

FIVE PLAYS IN SEARCH OF THE ABSURD

KIMBERLY SUE BEEGLE

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the roots of the dramatic literary movement known as the “Theatre of the Absurd.” In his book, The Theatre of the Absurd, Martin Esslin was the first to categorize theatrical Absurdism as a literary genre, focusing upon avant garde plays written during the 1940s and ‘50s. In order to determine the origins of the Absurd, five plays written between 1888 and 1925 were examined in relation to the criteria Esslin developed for Absurdism. These plays were Ubu Roi by Alfred Jarry, The Ghost Sonata by August Strindberg, Six Characters in Search of an Author by Luigi Pirandello, The Adding Machine by Elmer Rice, and Spurt of Blood by Antonin Artaud. By investigating Esslin's criteria for dramatic Absurdism in relation to the five plays under examination, this discourse satisfied two questions: elements of the Theatre of the Absurd are present in works written before 1940, and those elements can be identified as the six criteria Esslin developed for Absurdism.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose . . .

Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless (Ionesco, 1957).

In this excerpt taken from his essay on Kafka, Eugène Ionesco defines his interpretation of the term “absurd.” This philosophy, commonly identified as Existentialism, has inspired a host of playwrights who have contributed to an informal movement now known as the “Theatre of the Absurd.” The term “Theatre of the Absurd” came into prominence through the title of a book written by Martin Esslin. In this book, Esslin examines and categorizes playwrights such as Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, and Max Frisch, as well as other twentieth century dramatists, based upon common “Absurd” themes that are present in all of their works (Esslin, 1983, 15-17).

No curriculum or formal method of writing theatrical Absurdism exists; nor do the playwrights Esslin discusses in The

Theatre of the Absurd belong or contribute to an organized school of thought that results in the formation of the Theatre of the Absurd.

Esslin's purpose is to identify and discuss major twentieth century playwrights whose works are linked by universal characteristics and themes.

The subject matter of the Theatre of the Absurd is derived from the Existential philosophy of dramatic writers such as Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre. Esslin states that the theme manifested in the Theatre of the Absurd is "the metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition," the same thought found in works by Camus and Sartre (24-25). However, the underlying difference between Existentialist drama and Theatre of the Absurd lies in technique. While Camus and Sartre were writing about the irrationality of humans, they were presenting this irrationality in a highly rational and logical format. Absurdist drama thematically acknowledges human irrationality but mirrors that theme through irrational and illogical presentation. Therefore, Theatre of the Absurd seeks harmony between theme and technique. Esslin elaborates upon that relationship by saying that "the Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the

human condition, it merely presents it in being, that is, in terms of concrete stage images” (24-25).

In The Theatre of the Absurd, Esslin details the prominent traits characteristic of Absurdism. Esslin arrived at these conclusions by analyzing the numerous examples of Absurdist drama being written in the 1940s and '50s, and extracting the common attributes found in all of these works. These criteria are as follows:

- Absurd plays contain no concrete, logical plot structure.
- Characters are used only to draw attention to the theme of the play. They are undeveloped and secondary to theme.
- The theme of Absurd plays illustrates the disparity of the mortal state, and usually goes unresolved.
- The plays do not mimic “normal” life. Instead they present the abnormal, dark side of human nature that most people find painful and frightening and choose to avoid.
- Poignant dialogue is not used to portray theme; rather, the theme is reflected in failed communication through the utterance of scattered thoughts.
- Absurd plays are highly unconventional in presentation

(21- 22).

Not only can the above criteria be used to examine Absurdist drama of the 1940s and '50s, but it can be used to determine whether or not Absurd elements existed in plays written before 1940.

By studying the roots of an idea or philosophy, a better understanding and appreciation of that concept can be obtained. In Lunatics, Lovers and Poets: The Contemporary Experimental Theatre, Margaret Croyden states that “new movements are to some extent continuations of old ones. And old ones were at sometime new” (1974, XVI-XVII). Knowing the roots of the Theatre of the Absurd enables an individual to see where the rudimentary elements began, and how those ideas evolved or endured over time. Esslin himself states that an examination of the Theatre of the Absurd will show that they are “part of an old tradition that may at times have been submerged but that can be traced back to antiquity” (28). And while that is true, it is evident that Esslin’s Absurdist drama was not as prevalent during the 1920s as it was later in the 1940s and '50s.

Elements of the Absurd, such as language use and irrational plot structure can be found and identified in plays written during the 1920s and before. The plays that will be examined in this study are

Ubu Roi (1888) by Alfred Jarry, The Ghost Sonata (1907) by August Strindberg, Six Characters in Search of An Author (1921) by Luigi Pirandello, The Adding Machine (1923) by Elmer Rice, and The Spurt of Blood (1925) by Antonin Artaud.

Through an examination of the critical and dramatic literature, this study will seek to answer two questions. First, by looking at the Theatre of the Absurd as part of a perennial ritual, this survey will attempt to satisfy the extent to which elements of the Absurd can be found in plays written before 1940. The second aim of this discourse will be to identify those elements by comparing them to the criteria Esslin outlined in his book.

Critics who explore the Theatre of the Absurd frequently mention several literary movements. By defining these movements, a greater understanding of the dramatic forms and styles that influenced theatrical Absurdism can be obtained.

Discussion of Terms

The stage is a mirror in which are reflected the manners and peculiarities of life of its contemporaneous day. So the drama is always affected to a large degree by the

thought and by the social, political and economic customs of the generation from which it springs. Much of such drama is ephemeral and transitory, and soon disappears, but the part of it which survives becomes the epitome of its own era. So it is understandable that it should reflect all the freakish extremes of its time, as well as all normal lines of artistic endeavor (Belasco, 1969, 229).

In The Theatre Through Its Stage Door, David Belasco expresses the belief that the theatre is a reflection of its society. In discussing the Theatre of the Absurd, Esslin adds to this observation by explaining that Absurdism is a rebellion against the complacent nature of society during the 1940s and '50s, particularly "medieval beliefs still held and overlaid by 18th century rationalism and mid-19th century Marxism" (22-23).

Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot is a prime example of humans' disillusioned search for a meaningful existence and their inability to find one. Appalled by the violence and anti-Semitism of the Germans, Beckett served as a member of an underground

Resistance group during World War II. Waiting for Godot was written after the liberation of Paris in 1945. Many writers and critics have offered suggestions as to the identity of Godot. However, revealing Godot's significance is not the key to understanding the theme of Beckett's play. The author's intention can best be seen in the following line from Godot: "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful" (Beckett, 1959, 41).

In this study, the background of the Theatre of the Absurd will be traced by focusing primarily on the period between 1888 and 1925. Various social movements were given expression through dramatic literature. These movements did not occur chronologically, but rather, overlapped and influenced each other. The five plays that have been chosen for study are representative of at least one of these literary styles. To benefit the aim of this study, the terms "Avant Garde," "Symbolism," "Experimentalism," "Expressionism," and "Surrealism," will need to be clearly defined so that a proper understanding of earlier theatrical literary movements can be obtained. In The Theatre of the Absurd, Esslin stated that Absurdism is "a return to the old, even archaic traditions" (327). By examining these earlier conditions, a greater insight into the roots of

theatrical Absurdism can be gained.

The term “avant garde” has been used generically to describe any type of non-traditional art. In Holy Theatre: Ritual and the Avant Garde, Christopher Innes states that the avant garde originated during the 19th century and referred to a group of anti-political artists who attempted to bring about social change. They used their works to disavow traditional artistic and societal values (1981, 2). Innes explains the avant garde in these words:

The avant garde is usually seen as a whole in terms of what they are against--the rejection of institutions and established artistic conventions or the antagonism toward the public--while any positive programme tends to be dismissed as the exclusive property of isolated and mutually antagonistic sub-groups (2).

In reference to this study, the avant garde can be seen as those playwrights who have written non-traditional plays. Dramatists, such as Artaud and Jarry, rebelled against conventional literary methods because they viewed them as inadequate vehicles of expression. As a result of the efforts of the avant garde, several “movements” have been attributed to their work. The first that will

be examined in Symbolism.

In 1885, Stephane Mallarme´ developed a “manifesto” for the Symbolist movement that was in direct opposition to the realistic artistic works that were being produced in France at that time. In History of the Theatre, Oscar Brockett elaborates on the philosophy of Symbolism:

To the Symbolists, subjectivity, spirituality, and mysterious internal and external forces represented a higher form of truth than that to be derived from the mere observance of outward appearance. This deeper significance, they argued, cannot be represented directly but can only be evoked through symbols, legends, myths, and moods (1974, 487).

The dramatic views of Mallarme´, according to Innes, emphasized the mystery surrounding purpose in human life through the use of lyrical and implied language that was expressed on stage in very basic terms, using only the most necessary props and scenic devices. However, theatrical Symbolism did not become prevalent until around 1892, when the Theatre de l’Oeuvre began producing works using symbolic stage practices. The essence of theatrical

Symbolism is evident in the belief that the visual image transcends the spoken word. Abandoning the conventional proscenium framed stage that was common to the 19th century, Symbolists reduced the setting to isolated objects that elicited the theme of the play through their symbolic delineation, and they used colors that evoked certain emotions. As a result, Symbolism represents total artistic individualism (19-20). An example of the use of symbolism on stage can be seen in the following description of the play Pelléas and Mélisande:

No properties or furniture were used; the stage was lighted from overhead and most of the action passed in semidarkness; a gauze curtain, hung between the actors and the audience, gave the impression that mist enveloped the stage; backdrops, painted in grayed tone emphasized the air of mystery. The actors spoke in a staccato chant and behaved like sleepwalkers (Brockett, 488).

Playwright Alfred Jarry has been associated with the Symbolist movement because of his belief and expression of artistic freedom, as well as for his use of language and syntax. Jarry,

however, built upon the ideas of Symbolism and surpassed them, formulating his own style of verbal and visual expression. While Symbolists were using signs to depict or represent the “real” world on stage, Jarry used symbolism to delineate an imaginary world, using a creative linguistic style, to give his realm an existence of its own (Beaumont, 1984, 66-70).

Ubu Roi, perhaps Jarry’s best known play, is a grotesque portrayal of human nature. The main character, Ubu, is the embodiment of all that is indecent, ugly, and irrational in humankind. Although Jarry’s views did not receive wide acceptance when Ubu Roi was first performed, his unique writing style had a profound effect over playwrights like Strindberg and Artaud, crediting him with the unofficial title of “the father of Absurdism” (Brockett, 488). Jarry’s influence will be examined further in this study.

Another anti-realism movement was taking place around the turn of the century and can be identified as “Experimentalism.” Experimentalism was similar to Symbolism in philosophy and in its view of humans, but it was less satirical than Jarry’s portrayal of irrationality. One of the earliest playwrights to initiate the trend toward Experimentalism was August Strindberg. Writing after his

“inferno crisis”--a period of mental instability--Strindberg created what he called “dream plays.” In the following passage, Strindberg elaborates on the philosophy behind dream plays:

The author has tried to imitate the disconnected but seemingly logical form of the dream. Time and space do not exist. On an insignificant background of reality, imagination designs free fancies, absurdities, and improvisations (Strindberg, 1966, 193).

In these dream plays, Strindberg manipulated reality based upon his own perceptions. Logical plot structure, with regard to time and space, was abandoned, and reality and illusion were combined. Oscar Brockett comments:

Strindberg treats with great compassion alienated man, lost and rootless, seeking meaning in an incomprehensible universe, trying to reconcile the most disparate elements: lust and love, body and spirit, filth and beauty (492).

At his death in 1912, Strindberg was one of the most popular dramatists in the world. Part of that popularity can no doubt be attributed to the enormous interest in the psychoanalytic theories

of Sigmund Freud and his The Interpretation of Dreams. Freud's emphasis on understanding dreams as a way of unlocking the subconscious, in connection with his vision of reality which intertwined the rational and irrational as well as the conscious and unconscious, afforded much credibility to Strindberg's style (Brockett, 493).

According to Croyden's Lunatics, Lovers and Poets, Expressionism came into being in the late 19th century when German playwrights and painters disregarded both Realism and Symbolism, and began using their art as an outlet for self-expression. Expressionism is also the opposing response to authoritarianism and materialism. Just as the Realists portrayed reality based on an objective view, and the Symbolists attempted to ignore the irrationality of the real world by creating a world of their own, the Expressionists sought to express, not depict, the grotesque, the violent, and the eccentric through satire and sarcasm (20-21).

In The Reader's Encyclopedia of World Drama, Gerald Weales describes the expressionist as "one who takes the whole human race and the entire cosmos as his province, but he shows it to us as it is seen through the eyes of one character, invariably an alter ego of

himself.” Furthermore, Weales states that the dramatist compels his interpretation of reality on society, rather than society compelling its reality on the dramatist (1969, 256).

According to A Mirror to Life: A History of Western Theatre, Expressionists tried to depict the emotions and inner thoughts of the characters as opposed to emphasizing the reality that surrounded them.

The focus was on the protagonist and the journeys of his or her soul through a montage of seemingly unrelated events. Thus there was an effort to displace the unities of time, place, and action by varying the direction and the speed of the thoughts articulated. The selection, order, and arrangement of the events of expressionist plays are done for heightened theatricality, not for logical consequence. There is an absolute rejection of the representation of the actual and factual in favor of exaggeration and distortion so as to point up thoughts on particular social, political, and psychological issues (Grose and Kenworthy, 1985, 520-521).

Among the playwrights who will be discussed in this study,

Luigi Pirandello and Elmer Rice are considered to be Expressionists. Pirandello's Six Characters in Search of an Author is his questioning of the concept of "truth" and reality, as well as Pirandello's abandonment all the conventional approaches used in the theatre at that time. Manipulating his use of realism, Pirandello used this approach as a means of pointing out the inconsistencies of realism. The tone of Pirandello's work is "pessimistic" and "based on the conviction that the problems of life are unsolvable" (Brustein, 1964, 283). Rudolph Binion expounds upon Pirandello's self-expression in Six Characters in Search of an Author:

It is the instinctive, all-human mechanism of traumatic reliving that makes the very strangeness in Six Characters so compellingly real. The first place to look for an answer is in the personal experiences behind them. That is where Pirandello himself hints for us to look when in Six Characters he depicts a stageplay as a replay from life. The referent in his life for the trauma at the core of Six Characters is un-mistakable, for the play began germinating after his wife accused him of incest with their daughters (1981, 131-132).

Another example of Expressionism can be seen in Elmer Rice's The Adding Machine. Regarded as one of the first successful Expressionist dramas in America, The Adding Machine is an unrealistic portrayal of "Mr. Zero," the clerk who gets replaced by an adding machine. Frank Durham's Elmer Rice elaborates on the technique of Expressionism:

The Expressionist seeks at once to be both objective and subjective. His aim is to give abstraction of life, to present its essences as he sees it. To do so, he must alter the "surface reality" in many ways: the distortion of scenery, makeup, and physical and temporal elements; the stylization of language and action; and often illogical but symbolic use of almost any staging device (1970, 40).

In American Dramatists 1918-1945, Bernard Dukore describes Expressionism as a departure from "surface realism" in an attempt to portray another reality. Dukore elaborates on the alternate reality of expressionism:

As its name implies, such a play externally "expresses" the abstract or "inner life." Characters may be

fragmented or reduced to type. Time may be telescoped or extended. Scenery and lighting may abandon realism to express mood, feeling or idea. Settings might depict the essence of environment; and if they include realistic elements they highlight or give them a non-realistic context. Expressionistic dialogue includes clipped, telegraphic fragments of sentences, soliloquies, choral or group chants or speech, and both poetry and prose (1984, 29-30).

Surrealism, the final avant garde movement under consideration, was influenced directly by preceding movements such as Symbolism and Expressionism. It advanced “a new reality based on artistic truth defined as the subconscious dream state of the mind” (Grose and Kenworthy, 524-525). In The Surrealist Connection, David Zinder explains that for Surrealists, art was the end product of an attempt to elicit knowledge from the subconscious. The way they communicated those results was as important as the art form itself, thus supporting the belief that Surrealism was inherently theatrical (1980, 37). Zinder elaborates on this view:

One source of the surrealist movement's particular affinity with the theatre lies in the fact that the theatre is, after all, the one art form which absolutely demands that creation be in the form of an immediate experience by an artist together with the immediate presence and participation of the audience--who is even, in a sense, sharing the artist's experience (37).

The language and stage practices used by surrealists, such as Antonin Artaud, have been described as "the most powerful mental explosives ever invented" (Gaensbauer, 1991, 14). Artaud sought to revolutionize the theatre and the conventional practices associated with it. He called for a "cruel, physical theatre" utilizing a unique and different language form. Artaud maintained that the theatre was lost in its attempt to portray reality and that only by "furnishing the spectator with the truthful precipitates of dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, pour out on a level not illusory, but interior" can the theatre serve its true purpose (Artaud, 1958, 92).

By defining these terms and their relationship to the theatre, a consistent pattern begins to form. Possessing a few distinguishing

traits, all of these avant garde movements are very similar in purpose and practice. Each movement is a revolt against the complacency of its age, finding expression through dramatic and symbolic means. Thus, it is evident why the Absurdism of the 1940s and '50s appears to be a conglomeration of earlier theatrical movements. By discussing these antecedents, this study will provide a better understanding of the origins of the Theatre of the Absurd.

Literature Review

Comprehensive works on the Theatre of the Absurd are few in number, perhaps because Martin Esslin's The Theatre of the Absurd is an exhaustive study. Many view his book as a bible on Absurdism. The guidelines Esslin compiled for Absurdism provide clear and indisputable criteria by which other avant garde movements can be distinguished. He originated a means of defining a theatrical movement, just as August Strindberg did with dream plays and Antonin Artuad did with his Theatre of Cruelty.

While the main focus of The Theatre of the Absurd is centered

on playwrights of the 1940s and '50s, Esslin includes a chapter entitled "The Tradition of the Absurd" in which he mentions prior movements such as Symbolism and Expressionism and discusses the influence they had upon the theatre of their day. Esslin states, "What may strike the unprepared spectator as iconoclastic and incomprehensible innovation is in fact merely an expansion, revaluation, and development of procedures that are familiar" (327).

Building upon Esslin, several texts succeed in analyzing the societal concerns that influenced playwrights to produce Absurd plays during the 1940s and after, as well as the impact of Absurdism upon theatrical realism. However, no textbook or instructional method for writing literary Absurdism exists. As the focus of this study concentrates on the elements of Absurdism contained in plays written between 1888 and 1925, primary sources dealing specifically with this subject are non-existent. A mass of information is available, however, in comprehensive historical overviews of playwrights or early theatrical movements.

Robert Brustein's The Theatre of Revolt is an exhaustive study of several acclaimed playwrights, such as Strindberg, Ibsen, O'Neill, and Genet, with an attempt to classify them as "revoltists."

Brustein defines the theatre of revolt as “the theatre of the great insurgent modern dramatists, where myths of rebellion are enacted before a dwindling number of spectators in a flux of vacancy, bafflement, and accident” (4). First published a year after The Theatre of the Absurd, Brustein’s The Theatre of Revolt is organized in a similar fashion to Esslin’s compilation and description of Absurd theatre. Throughout his book, Brustein parallels Absurdism and the Theatre of Revolt. Both genres are rooted in existential philosophy with the portrayal of theme being the primary aim. However, the only significant variation is in the subject matter expressed through the theme. Where Absurd drama emphasizes the irrationality of human, Revolt drama stresses rebellion against God and society. Brustein elaborates on this by saying “the theatre of revolt, then, is the temple of a priest without a God, without an orthodoxy, without even much of a congregation, who conducts his service within the hideous architecture of the absurd” (16).

Christopher Innes’ Holy Theatre is a thorough chronological explication of avant garde movements that influenced the theatrical conventions of their day. Innes examines symbolism in relation to Alfred Jarry, as well as Strindberg’s development of dream states.

Expressionism is discussed, particularly in relation to German theatre, and Innes also looks at surrealism and Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. Holy Theatre includes a detailed chapter on Absurdism, relying heavily upon Martin Esslin's findings. Innes' book presents an organized view of many of the avant garde movements that have greatly influenced theatrical practices.

Avant Garde Theatre 1892-1992, the revised and up-dated version of Innes' Holy Theatre, examines the evolution of avant garde theatre from the 1890s to the present. Unlike the original version, Avant Garde Theatre includes recent developments in psychotherapy, critical theory and anthropology as it relates to expressionistic and symbolic techniques utilized in modern day theatre. Innes examines Strindberg's dream structure, as well as Artaud's "theatre of cruelty."

Margaret Croyden's Lunatics, Lovers and Poets is a rigorous compilation of the antecedents of the Absurd, as well as the avant garde movements that were contemporaries of the Absurd. Like Innes, Croyden's study begins with symbolism, focusing heavily upon the works of Alfred Jarry. Expressionism and surrealism are also examined at length, as well as Antonin Artaud's visual images and

his “sounds beyond words.” Croyden states that each avant garde movement “has had its antecedents, prophets, and radical fringe, and each, after producing innovations, shocks, and sensations, reached its full tide before ebbing and reappearing in another form” (32).

Grose and Kenworthy's A Mirror to Life: A History of Western Theatre and Oscar Brockett's History of the Theatre are comprehensive volumes charting the evolution of theatre from its origins to the present day. Both works contain detailed sections exploring early theatrical movements such as symbolism and expressionism as well as the phenomenon of the Theatre of the Absurd. Playwrights, such as Alfred Jarry, August Strindberg, and Antonin Artaud, are examined at length in relation to their works as well as their production practices.

As the critical sources are limited to those references that discuss components of Esslin's criteria as applied to symbolism, expressionism, etc., an examination of the dramatic literature is necessary as well. This study is not an inquiry into the movements that preceded Absurdism, rather it is an examination of certain plays that contain Absurdist elements as they existed prior to Esslin's categorization of the Theatre of the Absurd. Therefore, the

content of this discourse will rely heavily upon the text of the plays in question. These plays will be analyzed in relation to Esslin's criteria, arranged and examined according to the order of the criteria.

Alfred Jarry's Ubu Roi, a biting satire which begins with a four-lettered word and ridicules the sacred values held in esteem by the bourgeois society, is the first play that will be discussed. "Ubu" is a hideously grotesque man with a bald, pear-shaped head and gigantic flabby stomach. He embodies all that Jarry found irrational, vulgar, and ignorant in society. The play uses undeveloped characters and an illogical plot structure that helps to emphasize its theme.

In Alfred Jarry: Nihilism and the Theatre of the Absurd, Maurice Marc LaBelle addresses Jarry's approach to stage techniques and conventions. LaBelle states that Jarry used Symbolism as a manipulating tool, seducing the audience out of their rationality by using "logic to destroy logic" (1980, 54-55). LaBelle goes on to discuss Jarry's quest for an "abstract" theatre, one that would draw the audience into the creative process, permitting the spectator to visualize himself in the characters he sees on stage (55).

August Strindberg's The Ghost Sonata makes use of what Strindberg called "dream states." While Strindberg wrote over fifty plays, a set pattern or formula is difficult to establish, if one is distinguishable at all. However, elements of the Absurd can be identified in The Ghost Sonata in the use of long pauses to emphasize the failure of communication and the themes of alienation and death.

The Ghost Sonata is one of Strindberg's best known experimental plays. He presents a plot structure that appears highly realistic in form, but is unreal and dreamlike in effect. In The Social and Religious Plays of Strindberg, John Ward describes the theme of The Ghost Sonata as having an "all-embracing disgust with self and others, with the living and inanimate" (1980, 251). Ward further states that Strindberg's experimental style encompasses a "mixture of symbolism and expressionism which anticipates surrealism" (251).

Luigi Pirandello's Six Characters in Search of an Author, as in all of the five plays being analyzed, intertwines theme with stage techniques in order to emphasize the playwright's point. Through Six Characters, Pirandello uses realism to portray reality. Rather

than invent an imaginary existence or a dream-like illusion, he uses a bare stage, prohibiting his audience from escaping reality. By not allowing the audience to be transported to an illusionary realm, Pirandello confronted them with the disparity of human nature.

Roger W. Oliver discusses another common thread connecting each of the five plays being examined, that of noncommunication, in his book Dreams of Passion: The Theatre of Luigi Pirandello. Oliver states that "outsiders try to communicate their problems to an established group and fail, demonstrating, in the process, not only the difficulty of human communication but also the barriers that people erect in order to resist a new, more complex mode of perception" (1979, 53). As is common among the Absurdist works of Esslin's era, Pirandello's play ends with a lack of resolution and finality.

Elmer Rice's The Adding Machine, the fourth play to be studied, is perhaps the most organized, in terms of plot content, of any of the five plays being examined. However, Rice implements a different type of structure, organizing the play into scenes rather than separating it into acts. While the plot content may be organized, The Adding Machine is far from being a realistic play.

In American Dramatists 1918-1945, Dukore describes the scene in which “Mr. Zero” and “Daisy” are calculating figures. As they tabulate aloud, they are expressing feelings and emotions to each other without actually communicating their true intent. The repetition of “a dollar” reinforces their monotonous existence. Like Pirandello’s play, The Adding Machine ends with a lack of resolution and a feeling of despair (30).

The final play that will be examined is Antonin Artaud’s Spurt of Blood. A brief look at this play reveals to the reader that it is out of the ordinary, as its length is approximately one and half pages, yet it incorporates eleven characters. Artaud’s play is violent and surreal, implementing ritualized language and grotesque images. In discussing his works, Artaud wrote in The Theatre and Its Double that his reasoning behind writing such works is to “overturn the customary laws of the theatre” (110). He states that “the grammar of this new language is still to be found. Gesture is its material and its wits; and, if you will, its alpha and omega. It springs from the necessity of speech more than from speech already formed” (110).

By examining the texts of these five plays, as well as selected critical sources associated with them, several distinguishing and

unconventional factors can be identified. By comparing these idiosyncrasies against the guidelines Esslin established for Absurdism in The Theatre of the Absurd, this study will seek to analyze Absurd elements in plays written before 1925, consistent with Esslin's criteria for Absurd works written after 1940.

CHAPTER TWO

PLOT STRUCTURE AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Here you will find actions . . .
and the reasonable use of the improbable
And actors who may be collective or not
Not necessarily taken from mankind
But from the universe (Apollinaire, 1916).

The first and second points of Esslin's criteria for the Theatre of the Absurd are that absurd plays contain no concrete, logical plot structure and characters are undeveloped and used only to draw attention to the theme of the play. Examining plot structure first, Edwin Wilson defines plot in The Theatre Experience as "the selection and arrangement of scenes taken from a story for presentation on the stage. It is what actually happens onstage, not what is talked about" (1991, 152). Plot is normally used to unfold the action of the play in a chronological manner, and reveal the story or theme the author wishes to express. However, in Absurd drama, as well as in the five plays being examined, plot is used only to emphasize or enhance the theme of the play, not to develop or unfold the events of a story.

The plot of Alfred Jarry's Ubu Roi is described by Grose and Kenworthy in A Mirror to Life: A History of Western Theatre as having "qualities of a nightmare in its illogic and its crazy juxtaposition of events and places" (519). Ubu Roi is the humorous and garbled tale of Ubu's attempt to gain political power. The events that take place are highly unrealistic and arbitrary. After murdering the King of Poland, Ubu immediately kills all of his companions, noblemen, judges and financiers, by happily dropping them through a trap door to his "disembraining" machine. He then proceeds to levy enormous taxes and collects the amount due through massive executions and pillaging. Ubu then decides to fight the czar of Russia, and suffering defeat, escapes by ship to Paris. During the voyage, Ubu assumes the captain's duties in an impertinent manner that emphasizes his stupidity and coarseness:

'Bout ship. Let go the anchor. Go about in stays, wear ship, hoist more sail, haul down sail, put the tiller hard over, up with the helm, full speed astern, give her more lee, splice the top gallant. How am I doing? Tight as a rivet! Meet the wave crosswise and everything will be shipshape. Avast there!" (Jarry, 1968, 160)

While the outline of the play may not seem repugnant, Jarry's Ubu Roi was abominable to the French audience of 1888. In describing the techniques of the play, Croyden's Lunatics, Lovers and Poets states "scatalogically, grotesque humor, allusions to the stupidity and rapaciousness of men and monarchs, were radical departures from the formal theatre of the time" (12). The plot of Ubu Roi was designed to portray Jarry's disdain for the society of his day. Rather than satirizing bourgeois ideals, Jarry intended the audience to see itself represented in the person of Ubu. Beaumont points out in Alfred Jarry: A Critical and Biographical Study that Jarry's writings express utter repulsion for the moral degradation and political values, not only of the ruling bourgeoisie, but for society as a whole (104).

While Jarry's Ubu Roi attacks the moral degradation of society, August Strindberg's The Ghost Sonata focuses on the insufficiency of human existence. Identified as a chamber play, a short episodic work usually consisting of only one act, The Ghost Sonata is considered one of Strindberg's best experimental works (Grose and Kenworthy, 430). In "Notes to the Members of the Intimate

Theatre,” the type of structural techniques employed in the play are explained by Strindberg:

The author has tried to imitate the disconnected but seemingly logical form of the dream. Anything may happen; everything is possible and probable. Time and space do not exist. On an insignificant background of reality, imagination designs and embroiders novel patterns: a medley of memories, experiences, free fancies, absurdities and improvisations (1966, 3).

In The Ghost Sonata, Strindberg abolishes the constraints of space, time, and logical sequence and instead presents the plot as if it were a dream. Events melt together in a disorderly fashion, and vastly remote places and times merge together without logical explanation. Grose and Kenworthy elaborate on the composition of the play, explaining that structurally, the play’s arrangement was a drastic departure from the constraints of traditional drama. Because of this, audience members could no longer predict the motivations of characters or rely on them to react logically (430). Grose and Kenworthy further describe The Ghost Sonata as a “study in madness, a combination of the real and insane” (431). The main

reason for its unpredictability is that it progresses in the fashion of a realistic script, but as the plot unfolds, nothing is what it seems.

The following passage from The Ghost Sonata illustrates Strindberg's technique for muddling events by confusing what is real with what appears to be real. The text below is taken from the end of the play in which "the Student" is speaking to "the Girl" and recounting all of his experiences:

When one remains silent too long, it's the same as water that stands still and grows stagnant. That's how it is in this house. There's something stagnating here. And I believed that it was a paradise the first time I saw you come in here. I stood there on a Sunday morning looking in. I saw a Colonel who was no Colonel. I had a benefactor who was a thief, and had to hang himself. I saw a mummy, who was not a mummy. Where can I find anything that maintains what it promises? In my imagination! (1966, 97.)

In The Theatre of Revolt Brustein elaborates on the illusionary structure employed by Strindberg by stating that it reflected the theme that was being expressed. Brustein calls The Ghost Sonata an

existential work “directed against the meaninglessness and contradictions of human existence” (93). By presenting the action of the play as real and then lifting the veil to show that all that seemed true is now false, Strindberg emphasized his belief that the actions of people and human beings themselves were full of inconsistencies and hypocrisy.

The plot of Luigi Pirandello’s Six Characters in Search of An Author has been compared with Strindberg’s dream plays. In The Pirandello Commentaries, Eric Bentley states that in Six Characters “life is a dream” (1986, 61). Bentley is referring specifically to “the dreamlike comings and goings to and for from nowhere” by the characters--“the Six Characters”-- in the play (61). Bentley further states that the plot of the play is very difficult to analyze because it is divulged in “fragments,” much like the pieces of a puzzle that have to be carefully fitted together before revealing a complete picture (58). In regard to time and place, he states that in a realistic play the audience members know exactly when and where the play is set. However, Pirandello gives no clues, with the exception of the one scene that takes place in Madame Pace’s dress

shop. As for “the Actors” and “Director,” we find them on stage and nothing more about their personal lives is revealed (58-59).

When the play begins, the curtain is raised and the stage looks as it would during the daytime for rehearsals. A cast and their director are practicing a play when a group of people walk in and interrupt them. These people are “the Six Characters,” created by an author who refuses to write their story, and they have come to the theatre looking for someone to play out their drama. The Characters are a family torn apart by anger and grief, and they reenact their story for the Actors who attempt to transform it into a finished performance. In Luigi Pirandello, Renate Matthaei states that because the primary action of the play is a succession of short, episodic scenes, the structure appears to be “short circuiting, in a rapid transition from the comic to the tragic, from the naturalistic to the grotesque, from the overstylized to the coarsely spontaneous” (1973, 85-86).

The fourth play under examination, Elmer Rice’s The Adding Machine, is regarded as having a highly expressionistic composition detailing the struggle against the dehumanization of technology. Grose and Kenworthy state that the “philosophy” behind Rice’s

expressionistic style is to reveal to the audience “the inner feelings and experiences of Mr. Zero rather than the outer reality in which he exists” (520). An example illustrating Rice’s use of expressionism can be found in Mrs. Zero’s opening exposition. The play opens in the Zeros’ bedroom, with Mrs. Zero, a bitter housewife, talking continuously about trivial matters, pausing only to breathe. Mr. Zero lies unmoving, prostrate on the bed, a prisoner to his wife’s endless chatter (Rice, 1982, 195).

The Adding Machine is the story of Mr. Zero, a tabulator who is stripped of his dignity when he learns that he is to be replaced after 25 years of employment by a machine. The plot follows Zero from his dull life with an overbearing wife to a fatal encounter in which Zero murders his boss. Tried and convicted, Zero is confined to a cage where he is eating his final meal--eight courses of ham and eggs. A tour guide comes through and exhibits Zero to a crowd of onlookers as the typical “North American Murderer.” Zero eventually arrives in the Elysian Fields where he rejects the happiness offered to him. He learns that he must return to earth and begin all over again as a baby on a downward spiral of reincarnation in which his

life will never improve. In the end, Zero leaves the stage chasing a mirage of hope (Rice, 1982).

On the surface, the plot of The Adding Machine appears to be somewhat logical. However, a close examination reveals many discrepancies that would not be present in a realistic play. After Zero murders his boss, he returns home. When the doorbell rings, he tells his wife that it is someone calling for him. When he opens the door to reveal a policeman, Zero immediately replies, "I've been expectin' you," and pulls out his collar containing bloodstains from the murder and gives it to the policeman. As the policeman handcuffs him, Zero turns to his wife and says, "I gotta go with him. You'll have to dry the dishes yourself." Another example of illogical plot structure is revealed in the Elysian Fields scene. After death, Zero finds himself in a peaceful place, one that resembles heaven. When Zero discovers he is allowed to remain in the Elysian Fields without having to work, he relinquishes paradise in exchange for operating a huge adding machine (Rice, 202-219).

Frank Durham describes the plot of The Adding Machine as "a nightmare of soul-destroying drudgery and routine, of grubby passions unsatisfied, of grubbier dreams unrealized" (40). Durham

goes on to say that Zero exists in a world where he has no dignity nor identity. Through Zero, Rice portrayed people as a dehumanized slave to the machine. Because of this, “symbolically and ironically, such a man is unfit for life on earth and unable to remain in heaven” (Durham, 41).

While the plot of The Adding Machine is illogical, Rice does provide somewhat of an order of events as the action of the play follows Zero through the course of his existence. However, Antonin Artaud’s Spurt of Blood defies order and reason as chronology is avoided in favor of random, episodic events. The reasoning behind Artaud’s writing of the play has come under much scrutiny. Many critics claim this highly irrational and violent work is a result of Artaud’s mental instability. However, others such as J.H. Matthews regard Spurt of Blood as a highly surrealistic play expressing Artaud’s view of man and his failure to communicate. In Theatre of Dada and Surrealism, Matthews explains that technically (in terms of staging and plot composition) and morally (in terms of the opinions being expressed), Artaud’s play manifests the techniques and beliefs of Surrealistic drama. Therefore, the chaotic manner of Spurt of Blood coincides with the shared attitude among Surrealists

that it is not necessary nor mandatory to maintain a logical or sustained plot structure. In fact, structural consistency may be forfeited without apprehension or regret (1974, 140).

Spurt of Blood begins with “the Boy” and “the Girl” affirming their love for each other in a highly stylized and monotone manner. They are interrupted by a noise that sounds like a huge wheel turning and blowing out wind. A storm breaks, during which stars collide and human limbs, columns, masks, and scorpions fall from the sky. The “Knight,” who constantly eats cheese, and the “Wetnurse,” who has huge breasts, appear and claim to be the parents of the Boy and the Girl. Six new characters, including the “Priest and the “Prostitute,” appear just before a thunderstorm begins. An enormous hand reaches down from the sky and grabs the Prostitute by the hair. She bites the hand, which belongs to God, and blood spurts from His wrist. The Prostitute and the Boy rush into each other’s arms. The Wetnurse appears with her breasts deflated and carrying the Girl’s lifeless body under her arm. The Knight asks for more cheese and in response, the Wetnurse lifts up her skirt. Scorpions swarm out from between her thighs and crawl over the

Knight's penis, which swells and bursts. The Boy and the Prostitute leave and the Girl revives and delivers the last line of the play.

Obviously, the plot of Spurt of Blood is highly illogical and grotesque. In his own observations on the theatre, Artaud sheds some light on his method and style of writing by explaining his views on surrealism.

This revolution aims at a general devaluation of values, at the depreciation of the mind, at the demineralization of evidence, at the absolute and renewed confusion of tongues, at changing the level of thought. It aims at breaking and disqualifying logic, which it pursues unto the eradication of its original entrenchments (Matthews, 1974, 135).

Influenced by surrealism, Artaud wrote many essays and manifestos on his views of the theatre. In his essay, "The Theatre and the Plague," Artaud reveals his reasoning behind using such violent content for the action of his plays. He states, "the action of the theatre, like that of the plague, is beneficial, for impelling men to see themselves as they are, it causes the masks to fall, reveals

the lie, the slackness, the baseness and hypocrisy of our world” (1958, 31-32).

After examining the plot structure of each of the five plays, focus can now be placed on Esslin’s second criterion, which is that characters are undeveloped and used only to draw attention to the theme of the play. In The Theatre Experience, Wilson explains that most realistic playwrights portray their characters as everyday people by divulging background information and emphasizing particular personality traits that give the audience insight into their “lives.” These dramatists develop, reveal, and solve the action of the play through the motivation of their characters, much as “real” people would go about solving problems (220). However, for the playwrights of the Absurd as well as the five primary playwrights under examination, characters rarely resemble “real” people in any fashion. They are used primarily to mirror the theme the author wishes to express.

In Jarry’s Ubu Roi, the action of the play revolves around the main character Ubu. In The French Theatre of the Absurd Gaensbauer describes Ubu as an over-inflated Macbeth with a huge ego and lust for greed with an intellect comparable to a “whining, cowardly

moron" (1991, 5). In the forward to her translation of Ubu Roi, Barbara Wright describes his physical appearance as "hideous, grotesque, with a pear-shaped head, practically no hair and an enormous flabby stomach" (1961, vii).

Jarry used Ubu to represent all that he abhorred about bourgeois society, and because of that, the play is regarded as a symbolist work. Some have even suggested that the name "Ubu" was used because of its meaning. In Alfred Jarry: The Man With the Axe, Nigey Lennon explains that "Ubu" has several definitions, including "vulture," "hunter," and "predator" (1984, 45).

In Holy Theatre Innes states that instead of creating realistic and sympathetic characters in Ubu Roi, Jarry developed the characters with child-like disregard. He intended Ubu to be the embodiment of all society's ugly, grotesque, and abhorrent behavior. Innes goes on say that Ubu "reduced kingship to gorging oneself on sausages and wearing an immense hat, economic competition to a kicking, struggling race, social reform to slaughter motivated solely by envious cupidity, battle royal to boastful brawling, and religious faith to fearful superstition manipulated by the unscrupulous for their own benefit" (22). In other words, Ubu was the representation

of what was at the root of bourgeois society. He embodied everything they denounced as immoral, and as a result, Jarry revealed them to be condemned by their own lack of ethics (22).

Jarry used masks and hideous costumes in order to make his characters seem as unrealistic as possible. Other characters were represented by life-size dummies. According to Innes, nothing about Jarry's characterization could be associated with the "psychological depth" normally applied to characters of realistic drama. Innes goes on to say that characters were puppet-like in movement, and their lines were exaggerated and delivered artificially. Character motivation was inconsistent and "inner natures" were conveyed with primitive simplicity, disallowing the characters to reach a level of three-dimensionality (22-23). In The Autobiographies of W.B. Yeats, Yeats states that he was in the audience at the Theatre de l'Oeuvre in 1896 for the first performance of Ubu Roi. Yeats was not fluent enough in French to understand the text of the play, so he describes the activities of the characters.

The characters are supposed to be dolls, toys, marionettes, and now they are all hopping like wooden frogs, and I can see for myself that the chief personage,

who is some kind of King, carries for Sceptre a brush of the kind we use to clean a [water] closet (1958, 233-234).

Unlike the crass characters presented in Ubu Roi, Strindberg's The Ghost Sonata employs abstract and spirit-like characters, resembling souls rather than living beings. In Avant Garde Theatre 1892 - 1992, Innes states that instead of using realistic characters, Strindberg portrays the characters in The Ghost Sonata as "conglomerations of past and present stages of civilization, a fragmentary patchwork of contradictory and transient elements" (1993, 29). Innes further explains that Strindberg believed that humans are "phantoms" existing in an "illusory dream" of life where death is the awakening (35). Strindberg recreated this existence through the characters in The Ghost Sonata.

In his forward to The Ghost Sonata, Robert Corrigan describes the characters as "hollow men who cry out for help" when they are faced with the realization of the "insufficiency of human nature and the inadequacy of the human condition" (xii). Innes elaborates on Corrigan's reference to "human nature" and the "human condition" by stating that Strindberg viewed human beings as "spirits locked in

bodies, serving the life sentence of a materialistic definition of existence" in which pain and suffering are regarded as positive values (1966, 35).

Corrigan goes on to write that Strindberg's characters embody the sense of alienation inextricably felt in The Ghost Sonata. They are depicted as mummies, moving trancelike through a world of "consummate" mental and carnal decay (xiii). An example from the text that illustrates this is the dinner scene in which the corpselike guests are seated, chewing their food in unison during long periods of silence (Strindberg, 1966, 88-89). This scene illustrates the characters' failures to communicate, thus revealing more about the insufficiency and inadequacy of human nature. The motivation behind Strindberg's use of his characters is best explained in Corrigan's statement that the characters "are guilty of being alive." They are "victims of the inexorable processes of dehumanization and in the end, . . . each of the characters is crucified by the human condition" (xiv).

In contrast to presenting a realistic play that focuses on the lives and actions of the characters, Pirandello manipulates his characters so that they draw attention to his theme. In the forward

to Six Characters in Search of an Author, Pirandello states that he does not approach characterization by “presenting a man or a woman and what is special and characteristic about them simply for the pleasure of portraying them; [or] to narrate a particular affair, lively or sad, simply for the pleasure of narrating it” (1952, 209-210). Instead, the characters he creates are the outlets of his message.

Six Characters in Search of An Author utilizes a “group” character concept through two distinct sets of characters: the Actors and the Characters. The play opens with the Actors rehearsing with the Director. The Six Characters, the Father, the Mother, the Step-Daughter, the Son, the Boy, and the Child, are the second group who appear on stage looking for some actors to play out their story. In the stage directions of Six Characters, Pirandello instructs that there must be a distinct visual difference between the Characters and the Actors. Masks are to be worn by the Characters, each one depicting the predominant emotion expressed by that Character, and they are to wear stiff, heavy costumes so that they will look statuesque in their movements. In Luigi Pirandello, Bassnett-McGuire states that Pirandello stresses the

stylization of the Characters' movements in contrast to the naturalness of the Actors. However, the emotions the Characters express as they play out their scenes are to be presented with striking realism (1983, 36-37). In The Pirandello Commentaries, Bentley notes that in a later version of the play, Pirandello called for wax tears to be placed under the eyes of the Mother. The tears, unmoving and frozen in time emphasize the stationary existence of the Characters. As Bentley states, they are from art, whereas the Actors are from life. However, even though the physical appearance of the Characters denies all realism, the audience can relate more to them because they are allowed to witness their emotions and see into their private lives, thus making them appear more real. The actors, on the other hand, seem artificial with their natural movements and forced expression, resulting in the Actors' resemblance to make-believe characters from a play. This union of art and life and the inner weaving of the two are the themes Pirandello is expressing (70-74). Bassnett-McGuire elaborates on this by stating that the "fixed form" of art and the "moving vitality" of life were combined by Pirandello to state that art is the means where by man futilely creates illusions "to convince

himself he can escape from the processes that shape his existence” (34).

In the forward to Naked Masks, Bentley examines the actions of the Six Characters in relation to the themes Pirandello wants to express. First, he states that as the Characters defend themselves against accusations and through empty words fail to achieve mutual understandings, their actions and feelings mirror our own. Bentley further explains that Pirandello also examines the conflict between life, which is constantly moving and changing, and art, which freezes life and renders it immutable (1952, vii-xxvii).

Elmer Rice's The Adding Machine also stresses theme over character development. In Elmer Rice, Frank Durham explains that although some background and setting information is provided, the characters are drenched with Rice's point that “technological advance is accompanied by human retrogression” (51). Even though man helps create the machines that replace him, failure is not inevitable. Rice emphasizes that man can and should be the master of technology, not its slave (Durham, 51).

The main character of the play, Mr. Zero, represents the average man. In a memo to an actor who was to portray the role of Mr. Zero, Rice described the character in this way:

I hope that this sounds very complex. For I conceive Zero as a complex being. A bundle of inconsistencies and contradictions, of impulses and fears, of desires and inhibitions. His conduct in a general sense is determined by hereditary influences, childhood environment, education and the social inheritance, but more particularly it is influenced by the state of his digestion, the weather, his internal secretions and the multitudinous sensory stimuli of light and sound, touch and temperature, taste, motion and pain. Since all these elements are never present at once, nor in the same proportions, it follows that at no two moments in his life is Zero (or anyone else) in precisely identical psychological and physical situations, and that therefore he is at no two moments precisely the same person (1982, 5-6).

Rice's description could be a description of anyone, causing Zero to be an "Everyman." All people are the end results of their environment and heredity, and all react differently on a day to day basis depending on the weather, emotional state and physical condition.

Bernard Dukore states that Zero's name symbolically describes his insignificance to society, but his averageness makes him a representative of the middle-class majority that is trapped and oppressed by technology and capitalism. He is doomed to the life of a slave, never progressing on to a better existence. The party scene, in which acquaintances of the Zeros have gathered, show Zero's fellow workers and their wives as boring and routine as they discuss unessential matters using cliched phrases. Rice's characters are people without passion, exploited by society, and doomed to live a life of stagnancy unless they can break free of the moral and social taboos imposed upon them by capitalism. As Dukore points out, while Rice does not provide any answers as to how to overcome this dilemma, through The Adding Machine he did provide an innovative perspective on man's complacent position in a technologically advanced society (26-32).

As Rice's The Adding Machine implements stereotypical characters, Antonin Artaud's Spurt of Blood is highly presentational with character development being almost non-existent. In Avant Garde Theatre, Innes states that the primary characters represent degrees of "spiritualized ideal love as grotesque perversions of nature" (86). As the play is only five minutes in length, it is obvious that Artaud's intent was not to present realistic characters. Spurt of Blood is a violent, mocking attack on the social and religious beliefs of the society of that day, and the characters function as Artaud's tools for expressing his opinions. Innes elaborates on this by stating that the characters representing all the various aspects of society-- Priest, Shoemaker, Judge, and Street Peddler--are destroyed by flashes of lighting. He further states that the death of God is portrayed as fertilizing "the world of sexuality" when the Prostitute bites God's wrist causing blood to spurt across the stage (86).

Several theories abound as to why Artaud chose to use those particular characters in Spurt of Blood, ranging from his feeling of inferiority to women, to his unstable mental state. In Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, Bermel suggests the symbolism associated with

each character and how it emphasizes theme. He states that the theme of the play is the creation of the universe and how human beings, particularly women, have desecrated and perverted the world. There is a triad of men and a triad of women that the Boy encounters. His Wetnurse/Mother represents nourishment because of the milk and cheese she supplies. The Girl exemplifies love, desire, and beauty, and the Whore is lust and enticement. However, as Bermel points out, while the Boy is drawn to these women he is also repulsed by them because they are also a source for scorpions, corruption and immortality. He goes on to say that the triad of men embody the existence the Boy will have after he has been demoralized by the world. The Knight/Father wears armor, expressing the outward manifestation of masculinity, while he childishly depends on his wife (Wetnurse) for nourishment. The Beadle is the cuckold and the Priest represents a "man with a calling and no faith" (1977, 64). In other words, because women have destroyed the world, the Boy is destined to be a hypocritical man who sees his wife only as a source of sustenance, while fulfilling his sexual desire with other women.

In Antonin Artaud: Man of Vision, Bettina Knapp states the characters in Spurt of Blood are representative of Artaud's "inner life," particularly his adolescent years as he was on the verge of manhood. However, Knapp points out that the play is far from a personal narrative as the characters are kept impersonal by not having names but instead being referred to by their function (the Wetnurse, the Priest, etc.,). She goes on to say that Artaud's play is a short account of the idealism of youth, emphasizing the need for independence and companionship. However, the dream of a perfect world is shattered once one enters the complicated and violent the world of the adult (1969, 32-34).

According to The Surrealist Connection, Zinder states that Artaud wrote Spurt of Blood with the hope that it would help humans find their way back to their most primitive origin, that of "a state of chaos" (92). He used generic characters that were representative of all members of society in order to assault the audience with the realization that life, as well as the very core of human existence, is false and irrational.

In The Theatre and Its Double, Artaud provides his own views on the type of theatre he presented. Artaud, believing that the ideas

and purpose of the theatre had grown stale and complacent, called for a “theatre of cruelty.” He uses the word “cruelty” to suggest a world where “good is desired but evil is permanent. Cruelty is above all lucid, a kind of rigid control and submission to necessity”(1958, 102). Artaud further explains that the purpose of the theatre is to present the “internal world” of man by portraying his “taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his utopian sense of life, even his cannibalism” (92).

After examining the illogical plot structure and undeveloped characters of these five plays, it is evident that they fulfill Esslin’s first and second criteria for Absurdist drama. Focus can now be placed upon the theme and subject matter illustrated in each of the five plays.

CHAPTER THREE

THEME AND SUBJECT MATTER

The focus of the story in a drama is always the same:
human beings and human concerns (Wilson, 148).

The third criterion for dramatic Absurdism is that they possess a theme that illustrates the disparity of the mortal state, a theme which usually goes unresolved. In The Theatre Experience, Edwin Wilson defines theme as “the central thought of the play, (the idea or ideas with which the play deals and which it expounds)” (430). The predominant concept of the Theatre of the Absurd is rooted in Existential philosophy. Esslin states that the theme of Absurdist drama is the “metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition” (24). Similarly, Grose and Kenworthy describe Existentialism as “being concerned with the problems of human existence and the notions of abandonment, anguish, and fear” (611). While the Theatre of the Absurd addresses the disparity of the mortal state, it offers no solution as to how to restore order to the erratic state of the human condition. In History of the Theatre, Brockett reiterates this idea by saying that the Absurdist look at

the chaos of man's existence "without suggesting any path beyond" (564).

Presenting a dismal and sordid view of mankind without offering any solution, Jarry's Ubu serves as a shocking and vulgar mirror of the human condition. Innes notes in Holy Theatre that Jarry used the character of Ubu to sum up all his opinions on human nature. Innes states that in demonstrating how Ubu's "amoral and antisocial qualities" are revealed in his involvement in any situation, Jarry was essentially expressing his belief that all men are deceitful and inherently evil (22). An example symbolically illustrating Jarry's opinion of the ruling class is seen when Ubu becomes King of Poland and his scepter is a toilet brush.

In Alfred Jarry: The Man With an Axe, Lennon states that it was Jarry's intent to "pound human morality to a bloody pulp" (51). Lennon goes on to say that the theme of Ubu Roi is the baseness of humanity in the midst of a universe that is a "foul hell-hole" where evil runs rampant and is never overtaken by good. Lennon's theory is illustrated in the fact that Ubu acts out hideous crimes--murder, treason, thievery-- and is never punished or even questioned about his wrongdoing (50-51). The play ends with Ubu and his wife on a

boat back to Paris where Ubu declares he is headed to get appointed “Master of Phynances.” No doubt he will obtain this position by the same evil and bloody means he used to become King of Poland (73). In this regard, Jarry presented Ubu as the embodiment of all that is illogical and grotesque in human nature, and he ended the play with Ubu going unpunished for his wicked actions, free to unleash his evil upon the world. Therefore, Jarry viewed man as being inherently and hopelessly perverse in a never ending cycle of repugnant and wretched behavior.

The theme of The Ghost Sonata can best be understood when it is examined in light of Strindberg’s quest to find an adequate means of conveying his search for order and religious meaning in human existence. Corrigan points out that in using the style of a dream play, Strindberg found a useful format to emphasize his own yearning for spiritual truth. Corrigan goes on to say that a dream is the expression of a person’s inner reality, usually arranged in disconnected and episodic images, in which events and people merge and separate, and time passes and reverts without regard to logical sequence (xvi-xviii). By implementing this type of structure in The Ghost Sonata, Corrigan states that Strindberg illustrates “the lie

and crime of existence” that ultimately destroys us all. Therefore, the theme of the play is Man’s crucifixion by the human condition (xiv). At the end of the play, this theme is emphasized when Arkenholz says

Jesus’ descent into hell was his wandering upon the earth, his visitation to this madhouse, this charnelhouse that we call the earth. And the madmen he came to free have murdered him. But the thief has been freed, for one always sympathizes with thieves. Woe! Woe to us all! Savior of the world, redeem us, for we perish! (Strindberg, 98).

As The Ghost Sonata ends, Strindberg refers to life as “a world of illusion, of guilt, suffering, and of death; this world of eternal change, of disappointment, and of pain” (99). However, he attempts a resolution of theme by suggesting a heavenly afterlife. As the Girl lies dying, Arkenholz wishes for her a new life that contains a “sun that does not burn,” “a home that is undefiled,” “friends without dishonor,” and “a love which knows no stain.” He concludes the play by stating, “may the Lord of Heaven be merciful to you on your journey” (99). A complete resolution is not achieved,

however, because Strindberg fails to offer any concrete measures for improving man's hollow reality. Instead, he portrays death as an end to our wicked and meaningless earthly existence, with the hope that a better heavenly life awaits us.

Pirandello's Six Characters in Search of An Author implements a theme that is complex and not easily condensed. Walter Starkie's Luigi Pirandello: 1867-1936 lends itself to the belief that the central idea of the play is concerned with the union of art and life, and the inner weaving of the two. Starkie states that Pirandello explores the drama of life while examining the thin line that exists between reality and illusion (1965, 208-221). In Dreams of Passion, Oliver states that Pirandello uses the art form of the theatre as a "mirror of human actions" in order to examine "the masks and illusions of life" (50). Bassnett-McGuire elaborates on this by stating that Pirandello combined the "fixed form" of art and the "moving vitality" of life in order to explain how man uses art to create futile illusions "to convince himself he can escape from the processes that shape his existence" (34).

Another possible theme that has been suggested is that Six Characters contains autobiographical information as Pirandello's

attempt to understand his own human nature. In Luigi Pirandello, Matthaei points out that Pirandello struggled to find an understanding of human behavior. From his wife's bouts with insanity to her accusations that Pirandello was molesting their daughter, he was haunted by his family's lack of trust for each other as well as their failure to communicate. Matthaei points out that Six Characters illustrated the alienation between family members who think they are familiar with one another, but suddenly find themselves as enemies, accusing one another of awful deeds and all in turn vainly trying to defend themselves (80-81).

The text of Six Characters complies with both hypotheses on theme, concentrating on the damaged familial relationship of the Six Characters, as well as exploring the juxtaposition of reality and illusion. The Father describes the association between the two when he says "We [the Six Characters] have no other reality beyond illusion, you too must not count overmuch on your reality as you feel it today, since, like that of yesterday, it may prove an illusion for you tomorrow" (265). While Pirandello's play is, at times, conjectural, he merely presents his audience with ideas leaving all conclusions open for individual assessment.

Unlike Six Characters, Rice's The Adding Machine has a clear and poignant theme, the dehumanization of society by modern industrialism. Zero is presented as a weakling who devotes himself to a routine boring job for 25 years. When a machine is invented that can do Zero's job faster, he is immediately fired. Zero feels his length of service to his employer should merit his not being fired, and when he voices these opinions, he is almost ridiculed for thinking human devotion could even be a consideration over mechanized technology. As Dukore points out, the machines that humans labored to create ended up replacing humans, making them slaves to technology (28).

Dukore goes on to say that for people like Zero, even death is not an end to the master/slave relationship (28). In scene VIII of The Adding Machine, Charles informs Zero that "the mark of the slave was on you from the start," explaining to him that he is on a downward spiral of reincarnation with each new life getting worse than the one before:

Charles: If there ever was a soul in the world that was labeled slave it's yours. Why, all the bosses

and kings that there ever were have left their trademarks on your backside.

Zero: I ain't had a square deal! Hard work! That's all I've ever had!

Charles: You can't change the rules--nobody can-- they've got it all fixed. It's a rotten system (1982, 220).

Not only is Zero a slave to technology, but Rice is also blaming a “rotten” world for humans’ stagnant existence. He offers no solutions to the problem, but he does end the play by having Zero run off stage chasing after a mirage of hope, suggesting perhaps that hope for any person bettering his existence is merely a figment of the imagination.

Before diagnosing the theme of Spurt of Blood, it is necessary to examine Artaud’s philosophy on the role of the theatre. In The Theatre and Its Double, Artaud writes that society attends the theatre in order to find their own inner selves. He goes on to say “we seek an emotion on the stage in which the most secret movements of the heart will be exposed” (80). Artaud believed the mission of the theatre was to change society.

The Priest in Spurt of Blood expresses Artaud's view of religion and people when he states, "We others feed ourselves on the dirty little stories we hear in the confessional. And that's all there is--that's life" (1976, 75). The Priest represents the most trusted and sacred of all professions, and yet even he is not untouched by the perverseness inevitable in human nature. In The Surrealist Connection, Zinder states that the theme of Spurt of Blood is the re-education of man "to simultaneously savor and control the chaos raging inside Him which was His true being" (92). However, while Artaud confronts the audience with their own devastated existence, he does not provide any answers on to how humans can master the mortal state. He tears the audience apart leaving them to put themselves back together again.

Esslin identifies a fourth criterion which is an extension of the third: Absurd plays do not mimic "normal" life, rather they present the abnormal, dark side of human nature that most people find painful and frightening and choose to avoid. Ordinary plays usually revolve around a "slice of life" theme, a probable situation that audience members can readily relate to and accept. Subject matter focuses on the good triumphing over the bad, where the evil-

doer is punished and the victims finally get the justice they deserve. However, as dramatic Absurdism normally depicts the aberrant side of human existence, it does so through abnormal and grotesque images and situations in order to emphasize theme.

Jarry's Ubu Roi is an attack on the stupidity and rapacity of humans, and the deeds of Ubu are representative of a society caught up in superficial morality. In 20th Century French Drama, Grossvogel states that Jarry wanted the audience to see Ubu as the mirror image of themselves; therefore, he portrayed Ubu as someone who "exhibits gusto in mayhem and delight in slaughter" (1958, 26-27). An example of Ubu's joy in destruction can be seen in the following passage delivered after he has just murdered the king and taken over his reign:

My lords, I have the honour to inform you that as a gesture to the economic welfare of my kingdom, I have resolved to liquidate the entire nobility and confiscate their goods. Bring up the first Noble and pass me the boat-hook. Those who are condemned to death, I shall push through this trap door. They will fall down into the

bleed-pig chambers, and will then proceed to the cash-room where they will be debrained (1968, 39).

While the plot of Ubu Roi contains several instances of slaughter and bloodshed revealing Ubu's violent and grotesque nature, his physical appearance and use of language add to his repulsive traits. In the opening scene, Ubu and his wife, Ma Ubu, are attempting a conversation:

Ubu: Pschitt!

Ma Ubu: Ooh! What a nasty word. Pa Ubu, you're a dirty old man.

Ubu: Watch out I don't bash yer nut in, Ma Ubu!
You're looking exceptionally ugly tonight,
Madam, is it because we have company?
(1968, 22).

In another passage, Ubu is conspiring with Captain MacNure to assassinate the king. When MacNure agrees to help Ubu, the following dialogue transpires:

Ubu: (throwing himself upon him to embrace him)
Oh, M'Nure, I love you dearly for that!

MacNure: Pooh, how you stink, man! Don't you ever wash?

Ubu: Occasionally.

Ma Ubu: Never!

Ubu: I'm going to tread on your toes.

Ma Ubu: Fat lump of pschitt! (25-26).

Rather than present a realistic play, Jarry used Ubu Roi to portray the dark and gross side of human nature in order to address subjects not slated as "proper" for public discussion. His purpose in this was to wake society up to the realization that superficial moral beliefs cannot erase the fact that humans are inherently detestable.

While Ubu Roi focused on the repugnance of human nature, Strindberg examined humanity through the structure of a dream. In The Ghost Sonata, it is evident that Strindberg's intention was not to mimic "real" life as the play contains characters who function as vampires drinking the lives of the people they come in contact with, as well apparitions who can be seen by some and not seen by others. One of the most shocking and frightening scenes in the play is when the mistress of the house is revealed to be a mummy. Bengtsson and

Johansson, two servants, are discussing the mistress in the following passage:

Johansson: Is there a mistress of the house?

Bengtsson: Yes, of course, but she's mad. She sits in a large cupboard, because her eyes can't bear the light. (He opens the concealed door).

Look, there she is. (He shows her inside, chalk-white and shriveled to a mummy).

Johansson: My God!

Mummy: (babbling) Why do you always open the door? Didn't I tell you to keep it closed?

Bengtsson: (wheedling) Na, na, na, na, naa! Our little fool has to be good now, and then she'll get something good. Pretty Polly!

Mummy: (like a parrot) Pretty Polly!

Bengtsson: She thinks she's a parrot, and she may be right. (To the Mummy) Polly want to whistle for us? (89-90).

Bengtsson goes on to explain that she has taken on the aspects of a parrot in order to cope with her tragic life. In an effort to repent

for her sins of the past, the Mummy has doomed herself to an existence of suffering. When she encounters Hummel, the man with whom she had the affair, she forces him to admit his guilt and see himself as a sinner. Once this is accomplished, Hummel assumes the Mummy's place in the cupboard, taking on the same characteristics of a parrot (89-90).

Strindberg confronts his audience with a terrifying look at the depravity of the human condition, a view most people would rather not see. He depicts people doomed to a life of suffering and grief, not solely based upon specific evils or levels of wrong-doing, but they are slated to sorrow simply because they exist. As Corrigan states, Strindberg's theme is the crucifixion of Man by the human condition (xiv).

While Pirandello's Six Characters in Search of An Author is a juxtaposition of reality and illusion, it accomplishes this parallel by exploring the anguish and suffering of a family torn apart by misunderstandings and grief. The events that plague the Six Characters are violently realistic: the Father almost commits incest with the Step-daughter; the four-year-old Girl drowns herself in the fountain; the Boy commits suicide by shooting himself. This subject

matter is shocking for the audience, not only because they are told the events occurred, but also because it is the fate of the Characters to reenact their past exactly as it happened. The scene in which the Father and Step-Daughter have a seductive encounter occurs in Madame Pace's dress shop. The Mother is employed in the shop as a seamstress and the Step-Daughter works out of the store as a prostitute. When the Father enters, he is unaware that his wife works for Madame Pace, as he has not seen her or the Step-Daughter since he sent them to live with his secretary:

Father: Good afternoon, Miss!

Step-Daughter: (head bowed with restrained disgust)
Good afternoon.

Father: (looks under her hat which partly covers her face. Perceiving she is very young, he makes an exclamation, partly of surprise, partly of fear lest he compromise himself in a risky adventure) Ah...but...ah....I say...this is not the first time that you have come here, is it?

Step-Daughter: (modestly) No sir.

Father: You've been here before, eh? (then seeing her nod agreement) More than once? (Waits for her to answer, looks under her hat, smiles, and then says:) Well then, there's no need to be so shy, is there? May I take off your hat?

Step-Daughter: (anticipating him and with veiled disgust) No sir...I'll do it myself.

Father: Give it to me! I'll put it down.

Manager: (interrupting) Stop! Stop a minute! Don't write that last part down.

Step-Daughter: No sir! What you want to do is to piece together a little romantic sentimental scene out of my disgust. He is to ask me why I'm in mourning; and I'm to answer with tears in my eyes, that it is just two months since papa died. He's got to say to me; as he did say: "Well, let's take off this little

dress at once.” And I; with my two months’ mourning in my heart, went there behind that screen, and with these fingers tingling with shame...

Manager: For heaven’s sake! What are you saying?

Step-Daughter: (to the Manager) You can put me on as you like; it doesn’t matter. Fully dressed, if you like - provided I have at least the arm bare; because, standing like this (she goes to the Father and leans her head on his breast) with my head so, and my arms round his neck, I saw a vein pulsing in my arm here; and then, as if that live vein had awakened disgust in me, I closed my eyes like this, and let my head sink on his breast. Cry out mother! Cry out as you did then!

Mother: No! My daughter, my daughter! Don’t you see she’s my daughter?! (252-261).

Imagine the Father's horror to be discovered in a brothel by his wife unknowingly making love to his own child, not to mention the repulsion of the Step-Daughter when she finds herself with this man who "used to watch her come out of school" (259). The suffering and torment of the family does not end here. The two youngest children, the Girl and the Boy, overhear the account of how the Father sent the Mother, the Son, and the Step-Daughter away to live with his secretary as an "experiment" in human desire.

Overcome with the anguish smothering the other members of the family, the Girl and Boy commit suicide.

Son: I was walking in the garden...(hesitates with an expression of gloom).

Manager: Well...Well...Walking in the garden...

Son: (exasperated) Why on earth do you insist? Its horrible! (the Mother trembles, sobs, looks towards the fountain)

Manager: (observing the glance and turning towards the Son) The baby?

Son: There in the fountain...

Father: (pointing with tender pity to the Mother) She was following him at the moment...

Son: I ran over to her; I was jumping in to drag her out when I saw something that froze my blood...the boy standing stock still, with eyes like a madman's, watching his drowned little sister, in the fountain! (the Step-daughter bends over the fountain to hide the Girl. She sobs.) Then...(a revolver shot rings out behind the trees where the Boy is hidden.)

Mother: (With a cry of terror, runs over in that direction together with several of the Actors amid general confusion.) My Son! My Son! Help! Help!

Manager: (pushing the Actors aside while They lift up the Boy and carry him off.) Is he really wounded?

Actors: (divide shouting) He's dead! He's dead!/No, no it's only make-believe, it's only pretence!

Father: (with a terrible cry) Pretence? Reality, sir, reality! (275-276).

For the Six Characters, as well as the audience members who view this scene, the ordeal that takes place is very real and horrific. Although it is highly unlikely the same afflictions would plague a “real” family, the emotions they exhibit are common to all. The play ends abruptly with the double suicides, leaving the audience shocked and bombarded by violence and grief.

The subject matter of The Adding Machine is by no means a realistic account of people and events, rather, Rice presents an expressionistic view of dehumanization by the machine. However, other themes are present in the play as well, such as the exploration of moral views and sexuality. The prison scene, in which Zero has been confined to a cage, is humorous as well as grotesquely contorted. A tour guide leads a group of sightseers through the prison as they shamelessly sensationalize over Zero’s imprisonment.

Guide: This, ladies and gentlemen, is a very interestin’ specimen; the North American murderer, Genus homo sapiens, Habitat North

America. (a titter of excitement. They all crowd around the cage.)

Tall Lady: Oh, how interesting!

Stout Lady: Look, Charley, he's eating!

Guide: This specimen, ladies and gentlemen, exhibits the characteristics which are typical of his kind. He has the opposable thumbs, the large cranial capacity, and the highly developed prefrontal areas which distinguish him from all other species.

Youth: (who has been taking notes) What areas did you say?

Guide: (grumpily) Pre-front-al areas. He learns by imitation and has a language which is said by some eminent philologists to bear many striking resemblances to English. He thrives and breeds freely in captivity. This specimen was taken alive in his native haunts shortly after murdering his boss. (Murmurs of great interest.)

Tall Lady: How charming!

Youth: (again taking notes) What was that last? I didn't get it.

Several: (helpfully) Murdering his boss.

Guide: He was tried, convicted and sentenced in one hour, thirteen minutes and twenty-four seconds. Now take a good look at him ladies and gents. It's his last day here. He's goin' to be executed at noon. (Murmurs of interest)

Tall Lady: Oh, how lovely!

Man: What's he eating?

Guide: Ham and eggs.

Boy of 14: Look, Pop! He's eatin' with a spoon. Don't he know how to use a knife and fork?

Guide: We don't dare trust him with a knife and fork, sonny. He might try to kill himself.

Tall Lady: Oh, how fascinating.

Guide: And now, friends, if you'll kindly give me your kind attention for just a moment. (Pulls

out folders) I have a little souvenir folder. It contains twelve beautiful colored views relating to the North American Murderer you have just been looking at. These include a picture of his wife, the blood-stained weapon, the murderer at the age of six, the spot where the body was found, the little red schoolhouse where he went to school, and his vine-covered boy-hood home in southern Illinois, with his sweet-faced, white-haired old mother plainly visible in the foreground. And many other interesting views. Just pass them back, will you. Don't be afraid to look at them. You don't have to buy them if you don't want to (205-206).

In this passage, Rice is making an observation on the moral condition of society. The people on the tour consider themselves to be better than Zero, and incapable of committing such an evil deed. However, the group gains much pleasure from staring and gawking at Zero as they absorb each sordid detail. When the Guide pulls out the

folder of pictures, the people practically trample one another in order to bask in the gruesome details of Zero's life. Although the scene is humorous, it is also appalling the way Zero is regarded as a caged animal being scrutinized like a specimen in a laboratory. Rather than feeling sorry for him as a fellow human being and attempting to understand his reasoning for murdering his boss, the group separate themselves from him. Not only does the cage serve as a physical barrier, but the people view Zero as something they could never be.

Rice also explores sexuality and the moral taboos placed upon it by society. In one scene, the prostitute whom Mrs. Zero has arrested is frolicking in the cemetery with a male companion, when she happens upon Zero's tombstone. As a type of revenge, the prostitute suggests to her friend that they have sex on top of Zero's grave. She is unabashed by her desires, even to the point of desecrating someone's sacred burial ground. Another view of sexuality examined by Rice is acted out by Daisy and Zero once they have arrived in Heaven. They finally vocalize their love for one another, and begin to freely show affection and enjoy each other's

company. However, when Shrdlu returns, Zero's old earthly inhibitions return.

Daisy: What's the matter?

Zero: He's comin' back.

Daisy: Oh, is that all? Well, what about it?

Zero: You don't want him to see us layin' around like this, do you?

Shrdlu: I hope I haven't returned too soon.

Zero: No, that's all right. We were just havin' a little talk. You know--about business an' things.

Daisy: (boldly) We were wishin' we could stay here all the time.

Shrdlu: You may if you like.

Zero: But I thought you were tellin' me...

Shrdlu: Just as I told you, only the most favored do remain. But anyone may.

Zero: I don't get it. There's a catch in there somewheres.

Daisy: It don't matter as long as we can stay.

Zero: (to Shrdlu) We were thinkin' about gettin' married, see?

Shrdlu: You may or may not, just as you like.

Zero: You don't mean we could stay if we didn't, do you?

Shrdlu: Yes. They don't care. All these people here are so strange, so unlike the good people I've known. They seem to think of nothing but enjoyment or of wasting time in profitless occupations. And forever they are telling stories and laughing and singing and drinking and dancing. There are drunkards, thieves, vagabonds, blasphemers, adulterers...

Zero: That's enough. I've heard enough.

Daisy: What are you goin' to do?

Zero: I'm goin' to beat it, that's what I'm going to do.

Daisy: You said you liked it here.

Zero: Liked it! Say, you don't mean to say you want to stay here, do you, with a lot of rummies, an' loafers, an' bums? (216-218).

Even in Heaven, Zero cannot get past the moral restrictions placed upon him by society. The people Shrdlu considered to be "good" are not there. Instead, Heaven is filled with individuals who defied moral codes and openly pursued the lustful desires of their hearts rather than suppressing them.

Rice confronted the audience of his day with their own lofty and superficial morals. He shows society to be repressed and heavily influenced by ethical standards, so much so, that the only pleasure they receive out of life comes from basking in the misfortune and downfall of others. Spectators see themselves in The Adding Machine, not only as victims of technology, but also as prisoners of their own elevated ideals.

Artaud's Spurt of Blood is far removed from any kind of realistic portrayal of life. Horrific and violent in nature, Artaud mentally attacks his audience with the theme he wished to express. In The Surrealist Connection, Zinder states that the theme of Spurt of Blood is the re-education of Man "to simultaneously savor and

control the chaos raging inside Him which was His true being" (92). Chaos is exactly what is presented on stage. The Boy and Girl open the play, hollowly expressing their love for each other, after which pandemonium occurs. The stage directions state:

There is heard the sound of a huge wheel turning and making a wind. A hurricane divides them [the Boy and Girl] in two. Then one sees two stars collide and a series of legs of living flesh falling together with feet, hands, heads of hair, masks, temples, then three scorpions one after the other. Enter a medieval Knight followed by a Wet Nurse who supports her bosom with both hands and pants because of her swollen breasts.

Knight: Leave your tits alone. Give me my papers.

Nurse: Oh! Oh! Oh!

Knight: What the hell is the matter with you?

Nurse: Our girl over there, with him.

Knight: Shut up, there's no girl!

Nurse: I tell you, they're fucking.

Knight: I don't give a shit if they're fucking.

Nurse: Lecher. (She throws him his papers, and runs off.)

Knight: Cow. (he opens the papers revealing an enormous slice of cheese. With his mouth full) Show me your breasts. Show me your breasts! Where did she go? (73-74).

The manner in which the Knight and the Wetnurse speak to each other is similar to the way Ma and Pa Ubu “converse.” The vulgarity and violence with which Artaud’s characters are presented increase as the play goes on. Another storm occurs, during which a gigantic hand grabs the prostitute’s hair which catches fire.

Voice of God: Bitch, look at your body! (The Whore’s body appears absolutely naked and hideous under her blouse and skirt, which become like glass.

Whore: Leave me alone, God. (She bites God on the wrist. A huge spurt of blood slashes across the stage. When the lights come up, all are dead and their bodies are lying all over the ground.

The only ones left are the Boy and the Whore, who are looking at each other hungrily. They fall into each other's arms.

Whore: (as if at the height of orgasm) Tell me how it happened.

(The Wetnurse returns, carrying the Girl under her arm like a package. The Girl is dead. She drops her on the ground, where she collapses and comes as flat as a pancake. The Wetnurse has lost her breasts. Her chest is completely flat. The Knight enters, seizes the Wetnurse and shakes her violently.)

Knight: Where did you put it? Give me my Swiss cheese!

Nurse: (gaily) Here. (she lifts her skirts.)

Knight: Damn her. (He covers his face in horror. Now an enormous number of scorpions emerge from under the Wetnurse's

skirts, and begin to swarm in her vagina and over the Knight's penis, which swells and bursts. The Whore and the Boy flee like victims of brain surgery.) (75-76).

It is obvious that Artaud's attempt was not to mimic "real" life but, rather, to portray the chaos raging inside of people. Based upon the nature of Spurt of Blood, Artaud regards humans' basic nature to be extremely savage and maniacal. For an audience, visualizing human appendages falling from the sky, as well as seeing scorpions crawl from between a woman's legs would be highly shocking and violent. However, the effect of the play is even more horrific and devastating if an audience views Artaud's play as he intended, as a mirror of their inner being.

Esslin's third and fourth criteria focus on unresolved themes, which implement subject matter dealing with the dark side of human nature. After exploring these criteria and their relation to the five plays being examined, it can be stated that these elements are present within the five plays. The next aspect of dramatic Absurdism to be examined centers around language use.

CHAPTER FOUR

LANGUAGE

Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God quaquaquaqu with white beard quaquaquaqu outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but only time will tell (Beckett, 1959, 28).

The above excerpt from Waiting for Godot is an example of the way language can be used in Absurdist drama. Esslin's fifth criterion focuses on the utilization of language, primarily the absence of poignant dialogue to portray theme. Rather, the theme of failed communication is reflected through the utterance of scattered thoughts, often employing violent and crude language. In The Theatre of the Absurd, Esslin elaborates on this by saying that the constant struggle of human beings for self-realization and their attempts to express themselves are presented in Absurd drama through a "devaluation and disintegration of language" (406). Esslin goes on to say that communication is shown in a state of breakdown because words are not an expression of reality. Instead, language

often conceals truth rather than uncovering it (407-409). Therefore, by confronting their audience with characters who speak in a grotesque or incoherent manner, Absurdist are presenting “a distorted picture of a world that has gone mad” (410).

In the plays used for this study, language ranges from realistic conversation to nonsensical utterances. The language implemented in Alfred Jarry’s Ubu Roi emphasizes the warped and illogical realm of King Ubu. In The French Theatre of the Absurd, Gaensbauer states that the “linguistic inventiveness” employed in Ubu Roi mirrored Jarry’s repugnance of society (6). While the dialogue of the play appears to flow in a logical fashion, it is saturated with nonsense words and vulgar language. The play opens with Ubu’s loud exclamation of “pschitt,” and continues with a series of puns, blasphemies, and obscenities. Jarry formulated the language of Ubu Roi by combining words not usually associated with one another, such as “face-chopper,” “disembrain,” and “knuckle-duster.” He also used expletives frequently, such as “pschitt” and “phfart,” adding letters to the normal spelling of the words in order to alter the sound and add to their delivery. Jarry also developed new words by adding profanity to an otherwise acceptable word, such as

“pfartichoke” instead of “artichoke” and “pschittasword” instead of “sword.” He also added nonsense words like “hornstrumpot” and “hornboodle,” as well as emphasizing the satirical nature of the play by “renaming” items. “Pschittapump” was Jarry’s word for a “toilet brush” and a “pschittahook” was used in place of “knife” (1-45).

In Holy Theatre, Innes states that Jarry’s “deliberate crudeness of dialogue” gave way to his creation of the “Ubuesque way of speaking.” The language of “Ubuesque,” according to Innes, entails “reducing the semantic content of words to nonsense by giving equal weight to each syllable” (28). Innes states that reviews of the first production of Ubu Roi describe the characters as speaking their lines in “artificial singsongy voices with exaggerated articulation” (23). Crude language coupled with the style of speaking work together to further Jarry’s attack on the bourgeoisie. In Alfred Jarry: Nihilism and the Theatre of the Absurd, LaBelle states that Jarry believed the basic instincts of the bourgeois were centered around the waist, primarily gluttony and immorality. The language choices Jarry made emphasized his view that the religious and moral attitudes of the bourgeois were artificial and rooted in hypocrisy (87-90).

While Ubu Roi combines language and delivery to illustrate the base nature of the bourgeois, Strindberg's The Ghost Sonata uses the mixture to delineate the disparity of the human condition. In his introduction to The Ghost Sonata, Robert Corrigan states that Strindberg explores the failure of words to produce adequate communication between human beings (xiii). The "Mummy" character is Strindberg's most profound illustration of the alienation that is present when communication breaks down. She hides in a cupboard, chattering like a parrot, so that she can avoid all verbal and physical interaction. By evading human exchanges, the Mummy does not have to face the reality of her existence (xiv).

While Jarry's Ubu Roi was garrulous in its depiction of society, Strindberg uses silence to portray his view of humans. The dinner scene, in which the guests are corpse-like and unspeaking, is a haunting illustration of man's ineptness for communication. The servant, "Bengtsson" describes the incident to "Johansson:"

Bengtsson: It's the usual ghost supper, as we call it.

They drink tea, but never say a word; or at best the Colonel does all the talking. Then

they nibble their cookies all together, so that
is sounds like mice in an attic.

Johansson: Why do you call it a ghost supper?

Bengtsson: Because they all look like ghosts. And
they've kept this up for twenty years.

Always the same people, who say the same
things, or keep quiet, so as not to make fools
of themselves (81).

In The Social and Religious Plays of Strindberg, John Ward points out that the people in the dinner scene resemble ghosts because they have been "drained of life." Without communication and effective human interaction, the family has literally withered away. As Ward states, they are "the living dead" (1980, 255).

While Strindberg approached his view of humankind using experimental and symbolic language, Pirandello worked from the opposite direction, insisting on unequivocal realism. The vocabulary of the Six Characters, particularly the Father and the Step-daughter, is highly realistic and articulate. In Luigi Pirandello, Bassnett-McGuire points out that the Step-daughter and the Father are the most expressive because they are "the most complete, the most

alive, the most fully rounded." The Mother is "the resigned victim" and barely speaks, while the young children "hardly have any consistency at all and have to be led on by the hand" (43-44).

Pirandello uses realistic language in two ways: to show how the re-telling of events can be altered based upon one's perception of the ordeal, and secondly, to illustrate the ineffectiveness of words to express one's inner emotions. As the details of their story unfold, the various points of view held by each Character prevents any type of effective communication from taking place. Pirandello illustrates this point in the scene that takes place between the Father and the Step-daughter, in which the details of incest are revealed. Both are trying to explain the encounter when the Father states:

This is where the difficulty lies! In words! We all have inside ourselves a world of things; each one of us has his own world. And how can we possibly understand each other, signori, if in the words I utter I place the sense and value of things as they are inside of me, while to the person listening to me those words inevitably assume the meaning and values they have for him, in the world he

inhabits within himself? We think that we understand each other, but we never really do (224)

While the conflict between the Father and Step-daughter illustrates the obstacles hindering communication when different opinions are held, Pirandello strives for a deeper insight into communication. In Pirandello's Theatre, Paolucci states that while the Characters project a high sincerity level, the inadequacy of words to truly express their inner feelings is acknowledged by all. Paolucci goes on to say that Pirandello believed that by translating emotions into words, the inner experience is somehow negated, that is, "the reality of the inner experience is its inwardness" (70). Therefore, the human race's failure to communicate their deepest emotions parallels their hollow and meaningless existence.

Elmer Rice's The Adding Machine resembles Pirandello's Six Characters in its use of realistic language. However, Rice uses language in the same way he constructed the plot. On the surface, the words the characters use appear to be "normal," and logical, but underneath they are clichéd and empty. In Elmer Rice, Frank Durham explains that Rice was able to re-create authentic dialogue in order to confront the audience with their own words. Durham goes on to

say that “in abstracting the typical, he patterns and stylizes his dialogue through repetition of phrase, the hammering of cliché, the bumbling of the inarticulate for articulation” (52).

The Adding Machine opens with a lengthy and seemingly endless monologue spoken by Mrs. Zero. She drones on, exhaustively describing everything from movie plots to next-door neighbors. Durham compares her with a phonograph playing “the same scratchy record over and over” (41). The following is an example of the colloquial language used by Mrs. Zero:

I’m gettin’ sick o’ them. Westerns. All them cowboys ridin’ around an’ foolin’ with them ropes. I don’t care nothin’ about that. I’m sick of ‘em. I don’t see why they don’t have more of them stories like For Love’s Sweet Sake. I like them sweet little love stories. They’re nice an wholesome. Mrs. Twelve was sayin’ to me only yesterday, “Mrs. Zero,” says she, “what I like is one of them wholesome stories, with just a sweet, simple love story.” “You’re right, Mrs. Twelve.” I says. “That’s what I like too” (195-196).

Durham states that Mrs. Zero's language is highly realistic, but it is also carefully contrived and patterned. Her words and phrases have a familiar and repetitious rhythm. She is not revealing any necessary information or imparting any wisdom, she is merely talking. Durham describes it as "the talk of all drab, embittered wives to all inadequate husbands (41).

Another example illustrating Rice's use of language is during the party scene. As the guests arrive, the same ritual greeting of "How de do" is exchanged between Mrs. Zero and Mrs. One through Mrs. Six. Durham points out that the men and women separate into two groups and the banal dialogue and triteness of phrasing is a pathetic satire on social customs (44). As topics of conversation such as women's fashion and the weather are exhausted, the subject matter turns to bigotry. The men and women both rise and recite in unison: "Damn foreigners! Damn dagoes! Damn Catholics! Damn sheenies! Damn niggers! Jail 'em! Shoot 'em! Hang 'em! Lynch 'em! Burn 'em! " Then they begin singing, "My country 'tis of thee, Sweet land of liberty" (203).

Besides slanderous religious and racial expressions, Rice implemented slang with words such as "figgers" for "figures," and

“whaddya” for “what do you,” and “cancha” for “can’t you.”

Mispronounced words were used such as “Young Kipper” instead of “Yom Kippur,” and “empire” instead of “umpire.” Rice also added clichéd words and phrases such as “make it snappy,” “you’re a bum sport,” “square deal,” and “all dolled up,” emphasizing the fact that the characters were not individuals, but instead slaves to society, even in the language that they used.

While both Pirandello and Rice implemented realistic language, Artaud’s Spurt of Blood epitomizes Esslin’s description of the devaluation of language. In Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty, Albert Bermel states that Artaud sought to destroy language. He wanted spoken lines to be “explosive in sound, equivocal in meaning, and unnatural in its delivery” (62). Spurt of Blood employs these elements from the very beginning. The play opens with the “Boy” and “Girl” and speaking to each other. The stage directions call for them to recite their lines monotone, with the “Boy” beginning on the musical note of middle C.

Boy: I love you and life is wonderful.

Girl: (with a tremor of intensity in her voice) You love
me and life is wonderful.

Boy: (an octave lower than middle C) I love you and life is wonderful.

Girl: (an octave lower than his) You love me and life is wonderful.

Boy: (turning away) I love you. (a silence) Come here where I can see you.

Girl: (moves so that she is facing him) There.

Boy: (in an excited, high-pitched voice) I love you, I am tall, I am clear, I am full, I am dense.

Girl: (in same high-pitched voice) We love each other (72-73).

In The Dramatic Concepts of Antonin Artaud, Eric Sellin states that Artaud believed a new language needed to be created specifically for the theatre. The language needed to speak to all of the senses rather than the mind, as realistic language does (1975, 83). Sellin goes on to say that Artaud did not view words as “thought conveyors,” but rather as “objects in themselves, tonalities, and prolonged modulations”(87). Sellin elaborates on this by saying that to Artaud words were the catalysts for physical action. He insisted on combining gesture (encompassing both

physical movement as well as vocal inflection) and the spoken word, drawing focus away from the intellectual meaning of the words themselves and focusing on the consequences those words produce when spoken (86). Because of this, language is equally weighted with other theatrical components to express theme, such as lighting, set design, etc., rather than the primary element.

After exploring the technique of language use within the five plays being examined, it can be stated that these plays meet Esslin's fifth criteria. The sixth and final criterion, dealing with the way Absurdist drama is presented, is the next aspect to be examined.

CHAPTER FIVE

PRESENTATION

The alleged instinct for causality is nothing more than the fear of the unusual (Nietzsche, 1980, 168).

The final criterion for Absurdist drama is that these plays are highly unconventional in presentation. Esslin defines presentation as consisting of "concrete stage images," explaining that the Theatre of the Absurd not only describes absurdity but also demonstrates it through technical means such as movement, costumes and make-up, lighting and scene design (25). The "integration between the subject-matter and the form in which it is expressed" is the distinguishing factor used by Esslin to separate Absurdist drama from other literary theatrical movements (25). However, as the following examination will reveal, the mirroring of theme and presentation exists in plays written before the Theatre of the Absurd was formed.

One of the first playwrights to present an abstract theme coupled with illogical stage techniques was Alfred Jarry. In Alfred Jarry: A Critical and Biographical Study, Beaumont examines Jarry's proposed production notes for Ubu Roi. First, he wanted a mask to

be worn by the main character, Ubu (92). In Latest Rage the Big Drum, Melzer states that Jarry wanted the mask to envelop the entire head of the actor playing Ubu, indicating the “nature” of the character, such as “ the Glutton, the Miser or the Covetous Man” (114). The second note mentioned by Beaumont called for a cardboard horse’s head that would hang around Ubu’s neck during the equestrian scenes, resembling a technique Jarry had seen used in a “Punch and Judy” show. Scene changes were accomplished by a character in an evening dress who would enter and hold up signboards that indicated the place of action, also a practice borrowed from the “Punch and Judy” shows. Abhorring crowd scenes, which he found clumsy and distracting, Jarry called for a single soldier to represent the entire Polish army marching through the Ukraine, to which Ubu replies, “What a mob, what a rush, etc.” The actor playing Ubu was to adopt an accent or a “special voice,” one that would coincide with Ubu’s obnoxious nature. Finally, costumes were to be generic and lacking in historical accuracy so that the idea of something modern or eternal could be conveyed (92-93).

The set for Ubu Roi was as diverse as its main character. In Latest Rage the Big Drum, Melzer states that on opening night, Jarry

addressed the audience on stage before the production began. In describing the set, Jarry stated:

You will see doors opening onto snow-covered plains under blue skies, mantelpieces with clocks on them swinging open to turn into doorways, and palm trees flourishing at the foot of beds so that little elephants perching on bookshelves can graze on them (115).

Arthur Symons, a British critic who attended the opening performance of Ubu Roi, described the scenery as childlike, stating that “indoors and out of doors, and even the torrid, temperate and arctic zones were visible at all times” (1906, 373). Symons goes on to say that apple trees could be seen against a blue sky, and resting on the sky was a fireplace through which several characters entered. At the top of the sky was a huge orange sphere with an elephant riding on it, which represented the sun. On the left of the stage, a bed with snow falling on it was painted on one wall, with a bare tree growing at the foot of it. Palm trees were painted on the right wall, and beside them a door opened into the sky. Next to the door was a skeleton hanging from the gallows (373).

While Jarry's Ubu Roi is flamboyant and loud in its depiction of the rapacity of human nature, Strindberg's The Ghost Sonata examines the alienation of humans through the structure of a dream. In his preface to the play, Corrigan states that Strindberg realized that the form of a dream was the only adequate means of portraying the inner feelings of humans at all times (xx). In the preface to the play, , Strindberg elaborates on the setting of The Ghost Sonata by saying that the scenery should be a "facade" of painted trees and skies, as no definite location exists, as well as modern to avoid dating the subject matter. Strindberg goes on to explain that the costumes and scenery need to be abstract and distorted, much as they would be in a dream. However, he calls for the characters to be natural and believable, even though they flow in and out of scenes like ghosts (67).

While Strindberg specified the staging techniques he wanted to employ, Innes points out in Avant Garde Theatre 1892-1992 that the technical sources needed for the production were not available at the turn of the century. Therefore, Innes states that Strindberg began "working toward a theatre of the mind, independent of the

stage or physical representation" (36). In Open Letters to the Intimate Theatre, Strindberg elaborates on his concept by stating if Shakespeare's highly sophisticated contemporaries could do without scenery, we too should be able to imagine walls and trees. . .everything is make-believe on stage. The poet's vision is profaned through the written word; the written drama is profane in a definite way when it is materialized through performance (1955, 294).

In Strindberg's Dramatic Expressionism, Dahlstrom states that throughout the play, Strindberg incorporates distorted staging effects that complement the theme. In the dinner scene, the guests are seated corpse-like around the table. As they eat their biscuits in silence, the sense of alienation is heightened as they begin crunching their food loudly in unison (1968, 198-200). Another example Dahlstrom cites is the character of the Mummy, a woman who has so isolated herself from all emotional and physical pain that the other characters refer to her as a Mummy. When she first speaks, the Mummy prattles on like a parrot. However, toward the end of the play when she encounters the Old Man, the Mummy begins

to speak normally, passing on the role of the Mummy to the Old Man. Dahlstrom goes on to say that Strindberg wanted to begin the play with realistic characters abiding in a “suggested existence” (201-203). As the play progresses, just as a dream progresses, characters and events become increasingly distorted and abnormal.

While Strindberg presented realistic characters in a distorted environment, Pirandello insisted on absolute realism in every aspect. In Dreams of Passion, Oliver states that the first production of Six Character in Search of An Author was met with violent protests from the audience when they entered the theatre and discovered a raised curtain and bare stage. The audience came to the theatre wanting to be transported out of their reality “into the illusion of a new reality,” so that they could forget about their own problems and become involved in other people’s lives. Ironically, they wanted the realism of the theatre in order to avoid the reality of their own lives. Oliver goes on to say that Pirandello imbued the audience with confrontational reality rather than heightened realism to force them to gain insight into their own lives (52).

Pirandello abandoned the traditional three-act structure in Six Characters, but he did allow for natural breaks in the action that

provided intermission periods. The play begins with the Actors and Director rehearsing an old Pirandello play, when the Six Characters wander on stage looking for someone to dramatize their story. The first section concludes after the Director finally agrees to let his company act out the Characters' drama. He gives the Actors a fifteen minute break so that he can work on the script. Everyone exits, but the curtain remains raised. Oliver states that Pirandello incorporates a natural pause in the action without needing an "artiface" to create an intermission (53). The second break occurs after the Father and Step-daughter confront one another in Madam Pace's shop. The Director suggests the end of the scene and metaphorically calls out "Curtain!" A bumbling stage hand takes him seriously and lowers the curtain, establishing the end of the second section.

As the play ends after the deaths of the two children, the Director closes the action by proclaiming that he has wasted an entire day of rehearsal because of the Characters. Oliver points out that Pirandello chose to add a striking visual effect to end the play. After the Director speaks of the wasted time, he excuses the Actors and instructs the electrician to turn out the lights. The electrician

obeys his orders and the theatre is plunged into darkness. The Director cries out, "For God's sake, at least leave me a light so I can find my way out of here." At this point, a green light is projected against the cyclorama, revealing the giant shadows of the Characters, minus the two young children. Seeing this, the Director runs screaming from the stage and leaves by exiting through the house (70).

Pirandello's Six Characters is similar to Rice's The Adding Machine in the use of realism to portray theme. However, where Pirandello insists on absolute realism in every aspect, Rice incorporates a surface realism that, when penetrated, reveals a distorted and abnormal foundation. In Elmer Rice, Frank Durham states that in the original production, the play opened to reveal the Zeros in their bedroom, which was decorated with wallpaper containing rows of numbers. As the scene progressed, and Mrs. Zero continued to talk, the fact that something was "askew" became apparent (41).

Throughout the play, Rice implements a variety of staging effects. When Zero approaches his boss about a raise only to learn that he will be fired instead, Durham states that "sound effects -

the music of a carousel - and a revolving stage symbolically express the growing turmoil inside of Zero." As the music grows louder and the stage revolves faster, Zero's hysteria builds to a terrifying climax. A red streak of lightning followed by a thunder clap and then darkness, reveal Zero's inner thoughts at the moment he murders his boss. Durham points out that the act itself is not portrayed on stage (43).

Distorted scenery and imaginative staging techniques are used in the courtroom scene. Durham states that the courtroom is empty, except for the judge and jury, projecting the hard, cold, indifference of the law. The members of the jury, the same people who were party guests in the scene before, are robot-like in their movements. Durham points out that although Rice's text did not call for it, in the original production, a "black-robed, immobile dummy, expressionless and imperturbable" represented the judge (45).

The final scene of the play reveals Zero sitting before a giant adding machine, somewhere between the Elysian Fields and earth. The stage directions suggest the following conditions:

He presses the keys and pulls the lever with mechanical precision. He still wears his full-dress suit but he has

added to it sleeve-protectors and a green eyeshade. A strip of white paper-tape flows steadily from the machine as Zero operates. The room is filled with this tape - streamers, festoons, billows of it everywhere. It covers the floor and the furniture, it climbs the walls and chokes the doorways (218).

Charles, an officer, enters and tells Zero to stop because he must now prepare to return to earth to begin again as a baby.

Subsequently, Zero learns that he is on a downward spiral of reincarnation. Charles takes pity on him and offers Zero a girl for company. Zero hears her voice, but it is merely a trick of ventriloquism because the girl, whose name is Hope, does not exist (Durham, 50).

Similar to the distorted images portrayed in The Adding Machine, Artaud's Spurt of Blood rejects reality in favor of a violent explosion of images, bright lights, and sounds. In Experimental Theatre, James Roose-Evans states that Artaud was rejecting realism in exchange for "a theatre of space" which incorporated music, dance, pantomime, chanting, incantations, and lighting (1970,

54). After the Boy and Girl utter the opening phrases of the play, the stage directions dictate as follows:

A silence. There is heard the sound of a huge wheel turning and making a wind. A hurricane divides the two. Then one sees two stars collide and a series of legs of living flesh fall together with feet, hands, heads of hair, masks, [and] temples. . . (73).

As the items fall from the sky, a prostitute is also dropped on the stage. Without warning, the scene changes from daylight to night. A tremendous storm is leashed upon the stage. As the thunder claps loudly and the lightning streaks across the stage, the characters run around in chaos. Suddenly, a gigantic hand appears and seizes the Prostitute by the hair, which immediately catches fire. The Prostitute bites the hand, which is the hand of God, and blood spurts across the stage (75).

Among other violent images in the play, Artaud presents the Wetnurse, a woman whose breasts are so large that she must hold them up with both hands. After the Prostitute bites the hand of God, the Wetnurse reenters with her chest completely flat. The Knight, her husband, yells at her demanding to know what she did with his

cheese. She sweetly replies, "Here." Artaud explains the subsequent action in the stage directions by saying that "He [the Knight] covers his face in horror. Now an enormous number of scorpions emerge from under the Wetnurse's skirts and begin to swarm over the Knight's penis, which swells and bursts" (76).

In French Theatre, Bettina Knapp states that Artaud was deeply influenced by the arousal and stimulation that resulted from seeing physical movement on stage. Artaud felt that any gesture, regardless of how small or insignificant, was symbolic and conveyed meaning (69-72). Knapp goes on to say that Artaud utilized lighting, sound, and gesture so that the audience would view the production as fragmented, isolated moments rather than a uniformed entity. The reasoning for this coincided with Artaud's belief that the very essence of life is chaos. By forcing the audience to witness illogical, abnormal fragments rather than orderly, patterned scenes, Artaud reinforced his theme that man's inner nature is comprised of raging chaos (74-75).

In Avant Garde Theatre 1892-1992, Innes describes a 1964 production of Spurt of Blood at the London Amateur Dramatic Association. Peter Brook, the director of the project, staged the

play according to Artaud's stage directions and in conjunction with Artaud's ideas for a theatre of cruelty (127-128). Innes cites the following passage written by Clive Barker, a theatre professional and an audience member who witnessed Brook's production. In this passage, Barker relays the contradiction between what was spoken and what was staged:

The narrator gives the line: 'Enter a knight in medieval armour followed by a wet-nurse, her breasts in her hands.' The physical effect of a man in one of the suits of the Black Prince - ornate to the point of sensuality - followed by a big girl cupping in her hands a pair of great steaming tits, milk dribbling from the nipples, must be overwhelming. . . I can [also] see it performed by a man in a polished steel breastplate . . . [and] a girl decorated with a pair of crudely painted bladders filled with water. . . .What we saw was a man in standard Old Vic imitation armour followed by a girl, inexplicably in pseudo 14th century costume, cupping her empty hands 18 inches in front of her. The contradiction between words and images depressed me beyond words. (128-129).

Innes further explains that among Artaud's staging techniques, his use of lighting was inventive and advanced for the time. Artaud incorporated strobe lights into the Spurt of Blood to represent lightning. Innes explains that Artaud used lighting, not to provide "emotional coloring to scenes" but to "disorient the spectator" and to "dematerialize stage action, transposing it into a primitive, subconscious key" (86-87).

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS

When man wanted to imitate the action of walking, he created the wheel (Apollinaire, 1916, 866).

In discussing the "tradition of the absurd," Esslin cites the above quotation to illustrate the fact that dramatic Absurdism is "a return to old, even archaic, traditions" (360). In order to thoroughly understand and appreciate the Theatre of the Absurd, it is necessary to examine the roots and ideas that helped shape the concept of Absurdism. Through an analysis of the critical and dramatic literature, this study has examined some of those roots--specifically in plays written between 1888 and 1925--in order to satisfy two questions: to what extent can elements of the Absurd be found in plays written prior to 1940, and what specifically are those elements in relation to the criteria Esslin outlined in his book.

The first criterion states that Absurd plays contain no concrete, logical plot structure. Instead of employing plot to develop or unfold the events of a story, Absurdist utilize plot only to emphasize the theme of the play.

As the plot of Alfred Jarry's Ubu Roi is illogical and ludicrous, it is obvious that Jarry's intent was not to delineate the poignant tale of King Ubu. He uses Ubu to illustrate his disdain for the society of his day. Similar to Jarry in his portrayal of erratic events, the plot of Strindberg's The Ghost Sonata is ethereal in its dream-like structure. As characters and instances melt together and drift apart without any logical explanation, Strindberg emphasizes his belief that human existence is permeated with contradiction and hypocrisy. Compared with Strindberg's dream plays, the plot of Luigi Pirandello's Six Character in Search of An Author employs a sporadic unfolding of events as the Characters wander on stage to reveal their story. Complex and fragmentary, the structure of the play conveys the idiosyncrasies and correlations of life and art, as well as provides insight into the failure of communication to express emotion. Also stressing the inadequacy of communication, as well as man's futile attempt to control technology, Elmer Rice's The Adding Machine is a highly expressionistic work. Implementing a seemingly logical plot structure with its cause and effect sequence, Rice's play employs a juxtaposition of events that are contradictory and irrational. Also

inconsistent and illogical in its arrangement of incidents, Antonin Artaud's Spurt of Blood is a violent and unpredictable exposition on the inner chaos inherently present in human beings.

Esslin's second criterion focuses on characters in Absurdist drama being underdeveloped and used only to draw attention to the theme of the play. In most realistic works, the characters are the primary focus, as they are regular, everyday people with whom the audience can readily identify. However, Absurdism, as well as the five plays under examination, manipulates characters in order to draw attention to theme.

Jarry's *Ubu* is far from being realistic; rather, he is the embodiment of all that Jarry found detestable and abhorrent in the society of his day. *Ubu* and the other characters are to be regarded as puppets, whose gestures and words are the reiteration of Jarry's opinions on the bourgeoisie. Rather than presenting characters who functioned as puppets, Strindberg's characters appear ghost-like as they move like corpses through their world of alienation looking for meaning in existence. Resembling ghosts visually, Pirandello's *Six Characters* are to look as unrealistic as possible, in contrast to the living Actors. However, emotionally, the Characters express a

greater depth of feeling than do the Actors, whose emotions are to be artificial and forced, thus emphasizing Pirandello's theme of the interweaving of art and life. Although the plot of The Adding Machine details events in Zero's life, Rice uses him as a type of "Everyman," a representative of society whose dreams and fears can be found within all of us. However, Zero, as well as the remaining characters, is an uncultivated expressionistic symbols of a repressed and enslaved society. Unlike Rice, character development in Artaud's Spurt of Blood does not exist. The characters are highly superficial and abstract, making it obvious that their purpose is not to relay the events of a story but to emphasize Artaud's theme.

The third criterion states that Absurd plays possess a theme that illustrates the disparity of the mortal state, a theme which usually goes unresolved. As realistic drama primarily strives to present a logical central idea culminating in resolution, Absurdists, as well as the five plays under investigation, portray an irrational, grotesque theme without offering any problem-solving suggestions. The fourth criterion, which is an extension of the third, deals with the subject matter expressed through the theme. Specifically, this criterion states that Absurd plays do not mimic normal life, rather

they present the abnormal, dark side of human nature that most people find painful and frightening and choose to avoid. Because the fourth criterion builds upon the third, both will be examined here together for the purpose of summation.

While Jarry presents Ubu as a wretched and vile monster who commits murder, treason and robbery, the play ends with Ubu going unpunished, in a gluttonous pursuit of more material possessions. An example of Ubu's barbarous activities is his use of the "disembraining" machine, an apparatus that "removes" the brains of its victims. Through Ubu, Jarry portrayed human beings to be caught up in an irreversible cycle of abhorrent and detestable behavior.

Although Strindberg's The Ghost Sonata does not contain atrocious characters who seek pleasure from torture devices, it is equally as violent in its portrayal of human existence. Through such grotesque images as "the ghost supper," and "the mummy," Strindberg emphasizes his theme of the insufficiency of human nature.

Although the play ends unresolved, Strindberg does suggest the hope in a heavenly afterlife. The theme of Six Characters in Search of An Author parallels the union of art and life as well as concentrating on familial relationships. Pirandello brutally presents these ideas,

such as incest and suicide, through the turbulent emotions of the Characters. At the end of their story, the Characters and Actors exit the stage, leaving the audience to deal with the events and emotions on their own. Rice's The Adding Machine intensely explores the theme of the dehumanization of man by technology. Images, such as the "zoo scene" and the "giant adding machine" scene add to the inhuman portrayal of the master/slave relationship. The play concludes with Zero running off stage, chasing a mirage of hope, which emphasizes the fact that hope probably does not exist. Spurt of Blood is a savage portrait of the inner chaos at the center of human existence. Human appendages falling from the sky, coupled with graphic sights such as scorpions escaping from between the Wetnurse's legs, all serve as explicit examples of the way Artaud attacked his audience with the baseness of the human state. However, as the play ends, Artaud does not offer any suggestions as to how to obtain order and calm within one's self.

Esslin's fifth criterion involves the type of language that is employed in dramatic Absurdism, primarily the absence of poignant dialogue to portray theme. Instead, the theme of failed communication is reflected through the utterance of scattered

thoughts, often employing violent and crude language. The five plays under examination fulfill this criterion, both in their utilization of speech and in the illustration of communication processes.

The language of Ubu Roi is vulgar and imbued with nonsense words, emphasizing Jarry's disgust for the bourgeoisie. Words such as "disembrain" and "face-chopper" illustrate the violent nature of the play, while "pfartichoke" and "hornstrumpot" are examples of nonsense words. Jarry's language choices added to the portrayal of the base nature of society. The Ghost Sonata examines human existence through symbolic and experimental communication. The "Mummy" character, who sits in a cupboard and chatters like a parrot, represents the alienation that results when communication breaks down. By avoiding human interaction, the Mummy does not have to face reality. Unlike Strindberg, Pirandello uses realistic and articulate language in order to stress the ineffectiveness of words to express emotion. However, by converting inner feelings to spoken language, Pirandello illustrates that communication is not always a problem-solver, nor is it an adequate means for conveying emotions. Rice's The Adding Machine also employs realistic language; however, the words and phrases used are clichéd and meaningless. Colloquial

language such as “make it snappy” and “all dolled up” illustrates Rice’s belief that human beings are governed by society, even down to the word choices they make. Artaud’s Spurt of Blood exploits a deprecation of language where mere words are inadequate for expressing thought. Artaud believed that language needed to be explosive in sound in order to reach the senses of the audience. He illustrates this through lines spoken monotone or in unnatural pitches, stating that emphasis should be placed upon how the words are spoken, rather than the content or meaning of the words.

Esslin’s final criterion states that Absurdist drama is highly unconventional in presentation, that is, in tangible stage images. Esslin stresses the fact that the mirroring of theme and presentation is the distinguishing factor that sets Absurdism apart from other literary dramatic movements. As this study revealed, the five plays under examination utilize a combination of theme and presentation.

Alfred Jarry mirrored his theme of the rapaciousness of humans through avant garde stage techniques. A painted juxtaposition of locales and time zones on the background of the set, along with doors opening into the sky and in fire places are a few

examples illustrating the spectacle in Ubu Roi. Jarry called for a hideous costume and a huge mask to be worn by Ubu, as he was the representation of the bourgeois society. While Jarry implemented bold and openly ludicrous staging techniques, Strindberg employed the structure of a dream. He presented his theme of the insufficiency of human nature through abstract and distorted images, such as a painted backdrop that represented the facade of a house and trees. A violent image mirroring the theme of the play is the ghost supper. The guests resemble corpses as they sit around the table munching their biscuits in unison. Through this staging technique, Strindberg illustrated the failure of communication to provide meaning to existence. While Strindberg employed a dream-like setting, Pirandello insisted on blatant realism. The spectators entered the theatre and were confronted by a raised curtain revealing a bare stage. Although the audience came to the theatre looking to escape into the lives and problems of imaginary characters, Pirandello used the realistic setting to assault his audience. Similar to Pirandello, Rice implemented a surface realism that hovered over a distorted existence. An example of Rice's expressionistic staging is illustrated in the courtroom scene. The

only people present in the courtroom are the Judge, the Jury, and Zero. The Jury remains silent as Zero rambles through an endless monologue of defense, until they stand and shout "guilty" in unison. Artaud's Spurt of Blood is a flagrant rejection of reality in its surrealistic portrayal of the turmoil that rages within man's inner being. Among other violent images, such as human flesh falling from the sky and the Prostitute's hair catching on fire, Artaud called for scorpions to crawl from between the Wetnurse's legs. As the scorpions swarm from the Wetnurse and attack the Knight, his penis swells and explodes.

By investigating Esslin's criteria for the dramatic Absurdism being written during 1940 and beyond, and examining these guidelines in relation to five plays written between 1888 and 1925, this study has satisfied two questions: elements of the Theatre of the Absurd are present in works written before 1940, and those elements can be identified using the six criteria Esslin outlined for Absurdism.

As this study does not claim to be an exhaustive explication of the roots of Absurdist drama, some areas of further study are suggested. While Esslin is credited with naming the Theatre of the

Absurd, he did not "invent" the genre. Just as Aristotle's Poetics was not intended to be a rule book on tragedy, Esslin's Theatre of the Absurd is only a compilation of a phenomenon of dramatic literature that was permeating the theatre around 1940. However, because Esslin did originate the categorization of these playwrights in association with the term "Theatre of the Absurd," many view his book as the primary explication of dramatic Absurdism. Because of this, comprehensive sources dealing with Absurdist drama are scarce in number. While Esslin's findings are thorough, more research could be done in order to expand the theories Esslin puts forth in The Theatre of the Absurd.

In his book, Esslin includes a chapter entitled "The Tradition of the Absurd," in which he attempts to trace the roots of Absurdism. As the main focus of the book is on the body of literature written after 1940, the chapter explicating the influences on modern Absurdism is by no means complete. Further study could be accomplished by building upon the avant garde movements mentioned in this discourse, such as symbolism, surrealism, and expressionism concentrating on the specific characteristics of each, in relation to their influence on the Theatre of the Absurd.

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Kimberly Sue Beegle was born in Buckhannon, West Virginia on August 23, 1969. She attended elementary and junior high school in the Upsher County school district in Buckhannon. In 1983, she moved with her family to Winston-Salem, North Carolina where she attended and graduated from Gospel Light Christian School. In the fall of 1987, she entered Tennessee Temple University in Chattanooga, Tennessee and received the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Communication Arts. She entered Austin Peay State University in August, 1992 and received the Master of Arts degree in Communication Arts in May, 1994.

She is presently employed by Austin Peay State University as a Graduate Assistant, where she teaches classes in the Heritage program.