

Harold Pinter: The Absurdist-Existentialist Playwright

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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.

Keywords: 1. Harold Pinter 2. The Theater of the Absurd 3. Existentialism 4. Drama.

1. Introduction

Harold Pinter is one of the most prominent living dramatists of the age. The seventy-three year old Pinter, who has written twenty-nine plays and twenty-one screen plays and who has directed twenty-seven theater productions, is one of the early practitioners of the Theater of the Absurd which started in the fifties. Absurd, which is one of the many different aspects of his works, functions as a means of getting into the reality that is Pinter's main concern. In his own web site he writes,

In 1958 I wrote the following: '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'. I believe that these assertions still make sense and do still apply to the exploration of reality through art. So as a writer I stand by them but as a citizen I cannot. As a citizen I must ask: What is true? What is false?

The generic analysis of Harold Pinter's works has been one of the main interests of and, at the same time, controversial issues among his critics. Many critics regard him as one of the predominant figures of the Theatre of the Absurd, and his works have been approached in the light of the theories and doctrines of this avant-garde literature. Though very enlightening and helpful to the readers, the Theater of the Absurd has also been the cause of controversial views among readers and critics. Some have tried to prove that Pinter is a mere absurdist dramatist, and some others have provided clues to nail home the idea that he differs in many respects from the practitioners of the Absurd drama. Joseph Hynes (1992) lists the terms used by different critics with regard to Pinter and his play, terms such as: "'absurdist', 'existentialist', 'anti-humanistic' and 'amoral'" (740).

There is no doubt that Harold Pinter, a voracious reader and practitioner of modern drama, had a large number of references to consult in order to develop a keen knowledge of the art of writing. Etheridge (1963) believes that Pinter has artistically employed "tactics derived from Kafka, Hemingway, and Ionesco" (427). The

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impression one gets of his works “is that of eclectic scholarship rather than of creation. He seems to have read all of the secondary sources—Beckett, Ionesco, and Genet” (Wellwarth, 1964: 197-198). Consequently, almost all of the writers who had influenced Pinter’s dramaturgy were either founders or forerunners of the avant-garde Theatre of the Absurd. Eventually, Martin Esslin (1964), in his classification of the absurdist writers in his book, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, considers Pinter as “one of the most promising exponents of the Theatre of the Absurd . . . in the English speaking world” (205) and examines his works in the light of the absurdist conventions, which are as old as literature and cover all human conditions, leaving their earlier foot-prints in mythology and the myth of human existence.

The idea of the Absurd is not new in the history of man’s existence. It was experienced by the ancient people who strove in vain to achieve immortality and challenged both fate and the miseries caused by the interference of gods and goddesses in their lives. The very consciousness that created such invincible heroes as Achilles, Siegfried and the like testifies to the fact that man has always tried to escape from the absurdity of his existence through courage, heroic actions and, above all, the power that was gained either through knowledge (e.g. Odysseus) or unlimited physical strength (e.g. Achilles). However, there is a difference between the absurdity that existed in the ancient times, allegorically portraying a man (namely, Sisyphus) rolling a piece of rock to the top of the hill and finding it downhill again, and the one experienced by the twentieth-century man who is deeply involved in the absurdity of his life. He knows what it really means to feel absurd without the hope to gain a heavenly knowledge or physical strength.

The idea of the Absurd is one aspect of Existentialism. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, for instance, referring to a mythological story, Albert Camus, an existentialist, portrays the absurd man of the twentieth-century, one who goes beyond the limits of rationality and looks despairingly into darkness. He dwells in a universe that is inexplicable; he cannot overcome the feeling of dread that overtakes him; and he experiences the absurdity of existence within a world where nothing lasts, where life must not necessarily have any meaning. Nonetheless, Camus’ own career shows that he goes beyond it, maintaining that “if the absurd had meaning, then it is only in so far as it is not agreed to” (cited in Glicksberg, 1965: 55). With all its suicidal implications, Camus never commits suicide and lives a life of an intellectual to die in a car accident.

2. Discussion

Pinter sees the funny side of the absurd. Since there is nothing for Pinter that is not funny, he employs a comic way of expression to laugh at everything, even at the tragic parts of existence. In an interview with Tennyson (cited in Esslin 1964), Pinter declares: “Everything is funny; the greatest earnest is funny; even tragedy is funny. And I think what I try to do in my plays is to get to this recognizable reality of the absurdity of what we do and how we behave and how we speak” (211-212).

Nonetheless, to Pinter, fun does not go so far as to reach the state of mere laughable farce. The comedy in his works is double-edged: one side of which tickles and the other side cuts painfully into the bones. He wrote of *The Caretaker* to delineate the idea of the Absurd:

I did not intend it to be merely a laughable farce. Where the comic and tragic (for want of a better word) are closely inter-woven, certain members of the audience will always give emphasis to the comic as opposed to the other, for by doing so they recognize the other out of existence As far as I’m concerned, *The Caretaker* is funny, up to a point. Beyond that point it ceases

to be funny, and it was because of that point that I wrote it. (Cited in Innes, 1992: 290)

In a Pinter play, the apparently funny scene is simultaneously frightening and inhumane in terms of what the characters are experiencing. And the superficial view of the speech and action of his plays can fool the individual who sees the tickling side of it. In *The Room* Rose is constantly talking to her husband while he never even opens his mouth once:

Rose: Here you are. This'll keep the cold out You can feel it in here. Still, the room keeps warm. It's better than the basement, any way. (7)

She continues:

Rose: But I think some one else has gone in now. I wouldn't live in that basement. Did you see the walls? They were running. . . (8).

Rose: It's good you were up here, I can tell you. It's good you weren't down there in the basement. . . (9).

Some critics claim that Pinter is absolutely absurd as they see the first side; while, on the contrary, some other critics repudiate Pinter as being an absurdist writer because they see the other side. For instance, Philip Hope-Wallace (1986) regards Pinter's works as absolutely absurd, saying that "These Pinter pieces, variously amusing according to taste, and often fraught with that fashionable commodity menace, are not really 'about' anything" (197). James Vinson (1973) states:

Pinter has indeed absorbed the insights of the absurdists. He has peopled his physically limited world with incomplete characters whose internal life has been fully exteriorized. Yet, for all that, he is not an absurdist. For, despite the self-mockery of his characters and the painful inadequacy of their personal resources, Pinter can still conceive of human qualities which are not merely ironic. (613)

Similarly, Martin Esslin (1964), placing Pinter among the other absurdist writers such as Adamov, Ionesco, Genet, Albee and Beckett, limits the notion to a certain point: "For Pinter, there is no contradiction between the desire for realism and the basic absurdity of the situations that inspire him. Like Ionesco, he regards life in its absurdity as basically funny--up to a point" (211).

The paradox that the absurdist convention does not deny meaning must not be disregarded when speaking about Pinter's plays or about any other absurdist writer. It is safer to say that Pinter's works are not absurd when we think of the dictionary meaning of the term. Absurd originally means out of harmony, in a musical context; hence its dictionary definition: "Out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical. In modern sense, esp. plainly opposed to reason, and hence, ridiculous, silly" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1970). But this is not the sense in which Camus has used the word, and in which it is used when we speak of the Theater of the Absurd. "In the Theater of the Absurd," writes Esslin (1964), "the human condition is presented to us as a concrete poetic image that has become flesh on the stage and that is at the same time broadly comic and deeply tragic" (241). Corrigan (1961) states,

Yet the defiant rejection of language as the main vehicle of the dramatic action, the onslaught on conventional logic and unilinear conceptual thinking in the Theater of Absurd is *by no means equivalent to a total rejection of all meaning* [italics added]. On the contrary, it constitutes an earnest endeavor to penetrate to deeper layers of meaning and to give a truer, because more complex, picture of reality. (241)

In fact, the absurd is a gun aimed at a deeper target, namely, a deeper perception of human existence. It reveals a more complex reality that is not comprehensible when observed superficially; such themes as loneliness, lack of communication, fear of the

world outside, and the terror of betrayal become the major concern of the absurdist writer. He sees a subverted world, a chaotic one where there are many, instead of one, absolute truths. It is a world where fantasy and the real are mixed up, tragic and comic are interwoven, the choice becomes a real catastrophe, and disconnected situations are what determine the individuals' prospect of the future life. In *Birthday Party* Goldberg and McCann are interrogating Stanley:

Goldberg: Where was your wife?

Stanley: In—

Goldberg: Answer.

Stanley (turning, crouched): What wife?

Goldberg: What have you done with your wife?

McCann: He's killed his wife!

Stanley: What wife?

Goldberg: Why did you never get married? (514)

Language fails to unite these individuals and an intentional deviation from communication leads them to the solitude of a fearful void. Thus, the bigger questions concerning man and his position in the universe emerge: what is man and where does he really belong? Does his existence mean anything? Is he able to know the nature of his being in a world where the relationship between being and nothingness, between different entities in an undefined system of life, is contingent and arbitrary?

The attempt to answer these questions associates the idea of the Absurd with the more philosophical explorations of Existentialism which opens up a new chapter in the history of man's struggle to define his being and to determine his position in the universe. Though not very potent to relieve man from absurdity and its accompanying feelings of loneliness, desperation and insecurity, it accords man, through a deeper and newer understanding of his being, of his world and of the whole universe, with his dynamic, unpredictable and haphazard life. It rephrases man's questions and redefines his feelings of loneliness, fear and trembling, desperation and insecurity not to replace them with more solacing feelings and emotions but to give them a more controlled and, at the same time, more apprehensible meaning.

The theme of nothingness is one of the major themes discussed in existentialism, which, while pervading the movement, shows a mutual tendency between the Absurd and Existentialism rejecting all of the philosophies, sciences, political theories, and religions which fail to reflect man's essence as a conscious being. As Lavine (2002) states:

Granted, says the existentialist, I am my own existence but this existence is absurd. To exist as a human being is inexplicable, and wholly absurd. Each of us is simply here, thrown into this time and place ... only contingently, and so my life is an absurd contingent fact.

Lavine continues,

I have stripped myself of all acceptable structure, the structure of knowledge, moral value, and human relationship; I stand in anguish at the edge of the abyss. I am looking into emptiness and the void, hovering over the abyss in fear and trembling and living the life of dread.

The feelings of anguish and dread are caused by the supposition that man is a miserable creature whose life is controlled by some super-human forces. Besides the earlier classical notion of Fate and the interference of the supernatural creatures like gods and goddesses that governed the lives of the ancient people, the later naturalism emphasized man's captivity in the hands of the two inner and outer forces--biology and environment. And the much later modernism amplified the fact that it is man's unconscious mind that mainly determines his conduct in his life.

Existentialism discovers and discusses the themes and topics which present a living crueller, darker, and more hopeless than a naturalistic or modern one. Nonetheless, Sartre, who developed the Existentialist movement, introduces a way to escape them. Sartre insists that “man confers meaning on the world; otherwise, it does not exist” (Glicksberg, 1965: 103). He believes that man recreates himself by action, and by acting he finds identity. In fact, his essence is what he obtains through action; hence, the unpredictability of one’s fragmented personality.

Existentialism had a great influence on the thinkers and artists of the time, an influence which led them to the revision of their perception concerning man and his position in the universe. This movement, also, touched many great writers who were interested in the question of being and nothingness. Sartre, being one of the pioneers of the modern existentialism, was a keen observer of existence, a man “who distinguished two fundamental asymmetrical ‘regions of being’, ‘being-in itself’ and ‘being-for-itself’, the latter having no definable essence and hence, as ‘nothing’ in itself, serves as the ground for freedom, creativity and action” (*Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 1995).

Life for an existentialist is arbitrary and meaningless; he is thrown into this world, dethroned, disarmed, and helpless. One of the basic existentialist standpoints is that existence precedes essence; has primacy over essence. That is why a sense of **thrownness** captures his thought, for no knowledge is obtainable regarding man and his future position, unless a certain period of time passes. Therefore, he has a permanent experience of bewilderment, fear of unknown, and despair; that is, nothingness or void: he has stripped himself of all acceptable structures, the structures of knowledge, moral values, and human relationship; he stands in anguish at the edge of the abyss. He is looking into emptiness and the void, hovering over the abyss in fear and trembling and living a life of dread. Rose in *The Room* has barricaded herself in her single bed-sitting room. Her only contact with the outside world is through the window. She is frightened to near hysteria by any noise outside the door or any stranger coming in. Her alienation from the outside world is so much that she cannot be sure whether the couple who come into the room tell the truth or not. Her rejection of any normal relationship with people has forced her to stay inside the room; she has returned to the womb in order not to face the stark realities of life. The two killers in *The Dumb Waiter* are usually cooped up in a room before they carry out their killing.

The existentialists show how frivolous and cheap the existence is, but they are not able to show a better escape. Death may be the only way while the fear of death itself adds to the bitterness of the situation. “The existentialist hero has infinite possibilities to choose from,” Glicksberg (1965) states, “but his range of freedom is cruelly curtailed by his vision of nothingness and the dread that this vision calls forth” (100). The minimum profit which is achieved is that he is saved from the void through involvement and action. As Gascoigne (1962) declares, “personal integrity and personal relationships are the only protection from the void” (53).

Pinter, like existentialists is involved in the discord of living. His characterization figuratively reveals the same anguish apparent in Existentialism. The characters, in his earlier plays, are mostly isolated people who have sought out refuge in a small room, trying to escape an unknown danger. Rose is happy in her warm and cozy room, the coziness which might in any moment be turned into a bitter condition. The preoccupation with the thought of betrayal, the fear of danger and loss of ease and comfort, all portray existential anguish discernible in the play. Rose in her long one way conversation shows her fear:

Rose: If they ever ask you, Bert, I'm quite happy where I am. We're quiet, we're all

right And we are not bothered. And nobody bothers us (9).

Pinter's characters are unable to predict the danger. They are circumscribed by threats, but they know nothing of their nature. They are represented in Pinter's plays at their utmost climactic state when they are forced to meet the basic problems of their being. "It is this preoccupation with the problem of self," writes Esslin (1964), "that separates Harold Pinter from the social realists among the young British playwrights of his generation with whom he shares the ability to put contemporary speech on the stage" (221). Gus and Ben stay in the basement not knowing when and who they are ordered to kill; so towards the end of *The Dumb Waiter* when Gus goes to drink a glass of water, Ben is given the order to kill him.

We see Pinter's characters in the process of their essential adjustment to the world, at the point when they are to find answers to their questions to solve their basic problems of existence. However, there is a big difference between the pure existentialist writers like Sartre and Camus, who create mere existential characters who bear great philosophical weights on their shoulders, and Pinter whose real interest is to show man in a state of physical conflict. Man is depicted by Pinter in real situations and at the moment of misery.

The metaphysical questions and discussions have little place in Pinter's plays; they are only inferred from the characters' actions. He replaces the abstract ideas or philosophies by the concrete representation of man involved in the misery, either physical or metaphysical. Walter Ker (cited in Gales 1972) believes that

Pinter is the only contemporary playwright who designs his plays so that they will function according to [the] existential principle. He holds that *sequence is of extreme importance* and that concepts are inconsequential. For instance, existentialism pictures man as living in a void, yet refrains from conceptualizing this void. (75)

In *The Room*, Pinter examines man's life that is not always perceptible and predictable. Security and peace are two vulnerable states of being. No stability is guaranteed, and danger is lurking outside the door. As John Pesta (cited in Gale 1971) reaffirms, "In Pinter's drama there is typically a menacing "usurper", a figure who undermines the existential security of those about him while his own existence is simultaneously being undermined" (67). The Negro represents the menacing usurper who undermines Rose's existential security, while, at the same time, his own security is undermined by Bert, Rose's husband. Dorfman (cited in Gregory 1996) believes that in *The Room*, "the audience feels that beneath this world with no apparent contradictions (although in fact they are there, hidden, but cannot be easily located) there is another reality which, submerged in the unconscious, is afraid to emerge" (339).

The Birthday Party is another example of the existential drama in which the character's security is undermined. There is an absurd attempt to escape from one's own limitations, one's past, and past failures, but they are always there to captivate the individual. There is no exit, and the main point is that the individuals are not able to perceive their limitations: it is the lack of self-perception that causes the tragedy. If Stanley could have perceived his position, his abilities and weaknesses, he would have escaped the final destruction. But this is only one layer of the play's meaning. Exploring deeper in the play, the metaphysical anguish of man's existence is clearly revealed. Pinter, very cunningly, looks at a particular side of existence, and as an absurdist writer and through his humor suggests that Stanley's victimization is caused at the result of his only crime that was his birth; thus, living itself becomes the great sin that man commits. Pinter, therefore, shows "how frivolous life is", and the only exit, observed in his early plays, is the door which opens to destruction. As Walter Ker (cited in Gale 1972) says,

“*The Birthday Party* is a ‘blind’ encounter between parties who are acting purely because they exist; they have not reached a stage of ‘essence’” (64), which in Pinter’s world is achievable ironically in complete victimization.

The Dumb Waiter, like many other Pinter plays, follows the same triangular human relationship by which the nature of the man-to-man connection is analyzed. It probes into the essence of man’s position in the universe and his inquiry for knowledge, following the same path towards metaphysical and existential anguish, seen in *The Room* and *The Birthday Party*. The two characters on the stage, though apparently limited and undeveloped, examine a deeper and wider scope of human existence in which man is a play-thing employed by some superior beings to play their roles on the stage like puppets of no importance.

Existentialism, in fact, tries to establish an ideology which tries to reject the doctrines of determinism, an ideology which puts man in the center of life. Nonetheless, the paradox lies in the fact that our life is limited both by our existence and by the others:

It is our existence itself (whatever we do) that limits the freedom of the other, and not even suicide can modify that original situation ... The fact of my self-affirmation makes of the other an object and an instrument, and this original theme only is played with all its variations, in all our relations. (Blackham, 1961, 125)

In *The Dumb Waiter* the metaphysical anguish occurs to the character who asks many questions, inquiring for knowledge, attempting to step beyond one’s limitations, an attempt which is futile in existentialism. Gus is the one who commits the crime and wants to find the cause-and-effect relationship in the course of the events, while, since the effect in existentialism precedes the cause, reasoning is an absurd thing. However, Gus’s desire for knowledge is discernible from the very beginning of the play:

Ben. Kaw!

What about this? Listen to this!

He refers to the paper

A man of eighty-seven wanted to cross the road. But there was a lot of traffic, see? He couldn’t see how he was going to squeeze through. So he crawled under a lorry.

Gus. He what?

Ben. He crawled under a lorry. A stationary lorry.

Gus. No?

Ben. The lorry started and ran over him.

Gus. Go on!

Ben. That’s what it says here.

Gus. Get away.

Ben. It’s enough to make you want to puke, isn’t it?

Gus. Who advised him to do a thing like that?

Ben. A man of eighty-seven crawling under a lorry!

Gus. It’s unbelievable.

Ben. It’s down here in black and white.

Gus. Incredible. (Pinter, 1959, 37)

As it is seen in this opening conversation, Gus questions the possibility of that event in the society. He is looking for the cause, the origin or motivation by asking, “Who advised him to do a thing like that?” Meanwhile, Ben accepts it as it is without questioning its possibility. “It’s down here in black and white”, he simply states.

Gus wants to know more about his job, about the disorders he sees in the basement or those who are on the upper floor. It is this perpetual questioning that candidates him

as the victim of the final scene.

Gus. You got any cigarettes? I think you've run out.

He throws the packet high up and leans forward to catch it.

I hope it won't be a long job this one.

Aiming carefully, he flips the packet under his bed.

Oh, I wanted to ask you something? . . . (Pinter, 1959, 37).

On the next page Gus continues to ask questions:

Gus. What time is he getting in touch?

Ben reads.

What time is he getting in touch?

Ben. What's the matter with you? It could be any time.

Any time . . . (Pinter, 1959, 38)

.....

Gus (*moves to the foot of Ben's bed*). Well, I was going to ask you a question.

Ben. What?

Gus. Have you noticed the time that tank takes to fill?

Ben. What tank?

Gus. In the lavatory. (Pinter, 1959, 38)

Here Gus is after knowledge so as to decrease the fear of unknown in himself while Ben, by evading the thought of danger, does not permit the fear to capture his mind. This, of course, makes the whole difference. As Austin Quigley (1978) explains,

The play's focus on the incompleteness of the character's knowledge and control does not culminate in an assertion that the pursuit of knowledge and the exercise of control are consequently useless. It demonstrates instead the danger of losing sight of the inevitable incompleteness and exactness of our knowledge in almost all situations in which we find ourselves involved. (10)

The increasing questionings of Gus evokes a feeling of doubt in Ben, too, until the dumb waiter, with its queer commands, appears. Now Ben must choose between the two: either to work on the basis of orders received or to act on the knowledge of justification for those orders. "Ben, who clearly prefers the former choice", says Quigley (1978), "is repeatedly confronted by Gus, who clearly prefers the latter" (4). Thus, the desire for knowledge itself causes the final catastrophe. If Ben had the knowledge to respond to Gus's questions, there would be no conflict at all, and Gus could act more freely, or die knowingly.

But life in Pinter's view, like all other absurdist-existentialist writers, is a big game in which everything happens arbitrarily, and the gun that you have aimed at the other, may suddenly turn back at yourself. As Buck (1997) states, ". . . the language of the text demands that we participate in a probe for meaning, but a probe that leads us down paths that are all possible at once, but questionable. In other words, we see possibilities but are sure of absolutely nothing" (45-46).

In all, the desire for knowledge and the inability to obtain the necessary knowledge have become real disasters in the world of existence. That is why the existential absurdity dominates the mind and soul of the modern life. If people in our time fall into the abyss of desperation and loneliness, it is because they find nothing, neither on Earth nor in Heaven. The only thing to which they can cling as a shelter from the fears of the earthly living is a small room, a room which, in most cases, fails to protect its own dwellers.

3. Conclusion

Pinter portrays human condition in its wider modern sense, with all its arbitrariness. Therefore, if we are looking for some common characteristics to categorize him as an

absurdist-existentialist writer, there is enough evidence to trace these characteristics, especially in his earlier plays. It was because of those earlier plays that Martin Esslin has placed him among the great masters of the avant-garde Theatre of the Absurd. Nonetheless, categorizing and labeling his works, though helpful to some readers in understanding them, do not and cannot limit Pinter's multi-dimensional approach to modern life, an approach which is quintessentially **Pinteresque** or **Pinterish**. In fact, this article has tried to enumerate some of the characteristics by which a reader can cherish himself to call Pinter an Absurdist-Existentialist playwright. However, the multiplicity of his outlook towards life and his unique method of presenting this multiple outlook must not be ignored by the reader who is looking for truth and meaning in his works.

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