

Pinter's Language in 'The Birthday Party'

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Abstract

Harold Pinter is the leading playwright of the post-modern era in English literature. He was awarded the Noble Prize for literature in 2005. The Birthday party is his first full length play. It is very difficult to put this play in any one of the three well known categories, i.e. comedy, tragedy or tragic-comedy. It has been called an absurd play. The phase 'absurd drama' becomes popular as result of Martin Esslin's book- 'The theater of the Absurd'. This termed is applied to a group of dramatist in the 1950's. These dramatists shared certain attitude towards the predicament of man in this universe. The literal meaning of absurd is out of the harmony with its surrounding. The language becomes subterfuge implies

more or less an artifice used to avoid something unpleasant embarrassing and disgusting. The play is complex and confusing. It makes no apparent sense as the language used by Pinter only puzzles the reader. The events take place in bizarre manner and the characters act in an incomprehensibly baffling way sharing a completely off-beat dialogue among them. The language in his plays become a pretence, a means of evasion or a disgusted weapon to illustrate his own philosophy about language Pinter demonstrates the use of language as a pretext, as a more veil where true emotions are kept behind the doors and words are allowed only after having crossed numerous check posts like hurdles from head to lips. Pinter takes cudgels and present dialogue in

his play in such vein that the audience is made to feel the hollowness of the language. Thus language is used as a subterfuge in his play.

Key-words : Absurd, Subterfuge, Pretext, Hollowness.

Introduction:

Harold Pinter was Noble Prized Winning playwright, director, screen writer and actor. He is the leading playwright of the post-modern era in English literature. His writing career spans more than fifty years. His best known play include The Birthday Party (1957), The Homecoming (1964) and Betrayal (1978), each of which he adopted for the screen. He also directed or acted in radio, stage, television and film productions of his own and others works. Pinter's career as a playwright began with productions of his own and others works. Pinter's career as a playwright began with a production of The Room

in 1957. His second play The Birthday Party closed after eight performances, but was enthusiastically reviewed by Critic Harold Hobson. His early works were described by Critics as "Comedy of menace". Later plays such as No Man's Land (1975) and Betrayal (1978) become known as "memory plays". He directed nearly 50 productions for stage, theatre and screen. Pinter received over 50 awards, prizes and other hours, including the Noble Prize in literature 2005 and the French Legion d' honours in 2007 Despite frail health after being diagnosed with Esophageal cancer in December 2001. Pinter continued to act on stage and screen, last performing the title role of Samuel Beckett's. One act monologue Krapp's Last Tape, for the 50th anniversary season of the Royal Court Theater, in October 2006. He died

from Liver Cancer on 24 December 2008.

Language of Pinter

The paper focuses on how language becomes subterfuge' in Pinter's 'The Birthday Party'. It becomes indispensable on my part to clarify the meaning of the word 'Subterfuge' and the context in which the word is used here.

In the Oxford English dictionary, the word subterfuge' means an artifice or device to which a person resorts in order to escape the force of an argument to avoid condemnation or censure, or to justify his conduct, and evasion or shift, chiefly of discourse, argument, debate but also of action in general. While the word ' subterfuge' in Merriam Webster Dictionary means the use of tricks especially to hide, avoid or get something.

It is therefore, clear that word 'subterfuge' implies more or less an artifice used to avoid something unpleasant, embarrassing and disgusting or to prove one's point and take others in one's stride. It is in this sense that Pinter uses language as subterfuge in his play "Birthday Party'.

Pinter's language has been so off-beat, so different and so unique that it has attracted almost every critic of his plays. Critics believe that Pinter wants to project the absurd of man's existence on this earth, he uses absurd language in order to show a communication gap in the language of his characters, who are the product of this diseased modern world and according to Dukore, "Pinter's characters may contradict themselves, they may have more than one home and what they say is open to several interpretations."

Martin Esslin talks about the communication gap among Pinter's Characters.

“Always in Pinter's world, personal inadequacy expresses itself in an inadequacy in coping with and using language. The inability to communicate, and to communicate in the correct terms, is felt by the Characters as a mark of inferiority....”

Another critic, Hayman believes that in Pinter's plays the characters are not only uninterested in listening, they are hardly interested in what they are saying themselves. Another critic, Hayman believes that in Pinter's plays the characters are not only interested in listening, they are hardly interested in what they are saying themselves.

Pinter's Language in the Birthday Party:

Pinter's 'The Birthday Party' is an absurd play. The theater of Absurd is a designation for particular plays of absurdist fiction written by a number of primarily European playwrights in the late 1950s. Their work expressed the belief that human existence has no more meaning or purpose and therefore all communication break down. Logical construction and argument gives way to irrational and illogical speech and to its ultimate conclusion.

Critic Martin Esslin coined the term in his 1960 essay "Theater of absurd". The Absurd plays takes the form of man's reaction to a word apparently without meaning and man as a puppet controlled a menaced by invisible outside forces. Though the term is applied to a whole range of plays. The main characteristics of these plays are broad comedy, mixed with horrific or tragic images,

character caught in hopeful situations forced to do meaningless actions.

Playwrights commonly associated with the Theater of the Absurd include Somuel Durrenmatt, Alejandro Jodorowsky, Fernando Arrabal, Vaclav Havel and Edward Albee. In Pinter's 'The Birthday Party' when Goldberg and McCann torture Stanley with apparently nonsensical questions and non-sequiturs.

Goldberg: What do you use for pajamas?

Stanley: Nothing?

Goldberg: You verminote the sheet of your birth.

McCann: What about the Albigenesist herby?

Goldberg: Who wanted the wicket in Melbourne?

McCann: What about the blessed Oliver Plunkett?

Goldberg: Speak up Webber, why did the chicken cross the road?

As in this above dialogues, non-sense in absurdist theater may be also used demonstrate the limits of language while questioning or parodying the determinism of science and the know ability of truth.

It is because of this unmistakable insight into the things that the writers of the theater of the Absurd like Beckett, Lonesco, Adamov, Albee, Gimpson and Pinter break all the rules of writings. The language in the play of these playwrights is full of bad syntax, tautologies, pleonasms, repetitions, non-sequiturs and self-contradictions. This type of language is used in order to defrock the hypocrisy of language a one time unimepeachable mode of communication. That is why; in the play of the Theater of the Absurd we see language in all its nakedness with all its inconsequentiality,

repetitiveness, silences, whispers, pauses and gaps.

Since the Theater of the Absurd reproduces the real speech which really takes place among human beings, it becomes a piece of reality besides its honest depiction of man's dilemma, who is cut off from all the strings which had hitherto kept his feet firmly on the ground. For if the real conversation of human beings, if infact, absurd and nonsensical, than it is the well made play with its polished and logical dialogue that is unrealistic, while the Absurdist play may well be a tape-recorded reproduction of reality. Or in a world that has become absurd, the Theater of the Absurd is the most realistic comment on the most accurate reproduction or reality.

Harold Pinter, the British Playwright, remains a stalwart among the exponents of the Absurd, Pinter is applauded tremendously for having

uncanny accuracy in the reproduction of real conversation among English people and this had earned him the reputation of having a tap-recorder built into memory. His language popularly known as 'Pinteresque' reveals that the bulk of everyday conversation is largely devoid of logic and sense and in fact is nonsensical.

The Birthday Party is a complex and confusing play by Pinter. The play makes no apparent sense as the language used by Pinter only puzzles the reader. The events take plague in a bizarre manner and the characters act in an incomprehensibly baffling way sharing a completely off-boat dialogue among them. Thus a yawning reader will certainly try to dismiss the play by terming it to be a theatrical fraud or intellectual hoax. Pinter's basic idea about the essential human condition of a lonely, terrified individual confronting the dark,

mysterious, inscrutable, hostile universe. The play, in fact, highlights modern man's hopeless and helpless existence. As far as the language of the play is concerned, Pinter has undoubtedly achieved distinctions.

Throughout the play, i.e. The Birthday Party, because of the intentions of the characters, the language is studded with round sentences repetitions, silences, pauses, and whispers, grotesque sounds and oblique constructions of the dialogues. The illogicality of language is full of meaning mainly because of their intentions behind it.

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In the very first scene of the play, The Birthday Party, Meg And Petey, the veteren couples indulge in a seemingly illogical conversation at the breakfast table:

Petey: Someone's just had a baby.

Meg: Oh, they haven't! Who?

Petey: Some girl.

Meg: 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.

Petey: no.

Meg: What it is?

Petey (studying the paper) : Ex-a girl.

Meg: Not a Boy?

Petey: No

Meg: Oh, what a shame. I'd be sorry. I'd much rather has a little boy.

Petey: A little girl's all right.

Meg: I'd much rather has a little boy.

This conversation reveals not a normal exchange of views between husband and wife but it presents before us the hopeless condition of a couple of modern world. The dialogue between them, becomes a cover under which both these characters try to evade their actuality that they are

without children. Meg indicates her attempt to break the oppressive monotony of her life with Petey.

Meg: Is it good?

Petey: Not Bad.

Meg: What does it say?

Petey: Nothing much.

Meg: You read me out some nice bits yesterday.

So the words spoken by Meg and Petey are not so important as the intention behind these words. Both these characters help each other in distracting their attention from the fact that they are leading a dull life. This language becomes a strategy through which they want to shroud their actual condition. That is why behind the seemingly superfluous dialogues like: “Were they nice?”, “Is it good? “Is it nice out?” and “ Is it nice (BP, PP 10-11), these likes the hidden intention on the part of Meg to

thwart the ennui and boredom of her life.

Petey is doubtful of his wife’s relationship with Stanley. That is why he tries to distract her attention from Stanley, when she says “I’m going to wake that boy, he immediately tries to turn the gear. “There’s a new show coming to the Palace” (BP, P13). He however fails to stop her but when she comes back, she has to console him. I told him if he doesn’t hurry up he’d get no breakfast” (BP, P14). All three sentences work as a veil to the emotions of the speaker.

Since, Stanley is not interested in Meg’s affection for him, he again and again to denigrate her. When Meg asks him “what are the cornflakes like, Stan?” he answers “Horrible” (BP. 14). Again when tries to allow him by making him repeat the words “succulent, he understands immediately her motives and in a way laughs with his tongue in checks.

“Say please,” “Say sorry first”, “Sorry first”. Here both the characters use language as subterfuge in their own way.

Bur Meg retaliates by mentioning the expected arrival of the two outsiders. “I’m expecting visitors (BP.p20). This single sentence pulls the rug from under the vibrant Stanley’s feet and he gets hysterical in forcibly denying the possibility of the arrival of the visitors. “They won’t come someone’s taking the Michael. Forget all about it. It’s a false alarm, a False alarm” (BP.p.21). Stanley, infect does not want to let Meg go out of his sexual possession and the intrusion of the two visitors may mean her away from him, so he uses a pretentions language to heap the things.

Throughout the play ‘The Birthday Party’, Pinter makes his characters repeat their dialogues. This repetition perhaps echoes the philosophy – more

the emphasis, more the negation. Thus repetition of dialogues becomes a sort of subterfuge through which the characters want to convince themselves as well as others of the correctness of the words they are uttering. For examples, Stanley wants to assure Meg that the awaited outsider will not turn up. He knows very well that the impending disaster, which is here in the shape of the two outsiders, is inevitable. But he repeats again that the outsiders won’t come. He, infact, does not want to accept the reality that he will soon be thrashed out of his room. He tries to manipulate the things and wants to keep himself through the use of language as subterfuge.

Many a time, the repetition serves a completely different purpose. It shows us the inarticulate men’s struggle to find the correct expression. Martin Esslin observes in this context. “Always in Pinter’s world, personal

inadequacy expresses itself in an inadequacy in coping with the using language. The inability to communicate and to communicate in the correct terms is felt by the characters as mark of inferiority that is why they tend to dwell upon and to stress the hard or unusual educated words they know.

The questions asked by McCann and Goldberg are complex, confusing, contradictory and chaotic and hence just unanswerable. During their cross-questioning they ask Stanley, “Why did you kill your wife?” and only after a moment, “Why did you never get married?” (BP.p.49). There is no link between the questions that follow one after the other without a break, “Why don’t you play the rent?”, “Why don’t pick your nose?” (BP.p.51). Thus The words become totally meaningless and absurd, Finally, Stanley breaks down completely under this heavy

bombardment and fails to produce anything barring a few grunting sounds : Uuuuhhh! And hence the victorious declaration by Goldberg, “you’re dead. You can’t live, you can’t think, you can’t love. You’re dead. You’re a plague gone bad. There’s no juice in you, you’re nothing but an Odour!” (BP.p.52). Thus under the pretext of haybysing Stanley with their rapid-fire questions, that are couched in illogical dialogues Goldberg and McCann, deftly dehumanize him. In this way, language once again becomes a strategy to fight out the bottle of existence.

Since Pinter fully understands the hypocrisy, the duality and the artificiality of language he considers silence to be the most significant form of language. It can very well be understood by the fact that the emotions at their extremes are expressed only through silence.

Pinter himself categorises silences in two parts. “One when no words are spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is employed. This speech is speaking of a language locked beneath it”. Both types of silences are employed by Pinter in his *The Birthday Party*. When Goldberg and McCann want to take Stanley with them, Petey tries to protect him. “Where are you taking him?” (BP.p.85), they turn and then follow the silence. This silence shows that Goldberg and McCann are surprised at the sudden interruption by Petey and are annoyed, composed and answer quietly, “We’re taking him to Monty’. So, Goldberg and McCann, through their silence have indeed spoken a torrent of words and have, in a way warned Petey that he should not try to be an impediment between them and Stanley. This kind of Silence becomes highly suggestive.

In this context, T.S. Eliot also appears to share the same opinions. “Words, often speech, reach into the silence”. So it is the silence that exposes our reality and inner feelings whereas words merely try to evade our real self. That is why in Pinter’s plays the characters do not talk explicitly about the situation at all or they are not courageous enough to do so. They want to hang on their own illusions and in order not to be lose these illusions, they try to conceal their real self through language.

In this way, language does perform a sinister function throughout the play *The Birthday Party*. The language used by Pinter becomes a vehicle of the thematic import of the play. By exposing the dialectical nature of the real speech of our daily life, Pinter cuts the language to its proper size. His strategy is reductive. Pinter knows very well that the real speech of our people is full of

complexity, ambiguity and contradiction just because of the fact that it is an inseparable part of our chaotic existence. In this age of desperation, depression and distress, we cannot cope with the situations that surround us. Thus our actions become absurd and hence our language too. The Birthday Party rather flippantly, forages into the absurdity of human situation where language is either absurd or misused as a subterfuge or a patent formula that plagues our instruments of communication.

Since Pinter belongs to the theater of Absurd, it is his task to attack the comfortable certainties of people which hitherto had surrounded them. Pinter's plays demonstrate the real speech of people which he picks up from their conversation at their parties, breakfast table and living rooms. With utmost sincerity Pinter breaks the ice and we suddenly

comfort a language which we daily use in our life. In traditional theater language is always considered to be an impeccable mode of communication. But it is not possible in real life. The dramatists in the past have always over estimated the potential of language to express the feelings. Perhaps they didn't bother about the fact that language which can't succeed in driving the point home in real life, can't be shown to do that on the stage.

In Pinter's plays, the hypocrisy and hollowness of language has been exposed by showing it's a kind of subterfuge, as Pinter himself believes, " One way of looking at speech is to say it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness. This, Pinter believes language to be a cover in our daily life. It is a cover to hide our reality; it is a pretext to keep ourselves and not to get revealed to others. Pinter is intelligent enough to note that there is

hardly a sentence in our life, which is not loaded with multiple meaning, manifold subtexts on subconscious undercurrents.

Thus language is no more a language, i.e. it is not a mode to communicate with others; it is a mask to hide our real self, it is a pretence to keep the things intact, it is a means to trap others by using it as a sophistry. This is what Pinter really picks up from our palpable life and through it back on us.

Conclusion:

Pinter's treatment of language and the world around him is interpenetrating and inextricable. Pinter knows very well that we hide instead of revealing, through language.

He believes: "You and I, the characters which grow on a page, most of time we're inexpressive, giving little away, unreliable, elusive,

evasive, obstructive, unwilling, but it is out of these attributes that a language arises. A Language where under what is said, another thing is being said. Since he considers language to be unreliable he shows greater confidence in silence and causes our more reliable mode of communication through which we actually communicate in this malady of life.

It can, therefore, be safely concluded that by demonstrating language as subterfuge in his play 'The Birthday Party'. Pinter descends into the heart of his characters who are erratic, paralytic and egoistic and by doing so he very successfully highlights the debacle of modern man, who is too weak to reveal his true feelings and in order to keep his kettle boiling, he becomes pretentious, hypocrite and ferocious in the words he utters.

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