kingdom. One by one Pa greets them, asks them how much money they earn and what titles they have, claims the money and titles for himself, and sends them down a chute into a chamber where they will be "de-brained." He then issues orders to the judges about how they are to run their courts. They refuse to follow his orders, and they too are sent down the chute. Next Pa issues the order that from then on, he is to receive half the profits of all taxes. The kingdom's financiers protest, and Pa sends them all into the chute. Ma protests that he can't run the kingdom that way. Pa tells her it doesn't matter because he is going to go from village to village, collecting taxes himself.

Scene 3 - In a small village, a group of peasants gossip about what happened to Buggerless and about Pa Ubu's plans to collect taxes. They talk about how much they hate him, and then hear Pa swearing as he draws near.

Scene 4 - Pa Ubu comes in, demanding that the peasants listen to him and that they pay their taxes immediately or else they will be massacred. The peasants plead for mercy, but Pa Ubu reminds them that he is the king and must be obeyed. The peasants shout in support of Buggerless, whom they say is the rightful king. Pa Ubu calls in his soldiers, the peasants are slaughtered, and Pa Ubu collects his cash.

Scene 5 - Pa confronts Manure in his prison cell, bragging about the trick he played to expose his treachery and imprison him. Manure warns that Ubu will eventually face the vengeance of the people he attacked. Pa says he believes Manure might inspire a rebellion if he were free, but that he also believes the guards will never release him.

Scene 6 - This scene takes place in the palace of the Czar of Russia. Manure explains that he escaped from prison, and that he wants the Czar's help in defeating Ubu. The Czar demands proof of Manure's loyalty, and Manure shows him his sword, adding that he knows how to find Buggerless and that he can be convinced to join the rebellion against Ubu. The Czar makes Manure a commander in his army and dismisses him.

Act 3, Scenes 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 Analysis

Once again, in this section, it becomes evident that the primary motivating element in Pa Ubu's character is plain, simple greed. This is indicated in several ways - through his refusal to honor his agreement with Manure, his rejection of Ma's idea of negotiations with Buggerless, his abuse of the peasants, and most graphically in his confrontation with the nobles. In this scene, it is easy to see the puppet show influence, as characters are rapidly decapitated and sent "to the chute" with an increasing frequency and ease that would undoubtedly be much easier to stage with puppets than with human beings.

Another thematic statement is made in this scene, as the action points out the truth of the saying that power corrupts. This can be seen in the way Pa Ubu treats the peasants, defining the way his craving for money has increased exponentially now that he has the power to enforce his will. The action also indicates that what little conscience he started with has been corrupted by the opportunity and the means to indulge his cravings for gold. It could be argued that there is a more psychological explanation for his actions - because he's treated with so little respect by Ma Ubu, he acts in ways that guarantee he'll be respected, or at least feared, by the people he governs. This is perfectly possible, but in terms of the play as a whole and its thematic points about the evil of greed and power cravings, it makes more sense that Pa Ubu is being selfish and cruel to achieve his own money-grubbing ends.

Yet another parallel with *Macbeth* emerges in this scene. The conversation between the Czar and Manure can easily be seen as a parody of the similar scene in *Macbeth* in which exiled Prince Malcolm quizzes the soldier, Macduff, in the same way as the Czar quizzes Manure. Both scenes conclude with the king, or prince, accepting the assistance of their commander. In *Macbeth*, however, no one shows their sword, a gesture which, in *Ubu Roi*, is very likely to have an alternative sexual meaning, or double entendre.

Act 3, Scenes 7 and 8

Act 3, Scenes 7 and 8 Summary

Scene 7 - In his council chambers, Pa Ubu calls a meeting of his councilors to order, saying he first wants to talk about finance and then discuss his plans for controlling the weather. Ma Ubu mutters that he's an idiot, and Pa crudely tells her to be quiet. He then tells his councilors that he's pleased with how the collection of taxes is going, but Ma says the new tax on marriages isn't making enough money. As he again tells her to be quiet, Pa becomes confused and mixes up his words. As Ma and the councilors laugh at him, he swears angrily and tells them all to shut their mouths. A Messenger comes in with a letter, which Ma reads, saying it is from Manure. She reads the letter aloud, revealing that Manure is in Russia and is promising to return to Poland and remove Pa from the throne. Pa reacts with terror, making extravagant promises to God if he'll only protect him. Ma tells him the only course of action is to declare war on Russia. The councilors agree. Pa says he'll fight the war, but won't spend any money on it.

Scene 8 - Members of the Polish army come in, singing a nonsense song about how many buttons they've got on their uniforms. Their sergeant drills them, says they're great soldiers, and leads them off, all shouting the praises of Pa Ubu. Ma and Pa appear, with Pa fumbling with his armor and talking about how afraid he is. Ma berates him for being such a coward and for looking foolish. A huge horse is brought for Pa to ride. He tries to climb onto his back but keeps slipping off. Ma comments on how foolish he looks. As the horse wanders off, Pa shouts orders to his soldiers and then tells Ma that she's in charge when he's gone, adding that he's taking the account books so she can't take any money from him. She tells him to make sure to kill the Czar properly. He promises he will and goes out. In soliloquy, Ma says that she can now get down to the business of hunting down Buggerless and emptying the treasury.

Act 3, Scenes 7 and 8 Analysis

Yet another target of satire appears in this scene as the play makes fun of the military through the foolish actions of the Polish soldiers, and of Pa Ubu. As the play continues, it becomes clear that nothing is sacred, that the pretensions and belief systems of just about everyone with status in society: the military, government officials, and royalty, are all mocked with equal resentment and comic abandon.

Also, another reference to Shakespeare can be found in Pa's difficulties with a horse, which might be interpreted as a reference to the moment in *Richard III* in which Richard, desperate to retain his hold on the crown and the kingdom shouts the famous line "A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!" Pa Ubu, of course, is completely useless with a horse, again illustrating his general ineptitude and illustrating the play's thematic point that ambition without skill or intelligence to back it up is foolish.

Act 4, Scenes 1, 2, 3, and 4

Act 4, Scenes 1, 2, 3, and 4 Summary

Scene 1 - Ma Ubu searches the crypt where the kings of Poland are all buried for the kingdom's treasure. She discovers that the gold is mixed in with the bones of the dead kings and is frightened for a moment, but then shoves all the bones and the gold into a bag. She becomes more frightened when she hears a strange sound, and runs off.

Scene 2 - Buggerless appears followed by several soldiers and peasants. He shouts that the time has come to overthrow Ma and Pa Ubu and reclaim the country. His followers respond enthusiastically. Ma appears, realizes that Buggerless is there and what he's doing, and tries to run away. Buggerless and his allies chase her.

Scene 3 - Pa Ubu leads his army on a march to Russia, complaining in suddenly very formal language about how tired he is and about how he doesn't have enough money to afford a carriage to transport him, his weapons and his belongings. A Messenger arrives with news of Buggerless' rebellion and Ma Ubu's retreat into the hills. Pa tells the Messenger he's lying and sends him off, bragging that the defeat of the Russian army is imminent. A scout reports that the Russians are nearby, and Pa is stricken by another attack of cowardice, ordering that the men defend him. He then realizes that it is nearly noon and orders that lunch be served, saying that the Russians never fight at mid-day. A cannon-ball flies by, and Pa says again that he's frightened, but then changes his mind and says he's fine.

Scene 4 - A few moments later, another cannon-ball flies by and Pa says he's had enough. As he retreats, he meets a Russian and "tears him to bits." The Czar appears, accompanied by Manure, who slaughters Pa's soldiers as the Czar draws near. Pa recognizes Manure, and true to his familiar pattern, first reacts with terror and then tears him apart. Pa then goes after the Czar, veering back and forth between anger, fear, and apologies for being disrespectful. The Czar gets the upper hand and chases Pa Ubu. As he runs away, Pa encounters a trench and becomes frightened, but jumps anyway. The Czar tries to follow him, but falls into the trench. Pa narrates as his soldiers beat the Czar, speaking in language that is both crude and poetic about how his battle has been successful. The speech ends with Pa referring to how pretty the speech was, and what a shame no one was listening. Russian soldiers rush in and rescue the Czar. Pa and his fellow rebels flee, shouting that it is every man for himself.

Act 4, Scenes 1, 2, 3, and 4 Analysis

Noteworthy elements in this scene include its violence, with its references to Pa tearing people to bits. This is either a reference to the piece's origins as a puppet show, in which it might be more possible to show characters tearing other characters apart, or a metaphoric reference to his destruction of the lives of Manure, the Russian, and other

soldiers. Such references continue in the following sections, particularly in reference to the bear, and probably could be interpreted in similar ways. Another noteworthy element is the sudden appearance of Pa's good manners, glimpsed in his cease fire when the Russians stop for lunch. His respect, and the apparent habit itself, are satirical comments on how the wealthy, upper, or ruling classes refuse to allow their self-centered lifestyles and routines to be disrupted.

A third noteworthy element is Pa's sudden use of poetic, extravagant language. This functions on several levels. First, it serves to parody similar language used by similar characters in other dramas, particularly Shakespeare, warriors who take the time in the middle of a bloody battle to speak long, image-rich speeches about the glories and traumas of war. As such, it performs a second level of function as it indicates that Pa sees himself as a similar character, a noble man fighting a noble cause. There is clear irony here, in that Pa Ubu is clearly neither of those things. This irony is, in turn, pointed out by Pa's own comment that nobody is listening to him. In other words, he is not a great man, he is a fool.

A final noteworthy element can be found in the opening scene in which Ma scoops both bones and gold into her bag. This illustrates that she, like Pa, is willing to go to any lengths in order to get rich.

Act 4, Scenes 5, 6, and 7

Act 4, Scenes 5, 6, and 7 Summary

Scene 5 - As he and his soldiers take refuge from the storm in a cave, Pa complains about the awful weather, brags about how well he fought, and insists that he wasn't afraid, he just ran away. He mourns in exaggeratedly poetic language for one of his soldiers who was killed by the Russians, stopping when he hears a strange noise. He says that if whoever made the noise is Russian, he'll fuck them up even better this time.

Scene 6 - A bear comes into the cave. At first Pa foolishly calls it a dog, but then realizes what it really is and flees in terror as it attacks one of his men. Pa mumbles prayers in Latin as his men struggle with the bear and eventually kill it. Pa asks whether it is safe to come out, his men say with contempt that it's perfectly safe, and Pa says his prayers made the victory possible. He comments on how big the bear's belly is, saying that he and his men could have all fit inside with no trouble. The hungry men suggest they eat the bear and, at first, Pa finds the idea repulsive, but then suggests they build a fire and cook it. As they begin to cut it up Pa imagines that the bear is still alive. Pa talks about how frightened he is and how disgusting the bear is, but then urges his men to hurry because he's so hungry. The men finally have enough of his complaining, and shout that if he doesn't help he doesn't get any meat. Pa says he's not THAT hungry and goes to sleep, muttering about how much of a triumph their battle with the Russians was. The men debate whether the rumor they heard about Ma Ubu being captured was true, and whether they should desert Pa now or later. They decide to do it right away and run out.

Scene 7 - Pa talks in his sleep, narrating his dream about encountering Manure, fighting with Bugglerless, being chased by the bear, and discovering that Ma has stolen all his gold. He also talks about the joys of being king - killing people, fighting Russians, and collecting taxes.

Act 4, Scenes 5, 6, and 7 Analysis

A fourth Shakespearean play is referenced in this scene through the appearance of the bear, a situation with echoes of *The Winter's Tale,* which contains the famous stage direction "Exit, pursued by a bear." The device in *Winter's Tale* has long been ridiculed as something out of character for the usually much less fanciful Shakespeare, and its appearance in *Ubu Roi* reinforces this idea. An actor in a bear suit, or even a bear puppet, is always going to appear out of place or, at the very least, unlikely. The secondary level of importance in the bear's appearance can be found in its symbolic representation of Pa's animalistic nature, his uncontrolled and ungoverned anger and greed. This is defined by the bear's viciousness and its large belly, indicating the size of its hunger which is similar for Pa's hunger for money. At the same time, Pa's fear of the bear represents his own cowardice, his fear of that greedy side of himself which we've

seen from the beginning of the play. Finally, the fact that the soldiers kill the bear for him represents the way Ma killed, or at least subdued, his cowardice so that he could achieve his ambition.

The play takes satirical aim at yet another high-status target in this section - religion, or more specifically, its hypocrisy. Pa's claim that his prayers enabled the men to kill the bear represent the way religion claims credit and power for events that are completely and obviously under the control of man's will. The fact that the foolish and selfish Pa is making such a claim suggests that religion's claims are equally foolish.

In Pa's final sleep-talking speech, the play is taking aim at its primary satirical target, those with ambition, by showing Pa in a moment of complete freedom from hypocrisy. He wants power, and this speech suggests why. His motivations have been hinted at, but are never stated more clearly than they are in this moment. In giving him this brutally honest, albeit unconsciously spoken, statement, the play is suggesting that those who experience ambition like Pa's are as greedy and self centered as he is, but is also pointing out that they don't necessarily admit it.

Act 5, Scenes 1, 2, and 3

Act 5, Scenes 1, 2, and 3 Summary

Scene 1 - Ma Ubu comes into the cave where Pa Ubu is sleeping, recalling in monologue how difficult it was to escape from Buggerless, and commenting that she had to leave all her gold behind. Pa wakes up, disturbed by the sound of a voice, and Ma understands that he is referring to her. In an aside, Ma states her intention to pretend to be an angel and get Pa to forgive her for stealing his money. She speaks in what she thinks is an impressive voice and at first Pa doesn't pay any attention, but Ma then threatens him, and he reacts with fear and cowardice. Still pretending to be an angel, she tells him what a good and loyal wife he has, but he talks about how awful his wife is. She becomes increasingly angry, reminding him it was he who killed the king. He says he only did it because she made him. She then reminds him that he killed the king's sons and Manure, adding that the only way he can receive forgiveness is if he himself forgives his wife for taking all his money.

As Pa refuses, Ma realizes it's becoming light outside and she won't be able to conceal her identity for much longer. Pa wonders aloud where "the angel" went, and then sees Ma. For a few moments she continues to pretend, but he becomes angry, tells her to stop, and then throws the body of the bear on her. She collapses under its weight, cries out for help, and then crawls out from underneath it. Pa complains that he's never going to be free of her. They speak crudely and resentfully to each other as they each tell what's happened to them. Pa grabs Ma, forces her to her knees, and tells her all the punishments he's going to give her for betraying him. He starts tearing her to pieces, and then a noise is heard from the front of the cave.

Scene 2 - Buggerless rushes in followed by other rebels. Pa tells them to wait until he's finished punishing his wife. Buggerless attacks him, Pa fights back, and Ma fights Pa. The rebels rush in and fight to subdue Ma and Pa, and Pa's soldiers rush in and try to subdue Buggerless and the rebels. Pa swings the bear's body around his head, knocks some of the rebels to the ground, grabs Ma, and escapes.

Scene 3 - Pa and Ma race away from the cave, saying Buggerless can have the crown if he wants it so badly.

Act 5, Scenes 1, 2, and 3 Analysis

Two commonly used dialogue devices appear in this scene, the monologue and the aside. Both, like the soliloquy discussed earlier, serve to reveal the characters' innermost thoughts, feelings and conflicts. The differences between the three devices are that a soliloquy is spoken when a character is alone onstage, while a monologue is spoken when a character is not alone and the other character can hear. An aside is

spoken when a character is not alone, but the other characters onstage are unable to hear the aside.

Ma's monologue indicates that she was intending to keep Pa's money for herself and has been stricken by conscience and fear. This aspect to her situation is symbolically reinforced by the way Pa throws the bear at her, another of those visual moments that might be a holdover from the play's origins as a puppet show. Because the bear, for Pa, represented his ambition, his throwing it at Ma and her being temporarily overcome by it represents the way ambition also overcame her. The fact that they both avoid being killed by the bear is more representative of their victory over their fear and conscience than their failed struggle to realize their ambitions. This failure is dramatized even further by the arrival of Buggerless, and the Ubus' escape. Meanwhile, another parallel to *Macbeth* can be seen here, in that Lady Macbeth also has a monologue in which she suffers from her conscience and terror about what she's done.

In spite of there being so many parallels between the stories in *Ubu Roi* and *Macbeth*, the two plays diverge when it comes to the ultimate fates of its central characters. Ma and Pa Ubu survive with relative happiness and prosperity, whereas both the Macbeths end up dead. The reason for this divergence is thematic. *Macbeth* makes a thematically tragic point about the destructiveness of ambition but *Ubu Roi*'s thematic point is that, while reckless ambition and its pursuit might be foolish, it is a part of life in this world full of shit and as an aspect of humanity will never fully go away.

Act 5, Scene 4

Act 5, Scene 4 Summary

This scene is set on the deck of a ship. Ma, Pa and their allies celebrate their freedom as they sail, with Pa making bad puns on the word "knot" as used in ropes and as used to measure speed at sea. A storm suddenly comes up, and as Pa reacts with terror, the Captain issues terse orders for steering the ship and keeping it afloat. Pa issues his own orders, which sound similar to the Captain's but which are, in fact, nonsense. As the storm continues, the Captain issues more orders, Pa makes more jokes, and he and the others all laugh. Wine is brought, and Ma talks about how wonderful it will be to see their home in France again. Pa comments that they're just passing the castle of Elsinore, and then talks about how important he's going to make himself once he gets back to Paris. They speak poetically for a moment about the beauty of riding on the sea, and Pa says how much he will miss Poland, making a crude joke that if there wasn't any Poland, there wouldn't be any poles.

Act 5, Scene 4 Analysis

The play's previously discussed thematic point about the durability of foolish ambition is vividly reinforced in this scene, as it becomes clear that Pa and Ma have endured all their difficulties without being in the least changed by them, continuing to make plans for conquest even though their last attempts met an ignominious end. The foolishness and self-centeredness of such a perspective is illustrated by Pa's idiotic mimicking of the Captain and his very bad jokes. Pa thinks he's being clever and funny in the same way that he thought he had the right to be king. An additional thematic point appears here, in the suggestion that boasting is one thing, but unless someone has substance to back up what he is saying, he will be perceived as a fool. It's also possible to see in Pa's emulations of the Captain, a resonance with his earlier, and equally imprudent, emulations of royalty. His commands to the sailors are about as captain-like as his commands to his subjects were king-like. Once again, the thematically relevant point is that desire must be backed up by skill, otherwise appearing foolish is the result.

Finally, this section contains one last Shakespearean reference in the comment about Elsinore, the castle in which *Hamlet* is set. It is possible to see this reference as a comment on Pa Ubu's character - specifically, his indecision and his veering back and forth between cowardice and violent action. Hamlet is himself plagued by indecision, and ends up dead as a result. On the other hand, it's equally possible to see the reference as one last joke at Shakespeare's expense, in the same way as Pa Ubu's continued existence, and his freedom from the consequences of too much ambition, is a great big joke at ours.

Bibliography

Jarry, Alfred. "Ubu Roi" from "The Ubu Plays." Trans. by Cyril Connolly and Simon Watson Taylor. Grove Press, Inc. New York. 1968.

Characters

Captain Bordure

Bourdure kills King Venceslas of Poland, paving the way for Pere Ubu to become the king. Later, Bordure abandons Ubu, goes over to the Russians, and plots the death of Pere Ubu and the reclamation of the Polish throne by Bougrelas with the czar. Pere Ubu recognizes Bordure in the middle of the battle, and, the stage directions indicate, tears him to pieces.

Bougrelas

Bougrelas is the sole surviving son of King Venceslas and Queen Rosemonde. He escapes from the battle with Pere Ubu, receives a visit from all his dead ancestors demanding vengeance, and eventually defeats Pere Ubu and regains the crown.

Queen Rosemonde

Queen Rosemonde tries to warn King Venceslas by recounting one of her dreams. In the dream, Ubu kills Venceslas and becomes King of Poland. During the battle, the queen escapes down the secret stairway with her son, Bougrelas, but dies shortly after in a cave in the mountains.

Mere Ubu

Other than her outrageous husband, Mere Ubu is the only character in the play who exhibits more than two or three basic character traits. That is not to say, however, that Mere Ubu is a fully rounded, complex character in the play. On the contrary, she is merely a watered down version of her pompous husband. She does act like J-^ady Macbeth early in the play by suggesting that Pere Ubu slaughter the entire Polish royal family and ascend to the throne. After that, she makes no additional contribution to the plot of the drama.

Pere Ubu

Pere Ubu is less than a "king," even lesser than a traditional dramatic character. He kills the royal family of Poland in order to gain the throne, plunders their wealth, and steals whatever and whenever he desires. When threatened by the Polish king's surviving son, Ubu runs and hides. And, through everything, he stuffs himself with food and drink and shouts obscenities. Jarry uses the perverse behaviors of Pere Ubu greed, ambition, tyrannical behavior, absolute stupidity to satirize the middle class life he hated.

The original character of Pere Ubu was first seen as a marionette. The clipped speech and robot-like movements of the play's Pere Ubu derive from this earlier incarnation. Jarry wanted Ubu to be played masked, but the actor who portrayed the character in its outrageous performance at the Theatre de 1'Oeuvre, Firmin Gernier, refused. However, the rapid speech, the jerky stylized movements, and the bulging pear-shaped costume were maintained.

Unlike characters in more conventional plays, Pere Ubu is free from the restraints of good and evil. He experiences his own perversity with a sick joy, a bombastic attitude, and a foul tongue. It has been suggested that the character of Ubu is played "in life itself' rather than dreamed or written. Pere Ubu lives on, not so much because of the play that bears his name, but because of Jarry's transformation into his own creation.

King Venceslas

Venceslas is King of Poland. He raises Pere Ubu to the rank of Count of Sandomir. Venceslas ignores the warning of his wife and goes to the "Review" without a sword. There, the army of Pere Ubu, led by Captain Bordure, kills the King. The ghost of King Venceslas visits his sole surviving son, Bougrelas, as part of the assembled dead who demand vengeance.

Themes

Absurdity

As a philosophical term, absurdity describes the lack of reasonableness and coherence in human existence. As a literary term, absurdity seems to have been coined especially for Pere Ubu. Throughout the play, Pere Ubu appears to be unaware of what is happening around him. Murder, dismemberment, the trampling of a townsperson when Pere Ubu distributes gold none of these atrocities faze Ubu. The character of Pere Ubu is absurd in another way: his reason for living seems to be to kill everyone; his actions that lead up to these killings can be described as "irrefutably logical." Logic equals killing everyone.

Art and Experience

Alfred Jarry's view of a new theater centered on two conditions: the need to "create new life" in the theater by creating a new type of character and the need to transcend the "things that happen all the time to the common man."

Pere Ubu fulfills the definition of the new type of character as did Jarry himself. Jarry not only wrote the adventures of Pere Ubu, he lived them. He walked like Ubu; he talked in the clipped robotic speech of Ubu. Novelist Andre Gide wrote that Jarry showed no human characteristics. "A nutcracker, if it could talk, would do no differently. He asserted himself without the least reticence and in perfect disdain of good manners." Jarry fished for his neighbors' chickens from a tree and drove waiters crazy by gorging himself on meals ordered, and eaten, in reverse order, dessert first. In time, Jarry became known to his friends as Pere Ubu.

As for the need to transcend everyday actions and situations, Jarry advanced a type of "shock treatment." Ubu's opening line ("Merdre!") accomplished that rather handily. Jarry's admitted intention was to stir up the passive audiences pandered to by the realistic theater. Stock characters and slapstick action, the staple of Punch and Judy marionette performances, could express universal concerns and escape the narrow confines of the "lived reality" of the realistic theater.

Dadaism

Ubu Roi predates the official founding of Dadaism by about ten years. Nevertheless, Pere Ubu and his alter ego Alfred Jarry seem worthy ancestors to this literary and artistic movement. Dadaism was devoted to the negation of all traditional values in philosophy and the arts. The Dada review proclaimed its intention to replace logic and reason with deliberate madness and to substitute intentionally discordant chaos for established notions of beauty or harmony in the arts.

Ubermensch ("Superman")

The term Ubermensch comes from Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. It is used to designate the goal of human existence. Humans should commit themselves to earthly goals. They should sacrifice their lives for these goals and out of the destruction that would result from such sacrifice would rise the "Ubermensch."

Out of the destruction in *Ubu Roi*, Pere Ubu rises, though more like a "Stupidman." Ubu is the antithesis of Nietzsche's Superman, although he is an individual process of self-creation, unique and undefinable, and, like his creator Alfred Jarry, forever unfinished.

Style

Jarry had definite ideas, not only about the staging for *Ubu Roi*, but for the theater in general. In an essay, translated by Barbara Wright as "Of the Futility of the Theatrical," Jarry discusses "a few things which are particularly horrifying and incomprehensible ... and which clutter up the stage to no purpose."

It would be dangerous, says Jarry, for the writer to impose the *decor* [stage setting] that he himself would imagine and conceive. For "a public of artists" (as opposed to the general public), each audience member should be able to see a play in a *decor* that does not "clash with his own view of it." The general public, on the other hand, can be shown any "artistic" *decor* because "the masses do not understand anything by themselves, but wait to be told how to see things." A colorless background, an unpainted backdrop or the reverse side of a set, can allow the spectator to "conjure up for himself the background he requires." Better still, Jarry continues in this essay, "the spectator can imagine, by a process of exosmosis [the passage of gases or liquids through membranes], that what he sees on the stage is the real *decor*.

The actor in a play should use a mask to cover his head, argues Jarry, and replace it with the "effigy of the CHARACTER." The masks should not be a copy of the ancient Greek dramatic masks one for tears, one for laughter but should somehow indicate "the nature of the character: the Miser, the Waverer, the Covetous Man." Six main positions (and six in profile) are enough for every expression. Jarry uses the example of a puppet showing bewilderment by "starting back violently and hitting its head against a flat" to illustrate his point (*Ubu Roi* made one its first appearances as a marionette drama.)

Another important element for Jarry is that the actor have a "special voice." The voice must be "appropriate to the part, as if the cavity forming the mouth of the mask were incapable of uttering anything other than what the mask would say." The whole play, Jarry concludes, "should be spoken in a monotone."

Historical Context

The New Wave of Arts and Letters

"We want to demolish museums and libraries!" These fighting words come not from the mouth of a fanatic or a terrorist but rather from the pen of Italian poet Emilio Marietti. He, along with other artists and writers, wanted to destroy all that preserved traditional art and learning in Western Europe. These "futurists," who spurned the value of tradition, wanted to break completely free from the past. They wanted to fashion an entirely new civilization that would divorce itself from the serious moral and cultural crises of the late-nineteenth century.

Jarry's Europe was preoccupied with change. Developments in the sciences brought into question the role of a divine creator (particularly the work of Charles Darwin, which presented validation of the theory of evolution). Changes in communication (the telephone, the "wireless") and in transportation (the bicycle, the automobile) skewed traditional understandings of time and space. The introduction of moving pictures and X-rays redefined the ways in which people saw the world around them. What had once been the province of magic became reality in the waning years of the nineteenth century.

Liberation from the past and all of its traditions could only be achieved through acceptance of and immersion in these rapid changes. Painter Umberto Boccioni stated the goal: "Let's turn everything upside down.... Let's split open our figures and place the environment inside them." Another futurist proclaimed, "A speeding automobile is more beautiful than T*he Victory of Samothrace*"; contemporary achievement, rather than an ancient Greek statue, reigned supreme.

Fin de Siecle Political Turmoil

Two major events before World War I that transformed political life in France were the Boulanger Affair and the Dreyfus Affair. General Boulanger attempted to seize power in France in the 1880s. Molded by a carefully orchestrated publicity campaign, Boulanger appeared as the "messiah," the proverbial knight in shining armor who would save France's honor at all costs. His play for power failed, however, and Boulanger left France in disgrace amid allegations of treason.

Accused of selling military secrets to the Germans, Army Captain Alfred Dreyfus, on the other hand, sparked debate between those who were convinced of his innocence and expected the Republic to uphold the ideals of justice and freedom and those associated with the traditional institutions the Church, the army who considered themselves to be upholding and defending the honor of France. Intellectuals organized themselves and pressed for the exoneration of Dreyfus. Novelist Emile Zola, in his famous front page

letter to the editor *J 'Accuse*, demonstrated the power of the written word in changing governmental decisions.

Jarry's written words would not bring political change, though they would, with the production of *Ubu Roi,* change the way in which a pompous caricature could impact the literary consciousness of an age.

Critical Overview

When actor Firmin Gernier stepped forward and spoke his opening line as Pere Ubu "Merdre!" (often translated as "Shitter!") the audience erupted. Some would say the controversy still rages. What those who study late-nineteenth century theater do agree on is that Jarry attacked theatrical realism head-on and things just haven't been the same since.

Brian E. Rainey in an essay in the *Wascana Review* noted that" *Ubu* is at once a commentary on and a revolt against the world in which Jarry lived." Anarchy, greed, corruption, and cowardice all play prominent roles in *Ubu Roi*. Pere Ubu seeks to destroy everything; he holds nothing sacred. Jarry provided the prototype for much of what would come to be known in the future as a Brechtian or "alienation effect." Pere Ubu may speak en *Francais*, but his vices are not exclusively French. He has achieved real universality.

Many critics have dismissed *Ubu Roi* as immature and childish. G. E. Wellwarth in his article "Alfred Jarry: The Seeds of Avant-Garde Drama" argued that the "superficial childishness of the *Ubu* plays should not prevent the reader from taking them seriously. The fact that Jarry's mind remained in many essentials that of a child in no way diminishes his importance as the originator of a scream of protest which Antonin Artaud later decreed as the official theme of avant-garde drama."

Ubu Roi presents Jarry's warped version of a naive childish fantasy the good king killed by an evil person who wants the throne, the young and virtuous heir to the throne avenging his father, battles resembling those fought with toy soldiers, eerie (but not too scary) "supernatural" events, a fight with a pretend bear, and so on.

"If Pere Ubu exerted a profound influence on the young intellectuals of the period," stated Dan M. Church in *Drama Survey*, "it was not because they had seen him on the stage or had read about him in a book; it was because they saw him and knew him through his flesh-and-blood incarnation: Alfred Jarry." The nihilism of Ubu appealed to the young late nineteenth-century intellectuals. The foul-mouthed, rotund comic figure and the nascent revolutionaries stood side by side. But, argued Church, with two World Wars and the rise of dictators, Pere Ubu has changed from the symbol of the revolutionary to the embodiment of all that they are revolting against: the shining emblem of totalitarianism, the perfect representation of bourgeois bureaucracy, and the poster boy for the insanity of war and mass murder.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

In this essay, Wiles examines Jarry's play as a ground breaking work, what is considered by many to be the first drama in the Theatre of the Absurd.

It is highly doubtful that Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* will be performed on a high school stage any time soon. Why then subject it to academic scrutiny in a reference work aimed at the high school audience? The answer, quite simply enough, is because it was the first. In art, establishing a precedent is most important. Once Pere Ubu waddled to the middle of the stage and uttered his scandalous, foul-mouthed opening line, the theater could never be the same again. The entire dramatic experience had been fashioned into something new and different. Jarry opened a Pandora's box and neglected to close the lid.

Jarry rebelled, not only against the prevailing traditions and conventions *of fin de siecle* ("end of the century") drama, but against absolutely everything. He rejected the world of reality and the world of ideas and constructed his own world detailed in his *Pataphysics*. For example, Jarry's refusal to use "realistic" stage props is built on the idea that these artificial trappings prevent the audience from seeing its own personal vision of the setting in which the action (or non-action) occurs. The raising and lowering of the curtain, then, disrupts the creative relationship between the audience and the drama. The elaborate recreation of a room or an outdoor location would be the vision of the set designer and not the audience.

Instead, Jarry used descriptive placards and representational devices (a single actor for a parade of soldiers; wicker mannequins for the nobles) to shock his blockhead audience "so that we can tell from their bear-like grunts where they are and also how they stand."

Nearly every anti-realist artistic movement of the twentieth century used Jarry's confrontational dramatic format as a model. Todd London explained in his essay "My Ubu, Myself" that the Dadaists took inspiration from Jarry's chaos, while the Symbolists emulated Jarry's emphasis on image over action. The description of the *Ubu* set illustrates a rough, contradictory beauty: "You will see doors open on fields of snow under blue skies, fireplaces furnished with clocks and swinging wide to serve as doors, and palm trees growing at the foot of a bed so that little elephants standing on bookshelves can browse on them." The Surrealists admired Jarry's unwillingness to distinguish art from life, especially as he came more and more to embody his creation Pere Ubu in his public life. As Andre Breton explained in *Free Rein*, "Beginning with Jarry .. . the differentiation long considered necessary between art and life has been challenged, to wind up annihilated as a principle."

It is odd that so much attention has been paid to a play that has not been performed that many times since its debut in 1896. Rather, it is the transformation of Alfred Jarry into his character Pere Ubu that garners the notice of scholars. The shift from Jarry to Ubu did not happen all at once but occurred progressively as the distinctions between

the life and the work of art blurred and fused into a unique continuity. Roger Shattuck stated in *The Banquet Years* that this living creation was Jarry' s attempt to abandon himself to "the hallucinatory world of dreams. .. . Jarry converted himself in a new person physically and mentally devoted to an artistic goal.... He had found his Other, the flesh of his hallucination."

In late-nineteenth century France, farces and well-mannered plays with polite plots controlled the mainstream theater. Pere Ubu's explosive opening line disrupted this veneer of civility and established the rules for the avant-garde of the new century. The rules, of course, were there were no rules. Jarry not only put "the word" on the stage, he also brought "the object" in the form of a toilet brush which Pere Ubu serves as one of the courses at a banquet. With this new level of tastelessness (the guests lick the brush and are poisoned), Jarry illustrates the satirical qualities of scatology to degradation and violence.

John Updike, quoted in *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*, provided an excellent summation:

How are we to judge Alfred Jarry? Apollinaire expressed the hope that his weird words will be the foundation of a new realism which will perhaps not be inferior to that so poetic and learned realism of ancient Greece. Gabriel Brunei explained him by saying, "Every man is capable of showing his contempt for the cruelty and stupidity of the universe by making his own life a poem of incoherent absurdity." I think the second estimate more plausible; Jarry's life, as a defiant gesture, matters more that his works, which are largely pranks and propaganda of a rarefied sort. Compared to Jarry, most of today's so-called Black Humorists seem merely ex-admen working off their grudges in sloppy travesties of a society whose tame creatures hey remain still. Though we cannot grant him the comprehensive sanity and the reverent submission to reality that produce lasting art, we must admire his soldier's courage and his fanatic's will.

Jarry turned the theater upside-down and inside-out. He took reality and placed it into a magician' s top hat. With a wave of his wand and a magic word or two, he produced not a loveable furry white rabbit but the grotesque and foul-mouthed Pere Ubu. People have not been able to look at drama in the same way since.

Source: William P. Wiles, for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Oilman provides an overview of Jarry's play, explaining the plays concepts and themes.

In this five-act satirical farce, Jarry adapts the serious story of seizure of power to the comic aims of ridicule and relief. Mere Ubu, playing upon her husband's bestial instincts, urges him to overthrow Wenceslas, King of Poland. After enlisting Bordure's assistance, Ubu usurps the throne in the second act, murdering the ruler and his two sons. Bourgelas, one of the King's sons, escapes with his mother. Meanwhile, in order to placate the Poles and satisfy his greed, Ubu offers the people gold that he reclaims through taxation. In the third act, Ubu assumes authority, liquidating the nobility and magistrates and confiscating national wealth. He also condemns Bordure who, taking refuge in Russia, requests Czar Alexis to help restore order and justice. Alexis attacks, and Mere convinces Ubu of the necessary recourse to war.

In Act IV, while Ubu battles against the Russians, his wife plunders the treasures of Poland. Ubu kills Bordure, but the decimation of his army compels him and his two Palotins to retreat. In fending off a rapacious bear, the Palotins perceive their leader's cowardice and abandon him. In the final act, Ubu's wife flees Bourgelas's avenging army, arriving at the cave where Ubu is sleeping. Darkness enables her to impersonate the angel Gabriel which, in turn, impels him to confess his wrongdoings. The light of daybreak, though, reveals her identity, and Ubu reverts to his former ways. Bourgelas attacks, and the Ubus, along with the Palotins who return, sail home with nostalgia for Poland.

Ubu's grotesqueness evokes caricature and disbelief. His rotund body and pear-shaped head seem ludicrous and fantastical, and the opening trite insults between Mere and Pere suggest a slapstick show or a puppet-play. Like the closing scenes in farce, a comic resolution dispels danger as husband and wife return home, physically secure and morally unchanged. Lack of development of character excludes introspection: throughout the play, Ubu remains stupid, indolent, and totally egocentric; his wife stays avaricious, complaining, and domineering. Through incongruities and inversions, Jarry employs irony to elicit surprise and to induce absurdity. Besides his ridiculous appearance, Ubu swears meaningless oaths ("by my green candle", "shitter"), exaggerates the ordinary (his feast becomes a two-day orgy), and misconstrues reality (a bear is a "little bow-wow"). By exploiting the unexpected, Jarry has this Falstaff-like personage debunk the solemn and dignify the preposterous: his stepping on Wenceslas's toe incites revolution; unlike the agile Czar, he jumps over a trench; and, seated safely on a rock, he recites a *paternoster* during the Palotins' struggle with the bear. Jarry also uses dramatic parody: like Macbeth urged to depose Duncan, Ubu yields to his wife's goadings, but his clumsiness, moral blindness, and inanities turn potential pathos into rollicking burlesque. Disparities of language and action heighten the ridiculous. During deliberations and battles, Ubu blends religious and literary references with nonsensical statements, thereby reducing the serious and dignified to the trivial and foolish. And, in the dream-sequence that recalls epic conventions,

medieval allegories, and Renaissance romances, Mere convinces Pere that her ugliness is comparable to Aphrodite's beauty and her depravities to saintly accomplishments.

The deceptions and distortions, though, present a superficial enjoyment that obscures the horrors of human bestiality and bourgeois shallowness. Ubu's self-absorption and obsession with material wealth and sensual gratification explain his callous disregard and vicious abuse of others; and, prodded by his unbridled instincts, he acts irrationally and erratically. In depicting this primal nature devoid of reason and discipline, Jarry converts innocuous horseplay into actions provoking appalling disgust. For example, Ubu's attack on his guests with bison-ribs provokes amusement; but his subsequent serving of human excrement at table replaces laughter with repugnance. Mere's duplicity punctures pleasure. By injecting false courage into Ubu's cowardly character, she yields to her insatiable greed for wealth and power, manipulating her husband to commit pillage and genocide.

As caricatures, they resemble cartoon animations; but their self-interest, insensitiveness, and indignities reflect the values and evils in bourgeois society. Exemplifying the ethos of this post-Darwinian era, Ubu disregards spiritual values; religion lacks belief, and Ubu facilely recites prayers to escape danger and death. He is a survivor whose instincts endure, and whose bestial superiorities destroy the weak and unfortunate. If Ubu is Everyman, he is also, paradoxically, Nobody, with his prosperity encasing a spiritual void. Instead, Ubu's obesity suggests a material gluttony that assures an aggression necessary for success and stature.

In neglecting the unities of time, place, and action, Jarry constructs a series of scenes resembling a montage of inconsistent happenings and absurd characterizations. Ubu's ludicrous appearance, irrational behavior, and vile words demonstrate a rejection of the established principles of verisimilitude and decorum; and at the first performance, the audience, expecting entertaining farce, was stunned and outraged. But by shattering the illusions that often, paradoxically, define reality, Jarry reveals the potential evils inherent in the subconscious. Through the humor, resulting from fantasy and foolishness, Jarry attacks the materialism, egocentricism, and superficialities which, embodied by Ubu, reflect bourgeois aims and attitudes. Ubu's jokes are meaningless, insensitive utterances, and his unscrupulous deeds become unconscionable crimes. Satire, moreover, evolves into a probing of the dynamics of human impulses. Time and place dissolve, and Ubu emerges as an emblem of man's primal nature. Futility and absurdity characterize Ubu's endeavors: his actions end at the beginning; speech is claptrap; his uncontrolled affections and merciless, unrelenting aggressions destroy order and civilization. Jarry goes beyond a renunciation of conventional dramatic practice and accepted social standards. By creating a drama that suggests the later theories and plays of Artaud, Beckett, Genet, and Ionesco, he forces the spectator to confront, through Ubu, the savagery, isolation, and pain of human existence.

Source: Donald Oilman. "*Ubu Roi*" in *The International Dictionary of Theatre*, Vol. 1: Plays, edited by Mark Hawkins-Dady, St. James Press, 1992, pp. 847-49.

Critical Essay #3

Zelenak reviews a revival production of Jarry's play, one that takes considerable liberties with the playwright's text. The critic opines that by placing an emphasis on slapstick and scatological humor as well as adding modern pop culture references the Irondale production company captures the essence of Jarry's play while making it accessible to modern audiences.

Few dramatic works have attained the iconographic status of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu roi*. Its original two-performance production by Lugne-Poe in 1896 caused the greatest sensation in the French theater since Hugo's *Hernani* sixty years earlier. Jarry's play took only one word the infamous merdre to cause a near riot. Amidst the hysterical audience demonstrations, fist-fights and shower of missiles, the actors found themselves spectators to a theatrical event that dwarfed the one on stage. Although *Ubu* remains central to the avant-garde tradition, one might wonder: "Why revive *Ubu* ?" And if one answers that question, a larger one looms: How to do *Ubu* ninety years later?

The Irondale Ensemble's New York production of *Ubu Roi* (1984-87) put itself in an active relationship to the text, using it simply as a starting point, a "pre-text" for a performance. They approached *Ubu* as a comedy-parody of the bourgeois world spirit, an ironic celebration of its endless adaptability and will to survive. Furthermore, they had fun with *Ubu.* The Irondale's *Ubu Roi* in some ways resembles a series of cabaret or burlesque skits. Just as much of *Ubu* is cartoon Shakespeare, the Irondale's is a cartoon *Ubu*. Very little of the actual Jarry text is used, but it follows the plot and incidents of the play fairly closely. The production is irreverent from its opening moment, which finds Ubu enthroned on the toilet, grumbling "Shit!" Taking the cue from Jarry, the scatological metaphor is sustained throughout. When Ubu has to think hard or soliloquize, he retreats to his toilet seat; the cue for the beginning of Ubu's coup d'etat is the password "shit." Pa Ubu (Josh Broder) is not a fully realized "character," but a grab-bag of comic techniques, most often the comic straight man or the deadpan stand-up comic. Pa Ubu is dim-witted and gross. He picks his nose, substitutes turds for meat at a state dinner to save money. He is an Aristophanic creation, operating from the basest, bottom-line human instincts, *viz*. food, sex and money. Ma Ubu (Molly Hickcock) is heavily camped, sometimes *a la* Mae West. The production is filled with low comedy, one liners, gags and intricate "bits" perhaps similar to the *commedia dell'arte's lazzi*. Its success is not due to any particularly brilliant comic moments but rather to the cumulative effect of the rapid succession of gags and routines and the almost endless invention of the company.

The level of humor ranges widely from slapstick and crude farce to literate satire. Irondale borrows from Shakespeare almost as much as Jarry did. Wenceslas is possibly even costumed to look like Duncan, and Ma Ubu's exhortations to her husband more than a little resemble Lady Macbeth. Wenceslas' wife has prophetic dreams very similar to those of Caesar's wife. A bear right out of *The Winter's Tale* eats most of Ubu's army near the end. In a parody of the parade of ghostly apparitions in Act V of *Richard III*, Pa Ubu has a similar vision. "Why have you come?" he questions the shades of his victims.

"Because the show is going badly" they respond. It is surprising that the production holds together, since the audience is addressed directly so often. One scene is stopped halfway through because Ubu remembers that two scenes have been skipped. The humor is free-wheeling, at times reminding me of the old Firesign Theater. When the old Nobility beg King Ubu to spare their lives, he gives them a chance by presenting a mock "game show" where the category is "Reagan Fuck-ups." The nobility are executed for the wrong answer. Likewise, the "Financial advisors," an identically costumed chorus of moustached, cigar-chomping Groucho Marxes who move in unison, get a similar opportunity to play charades for their lives. They get the right answer, but are executed for not getting a laugh. There are references to everything from *My Favorite Martian* and "Eggo Waffles " to Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, evoked by Ma and Pa Ubu in the last scene as they sneak out of Poland and sail into the sunset.

The Jarry plot is the basic scene-by-scene scenario for Irondale's *Ubu*. The hen-pecked Pa Ubu is pushed by his wife into leading a coup to topple King Wenceslas of Poland and seize the crown for himself. He is aided, in the Irondale production, by Manure, Duke of Lithuania. Ubu redistributes the wealth ("Ninety per cent of the wealth for me!"), doublecrosses everyone and is transformed from "a skinny little runt" to a bloated hedonist with pillows padding his belly. But Ubu remains the Master of Ceremonies, the clown controlling the action, also doubling as narrator and interpreter. He is constantly improvising one-liners and slipping quick jokes to the audience. Each sequence or scene is like a Saturday Night Live version of the Jarry original. The play becomes a pretext for the company to hang its jokes on. When the conspirators plan the murder of Wenceslas, Manure (Paul Lazar), Duke of Lithuania, gets a little carried away in his enthusiasm:

MANURE. My plan ... is to take my stiff, hard, gleaming sword out of its sheath and shove it into his parted flesh and start to thrust, thrust, thrust (getting excited).

UBU. Cut through the hormones, Manure!

Later, when Manure gets similarly excited by the prospect of total war against the anti-Ubu armies, Pa Ubu cuts him off with: "That's fine for you, you're into that quasi-homosexual ritualistic behavior." Ubu continuously switches from character to actor to clown. He taunts the chained and manacled Manure with:

UBU. This is it. You're no getting out of here. You're gonna die. You ain't ever gonna be in Shakespeare in the Park, you're never gonna do that Dr. Pepper commercial, never be on David Letterman.

The most interesting incorporation of the audience into the performance is a series of abrupt interruptions of the play's action, modeled on the Aristophanic *parabasis*. Sometimes Ubu steps out of the play to explain some aspect of improvisational theater or the company's work. At one point Ubu paces through the audience and muses:

Those of you who've seen our plays before know that we're a political company. You may be wondering why is this political company doing a play about shit? Not only about shit, but shit for shit's sake.

Ubu promises that the play will get more political. Later, General Lasky, Commander of the pro-Ubu armies, marches out and tells the audience that the company has been heavily criticized by "textual purists" for mutilating Jarry's text. In an effort to be more faithful to the original script, a simultaneous French reading of the text will now be given so that the critics can check for accuracy. He then introduces Sven, a Swedish-born graduate of the Sorbonne, who proceeds to translate everything being said into French (with a noticeable Swedish lilt). The situation becomes hilarious as Sven tries to "take over the play," getting in the way of the actors and turning even commonplace exchanges into wildly funny sequences. In effect, we are following several different levels of action or "texts within a text:" the text of Jarry's *Ubu*, the Irondale's commentary on that text, and another "text" created by the improvisation and dialogue with the audience.

Despite the numerous contemporary references, the production is not overtly or obviously political. The specific political references, jokes and parallels all seem part of the overall comedic momentum, not its point. But Ma and Pa Ubu perhaps represent a more insidious attack on middle class values, habits and ethics. Pa Ubu is so likeable ("the Santa Claus of the Atomic Age" as one critic has put it) not because he is a negation of bourgeois values, but their apotheosis. Ubu knows no moderation he is bourgeois values writ large, taken to extremes. He is the ultimate glutton, miser, sadist and egomaniac. Ubu is cold, raw bourgeois instinct with bad manners and without tact. He has no pretenses and the Ubu Administration has no P.R. director. Ubu is the bourgeoisie seen from the belly down. Appropriately, the distinguishing mark of the pro-Ubu armies is their stomachs: the Ubu Loyalists all have padded paunches like their leader.

The production attempts to move to a political level through the use of nonspecific and non-verbal techniques. The play begins with the company singing "I'm so happy to be an American" and ends with a flag-waving rendition of "It's a Grand Old Flag." Beginning with the anti-Ubu Revolution, led by Buggerless, son (played by a woman) of the executed King, the purely physical, mimed aspect of the production increases. When Ubu exhorts his troops into war frenzy, a loud electronic metronome starts. The actors begin a sequence which I can only describe as a "biomechanical gestus of war ritual." This is repeated during battle sequences. In the middle of the rousing flag-waving finale, the electronic cue comes again; the actors almost robot-like respond frantically to the cue. The metronome beats faster and faster as the lights fade while the gestus of war continues.

The Irondale's eclectic techniques, their ability to bring a contemporary feel to the imagination of the performance and, above all, the intense and dynamic audience-actor bond created by the improvisational nature of the performance, puts the audience in a very active relationship to the text and the theatrical event. The Irondale's work is always "in progress;" a play is rehearsed and performed over a period of years. The

rehearsal process never stops, and the company stresses that performances are actually "shared rehearsals." The Irondale's commitment to improvisational performance encourages the actors to experiment and make changes during performance, so that no two performances are the same. The performance text continues to evolve with parts being added or dropped. What we have is a very close parallel to the textual/performance process of the classical age of *commedia dell'arte*. Actors can discover a specific *burla* or "running gag" that works for this specific audience, or try to see how far the audience will go in a specific vein. They are also free to comment broadly on anything from current events to the performance and the audience. Rather than attempting to create any type of consistent or conventional characterization, the *Ubu* company is a company of clowns that seems to be making-up the characters as they go along, employing anything from song-and-dance, stand-up comedy, acrobatics, to low farce and mime.

Most theater seeks to render the audience passive; the result is the deadening feel to so many contemporary productions. It seeks to bludgeon us into a lethargic loss of individuality, to surrender up our consciousness so that our experience can be shaped and manipulated by the production. This technique is not without its social ramifications. Brecht was quick to realize that although this model can be made to work for Shakespeare and Ibsen, it also worked for Goebbels and Hitler something about this "fascist" theater experience can effect our reactions to situations and events outside the theater. Interestingly, the theories of Wagner, Appia and Craig reached their zenith not at Bayreuth but at Nuremburg.

The Irondale' s *Ubu roi* employs another model of consciousness. Its production lives, moment-to-moment, only by the direct, active involvement of its audience. There is no pre-determined terminal point when the production is "finished" or ready. It is a commonplace that comedy is subversive. The "low comedy" technique that marks clowning is perhaps anti-authoritarian by its very nature, and this type of satire is itself an act of rebellion. Clearly, Jarry's play is a rebellion against bourgeois values, ethics and "good taste." The Irondale Ensemble attempts to extend this revolt further not simply by rebelling against Jarry's text but by the company's revolt against the notion of the fixed text and their refusal to accept the authoritarian restraints imposed upon conventional theater performance.

Source: Michael Zelenak. "Ubu Rides Again: The Irondale Project and the Politics of Clowning" in *Theatre*, Vol. XVII, no. 3, Summer/Fall, 1987, pp. 43^5.

Adaptations

The Gertrude Stein Repertory Theatre has plans to present UBU WEDNESDAYS, "an exciting new multi-media look of the creation of the innovative UBU PROJECT. Collaborating with artists in Japan and Russia, GSRT is developing new theatre for the twenty-first century by integrating traditional stage-bound techniques with the limitless space of the World Wide Web." The UBU PROJECT is the GSRT's original, full-length adaptation of Alfred Jarry's 1896 work, *Ubu Roi*. The project features live actors present in the performance space, projected characters via video-conferencing, and "Digital Puppets" derived from the Japanese performance traditions of *bunraku* and *ningyo buri*. More information can be found on the World Wide Web at http://www.gertstein.org/details/pro-ubu.htm.

The American Repertory Theatre presented *Ubu Rock* by Shelley Berc and Andrei Belgrader based upon *Ubu Roi*. Music and lyrics by Rusty Magee, directed by Andrei Belgrader. A special return engagement was sponsored by the Boston Phoenix and WFNX-FM. This performance closed March 23,1996, at the J_x)eb Drama Center.

Topics for Further Study

Playwright Eugene lonesco has written that his plays are not exercises in absurdity but denunciations of our decaying language. How might *Ubu Roi* fall into that description?

Many critics have said that *Ubu Roi* satirizes the bourgeois values of turn of the century European society. Show how the actions and character of Pere Ubu accomplish this satire.

Scholars have frequently remarked on the allusions to Shakespeare found in *Ubu Roi*. Find and explain specific references to *Hamlet, Julius Caesar*, and *Macbeth* in this play and comment on their effectiveness as a dramatic tool.

The first public performance of *Ubu Roi* caused a riot in the Theatre de FOeuvre. Research this opening performance and observe not only what happened but how some of the eyewitnesses reacted to this. Compare these reactions to those that accompanied the opening of "controversial" plays such as Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* or *Hair* by Gerome Ragni, James Rado, and Gait McDermot.

Compare and Contrast

Late-1800s: In the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71) France loses the Alsace and Lorraine regions. It is the end of the French monarchy. The war, however, does not slow industrial expansion, which continues at a rapid pace. The artistic and cultural scene flourishes and witnesses the Impressionists, Art Nouveau, and the novels of Flaubert and Zola.

Today: With the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union, the Cold War ends. The U.S. economy thrives, even in the face of "mini-wars " with Iraq and Serbia. The Impressionists still draw a crowd as museums sell out shows of Monet.

Late-1800s: The Industrial Revolution changes the face of England, the Continent, and the United States. Factories are churning out goods at an unprecedented rate.

Today: The Industrial Revolution has moved to other countries where consumer goods, like electronic equipment and clothing, can be manufactured for less. Charges of "sweatshop labor" are leveled against many prominent American companies.

Late-1800s: Pere Ubu shocks the Paris theatre going audience and causes rioting in the seats when the first word he utters is considered profanity.

Today: Cable television brings profanity in film to living rooms while the internet makes other unsavory forms of content such as hate propaganda and child pornography available.

What Do I Read Next?

Two works by French author Albert Camus explore the concept of the absurd in modern literature. *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger* emphasize the psychological implications of the absurd.

Waiting for Godot, a play written in French by Irish born playwright Samuel Beckett, is a tragicomedy in which nothing happens except conversations that suggest the meaninglessness of life. Although bleak and austere, the drama is humorous, making a statement about the will to live and the ability to hope when hope is lost.

According to *The Reader's Encyclopedia*, the plays of Eugene Ionesco are characterized by deliberate *non sequiturs*, the logic of nightmares, and strange metamorphoses. These farces are essentially comic, however, because Ionesco is sympathetic to any human attempt, inadequate or otherwise, at communication and love. Two of his better-known works are *The Chairs* and *Rhinoceros.*

The Maids and *The Balcony* by French dramatist and novelist Jean Genet reveal a deep concern with the illusory nature of reality, particularly with the definitions of good and evil by a society that exhibits duplicity and hypocrisy.

Further Study

http://hamp.hampshire.edu/~ngzF92/jarrypub/commence.html.

This site has a brief biography of Jarry, as well as links to other Jarry sites. The Bibliography of English Translations link may prove especially helpful.

http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~art/ubu.html.

This site for a production of *Ubu Rock* also contains an interesting set of links to online articles concerning *Ubu Roi*. The article on the play's opening night in December of 1896 may prove particularly illuminating.

Shattuck, Roger. *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant Garde in France, 1885 to World War I: Alfred Jarry, Henry Rousseau, Erik Satie and Guillaume Apollinair*, Random House, 1979.

This influential volume examines the cultural upheaval brought about by such turn-of-the-century artists as Jarry and Composer Erik Satie. Shattuck discusses how the arts were driven into a period of renewal and accomplishment and how the ground-work for Dada-ism and Surrealism was laid.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

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

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□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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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.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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