



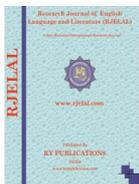
## REALISM, NATURALISM AND ABSURDISM IN THE PLAYS OF HAROLD PINTER

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### Abstract

Since the ancient times up to the present day, reality has been variously presented in different literary genres. But the convention of realism and naturalism, where everything appears to reflect normal life, practically extends back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and were adopted by most European and American playwrights as well as English. Plays as different as Henrick Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* and Arnold Wesker's *Roots* all present a visual stage picture reflecting the life of their time. The Nobel Laureate, Harold Pinter's treatment of realism is very unique in the sense that often in his plays the stage setting, 'the room', approximates to photographic realism, but it takes on a heightened significance. In his major plays, there are the realistic setting and domestic details on the one hand, and the poetic and psychological realism on the other. Apart from the realistic setting, the characters and the language are very simple and ordinary and reflect everyday reality. But these realities are often intensified and heightened to reflect another level of reality which often appears as absurd. Pinter's plays, indeed, reflect the real situation of human being in the present-day society with various complications of modern life. Realism as mirrored in the plays of Pinter can also be perceived through his use of various non-verbal communication processes – silence, pause etc.

**Key words:** realism, naturalism, absurdism, poetic realism.

### Introduction

Harold Pinter (1930 – 2008) was a man of multi-faceted genius – a playwright, a poet, a producer and a brilliant actor. Before he began writing plays, Pinter spent a number of years as an actor mostly touring and working during the 1950s. As an actor Pinter became well acquainted with the essentials of the drama in those days – character in modern dress, in recognizable relationships, speaking a language that everybody could understand, all set in a domestic interior. These conventions of simple naturalism, where everything appears to reflect normal life, extend back to the

social-realist playwrights of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Pinter adopted his own experience without much question. Pinter explained, "I have usually begun a play in quite a simple manner; found a couple of characters in a particular context, thrown them together and listened to what they said, keeping my nose to the ground...I've never started a play from any kind of abstract idea or theory." However, in his plays ordinary matters and conventions are heightened, intensified and taken beyond what is normally expected of everyday events.

Pinter's world is different from that of the social-realist playwrights. Pinter does not primarily

concentrate on the social problems unlike that of the social-realists. He is more concerned with the fundamental human situations. Actually, Pinter's characters live at the extreme end of their tether haunted by the horrors and anxieties of the inter-war and post-war world. Contemporary socio-political insecurities undermine the stability of Pinter's characters. Pinter, growing up as a Jewish boy in London has himself experienced fear, isolation and anxiety during Hitler's time and so these networks of feelings form the basic background of the emotional texture of his plays.

Pinter has realized that the harassed Western men have lost their identities and certitudes. He does not present the illogical world in a logical frame as Sartre and Camus did. His characters do not progress logically and Pinter actually throws logic away to present the illogical world. Pinter has explained that his writing process is one of 'finding out' about his characters by following how they proceed from his initial image of them. But this is not an arbitrary process or one that leads to 'Absurd' theatre, where characters do not conform to recognizable psychological behaviour. There is a psychologic to how characters speak and behave in Pinter, but not everything is explained in an obvious way.

The things can be explained from a psychological point of view. Pinter is an acute observer of human behaviour and is well aware that the individual psyche is very complex and does not always operate according to reason. For Pinter, there is no contradiction between the desire for realism and the basic absurdity of the situations that inspire him. Pinter tells, "There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. The thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false..." Pinter records the world around him as dispassionately as he can, but, this is a world recorded by him, seen through his eyes, which notice and select each detail by the inner law of his personality. The external world, objectively and meticulously recorded, must, of necessity, be fragmentary, disconnected, unmotivated and without a clearly discernible structure: segments of reality are like that. But, because these fragments

have been noted down by a highly individual personality they will coalesce into an organic structure, expressing its own inner consistencies – obeying its own inner law as an individual's personal vision of his own personal world.

Hence the dual nature of Pinter's work, the simultaneous co-existence within it of the most extreme naturalism of surface description and of a dreamlike, poetic feeling, which, as indeed often happens in dreams, is, by no means inconsistent with an uncanny clarity of outline. Whereas Kafka and Beckett are moving in a surreal world of acknowledged phantasy and dream, Pinter essentially remains on the firm ground of everyday reality, even though in some of his earlier plays symbolic or even supernatural elements are later introduced into the action (the symbolic blind Negro in *The Room*, the mysteriously operated food lift in *The Dumb Waiter*). But even in these plays the starting point is always a very real situation with the most closely observed real, even hyper-naturalistic dialogue. And yet, Pinter is not a naturalistic. This is the paradox of his artistic personality. The dialogue and the characters are real, but the over-all effect is one of mystery, of uncertainty, of poetic ambiguity.

#### Discussion

*The Caretaker* has the solid reality of the circumstances and characters; but, this reality has also all the indeterminacy, open-endedness and mystery of real life which becomes the basis for its effectiveness on a higher plane – the plane of the poetic image, the metaphor for a greater and more general truth. From the beginning of the play, realistic detail is a most striking feature. The setting of an attic room filled with a vast amount of clutter, all easily identifiable, has to be taken as a place where somebody lives. The physical details of the room are used in the most natural way up until Mick hurls the Buddha statue against the gas stove. "In *The Caretaker*, there is a continuous motif of place-names and local landmarks which keep the characters in a very real world. This is 1950s urban London, which is always being evoked in a legion of references: the North Circular, the Great West Road, Sidcup, Acton and so on". The environment of a specific room in a defined locality provides a realistic

setting for an exploration of characters who are each granted an intense psychological realism, mainly through the medium of language.

Apparently bizarre or comic business in *The Caretaker* should not be regarded as simply 'absurd'. It is not meant to expose the meaninglessness of all action (as is the case in the rituals of Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*). Generally, it reveals the truth about a relationship on stage. The existentialist dilemma of the characters, Davies, Aston and Mick, is underlined by their lack of positive 'identity'. What Pinter, in his search for a higher degree of realism in the theatre, rejects in the 'well-made play' is precisely that it provides too much information about the background and motivation of each character. It is significant that we are not introduced to the characters by way of a formal exposition. We do not know why Aston has brought Davies into the house. Likewise, Mick's motives are never explained. Davies, especially, is a remarkable example of confused and uncertain identity. Above all, what Pinter presents in *The Caretaker* is a revealing awareness of how people, especially less educated people, actually speak. What might appear to be an absurd sequence of non sequiturs can be, in reality, a psychologically accurate depiction of mental processes.

The theme of insecurity of human life looms large in Pinter's first and second plays *The Room* and *The Birthday Party*. *The Room* takes place in the humdrum lower-class apartment of a middle-aged woman, Rose. Rose's status as the occupant of the room becomes insecure with the appearance of the young couple Mr. and Mrs. Sands who claim that they have been told that Rose's room is vacant. Rose's position is further questioned by the appearance of the blind Negro, Riley who is beaten mercilessly by Rose's husband, Bert. All through Pinter has dealt with the theme of man's insecurity, fear and incomprehensible threat.

Again, in *The Birthday Party* we are at once thrown in a realistic atmosphere. The stage set reflects a living room of a real house, with three doors, a kitchen hatch, table and chairs. Petey reads a newspaper. We are given cornflakes, fried bread and tea. We see Meg going shopping (later to be

seen emptying her bag). Lulu 'powders her nose' from a compact. Stanley smokes cigarettes. Goldberg and Mc Cann arrive with suitcase. Whisky is brought in for the party. There is an equally strong sense of an outside world. It is important to appreciate the solidity and actuality of this world, which is so carefully structured, because of what goes within it. The action of the characters and their behaviour towards each other take on a heightened significance largely because the stylized language and bizarre events are placed in a real world.

In *The Birthday Party*, the logical progression of the action, as characters are shown to be affected by their relationships with each other, takes on an almost surreal dimension because of the dichotomy between stage naturalism and stylized dialogue. The 'reality' of the individual psyche, of personal identity, is shown to be a fragile entity and this is the more disturbing because of the banality of the setting. But the multiple interpretations (allegorical, metaphorical etc.) are, in fact, no contradiction, they can be seen merely as different aspects of the same, immensely complex and immensely 'true' poetic metaphor for a basic human situation. And it is precisely the realism, the reality of the concrete situation portrayed, which gives the poetic image its solidity and power. Goldberg and Mc Cann, it is true, add a dimension of the surreal by combining a stylized language, a stage double-act, and an unspecified mission which is obviously related to a pursuit of Stanley. Thus, the play, which began with a perfectly conventional setting – the living room – and recognizable characters, moves into a shockingly different level of 'realism'. That is why Martin Esslin convincingly argues that "A play like *The Birthday Party* can only be understood as a complex poetic image. Such an image exists, simultaneously, on a multitude of levels..."

*The Homecoming* initially shocked its audiences by the apparently inexplicable motivations of its main characters: why does Ruth agree to leave her comfortable family in America, and why does Teddy do nothing to stop her? However, on closer analysis we find that the theme of reality and the fantasy of wishfulfilment is brilliantly merged in the play. On either level the play makes sense. It is fairly clear from what is said about

Ruth in the play (she used to work as a nude model), that she may well have been a prostitute, or very nearly one before Teddy met and married her. She describes America as an arid desert infested by insects. It is clear from the text that her marriage to Teddy is on the point of breakdown. Teddy, it seems, is also well conversant with family tradition of prostitution, as Jessie, his mother appears to be a whore (as indicated by Sam's speech). Hence Teddy's lack of surprise and cool acceptance of the new situation would be quite natural. Thus, apart from its metaphorical plane of wishfulfilment, the play is also valid on a realistic level. Roger Michell, who directed the play at the Royal National Theatre in 1997, describes in an interview: "I'm approaching this play in a totally naturalistic way...I see it as an entirely naturalistic, behavioural account of what happens in a particular house over two days. There's nothing weird about it." After all, the main focus in the play is on basic human needs: the need to be recognized, appreciated, wanted. All the characters apart from Teddy, reveal their insecurity and expose their emotional weakness.

All these plays, as we see, are marked by simple characterization, realistic dialogue and sheer ordinary setting. In later plays such as *Old Times* and *No Man's Land*, where the domestic setting is much more up-market and middle-class, the basic formula of intrusion into a space and a relationship is the same.

### Use of Silences and Pauses

One of the important themes of Pinter's plays is the problem of communication. He finds that this problem of communication, especially between family members or friends is a vital problem. The difficulties that characters experience with language are underlined by the pauses and silences for which Pinter's dialogue has become renowned. The pauses and silences are silent but pregnant tools of communication. They are not dead-stops in the communicative process among his characters and, in fact, communicate something that cannot be expressed through words.

Some critics have accused Pinter for his lack of belief in the utility of language. But, in reality, rather than finding language incapable of communication, Pinter holds our intensions, limitations, fears and lack of substance within us to be the chief reasons behind the breakdown of communication among human beings. Pinter even goes on to the extent of stating that language is a means of concealment and the speech that we hear is, in fact, a kind of silence where words are used not to reveal what we want to say but to conceal what we do not want to say. Consequently, much of the dialogue in a Pinter play is strategic, a means of self-protection. Silence, for Pinter, is an essential, an integral part, and often the climax of his use of language. Indeed, the pauses and the silences are the successful devices used by Pinter to communicate his perception of reality around us.

Pinter's silences and pauses are the bridges through which people reach out to others and contain more information than what can be expressed through words. There is the climactic 'long silence' at the end of *The Caretaker* when Davies's pleading for permission to remain in Aston's room elicits no answer. This 'long silence' silence is the death of hope for the old man, Aston's refusal to forgive him, his expulsion from the warmth of a home – death. But, as the curtain falls before he is seen to leave, it may also be the long silence before that final word of forgiveness is pronounced: the 'line with no words in it' thus has all the ambiguity and complexity of true poetry and it is also a metaphor, an image of overwhelming power. *The Birthday Party* starts with a silence as Petey enters through the door with a paper in his hand. It is not Petey but Meg who breaks the silence and calls out "Is that you, Petey?" Petey does not answer and a great vacuum is created as there are pauses even after repeated questions from Meg. In fact, Meg's first three questions seem at first to repeat the same enquiry, but a slight change in the use of words reveals that the questions she asks are not only questions but a challenge which can no longer be avoided and Petey has to answer her. The pause after Meg's first question signifies that the husband and the wife are not in good terms with each other. And the second pause confirms that Petey has a

repugnance for Meg. These two pauses prepare the readers for the unpleasant answers which Petey gives Meg. Thus, the pauses highlight the drama underneath the seemingly inconsequential exchange of the information; they hint at the breach in the relationship between Meg and Petey.

### **Conclusion**

Pinter's approach to realism is unique as reality is reflected in various ways in his plays. Often, as we have seen, starting points in his plays are familiar, real and natural. But Pinter does not remain confined to the everyday reality only and from the initial familiar world we are taken, as we have seen, to a world which appears to be illogical, bizarre and absurd. Actually, these are other levels of reality – poetic reality, metaphorical reality, psychological reality etc. And Pinter's unique style of multivalent realism made him a dramatist set apart, *sui generis*, and this is what he has remained.

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