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# The Balcony

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss Jean Genet's play "The Balcony" and analyze how it portrays social structures in our community, blurring the lines between illusion and reality & changing our fundamental understanding of societal interactions.

## 1 About the Author

Jean Genet, (born Dec. 19, 1910, Paris, France — died April 15, 1986, Paris), French criminal and social outcast turned writer who, as a novelist, transformed erotic and often obscene subject matter into a poetic vision of the universe and, as a dramatist, became a leading figure in the avant-garde theater, especially the Theater of the Absurd.

Genet, an abandoned, illegitimate child was raised by peasants. Caught stealing, he spent his adolescence at a notorious reform school, described in the novel *Miracle de la rose* (1945–46; *Miracle of the Rose*). His autobiographical *Journal du voleur* (1949; *The Thief's Journal*) gives a complete account of his life as a tramp, pickpocket, and male prostitute. It also reveals him as an aesthete, an existentialist, and a pioneer of the Absurd.

He began to write in 1942 while imprisoned for theft and wrote *Notre-Dame des Fleurs* (1943; *Our Lady of the Flowers*). After writing two other novels, *Pompes funèbres* (1947; *Funeral Rites*) and *Querelle de Brest* (1947; *Querelle of Brest*, filmed 1982), Genet began to experiment with drama. *Haute Surveillance* (1949; *Deathwatch*) continues his prison-world themes. *Les Bonnes* (1947; *The Maids*), however, begins to explore the complex problems of identity. With this play Genet was established as an outstanding figure in the Theater of the Absurd. His subsequent plays, *Le Balcon* (1956; *The Balcony*), *Les Nègres* (1958; *The Blacks*), and *Les Paravents* (1961; *The Screens*), are large-scale, stylized dramas in the Expressionist manner, designed to shock and implicate an audience by revealing its hypocrisy and complicity. This "Theater of Hatred" attempts to wrest the maximum dramatic power from a social or political situation without necessarily endorsing the political platitudes of either the right or the left.

Genet, a rebel & an anarchist of the most extreme sort, rejected almost all forms of social discipline or political commitment. The violent and often degraded eroticism of his experience led him to a concept of mystic humiliation.

## 2 Setting

The balcony is set in no specific time or place. Nearly all of the play takes place inside The Grand Balcony, a brothel that serves the fantasies of its clients. The brothel has different rooms, each set up to fulfill a particular fantasy. Irma (the madame) has her own room, with a video surveillance system, to monitor the other rooms.

Scene VIII takes place in a balcony attached to the The Grand Balcony, and Scene VI takes place in a public square near the brothel.

Another key element to this play is the role of props, costumes and decorations. These are essential for the play, especially mirrors. To fulfill the fantasies, these must be as authentic as possible, and towards the end when they break out of the illusion and play their roles in real life, they are accepted as the real deal. Props, costumes and mirrors show us the fine line between illusions and reality in the play.

## 3 Plot

Genet uses the first few scenes to explore the role of power in society, these scenes are the “play-within-a-play”, since each of them showcase a client acting out his fantasy (the bishop who forgives a sinner, the judge who punishes a thief, the general who rides his horse), with great eye for detail and authenticity. Here, any disturbance or break in their charade aggravates the men and they are, if only momentarily, completely immersed in the fantasy. Meanwhile, a revolution is progressing outside the brothel and Irma anxiously await the arrival of the Chief of Police – George. Chantel, one of the prostitutes at The Grand Balcony, has quit and become the spirit of the revolution. An envoy from the Queen arrives and informs that the pillars of society (Head of Church – The Bishop, Head of Law – The Judge, Head of the Army – The General) have been killed by the rebels. Using the costumes and props in the house of illusions, the clients fantasies jump outside their settings when they pose in public as their respective figures of authority in an effort to maintain peace and order in the masses.

## 4 Major Themes

The primary clash within the play is between the Illusions within the brothel and the Reality outside it. Common men pay to live out their fantasies. The common men choose to be men of power (Bishop, Judge, General) whereas the rich choose to be poor (the tramp). In this way, people want a break from their daily routines of “reality” and enter this house of illusions to take charge of their fantasies. Details are important, and Irma goes out of her way to ensure perfection and authenticity in each of her illusions. However, sometimes the reality does manage to sneak in, as the walls aren’t able to keep out the sound of the revolution. The use of mirrors and screens further emphasize the distinction from the outside world, creating a perfect illusion for the customers. When the clients and Irma have to play their roles in reality, the desire for this illusion conflicts with the realism of this reality and not all of them are able to handle this transition.

In this way, Illusion is superior to reality, although reality is necessary for illusion to exist.

## 5 The Balcony as a Dream

Despite its lack of coherence and almost non-existence of structure, this play is still popular among the masses due to its portrayal as a dream. Even indirectly mentioned by Genet in the last act, this dream is something shared by everyone. This, along with the fact that the audience is an extension of the stage, further cements the fact that this play basically appeals to certain subconscious feelings within us.

The main symbol of the dream is the image, the false appearances. Everything in a person’s life is made in order to establish their fake image [i.e. how other people perceive him, as well as how he experiences him/herself through the eyes of others (mirrors)].

The very existence of this brothel serves to cater to the fulfillment of these dreams and establishing these fake images in the scenarios. These fake images, which are normally suppressed in society due to norms and customs.

## 6 Illusion vs Reality

Using this play, Genet successfully shows us how a thin line exists between illusion and reality. The clients at the 'House of Illusions' come there in order to escape their everyday reality and live for a while in the world of fantasy and grandeur. In order to fulfill their lust for power and spirit, they act out various roles they aspire to by putting on costumes and exercising their power over the women who provide them service. Each of the clients revels in this illusion of power provided by the costumes. To them, reality is the real punishment. The real world is too demanding, full of its responsibilities and societal functions. Since the truth of their existence is unacceptable to these men, the escape to the fantasy where they have both power and prestige without the mundane function that position entails.

However deep these men are immersed in their fantasy, reality finds a way to intrude, one way or another, They are never allowed to completely lose themselves in their fantasy. For example the sound of machine gun fire, constantly brings them back to reality. Moreover, the women who assist them in realizing their ideal illusionary dream often fall out of character. Even the clients themselves often fall out of character, but only to verify the authenticity of their illusion.

There is always an element of realism that exposes the ideal state of being that each man aspires to as fantasy. While the Bishop relishes forgiving the sins of the sinner, the prostitute playing at being the sinner interrupts his fantasy by asking what he would do if her sins were for real. When the prostitute playing the role of the thief admits to being a thief too soon, the Executioner interrupts the illusion of the Judge giving the impression that the scenes that take place in the privacy of the salons are scripted. The Judge would have to meet with frequent interruptions from reality. At one point he himself would step out of his role and would ask the girl if she was new to the brothel. At another moment, he would enter into a long discussion with the Executioner about the revolution that is raging outside. The General's fantasy too is interrupted by reality when the girl who has to pretend to be a mare refuses to wear the bit in her mouth saying that it makes her bleed, and when his concern about the revolution forces him out of character for a while.

Reality not only threatens to intrude and take over the world of illusion, but it actually does. The three figures of the Bishop, the Judge and the General are at one point required to join Irma, who is dressed up as the Queen, to

help quell the revolution. They abandon the privacy of their world of fantasy and appear in the public as figures of authority. However, it is a disaster for them as there is no longer any joy in playing those roles. For, their fantasies and illusions have become real and in the process they have lost their ideal states of being. They are forced to play the well-established traditional roles of power that occupy popular imagination. The outcome is that they lose their individuality that was defined by their wishful moving in and out of role-play. As reality intrudes and takes over illusions, these men are no longer able to dream. The impersonators of the Queen, the Bishop, the Judge, and the General appear to the masses who believe them to be the true figures of authority. This only highlights the fact that the real world too is defined by costumes, props and role-playing. The irony is that the impersonators had tried to escape reality by those very costumes, props and role-playing in the illusory world of Irma's brothel. The revolution which would have been the end of all illusions had it been successful, crumbles because it too feels the need to be represented through an icon. Genet shows that the real world of the revolution is as illusory as the world of the brothel where men go to live their illusions.

## 7 Social Structures

Social structures play a vital role in society as shown by Genet. The positions themselves have power associated with them, irrespective of whoever is filling the role. In that aspect, we see when the Bishop, Judge and General are impersonated by Irma's clients, their roles appease the masses, which once again believe in the power of the state. In this manner, social structures are essential as they prevent society's descent into anarchy and darkness. The institutions of Church, Law and Army are for the people to feel safe while also to ensure they follow a set of rules either by fear of God, jail time or forced conscription. Each of the structures has its own methods of enforcing discipline in the common folk. The three of them working in harmony is what keeps the wheels of society running.

The illusionary impersonation of these social structures on the other hand, is primary a means of escape, a way to attain power and authority, albeit for a short while. The men who come to Irma's house of illusions seek to use these fantasies, this role play as a form of recreation, a way to attain these positions without the mundane work that comes along with it. These roles

are pedestals, and their fulfillment becomes the sole purpose of the role play. For example, the Judge is single-minded determination to punish the thief, he is willing to do anything (even lick her feet) in order for the thief to confess to her crimes. They become so immersed in the fantasy, that they don't want to leave. This is demonstrated perfectly by Roger, who refuses to leave after the Chief of Police fantasy is over, but rather wants the destiny of the Chief of Police and himself to be intertwined. Failing to accept that the fantasy was just a fantasy, he ends up castrating himself. In this way, we see that the rehabilitation from the fantasy is tough and many people prefer the fantasy over their real lives. But this is again refuted when the clients are actually given a chance to live their fantasies in the real world. The Bishop, Judge and General take up these roles in real life and assume power. However, the results are not as pleasant. Taken out of their reality, they don't know how to act. They enjoy the power that comes with their role but are unable to perform the functions that they are supposed to. The Bishop is overwhelmed and completely unprepared for his role, the General tries and fails to act as a real general should and the Judge is flustered and unsure of himself and his decisions. They are all dismissed by Irma, the Queen, for failing to perform their duties.

So we see, that when the realms of illusion and reality collide, when objects are taken from one plane to another, the results are not quite as we expect. Initially, we see what happens when reality interferes in the realm of illusion. Here, this just leads to frequent breaking of the illusion and the characters being unable to fully immerse themselves in their fantasies. But, when the illusionary objects make their way into the realm of reality, only a husk of theirs remains. They are the misfits, unable to live up to their real counterparts. The shadow realm (illusionary world) only produces inferior copies of reality, as seen from the Bishop, Judge and General.

The social structures are laid bare in this play, due to the audience having to face the harsh truth about them. These positions are hollow husks, and will exist irrespective of who fills them. The "human" who holds this authority is just fulfilling an act, much like the clients did at The Grand Balcony. The roles of these authoritative figures are just that, roles. But here we're faced with a duality. The roles can be played by anyone, but the impersonators aren't able to play them. This is due to their conflict with their illusionary self. When they tried to bring that out into the realm of reality, we end up with something that is a half measure, neither completely here or completely there.

## 8 Power of Images

The envoy comments “A true image born of a false spectacle”, on observing the photographers capturing the Bishop, Judge and General impersonating the real roles. This comment can be the linchpin for our fundamental understanding of the play.

The spectacle which the envoy witnesses is fake for a variety of reasons. The characters who are attempting to represent the heads of Church, Law and Army are in fact doing only that, representing them, for in reality they are merely clients of The Grand Balcony with a fetish for dressing up and role playing in these roles. Merely due to circumstance, they acquire the real powers of the figures they represent, but only because their original placeholders perished in the revolution. Now since the rebels have been defeated, the old order must be restored, and the symbolic heads must regain their power, which is done through the propagation of their images.

Power is equated with image, or the demonstration of power. Hence, the scene of the photographs showcases the re-establishment of power in the old order. Three ordinary people are now being photographed, but all that matters is the final photographic image that results and this does not necessarily have to correspond to the real objects before the camera.

Each character being photographed attempts to pose, under the guidance of the photographer, a “definitive pose”, i.e., the image which encompasses most ideally the essence of their role. The reference point for this pose is judged from the existing precedents, a sort of ideal image. Thus, we see the Bishop attempting to find the pose of perfect piety, the Judge being encouraged to draw the longest face possible to the point of being morose, and the General drawing inspiration from the great generals that preceded him.

There are very clear differences the objects and their resulting images, hence the nature of the comment. The spectacle, as we saw, is entirely false, but the image, looks to be true, for in image only shows us a superficial and surface view, and the surface faithfully represents the images of these roles as much as photographs of the real people, equipped with the real props of their office, could hope to do.



## 9 Absurdism in the Play

Genet, through this play, holds up a “mirror” to society and bares it all. He trivializes social structures, the backbone of our society. Society is shown to be akin a brothel, providing its customers with the illusion of power. Society is shown to be as unreal as the play itself, further emphasized by Irma’s final speech which says the play is a fantastic representation of reality, which is fantastic in itself. Genet aims to show us that reality is unattainable since one cannot have a control over it.

We see that Irma’s House of Illusions is just a reflection of the real world, governed by the same rituals and ceremonies and hence is equally as absurd. Throughout this play, we get the feeling of impotence as one feels trapped in the meshes of society. The end of the play aims to suggest a breakdown of current “absurd” societal norms and a rebuilding of a more unrealistic society.

## 10 Concluding Remarks

The Balcony, first published in 1956, is a diabolical play of epic proportions. It has the power to disturb and even disorient anyone to read/watch it. It has rightfully been dubbed “a political fantasy within a fantasy”, where all values are overturned.

Genet successfully, through his distorting mirror, portrays society as a brothel, where the play-actors realize that they belong to their fantasies, and not vice versa. They need their fantasies as much as they need oxygen to breathe.

The play consists of two main stands, a political conflict between the revolution and counter-revolution and a philosophical one between reality and illusion.

Martin Esslin rightly called The Balcony, “one of the masterpieces of our time.” Even though Esslin’s time was decades ago, the statement still stands.

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*“If we behave like those on the other side, then we are the other side.  
Instead of changing the world, all we’ll achieve is a reflection of the one we  
want to destroy.”*

***Jean Genet, The Balcony***