

THE EXERCISE OF POWER IN IONESCO'S **THE LESSON** AND PINTER'S **APPLICANT**

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Although Absurd plays tend to have general characteristics in common, as Martin Esslin has so well pointed out in his introduction to **The Theatre of the Absurd**¹, nevertheless two plays have called my attention for the fact that they not only share some of these general characteristics but go even a step further in having technically and thematically striking similarities. These two plays are Ionesco's **The Lesson**², published originally in French in 1954, and Pinter's **Applicant**³, a sketch published in 1961.-

My intention is then to examine both plays in order to discuss these similarities, showing at the same time how these foregrounded correspondences in relation to plot, setting, character, action, dialogue and so forth in both plays lead to a common theme: the exercise of power. My treatment of both texts will thus be relatively superficial, for I shall concentrate and exploit only the common aspects which project the gradual increase of the exercise of power in the two plays. Due to differences in length (**The Lesson** has 38 pages while **Applicant** has only 4) these aspects are of course much more developed in Ionesco than in Pinter.

The domineering-dominated relationship in **The Lesson** and in **Applicant** is already latent in the titles of both plays, for **The Lesson**⁴ suggests a professor-pupil relationship and the plot deals with the private instruction given by an old professor to a young and eager girl, a lesson which includes geography, arithmetic, linguistics and so on, but which ends with the professor dominating and then killing the girl with an imaginary knife. Pinter's sketch, similarly, indicates by its title a domineering-dominated (secretary-applicant) relationship, which is developed in the plot through an interview in which a young man undergoes several mental tests such as questions, and physical tests such as earphones, electrodes

1 ESSLIN, Martin. **The Theatre of the Absurd**. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1970. p. 21-2.

2 IONESCO, Eugène. **Rhinoceros. The Chairs. The Lesson**. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1974. p. 181-218. (References and quotations from the play are indicated by page numbers cited in parentheses).

3 PINTER, Harold. **A Slight Ache and other plays**. London, Eyre Methuen, 1961. p. 133-6. (Ibid. in relation to quotations from **Applicant**).

4 For an analysis of the play inside the Absurd tradition, see ESSLIN, p. 142-5.

and lights, to see if he fulfills the demanded requirements - his "psychological suitability" (133) for the job - until he collapses.

Resemblances are also evident in the setting of the two plays, for both the professor's study in *The Lesson* as the office in *Applicant* imply a business-like and impersonal relationship between a superior and an inferior. This impersonality is enhanced by the sparse furniture on stage, for the professor's study contains only a simple dresser, a table (which serves as desk) with three chairs around and two more on either side of a window, and a few shelves holding books (181). The office in *Applicant* has only a drawer, a chair and a high stool. One can then see that this sparse furniture can be very functional, the chairs being used to project the domineering-dominated relationship between the characters during the action of play, indicated by their movements.

Both plays start with the two characters (professor-pupil and secretary-applicant) standing while they exchange greetings and start their duologue, then both characters sit down (in *The Lesson* opposite each other at the table, in *Applicant* the young man on a chair and the secretary on a high stool looking down on him). This sign of superiority in *Applicant* becomes evident in *The Lesson* more at the end of the play, with the professor and the pupil standing again, and the play reaches its climax with the professor killing the student, who falls, "crumpling into an immodest position on the chair which happens to be in the right place near the window" (214). Thus, while the pupil receives her death-blow standing and then crumpling onto the chair—the professor still in a superior position, standing in front of her—the applicant receives his shock treatment sitting and then being propelled from the chair, falling, rolling, crawling, tottering and collapsing (136).

Other correspondences are apparent in the appearance of the dominating-dominated couples. As *The Lesson* starts, the stage directions indicate that the student "looks a polite, well brought-up girl, but vivacious, dynamic, and of a cheerful disposition: she has a bright smile" (182). But as the play progresses, the student's general bearing and movements "gradually lose their animation" and she slowly changes "from being happy and cheerful to being downcast and morose", becoming "more and more tired and sleepy", in "a state of nervous depression", until at the end "she is nothing more than an object, limp and inert, lifeless (...) in the

hands of the Professor" (182). The applicant too, is a young man "eager, cheerful, enthusiastic" (133) although striding nervously before the door opens and Miss Piffs comes in. With the development of the action, he too becomes more nervous, more unable to react and he collapses twice - one after each shock treatment: the equivalent to receiving a death blow from the Professor's knife. Thus, in spite of the difference in length, the change that takes place in the student and in the applicant is actually the same: from lifelike to deathlike, from cheerfulness to exhaustion and total collapse or death.

Concerning the professor-interviewer's appearance and bearing, there are some slight differences between the two plays, but the basic similarity remains, in the reversal of roles: in *The Lesson*, the Professor changes from timidity to equality to aggressiveness and domination, while in *Applicant* the interviewer changes from equality or impersonality to imposition and domination, until she also becomes, like the Professor, a Gestapo-like figure at the end. As the stage directions say, the professor is "excessively polite, very professorial". He then becomes, in the course of the drama, "more and more sure of himself, excitable, aggressive, domineering, until he can do exactly as he pleases with his Pupil, she having become as putty in his hands" (183). Thus, the change in the Professor's bearing is much greater than in the interviewer, for the first moves from inferiority to equality to superiority while the second only from equality to superiority. After killing the student, though, the Professor is "panic-stricken" (214) whereas the secretary just looks at the applicant then bends over him to thank him and say that the experience is over (136).

The dominating-dominated relationship is also partially corroborated in both plays by the characters' names. Although names are omitted in *The Lesson*, in order to impersonalize the Professor and the Pupil, the fact that the two nouns are always capitalized in the play makes us think of these two nouns as being their proper names, thus emphasizing once more the superior-inferior relationship⁵. In the *Applicant*, conversely, although both interviewer have names, these very names seem to increase the relationship domineering-dominated, for the young man is called Mr. Lamb — with implications of innocence, weakness, offering no resistance, sacrifici-

⁵ There is a third character in *The Lesson*, the Maid, but she is outside my scope of interest.

ce — while the secretary is called Miss **Piffs** (which is partially reechoed in her being labelled "the essence of efficiency" (133)) — plus the fact that "pff" reminds us of a short-circuit, which is in keeping with her dealing with electrodes, lights and sounds in the play, associated, again with her role of dominating the applicant. This would actually be the greatest difference in both plays, for while in *The Lesson* the dominating figure is a man and thus inside our normal expectations of a class situation, in *Applicant* we have a role reversal of the interview situation, for here we have a woman interviewing a man and, even more, the woman is the oppressor while the man is the victim. But of course this contrast between what you feel should happen and what actually goes on is also very much evident in *The Lesson*, with the Professor prescribing the meanings arbitrarily to his pupil in order to dominate and possess her—something the interviewer in *Applicant* also achieves doing.

Thus, if fictional speech represents "the kind of language which a reader can recognize, by observation, as being characteristic of a particular situation" according to Leech and Short⁶, what happens in these two plays is that both Ionesco and Pinter show us situations of which we have habitual notions which they then reverse and make peculiar, odd, transforming the class and the interview into a dehumanizing situation, confounding, absurd, paradoxical, and in which language becomes "an instrument of power", as Esslin had already commented in relation to *The Lesson*⁷. And, as the contrast between what is characteristic and what is odd becomes more and more intense, as both plays progress, the only possible outcome is a break of this equilibrium domineering-dominated, with the full control of the "aggressors" over their "victims" at the end.

But it is actually when we come to discussing the language of both plays, treating the text as a "series of communicative acts"⁸, that the exercise of power becomes patent in all its strength.

When *Applicant* starts, the first nine lines show us that the social relations between the interviewer and the interviewed are marked from the beginning as being roughly equal, although a

6 LEECH, Geoffrey N. & SHORT, Michael H. *Style in Fiction*. London, Longman, 1981. p. 160.

7 ESSLIN, p. 143.

8 SHORT, Michael H. *Discourse Analysis and the Analysis of Drama*. *Applied Linguistics* 2(2):183, Summer 1981.

certain impersonality is already apparent in the exploitation of the naming system:

PIFFS: Ah, good morning.

LAMB: Oh, good morning, miss.

PIFFS: Are you Mr. Lamb?

LAMB: That's right. (133)

Examining the status-marking vocatives, we find that Miss Piffs calls the applicant "Mr. Lamb" only twice — here, at the very start and then at the very end of the play, as if to mark the beginning and end of their relationship, both of which are very formal and politely distanced by the choice of the form of address: "Mr. Lamb", "Miss". At the end, we have: "PIFFS: Thank you very much, Mr. Lamb. We'll let you know" (136). On the other hand, Lamb's calling her "Miss" already implies a person in a slightly inferior position addressing somebody whose name he doesn't know.

The next two questions and answers continue inside our habitual notions of how an interview should run:

PIFFS (studying a sheef of paper): Yes. You're applying for this vacant post, aren't you?

LAMB: I am actually, yes.

PIFFS: Are you a physicist

LAMB: Oh yes, indeed. It's my whole life (133).

Miss Piffs' impersonality still increases as when she explains to Lamb what her establishment's procedure is, by using the plural pronouns "our" and "we" when referring to herself, as if she were behind their impersonality. At the same time, this new "communicative act" also marks the beginning of her imposing authority on him, when she mentions the "test" Mr. Lamb has to be submitted to:

PIFFS (Languidly): Good. Now our procedure is, that before we discuss the applicant's qualifications we like to sujet him to a little test to determine his psychological suitability. You've no objection?

LAMB: Oh, good heavens, no.

PIFFS: Jolly good (133).

In *The Lesson*, the use of status-marking vocatives is also exploited in a similar way, for the pupil calls the professor "Sir" from the beginning of the play, whereas the Professor is still too timid to call her "Mademoiselle", which he does as soon as he is

a little more sure of himself. Compare

PROFESSOR: Good morning, good morning... You are...er...I suppose you really are...er... the new pupil?

(The PUPIL turns round briskly and easily, very much the young lady: she gets up and goes towards the Professor, holding out her hand.)

PUPIL: Yes, Sir. Good morning, Sir. You see I came at the right time. I didn't want to be late. (183)

with

PROFESSOR: It will come in time... take heart, Mademoiselle... I beg your pardon... a little patience... quietly, quietly does it... you'll see, it will come... Beautiful weather we're having... or perhaps not so... er... but after all why not? At least it's not too bad and that's the main thin... er... er... it's not raining... in fact it's not snowing, either (185)

Both passages make clear that at the start the Pupil is easily the young lady, polite and showing deference towards the aged Professor, while he is still too embarrassed (as the stage directions indicate, "during the opening passages the Professor could perhaps stutter slightly" (183)) to think of rules of courtesy.

But as the play progresses and the pupil is gradually being dominated by the Professor while her toothache — a sign of her discomfiture — increases, she stops calling him "Sir":

PUPIL: Are they really, Sir?... Oh, Sir, I've got toothache.

PROFESSOR: Don't interrupt! And don't make me angry!

For if I lose control of myself... As I was saying, then (...) I repeat: if you prefer. for I notice that you are no longer paying attention...

PUPIL: I've got the toothache. (207)

The Professor on the other hand, calls her "Mademoiselle" for the last time somewhat later on, when he takes hold of an imaginary knife from the drawer, a symbol of his spirit of domination:

PROFESSOR: Ah! (...) Here's one, Mademoiselle, here's a knifel It's a pity this is the only one; but we'll try to make it serve for all the languages! All you need

to do is to pronounce the word Knife in each language, while you stare closely at the object and imagine it belongs to the language you're using.

PUPIL: I've got the toothache (212).

This stop in status-marking vocatives suggests at this point not only the pupil's growing unease — making her forget the rules of politeness — through her gradual lack of grasp of language, but on the Professor's part it implies that their relationship is also becoming more intimate, even if in a negative sense, for both become sexually involved: in this climactic passage of the play the Professor brandishes the knife and turns it about her while both repeat the word "knife". The sexual connotation is very obvious, reinforced by the stage directions (mentioned above) of the student falling on the chair, after the Professor has killed her "with a spectacular thrust of the knife" (214), "her legs apart and hanging on either side of it; the Professor remains standing in front of her, back to the public" (214).

Thus, as Esslin so competently argues, the main proposition of *The Lesson* "hinges on the sexual nature of all power and the relationship between language and power as the basis of all human ties".⁹

This relation of power to sex also constitutes the basic background to Pinter's sketch, only with the roles reversed, as mentioned above: woman versus man, woman questioning man and dominating him. And it is exactly on this questioning in *Applicant* that we are going to concentrate now, by examining excerpts of the dialogue, in which the superior asks for and demands information and the inferior answers, either willingly or not.

As already mentioned, status-marking vocatives are omitted during the greatest part of the sketch, implying again a more intimate relationship between Miss Piffs and Lamb, which is then taken to an extreme on part of Miss Piffs, who virtually "drowns" Lamb with personal, intimate and shocking questions, as shocking as the electrodes she has fitted to his palms, transforming what starts as a reasonable interview and request for information (see the first nine lines of the sketch above) into an abuse of authority which ends in the total subjugation and collapse of the applicant. Thus, after having received his first "shock treatment", during which.

⁹ ESSLIN, p. 144.

a piercing high pitched buzz-hum is heard. LAMB jolts rigid. His hands go to his earphones. He is propelled from the chair. He tries to crawl under the chair. MISS PIFFS watches, impassive. The noise stops. LAMB peeps out from under the chair, crawls out, stands, twitches, emits a short chuckle and collapses in the chair. (134)

the questioning goes on like this:

PIFFS: Would you say you were an excitable person?

LAMB: Not — not unduly, no. Of course, I —

PIFFS: Would you say you were a moody person?

LAMB: Moody? No, I wouldn't say I was moody — well, sometimes occasionally I —

PIFFS: Do you ever get fits of depression?

LAMB: Well, I wouldn't call them depression exactly —

PIFFS: Do you often do things you regret in the morning?

LAMB: Regret? Things I regret? Well, it depends what you mean by often, really — I mean when you say often — (134)

One can see how the applicant's answers gradually become less clear, less coherent, contradictory even, projecting his lack of assurance and slight nervousness, while the parallelistic construction of the interviewer's questions ("would you say...", "do you ever...") form a repetitive pattern which enhances the gradual increase of power through language.

Questions become more and more embarrassing to the applicant, and this is projected through the answers the applicant gives to her, which are questions again, as if he wouldn't trust his ears:

PIFFS: Are you often puzzled by women?

LAMB: Women?

PIFFS: Men.

LAMB: Men? Well, I was just going to answer the question about women —

PIFFS: Do you often feel puzzled?

LAMB: Puzzled?

PIFFS: By women.

LAMB: Women?

PIFFS: Men. (134-5)

The only occasion in which Lamb challenges her authority is exactly

here, after Miss Piffs again contradicts his question "Women?" by answering "Men" and Lamb reacts by saying: "Oh, now just a minute, I... Look, do you want separate answers or a joint answer?" (135). But his reaction is ignored by Miss Piffs, who then "drowns" him again with questions which include different semantic areas: psychological, sexual, emotional — really another "shock treatment" through language:

PIFFS: After your day's work do you ever feel tired?
 Edgy? Fretty? Irritable? At a loose end? Morose?
 Frustrated? Morbid? Unable to concentrate? Unable
 to sleep? Unable to eat? Unable to remain seated?
 Unable to remain upright? Lustful? Indolent? On
 heat? Randy? Full of desire? Full of energy? Full of
 dread? Drained? of energy, of dread? of desire? (135).

One infers that Miss Piffs gets more demanding as a result of the syntactic structure of this passage, for Pinter is taking away all items which carry grammatical information from the sentence pattern. This of course on stage would be reflected on the actress's voice, which would increase in volume to suggest the building up of emotion and intimacy, while the actor taking up Lamb's role would have to gradually fade into timidity, in the same manner as in *The Lesson*, as mentioned in the stage directions, there is an identical reversal of roles:

Obviously the Professor's voice too should change from thin and piping at the start, getting louder and fuller, to an extremely powerful, braying, sonorous instrument at the end; whereas the Pupil's voice, after being very clear and resonant at the beginning, will fade almost into inaudibility. (183).

This gradual loss of the pupil's ability to answer properly, asking questions, being in doubt instead of answering, stammering, recovering her self-control sometimes, to then becoming increasingly more and more in pain is masterfully expressed in the text, as one can see from a few excerpts:

PROFESSOR: Very good answer. Seven and one?
 PUPIL: Eight again.
 PROFESSOR: Excellent. Perfect. Seven and one?
 PUPIL: Eight for the fourth time. And sometimes nine.
 PROFESSOR: Magnificent! You're magnificent! Sublime!

My warmest congratulations, Mademoiselle. There's no point in going on. You're quite first-rate at addition. Let's try subtraction. Just tell me, that is if you're not too tired, what is left when you take three from four?

PUPIL: Three from four?... Three from four?

PROFESSOR: Yes, that's it. I mean to say, what is four minus three?

PUPIL: That makes... Seven? (189-190)

Some time later, there is a reaction on the pupil's part

PROFESSOR: (...) how much is three billion, seven hundred and fifty-five million, nine hundred and ninety-eight thousand, two hundred and fifty-one, multiplied by five billion, one hundred and sixty-two million, three hundred and three thousand, five hundred and eight?

PUPIL (very rapidly): That makes nineteen quintillion, three hundred and ninety quadrillion, two trillion, eight hundred and forty-four billion, two hundred and nineteen million, a hundred and sixty-four thousand, five hundred and eight... (196)

to then becoming more and more in pain, nervous, morose, while the expression "I've got toothache" is repeated 36 times before she starts complaining of other aches:

PUPIL: Oh yes?... I've got toothache.

PROFESSOR: We go on... are always the same, as are all flexional endings, all prefixes, all suffixes, all roots..

PUPIL: Are the roots of words square roots?

PROFESSOR: Square or cubic. It depends.

PUPIL: I've got toothache. (203)

Some time later:

PUPIL: No! No! No more! That's enough! I've had enough! Besides, my teeth ache and my feet ache and my head aches... (212).

Still later:

PUPIL: I'm aching all over... my throat, neck... ah...
my shoulders... my breasts... knife...

PROFESSOR: Knife... Knife... Knife...

PUPIL: My hips... Knife... My thighs... Kni... (213)

The explicit sexual connotations of her aches plus the repetition of the word "knife" (at least 33 times) by both Professor and Pupil, leading up to her rape and murder, constituting the climactic scene of the play, are again reechoed in *Applicant*, with variations, of course.

After having established Lamb's "innocence" by asking him four times "Are you virgo intacta?", "Have you always been virgo intacta?" (135) — another reversal of our presuppositions, for this expression is applied to females and besides, this is an interview¹⁰ — the secretary is now ready to symbolically also "rape" and "kill" him, through language:

PIFFS: Do women frighten you?

She presses a button on the other side of her stool. The stage is plunged into redness, which flashes on and off in time with her questions.

PIFFS (building): Their clothes? Their shoes? Their voices? their laughter? Their stares? Their way of walking? Their way of sitting? Their way of smiling? Their way of talking? Their mouths? Their hands? Their feet? Their shins? Their thighs? Their knees? Their eyes?

Their (**Drumbeat**). Their (**Drumbeat**). Their (**Cymbal bang**). Their (**Trombone chord**). Their (**Bass note**).

LAMB (in a **high voice**): Well it depends what you mean really —

The light still flashes. She presses the other button and the piercing buzz-hum is heard again. LAMB'S hands go to his earphones. He is propelled from the chair, falls, rolls, crawls, totters and collapses. (136).

As one can observe, there is again a parallelism between the words referring to parts of the body as spoken by the Pupil in relation to what is aching and what Miss Piffs asks Lamb in rela-

¹⁰ The expression is neither grammatically nor lexically deviant, but discursively.

tion to women, from "tooth, feet, head, ears, head, throat, neck, shoulders, breasts, hips, thighs, throat" in *The Lesson* to the quotation above from *Applicant*. And the repetition of the word "their"(*) in relation to women produces the same orgasmic effect as the repetition of the word "knife". That Lamb is in pain and out of his wits becomes evident by his answering her "in a high voice", as the stage directions indicate. Thus, the knife-like incisiveness of Miss Piffs' questions is a correlative for the exercise of sexual power over Lamb, in the same way that the Professor's final proposition — "The knife can kill" (214) is the correlative for the "sexual, sadistic nature" of all authority, as Esslin comments¹¹.

We have thus shown, through a few examples, how the exercise of power becomes apparent in both plays, and how the different formal aspects confirm, and help to visualize and to better grasp what is occurring at the level of communication between the characters in *The Lesson* and in *Applicant*, for "a text can only be understood as an object embedded within a set of linguistic (and other e.g. sociological, literary) conventions"¹². We hope, at the same time, that the examination of their similarities and differences, can lead us to a richer understanding of both plays, and to a better grasping of a number of accumulated messages which Pinter and Ionesco are giving us about the world in which their characters live, and, by extension, of ours.

(reinforced by the sounds of musical instruments and by lights)

11 ESSLIN, p. 146.

12 SHORT, p. 168.

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R E S U M O

A intenção deste artigo é examinar as semelhanças evidentes em duas peças do Teatro do Absurdo, **A Lição** de Ionesco e **O Candidato** de Pinter. Comparando e contrastando estas correspondências de enredo, cenário, personagem, ação e diálogo, percebe-se como todas elas nos levam a um tema comum: o exercício do poder. Desta maneira, explorando as potencialidades de ambas as peças em relação a este tema, podemos chegar a uma compreensão muito mais rica de ambos os textos como também a um melhor entendimento das mensagens de ambos os dramaturgos a respeito de seus mundos ficcionais, e particularmente da relação dominador-dominado que é a pedra angular sobre a qual repousam os dois textos.

S U M M A R Y

The aim of this article is to examine the similarities evident in two Absurd plays, Ionesco's **The Lesson** and Pinter's **Applicant**. By comparing and contrasting these correspondences in plot, setting, character, action, and dialogue, we can see how all of them lead to a common theme: the exercise of power. Thus, by exploiting the potentialities of both plays in relation to this theme, one can arrive at a richer understanding of both texts as also at a better grasping of the two playwrights' messages about their fictional worlds, particularly in relation to the dominating-dominated relationship which is the point on which both plays hinge.