



The Genealogy of the Theater of Absurd in Jarry's Ubu the King

Farid Parvaneh,¹

Sanam Fakhriazar,²

¹Assistant Professor at the Department of Humanities, Islamic Azad University, Qom Branch, Iran

²Department of Foreign Languages, Islamic Azad University, Central Tehran Branch, Iran

Corresponding Author: Farid Parvaneh

Phone: +98-9124516069

e-mail: faridparvaneh@gmail.com

Article citation: Parvaneh, F. & Fakhriazar, S. (2020). The Genealogy of the theater of absurd in Jarry's Ubu the King, *Applied Linguistics Research Journal*, 4(1): 46–52.

Received Date: April 24, 2019

Accepted Date: September 18, 2019

Online Date: January 5, 2020

Publisher: Kare Publishing

© 2018 Applied Linguistics Research Journal

E-ISSN: 2651-2629

ABSTRACT

Alfred Jarry's revolutionary play, *Ubu the King*, has been a source of muse for various literary and theatrical movements including Dadaism, Surrealism, and the Theater of the Absurd for relatively a long time. The thematic and formal construction of this play owes much to the principles of the Theater of the Absurd. This paper follows two major steps. It first attempts to show the traces of Shakespeare in *Ubu the King*, and accordingly discusses Jarry's probable intentions of linking this play to those of Shakespeare. It then goes on to enlarge the facets of absurdity and grotesque in the play. This paper aims at illustrating the absurd elements in the play first by drawing some examples from the text, and secondly by elaborating on the social reaction toward the production of *Ubu the King*. In other words, if absurdity is the outcome of the confrontation of a rational being with a system that defies to provide any rational answer, it aims at answering the question of Jarry's position as one of the pioneers of absurd drama under the influence of William Shakespeare.

Keywords: Alfred Jarry; Absurd theatre; *Ubu the King*; Shakespeare; Grotesque; Satire.

1. Introduction

Alfred Jarry, a playwright and novelist, was born in France in 1873. He is mostly recognized as the creator of *Ubu Roi* translated as *Ubu the King* (1896); nonetheless, Jarry has signed his name under the influential novels as well. To literary critics, he is one of the pioneers of symbolism, under the influence of Stéphane Mallarmé, for his extensive use of symbols specifically in his prose fiction. The employment of grotesque and satire are also two other literary characteristics attributed to his works to make him known as one of the uncanny writers in the genre of dram. His plays mostly confine to the elements of Surrealism and Dadaism (Fell). To Andre Breton, Jarry is one of the 'figures from the past with whom we felt a bond of kinship' (72). As a mysterious and prolific writer, he is also accredited as one of the forerunners of the most recent cultural movement known as postmodernism. Ihab Hassan regards him 'antecedent of postmodernism' (150). As to *Ubu*, it is often said that 'The grotesque of the imagery, the juxtaposition of objects, and the collage of chronological periods

would seem to qualify this famous production as the first postmodern design' (Aronson 8). One of the most complicated and studied novels published posthumously is *Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician* (1911) in which Jarry develops on his idea of pataphysics, a science moving beyond the realm of physics and metaphysics or as Christopher Innes calls it 'a science of imaginary solutions'. He is less known by this work. Jarry as "the most extraordinary and eccentric figures among pokes maudites of French literature" (Esslin 189) is largely referred and revered as the creator of *Ubu the King*. This play as the extension of the puppet play *Les Poloneis* collaboratively created by his two friends Henri and Charles Morin at some point in schooldays at Lycee Rennes is later followed by two other plays by Jarry, *Ubu Cuckolded* (1897) and *Ubu in Chains* (1899). The exclusive style in personal life and the iconoclastic approach to language and theatrical conventions set out in *Ubu the King* underscore Alfred Jarry and his play as one of the major precursors of the Dadaism, Surrealism and the Theater of the Absurd. The question this paper attempts to answer is that why this play is considered as the forerunner of the Theater of the Absurd, and whether it is so-considered for the content and its themes or it was the social reaction and the iconoclastic nature of its production that made it be brought in different anthologies of Theater of the Absurd or the movements such as Dadaism or Surrealism.

Christopher Innes in his influential book on theatre discusses the roots of Symbolism in theatre by claiming that "The aim was to reach a deeper level of reality" (19). To Innes, if Symbolism means a reaction to rationalism, Alfred Jarry's play can be included in the list of symbolist writers in drama. The first production of the play *Ubu the King* (1896), in which Jarry played the role of the Old Man of the Mountains, was regarded as an unconventional form of drama. Also, the audience conceived it as a disparagement. The conventional picture of a king to the audience was an idealistic figure whose patriotic features were magnified in plays. (Innes 22).

Lance Mekeel (2015) in his PhD dissertation reviews the history textbooks and some other important researches done on Alfred Jarry. He examines the positions of Jarry in world theatre and finds out that *Ubu the King* (*Ubu Roi* in French) in all the history books has been regarded as an avant-garde "classic". In other words, as Mekeel observes, the elements of the play, due to being unknown to the audience of the time, established Jarry's position and reputation as an avant-garde playwright. In his study, Mekeel proposes a new approach to the reading of this "classic" of world literature. He concurs that the previous accounts on Jarry do not illustrate the depth of the text and its historical background. Thus, Mekeel suggests a post-structuralist historiographical approach. To achieve his goal, Mekeel examines the production history of the character Ubu on the stage both in French and English.

Two other researchers worked on the machine translation of the play from English to Polish to examine whether the translation produces the same grotesque elements and thus cause the audience to laugh at the character Ubu or not. To conduct the research, Maleka and Marecki used Google Translate machine to translate the text. As they stated, the 'printed publication of the automatically translated play' generated a deep conceptual meaning in Polish.

2. A Synopsis of the Play

To elaborate on the issues put forward, one might take a deep look at *Ubu the King* thematically and structurally. In this play, Jarry pushes the audience/reader to figure out his own form of reality, a kind of pataphysics. Papa Ubu as the central character of this play is an officer to Wencelas, king of Poland. As a fat, grotesque, somehow stupid character, Papa Ubu is tempted into killing the king by his wife, Mama Ubu. Papa Ubu, Ironically in a feast that is held for the promotion of him to a higher rank, kills the king and his two sons while the youngest son survives the battle and fled to the mountains. After seizing the throne, he gradually destroys the apparent social order and peace and follows gratifying his own satisfaction. Finally, Papa Ubu is defeated in a battle by Czar Alexis and the survived son of the king, Bougrellas, and runs away with his wife.

3.Ubu and Shakespeare

Taking a brief look at the plot of *Ubu the King*, the reader immediately recognizes its similarity to Shakespeare's play(s). The first play coming to mind is *Macbeth* in which the two share elements of plot. While *Macbeth* is tempted by Lady *Macbeth* into killing *Duncan*, in Jarry's play it is *Ubu* who is tempted into killing *Wencelas* by *Mama Ubu*. Carrey Mittenberg in his article "Proto-Absurdist Strides and Leanings: Alfred Jarry's Shakespearean Spirit in *Ubu Roi*" draws analogies between Jarry and Shakespeare and provides the readers with some similarities. The last scene of *Ubu the King* shows the escape of *Papa Ubu* and *Mama Ubu* in the storm which brings to mind the opening scene of *The Tempest*. It is also similar to one of Shakespeare's historical plays, *Richard III* "Père *Ubu*'s all-encompassing stomach embodies the physical deformity of his hunger for usurpation not unlike *Richard III*'s premature misshape" (Mittenberg 51). The title also suggests Jarry's intended parallelism in his *Ubu the King*; the order of the words and the focus on the character as a king is like some of the titles of Shakespeare such as *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Henry VII*. The other structural element is the division of the acts and the scenes in *Ubu the King* that makes it comparable to some of Shakespeare's tragedies.

Saying that *Ubu the King* is similar to Shakespeare's plays is not the main focus of Mittenberg's study; what he aims at unfolding is the fact that *Ubu the King* for the audience of late 19th century does the same thing that Shakespeare did for the French theatergoers of 16th and 17th centuries. Being rigid in characteristic and holding inflexible worldviews toward society and tradition, people attended to watch production of Shakespeare's plays were far off accepting the subjects dealt with in those tragedies. The audience of 16th and 17th centuries hardly accepted Shakespeare since "the play violated the already relaxed and expanded confines of French taste (goût)" (Mittenberg 6). Mittenberg asserts that *Ubu the King* does the very same thing to the goût of the late 19th century audience. Implicitly it would not be inappropriate to say that both Shakespeare and Jarry provide the world of literature in France with being avant-garde in content (mostly in case of Shakespeare) and form (mostly in case of Jarry). To come to a clear point is to say that Jarry's treatment of Shakespeare's major plays is a kind of conscious reaction to the morals and conventions of French theater. Jarry divests himself of the Frenchistic "goût" of the late 19th century and throws himself into a battlefield of defining a new goût for French theater and more importantly for worldwide literature.

[C]ritics furiously debated *Ubu Roi*'s worth and legitimacy to the French stage, much like others had with Shakespeare 150 years earlier. And while *Ubu Roi* is both a mixture of Shakespearean tropes and a reworked version of a collaboratively-written schoolboy farce, the pervasive non-serious mood, the historically inaccurate and implausible action, the bawdy songs and indecorously strange verbiage, and the total disregard for the unities (outdoing Shakespeare by leaps and bounds), suggest that Jarry was attempting to destabilize the bourgeois mentality that clung to goût and to the suffocating conception of legitimate theater. (Mittenberg 26)

As Mittenberg states in his article Jarry with *Ubu the King* attempts to "destabilize the bourgeois mentality." The 19th century France socially is divided into three main orders: the aristocrat, the middle class or the bourgeois, and the lower class. The power being in hands of the aristocrat deprives the lower class wholly out of the suitable working and living conditions. The lower class suffered not only from the lack of suitable life facilities but also from necessary sanitary. The middle ground was captivated by the bourgeois who tried their best to get to the more aristocratic living conditions. Jarry by characterizing the gluttonous *Ubu* mocks the bourgeois, their destructive ambition, and their lack of care. *Ubu* as the representation of the middle class in *Ubu the King* kills *Wencelas* and seizes the throne. He constantly thinks about money, and as it is shown in act three he personally goes to the home of the peasants and asks for the tax and brutally kills the ones who resist in paying him money. He is even initially tempted into killing *Wencelas* by the idea of getting richer and leading an aristocratic luxurious life.

MAMA UBU. If I were in your place, I'd want to plant
that arse on a throne. You could make lots of money,

and eat all the sausages you want, and roll through the streets in a carriage.

PAPA UBU. If I were King, I'd wear a big wide-brimmed hat, the kind I had in Aragon, the one those Spanish rogues stole from me.

MAMA UBU. You could also obtain an umbrella and a big cape that would fall to your heels. (Jarry 5)

However Ubu is a stupid, grotesque, greedy, and absurdly tyrannical character, his creation signifies something more than these personal attributes. He is an absurd character whose absurdity gives Jarry pleasure. "Talking about things understandable only weighs down the mind and falsifies the memory, but the absurd exercises the mind and makes the mind work." Whether Jarry takes pleasure in the character of Ubu because of his absurdity is a matter of investigation. This absurd Ubu does not solidify the mind; it, on the contrary, sets the mind of its creator and the readers in motion. To see to what extent this play is absurd, the notion of absurdity must be applied on *Ubu the king*.

4. Ubu and Absurdity: Theoretical Framework

According to Martin Esslin's influential book *The Theater of the Absurd* on the notion of absurdity in drama, the impossibility of communication is one of the tenets that could classify a play as absurd. The communication has been shed light differently in various landmark plays of this type of theater. Absurdity of this kind in *Ubu the King* is similar to *Waiting for Godot* in that the major characters use language in a staccato manner that resembles a machine rather than a human being. It is worth mentioning that *Ubu the King* is the extension of the play that has been sketched during Jarry's schooldays as teamwork with his two friends Henri and Charles Morin. This sketch under the title of *Les Poloneis* has been also staged in the form of marionette. However, in case of *Ubu the King*, the characters act in some scenes like puppets, they reject being wholly like one and refused to put on a mask.

In spite of the fact that Esslin does not indicate in his introduction to absurd drama, The elements of hallucination and distorted awareness can be traced in *Ubu the King*. These elements have been noticed by Rogers Shattuck's *The Banquet Years* in 1979. In Shattuck's point of view, Jarry is an avant-garde playwright who

In Jarry, we confront a reversal of values in which the baseness and incongruity of life must be understood as a source not of disgust but of joy. The intelligence can feed on triviality and by persistence create the sublime. By clinging to this attitude, Jarry pushed systematic absurdity into the realm of hallucination, of violated consciousness (34).

The symbolism in *Ubu the King* is also reconcilable with another element of the Theater of the Absurd. "By my green candle" is a symbolic phrase which is repeated by Ubu many times throughout the play but it is not at all justified within the play, or is too complicated to be comprehended. This element is also present in *Waiting for Godot* in the form of a tree. The tree which is present from scene one makes it hard to be related to the other objects or characters in the play.

Comparing *Ubu the King* with the typical plays of 19th century like plays by Ibsen, the reader can find some traces of illogical elements which add to the absurdity of Jarry's play which are absent in the latter. The fast-moving scenes and actions, being extreme at its best make this play nothing but avant-garde. For this reason and the incongruity of the illogical actions and the plot, many critics have regarded this play as the earliest spring of Theater of the Absurd.

The other element of absurdity could be pinpointed in the genre of this play. Whether this play is a tragedy or a comedy is a matter of question. Applying the notions of grotesque put forward by Jan Kott *Ubu the King* could be classified in this category. Manuel L. Grossman in his essay "Alfred Jarry and the Theater of Absurd" defines the absurdity of the grotesqueness of *Ubu the King* by

mentioning that the “distinction between comedy and tragedy” is broken down. While the comedy of the earlier times tend to use “comic means to comic ends” the tradition started with Jarry is to use “comic means to serious ends” that culminates in the works of Beckett, Ionesco, and Pinter, to name a few. Koos inaugurates the discussion of language in *Ubu* as:

The drama of language that Jarry’s play enacts distills the comic to an essential state that, in a truly cruel manner, initiates the dissociate movements that will illustrate the complete relativity of all value in the human plane. Embodying this fundamental, extra-human chaos in the theater was a primary goal of the ritualized Theater of Cruelty (46).

What Koos emphasizes here is the avant-garde dramaturgy created by Jarry to convey the latent potential for absurdity. In this respect, Koos might be referring to Artaud’s introduction to Jarry and his revolutionary theatre. Artaud had once said that “the Theatre Alfred Jarry was created in order to use theatre and not serve it” (qtd. in Koos 41). Artaud’s attempt in giving a high stand to Jarry is unquestionably true since after Jarry, many dramatists followed his style and linguistic structures to represent the chaos and satire needed for an absurd theatre.

Another critic Pronko analyzes the stand of Jarry’s *Ubu the King* and consents that:

After a silent pregnancy of almost twenty years, the French theater at midtwentieth century gave healthy birth to a type of drama that had been conceived, and briefly drew breath, as early as 1896 when Alfred Jarry shocked the placid audience at the Théâtre de l’Œuvre with *Père Ubu*’s resounding “Merdre!” Jarry’s revolt against bourgeois morality and prevalent theater values, drawing inspiration from the romanticism and bohemianism of the nineteenth century, led in the theater to the more organized revolt of Apollinaire’s *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, and the few dramatic efforts of dada and surrealism. By 1930, however, despite the efforts of Antonin Artaud, the lineage of Jarry seemed extinct, and it was only in 1950, with the performance of Ionesco’s *Bald Soprano*, and three years later with Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, that it became clear that the spirit of the avantgarde was still alive in the theater. (1)

What Pronko highlights here is twofold: firstly he recognizes Jarry as the forerunner of avant-garde theatre in French history of drama. Secondly, he refers to the role of the audience at the time of the play’s production 1896. This means that the audience was ‘placid’ in the recognition of the play.

Wellwarth, another theatre critic, implicitly reads Jarry’s *Ubu the King* and its theatrical production as an incongruity in the vein of current productions of the time.

In the theater, as in life, events are irreversible. Once something has happened, it has happened; and once it has happened, it can happen again. In art, setting the precedent is the important thing. After the production of *Ubu roi* the theater could not be the same again: *Ubu roi* had happened, and the totality of theatrical experience had instantly and irretrievably been translated into a new perspective. (4)

He does not refer to the events of the production time but he means that any anomaly and incongruity can be regarded as avant-garde.

Although the elements of the absurdist theater are present in *Ubu the King*, there are other influential social factors at work at the time of its production that makes this play avant-garde of a certain context. These features have been investigated in an essay by Lance Mekeel as *U – Effects*. By *U – Effects* Mekeel means the influences *Ubu the King* had on the history of a new wave in literature. To put it another way, Mekeel implies that there are particular features beyond the text of *Ubu the King* that caused it to be recognized as the precursor of the Theater of the Absurd. The *U-Effects*, according to Mekeel, are divided into three strategies. The first is the life style of Jarry in which he identifies with *Ubu* to a great extent. Jarry became obsessed with his creation, to the point that he began to imitate him, using an odd way of speaking, referring to himself as “Pere Ubu,” and behaving in an eccentric manner have attracted critics attention. The next is “the capacity of

the play to scandalize," with its beginning word "mardree" and the offensive use of language on the whole. The third is the revolutionary dramaturgy that is apparent in the form of the play.

Mekeel focuses on the fact that scholars have dismissed "the contingent contexts of 1896 Paris and 1910s suggesting that this ignorance reveals the result of the 'U-Effect' on the contemporary scholarship." The first production of "*Ubu Roi* at Lugué-Poés Theatre de l'Œuvre [had] provoked a scandal," (Esslin 188) with the very first word "Mardree" poured out of Ubu's mouth. In his demystification of *Ubu the King*, Mekeel goes on to state that the biographies written on Alfred Jarry made him favorable to study in 1920s. Furthermore the curtain speech Jarry carried out before the start of the first production shocked the audience. He was clothed in an unusual outfit, and talked in a disjointed way. These all provoke nothing but sense of shock and bewilderment in the audience. There were important literary figures present among the spectators such as W. B. Yeats who said of the play "[a]fter Stephane Mallarme, after Paul Verlaine, after Gustave Moreau, after Puvis de Chavannes, after our own verse, after all our subtle colour and nervous rhythm, after the faint mixed tints of Conder, what more is possible? After us the Savage God."

Regarding the plot of the *Ubu the King*, the traces of Shakespeare can be found. Jarry, as a French writer does not seem to be interested in Anglophone literature like many other Francophone men of letters. However, what Jarry borrows from Shakespeare is not the plot but the traditional Western Europe plot practiced by great dramatists like Shakespeare. Like Shakespeare's rule-breaking plots (*Macbeth* is one of the best examples), Jarry writes *Ubu the King* in the same manner. Not to mention other similarities to Shakespeare and more specifically the textual ones to *Macbeth*, such as the red glove Mère Ubu wears, *Ubu the King's* plot is an anti-tradition dramaturgy which positions Jarry as a pioneer in his era.

5. Discussion

It is an undeniable fact that Jarry's *Ubu the King* is structurally and thematically absurd. The basic elements of absurdity can be traced back to Jarry long before being categorized by the theoreticians of drama. This article discussed the roots and reasons for such kind of early absurdity in drama. Nonetheless, it was the social situation and the reaction of the audience to the production of this play that extensively makes it absurd. The production of this play, on the other hand, is coincided with the usual transformation and awkwardness of the fin-de-siècle. Whether to call it a precursor of the theater of the absurd is only scratching the surface, *Ubu the King* is the play of contradictions. It could have been these very contradictions of the play that were against the taste of the late 19th century French audience. Alfred Jarry was a leading figure among his contemporaries in various ways; bringing up these contradictions and producing laughter out of them was Jarry's innovation. Twentieth century Europe starts to sense these contradictions and twenty-first century world see them and live with them in the flesh. Jarry declares that "laughter is born out of the discovery of the contradictory." By stating this remark Jarry proves to be ahead of his time, probing the possibilities of abiding by the opposites. The contradictions are out there; it might make the reader/ audience (or the spectator) laugh the moment they are discovered. Whether this laughter is generated as a result of machine translation into another language or in its original, the audience feels grotesque after watching the character Ubu. If absurdity is defined as a feeling which is produced as the confrontation of the rational being with a universe that denies to be rational, then character Ubu is that rational one who has confronted the irrationality within the system of his kingship (the personal universe) and conveys his state of astonishment to the audience. It can be concluded that Jarry is both a traditional Western writer borrowing from the monumental figure of drama William Shakespeare and his plays conveying themes of absurdity like *Hamlet* and an absurdist who employs the elements of absurd drama such as satire, chaos, disorder, farce, satire, dark humor, incongruity, the belittlement of reason, and controversy regarding the philosophical condition of being "nothing" before being announced by Martin Esslin.

References

- Aronson, A. (1991). "Postmodern Design." *Theatre Journal* 43: 1-13.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3207947>
- Aspley, K. (2010). *Historical Dictionary of Surrealism*. Maryland: The Scarecrow Press.
- Breton A. (1924). *Manifeste du surréalisme*. Paris: Sagittaire.
- (1997). *Anthology of Black Humor*. Trans. Mark Polizzotti. San Francisco: City Lights Books,
- Esslin, M. (1961). *The Theater of the Absurd*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Fell, J. (2005). *Alfred Jarry. An Imagination in Revolt*. Cranbury NJ: Associated University Presses.
- Fisher, B. (2000). *The Pataphysician's Library*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.5949/UPO9781846313721>
- Hassan, I. (1993). "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism." *Postmodernism: A Reader*. Ed. Thomas Docherty. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo, Singapore: Harvester Wheatsheaf. 146-156.
- Innes, C. (1993). *Avant Garde Theatre: 1892-1992*. Routledge, London.
- Jarry, A. (2007). *King Ubu*. Trans. Patrick Whittaker.
- Koos, Leonard R. "Comic Cruelty: Artaud and Jarry." *Antonin Artaud and the Modern Theater*. Ed. Gene A. Plunka. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1994. 37-50. Print.
- Lasser, J. (2011). "Ubu and the Grotesque."
- Malecka, A. & Piotr Marecki. (2018). "Literary experiments with automatic translation: a case study of a creative experiment involving King Ubu and Google Translate". *On the Fringes of Literature and Digital Media Culture*
https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004362352_007
- Mekeel, L. (2013). *From Irreverent to Revered: How Alfred Jarry's Ubu Roi and the "U-Effect" Changed Theater History*. College of Bowling Green.
- Mittenberg, C. (2007). *Proto-Absurdist Strides and Leanings: Alfred Jarry's Shakespearean Spirit in Ubu Roi*. New York.
- Neophytou-Georgio, S. (2010). "The disfiguring mirrors of power in the speculation of evil: despots and tyrants in the theatre of the 20th century 4:32-41.
- Rajan, K. (2013). "Analysing Shakespearean Adaptations in Modern European Absurdist Drama: Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* and Eugene Ionesco's *Macbett*." *Lapis Lazuli*.
- Schumacher, C. (1985). *Alfred Jarry and Guillaume Apollinaire*. New York: Grove Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-17328-0>
- Shattuck, R. (1955). *The Banquet Years. The Origin of the Avant-garde in France 1885 to World War I*. New York: Random House.
- Shattuck, R. and Simon Watson Taylor, eds. (1965). *Selected Works of Alfred Jarry*. New York: Grove Press, 1965.
- Stillman, L. K. (1983). *Alfred Jarry*. Boston: Twayne Publishing, Inc.
- Wellwarth, G. "Alfred Jarry: The Seed of the Avant-Garde Drama." *Criticism, a Quarterly for Literature and the Arts*. 4.2 (Spring 1962): 108-119.
- White, K. S. (1977). *Savage Comedy Since King Ubu: A Tangent to "The Absurd"*. Washington, DC: UP of America.