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# Harold Pinter: Absurdism and farther horizons

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### ABSTRACT

The two World Wars and the devastation they bring to the Western mind results in a kind of revision or better to say in abandoning the worldviews and ideologies remained for centuries and the consequently in rebuilding of a new system of thought and rationale in all the aspects of man's life. These profound changes do not leave a stone unturned and also manipulate the field of literature and finally affect the field of Drama and produce a unified body of works categorized by Martin Esslin in 1961 under the title of "the Theatre of Absurd". This Study intends to investigate the quality of the Absurdism of such a kind in the plays of the British Playwright Harold Pinter in hope of dealing with the strategies he applies in his crafting; the strategies that are innovative and as used for the first time take the name of Pintersque.

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### Introduction

"There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false." (Nobel Lecture: Art, Truth & Politics 1)

The above sentences are in fact a restatement of one of Harold Pinter's early speeches that he quotes once again at the Noble Prize Lecture in 2005. In this lecture Pinter, the Noble winner, speaks about the elusiveness of the nature of the drama and the fact that besides all the existing uncertainties and instabilities in the way of understanding the truth, it is the job of the playwright to shoulder the responsibility and represent characters that are kept under such circumstances.

Having interpreted Pinter's statement in terms of his dramatic career and relating it to the age in which he was living, one may suddenly be reminded of the notion of "Absurd theatre" and what Martin Esslin asserts in his seminal work "the Theatre of Absurd" in 1961. In fact, in this work Esslin tries to draw distinction between the pre-war and post-war playwrights and claims that "Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Harold Pinter" are different from the nineteenth and early twentieth century playwrights as they have come to view the world wiped out from all the illusions of rationality and reason(6), in result of what came to humanity for the souvenir of the two wars. As he goes further, Esslin adds that these playwrights are no more as optimistic as their forefathers and cannot make themselves believe that man is living a life of stability and whatever he does comes from the vanity of his struggles in order to show that only he exist without the true insight. In another part, he mentions that the spirit of the age- what mentioned above- has led such playwrights to abandon what they inherited from past and to replace it with the images that would show "the human condition is presented to them as "a concrete poetic image", something that would show itself on stage in a "comic" and "tragic" manner (241).

Based on what has been mentioned by Esslin -the fact that the post-war drama has got an absurd spirit, that of a tragic comic essence-this short study is to investigate the quality of Harold Pinter's absurdity of the plays and intends to bring

enough proof to the claim that Pinter is successful in portraying the complexities of the condition of man in the chaos of the modern world by the application of some strategies and techniques.

The thing worthy to be mentioned here as an umbrella term is the matter of "Pinteresque". It seems that getting familiar with this matter is very much helpful in the way of understanding the quality of Absurd, as one faces with it much when he is reading about Pinter- even in the first few pages. Adam W. Cheshire in his thesis elaborates the matter and speaks of the way Pinter manipulates the boundaries of absurd, "For [in Pinter's view] the literary absurd is not merely that which proposes humanity's "senseless" condition; it is the dismantling of the accepted possibilities of human action and interaction (4). Based on Cheshire's viewpoint, the specific strategies of Pinter in the way of development of the plot, the structure and characterization of his plays- all coming from a powerful ideology- have been so much different from other playwrights that according to many critics has made for a especial school in the theatre of Absurd- the trend that is been called "Pintersque". First of all, Pinter's ideology as the leading force in the formation of such drama and consequently the due strategies applied by him will be discussed below in the way of analyzing Pinter's Absurdism.

In the way of probing Pinter's ideology it is good to refer to H. Aliakbari and F. Pourgiv in their article. They assert that his plays have the quality of being simultaneously tragic and funny (2); and that is because of his ability to picture the absurdity of life on realistic level, the "ability to present characters and environments that exist naturally in an unnatural world, where situations the reader and audience find illogical and surreal are commonplace and mundane to the characters"(3-4). This quality mentioned by them cannot be merely justified based on the absurd theories stated by Esslin in his book. These two authors believe that Pinter's difference from other absurdist- or in other words the quality of Pinteresque- come into being when he mixes the absurdity of modern life manifest in characters on stage with a kind of Existential struggle to make sense of whatever irrational around them as rational and life-producing.

At this stage it is necessary to define existentialism in post-war drama of Europe and its relation with the emergence of absurdity in Pinter. It is out of question that the two World Wars devastated the foundation of thinking in Europe and put an end to man's illusion that he is the center in the universe and that in eternity he has been blessed with the gift of rationality to make sense of the objective truth of existence or his notion of being, as if his subjectivity is inclusive enough to contain the complexity of the whole existence and its inference,

Harold Pinter, the Jewish Playwright, was born in 1930; that is he faced the society shattered by war and experienced in his Childhood the anti-Jewish tendencies and all the terrors coming from that. It is unexpected that in such context Pinter remained unaffected and that he not takes anything from what was in air from France; that is Existentialism.

In this short space it is not economical to speak this school in detail. Enough has been said about the causes and origins and now it is necessary to go to the major assumptions. Jean Paul Sartre, one of the leading figures of this movement speaks about the issue of "choice" ( Yegane 536), and asserts that "there are no objective standards or rules to which a person can turn for answers to problems of choice, because different standards supply conflicting advice(537).That is why Pinter's Characters are all trapped in snares that demands them to make choices even though they do not have a clear understanding of the truth and are going astray.

Besides the influence that comes from the side of Sartre, many critics believe, it is Alfred Camus and his different reading of existentialism that has been much help to Pinter in his dramatology. Camus in his famous *Myth of Sisyphus* says "Sisyphus is 'stronger than his rock' not because he resigns himself to fate, but because he makes that tragic fate his own by accepting the hand that he has been dealing with (q.t.d in Rosengarten and Chui 6).In fact in the viewpoint of Camus "Life is meaningless, and the absurdity of life lies in man's intrinsic desire to continue living tomorrow even though tomorrow is another day closer to death (5).Pinter owes much to Camus in this case and his characterization, plot making and themes reflect his faith in such a worldview.

Now that Pinter's ideology has been discussed, it is good to focus on its manifestation in his plays and the way Pinter crafts new techniques and strategies in dealing with his characters, plots and themes.

It was said that Pinter's Characters are kept in a kind of absurd-existential situation and they struggle to make sense of their own being. One of the strategies of Pinter in portraying the mind of these characters is to makes use of dialogues which are at the surface comic- reflecting the superficiality of the characters involved- but in depth stand for the traumatic state of mind at the moment of speech and their helplessness. According to Cheshire these kind of dialogues "create a tension that resonates deep within the reader and the audience" (Cheshire-abstract iii)", something that would show man's partial understanding of truth and puts an end to his illusions leading to a kind of radical mystification about his existence (Karwowski 293).For example in *The Care Taker* we have *Davies* and *Aston* whose illusions have been keeping them from perceiving the reality; so they have remained static for a long time and their dialogues reflects nothing but that.

Besides the issue of dialogues, another thing shall be mentioned in relation with the system of characterization of Pinter and that is the issue of "Comedy of menace" proposed by

Irving Wardle ( q.t.d in Rosengarten and Chui 7-8).Hogwei Chen elaborates the matter in his article and asserts that in plays of Pinter at the early phase, the characters shall be interpreted in terms of the menace or intrusion that comes to them from the world outside; the only thing that can help the reader in interpreting these characters, because they are put into analysis by considering their reaction to the crisis produced by the intruder or the trauma of an accident both coming from the outside world; matching their skills and mastery in dealing with those happenings. Again some examples for the elaboration of the matter can be given: The arrival of *Davies* from the outside world as the intruder who would be the only device that would make the reader able to interpret *Aston* and his worldview as his alienated character and the absurdity of his mind and situation cannot be studied in isolation. Another example can be from *the Birthday Party*: the gift sent to Stanly by Lulu for his birthday. It comes from the outside world and acts as an intruder that provides the playwright with enough material to discuss the characters; something impossible if was no gift sent at all.

The last matter to be discussed here besides the characterization of Pinter in relation with the quality of Absurd in his plays is the matter of plot, themes and setting. In breaking the news of Pinter's death, New York Times writes so:

Mr. Pinter captured the anxiety and ambiguity of life in the second half of the 20th century with terse, hypnotic dialogue filled with gaping pauses and the prospect of imminent violence. (M. Gussow and Ben Brantley Selections from the December 26, 2008)

This precise paragraph can be much illuminating; because it gives comment on the thematic significance of Pinter's plays-that of man in modern world- and mentions to the fact that they would bear a kind of "hypnotic" quality that is a key term in discussing the issue of plot, themes and setting in his plays. According to many critics Pinter is affected by the notion of unconsciousness and Freudian Dreams (Cheshire 6), and tries to reflect the fact that in modern world man's unconsciousness is to rule manifestly over everything, so the characters should be placed in settings and plots that would reflect such hallucinatory –condensed and displaced- images from the modern world and the way he is trapped in such absurd situations. According to Kazula, "The scenography plays no vital role apart from the fact that we see a border between the outside world and the space occupied by people"(2-3).

Based on this fact, the reader can trace many similarities in Pinter's plays. The most outstanding one worth mentioning here is the out side-room versace in side-room setting or theme, (Pi Binyan 39), transparent in *the Care Taker*, *the Dump Waiter* and *the Birthday Party*. If one is careful, he will find that the settings of these plays will reflect a kind of limitation of space on the stage that is in contrast with what goes on in outside world, as if the characters bear a kind of phobia in facing the realities of the outside world. That is why the stage in these plays is decorated in a way that would reflect such facts. The best example can be *Aston* in *the Care Taker* and the way the shed he is working on, is isolated from the world outside.

The last matter to be mentioned besides the setting of the plays of Pinter is the matter of the plot. Even though one may face a realistic and linear plot-that may in the first look be inferred not in line with his Absurdism- it will soon become clear that his plot is so multi-faceted that it is misleading and hard to interpret. This complexity of plot can be related to the matter of the existential struggles in a so-called absurd world -

mentioned early in this wring- and the way a reader may interpret a character's struggle based on either existential or absurd status. To bring a good example it can be referred again to *the Birthday Party*: The party and the way the characters converse with each other may seem too much absurd by some audiences or readers, but of more significance if related to political matters or what goes on in a society shattered by the post-war tempests.

Absurdism is a significant post-war phenomenon and has played an important role in the formation of literature of the second half of twenties century. Once the traumatic situation of man in this shattered world has come to discussion, it is not fair to say that Absurdism has no place and that the critics can do their job without having an eye for the absurd elements in the works of the writers, poets and the playwrights of this age. Based on this fact this Study has been tried to investigate Absurdism in Harold Pinter's plays, having in mind the fact that how complexities of the condition of man in such a chaos can affect the theme, plots, and the settings of his plays and the strategies applied by him in order to portray those matters. By all that has been elaborated here one may be sure enough to repeat what Pinter has asserted in his speech at the Noble-Prize Lecture: Truth in drama is forever elusive.

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