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Realism and Absurdism: Representative Scenes in *The Cherry Orchard* and *The Chairs*

The plays *The Cherry Orchard* by Anton Chekhov and *The Chairs* by Eugene Ionesco stand as seminal works within each of their dramatic movements: realism and absurdism, respectively. These plays both display characteristics of their styles throughout, and also display facets of realism and absurdism unique to their individual authors. Each play, however, can be boiled down to a single representative scene. For *The Cherry Orchard,* it is Act II. For *The Chairs,* it is the final scene with the Orator. In studying both of these, one can better understand both the author, the play, and the dramatic movement that the play was part of.

The Cherry Orchard by Anton Chekhov is an excellent example of early-20th century realism in drama, and one of the clearest examples of realism in the play is found in Act II. Realism is evident not only in the text, but in the setting and staging of the scene.

Before one can examine this scene for markers and influences of realism, however, one must establish what exactly realism is. In the dramatic sense, realism is the writing and staging of a play so that the characters behave, speak, and exisit in a manner accurate to every day life. It is not overly formulaic in plot, nor overly oratorial in delivery. It attempts to reflect the experiences of life as they might actually occur (Jones). Chekhov himself had a specific goal in his own personal take on realism: “to provide some constructive criticism of the social behaviour *(sic)* of his contemporaries” (Borny 23). Chekhov’s presentation of reality was not nihilistic or pessimistic, but realistic; his goal was to help his audience realize the circumstances of their lives

and to—hopefully—change for the better. This is, actually, a positive take and Chekhov wanted this reflected in the criticism and direction of his plays (Borny 23). With this in mind, one can begin to examine Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard.*

From the outset of Act II there are clear evidences of realism. Even in the stage directions the ethos of realism is shown. It is set, not in an immaculate drawing room like one might see in the earlier, conventional "well-made play", but in an overgrown, outdoor chapel. And the description of the setting itself is quite detailed, again showing a commitment to realism in staging. The way the characters speak, flitting between topics like Carlotta and harping on the same topic like Yepikhodov, is similar to the way people speak in actual conversation (Gainor et. al. 363-364). But Chekhov's own commitment to realism—and his own convictions about realism—are best seen in the monologues delivered by Liubov Andreyvna and Trofimov. In the case of Liubov Andreyvna, her monologue shows the true, sad state of her life. It does not shy away from the ridiculous nature of her actions, nor does it gloss over her immoral lifestyle. Instead, it portrays all of these things just as they might be in real life (Gainor et. al. 367). In displaying her true nature, Chekhov does not make a moral judgement about her or her actions. Instead, he allows the audience to see her and to see themselves in her, and make decisions based on that.

This particular style of realism is seen again in Trofimov's revolutionary monologue towards the end of the act. It depicts the actual beliefs of people in Russia during the time that Chekhov was writing, and the character states them with conviction and factuality (Gainor et. al. 369). Because Chekhov does not only provide this perspective but also provides the perspective of the aristocracy, this monologue does not come across as a social sermon. It comes across, again, as an observation offered to the audience that they might judge the play and their own

lives through it. These monologues are the greatest evidence of Chekhov's particular style of realism in the scene.

In sharp contrast to the realist *The Cherry Orchard* stands the absurdist *The Chairs* by Eugene Ionesco. Absurdism, or "the Theater of the Absurd" was a term coined by the theater critic Martin Esslin to describe the styles of Ionesco and contemporaries Samuel Beckett and Arthur Adamov. While each of these playwrights has different characteristics, Esslin argues that they are all tied together by a sense of the "absurd" or "a deep sense of human isolation and of the irredeemable character of human condition" (Esslin 4). Absurdism, in its purest sense, presents the world of the play as to the audience with the audience being totally outside of it and unable to understand it. It reveals the "irrationality of the human condition and the illusion of what we thought was its apparently logical structure" (Esslin 5).

With these characteristics in mind, one can being to examine *The Chairs* for evidences of realism. In this examination, the final scene of *The Chairs* presents itself as the pinnacle of absurdism with the text. Specifically, the moment after the Orator leaves and it is just a chalkboard, the audience, and the empty chairs particularly embodies that themes and ethos of absurdism. This scene demonstrates the illusion of logic, as the audience has been lead to believe, and "logically" concludes, that the chairs are completely empty and that the individuals occupying the chairs are figments of the main characters' imaginations. When this invisible audience begins to make noise, to stir and speak, it turns the inferred logic of the text on its head. This external logic is further disrupted by the Orator as a character, as he cannot speak and so is an oxymoronic character (Ionesco 513-514). This disruption of logic undermines the audience's faith in their own capabilities and their own sense of structure and order, thus fulfilling the core

tenants of absurdism as defined by Esslin. For this reason, the closing scene of *The Chairs* best embodies absurdism as a dramatic style.

Both of these plays are exceptional examples of the movements within each was created, and there are many scenes that display that characteristics of realism and absurdism in *The Cherry Orchard* and *The Chairs*, respectively. But the scenes detailed above both capture the essence of each of their movements, and display features of their movement characteristic of their individual authors. In addition, they both fit requirements for and observations of realism and absurdism as established by theater critics of the time. In examining these scenes closely, we can learn more about the execution of both styles and about the individual authors, and gain greater insight into the themes and goals of the plays themselves.

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