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Fun and Games: A Study of Ionesco's *Victims of Duty*

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Abstract:

Ionesco's view humor serves as a diagnostic tool to escape anxieties and tensions of life. It seems Ionesco was influenced by Cervantes since both the writers use the tools of comedy to expose and ridicule the contemporary society. The common feature of form is the use of an "imaginary reality" as the focal point of each play of Ionesco. Ionesco uses the tools of parody, burlesque, grotesque realism and the technique of mask in the plot. The plot is loaded with puns, spoonerisms, equivocations, misunderstandings and countless nonsensical drolleries. This paper is going to be an in-depth study of Ionesco's play *Victims of Duty* which dramatizes fun and games of the protagonists. All the major three characters Choubert, Madeleine and the Detective play fun games. The games begin with the arrival of the Police Chief who intervene in their private life and the elements of dreams and illusions add interest in the drama.

Keywords: absurdity, burlesque, fun, grotesque, parody.

Ionesco's *Victims of Duty* (1952) presents the elements of dream, nightmare, and fantasy. His journey began in 1948 when he started learning English language through an assimilation method. In his *The Bald Soprano* Ionesco started his experimentation with language. When he wrote the dialogues of Mr. Smith, Mrs. Smith and Martins the language disintegrated. No wonder nonsensical language was used in the dialogues and at the end of the drama the stage is converted into a mad house as all the characters are enjoying the carnival freedom; the characters are screaming and shouting at one another: "It's not that way, it's over here, it's not that way, it's over here, it's not that way, it's over here" (Eugene, Ionesco *The Bald Soprano* 42). Ionesco called this play as a pseudo-drama dealing with the nightmarish experiences of Choubert who is the main protagonist of the play. The main message in this drama is that man must come to grips with his own situation. The universe in which he is living the whole system is collapsing; the values deteriorate into senselessness of

life. Man cannot rely on rational approaches as all ideals; purity and purpose become devalued leaving man to confront the absurdity all alone.

The traditional playwright like Galsworthy and Shaw depicted the passions and characters and they used language which was never disquieting and bewildering. Ionesco doesn't use common language; his characters mutilate and distort words expressing their psychological ailments. Deconstruction and deformation of traditional language is an important feature of the plays of Ionesco; he uses a language made up of cliché and ready-made formulas, which is that of an alienated society. The drama of words will therefore be only a drama of absurdity, and the theatre of language, by destroying its object, will become an anti-theatre. In theatre Ionesco transcends reality and introduces themes which lessen his anxiety and despair. Ionesco ridicules the petty bourgeois language in his dramas; his passion for reducing the language to absurdity is quite apparent.

Ionesco's plays were the product of his nightmarish vision of life. His plays are often dismissed by the critics as mere extravaganzas of dreams and anxieties of his life. When he was a child he had attended puppet shows mounted for children in the Jardin de Luxembourg. The image of the reverse relationship of human beings went deep in his psyche. He had witnessed human beings as puppets pulled by irrevocable forces. Puppetry and parody of the traditional realistic drama is the conspicuous feature of Ionesco's theatre.

Richard N. Coe aptly observes that Ionesco was greatly impacted by "the great comedians of the cinema". In his famous book *Notes and Counter Notes* Ionesco describes the structure of an absurd play as "a sequence of events without sequence" (123). Ionesco noted with interest that in the film comics the human existence is reduced to the level of a madhouse. Ionesco felt excited to observe this nightmarish transformation. James Agee in his essay "Comedy's Greatest Era" speaks of the nightmarish effect. Critic Martin Esslin hailed Ionesco's theater as an effective absurd theatre transcending the conventions and techniques employed by Camus, Jean Anouilh, and even Jean-Paul Sartre. Ionesco "presents on the stage the absurd in its purest form, truer to life by the mere fact of its apparent gratuity".

In *Victims of Duty* Choubert is made to confront a harsh universe which has lost its purpose. When the curtain rises the main character, Choubert discusses theatre with his wife, Madeleine. Choubert is reading the newspaper in the routine manner. Madeleine expresses her curiosity to know about the latest news. Choubert expresses his cynicism and nihilism thus: "Nothing ever happens. A few comets and a cosmic disturbance somewhere in the universe" (Eugene, Ionesco, *Victims of Duty* 118). Their conversation shifts to the ideal of detachment as they deliberate upon the official announcement; "the only way to get rid of

economic crisis, the confusion of the spirit and the problems of existence” (118). Soon this middle class family is interrupted by the unexpected entry of the Detective who is in mission to gather information about the previous tenant, Mallot. Madeleine is impressed by the impressive appearance of the Detective: “What a polite young man! Such wonderful manners!” (122). The Detective also joins the couple in discussion of the theatre. Choubert feels uneasy in the presence of the Detective who begins his interrogation about Mallot. Choubert gets confused and seems restless. His tie and shoes are taken off to make him comfortable. Choubert expresses his sense of relief: “It’s much easier to breathe and I feel free in my movements” (124). Madeleine, in *Victims of Duty*, fills the stage with numberless coffee cups while her husband Choubert is being tortured by the Detective. But each attempt at locating the self within things fails, and the characters can only try harder the next time. The games of death and terror continue until the play reaches its climactic moment of realization and frustration. Choubert is so much confused that Madeleine is surprised to his childish behavior: “Come along, you’re not a child” (124). Choubert reveals his dementia as he curses his memory though the Detective shows him a photograph of Mallot to “jog his memory” (124). The Detective uses all possible methods to sharpen the memory of Choubert. His journey begins through his memory with the help of his wife, only find that he does not possess the answers that the Detective needs. The Detective gives him stale bread to repair his memory. Choubert certainly doesn’t know Mallot but he is bullied by the Detective who insists to explore the whereabouts of Mallot. The investigation of the Detective is intended to explore his consciousness. As the plot progresses the Detective grows aggressive and Madeleine turns out to be friendly and amorous. All the characters change identities baffling and confusing the audience. Ionesco’s *Victims of Duty* is a parody of the protagonist’s initiation into society. Initiation is symbolized as the death and resurrection of the protagonist. Ionesco gives the history of Choubert’s journey into hell and his eventual awareness of the absurdity of life and the disintegration of the universe. Mircea Eliade in her *Images and Symbols* observes that Ionesco dramatizes the cycle of death and rebirth of Choubert. Madeleine seeks to appease the Detective, who represents his totalitarian ideology. Ilan Berman (2006) in his book *Dismantling Tyranny* observes that the Detective represents Nazi ideology and despotic his political police (153). The Detective evidently stands for a political police service. While Lane attributes the vacillations of characters' personalities to its being a dream play (67), The Detective compels Choubert to begin the search for Mallot seriously. He directs and guides him to carry out the journey. Madeleine also exhorts him to “go down and down” to reach the bottom and to search for Mallot. But Choubert is

vacillating: "It must be dark down there; won't be able to see anything" (128). The Detective urges him to go down and follow his instructions. Choubert is forced to follow the oppressive directions of the Police Chief. Madeleine is scared and fears danger; she warns Choubert expressing her anxiety: "Not far enough, darling, not far enough!" (128).

Ionesco's *Victims of Duty* is structured around fun and games of the protagonists. Ruby Cohen in *Currents in Contemporary Drama* (1969) observes that "comedy is one of Ionesco's most effective tools for creating a freshness of vision" (31). Ionesco in his interview as to Carl Hildman explained: "I believe that laughter is a very important thing ... from time to time one should burst out laughing and so burst the crust, the screen which gets between oneself and the virgin vision of things and the world" (9). Humour also associates the actual and the fantastic, thus equivalent to an idea that is fundamental to Ionesco's concept of the theatre and the humankind. Ionesco starts with a setting, or an action, that is studiously real and turns it to ridicule, showing the fantastic inherent in everyday life. The dream sequence of Choubert is an essential part of the games and as the plot progresses there are multiple changes in the plot and characterization.

The plot of *Victim of Duty* is focused on the conflict between innocence Choubert and the oppressive the Detective. Choubert undergoes a quasi-mystical trance in search of his journey to find Mallot. Ionesco dramatizes the loss of innocence of Choubert and his spiritual longing to return to paradisiac state through the images of mud, darkness, night and death act as a source of conflict.

Ionesco's main focus is on the exploration of the questions of being and consciousness. The play becomes a dream allegory as Ionesco puts absolute faith in the function of dream. He observed thus in his *Notes and Counter Notes* highlighting the significance of dream element in human life and drama: "Everything we dream is realizable Reality does not have to be: it is simply what it is. It is the dreamer, the thinker ... it is he who tries to change the world" (16). Imagination and dream elements are used as tools to explore the ultimate truths of human existence. Guicharnaud (1973) supports this argument observing that in dreams reality is accepted and in waking state reality is nightmarish because of its illogicality. Choubert thinks that his quest will be exhilarating leading him to awareness and enlightenment but the opposite happens in his case. He is thrown into a hellish bottom where he suffers anguish and psychological trauma. Here is transformation in his personality; he changes his identity and feels guilty for his oppression; he expresses his guilt thus: "Who made you old like that ! old, old, old little woman, old little doll" (130). Choubert is fed up with his journey and the games of fun since he finds everything subject to change. The

shifting of identity is depressing to him He wants to end the game as he finds himself in the grip of evil forces. He feels that the rug is slipping from his feet as he observes metamorphosis in his wife Madeleine: “Your skin will find its bloom again. I want, I love you, I want , Oh! Please! We don’t grow old when we are in love. I love you, grow young again, throw away that mask...” (130). Choubert’s journey to the downward pit leads him to depression and alienation. The brutal interrogation of the Police Chief proves painful to Choubert. The critics observe that his descent to hell is a symbol of mystical and mythical journey of the ancient heroes. Choubert fears death and expresses a desire for his wife to grow young again:

Nobody had died and you’d never shed a tear...Where were all the others? In their graves, by the roadside. I want our happiness back again, we’ve been robbed and despoiled...Madeline, you must believe me, I swear it wasn’t I who made you old! No... (130)

Like Berenger in *Exit the King* Choubert is threatened by the external forces but he seeks love of his wife. He is attached to his wife and dependent on her as a source of strength. But he feels that his love is threatened and here Ionesco gives the effective imagery of mud symbolizing the destructive nature of the quest game: “The enchanted garden has folded into night, has sunk into the mud...our love in the mud, in the night” (130). Choubert must descend into the hellish bottom to recapture his identity. But there is no hope for him to retain his identity as Martin Esslin observes thus: “He can find no solution there, only a gaping hole of nothingness”. This void is symbolized by Choubert's descent into the past to search for a concrete perception of himself, only to find a void (Martin Esslin *The Theatre of the Absurd* 126). Choubert goes down deeper and deeper according to the instructions of the Police Chief to search for Mallot. But he feels weary and exhausted as he cries out in despair: “ I’ve fallen down, but I’m getting up...” (131). He has to go down deeper and deeper to find out Mallot: “You won’t find Mallot until you touch rock bottom” (132). Choubert is caught in the darkness and is trapped in mud. Madeleine is seriously concerned about his survival”; Oh! Poor darling! I’m frightened for him. I shall never hear it again, that voice I love so well!...” (133). Chous quest brings about abert struggles to find out Mallot but his quest brings about his anguish. He tries to gain his lost perception; his mind merges with the meaningless of space. As he journeys towards the centre of himself, Choubert is faced with conflicting emotions that overwhelm him, although the situation is not totally disagreeable. The Detective gives consolation to Madeleine that Choubert will come back from the bottom and she has no need to panic. He is playing the game very well: “He’s still got a trick or two

up his sleeve. He's got the hide of a rhinoceros" (133). The Detective becomes emotional and expresses his emotional feelings for Madeleine. He puts his hands round her waist and says: "What are you frightened of, you're with me...we're alone, just the two of us...my beauty" (133). Madeleine and the Detective are transformed; their identities are changed as Madeleine takes the Detective as her husband and expresses her grudges thus:

You're a despicable creature! You've spent a whole life time humiliating and torturing me. Morally you've disfigured me. You've made me old before time. You've destroyed me, I've finished with you (134).

Madeleine is sick and desperate and expresses her Freudian wish to commit suicide. The Detective plays the role of Choubert and he expresses his indifference towards Madeleine. The row between the Detective acting as Choubert and Madeleine provokes much laughter. Ionesco gives the comic relief to the audience employing the tools of comedy and humor. Ionesco depicts the emptiness and despair experienced by Madeleine. Choubert struggles to get liberation but his daylight fades into night and encompasses him. In desperation Choubert recollects his past; his mother and dreams of mother holding his hand: "I'm frightened. My mother's hand is shaking in mine. There are shadowy figures looming in the gaps in the walls" (134). In darkness Choubert has hallucinations of his mother; he is in a state of psychological trauma because he is confronting darkness and death alone at the bottom in his quest for Mallot. Madeleine performs the role of mother of Choubert and expresses her motherly concern for the survival of Choubert: "My poor child in the dark, in the mud all alone. Little lamb..." (135). Madeleine exhorts Choubert to forgive and forget the past though this is "hardest of all". Madeleine gives the message of real life exhorting him to "repent and learn to forgive" (135). Ionesco believes in different role plays and this is an important comic technique employed by the dramatist. The change of personalities intensifies the interest in the audience. The fun and games become interesting because the suspense is built in each game. Choubert is made to confront death and darkness in his game cycle. In this cycle, Choubert once again change his personality and addresses the Detective as his father: "Father, we never understood each other...Can you still hear me? I'll be obedient; forgive us as we forgave you... Let me see your face!" (136). Choubert suffers from disorientation of mind as he loses his identity: "Where I am?" Madeleine also asks the Detective in desperation: "Where is he?" (141). Choubert is almost in a trance as he talks about "shreds and fragments of a universe" (141). Like *King Lear* of Shakespeare Choubert has lost his consciousness as he behaves like a lunatic. Madeleine is sure of his psychological loss of self and balance of mind. She affirms his abnormality: "He's not normal. He must be

ill. He ought to keep his feet on the ground” (141). Madeleine sees Choubert flying in the air in the “yawning pit” where he is struggling to search out Mallot. The running commentary of Choubert about the “yawning pit” is quite threatening. His language is a blending of wit, irony and paradox. He says: “the light is dark...the stars are dim...I’m suffering from an unknown disease...” (141). In his dream sequence Choubert is worried about the loss of his innocence; beauty, identity and everything. Choubert is quite upset when he observes the loss of his beauty and identity: “My face is wet with tears. Where has beauty gone? And goodness? And Love? I’ve lost my memory...” (142). In a state of neurosis he goes into the past and recollects his childhood in great despair: “My toys...in pieces...My toys are broken...The toys I had as a child...” (142). Madeleine doesn’t like her husband to reminisce: “If we all started reminiscing, where would it end...” (142). Choubert evokes the images of Coleridge’s poem *Kubla Khan* which was a dream fragment. His mind merges with the purposelessness of space. In his journey he is confronted with conflicting emotions that overwhelm him. Ionesco uses the dream elements to explore the inner self of the protagonists. Obviously, he showed some interest in Freudian and Jungian methods of psychoanalysis.

Eugene Ionesco deals with the theme of the loss of identity and individuality in his play *Victims of Duty*. Choubert’s individuality is destroyed by the duty imposed on him the Detective. He is not willing to search for Mallot but the Detective grills him and interrogates him in a callous manner representing the authority of the police force. The Police Chief aggressively remarks: “You cannot retrieve Mallot, you have a hole in your memory. We shall fill up that hole in your memory”. The final scene of the play, with its extraordinary crescendo of frantic chewing and eating on the part of Choubert, brings out one of Ionesco’s central themes and illustrates the symbolism of the “hole”, analysed by Sartre at the end of *Being and Nothingness*.

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