

ESTUDOS LITERÁRIOS

IONESCO'S *THE CHAIRS*: IS WOMAN EXCLUDED FROM THE RADIANT CITY?

Mail Marques de Azevedo*

"Come, my darling, close the window.
There's a bad smell from that stagnant water ..."¹

The opening words uttered by the decrepit old woman in Eugène Ionesco's tragic farce *The Chairs* introduce a powerful image of decay and sterility which fits to perfection the central situation in the play: an almost centenary couple living as guardians of a solitary house, their existence a fruitless repetition of half forgotten memories, or inanities; a weeping over frustrated hopes and ambitions; desultory talking about a message to be announced to the world. The immense expanse of water, stretching "as far as the horizon", furthermore, imprisons the characters within a stifling unbreakable circle. Their physical and spiritual estrangement both from each other and from the outside world reproduces man's profound solitude, the isolation to which he is condemned by the very conditions of his being, in an absurd universe, and which results in the unsurmountable anguish that assaults Ionesco's characters:

* Universidade Federal do Paraná.

¹ IONESCO, Eugène. *The bald soprano and other plays*. Translated by Donald M. Allen. New York: Grove Press, 1982.

In *The Chairs* I have tried to deal more directly with the themes that obsess me: with emptiness, with frustration, with the world, at once fleeting and crushing, with despair and death. The characters I have used are not fully conscious of their spiritual rootlessness, but they feel it instinctively and emotionally. They feel "lost" in the world, something is missing which they cannot, to their grief, supply.²

We judge this feeling of emptiness to be more evident in the female protagonist who seems to be acutely aware of the crushing effect of "water all around (them) ... water under the windows".³ The obvious association of the woman with water which, as dead stagnant matter, stands for the sterile atmosphere, as a basic image in the play, was a decisive factor in our choice of subject: examining Ionesco's creation of the female character, in connection with some of the main concepts of his dramaturgy foregrounded in *The Chairs*.

The first of these concepts will be the two fundamental states of consciousness which Ionesco claims to be at the root of all his plays: the basic feelings of *evanescence* on the one hand and of *heaviness* on the other.⁴ Some aspects of his treatment of language will also be considered insofar as they illuminate character building.

Consistent with the position of other avant-garde dramatists Ionesco's theatre abolishes the prevailing concepts of time and space, cause and effect, but it is in the destruction of the whole dramatic concept of psychology that it turns most forcibly away from the realist conventions. In a universe perceived by the artists to be governed by subtle and complex laws rather than by those of classical logic, nothing is left but an endless series of causeless and unrelated phenomena. The same lack of logic and consistency presides over the construction of character: for Ionesco personality does not exist.

His diary entry for 10 April 1951 makes the dramatist's position clear when he comments upon his experiment in abstract or non-representational drama, which eschews conventional plot and subject, and leads to the "revelation of monstrosity or of some monstrous formless state of being or of monstrous forms that we carry within ourselves." In this new "free" theatre "characters are without character. Puppets. Faceless creatures."⁵

² IONESCO, Eugène. In COLE, Toby ed. *Playwrights on playwriting: the meaning and making of modern drama from Ibsen to Ionesco*. New York: Hill & Wany, 1961, p. 284.

³ *Idem*. *The chairs*, p. 113.

⁴ COE, Richard N. *Ionesco: a study of his plays*. London: Methuen, 1971, p. 80.

⁵ IONESCO, E. In HAYMAN, Ronald. *Theatre and anti-theatre: new movements since Beckett*. Lon-lon: Secker & Warburg, 1979, p. 54.

The ancient protagonists of the play, presented simply as the Old Man and the Old Woman, in the stage directions, are evidently faceless creatures, mere puppets, their actions and speeches mechanical and repetitive, the woman an obliging shadow of her husband. From her very first words in the play, her function of sympathetic supporter is established. Her husband calls her Semiramis, the name of a heroine of legendary exploits, extraordinarily unfit for the submissive, self-effacing creature whose only aim seems to be keeping her husband happy: she cajoles, praises his supposed talents — he could have been anything “head president, head king, or even head doctor, or head general (...) if only (he’d) had a little ambition in life;”⁶ — mothers him and tries to stop his fits of weeping; and above all stimulates him to announce his message to the world, in a meeting at which hundreds of important guests are expected. The farcical tone of the language, however, and the catalogues of incongruities make her protestations a sham:

(...) And have you invited everyone, all the characters, all the property owners, and all the intellectuals?(...)
The janitors? the bishops? the chemists? the tinsmiths? (...) the buildings? the pen-holders? the chromosomes?

The gradual degeneration of language reaches the point of incoherence:

The papacy, the papayas, and the papers?⁷

Moreover, the Old Woman calls her husband’s attention to her own shortcomings, in contrast with his qualities. Thus, she praises his extraordinary memory, while she herself has been told the same bedtime story over and over, every night for seventy five years. This story is the Old Man’s memory of a garden with a luminous city beyond and which the Old Woman is unable to remember. The perception of a universe made up of light and color is denied her, in contrast with the Old Man’s poignant longing for the city of light which has been extinguished “for four hundred thousand years.”⁸

The text does not evidence whether she has memories and dreams other than those of her husband’s, but if she does they are associated with water rather than with light. Whereas the Old Man is inclined to see shadows of sunlight at

⁶ IONESCO, E. *The chairs*, p. 114.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

nighttime, and is cheerful when looking at the water, she is frightened by his leaning out of the window and feels all their ambitions and possibilities "have gone down the drain, (...) down the old black drain".⁹ The Old Woman, then, is associated with the somber aspects of the symbology of water — death and oblivion — evident in the waters of solitude, the waters of Styx¹⁰ which surround the house and will offer its ancient inhabitants the means to commit suicide.

The woman's consciousness of the universe is evidently one of heaviness, of darkness: she is the one to bury past events under layers of forgetfulness. She admits doing it on purpose and presenting her mind "as a clean slate" to register the Old Man's memories. When the invisible guests start arriving she forgets who some of them are immediately after introduction.

The two characters' sentimental exploits also offer a contrast. The Old Man addresses his old love Belle, one of the invisible guests, using outworn clichés, but presents a picture of ideal old age, when he claims to be strengthened by "inner life, peace of mind, austerity, my scientific investigations, philosophy, my message..."¹¹ Although this sounds incongruous when compared with his previous fits of crying for his "mamma" when he has to be crooned back into calm on the Old Woman's lap, it is still a dignified position in comparison with her grotesque sexual overtures to one of the guests. The stage directions describing her attitudes are revealing:

... (she) makes little erotic cries, projects her pelvis, her legs spread apart; she laughs like an old prostitute; this business, entirely different from her manner heretofore as well as from that she will have subsequently, and which must reveal the hidden personality of the Old Woman, ceases abruptly.¹²

Are we to take the playwright's hypothesis that this attitude must reveal the hidden personality of the protagonist as bias against the woman? Or is this the apparently paradoxical behavior of puppet characters in an absurd universe where sex has replaced language as a means of communication?

In his study of Ionesco's plays, Richard Coe claims that the position of insensibility and obtuseness occupied by women is evident specially in the

⁹ IONESCO, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

¹⁰ The Styx. A subterranean spring or lake in Greek mythology, which the sun crosses every night. By analogy, therefore, the lower waters of the Styx pertain to death, just as every sunrise points to resurrection. CIRLOT, J.E. *Dictionary of symbols*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985, p. 316.

¹¹ IONESCO, *ibid.*, p. 133.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 132.

dramatist's early work and that his "mistrust of women has roots that go extremely deep".¹³

We should add that this stands in opposition to Ionesco's personal attachment to the women in his family, revealed by existing biographies. Anyway, our analysis of the female character in *The Chairs* has disclosed several instances of undesirable behavior.

In relation to the dream of luminosity, for example, which is part of the consciousness of evanescence, the Old Woman is equally in a position of inferiority. Like her husband she is not admitted through the gate of the garden and onto the path to the city of light beyond, although the man is at least allowed to relive the dream-like experience mentally.

She does not seem to lament her exclusion from the Garden of Eden, although like Eve she entices the man away from his dream of luminosity, by laughing senilely at the "idiotic story" and suggesting they amuse themselves with make-believe games. The dialogue degenerates into Stan Laurel-type slapstick and incoherent language.

Other functions confirm the placing of the female character on the negative end of the evanescence-heaviness polarity. When the invisible guests start arriving, it is the Old Woman's task to bring the chairs onto the stage, hobbling along with increasing difficulty in the unsuccessful attempt to move ever faster, in order to seat the fantastically growing number of people. This makes her responsible for the concrete physical form of overabundance of presence, a prevailing terror in Ionesco's worldview and the main palpable manifestation of existential anguish in *The Chairs*. To the feeling of being crowded by the massive number of chairs, and restrained in her movements is added the perception of the world as dense and impenetrable. Her inability to recognize people becomes sheer horror at the unbearable opaqueness of her surroundings:

My darling ... I can't see you , anymore ... where are you? Who are they? What do all these people want? Who is that man over there? (...) What am I doing here?... [She screams:] My darling, My darling!¹⁴

The impact of horror is not lessened by the lightness of the dialogue that ensues, an attempt to fill the inexpressible inner void of the human being with habitual actions and meaningless exchange. In Ionesco's own words, human

¹³ COE, *op.cit.*, p. 85.

¹⁴ IONESCO, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

beings have fleeting bursts of consciousness of their plight. In the present case, it is made more poignant by the realization that "there are people who are happy (...) and don't slink away into the shadows."¹⁵

It is obvious that both the Old Man and the Old Woman are a sum of incongruencies and paradoxes, whose inner anguish rises to the surface occasionally, but it is also clear there is a sharp contrast between them, with negative traits ascribed to the female character.

Thus, in contraposition to her overstressed care for her husband she keeps nagging him for his lack of willpower. However, contrary to her suggestions of firmness, she herself is content to echo her husband's ideas:

OLD MAN : I've perfected a real system. [Aside:] The Orator ought to be here. [Aloud:] I've suffered enormously.

OLD WOMAN: We have suffered so much. [Aside:] The Orator ought to be here. It's certainly time.

OLD MAN: Suffered much, learned much.

OLD WOMAN [like an echo]: Suffered much, learned much.

OLD MAN : You'll see for yourselves, my system is perfect.

OLD WOMAN [like an echo]: You'll see for yourselves, his system is perfect.

OLD MAN: If only my instructions are carried out.

OLD WOMAN [echo]: If only his instructions are carried out.

OLD MAN: We'll save the world!...

OLD WOMAN [echo]: Saving his own soul by saving the world!...

OLD MAN: One truth for all !

OLD WOMAN [echo]: One truth for all!

OLD MAN : Follow me!...

OLD WOMAN [echo]: Follow him!...

OLD MAN: For I have absolute certainty!...

OLD WOMAN [echo]: He has absolute certainty!

OLD MAN: Never ...

OLD WOMAN [echo]: Ever and ever ...¹⁶

Saving the world is a marvelous dream, but it is not her dream, as the selected passages indicate. In depicting conflicts between inner and outer worlds, between man's desire to announce messages that will change reality and his awareness that nothing can be done, Ionesco's comprehension of human suffering reaches impressive heights. In fact, he ascribes the male protagonist

¹⁵ IONESCO, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 146-47.

in his play the deepest thoughts about life disguised by the clowning in the action and in the dialogues. Yet though the woman solely echoes the man's words, both of them in contrapuntal chorus express human beings' common feeling of loss in an absurd universe where reality has emptied itself of meaning, and where they move inexorably toward extinction.

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Ionesco's construction of the female protagonist in *The Chairs*, in relation to the polarity evanescence-heaviness.

RESUMO

Este trabalho examina o desenvolvimento da personagem feminina em *As cadeiras* de Eugène Ionesco, relativamente ao eixo evanescência-peso.

Palavras-chave: Ionesco, *The chairs*, *caracterização*, *evanescência*.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

- CIRLOT, Jean-Eduard. *Dictionary of symbols*. London: Routledge & Kegan, 1985.
COE, Richard N. *Ionesco: a study of his plays*. London: Methuen, 1971.
COLE, Toby ed. *Playwrights on playwriting: the meaning and making of modern drama from Ibsen to Ionesco*. New York: Hill & Wane, 1961.
IONESCO, Eugène. *The bald soprano and other plays*. Translated by Donald M. Allen. New York: Grove Press, 1982.