

Ubu roi essay sample

[Entertainment](#), [Theatre](#)



1. Alfred Jarry (1873-1907) is considered to be the father of the theatre avant-guard, a new revolutionary style that appeared in the European theatre at the end of the XIX century (a so called *fin de siecle*) to prosper for a very long time. Provoked by the philosophy of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Kierkegaard and, of course, Freud, the avant-garde phenomenon was there to sum up the previous century literature experience and to dethrone the positivist tradition which controlled childish human minds and fooled them with the nonsensical promises of progress and evolution through the years.
2. Actually what avant-guard, and particularly the avant-guard theatre, intended to do and finally succeeded in is a total destruction of conservative narrow-minded bourgeois forms of art and establishing new declarative and shocking, usually scandalous and completely irrational artworks. Jarry's play " Ubu Roi", written by the 14-years old lyceum pupil-ribald as a parody on his arbitrary Physics teacher, was first staged in 1896 in one of the French experimental theatres, " Oeuvre" in Paris, and stirred a great scandal. It was neither a success nor a failure: actually people were waiting for Alfred Jarry to come on the stage and confirm their timid guess that the play was just a joke... Jarry never did that...
3. The Paris intelligentsia, educated on the best examples of the French classicism, was shocked by the obscene words and unusual form of the play that, for this reason, couldn't be staged anymore and was forgotten for a long time till its resurrection by the surrealists in the 1920s. Since then " Ubu Roi" undoubtedly occupies the first place in

the list of avant-guard prophecy scriptures and is considered to be the manifest for almost all the nihilistic modernistic trends such as symbolism, dadaism, surrealism, futurism etc.

4. This tragifarce was as bold as to overturn all possible theatre conventions and audience expectations as well as simply to shock the bourgeois public. Jarry's intention realized just the right way. His play looks like a parody on the canonical texts of Shakespeare, Corneille and Racine and still no one knows how to stage this play properly. Jarry's riddle which started as an infantile ambition overgrew in one of the most polysemantic and disputable plays of the XX century.

1. Alfred Jarry and his followers cast doubt on the efficiency of the contemporary theatre system. Actually it was surrealism, inspired by Jarry's epatage revolution, that turned from the dramatic primacy in the theatre art: surrealists claim that drama violates an acting itself and ruins an actor's freedom to create an image. The vanguard theater stands for the renovated theatre – dynamical, improvising, simultaneous, unreal and irrational. It takes away the power from the words and gives it to the action: nowadays, when language names things no more and is nothing but a storage of simulacra, only performance or happening can matter. With the advent of Alfred Jarry on the literature stage the place of drama have been reserved by small theatrical scenes, sometimes even plays without words, where no logic and no psychological image elaboration appear.

The renunciation of all possible theatre conventions was more than effective for the further dramatists. The high level of Jarry's artistic generalization

served to be the unique method to involve the whole of human history and experiences into the elaborate buffoonery of “ Ubu Roi”.

It is a great challenge even to try to analyze not the problem of a man but the problem of the man phenomena. In fact, here comes to light the characteristic French feature to combine philosophy with drama – no one will doubt that some of the Jarry’s, Camus’ and Sartre’s heroes have nothing to do with the plays but look like the characters of philosophical treatise. Yet, if not aesthetical than intellectual charm of their plays is beyond discussion. Since the appearance Jarry’s tragifarce it is indecent and degrading to write the drama of plot but the drama of multiple ideas.

“ Ubu Roi” not only erased the gloomy contours of the coming century (that was called “ a century of mass murders” by Andre Malraux) but also rubbed off the tiresome borders of the theatre poetic. Jarry’s play uses the extreme conventionality of vernacular performance creating the specific relative time and space (a so called Bahtin’s *chronotope*) conveying but the French history reality. His intention lies far beyond, just as his dramas’ history and geography loses any touch of concreteness. Relative “ Russia”, “ Poland” or “ Ukraine” in “ Ubu Roi” can be regarded as real Russia or Poland as well as Ancient Greece or Roma.

The absurd theatre (or existential theatre) deals with the universal time and space only. That’s why this play is a treasure for a talented theatre director. Father Ubu, who conquers the made-up “ Polish” throne and fights the made-up “ Russians”, really seems to be Hitler’s prophet. The grade of the violence and savage punishment he applies to his people should be envied by Stalin.

And the obscenity of his words would turn your face in red even today (not in the sense of a surprise but rather a pity for human narrow-mindedness).

While the stream of consciousness used in the play is not the worse of Joyce's. The tight, sweaty, awfully funny yet tragic world of "Ubu Roi" is nothing but the scheme of the XX century reality.

The contemporary father Ubu looks quite natural in any modern interpretation. Jarry had intended for Ubu to function like an "exaggerating minor in which the spectator should see his own vices enlarged." (39) He feels free to drink no matter absinth or vodka, to make money and to lose money, to kick his wife and to humiliate people subordinate to him etc. Ubu is a typical consumer that lives in every man and a typical dictator in his exaggerated nature. "We are free to do whatever we want even to obey. We are free to go wherever we want including jail. Freedom is a slavery" [Alfred Jarry. Ubu Roi: Drama in 5 Acts, 1961; p. 19], – this is a great example of a tyrant's demagoguery.

The message of the play is meaningful through the time. It seems strange that more than one hundred-year play is still urgent. What happens to a man who rules the country? Does he have the right to kill? Why is it a usual situation that powerful people turn into monsters? At first Adolph Hitler looked like a funny guy, even a clown. Chaplin used to say: "He has stolen my character". And what happened then? Who is guilty for this metamorphosis: his surrounding or he himself?

The avant-garde theater, such as Alfred Jarry's "Ubu Roi" (1896), used puppets in reaction against naturalistic conventions. Afterwards Manuel de

Falla established a puppet opera, *El Retablo de Maese Pedro* (1926). Written as a play for the puppet theatre, “Ubu Roi” demanded to be staged in a proper way. First of all, actors should move and speak like puppets. Alfred Jarry was proud of his invention – a new manner of acting (“plasticity of a broken puppet”)– and applied it not only on a stage but in his everyday life too. It was a sort of his image. Jarry himself seems to have been one of the first victims of the Ubu myth.

In his letter to Lugné-Poë, Jarry proclaims some specific aspects of his dramatic vision. In a summary form, his six main paragraphs call for a stage character to be stripped down to a few essential symbols – masks, rudimentary sets, token individuals for crowds – as well as an “accent” or “special voice” for the protagonist and modern clothes as distant as possible from local color. These indications are early evidence of his concern to keep his stage world akin to that of puppets.

The allocution introducing *Ubu Roi* (the play was indeed a puppet show in its original form) merely repeats the idea. In an essay significantly called “*De l’inutilité du théâtre au théâtre*,” Jarry suggests the replacement of the actor’s fallible structure by masks: “The actor will have to substitute for his head, by means of a *mask* enclosing him, the effigy of the *personage* which will not have, according to the tradition of antiquity, character traits represented by tears or laughter (which do not in themselves represent a character), but the very character of the personage: the Miser, the Waverer, the Covetous Man heaping up crimes. . . .” [20th Century French Drama .

Columbia University Press. Place of Publication: New York. Publication Year: 1961.; p. 23].

In none of this does the actor play a part except as skilled clockwork. It is interesting to know that Jarry compares him at the end of his article to the “skeleton hidden under the animal flesh and whose tragicomic value has been recognized in every age.” [24] For, as a matter of fact, the skeleton can have tragicomic value only if it suggests a man. That’s why Jarry wishes to invert this suggestion by having a man do no more than wear a mask and be able to actuate it only with the help of a ramp light. Hollow surfaces are indeed the areas upon which the author can create the fathomless bowl of meanings.

III. Not the less intricate is the question of Jarry’s language. The French “*Infant Terrible*” isn’t afraid to cross all possible language boundaries as well. *Ubu Roi’s* “*Merdre!*” which unexpectedly rang up the curtain at the “*Oeuvre*” one evening in December 1896, was a brief but correct summation of a particular climate, and as such it echoed in time and space beyond the sensitive ears of first-nighters. Limiting the word’s implications to the actual performance, it might be of more than sociological interest to speculate why it so affected the audience represented by its official critics (such as, for example, Francisque Sarcey, who walked out in a pointed manner even before the end of the performance).

Although liberty of the press had been declared in 1881, Article 28 was simultaneously introduced, imposing “severe penalties for the offense of *l’outrage aux bonnes mœurs* . [Elizabeth K. Menon. Potty-Talk in Parisian

Plays....; p. 15] This law concerning obscene publication was strengthened by amendments in 1882, 1898, and 1908. But the danger of prosecution under these amendments (which would mean following in the footsteps of the likes of Flaubert) only served to intensify the effect that scatological or pornographic references (Jarry's texts literally teem with) would have been demonstrated on the public.

As a matter of fact, Jarry's foul language served as a strong stimulant to engage audience's imagination. Obviously, he wanted his spectator to be puzzled and shocked. He applied to this obscene and hardly disputable methods to make the audience disagree and row. The word 'merde' thrown into the auditorium by the actor (Fermen Jamieer) first resulted in an easy-going laughter. Some even clapped... But with the beginning of the 3d act patience abandoned them. The famous dramatist George Kurteleen merely jumped out of his seat as if showing everyone: "Can't you all see that Jarry is laughing at us?.."

The audience was stirred. Eccentrics (Anry Bauer, a literature columnist) expressed their admiration. One could hear something like: "This thing is a sort of Aeschylus'! Even more powerful!", "That's how you damned Wagner!". Fernan Greg screamed: "You are unable to understand even Shakespeare!.." "You'd better read it first", – immediately heard from the box. The audience stays rough for more then half an hour when finally Jamieer invents a masterful thing: he starts to sing and dance on the stage till he exhaustedly falls on the prompt-box.

Ubu Roi also provides clear verbal references to shit. *Coope r* has noted that “shit” appears thirty-three times in the play, by itself and in compounds such as “pschittabugger” and “buggerapschitt.” [Alfred Jarry. Ubu Roi: Drama in 5 Acts, trans. Barbara Wright (Norfolk, Conn.: New Direction, 1961); p. 22] “Pschitt” becomes the signal to slaughter the king in act 2 of Ubu Roi. Mere Ubu becomes “Madam of my pschitt.”[23] During all the play Ubu tirelessly utters multiple expletives that include the word ‘merde’ and also phrases such as “piss off” or “fuck off.” In his first play Jarry seems to be most concerned with the use of the word itself (the later plays are more complicated and less intent on the use of that word), but some special weapons – the “pschittasword,” the “pschittahook,” the “pschitt-scissors,” and the “pschittapump” (the latter he calls the “special Turkish hookah”) – are also introduced.

The army’s marching song includes the chorus “pee-pee, pee-pee, pee-pee, ca-ca, ca-ca, ca-ca. . . . poo-pool poo-poo, poo-poo.”[26] When things get difficult in the fighting, Ubu declares, “Ooh, I’ve done it in my pants.”[27] Another hypothesis is supported by a description of Ubu’s costume by Jarry as a “bum in front and behind”[20]. Jarry’s interest in the organs of excrement is supported by the famous story of the stone penis given to him by Felicien Rops, which was considerably larger than life-size and once frightened one of his female guests.

The interpretations of this single yet very fruitful obscenity symbol can be taken further – perhaps he is to be seen as shit personified (this interpretation is supported by English versions of the plays in which *Ubu Roi*

is translated as *King Turd*). [18] Moreover, Ubu's scepter is a toilet brush ("the little sceptre made of straw which kept the peace in old Warsaw"), and his wife serves him food that includes Jerusalem "fartichokes" and "cauliflower a la pschitt." [19] Ubu also shows a significant modification of the use of the pear...

This resulted in a not very convincing assumption (made by Louis-Philippe) that the derogative statement about the body politics of the play to be evolved into a more complicated symbol. Ubu not only represented the upper middle class, but also suggested that the lower classes, having now appropriated Ubu as their symbol by his close linking to a base bodily function, were struggling to be seen and heard. To what extent it is right is hard to say. Anyway the nature of Jarry's ribaldry lies more in the field of eccentricity and desire to ruin old mimetic forms rather than parvenu's craving for recognition. The social unmasking of bourgeoisie that Jarry completed in his play has been analyzed in the IVth chapter of this research work.

However, shameless Jarry is free to use obscene words to demonstrate the newly found freedom of the theatre. Now there are no boundaries to cross because they are already crossed by Jarry. It was a so deep evocation of disgust that conventional language was powerless to express it," and further that "the various scatological references that are sprinkled through the play represent rebellion on its most instinctive and elementary level – the level of a child's refusal to bow to bathroom training." [20th Century French Drama ...; p. 26].

1. Hatred of the bourgeoisie manifested itself in the ideas and practices of the anarchists at the end of the XIXth century. Within this broad discourse of bourgeoisie critics, Jarry's use of the word 'merde' and the scatological content of the *Ubu Roi* (and the following plays) can be compared to the anarchist philosophies of "propaganda by word and propaganda by deed" [Elizabeth K. Menon Potty-Talk in Parisian Plays...; p. 20]. Jarry had intended for *Ubu* to function like an "exaggerating minor in which the spectator should see his own vices enlarged"[21]. It had been the lack of understanding among successive generations of conservative well-to-do French citizens that had resulted in continued persecution of the poor. George Wellwarth notes that the "rebellion implicit in the utterance of the word 'merde' on a public stage was a rebellion against all society and, indeed, all life" [23].

Yet it is a big mistake to identify Jarry's "*Ubu Roi*" merely with the political satire. To stage the play as a transparency of bad political taste means to kill the play. Jarry's intention was to change the mimetic stage into the hieroglyphs of meanings, ultimately polysemantic.

It is a wide-spread thought that *Ubu Roi* is the reflection of the decaying bourgeois society contemporary to Alfred Jarry. The connection of *Ubu* and the bourgeoisie is made clear in *Ubu Cocu* (the later Jarry's play), where the "sometime King of Poland and Aragon, professor of pataphysics" becomes a tax collector (gathering the funds in his "pschitt-sack," of course) [29]. *Ubu* also has a conscience, which he keeps in a box and when angered, banishes

to a chamber pot. This play features a Greek chorus of sorts, “ the palcontents,” who declare in act 2, scene 5:

Tremble and quake at the Lord of Phynance, Little bourgeois who’s getting too big for his pants!

Ubu is also called the Chancellor of the Excreta in addition to Master of Phynance. It is in this play that we learn of the true function of the “ pschittapump,” which is just another word for a flush toilet. Ubu is accompanied by such characters as Crapentake, Achras, and Scytotomille (they are obviously written in Rabble’s style). The last is a cobbler who sells shoes called “ Turd-Crunchers” that come in special varieties: “ still-steaming, horsedung, the oldest coproliths, sullen cowpats, the innocent meconium of a breast-fed baby, something special for policeman’s droppings, and a pair for the stools of middle-aged men.”[30]

Anyway, in the discussion of Jarry’s scatology with reference to the bourgeoisie and the lower classes in Ubu Roi and the following plays, it is necessary to comment upon the specific choice of the theater as the forum where these “ revelations” took place. Nowhere in previous “ high artistic” output is there a pictorial representation of excrement or even of anything suggestive of it. Yet it is also only the followers of Jarry demonstrated what was told about in the dialogues. Jarry himself does not make present in the illustrations of Ubu what is present in the dialogue (unless, that is, one supports the hypothesis that Ubu is meant to be viewed as a walking, talking piece of shit that represent the nature origin of the bourgeoisie class).

The theater is traditionally an upper-class and uppermiddle-class venue, and certainly the potty-talk plays could be perceived as commentary on the classes that frequent the very forum in which they take place. It was during this period that social activity among the rich and idle bourgeoisie reached a peak; “ its members vied with one another in theater and salon, in the Bois de Boulogne and Maxim’s.”[38] Thus, the theater was the field to take direct action on – to make the bourgeois eat shit (figuratively) [Elizabeth K. Menon Potty-Talk in Parisian Plays; p. 18] at a performance that satirized their very existence. It was also a means to popularize imagery by presenting crude words and situations that appealed to the masses, who were being solicited to attend a “ popular” theater.

Still, in the pendant “ Questions de théâtre,” Jarry had written about *Ubu Roi* : “ I wanted the stage to be before the public, once the curtain was up, like that mirror in the tales of Madame Leprince de Beaumont, where the one who is vice-ridden sees himself with the horns of a bull or the body of a dragon according to the exaggeration of his vices.” [20th Century French Drama ...; p. 24] The “ one who is vice-ridden” here referred to *knew* that the reflected image was his because he was before a mirror and a mirror has only one reality, that of the one looking into it. In order for the stage to be “ mirror” the spectator must first credit the figure on stage as his own projection. Thus, Jarry’s intention here really appears to be of the unmasking nature.

1. The Paris public, starved for distraction and, moreover, deconstruction of the old conservative values during the long crises of the war, at last

found something to yell about. About a bad-mannered and evil-spirited Alfred Jarry. Ignoring the music, they heard only the seasoning of sound effects and called it a “ din” [The Banquet Years: The Arts in France, 1885-1918 Alfred Jarry, Henri Rousseau, Erik Satie, Guillaume Apollinaire ; p. 10]. On stage they saw not a ballet but a road show. As revolutionary seemed to be far away from the obscene play’s forethought. As at the “ Ubu Roi” *première* , whistling and clapping intermingled in the auditorium and fists were raised. The conservative critics reacted scornfully to Picasso’s designs and to the music as well. It was not difficult in those days to tame heightened emotions and to persuade people that such artworks have to be created in order to find a new background. But surely, Jarry was delighted. The scandal was on... Withal, since that time no one can consider Aristotle’s *Poetics* as a guiding source for a play-writer. The theatre rules and conventions have been disproved and authorities have been denounced of having lied. The only truth now is the absurd laughter or senseless curse of the hopelessly twitching puppet...

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