

APPROACH TO HAROLD PINTER'S DRAMATIC HERITAGE

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Abstract: Dramatic heritage of English Modern playwright, poet, screenwriter, Nobel Prize laureate Harold Pinter (1930-2008) is full of literary definitions: "Pinteresque", "Pinterian", "Pinterishness", as well as "plays of menace", "plays of language", "theatre of discord", "theatre of Absurd". The article gives some approaches for teaching the dramatic heritage of H. Pinter. The article analyzes the Pinter's dramatic language as a language of power; it exposes how language, power and subjectivity are tied together in his dramas. The process of negotiating relations between Pinter's characters can be seen as the process through which the character or subject attempts to place itself within the symbolic order, within the cultural space organized by the codes, structures of representation and ideology that speak (from) the symbolic Other.

Keywords: theatre of Absurd, Pinteresque, strategies of power, language of power, identity, the symbolic order, the Other, patriarchal order

Introduction

The history of the Modern drama is one of rebellion, with new forms challenging the old ones, and the old forms in turn providing the basis for the new. Immediately after the Second World War of 1939-1945, Paris again became the capital of dramatic art in the West and French theatre that was soon associated with a short-lived eruption of surrealistic drama which came to be known as the "Theatre of the Absurd". French philosopher Albert Camus's existentialist use of the term "absurd" in *The Myth of Sisyphus* written in 1942 was ten years later vastly narrowed to connote absurdist drama where the "man

trapped in a hostile universe that was totally subjective, and made to describe the nightmare that could follow when purposelessness, solitude and silence were taken to the ultimate degree". (Styan, 1981).

The plays, written after the WWII and in the 1950s, were a nihilistic sudden outburst of French Absurdist plays may in part be explained as plays fall within the symbolist existentialist, surrealist traditions, and they have no logical plot or characterization in any conventional sense. The plays do not discuss the human condition, but simply portray it at its worst images. Their characters lack the motivation found in realistic drama, and so emphasize their purposelessness. The absence of plot serves to reinforce the monotony and repetitiveness of time in human affairs. The dialogue is commonly no more than a series of inconsequential chiches which reduce those who speak them to talking machines. The plays of Irishman Samuel Beckett (*Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*), French-Romanian Eugene Ionesco (*The Bald Soprano*, *Chairs*), Armenian-French Arthur Adamov (*The Confession*, *The Parody*), French Jean Genet (*The Maids*, *The Balcony*) are centre-pieces of the Absurdist Theatre. The authors present their plays in French and in Parisian avant- garde theatres.

The famous literary critic M. Esslin tries to define the core of the Theatre of Absurd as "it strives to express its sense of

reaction to the recent atrocities, the gas-chambers and the nuclear bombs of the war. The world seemed no purpose and human life was only human existence which, Richard Coe named as "intolerable imprisonment" spent "between the compulsion of birth and the worse compulsion of death". (Coe, 1964)

The senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought. It has renounced arguing *about* the absurdity of the human condition; it merely *presents* it in being - that is, in terms of concrete stage images". (Esslin,1987).

The early plays of Samuel Beckett particularly "drew upon the content and techniques of mime, the music hall, the circus and the *commedia dell'arte* to represent the business of everyday living. The tramps who wait for Godot quarrel, eat, try to sleep, even attempt suicide, all in the fashion of such performers, and the loss of dignity implicit in their antics itself becomes an absurdist image of life. (Styan, 1981) Beckett paid attention to language, as he explained that he wrote them in French in order to make sure his words were simple. All his characters of *Godot* and *Endgame* are pairs of comics or clowns with double - acts of cross-talk, tumbling and falling asleep, switching hats and so on.

Pinter's Dramatic Language

words, what happens when no words are spoken". (Styan, 1981)

Pinter's language is full of jokes, deft puns, Shakespearean quotations, bizarre non-sequiturs and ironic clichés. The verbal exchanges between characters are often ritzy, funny and fast. Pinter explores and exposes an extraordinarily wide range of English expressions, most of them derived from the East End dialect of London, his birthplace, and its Jewish cockney language. But the real treasure of his style lies beyond these qualities. Listening to the ordinary conversation of people, Pinter has discovered that struggle for upper-hand position or tactical advantage is rooted in conversation

In Britain, the actor and director Harold Pinter has acknowledged his debt to Samuel Beckett: for him, Beckett was "the greatest writer of our time", the master and the friend. The debt has shown itself in Pinter's bleak settings and in the occasional patterning of spare over simple dialogue in his first one-act play *The Room* (1957). This play, bearing the marks of the Absurdist Theatre, suggests something new: Pinter's particular vision of the world, his understanding of human beings and society, and his own view on drama. For the most part of the play, Pinter's extraordinary talent for suggestive obliquity in his dialogue is distinctively his own. As he explained, "life is much more mysterious than plays make it out to be. And it is this mystery

which fascinates me: what happens between between two people, and that the language people use in everyday life is rarely innocent of hidden intentions but is riddled with internal politics. Language in Pinter's plays becomes a machinery of battle, a potential weapon of domination, a defensive posture to secure one's position. It has nothing to do with "failure of communication". As Pinter noted:"I feel that instead of any inability to communicate there is a deliberate evasion of communication. Communication between people is so frightening that rather than do that there is a continual cross-talk, a continual talking about other things, rather than what is at the root of their relationship".(Billington, 1996)

Pinter's dramatic world (*The Birthday*

Party 1957, *The Caretaker* 1960, *The Homecoming* 1964, *Landscape* 1968, *Silence*

1969) is an unpleasant place for living in which security, certainty or fixity are never guaranteed. His characters seem to be perpetually in the midst of a struggle for power, for personal and intellectual dominance. This struggle is not always conducted in polite or "civilized" terms but is often brutal, hostile, animalistic - a "survival of the fittest". The measure of the happiness of the characters' lives is the quality of their survival. Hence Pinter's dramatic world deals with power, territory, dominance and subservience, depicting the politics of private relationships and the mystery of women.

Language in Pinter's plays operates on many levels - as a mask, a weapon, a source of evasion - but it is always used with distilled accuracy to reveal a character who is struggling. Pinter's faithful reproduction of the repetitions, hesitations and lacunae of everyday speech alongside the exuberance of street jargon is his important contribution to British drama. It has been said that he places colloquial language under a microscope, showing it as it really is: inconsequential, illogical, unwittingly comic, and irrational. Pauses and silences are frequent stage directions as they are frequent features of real conversation, with each bearing a different implication: a pause usually denotes an intense thought process in the mind of the character, while a silence signifies an attempted change of topic. Furthermore, a silence can be signified even when 'a torrent of words' is employed.

Pinter's dialogues show how all language games are implicated in assertions of power relations. They can be seen as exterior signs of behavior, as interpretive guidelines, or as instruments of negotiation. Characters use language as a means of dictating and reinforcing their relationships. Hence the battle for position, as argued by A. Quigley, is grounded in the power available in language. This function he names as the "interrelational" function of language. (Quigley, 2001)

Analyzing Pinter's plays from this point of view has led critics to neglect the category of history and the ways in which cultural power operates at every level and every sphere of life. In Pinter's plays the process of functioning of language is inseparable from the process through which the subject attempts to fix itself strongly within the symbolic order, the cultural space organized and supported by the codes, structures of representation and ideological apparatus that speak (from) the Other. It is in language and through language the man constitutes himself as a subject, since language alone established the concept of "ego" in reality, in a reality which is that of the being. The "subjectivity" is the capacity of the speaker to posit himself as "subject" in the symbolic field of the Other, and the foundation of "subjectivity" is determined by the linguistic status of the person. "Personal" power for Pinter is both an effect of and a vehicle for cultural power and it is the integrity of the cultural order that

is

ultimately at issue in the various battles for authority that he dramatizes.

In *The Birthday Party* we can trace the process of how Stanley's subjectivity slides into subjection on the demand of authority as represented in ideological discourses that speak (from) the Other. At the end of the play, Stanley sees the world through the eyes of the Other's codes and categories of evaluation. Goldberg and McCann, as the voices of the Other, use the language of splendid desires in order to direct Stanley's desire towards the Other's desire. Pinter shows them, however, as being as much vulnerable as Stanley, since they remain in the position of subjects.

The play, which closed with disastrous reviews after one week, dealt in a puzzling manner with an apparently family) sit. Suddenly there is a knock at the door and a heavily armed policeman is appeared. It may be that the father or son, or a friend sitting in the cottage, is called out and taken off into the dark, and no one knows whether he will ever come back, or what his fate has been. All they know is that they had better not enquire.” (War Speeches 1939-45)

The *Birthday Party* is a similar story of an obstinately reclusive hero who is 'taken off', who being obliged to conform to the external pressure of power and conventional society. In the course of the play we can trace the process through which an individual is compelled into subjection to the demands of

ordinary man, Stanley, who is threatened by two strangers for an unknown reason and is tracked down by them for a “better” life appropriated by some high authority. As critic Raymond Williams noted, “The menace of what they are doing is tangible but unexplained; it is the irruption of a bizarre and arbitrary violence into an ordinary life.”(Williams, 1987)

Pinter applies postwar continental experience to a British situation, thereby fulfilling the Kafkaesque scenario depicted by no less a figure than Sir Winston Churchill in his first speech as the leader of the opposition in the House of Commons, on August 16, 1945. Considering the plight of the many European countries subject to police-state governments, he said, “There they (the

the state authority and its ultimate form, Law.

Michel Foucault set up a scheme for understanding the process of “subjectification” that lies in the political structure of the state: “Most of the time, the state is envisioned as a kind of political power which ignores individuals, looking only at the interests of the totality, or I should say, of a class or a group among the citizens. That’s quite true.” (Foucault, 1982)

Foucault defined the new regime of power in the state as “bio-power”, which coalesces around two distinct poles: human species and an individual. A new set of operations and procedures - that Foucault calls ‘technologies’ -

come together around the objectification of the body of an individual person. The aim of these technologies is to forge a 'docile body that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved.'" (Foucault,

1979) Foucault gives the definition of the 'subject' as follows: "(being) subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self

– knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to." (Foucault, 1982)

The play represents the processes of de-formation and re-formation of Stanley's subjectivity. These processes relate to the events of the play: Stanley's life in the seaside boarding house, his meeting with Goldberg and McCann, the birthday party and the events following it. Stanley's unique touch as a pianist, his "sin" is a usurpation of the Father's prerogative. This can only end in failure because the Other never releases its subjects from the demand for adherence to its law. Stanley's "anormality" has to be corrected and isolated, and he is forced to be silenced in order to be "adjusted" and "integrated" into conventional society. Stanley becomes assimilated and subjected to language and the values expressed in language. In the world of the Other, he will be permitted to receive a "new" language filled with the Other's codes, categories of evaluation and desires. As Lacan noted: "Man's desire is the desire of the Other". (Lacan, 1977) This desire has to be 'framed' by the pleasurable and honorable things the society promotes. The language models that reorient Stanley into the society's course of conduct have also placed Goldberg in the

position of a desiring subject pursuing mouthpiece that articulated the desire of the Other, remaining in the position of subject. When he opens his mouth the Other speaks.

The Dumb Waiter deals with two hired killers, Ben and Gus, who are waiting to carry out a contract killing. They themselves, however, become victims of authoritarian power and one of them, Gus, is the intended victim. Ben exhibits an unquestioning need for authority, whereas Gus questions it. The image of the dumbwaiter can be seen as a metaphor for a manipulative and invisible authority which transmits commands that are impossible to fulfill. The partnership between the two killers collapses in the face of the divide-and-rule tactics of an authority which places both of them at its mercy. Through the microcosm of their power relationship, oscillating between dominance and subservience, Pinter creates a macrocosm of power relationships in a society with larger political implications.

The play shows the dynamics of power which imposes its matrix of values and ideological implications within the subjectivity of its agents and can be seen as illustration of Foucault's idea that "the individual is an effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation". (Foucault, 1980) Pinter relates the sense of insecurity and alienation that arises in Gus's mind to the cultural construction of subjectivity, to the subject's

what the Other desires. He is only a status as the subjected being at the disposal of

the omnipotent and invisible power of the Other through the small microcosm of power relationships in a society with larger political implications. As A. Quigley, in examining Pinter's dramatic technique in "Pinter, Politics and Postmodernism", observes that what Pinter has effectively done is transfer to the realm of political situation the exploration of complex local social interaction that is characteristic of his plays as a whole."(Quigley, 2001) This exploration of local social interaction shows two partners in the permanent presence of third one - the invisible institution of power.

Significantly, Ben and Gus are partners and, seemingly, friends. But Pinter shows how their partnership collapses before the divide-and-rule trying not to eradicate it but to maneuver their relationship to their advantage. The battle for position turns out to be primarily linguistic as one character tries to overcome the other through the power of language. Pinter presents a strategic situation in which the winner is someone who is able to use language as a weapon to force his opponent to accept his own meaning of words. At the end of the play Davies is rejected and excluded from the brothers' house, not simply because of his verbal inability or his "choosy" character and built-in racism, but as well because he has no papers which can confirm his identity. The papers should have been

tactics of authority. They are both victims of the system which places them at its mercy. Pinter puts in focus the reconstitution of Gus's subjectivity, a self-discovery which precipitates self-estrangement and self-alienation, in his feeble attempts to resist the hypocrisy of the invisible institution of power, which is upheld by both willing and reluctant executioners.

The Caretaker is a play about three men who use language as a weapon of power, evasion and tactical negotiation. Pinter vividly shows the image of life as one ceaseless struggle for survival and identity, an identity which is appropriated and demanded by the cultural codes of society or the Other. He presents characters who are struggling to come to terms with the social complexity,

recorded and classified by the authority of the Other, by written language imposed by society.

Aston, the elder brother, is someone different from the rest of society. Like Stanley in *The Birthday Party*, he can be seen to be a nonconformist, someone who has had to be made to conform by the means of a brain operation. As a result he has become a subject reoriented to the Other's order, albeit isolated and lonely. There are no further attempts by society to integrate him.

In Pinter's play we can see how people attempt to shield themselves against reality through protective illusions. These illusions can demonstrate the values which are honorable in

the gaze of the Other. Sidcup for Davies is the place where he can get his longed-for papers; Aston can transform the wilderness of the garden and built a shed before decorating the upper part of his

brother's house, Mick to turn the junk-filled house into a luxury penthouse, thus bringing it up to the standards that modern society finds desirable.

The Homecoming deals with the duality and the strength of the female psyche. Ruth struggles for dominance and independence, using her sexuality as an instrument of power in challenging the patriarchal order and exposing male vulnerability. She struggles for her independence through the language. It is never transparent or referential but discursive, evasive and equivocal. She repeatedly undercuts the dominant cultural order by exposing the constructed, discursive nature of language and hence the arbitrariness of the gender roles and power relations built in and through it. Ruth can and does attempt to resist the dominant patriarchal order and its attempts to fix and categorize her, as most famously expressed in the play's crucial "contract" scene. The factual outcome is well known: Ruth agrees to stay on with her husband's London family, earning her living as a prostitute, while Teddy goes back to the States to their three children on his own. It is the significance of this event which has proved controversial in Pinter criticism. Some critics have insisted that Ruth wields power at the end of the play; at last, they claim, she finds an alternative, autonomous subject position outside the male homosocial circuit through an open treatment of prostitution in economic terms, thereby disrupting male's euphemistic

formulations laying bare the economic and sexual exploitation that lies at the basis of the patriarchal family structure. Other critics have asserted, however, that she fails. While no Pinter play is ever a categorical statement, the inference to be drawn from the dramatic action and from the concluding image of this play is that women, through strength of will and sexual authority, can achieve their own form of empowerment. Pinter himself has acknowledged her as a winner who both exposes phallogentric vanity and achieves the necessary dramatic feat of disrupting the power structure and changing the essential situation. In this play Pinter effectively depicts the family as a site for the transmission and reproduction of the dominant patriarchal ideology. He combines a realistic study of family ties with a microcosmic study of power.

As Pinter's career proceeded, he increasingly came to see private life as a form of power politics, full of invasions, retreats, deceptions and subjugation. Conversely, when he later came to deal quite overtly with the machinery of the state, he began to decry it in terms of individual power and powerlessness. Thus in his "political phase" in the 1980s, Pinter concentrated on conflicts between the individual and the enclosing political regime.

In *One for the Road* Pinter examines the psychology of a man who embodies the power vested in the state. The torturer, the head of an organization, a convinced

passionate man of

great faith - in other words, one who believes

in all number of things valuable in society - is able to subject his victims to any amount of horror and humiliation for what he sees as a just cause. The author showed a separation between the language of political rhetoric and the reality that is evident in cultural order.

In *Mountain Language* prisoners in an unnamed fascist country are persecuted when they attempt to speak their own native language that they have always known and that gives them an identity. It is an overtly political play about the suppression of language and local differences in favor of a centralized culture, portraying an image of a society that sees any brand of nonconformity as a threat. Once subordinated to the language

Pinter portrays cultural order, and the forms of power that ensure its perpetuation, as homogeneous and monolithic, unalterable to fundamental change. He investigates how language, in its dimension as cultural code, functions as a vehicle for the transmission of power. Pinter conceptualizes the subject's relation to power in more Foucauldian terms: the subject is an effect that emerges from the operations of a power that remains irreducible to the dimensions of that subject. Power does not display itself solely through the negative activity of oppression, but through the creation of the subject position with which the characters identify and in which they install themselves. Both those who "possess" and those who lack

of the capital, the mountain people will effectually lose the cultural distinctiveness that separates them from the people of the capital. Such a monologic language functions as the most powerful expression of the totalitarian impulse that transforms the state into an all-encompassing hall of mirrors in which the subject repeatedly (mis)recognizes itself in the image of the other members.

Here again Pinter focuses on the reality behind the rhetoric of politicians, on the way language is constantly perverted. The language voices state power and serves as an ideological instrument for the creation of docile political subjects. The plays demonstrate how the political version of these codes erases differences by making the subjects in the image of the Other.

authority in Pinter's universe thus share a similar instability, a similar disappearance within the field of the Other.

Conclusion

Teaching of Harold Pinter's dramaturgic heritage is complicated by the big

range of critical interpretations. Pinter's plays accumulate the general truth about any existing theories about the nature of society, power relations, language, identity, culture, gender and race. The critical approach to interpret Pinter's plays is based on linguistic and cultural approaches to postmodern politics, defining language and its role in creating power structures, its strategies and manifestations of violence. In Pinter's major plays the process of negotiating

relationships between the characters is inseparable from the process through which the subject attempts to fix itself strongly within the symbolic order, the cultural space organized and maintained by the social codes, structures of representation, and ideological apparatuses that speak (from) the Other. Pinter's works are both expressions of the time in which they are written and expressions of eternal truths in human behavior.

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