

Dan Baker

Eng 555/Dr. Gianakaris

Essay #1/Ionesco

*A Cruel Lesson about Education: Eugene Ionesco's The Lesson*

Eugene Ionesco's *The Lesson* is a captivating piece of literature. Funny and frighteningly direct, Ionesco creates a meaningful narrative that investigates the corruptive nature of power in society. In particular, Ionesco addresses the oppressive personality of conventional schooling. A close examination of the play and the relationship between Ionesco's "Professor" and "Pupil" draws attention to important humanistic themes, especially the distasteful reality that schooling is controlled by a collection of elite societal caretakers who use power and knowledge to reduce individuals to the same level of meaninglessness and non-existence.

Briefly, *The Lesson* highlights the relationship and eventual communication breakdown between an elderly male professor and his 18-year-old female pupil. Initially, Ionesco casts the Pupil as a demure, fresh-smiled, "well-brought-up girl" whose personality is "gay, [and] dynamic" (Ionesco 45); early on, the Professor appears as a "little old man with a white beard" who is "excessively polite, very timid" and, apparently, "very much the teacher" (46). The audience/reader learns that the Pupil travels to the Professor's home seeking help on how to "qualify for the total doctorate" (49).

Particularly worth noting is the exchange of ideas between the Pupil and the Professor near the beginning of the play. Marked with respect and graciousness, the Professor's early treatment of the Pupil could be described as easygoing. For

instance, as he quizzes her knowledge “past and present” so that he may chart a “future course” (50) of teaching, he repeatedly praises her and her “great thirst for knowledge” (48). He tells her that she is “advanced for her age,” and tells her that she has “great courage” for seeking a total doctorate “at so young an age” (49). As for the Pupil, she also appears polite and agreeable. Perhaps as a response to the Professor’s initial questions and praise, she makes it clear that she is at his “disposal” (50), and even “begs” (49) the Professor to begin teaching. Ultimately, the Professor is convinced that the well-educated Pupil “will be a good pupil” (48), and agrees to help with her studies.

Regrettably, pleasant feelings between the Professor and the Pupil at the outset of the play quickly evaporate. As the play ripens, the Professor’s actions suggest that he has little interest in relevant teaching and in helping the Pupil find her fundamental nature. While teaching the Pupil, the once-timid Professor loses touch with reality and becomes aggressive, inflexible, and even murderous in an attempt to control and end the Pupil’s academic aspirations. His increasingly bizarre behavior for most of the play strengthens Ionesco’s claim that conventional schooling is largely about training children to be dutiful servants, and less about teaching them the importance of critical thinking and autonomy.

To develop this point, consider the Professor’s makeover during his teaching lessons on math and linguistics. For starters, the Professor feels arithmetic is a significant, almost therapeutic “modern science” (50) that the Pupil should comprehend. Ignoring his Maid’s warning about not starting the “young lady on arithmetic” (51), the Professor begins his session with “arithmetical knitting” (51): an investigation of the

Pupil's mathematic dexterity. After a thorough examination, he learns that the Pupil can add "one and one" and "Seven and one" (51-52)). However, he also realizes that the Pupil cannot subtract. The Pupil, for instance, thinks that four minus three is seven; she cannot tell if three is larger or smaller than four; she cannot answer the question: "if you had two noses, and I pulled one of them off . . . how many would you have left?" (55).

Noticeably, the Pupil's inability to subtract annoys the Professor. Even though she knows addition and has "memorized all the products of all possible multiplications" (59), the Professor feels it is "not enough to integrate" (53); to him, the Pupil must also be able to "disintegrate" (55). Consequently, instead of paying heed to the critical skills that she exhibits, the Professor (like so many educators) blames the Pupil for an apparent lack of dexterity in "specialized mathematics" (59), and informs her that she will not "qualify for the total doctor's orals" (59). Not surprisingly, as a subordinate in the social and educative hierarchy, the Pupil immediately complies with the Professor's judgment, and politely accepts the notion that she would be better off preparing for a partial doctorate than working on her total doctorate.

Admittedly, even though he is a bit disjointed and disturbed by the Pupil's lack of comprehension, the Professor generally remains cordial and "inoffensive" (46) during his math tutorial. However, by the time he starts teaching linguistics, the Professor's appetite for abusive power becomes more noticeable, as does the Pupil's powerlessness. Like math, the Professor snubs the desperate objections from the Maid regarding the content of his teaching lesson, specifically the calamitous cost of teaching linguistics ("You mustn't do that"; Philology leads to calamity" (60)). Self-importantly, he

enters into a blurred exaltation on the virtues of linguistics, the “distinctive traits” (61) of the neo-Spanish languages, the importance of phonemes, and the “irrational assemblages of sounds” (63); he vigorously demands that the Pupil gain knowledge of the “fundamental principles and comparative philology of the neo-Spanish languages” (60).

During the linguistics lesson, the Pupil initially remains polite, compliant, and willing to memorize all that the Professor teaches her about linguistics. Ironically, she even says that she will learn “Every tongue . . . until the hour of [her] death” (62). However, as the Professor’s lecture becomes less coherent, the Pupil becomes less capable of understanding the lesson. Like arithmetic, the Professor condemns the Pupil for not figuring out the importance of the lesson, and for not seeing the importance of articulation, sounds, “syllables, words, even sentences” (62). As a result of the Professor’s sloppy schooling, the Pupil begins to protest, and starts suffering from a toothache, undoubtedly a symbolic ailment meant to draw attention to the Pupil’s ever-increasing frustration over feeling helpless and not being allowed to speak.

Given the fact that education is a suffocating social institution controlled by affluent, white, male caretakers interested in maintaining the status quo, it is not surprising that the Professor shows antipathy towards the grouching Pupil during the linguistics lesson. Clearly, the Professor does not care about aching teeth or that his lesson on bad pronunciation, Spanish, “labials, dentals, occlusives, palatals, and others” (64) is an irrational assortment of “sounds, denuded of all sense” (63).

Moreover, as the grizzled social caretaker farcically exalts the virtues of language and communication -- as he discusses “Firmin instead of Firmin, French bean instead of French bean, go frig yourself instead of go frig yourself (64) -- it is obvious that he cares little that his sermon on ideas, meaning, and clarity collapses into insignificance, or that his lesson falls on “deaf,” demoralized ears (62). Undeniably, the linguistics lesson demonstrates how little attention the Professor gives to the effectiveness of his teaching, or to the welfare of his student. In the end, he personifies conventional schooling’s narrow-mindedness, and its intolerance of diverse opinions, change, and students who fail to do as they are told.

Arguably, what is most alarming about the Professor is that he actually seems to take pleasure in the Pupil’s pain and powerlessness during the linguistics lesson. As the lecture draws to a climax, the Professor uses language and words not only to control and belittle the Pupil, but also to become sexually aroused. His destructive behavior leads to the play’s tragic ending where Ionesco makes his most obvious statement on how institutionalized education violates the rights of individuals.

As an absurdist, and as a member of the Modern French theatre, Ionesco had an interest in exploring contemporary social issues, and in deconstructing ideologies limiting human freedom, such as the abuse of power. Murder and sex, of course, can be about power, and the Pupil’s tragic demise at the end of the play serves as an appropriate metaphor for how conventional education controls, violates, and ultimately destroys the autonomy of young people. Consider that at the end of the linguistics lesson, the sadistic, mean-spirited Professor savors every occasion to use his authority

as schoolmaster to marginalize, oppress, and bully the Pupil. For instance, each time the Pupil grumbles about her toothache, the Professor ignores or chastises her; time and again, he says things like, “Keep quiet. Remain seated, don’t interrupt me” (62); “Let’s go on, go on” (64); “Let’s continue” (65); “Ache . . . so what . . . let’s continue!” (67); “Son of a cocker spaniel! Listen to me!” (68). Moreover, as his anger increases, the Professor’s teaching style becomes noticeably more aggressive. He shouts phrases at the Pupil such as: “Don’t interrupt me! Don’t make me lose my temper!” (69); “Ache! ache! ache! . . . I’m going to pull them out, I will!” (69); “Silence! Or I’ll bash in your skull!” (70).

Fed up with interruptions and with the Pupil’s inability to grasp the importance of distinguishing “all the different languages” (72), the Professor ultimately turns violent words into violent actions. At the end of the lesson, he makes the Pupil learn translations of the word “knife.” Brandishing a “big knife” (an obvious phallic symbol), the Professor orders the Pupil to look at it “closely” and imagine that it [the knife] is a “language” (73); he repeatedly says things like, “Knife . . . look . . .knife . . .look . . .knife . . .look . . .” (73). Again, despite the Pupil’s uneasiness with the lesson (reflected in her tears, exhaustion, and in her complaints of soreness in her head, ears, teeth, throat, breast, hips, thighs, shoulders (74)), the Professor continues teaching until his lust for power causes him to rape and murder the Pupil. At the conclusion of the linguistics lesson, he strikes the Pupil twice: once a “spectacular blow”; the second, a “slash” from “bottom to top” (75). Fittingly, after putting the Pupil to death, the Professor stands post-orgasmic between the Pupil’s spread legs visibly enjoying the certainty that he has just

reaffirmed his position in the scholastic hierarchy. Unmistakably, when the Professor rapes and plunges the knife into the Pupil, he takes away all that is left of the Pupil's distinctiveness. Ionesco's lethal finale connects knowledge, power, sex, and death to illustrate his belief that institutionalized schooling not only beats the creativity out of young learners, but that it also terminates the quest for individual identity.

Theatre of the Absurd makes good use of nonsensicality to shed light on human beings, particularly on how society's controlling elite uses mechanical, dehumanizing rules and mannerisms to negatively shape human lives and meaning. Clearly, Ionesco's *The Lesson* is a fine example of Theatre of the Absurd's fascination with using farce to examine the human condition and contemporary issues related to gender, culture, exploitation, and political and social crises. To Ionesco, education is clearly a tool of a corrupt, decaying society; to him, it is a social convention worth investigating. Deconstructing the Professor/Pupil relationship and the eventual communication breakdown between the two provides an audience/reader the opportunity to learn a thing or two about the nature of human beings, schooling, and the risks of leading an institutionalized life in contemporary society.

