IONESCO'S CHARACTERS – OSCILLATING BETWEEN PASSIVE AND AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR

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Abstract: This paper examines the conflicting world of Eugen Ionescu's character in theater, referring to individual frustration, expressed in two ways: passivity and aggressivity. The passive attitude of the character is dominant in the ionescian theatre, specific to human condition, in the modern world can be illustrated in plays like "Killer without wage", or "How to get rid Amedeu", "The new tenant", "The chairs", "The Rhinoceros" etc.

Keywords: alienation, aggression, withdrawal, frustration, a world of conflicts, passivity.

In the theatre of the absurd, the character confronts mainly with the lack of communication, a characteristic trait of the modern world, associated with negative psychological states like anxiety, fear, uneasiness, uncertainty, and isolation.

From Eugène Ionesco's point of view, society is influenced by the human condition[7], so that the problem of art consists in being "*the expression of an incommunicable reality*"[8], although this seems to be a paradox. In his plays, the author created a world where the individual cannot communicate, thus achieving the authenticity of his existence, "*by putting man face to face with the harsh realities of human condition*"[9], describing

[7] E. Ionesco, "The playwright's role", *Observer,* 29 June 1958: "it is the human condition that directs the social condition, not vice versa".
[8] E. Ionesco, *Observer,* 29 June 1958: "A work of art is the expression of an incommunicable reality that one tries to communicate – and which sometimes can be communicated. That is its paradox and its truth".
[9] Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd,* Methuen, London, 2004, p. 198: "he wants to make existence authentic, fully lived, by putting man face to face with the harsh realities of the human condition".

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an absurd universe where "*the decline of religious belief has taken away his certainties*"[10].

Characteristic for the tragic farce, in Ionesco's theatre, the sources of dramatic conflict are found in the social relationships of the individual, influenced by the basic anxieties of the human being that dwells in a degraded universe: the fear of death, the impossibility to communicate and the dependence on society. All these anxieties lead to the individual's frustration, which unavoidably ends up in aggression. In the field of sociology, the "*frustration-aggression theory*"[11] associates aggression with frustration in the frame of the interpersonal human conflict, stating that "*aggression is always a consequence of frustration*"[12].

Ionesco's character is a frustrated individual who manifests his frustration on two occasions: the passive attitude or the aggressiveness towards others, but also towards himself. In Eugène Ionesco's theatre, the passive attitude of the characters is dominant, being characteristic of the non-hero in the tragic farce.

In most of the plays, Ionesco's character has "*the attitude of a person who withstands the events, but does not create them"*[13]; being a frustrated individual, he chooses to give up the fight, proving to be passive in relation to the events that affect him in the world he lives in.

In *Amédée, or How to Get Rid of It*, the character, bears for fifteen years with the same obstacle suggested by the presence of the dead body which grows inside his bedroom. Amédée has a passive attitude in his relationship with his wife who works to survive, while he doesn't do anything but wait for inspiration to come, being unable to write more than two lines in a play begun fifteen years before. His frustration is also noticeable in his social relations, because the couple avoids relations with the neighbours or anyone who would try to get into their home, fearing that people could discover their secret.

In *The Killer*, the inhabitants of a district are terrorized by a killer, but they do nothing to protect themselves, everyone hoping that he won't be chosen to become the next victim. They are contented with the same passive

[10] Ibidem, p. 401.
[11] Anatol Rapoport, *Conflict in A Man – Made Environment*, Penguin Books, 1974, p. 131.
[12] Ibidem, p. 126: "A frequently cited theory of human interpersonal conflict links aggression to frustration. The fundamental assumption of the theory was stated categorically by John Dollard and his collaborators".
[13] Romul Munteanu, *Farsa tragică*, Editura *Univers*, Bucureşti, 1989, p. 198-199.

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attitude, the same as the town authorities'; the only character with a different conception from the others' is Béranger, who is responsible and feels the need to find a way out of the indifference state. In the beginning, Béranger feels strong, then the feeling of frustration overcomes him, the passivity and helplessness replacing in the end the will to fight against evil.

In some of Ionesco's plays the characters' waiting state represents a form of passivity, because the outcome of the frustration is giving up on action, giving up on one's own life.

In *The New Tenant* the main character withdraws himself from society due to his frustration; being unable to find the power to fight, the character chooses isolation and not to communicate with the outside world. He turns his retreat from life into a real celebration represented by the ritual of moving the furniture around, furniture that invades his apartment, the flights of stairs, the street and finally the city. His final gesture of retreat could be interpreted as an escape from the conflict-dominated world; some elements, e. g. the flowers brought by the porters and the blacking out in the end of the play suggest the character's suicide.

Other plays of the author, where the characters oscillate between passive and aggressive states are *The Chairs, The Bald Soprano, Jack, or the Submission, and The Rhinoceros.*

In *The Chairs*, the old couple isolated from society, who lives in a house surrounded by water, in a state of alienation reaching its climax, hopes to escape from the frustration of an anonymous existence and thus to become the saviours of a world that no longer exists. During his lifetime, the old man oscillated between aggressive and passive states: in his youth he was a war criminal, then, retreating from society, frustrated because of a mediocre existence of caretaker, becomes obsessed with communicating a message which could save humanity. The couple ends up committing suicide after delivering a meaningless message, suicide representing a form of aggressiveness directed towards oneself.

In *The Bald Soprano*, the characters are in a waiting state in the beginning, sitting around the table and talking, and in the end they enter a state of verbal aggressiveness, everybody talking at the same time and during this simultaneous conversation nobody listens or understands the others.

In *Jack, or the Submission*, initially the main character has his own personality, fighting against his family in order to abide by his own

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convictions, but in the end he gives up fighting, entering a passive state when he accepts and obeys all the requests of his family.

Compared to the other plays written by Ionesco, *The Rhinoceros* is an exception because Béranger, the main character abandons his passive attitude and, although he ends up alone, he becomes aggressive, arming himself and deciding to fight against a whole collectivity of people turned into rhinoceros.

"[…] *Oh well, that's that! I shall defend myself against everyone! Where's my gun? my gun! (He turns towards the back wall, where the heads of the rhinoceros are, yelling): I shall defend myself against everyone, against everyone! I am the last human being and I shall remain a human being until the very end! I won't surrender!*"[14]

In Eugène Ionesco's theatre there are certain elements which function as a "*mechanism*"[15] that generates the absurd, a "*mechanism*" represented by a "*threat by means of aggression*"[16], without a logical reason, invading the character's universe irremediably and progressively.

In *The Rhinoceros*, this "aggression" manifests itself through the appearance of the rhinoceros, or through the presence of the dead body that continually grows for fifteen years in *Amédée, or How to Get Rid of It*, or through the imminent death of the king in *Exit the King*. One can notice that the existence of this "*aggression*", present as a mechanism in the structure of Ionesco's plays provokes a progressively violent behaviour of the characters.

In some of Ionesco's plays, the split personality has a decisive role in the changing of the character's behavior, who becomes violent without a logical reason; this violence of Ionesco's character increases progressively, contributing to the realization of the dramatic conflict of the plays.

In *The Lesson*, as the author states in the stage directions at the beginning of the play, the behaviour and the reactions of the student are gradually changing during the play, turning from dynamics to passivity, from joy to sadness, even depressive states; this gradual change of the characters' behaviour can be seen in the communicative process. Contrary to his student, the teacher is shy in the beginning and very polite; during the play he becomes aggressive and domineering.

[14] Eugène Ionesco, *Teatru VI*, Editura *Humanitas*, Bucureşti, 2002, p. 174.
[15] Gelu Ionescu, prefață la *Cântăreața chelă* de Eugen Ionescu, Editura *Minerva*, Bucureşti, 1970, p. XVI.
[16] Ibidem, p. XVII.

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These changes in behaviour of the characters were mentioned by the author in the stage directions in the beginning of the play: The student seems "*a polite girl, well-bread but very lively, dynamic; on her lips there is a fluttering smile, full of freshness; during the play, she will gradually slow down the vivid rhythm of movements, of walking, she will have to restrain herself; from joyful and smiling she will gradually become sad and gloomy; quite lively in the beginning, she will grow ever more tired, sleepy; towards the end of the drama, her face will have to clearly express a nervous breakdown; her manner of speaking will change accordingly, she will mumble, she will have a hard time remembering words and will utter them with difficulty; she will seem slightly paralyzed, with a light aphasia; voluntary in the beginning, seeming almost aggressive, she will become increasingly passive, ending by being nothing more than a flaccid and inert object, apparently powerless in the hands of the Teacher; so much that, when he would make the final gesture, the student won't react anymore; becoming insensitive, she won't have reflexes anymore; just the eyes on the immobile face will express a terrible fear and astonishment; the turning from one type of behaviour to the other will take place gradually, as a matter of course*"[17]. Contrary to his student, the teacher is "*excessively polite, very shy, with a voice swallowed by shyness, extremely correct, very teacher-like. He is always rubbing his hands together, occasionally, an obscene glimmer in his eyes, immediately repressed.*

During the drama his shyness will gradually disappear, furtively; the obscene glimmers in his eyes will end up in becoming a permanent, consuming flame; with his innocent appearance from the beginning, the Teacher will grow ever more confident, nervous, aggressive, domineering, until he is able to play to his heart's content with his student, turned into a mere object in his hands. Obviously, the Teacher's voice will have to become ever more powerful, while before it was weak and feeble, and in the end it will be extremely strong, resounding, like a trumpet, while the Student's voice will become almost inaudible, not clear and properly sounded as it was in the beginning of the drama"[18].

In the beginning of their conversation, the teacher and the student are very polite, one can notice closeness between the two interlocutors, associated with the logic course of their lines; at the beginning of the lesson

[17] Eugène Ionesco, *Teatru I*, Editura *Humanitas*, Bucureşti, 2003, p. 86.
[18] Ibidem, p. 87.

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the teacher praises and encourages his student, and his assessments are highly overrated: *"Of course, young lady, bravo, it's very good, it's perfect. Congratulations. You are an ace of national geography. All the main cities"*[19]*; "Exactly, young lady, you answered very well, it's perfect. I'm convinced you'll make a good student. You will be making progress. You are intelligent, you seem well-read, you have a good memory"*[20]*; "But you have a lot of courage, young lady, my sincere congratulations. We'll do our best, young lady. Anyway, you already know a lot of things. At your age…"*[21]*. "Oh, my, young lady, but I'm at your service. I'm nothing but your servant"*[22]*, "Oh, but it is very good. I get the impression that you studied a lot. The Ph. D. will be a piece of cake, young lady"; "Formidable. You are formidable. You are extraordinary. I sincerely congratulate you, young lady. It's no use to continue. When it comes to addition, you are great. Let's see how your subtraction is. Just tell me, if you're not somehow exhausted, how much is four minus three?"*[23]

During the drama, the teacher's behaviour changes, he becomes nervous, aggressive, dominating his student verbally through his lines: *"Be quiet! Sit in your chair and don't interrupt me…"; "Leave the bloody teeth alone";*[24] *"Shut up! If you don't, I'll break your head!"; "Sit, damn it! Shut up!"*; *"Don't act high and mighty, doll face, or I'll hit you!..."*[25]*; "Sit the hell tight, young lady, don't fret so much and don't move your legs…"*[26].

In the end of the play, the violent behaviour of the teacher reaches its climax through murder; one can notice that, in the play, there is no murder weapon, because the knife that the teacher takes out of the drawer is invisible. The author describes the crime in the stage directions as a sort of ritual: *"They are both standing; the Teacher continues to hold up the invisible knife, almost out of his mind, as he's circling around the Student, in some kind of scalping dance"*[27].

In this play, one can notice the association between the aggressive behaviour of the characters and the technique of the counterpoint made up

[19] Ibidem, p. 89.
[20] Ibidem, p. 90.
[21] Ibidem, p. 91.
[22] Ibidem, p. 92.
[23] Ibidem, p. 94.
[24] Ibidem, p. 106.
[25] Ibidem, p. 111.
[26] Ibidem, p. 117.
[27] Ibidem, p. 120.

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through a contrastive idea-related simultaneity of the two characters, this technique being a way to suggest the aggressiveness of the characters. For example, during their dialogue, at some time the student interrupts the teacher's explanations with the invariable line *"My teeth are hurting"*[28], and then it progressively continues with lines expressing pain in contrast with the teacher's explanations regarding the knife as a possible pain-inflicting object.

In *The Rhinoceros*, even from the beginning of the play there is a conflict between Béranger and his friend Jean, because the two interlocutors have different point of view during their conversation.

Even in the beginning of the dialogue, starting with the moment they meet in the café, Jean reproaches Béranger the fact that he was half an hour late, although he was coming at that moment too, justifying his being late at the meeting by means of an irony, because he knew that Béranger was usually late: *"Here you are at last, Béranger"; "You're late again, of course! We planned to meet at half past eleven. It's almost twelve o' clock"; "As for me, it's something else, I don't like to wait,' don't have time to waste. Because you're never on time, I'm late on purpose, I come when I suppose I'll have the chance to find you"*[29].

From Béranger's words one can notice his docile, cooperating attitude, because he apologizes for being late. Continuing the conversation, after sitting around the table, Jean attacks his interlocutor's image, using ironies and reproaching him the hangover state he was in and criticizing the careless way he dressed: *"You're not longing for water, my dear Béranger…"*[30]*; "You're in a terrible state, my friend"; "You reek of alcohol"; "Every Sunday morning the same story, not taking into account the other days"; "And the tie, where's your tie? You've lost it during one of your parties!"; "And you really didn't comb your hair! Here's a comb!"; "You haven't shaved! Look at your face!"; "The cirrhosis is lurking, my friend"*[31].

After all these reproaches gradually piling on Béranger, Jean's conclusion attacks even harder his friend's image: *"It's pathetic, pathetic I tell you! I'm ashamed that we are friends"*.

[28] Ibidem, p. 115.
[29] Eugen Ionescu, *Teatru vol II*, EPLU, Bucureşti, 1968, p. 10.
[30] Ibidem, p. 10.
[31] Ibidem, p. 11.

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Béranger' answers are cooperating, trying to explain to Jean that he is a misfit: *"I cannot get used to living"*, but Jean is lacking tolerance and does not understand others: *"the superior man is the one that fulfills his duty"*[32].

This conversation is suddenly interrupted by the appearance of the first rhinoceros that races in front of the café. Jean's mannerisms could be associated with his later metamorphosis, because through his inflexibility of opinion and the lack of understanding towards others, he can be classified along those who share a *"crowd mentality"*[33], mentality defined by a *"turning into a fanatic process"*[34].

After the metamorphosis of his friend Jean into a rhinoceros, Béranger is in conflict with the whole world up to the point of alienation, when he understands that everyone has turned into a rhinoceros, conquering the world, especially after Daisy, his girlfriend, leaves him due to his violent behaviour, he isolates inside his house, looking at himself in the mirror, with cotton balls in his ears in order not to hear the tormenting bellowing of the rhinoceros outside; he realizes he cannot become a rhinoceros and, reaching the climax of violence, yells that he would defend himself against everyone in order to remain *"a human being until the very end"*[35]. In *The Rhinoceros, "the aggression"*[36] is represented by the hostility of the social environment towards the individual and the lack of communication, these triggering the conflict between the individual and the environment he lives in. The hostility between individual and society is represented in a suggestive manner by the metamorphosis man – rhinoceros, this being *"the aggression"* that increases progressively and the cause for hostility to reach its climax.

In *Exit the King, "the aggression"* is really the king's imminent death; his tragedy resides in the fact that he does not accept death with dignity and hopes in a possible recovery of his previous strength.

In *The Chairs*, *"the aggression"* is the solitude that becomes unbearable of the two characters, who become obsessed with the desire to

[32] Ibidem, p. 12.
[33] Eugen Ionescu, *Note şi contranote*, Editura *Humanitas*, Bucureşti, 1992, p. 215.
[34] Ibidem, p. 217.
[35] Eugen Ionescu, *Teatru vol II*, EPLU, Bucureşti, 1968, p. 112.
[36] Gelu Ionescu, *O introducere în teatrul lui Eugen Ionescu*, în Eugen Ionescu, *Cântăreaţa chelă*, Editura *Minerva*, Bucureşti, 1970, p. XV.

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communicate; they end up by committing suicide, the result of their aggressiveness directed towards oneself.

In *The Bald Soprano, "the aggression"* is represented by the lack of communication, so by the language which reflects the conflict-like behaviour of the four characters who talk without really communicating.

In *The Killer* there is an aggressive attitude symbolized by the killer, who topples the life of passive individuals.

In *Frenzy for two or more*, *"the aggression"* increases progressively during the play, being represented by the couple's hostility associated with the social conflict from outside. The two simultaneous conflicts turn this play into a symbol of the climax of aggressiveness and of the lack of communication in Ionesco's theatre.

Analyzing the two attitudes of Ionesco's characters, one can state that the passive state is the dominant one, which is characteristic for the non-hero in the tragic farce. This type of attitude is a special trait which characterizes the disturbed universe that depicts the anti-world seen in Eugène Ionesco's theatre.

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