

ANALYSIS

The Lesson (1954)



Eugène Ionesco

(1909-1994)

Type of plot: Absurdist

Time: The 1930's (rise of Nazism)

Locale: Europe

First produced: 1951, Théâtre de Poche, Paris

First published: La Leçon, 1954

THE PROFESSOR, a man in his fifties

THE PUPIL, a young girl of eighteen

MARIE, THE MAID, a woman in her mid-to late forties

The Lesson is set entirely in the Professor's apartment office, which is also a dining room, with a provincial buffet standing on the right. At center stage is a table that doubles as a desk. The window, upstage, is not very large, and through it the roofs of a small town can be seen in the distance. When the curtain rises, the stage is empty. After a few moments, the doorbell rings.

The stout Maid, wearing an apron and a peasant woman's cap, enters through a door upstage, to the right, from a corridor of the apartment. She opens the hall door at stage left and lets in the young Pupil, a girl wearing a gray student's smock with a small white collar and carrying a satchel. The Maid exits, calling the Professor to come down. While waiting, the Pupil takes a notebook from her satchel and looks through it as though she is reviewing a lesson. She is smiling, lively, and dynamic, with a self-assured manner. The Professor enters, a short, aging man wearing pince-nez and formal black clothes, with a white

collar and a small white beard. He is very timid, polite, and proper, but a lewd gleam comes into his eyes occasionally and is quickly repressed.

After a polite exchange, the Professor says that he has lived in this town for thirty years but would prefer to live in Paris, or at least Bordeaux, and then admits that he has never seen Bordeaux and does not know Paris either. When the Pupil guesses that Paris is the capital of France, he jumps to the conclusion that she is a master of French geography. She needs help in naming the four seasons, yet says that she already has diplomas in both science and arts. Now, she declares, she is at the Professor's disposal, whereupon the recurrent gleam reappears and is extinguished. The Maid enters, looks for something at the buffet, irritates the Professor by urging him to remain calm, and exits. When the Pupil is able to add one and one correctly, the Professor concludes that within only three weeks she "should easily achieve the total doctorate."

Thereafter, the Pupil gives answers that are sensible to her but often do not make sense according to the Professor's mathematics. She solves a massive multiplication problem through memorization but cannot rely on reasoning, so that she will never be "able to perform correctly the functions of a poly technician." Consequently, the Professor decides to prepare her only for a partial doctorate. As he prepares to move on to the subject of philology, or the meanings of language, he is interrupted again by the Maid, now called Marie, who pulls on his sleeve and warns him that philology leads to calamity. He warns Marie that she is going too far, that he is not a child, and orders her out. Stage directions indicate that his voice changes during the play, starting off thin and reedy but growing stronger and stronger, as he becomes ever more authoritarian, until at the end it is extremely powerful. His domination reduces the Pupil to passivity, until she becomes "almost a mute and inert object."

The Professor proceeds to give a vacuous lecture full of absurdity, circular reasoning, and double-talk on the philology of various "neo-Spanish languages," including references to jai alai, a game resembling handball. He reproaches the Pupil for parading her knowledge, then lectures her on articulation in a flight of clumsy metaphors and clichés. The Pupil now begins to complain of a toothache. She continues to do so for the rest of the play, while the Professor lectures, ignores her increasing pain, and tries to force her into obedience. He threatens to extract her teeth. Then he tries to silence her by threatening to bash in her skull. He twists her wrist and she cries out. In a rage, he continues to lecture on languages.

Finally, the Professor is exasperated by the Pupil and calls in the Maid to help, but she refuses, warns him that once again he is going too far, and exits. He goes to a drawer and finds a big knife, "invisible or real." The lewd gleam in his eyes becomes "a steady devouring flame." He brandishes the knife happily, says that it will serve for all the languages, and orders the Pupil to look at it while repeating after him the word "knife." When she finally yields and repeats after him, he stabs her. They both cry "Aaah!" at the same moment. She flops onto a chair by the window in "an immodest position." He then stabs her to death, convulses, and collapses into a chair. When he returns to his senses and realizes what he has done, he calls in the Maid again. Marie lectures him, saying that "every day it's the same thing": and this pupil makes his fortieth murder; she warns him that soon he will run out of pupils. The Professor tries to strike Marie with the knife, but she overpowers him. He apologizes, she slaps him, and he cowers like a child. Then she forgives him and says that he is a good boy in spite of being a murderer.

With forty coffins to bury, the Professor is afraid that someone will notice. The Maid assures him that the sight is so commonplace that people will not ask questions. Around his arm she puts an armband with an insignia, "perhaps the Nazi swastika." If he wears this armband, she says, he has nothing to fear. They exit, carrying the corpse. After several moments, the doorbell rings. As at the beginning of the play, the Maid appears, goes to the door, and ushers in the next Pupil.

Themes and Meanings

The Lesson satirizes totalitarianism in education, politics, language, psychology, and sexuality. This play is typical of Ionesco in its parodies, irony, nonsense, and themes of contradiction, proliferation, repetition, circularity, interchangeability, and futility. The Professor exhibits the tendencies of bourgeois consciousness, especially reductive reasoning, to oppress and destroy the best in human nature--the Pupil--based upon repression of instinct, represented by the Maid. Yet this description is itself reductive, for the

free, imaginative spirit of the play transcends its own conceptual structure, through absurdity. The absurd shatters the order of rational consciousness and shocks or seduces it into at least a momentary acceptance of a larger reality, as when the self-contradicting Professor accepts from his Pupil the answer that seven plus one is sometimes nine: "We can't be sure of anything, young lady, in this world."

Some critics see the Professor as modeled on Ionesco's father and some of his teachers in Romania who were Nazis. At the end of the play, the explicit reference to a Nazi swastika points to a historical case that exemplifies on a world scale the psychodynamics of the repressed, provincial teacher, the Professor. The way he teaches makes him deadly whatever political form his opinions may take, and he is killing pupils every day. The other characters, also, are what Ionesco calls archetypes. The most resonant lesson of *The Lesson* is conveyed by its circular structure and embodied in the stout Maid, or instinct, who opens doors, is the strongest authority, and is on the stage both first and last. The cyclical structure of the play implies continual recurrence, an archetypal pattern of human behavior.

In his reductive, totalitarian lecture on philology, the Professor equates language with geography, making the lecture a metaphor of conquest that evokes the rise of Adolf Hitler. His language is out of control. The Maid, one of the common folk, does not altogether approve of what he does--he goes too far--yet she is loyal, forgives him, continues to serve him, and puts the armband around his arm. She hints that she might become his lover. Her relationship to him is subordinate in her social role as maid, dominant in her instinctive role as mother, and devoted in her sexual role as "little Marie." She reinforces the indications in stage directions that the Professor is sexually frustrated and perhaps inclined to impotence, for she refers to gossip that he is "something of a priest at times." The language of the play is frequently sexual, its rhythm is a movement to climax, and the lesson is a mock seduction culminating in a rape.

The Professor tries to compartmentalize his mind and exclude the Maid from the lesson, saying that it is not her department. He justifies himself as a force of disintegration necessary to progress and identifies integration with the Pupil, who can add but not subtract. Ironically the Pupil is the better teacher. They sit facing each other at the table as archetypal opposites in contradiction, like hemispheres of a polarized brain. The Professor cannot force the Pupil to submit to his notion of progress, his ideology, except by killing her. The difference between ideology and integrated reality, the Professor and the play, is the absurdist factor.

Dramatic Devices

The Professor says of a military friend, "He managed to conceal his fault so effectively that, thanks to the hats he wore, no one ever noticed it." The Professor wears a conventional black skullcap, and the absurdities in his dialogue expose his faults of the head in a way that no one can fail to notice. As the absurdities increasingly reveal truths, it is the conventional that comes to seem absurd. Many ironies in the play depend upon sustaining the illusion of the ordinary while subverting it. Absurdity contradicts expectation, and contradiction generates irony. *The Lesson* reverberates with multiple ironies from beginning to end, and this ironic tone is clarified if the Professor is played with emphasis upon his self-contradictions.

The one window of the set becomes significant at the climax of the play: Just before stabbing his pupil, the Professor changes his voice and says to her, "Pay attention...don't break my window..." He has her where he wants her now in his lust to dominate, and the window is a metaphor of his outlook, which, like the literal window, is not very large. At the beginning of the play, when the Professor is proper, the window looks out upon the town, and the sky is a calm grayish blue. Later, when he stabs the Pupil, she flops into a chair that stage directions place near the window. The view out the window, in particular the color of the sky, may be changed by stage lighting to correlate with the changes in the Professor. Approaching the end, exaggerated shadows are also appropriate.

Early in the play the Professor uses imaginary matches to illustrate a math problem, then writes at comical length on an imaginary blackboard with an imaginary piece of chalk. The leap from the commonplace to the absurd capsulizes Eugène Ionesco's method as a dramatist: requiring the audience to respond in a figurative rather than merely a literal mode. Similarly, stage directions say that the big knife may be invisible or real, but two subsequent references are made to "the invisible knife," implying that the

knife should be seen as a metaphor. The murder is spiritual. The Pupil is killed by the word, an instrument of ideology that deprives her of independent life.

At the end of the play, the insignia on the armband is “perhaps” a Nazi swastika, indicating that it represents more than a single political movement. Some critics object that this reference contradicts the otherwise anti-didactic tone of the play. Others say that a larger meaning is conveyed if the insignia used is not a Nazi swastika but resembles or evokes one, and that this play, like *Rhinoceros* (1959), may be reduced by too literal an interpretation to the kind of propaganda it ridicules.

Critical Context

The density of meaning in *The Lesson* is evidence to some that Eugene Ionesco is more complex than Samuel Beckett, his rival for leadership of the influential avant-garde movement of the 1950's, Theater of the Absurd. This play, though less well known than *La Cantatrice chauve* (pr. 1950; *The Bald Soprano*, 1956) or *Rhinoceros*, is a more concentrated, resonant, and powerful expression of artistic vision and makes an excellent introduction to Ionesco.

In his first play, *The Bald Soprano*, Ionesco wrote with comic effect about what he called “the tragedy of language.” The characters are like mechanical puppets manipulated by their language, which consists mainly of platitudes and clichés. In *The Lesson*, the dangers of language are emphasized, as the spiritual murder of the Pupil points to the literal murder of millions in World War II and beyond them to the ongoing carnage that is human history. In Ionesco's fourth play, *Les Chaises* (pr. 1952; *The Chairs*, 1957), the deaf-mute Orator is comparable in his pretentious role to the wordy Professor in *The Lesson*. While some critics see these and later plays as chaotic and anarchistic, others see preconscious, mythic, or archetypal meaning underlying the absurdity.

Ionesco's early plays dramatize an Existential view of life and represent the beginning of his effort to create an abstract theater, transcending the limitations of realism and the explicit politics of “committed” Leftist theater as represented by Bertolt Brecht. *The Lesson* is especially ironic in the context of Ionesco's aesthetics. Some believe that it is too didactic, while others, of the political Left, condemn it as not didactic enough. Some see his later plays as efforts to be more politically relevant, while others see consistency. As an anti-totalitarian drama, *The Lesson* is comparable to *Tueur sans gages* (1958; *The Killer*, 1960) and to *Rhinoceros*, in which everyone except the protagonist turns into a monstrous conformist, a rhinoceros.

Ionesco's bizarre abstraction, often deriving from his dreams, has been related to abstract Expressionism in painting and, in particular, to Surrealism. The analogy to painting is especially apt in respect to plays that include characters with multiple noses and breasts, and plays that focus on objects: chairs, eggs, coffee cups, and mushrooms. Because of its intellectual richness and visceral power, *The Lesson* is perhaps the most comprehensive example of Ionesco's distinctive qualities as a dramatist.

Sources for Further Study

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