

The Language of the Absurd Theatre in Pinter's *Birthday Party*

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces Pinter as an early practitioner of the Theater of the Absurd as well as an existentialist. In his plays *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Room* and *Birthday Party* absurd is presented in its different aspects and faced by different characters. Sometimes this absurdity is funny but the dramatist's aim is to get into reality. Another aspect of Pinter's plays is existentialism. His Pinteresque characters show his multi-dimensional way of looking at life.

KEY WORDS: Harold Pinter, Theater of Absurd, Existentialism, Drama.

INTRODUCTION

Martin Esslin, an eminent critic, used the phrase "Theatre of the Absurd", to describe the plays of the 1950s and 1960s. It has been derived from an essay by the French philosopher, Albert Camus, "Myth of Sisyphus" written in 1942, who defined the human situation as basically meaningless and absurd. Plays by Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter and some others share the view that man inhabits a universe whose meaning is indecipherable, and that his place within it is without purpose. He is bewildered, troubled and obscurely threatened.

The roots of this drama refer to the happenings in the 1920s and 1930s. It was influenced by the traumatic experience of the horrors of the Second World War which showed the total impermanence of any values, and highlighted the precariousness, fundamental meaninglessness and arbitrariness of human life. Living under the threat of nuclear annihilation was also important factor in the emergence of this new theatre. Also The Theatre of the Absurd seems to have a common association with existentialism. Beginning in the 19th Century, religion was described absurd because it could not be justified on rational principles; Soren Kierkegaard called it "a Leap of faith". Martin Heidegger and Jean Paul Sartre also described the human consciousness as facing an apparently absurd world, because it finds itself at the crossroads of "Being" and "Nothing", and is baffled by the meaninglessness of the human condition. Sartre's ideas of absurdity, anguish and disgust are expressed in his plays and novels, especially in *Nausea* (1938: Eng. Trans; 1949). Thus the Theatre of the Absurd presents an individual's basic situation. According to it the reality of life will keep on going round and round till we perish away.

The Theater of Absurd

In this drama, everything eventually becomes unreliable, even the language. Language, as a means of communication, becomes a vehicle of conventionalized, stereotyped meaningless exchange. Words fail to express the essence of human experiences, not being able to penetrate beyond its surface. The Theatre of the Absurd shows language as a very unreliable and insufficient tool of communication. By ridiculing conventionalized and stereotyped speech patterns, the theatre of the Absurd tries to make people aware of the possibility of going beyond everyday speech conventions and communicating more authentically. Conventionalized speech acts as a barrier between us and the world outside. In order to come into direct contact with natural reality, it is necessary to discredit and discord the false crutches of conventionalized language. Within the world of the Absurd, each individual identity is defined by language; having a name is the source of our separateness, the loss of logical language brings us towards a unity with living things. In the Theatre of the Absurd language, as an agent of logical world, encloses the true self, which belongs to the world of infinite.

In the world of Absurd, each individual confronts with intoxicating freedom, which brings once the essence of life.

Absurd dramas are lyrical statements, like music; they communicate an experience of archetypal human situations. The Absurd Theatre is a theatre of situation, as against the more conventional theatre of sequential events. It presents a pattern of poetic images, using visual elements, movement and light. In the Theatre of the Absurd language is only one of many components of its multidimensional poetic imagery.

In the Theatre of the Absurd, the characters try to conceal their self by using language in a special way in which the mutual understanding among them are not possible; each person finds himself cut adrift from the other, completely disunited and disconnected. Either they do not communicate, or they communicate through

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silence, pause, repetition and non-verbal expression, their words being devoid of any sense. They are divided, and don't know who they are. As such the Theatre of the Absurd is a critique, and an attack on fossilized forms of language, devoid of meaning. People use language to fill the emptiness, to conceal the fact that they have no desire to tell each other anything at all.

One of the dramatists who follow this way of expression is Harold Pinter. In the following section, I shall try to clarify the functions of the language in the world of Absurdity, of which *The Birthday Party* is a good sample.

The Birthday Party and Absurdity

While for Beckett, absurdity is a metaphysical predicament, Eugene Ionesco visualizes absurdity in concrete terms. For these dramatists, much of the absurdity in human existence emerges from our failures in language, communication, motivation, judgment and human relationships.

Harold Pinter presents the same Theatre of the Absurd one finds in the plays of Beckett and Ionesco. Pinter, however, presents his plays in a deceptively realistic idioms and convention and goes to unmask the absurdity of the human situation and the conventional theatre. *The Birthday Party* has a credible dramatic situation, but not a credible plot structure, characters or any logical, progressive and linear action. In Pinter's theatre, the persistent presence of a closed room, with a few persons huddled together inside, in a sort of "non-communicative conversation", is significant. The dramatic image of his play is based on a basic human situation: individual's search for security in a world which is full of anxiety, terror, false friendship and a lack of understanding between people "We live on the verge of disaster" [Esslin: 1970: 23].

The absurd character, in order to reveal the precariousness of man's existential security, is built up by three distinct elements: mystery, menace and humor. Pinter successfully creates a drama of human relations at the level of language.

The plot of the play hinges on Stanley who isolates himself from the world by putting up in a squalid seaside boarding house, owned by Meg and Petey. The couple protects Stanley and tries to make him comfortable. But the peaceful atmosphere is disturbed by unexpected guests, McCann and Goldberg, the agents of unknown forces who have come to claim Stanley.

Pinter presents personal breakdown, disillusionment and decay through the linguistic terror unleashed by McCann and Goldberg. Pinter's play is the absurd story of language. In fact, it is only language that significantly happens in the play, with the characters, plot narrative and stage action hiding behind the language. Language significantly evolves the absurdity in the characters, emotions, relationships and situation. Stanley is tormented not so much by McCann and Goldberg, but by the language used by them.

For Pinter, language positively creates a stasis in a communication. Uttering leads characters into pauses and silences, and any verbal assertiveness causes communicative disjunction. The dialogue between Petey and Meg are more an attempt at evasion than communication. According to Ganz (1970:3), "The most distinctive elements in Pinter's dramatic technique are the ambiguity that surrounds events, the mysterious behaves of characters, the near omni presence of menace, and the silences and other verbal characteristics."

For instance, Pinter uses repetition as a mode to create laughter and also to ease the tension of the scene and divert the audience's response slightly from the action. In the first Act, Meg repeatedly asks a question to create laughter

Meg – Is that you, Petey?
 Pause
 Petey- is that you?
 Pause
 Petey?
 Petey – what?
 Meg –Is that you?
 Petey – Yes it's me.
 [*The Birthday Party:24*]

Absurd ideas and fanciful imagination indicate the feeling of hollowness in Meg and Petey's married life and also in Stanley's life gripped by uncertainties and insecurities.

This peaceful atmosphere is disturbed by the unexpected entry of McCann and Goldberg who come to perform a "job". They not only disturb Stanley but arouse his fear for unknown reasons. And this tension passes on to Meg as Stanley starts behaving peculiarly. Pinter is more preoccupied with our fears, our anxieties that reflect throughout the play.

Meg's fear of losing Stanley, "You wouldn't have to go away if you get a job" (*The Birthday Party: 9*), reveals her sense of insecurity. The arrival of the two men at the boarding house reflects Stanley's fear of losing the security, which he was getting from Meg. Again, Stanley's fear becomes an inevitable cause for absurd imagination. He says:

“They’re coming today.”
Meg: Who?
Stanley: They’re coming in a van.
Meg: who? They’ll carry a wheel barrow in a van.
Stan: They’re looking for someone.
Meg: No they’re not. (*The Birthday Party: 24*)

Pinter’s dialogues are so created that the ambiguity is maintained and yet they unnerve the audience and open several avenues for interpretations. In this context, Hobe (1971:418) says: “Pinter has consistently relied upon language device for his effects rather than ritualistic visual devices characteristic of the theatre of Absurd”. Pinter uses silence and pauses as mediums of communication. He says that the characters convey a lot by being silent or giving a pause during their conversation, both the actors and the spectators are left wondering as to what would follow.

Terror is intensified further with the arrival of two agents who start interrogation and cross-examination. They accuse him of unknown guilt and sins. Stanley remains speechless and only makes the inarticulate gurgling sounds. His silence only denotes the gradual fading of memory, the disintegration of the human personality. In the process of cross-examination words become weapons. Stanley is virtually brain-washed through a flood of incomprehensible questions.

Pinter’s plays can be seen as structures of poetic images of an unverifiable and, therefore, dream-like world between fantasy and nightmare. His observation of linguistic quirks is extremely sharp; his dialogue must be considered to be one of the most realistic representatives of the genuine vernacular of the mid-twentieth century. But the real speech of the real people is to a large extent composed of solecism (mistake of grammar idiom) and tautology; it can also be compared to nonsense poetry.

In Pinter’s drama, implied meaning with an undertone of ambiguity is quite manifest. He has attained this unique dynamism by a clever manipulation of the exchange pattern of the dialogue. He stresses on four different aspects of language: rhythm, tempo, intensity and tension. These aspects are manifest in the brief exchanges amongst characters and their subtle moves are also precisely illustrated through lingual variation. In Pinter, the structure of the dialogue plays a vital role in creating a tense dramatic atmosphere of menace, and the absurd changes, from one to another, which is a major linguistic element in *The Birthday Party*. Pinter arranges his words meticulously, and he listens to them through silence.

Pinter as an absurdist knows that life never shapes itself. He wants the existential adjustment to come first, and hence, the characters and situation are minutely observed. Dialogue is shaped on bad syntax, tedious repetitions and excruciating contradictions. Through dialogue he presents the inadequacy of the words we use. He hints at the unspoken and latent. He creates an absurd atmosphere by means of the theatrically useful nature of words pertaining to correct rhythm.

Illusions, past recollections and childhood memories also become a medium for the characters to relieve their mounting tensions and serve for them as an escape from the present world of brutality. Meg easily enters into her world of happy memories and illusion the next day after the Birthday Party. She is not aware of the harsh reality that Stanley had to undergo harassment, and that he was carried away by force by McCann and Goldberg. With an unconscious irony, she recollects the happy moments and insists....

“I was the belle of the ball.”
Petey: Were you?
Meg: oh Yes, They all said I was Petey, I bet you were, too.
Meg – oh!. It’s true, I was.
(Pause) I know I was. (*The Birthday Party: 59*).

The Birthday Party evokes a mood of terror and mystery by creating a distorted world. Esslin (1969:205) rightly remarks: “It speaks plainly of the individual’s pathetic search for security of secret dreads and anxieties of the terrorism of our world.”

CONCLUSION

As a whole, Harold Pinter’s plays reveal our state of solitude, nothingness, meaninglessness and isolation. In Pinter’s world, language has lost its semantic power and significance. The characters in *The Birthday Party* are neither capable using the language; language for them is like movement, the irrationality, aggressiveness and violence. Language, like an absurd hero, brings to the audience the absurdity of human situation. Pinter succeeds in creating an allegorical drama of epic proportions: Man versus his birth and existence, or Man versus language. But, though Man is foredoomed to failure in any epical battle between himself and nature, fails heroically. Absurdity engulfs everything and everyone, even language and life itself.

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