



A STUDY OF IONESCO'S CHARACTERS

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Abstract

The characters in Ionesco's play stand up to for the most part with the absence of correspondence, a trademark attribute of the cutting edge world, related with negative mental states like anxiety, nervousness, dread, vulnerability and separation. Ionesco's character has the demeanor of an individual who withstands the occasions, however doesn't make them; being a baffled individual, he decides to surrender the battle, ending up being uninvolved according to the occasions that influence him on the planet he lives in. This research paper examines the incompatible world of Ionesco's characters in plays, referring to individual dissatisfaction, which is expressed in multiple ways.

Keywords: alienation, absurdity, depression, fun, games, burlesque, parody, grotesque

In Ionesco's play *Victims of Duty* (1953), Choubert imagines he is engulfed in a mire, a quicksand that is stifling his being. Ionesco also commented thus: "human condition is becoming more and more difficult to bear; that the dangers threatening us ... are becoming more and more serious" (Notes and Counter Notes, 236). Choubert finds himself like a stranger in his universe. Ionesco reiterates thus:

An awareness that I am, that I exist, that I am surrounded by something, all sorts of objects, a sort of world, and everything seems strange and incomprehensible to me ... Then the universe seems to me infinitely strange and foreign (236).

The Detective in the play is very soft in the beginning like the Professor of *The Lesson* but soon he begins the game of life and survival and orders Choubert to search for Mallot. In his quest Choubert disintegrates into mental anguish but the Detective

gives him official orders: "You must realize Mallot's got to be found again. It's a question of life and death, It's your duty. The fate of mankind depends on you" (144). Choubert is treated as a victim by the police officer as Choubert endures the oppression of the Detective during his harassment. He immerses in mud and continues his search honestly until his mouth, nose and eyes are submerged (192). He is virtually fed up with the search and he cries to end the game of the search. Madeleine warns the Detective that "He's in danger, his life is in danger" (134). But the Detective is not concerned about his life and exhorts him to carry on. The Detective crosses all limits and forces Choubert to eat unpalatable bread in order to "boucher les trous" in his memory (217). The Detective antagonizes Choubert in the name of duty and ironically it is the duty that kills the Detective. The antithesis between unity and disorder is perpetuated after the psycho-journey by the unmotivated entrance of Nicolas, who serves to represent the avant-garde artist. He is

bearded and scruffy. He arouses suspicion in the Detective who represents the values of obedience, nationalism and conformism. The theme of 'duty' is expanded when Madeleine suddenly begins to "do her duty" as a hostess to guests and brings in hundreds of coffee cups. In her automatism she does her duty but has no interest in the effects. The message of Ionesco is clear the Detective who is a staunch supporter of the ideal of duty becomes oppressive and tyrant. Choubert is a middle class man who falls in the trap of the cruel and cunning the Detective. Ionesco has natural aversion for conformity and the Detective suffers because of his commitment to ideology, duty, belief and the system. All beliefs fall into the same "absolutist" rut. Choubert suffers anyway, whether he is under the Detective or Nicolas. The end of the play gives the message of Ionesco that all social relations inevitably involve conflict, power and oppression. Choubert is so much involved in his search mission that he loses contact not only with that world, but also with themselves.

In *Hunger and Thirst*, Jean has been a dreamer like Ionesco: "I've always longed for the snow, and the sea, and the mountains across the plain, and the clear water of the lakes". He longs for free air in the polluted and stifling environment. The imagery of snow, lake and flowers is very effective in this part of the play. Jean emerges as a psychic wreck longing for peace and happiness: "It's not peace I want, not mere contentment. It's boundless joy and ecstasy for me. And in the surroundings ecstasy is out. We've hardly been here more than twenty minutes" (13). The problem with Jean is his disorientation of mind; he is never satisfied and refuses to settle down at one place. Like Albee's Jerry of *The Zoo Story*, Jean is a crank who is always haunted by the past memories and thinks that the world is collapsing and he is at the end of the road:

JEAN: The ceiling will soon fall in. The plaster's crumbling. I can feel the weight on my shoulders already. Those patches on the walls are getting bigger. Is all this an image of time? Everything disintegrates before our very eyes. (14)

Another character Marie finds beauty in the shapes made by the damp patches on the wall. Jean sees horrific sights. Jean fails to look inside but he finds faults with the outside world. His quest in the play is fruitless as he behaves like a neurotic expressing his anxieties and tensions. Proust observes that there are some people in the world who suffer from the sickness of mind. Jean is one typical such character of Ionesco; he longs for all those things which are beyond his reach and he scorns what lies within his reach. He is in perpetual strain and goes on striving for the future hoping against hopes. Jean thinks that the world can be run as per his desires. In the first section of the drama Ionesco gives a comparison between hunger and thirst of Jean with the positive attitude of Madeleine.

MARIE: So long as I'm with you, I'm not afraid to die. If by taking one step I can touch your hand, or hear your voice from the next room when I call ... then I'm happy. (14)

Marie accuses Jean of failing to see the world in its "density" because of his desire to see its broad totality (83). Jean solves problems by moving away from them while Marie-Madeleine believes in using her inner resources. Marie has firm faith in the human relationship which brings happiness in the life of man but Jean loves to live alone and prefers confinement. Marie knows that Jean is ignorant of the reality of human existence so she exonerates him with the belief that he doesn't know himself. Ionesco presents romantic images in this section dilute pessimism of Jean. The imagery of a garden, flowering trees, green grass, blue sky are very effective in creating healthy environment after Jean has left in search of himself. Ionesco gives the idea that Jean is suffering not because of outer world but because he is in conflict within his own self.

The supernatural atmosphere is heightened when Jean looks in the mirror. He says: "No, Aunt Adelaide! It's definitely not real blood. You're really trying to mislead us" (23). Marie also tells Jean that "She is giving another performance" (23). Jean tries to justify his innocence: "It's shame! Anyway I didn't kill aunt Adelaide!" (23). Marie defends Jean "How could you have killed her! You weren't at the

funeral" (23). In this play Marie is compassionate and sympathetic. She gives mutual support to Jean in all circumstances. Jean is horrified; his teeth start chattering and his body is becoming numb, He cries in despair:

Jean: I really can't stay in this house any more. I can't stand it....

Marie: I know, I know...You're neurotic. There's a cure for that. (24)

Marie tries to heal him showing his old photographs and helping him to forget the present worries but Jean hates "other people's memories" and looks sullen and depressed. He is again horrified to watch his aunt in the flames and cries like a child: "No, don't! Put it out! I can't stand the sight of that woman in the flames. Look at her hair! That's how I always see her, desperate, holding out her arms, in agony: (25). Marie also exorcises the apparition fervently: "It's not his fault. Believe me it's not his fault! Go away! Please! Please! Go away!" (26). Jean expresses his hunger and thirst and Marie gives him moral and spiritual food empowering him to confront the existential reality of life.

You'll get used to it. I'll help you, you'll see. You can make a nest of anything and find refuge in nostalgia. Feed on desire and quench your thirst with hope. Wishful thinking saw waste of time. Harsh memories can be muted, make a source of entertainment. Turn despair into sadness; sadness into regret...The sun will shine today, the sky will be clear tomorrow. (26)

Ionesco got inspiration from the instinct theory of Freud who observed that the instinct of life really contain the zeal instinct and of self preservation. In his plays Ionesco constantly dramatized the opposing forces inside his protagonists and most of his characters are haunted by the fear of death. The actions of Jean are grotesque and his ideas; thoughts, feelings and emotions are of a neurotic being. Soon Marie discovers that Jean has disappeared; perhaps he has left in search of truth and to repair his neurosis. She expresses her curiosity to know about him "where are you going? Where are you? Now that's

enough..." (31). She is fed up the old stupid fun and games: "Stop playing hide-and seek! Still the same old stupid games! ...Noe Jean please stop this" (32). Marie-Madeleine is not very much interested in participating the fun and games of Jean. She however, becomes a forced participant. On Ionesco's plastic each player is free to play tricks on others. In fact, there are no rules for the games as games have unpredictable scope. Each game is handled with care as each character is fully involved in each game:

MARIE: Jean, you can't have gone out, can you? You can't have gone away, can you? You'd have told me, wouldn't you? Answer! Cooee! I can hear him. No. I can't hear him. This is a cruel game. Much too cruel! (She goes on looking for him automatically, with less and less conviction, not looking too hard, slowing the pace down. (34-35)

Marie is worried when she doesn't find out Jean anywhere: "From your heart you cannot tear this love, you can't tear love from your heart. This love from your heart you cannot tear, you can't tear it 'Out, you can't rip it away. Cooee! Cooee!" (33). Jean escapes in one of the transformation-scenes and Marie being a loyal woman is seriously worrying about him. Ionesco uses the technique of pantomime, to the Ionesco might just as well have borrowed from nineteenth-century pantomime. The scene of the garden appears:

The back wall . . . vanishes. You can see a garden: trees in blossom, tall green grass, a very blue sky. Then, on the left of this landscape, which is also on the audience's left, you can see a silver ladder appear, hanging in the air, the top of it out of sight's game! (32)

Jean is now a transformed character though in a fit of violence he tears from his heart a branch of briar rose. His face is screwed with pain as the blood flows from his fingers. Here Ionesco gives the imagery of flowers and garden full of flowers to dramatize the transformation scene of Jean. Jean disappears making Marie sick and restless. Marie searches him everywhere in the house; in the garden and in the wardrobes but he is not to be found. He

has vanished to embark on a journey to explore the existential mysteries of life. She goes on looking for him relentlessly. His search ends in despair and doesn't bring any change in him. The problem with Jean is inside and not outside. The ending of the drama is ambiguous he fails to rediscover his self. There is no Paradise for him and no awareness. Ionesco gives the message that a sick person like Jean shouldn't go outside and such a person can get peace and contentment only living within the family with changed attitude. Jean should learn to live with reality; he should realize the support of his loving wife who is positive and loving. Ionesco seems to indicate in this play that it is within the bounds of the contentment and security of home and family, where women endeavor to persuade their husbands to remain loyal for peace and prosperity of the family. Marie's love for Jean and her support for him in the plot is quite praiseworthy. She searches for him passionately:

Please! I can't find you anywhere. I used to know all your old hiding places, but not this one. You can't have disappeared, you can't have gone out. I'll go on playing just for one minute more. I don't mind looking for one minute more, but at least let me hear your voice! Say Cooeee! Cooeee! (34)

Ionesco does not condemn women for their attachment to habit, home, and duty, but shows that this aspect of the female has a very important role in guiding and supporting men. Women's supportive role, combined with their kindness and capacity for love, makes many of his later heroines very commendable. Ionesco gives the familiar images of the garden and the silver ladder in the transformation scene. Marie is seen beckoning to him to join her and the child to enjoy the fruits of love and care. At the end of the drama Jean emerges like the Sisyphus of Camus. Jean comes to the conclusion that his quest will inevitably leads to an eternal punishment, accompanied by an insatiable hunger and thirst for fullness and accomplishment that can never be assuaged. Coe observes that the protagonists of Ionesco struggle to escape their ennui, but explore the reality of the absurdity of life which is a source of their anguish. They find that everywhere they see nothing but a reflection of their

inner emptiness: The best way for the search of identity in the modern ontological world is the exploration of the inner depths and divine spark that is hidden in each individual. Jean struggles to come out of the whirlpool of fears, obsessions, dreams, and fantasies and Marie gives him genuine support. Eugene Ionesco in his Interview with Jacques Depallens of 5 October 1968 observed thus:

The only fertile research is excavatory, immersive, a contradiction of the spirit, a descent. The artist is active, but negatively shrinking from the nullity of extra circumferential phenomena, drawn in to the core of the eddy. (Ionesco 12)

He also took ideas from Freud and Jung to create personalities for the plays. Jean is the product of laws buried deep in the subconscious and is slave to the passions and drives of Id, Ego and Superego. Jean doesn't get any awareness at the end of the drama and his hunger and thirst remains active as he is tortured by his hunger and thirst for knowledge of the self and is compelled to continue his search. Ionesco has used the dreams; fantasies and to dramatize the fears and fantasies of Jean. He has used the tools of comedy; fun and games to alleviate the sufferings of Jean in the drama. Jean doesn't fully recover from the traumatic self but at the end he does realize the importance of the family and the love of Marie who has really diagnosed his psychological disease:

A hopeless case of nostalgia. That's what I'll say. But I'll go on looking, in every nook and cranny, though I know he's not here anymore. I won't be able to stop myself. I'll reach out to touch him, but there'll be no head on his pillow. (35)

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