

Navigating the Mechanics of Secondary Imagination in the Select Works of Eugene Ionesco and Harold Pinter



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Abstract: *The phrase “Science and Imagination”, in the most modern usage, has beckoned the interest of many critics across the globe to dwell on the many possible connections between the two conflicting concepts evoking myriad responses from social commentators. There are those who would dismiss the role of reason in imagination as the infringement of ethics in creative writing. Aesthetic imagination in creative writing perhaps demands going one step beyond the contours of reason to achieve what is artistically termed as the miraculous representation of reality. The juxtaposition of Science and Imagination is well explained in the words of Coleridge in Biographia Literaria as “To make the external internal, the internal external, to make nature thought, and thought nature this is the mystery of genius in the Fine Arts”[223]. The confluence of science and imagination breaks down the seemingly opaque barrier between the heart and the head leaving the path open for the meeting and merging of intellect and emotion. The present paper works upon the ways by which the writers or artists of absurd literature, especially of drama, have used secondary imagination to recreate the experiences of their conscious will. The proposed paper titled “Navigating the Mechanics of Secondary Imagination in the Select Works of Eugene Ionesco and Harold Pinter” tries to explore the nuances of secondary imagination in Amedee or How to Get Rid of It and Rhinoceros by Eugene Ionesco and The Birthday Party and The Caretaker by Harold Pinter. The paper further intends to focus on how authors of absurd literature, like Ionesco and Pinter, reflect the futility and absurdity of human existence by making use of Secondary Imagination in their works.*

Keywords: Science, imagination, fancy, aesthetic, creativity, absurd

I. INTRODUCTION

Coleridge may not have held an indispensable place in the captivating sphere of aesthetics, but his concept of Secondary Imagination, without exception, needs a closer analysis. Coleridge is more concerned with attempting to establish the principles of writing rather than to furnish rules on how to pass judgment on what has been written by others.

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His literary outputs, often scattered, complicated and unfinished, exhibit ‘the within and without of his poetic experiences’ often of a unique and fastidious nature. Coleridge defines Secondary Imagination in Chapter 13 of *Biographia Literaria* as:

The primary Imagination I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I Am. The secondary Imagination, I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead. [215]

What psychologists define as concepts is not exactly the concepts or ideas elaborated in literary theories. But they do have something common to share. In *Amedee*, the protagonist Amedee and his wife Madeleine discuss on how to deal with a continually growing corpse in the other room. The audience or readers are given no clue why the corpse is in the room. Psychologically speaking, the corpse is the product of secondary imagination which the author consciously uses to signify the dead love growing out of proportion between Amedee and Madeleine. The concept of the corpse growing in size is, in fact, an adaptation from the first section of Eliot’s monumental work *The Wasteland*. The first section entitled “The Burial of the Dead” brings out the image of the “sprouting corpse” in the lines:

That corpse you planted last year in your garden/ Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year? / Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed? / Oh keep the Dog far hence, that’s friend to men, / Or with his nails he’ll dig it up again! / You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!

[71-76]

The image of the corpse evokes the idea that the past cannot be altered and suggests that in the realm of human existence death must precede rebirth. Did Amedee kill the person whose corpse has been stranded in Amedee’s apartment? Does the corpse indicate the death of someone close to Amedee and Madeleine? Or could it be the cadaver of a drowned woman whom Madeleine suspects to be Amedee’s ex-lover despite the fact that the physiology of the body is that of a male? Speculations drift throughout the play. The cadaver of a baby, Amedee’s father, of Madeleine’s lover, of a drowned woman—all invariably alludes to the existence of changing perspectives in the light of an infinite reality.



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The play envisages the absurdity of human existence by building up the plot around a corpse that is portrayed as an integral part of the couple's life for the past 15 years. On many occasions, Amedee makes false promises of getting away with the body and eventually Madeleine loses trust on her husband. The corpse, on the other hand, adds mystery to the couple's existence as it causes mushrooms to sprout all around the apartment which apparently leads to the neighbours' suspicion as to whether the existence of the couple is real or mysterious. The audience is bewildered by the presence of the corpse. The corpse eventually ruins the couple's peaceful life for a long time ever since they discovered the corpse in their private room. As each day passes by, the cadaver conquers more and more space in the couple's room parallelly evoking absurd responses from the spectators. The couple conspicuously confront weird experiences as they come face to face with the absurd reality of life. Towards the fag end of the play, Amedee decides to get away with the corpse by dumping it in a river. As Amedee drags the corpse out of the apartment, he is been watched by a few and one among them is referred to as Eugene who is probably the author himself. Amedee reaches the cliff and as he was about to dump the body in the river, one of his feet gets tangled to the rope and Amedee is drawn along with the corpse into the river. Thus Amedee confronts his fate. Ivano Markova in her article *Amedee or How to Get Rid of It: Social Representations From a Dialogical Perspective* remarks: There are some fundamental facts about the theory of social representations which will make it difficult for Amedee to get rid of the 'growing cadaver'. First, the critics of the theory of social representations confuse different levels of scientific explanations, in particular with respect to what they call 'perceptual cognitivism' and 'information processing'. Second, and more importantly, the theory of social representations in Moscovici's formulation (which may not be so in other kinds of formulation) belongs to a broadly underlined by *dialogical epistemology*. *Dialogical epistemology*, I claim, is at present the only viable alternative to traditional individualistic and static epistemology, which, as many have argued, is totally inappropriate to scientific investigation. [420-421]

II. RHINOCEROS: METAPHORIC ALLUSIONS

Considering the theory of secondary imagination, the play evokes metaphoric allusions at various levels of interpretations. Amedee, at one level, can be perceived as a prototype of Berenger, the protagonist of *Rhinoceros*. The corpse signifies the dead love growing in proportion between the couple, Amedee and Madeleine. The sprouting mushrooms symbolize the ascending doubts and suspicions among the neighbors about the mysterious existence of the estranged couple. Thus, in the play, we are introduced to many conceptions of the working of the secondary imagination wherein the author uses certain specific cardinal images to draw parallels between fancy and reality. RA Scott James mentions the theoretic strategy of Coleridge in his influential work *The Making of Literature* as:

It was, in the first place, a practical conviction drawn from experience, from his working knowledge of and feeling for poetry and nature. Years later, after prolonged wrestling with

the problems of metaphysics, he thought himself into a philosophical justification and explanation of it. But in expounding his system he did less than justice to himself and his readers. [218]

In *Rhinoceros*, Ionesco identifies the imminent struggle of one man to sustain his identity or integrity in a world where all others have fallen in the web of destruction, violence and brute force. The protagonist, at a later stage, realizes that the greatest monstrosity in life is being human and then being a brute. The protagonist loathes his slacky skin and admires the thick, hard and robust skin of the rhinos. The aftermath of the quick upsurge of fascism has tremendously influenced Ionesco's views on life and prompted his secondary imagination to interpret the makeover as an all pervading perilous monster-the rhinoceros. To quote the words of Berenger from the play *Rhinoceros*:

He hangs the paintings up on the back wall next to the rhinoceros heads. That's me-that's me.

When he hangs up the paintings we see that they're of an old man, a large woman, and another man. The ugliness of the portraits contrasts with the rhinoceros heads which have become very beautiful. Berenger moves away to contemplate the pictures. I'm not beautiful-I'm not beautiful. He takes down the paintings and angrily throws them to the floor-he heads for the mirror. It's them who're beautiful. I was wrong. God, if only I could be like them. But I have got no horns. A flat. Forehead's so ugly. I could do with one or two to stop my face sagging. Maybe it will happen and I'll stop being ashamed-then I can go and join them all. But it just wont grow! [146-147] The play skilfully moulds and constructs the inconsistency of human life bringing out the absurdity present in contemporary thought and politics. The result is a play, whose irrational outlook and strategy attack the use of flawed logic and rationality; while at the same time attacking the ideologies or philosophical perspectives that only promote violence to hegemonize people. While the characters in the play are always speaking to each other, there is nothing suggesting something like a communication between them. Each character within the play represents a deliberate fixture on the absurdist. The play gives the impression of being deeply rooted in an existentialist tradition, but is as much about the insanity and monstrosity of human condition as it is about our historical capacity for atrocity and savagery as a race. Ionesco, through a sharp use of transgressive satire, establishes the inclination of the human race for the absurd and the grotesque. *Rhinoceros* is carved out as a play with bizarre animalistic impulses. When a person morphs himself into a rhinoceros, he abdicates his personal convictions, beliefs and aspirations to get in track with the wild, animalistic, anti-human metamorphosis. The most modern theatre props are used to complete the effects with advanced sound tracking systems

III. INTUITION AND IMAGINATION: AN INTERPRETATIVE ANALYSIS

Harold Pinter's *Birthday Party* is a product of an intuition rather than conscious imagination.

The Birthday Party is credited as being Pinter's first full length play and the first of the three plays marked in the list of his "Comedy of Menace" pieces. Pinter's plays though streamlined as "Comedy of Menace" are chiefly cruel comedies of alienation, withdrawal, isolation and utter despair and Stanley's role as the protagonist of the play is quite enigmatic. He is portrayed as always being haunted by a guilty consciousness. Stanley is portrayed as a young man in his late thirties, the only lodger in Meg's guest house, leading a composed vegetative life. He, at times, falls a prey to the external torture and humiliation by Goldberg and McCann. The timid, but otherwise nervous character Stanley, is an outward reflection of the emotional frustration that the author feels within himself for some reasons that are too personal to reveal. Thus Stanley is a reincarnation of the author's "esemplastic imagination". The conversation between Meg and Petey is often triggered by Meg; Petey being silent in most of the occasions. Meg is characterized as the one who always initiates the dialogue. The playfulness in Petey is well manifested in the scenes where he tries to toy with Meg, almost always delaying her attempts to wake up Stanley from his sleep. The play, on a broader scale, has widely been praised for the frequent use of "Pinter Pause". Pinter precisely employs certain dramatic techniques such as 'silence' and 'pauses' to manifest a higher level of reception and cognition among the spectators. For the writers of absurd literature, 'silence speaks better than words'. 'Silence' and 'pauses' are deliberately stuffed in the entire narrative to disseminate the futility of a mundane, listless, tedious existence. 'Shifting identities', again a symbol of changing perspectives, is one of the prominent themes in *The Birthday Party*. The action of the play progresses through past and present keeping track of the fluctuating moods of human consciousness. The further the play progresses, the further back are the audiences placed to comprehend the vital events that keep happening in the ever evolving sphere of time and space. Pinter often engages the readers with trivial dialogues of his characters to suggest the mundane and isolated existence of human psyche. Meg and Petey spend the leisure time sharing news from the gossip columns of newspaper and Meg, with great delight, asks Petey:

Meg : What are you reading?
 Petey : Someone's just had a baby
 Meg: Oh, they haven't! Who
 Petey: Who Petey? Who?
 Petey: I don't think you'd know her
 Meg: What's her name?
 Petey : Lady Mary Splatt
 Meg: I don't know her [21]

.Apart from Meg's excitement and excessive curiosity over what has been trivially stated as a newspaper gossip, the cryptic reference to Lady Mary having a vigorous aroma of aristocratic lineage and the surname Splatt denoting the vulgarity of a low class further adds something to the absurdity and futility of human existence. The abrupt descent from the sublime to the trivial or ridiculous is one of the hallmarks of the literature of the absurd. The author skillfully makes use of the realm of his secondary cognition to effect this sudden fall from the sublime to the ordinary. Quoting the words of R N Sharma from his interpretation of the play *Pinter: The Birthday Party*:

The death of the author in post-modernist times has given rise to corresponding birth of the reader. It is significant, then, that the *The Birthday Party* despite its initial failure, should, over the years, have become a commercial success, for this is a play which, more than any other on an English stage, heralded the triumphant emergence_ or perhaps renaissance_ of the reader _participant who contributes to the meaning of the text ,and the belated exit of the passive reader, the reader-consumer.[220]

Harold Pinter's much discussed play *The Caretaker* takes place in one room of a house in West London during the 1950's. The characters in the play are profoundly isolated from one another. The whole action takes place in a world characterized by absurdity and hopelessness. Mick, Aston and Davies are nonchalant characters. They are defined more in terms of their relationships to different objects rather than their actual characteristics or motivation. Overall, the characters, the product of Secondary Imagination, exemplify the beliefs, values and behaviors of those deemed by society as worthy of little regard. *The Caretaker* depicts the critical conditions of the characters in the play. All the three characters Aston, Mick and Davies represent their isolation and alienation in a world defined by selfish motives. This play of Pinter presents the life in England in the late 1950's. The isolation is either forced on them or is chosen by them on their own. Aston lives with his brother Mick in a one room apartment. Though bonded by blood, they are not bound by emotions. Davies is mentally challenged and seems to be content in his own world. The isolated existence of Davies reminds us of the critical existence of man in a world devoid of values and virtues. Aston expects Davies to stay with him and interact with him like a brother. Davies is also badly in need of companionship but both lack the emotional strength to exhibit their guiding emotions. Davies is cut off from the society and has been branded an outcast. He lives his life in dirt and nearly all loathes his proximity. Aston, on the other hand, showers his kindness on him. Thus, Pinter presents the psyche of two brothers rationally stranded by their conflicting emotions which again shows the dexterity of an artist to bridge the altering voices of his heart and head.

IV. CONCLUSION

Plain observation of the lives of scholars and critics will confirm Coleridge's perspective that each artist holds it his freedom to express nothing less than his conviction about the world around him, whether rational or imaginative. The only pitfall being that he is limited by the constraints of time and space. Quoting the words of R A Scott James: If Coleridge is right in insisting that the authentic Imagination includes all the activities of the soul_ the intellect, the will ,the perspective faculties, the emotions_ it follows that the imagination is a power which the artist can only use when he is at his best_ when he is in the fullest possession of himself_ when he is not writing from caprice, or for argument's sake, or in accordance with convention. It appears to be his ideal to project the whole of himself upon the whole of life; and his practical task to get as near to this unattainable ideal as the limited divinity within him can compass.[232-233]

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Imagination is the creative faculty in action. Imagination equally uses our brain and our senses to create and shape an image within us. Imagination draws on our experiences and knowledge of the outside world and fuses them with the unknown to arrive at interesting facts and explanations. Science and imagination are poles apart according to human perception but together they take us beyond the constraints of our environment and our conception of reality, into a world of assumptions, where creativity and invention are at their best.

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