

The Balcony Le Balcon

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a masterpiece of twentieth century drama by the iconic author of our lady of the flowers ingenious intellectually exciting and yes still quite shocking the new york times in the midst of a city ravaged by violent rebellion a brothel caters to the elaborate role playing fantasies of men from all walks of life a gas company worker pretends to be a bishop while in the next room another customer dons a judge s robe to savor the erotic pleasures of meting out justice and punishment these perverse costumed masquerades parody the larger more violent dramas of the outside world but as the anarchic political struggle threatens to topple society even the revolutionaries come to believe that illusions are preferable to reality a poet novelist playwright and outlaw jean genet helped define french existential theater of the mid twentieth century deeply influential and widely acclaimed genet s the balcony presents an unrelentingly profound and critical reflection of contemporary society

jean genet s the balcony which premiered in 1957 is acknowledged as one of the founding

plays of modern theatre philosopher lucien goldmann dubbed it the first great brechtian play in french literature in a brothel of an unnamed french city the madam irma directs a series of fantastical scenarios a bishop forgives a penitent a judge punishes a thief a general rides astride his horse outside an uprising threatens to engulf the streets the patrons of the brothel wait anxiously for the chief of police to arrive but in his place comes the queen s envoy to inform the assembled that the figureheads of the establishment have been killed in the uprising play acting turns to reality as the patrons don their costumes in public in an attempt to quell the insurrection illusion and reality order and dissolution these are the grand themes of the balcony

surprisingly there are few book length studies available that approach the poems in charles baudelaireís collection on an individual basis understanding les fleurs du mal fills this gap by providing students and serious readers with clear scholarly explications to many of the most widely read of baudelaire s poems

in this book gene a plunka argues that the most important single element that solidifies all of genet s work is the concept of metamorphosis genet s plays and prose demonstrate the transition from game playing to the establishment of one s identity through a state of risk taking that develops from solitude however risk taking per se is not as important as the rite of passage anthropologist victor turner s work in ethnography is used as a focal point for the examination of rites of passage in genet s dramas rejecting society genet has allied himself with peripheral groups marginal men and outcasts scapegoats who lack power in society much of their effort is spent in revolt or direct opposition in mainstream society that sees them as objects to be abused as an outcast or marginal man genet solved his problem of identity through artistic creation and metamorphosis likewise genet s protagonists are outcasts searching for positive value in a society over which they have no control they always appear to be the victims or scapegoats as outcasts genet s protagonists establish their identities by first willing their actions and being proud to do so unfortunately man s sense of being is constantly undermined by society and the way individuals react to roles norms and

values roles are the products of carefully defined and codified years of positively sanctioned institutional behavior according to genet role playing limits individual freedom stifles creativity and impedes differentiation genet equates role playing with stagnant bourgeois society that imitates rather than invents the latter is a word genet often uses to urge his protagonists into a state of productive metamorphosis imitation versus invention is the underlying dialectic between bourgeois society and outcasts that is omnipresent in virtually all of genet s works faced with rejection poverty oppression and degradation genet s outcasts often escape their horrible predicaments by living in a world of illusion that consists of ceremony game playing narcissism sexual and secret rites or political charades like children genet s ostracized individuals play games to imitate a world that they can not enter essentially the play acting becomes catharsis for an oppressed group that is otherwise confined to the lower stratum of society role players and outcasts who try to find an identity through cathartic game playing never realize their potential in genet s world instead genet is interested in outcasts who immerse themselves in solitude and create their own sense of dignity free from external control most important these isolated individuals may initially play games yet they ultimately experience metamorphosis from a world of rites charades and rituals to a type of sainthood where dignity and nobility reign the apotheosis is achieved through a distinct act of conscious revolt designed to condemn the risk taker to a degraded life of solitude totally distinct from society s norms and values book jacket

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