

THE HUMAN CONDITION AS SEEN THROUGH IONESCO'S

The Chairs

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Eugène Ionesco is a writer of the "Theatre of the Absurd," a term applied to a group of writers of the 1950's and 60's who share some characteristics in their work, and who are worried with more or less the same problems. Ionesco's *The Chairs*, which was written in 1951, well illustrates the main concerns of this group of writers the human condition and the reality of man's position in the universe. These writers emphasize that the same man who contributes with his knowledge and work to the development of technology and science is the one responsible for the consequences of this development. In their works they decry that the world of man has become more and more dehumanized, purposeless, disjointed, absurd. But, most of the time, man is not conscious of this. He goes on living like a robot, he gets used to his mechanical existence, not because he is completely satisfied with it, but because he is lost, uncertain, unable to react and take a different position. There is, in fact, a general dissatisfaction among men with the present state of things, which is expressed in endless complaints. There is, moreover, a tendency to blame life and the world, to diagnose the epidemic merely as "misfortune." Nevertheless, man forgets that "life" is only a word to express a concept; that the world is what he makes of it, a result of his choices, a reflection of his own deeds. Therefore, man is the only one to be blamed for the chaotic state of things.

The first reactions to the plays of the "Absurd" were the worst possible. Critics and audiences felt insulted and puzzled, because they were presented with form and action completely different from

those of the conventional theater and the "well-made" plays. The theater is a representation of life, an attempt to confront man with, and make him conscious of, his reality. Life, for its turn, would be merely an abstraction if man did not exist. Of course, there is life in nature, but it depends on man to be cultivated and preserved. Man is a strange being! After complicating his life to a maximum, he cannot cope with his dissatisfaction. Instead of seeking some solution within himself, he deludes himself. Unable to solve his existential conflicts, he blames life for being "absurd." Being faced with a kind of theater that he cannot understand, he labels it "absurd." However, what might be called "absurd" is neither the theater nor life but man and what he makes of himself and his world.

Also influenced by Existentialism Ionesco questions the meaning and reality of existence through his plays. He projects his interior world into the stage, his personal views and feelings about the exterior world, and the relationship between the interior and the exterior. Unlike Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who considered man intrinsically good but corrupted because of what society makes of him, Ionesco believes that "no society has been able to abolish human sadness, no political system can deliver us from the pain of living, from our fear of death, our thirst for the absolute; it is the human condition that directs the social condition, not vice versa".¹ He chose to develop his ideas through "Theatre of the Absurd," which breaks down all traditional, accepted rules, and where anything may happen. He provides his audience with something unusual which is revealing rather than arbitrary. One of his greatest achievements is *The Chairs*, which he defines as "a tragic farce." It is a farce, because it is a caricature, a metaphor, which makes the audience laugh. Yet, it is tragic, because through its paradoxes and antitheses, it questions the basic meanings of existence. The laughter leaves a bitter taste of seriousness, as one realizes that he is laughing at himself, at the truth about his condition that he

has tried to ignore.

The Chairs begins with a familiar, conventionalized situation - an old married couple having a trivial conversation at home. The situation, however, soon becomes unnatural. The couple is absurdly old (over 90 years of age), and they live on an island completely isolated from the rest of the world. They have even forgotten what the world outside is like, as conveyed in the following conversation: "Paris never existed, my little one"... "The city must have existed because it collapsed... Nothing remains of it today, except 'a song.'"² Their recollections of the past are very mixed up, due to their own decay. In one of his comments on the play, Ionesco said, "The characters I have used are not fully conscious of their spiritual rootlessness, but they feel it instinctively and emotionally."³ The couple has a feeling that the end is approaching. Old age makes one closer to death than to life. The Old Man's reference to darkness is an image of death, when he tells his wife, "It's six o'clock in the evening... it's dark already. It wasn't like this before. Surely you remember, there was still daylight at nine o'clock in the evening, at ten o'clock, at midnight." (p. 113)

Reminiscence brings the ghosts of the past to the present. The bond of their marriage has long before disappeared. They do not have much to talk about, and they live out an illusion. They are always pretending, telling each other stories, performing absurd imitations (like the months of the year, for instance). They cannot tell the difference between reality and fantasy anymore. Regret and remorse are constantly recurring. The Old Man talks about the great admiration she feels for her "gifted" husband, but at the same time she regrets the way of life he has chosen. As a matter of fact, all his life he has been nothing, just a factotum, one who is supposed to do a little of everything but who actually does nothing, or, at least, nothing relevant. The Old Man is constantly reminding him that, with a little ambition, he might have been much more, such as

"head president, head king, or even head doctor, or head general..."(p. 114). But he has accomodated and pretends to be satisfied with his position of "general factotum." In short, he has never tried to establish his own identity.

The Old Man's relationship with his wife is characterized on the one hand by the wife's demanding some kind of performance from her husband. On the other hand, the Old Man is incapable of living up to her expectations. He suffers from the Oedipus Complex, and his wife plays Jocasta to him. He sits on her knees and plays the role of husband-child, longing for protection. For the Old Woman, it is very natural to be the mother figure. In fact, here she is a prototype of the woman who lies behind this image to hide her lack of personality, to have an excuse not to assume a definite position. She transfers the responsibility to him by telling him what to do, claiming that what is his is hers and that it is his life that fascinates her (a symbiotic relationship). Meanwhile, she fails to realize what a nonentity she is.

The Old Woman is actually a projection of the Old Man's relationship with his mother, a concretization of his feelings of guilt towards her, and a kind of self-punishment. The Old Couple's argument over their "imaginary" son is also a projection of their guilt. Freud's theory is referred to again, when the Old Man says that "sons always *abandon* their mothers, and they more or less *kill* their fathers. (p. 135) . The son wishes to destroy his father because the father is a rival for his mother's love and devotion. In a symbiotic relationship, even the wish to live independently raises in the son a feeling of guilt towards his parents, mainly his mother. The dependent son is so used to being told what to do and how to do it, that an attitude of breaking up the symbiotic tie with his mother may be interpreted by them as abandonment.

After ninety five years of failure to accomplish anything meaningful, the Old Man makes a last attempt to justify his

existence by claiming that he has a message to communicate to mankind. But, what kind of message can that be, if he does not even know who he is? In one passage, he confesses, "I am not myself... I am one in the other." (p.145). Once more, the symbiotic relationship is emphasized. It has annihilated his personality in such a way that he cannot even express himself. In order to reveal his message, he has contracted a professional orator to speak in his behalf that same evening. This fact is announced at the beginning of the play, but the audience is kept in suspense, as they grow more and more puzzled and anxious to have this message delivered at once.

The Old Couple continues its conversation while they wait for the arrival of the guests who were invited to listen to the Old Man's message. Desintegration becomes apparent, and the Old Couple's decrepitude due to senility is symbolized by their use of language, which becomes more and more illogical, fragmented, meaningless. Sometimes, it even skips reality, as when the Old Woman includes "the buildings, the penholders, and the chromosomes" among the guests they are expecting." (p. 121)

Desintegration of language is another device Ionesco uses with great effect. It is both comic and tragic; nevertheless, very interesting. Words are associated one to another as in a game, where only the sound matters. For instance, when the woman is trying to console her husband-child, she says, "My pet, my orphan, dwarfan, worfan, morphan, orphan... Orphan-ly, orphan-lay, orphan-lo, orphan-loo... Li lon lala, li lon la lay, orphan-ly, orphan-lay, relee-relay, orphan-li-relee-rela..." (p.118). By means of language, Ionesco illustrates the emptiness and meaninglessness of the Old Couple's life and of man's life in general.

With the arrival of the guests, the play gets to its climax. They are all invisible to the audience, and, for each one that comes, a new chair is brought onto the stage. The couple does not stop from moving to the door, getting more chairs, introducing the invisible

guests, talking here and there. Their conversation with the guests is quite superficial, full of empty clichés. The guests may be said to constitute a microcosm of society. Through the mechanical exchange of platitudes directed to a row of empty chairs, Ionesco is, in a way, attacking the emptiness and futility of bourgeois conversation, the mediocrity and hypocrisy of modern society. Through the proliferation of chairs, Ionesco is emphasizing the *presence* of objects, which are actually expressing the *absence* of *real* human beings. All of a sudden, the situation is reversed; the chairs take a life of their own and dominate the couple, who rush back and forth, almost breathless, in a frenetic way. The Old Couple is dehumanized and enacts like a machine, while the chairs get out of control - a mechanical chaos.

The empty but animated chairs on stage are very real and visible. They are the couple's constant point of reference, and emphasize their "unreality." The presence of empty visible chairs points out the absence of the "empty" invisible guests. To express the concept of absence, Ionesco uses presence and vice versa. The three visible characters - the Old Man, the Old Woman, and the Orator - are actually *false presences*, because they are "unreal," empty, insignificant. The invisible guests, on the other hand, seem very real and present. The presence of the chairs really created the sense of a crowd, thus expressing the absence-presence dichotomy: the absence of presences (the "unreal" visible beings), and the presence of absences (the "real" invisible beings). The way the chairs are displayed on stage is equivalent to the way the chairs are displayed in the theater. It might even be said that the chairs that seat *absences* on the stage stand as a symbol for the chairs that seat *presences* in the theater, but implying that the audience is made up of *false presences*.

The audience may be shocked to realize that they are the empty presences of society that are being denounced by the absences on

stage. Many people in the audience may identify themselves with the guests through the kind of conversation the Old Couple pretends to be holding with them. The woman who is worried about her physical appearance, the man who is clumsy in his attempts to behave like a gentleman, the military man who wants to make a good impression by exhibiting his medals, the people who worship those who have a noble or military title, are indeed real people who may be sitting in the audience, facing their real selves, possibly for the first time. The interaction of the Old Couple with Mrs. Belle and her husband, the photo-engraver, is the couple's desperate attempt to "recherche le temps perdu." However, the impossibility of recovering what was lost in the past is bitterly clear to the couple as well as to the audience. Ionesco reinforces, once more, the empty chairs standing as a symbol for the audience, when the Old Couple gets lost in the imaginary crowd selling programs and pies, begging for silence, and trying to establish the order when they run out of chairs.

All of a sudden, trumpets are heard and His Majesty the Emperor in person arrives. The Old Couple's attitudes well represent how people behave towards those who are in a position of power and authority in society. Only then, the couple worries about the Orator's delay (he is keeping His Majesty waiting!). When the Orator finally comes, the audience is faced with a visible character, but one who looks very unreal and misplaced, dressed in the fashion of the nineteenth century and "very histrionic in manner." (p. 154). One gets the impression that Ionesco is thus emphasizing the artificiality of the situation. The Orator is indeed an actor-figure who will supposedly deliver someone else's message - the Old Man's message. Once more the Old Man is not capable of assuming his identity. This time, however, he expressly delegates someone else the right to speak for himself. Feeling that he has accomplished his mission in life, he introduces the Orator and commits suicide, followed by his wife.

The Old Couple, who have always been two in one in their symbiotic relationship, end their lives. They consider the occasion a glorious conclusion and are sure that they will remain immortal through the Old Man's message, whose relevance will make them worthy of having a street bearing their name. They "die in order to become a legend." (p.158). This last attitude of the couple well illustrates the human condition. Man is the only being who is aware of the inevitability of death. This knowledge accompanies him throughout his life. Nevertheless, he cannot avoid the anguish of facing death realistically. He needs to believe that, somehow, he will continue his existence eternally after the death of the flesh. He needs to believe that he will never be forgotten, that the "will leave some traces " (p. 158) be a child, a message, or even a street bearing his name.

The Old Man's message, however, is that there is no message. The fact that the Orator turns out to be deaf and dumb is not the only cause for the message not to be delivered. Transference of identity is something which cannot be accomplished. No one can ever behave or speak for someone else, especially when the one involved has never done anything meaningful for himself. The Old Man's message is no message, because he has never lived as an individual. The only thing which makes sense that the Orator transmits is the word: "Angelfood," which he writes on the blackboard. The word stands for something which lacks consistency, taste, color, or weight. It stands for nothing. To add to the impact of the last scene, sounds emerge from the crowd of non-existent beings, from the empty chairs facing the audience. The noises on stage are mixed with the noises made by the audience leaving the theater.

Once more Ionesco intermingles stage and audience, and the absence-presence dichotomy is reflected. There is catharsis both on the stage and in the audience. The invisible crowd suddenly expresses its relief through the liberation of sounds. The "nothingness" which

was represented through the play leads the audience to realize their own nothingness. Ionesco himself explained what he aimed the play to be: "... the point of the play... was the chairs themselves, and what the chairs meant... that's it, its absence, emptiness, nothingness. The chairs remain empty because there's no one there. And at the end, the curtain falls to the accompanying noises of a crowd, while all there is on the stage is empty chairs, curtains fluttering in the wind, etc.... and there's nothing. The world doesn't really exist. The subject of the play was nothingness, not failure. It was total absence: chairs without people."⁴

The idea of nothingness, however, implies the concept of "everythingness." By realizing their nothingness the audience is led to question and consider the meaning of "everythingness". We may conclude that Ionesco succeeded in diagnosing the intrinsic problems of human condition. Through a confrontation with the negative aspects of man and society, the audience may be led to reflect about their condition and wish to make a positive re-evaluation of their behavior.

Notes

¹ Eugène Ionesco, "The Playwright's Role," in *Notes and Counternotes: Writings on the Theatre by Eugène Ionesco*, trans. Donald Watson (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1964), p. 91.

² Eugène Ionesco, "The Chairs," in *Eugène Ionesco: Four Plays*, trans. Donald M. Allen (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1958), p. 116. All subsequent quotations from the play are taken from this edition.

³ Eugène Ionesco, "The World of Ionesco," in *International Theatre Annual*, No. 2, ed. Harold Hobson (London: John Calder, 1957), p. 46.

⁴ Claude Bonnefoy, *Conversations With Eugène Ionesco*, trans. Jan Dawson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 73.