

The Basement by Harold Pinter: Why the ‘Absurd’ Is Never- ending A Thing?

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ABSTRACT

Harold Pinter and other Absurdist writers were the aftermaths of the World Wars. The hollowness of claims of unity, the world being a beautiful place, greatness and development, and above all, humanity shattered with the two World Wars. Pinter got ‘the absurdist’ nerve right on the stage devoid of any possibility for relief. Also, the bare minimum that a man can do to find escape is following his will without thinking of the consequence. Pinter’s characters are always in a war for possession of something or the other, a flat, a woman or both. *The Basement* features two ‘friends’, Tim Law and Charles Stott and their ‘shared’ female interest Jane. The plot revolves around the competition for possession of a basement flat and the girl between the two men and the shifting attitude of the girl herself. Pinteresque mode of expression is likely to manipulate both language and silence to the cause. When characters handle a ‘should be’ and ‘could be’ two- way dialogue single -handedly, it is either the others’ failure in or the speaker’s denial to accept communication. Absurdity lies in this very reiteration, the monotony of suffering and the helplessness increased with the fall of each day. The Absurdist Theatre features these attributes personified in the manner of Miracle and Morality plays of the European Middle Ages. Pinter’s ‘Pinteresque’ plays create this magic within the four walls of a house. The present paper is an effort to get an insight into Pinter’s presentation of the world as it is, bare and rough, having absurdity in profundity, with special mention of his television play *The Basement*.

Keywords: The Absurdist Theatre, Pinteresque, Language and Silence, Sisyphean Task

Introduction

This malaise in front of man’s own inhumanity, this incalculable letdown when faced with the image of what we are, this ‘nausea’, as a contemporary writer calls it, also is the Absurd.

(Camus, 1942)

Harold Pinter, the British playwright had a fifty- years long writing career, which consists of *Homecoming* (1964), *The Room* (1957), *The Birthday Party* (1957), *Betrayal* (1978), *The Servant* (1963), *The Go- Between* (1971), *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1981),

The Trial (1993), *Sleuth* (2007), *The Lover* (1962), *Tea Party* (1964), *The Basement* (1966), *Landscape* (1967), *Family Voices* (1980), *The New World Order* (1991), *Ashes to Ashes* (1996) and other plays. His unique style got named after him, 'Pinteresque', having characteristics of meanness, dark reality, multi-faceted use of language and stage set-up, circular structure and such.

Pinter got 'the absurdist' nerve right on the stage devoid of any possibility for relief. Also, the bare minimum that a man can do to find escape is following his will without thinking of the consequence. *The Basement* features two 'friends', Tim Law and Charles Stott and their 'shared' female interest Jane. The plot revolves around the competition for possession of a basement flat and the girl between the two men and the shifting attitude of the girl herself. Law and Stott are long time acquaintances and, in the play, they live in the same flat with the girl Jane, who, in the beginning is Stott's girlfriend and at the end, Law's.

The Plot

The play opens with Stott and Jane waiting outside of a basement flat in heavy rains. Law is the owner at the beginning. He welcomes his friend with all enthusiasm and hospitality. Later, Stott tells him of Jane and asks permission for them to live there. Law is reluctant but the two guests seem to be way more comfortable and go to bed together. In the in between scenes, Law and Jane are seen in cozy and confidential conversation. He tries to ask her about her relationship with Stott. Meanwhile, he tries to influence Stott as well, telling him that Jane is immature and unfaithful. It is evident through their responses that there is no serious emotional attachment between them as Jane is concerned with having a shelter and financial support and Stott has a caretaker as Jane provides him food and drink and such.

In one scene, the two men are modifying the interior of the house. The one who wins in the race acquires the ownership and arranges the properties according to his taste. Jane remains with the winning side and does her duty remaining neutral. At the end of the play, Stott has the full possession of the basement but he loses Jane. The scene in the beginning is repeated but with Law this time. He and Jane are standing outside the door in heavy rains and law rings the bell. Stott opens the door and is enthralled at his 'friend's' sight. The whole scenario is likely to be repeated. Life is, after all, a 'Sisyphean Task', tiresome and never ending till death, no one reaching to the accomplishment peak.

At one point, Jane is begging to Law to throw Stott out of the house. She says that they (Law and Jane) were happy and it was 'their' home, *Why don't you tell him to go? We had such a lovely home. We had such a cosy home. It was so warm. Tell him to go. It is your place. Then we could be happy again. Like we used to. Like we used to. In our first blush of love. Then we could be happy again, like we used to.* (Pinter, 1966, p 57) This sequence hints towards the whole action being repeated for umpteen times, the present piece being just one slice of the whole event that goes on and on. Jane is the one who is benefitted every time as she has her needs of shelter and money fulfilled whoever she is with.

Characterization and Style

Pinter's characters are always in a war for possession of something or the other, a flat, a woman or both. In *The Basement*, the two men race and the winner gets the girl. Later he tries to get the accommodation. They are at ease with the role reversal and switching positions as well. They accept the bare reality, the fact that there is no much options left out there. They have to be content with whatever they have and whatever they can snatch easily. They move

in as a guest, beg for shelter and then try to dominate. At one point, it is the original owner that begs for mercy. Pinter has to tell the sad reality; that's how the world goes. According to Esslin, *The television public was disconcerted by the difficulty of deciding whether the action was real or imagined. In fact, Pinter's intention seems to have been the creation of an almost abstract piece of fantasy, a permutation in the author's own mind, of all the possibilities of one archetypal situation.* (Esslin, 1961, p 212)

The 'Pinteresque'

Pinteresque mode of expression is likely to manipulate both language and silence to the cause. When characters handle a 'should be' and 'could be' two-way dialogue single-handedly, it is either the others' failure in or the speaker's denial to accept communication. Long pauses, repetition of dialogues and sequences refer to refraining unnecessary verbosity. The mundane happenings of our lives that we are compelled to repeat on a daily basis just to carry on. Nasrullah Mambrol in his "Analysis of Harold Pinter's Plays" puts, "The language of his characters, bumbling, repetitive, circular, is actually more realistic- more like actual human speech- than the precise and rhetorically patterned dialogue found in what is considered to be 'realistic' drama. Yet that actual language of human beings, when isolated on the stage, underlines the absurdity of human aspirations and becomes both wonderfully comic and pathetic as it marks the stage of human beings' inability to communicate what is most important to them." (Mambrol. 2019)

In the first scene when Stott and Jane go to bed, leaving Law alone as he is non-existent, one can sense his disappointment over the scenario. Having Stott, he had thought of a good company to spend time with. But with Jane, he knows that he will remain lonely and a caste-out. Yet, he is reluctant to admit it, *I was feeling quite lonely, actually. It is lonely sitting here, night after night. Mind you, I am very happy here. Remember that place we shared? That awful place in Chatsworth Road? I've come a long way since then. I bought this flat cash down.* (Pinter, 1966, p 51)

The 'Absurd'

Law and Stott had been 'friends' once. But they two parted ways due to reasons unknown in the play. Law has got a big house. But no one to live with. Initially he admits it. Later his male ego makes him deny it in front of 'others'. One woman in the house changes the equations, it is evident in Pinter's *The Homecoming* also, where the arrival of Ruth shifts all the spotlights towards her and the male embers of the family compete to get her. Authority of material is essential above everything, that is the reality of the modern era. Pinter doesn't hesitate even for once while admitting it on stage.

In the year 1967, on February 20, Pinter himself played the role of Stott in the BBC 2's Theatre 625 Series production of the television play *The Basement*. The actor in Pinter paved the way of betterment for stage direction and dialogues. Pinter also played Krapp in Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* in a production at the Upstairs theatre, Royal Court, London in 2006, where he had to deliver no dialogues on stage. The play is about an old man listening to a tape-recorder playing cassettes that he himself recorded at younger age. At this point of life, Krapp has no companion but his own voice. The gruesomeness of silence that Pinter felt closely, is reflected in his own plays. It was just a tape recorder playing, in his own younger voice and he had to act in silence, only through expressions.

Martin Esslin in *the absurdist Theatre* says,

Of all major dramatists of the Absurd, Harold Pinter represents the most original combination of avant- grade and traditional elements. The world of his imagination is that of a poet under the shadow of Kafka, Joyce (whose play exile he brilliantly adapted and directed), and Beckett. But he translates this vision into theatrical practice with the technique of split- second timing and the epigrammatic wit of the masters of English high comedy from Congreve to Oscar Wilde and Noel Coward. (Esslin, 1961, p 217)

Albert Camus in his phenomenal book *The Myth of Sisyphus* calls the very never-ending suffering as ‘absurd’. All the efforts prove to be in vain. We all are rolling a stone up a hill and it will roll down again every day. Next day, we will start again, with a make- believe enthusiasm and positivity which will burn out by the evening once again. Law, Stott, Jane- all are doing the never -ending task for survival. The circle of days and nights are repetitive; so are materialistic desires. Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* is often described as a play where ‘nothing happens twice’. The play ends where it starts. The wait is not over and no conclusion or solution is provided. In *Endgame* also, the first and last scene depict all the characters remaining still and mundane as they know that the whole action is to be recreated next day and the day after tomorrow and so on,

The end is in the beginning and yet you go on. Perhaps I could go on with my story, end it and begin another. (Beckett, 1957)

Aleks Matosoglu in his article *The Theatre of The Absurd: Beckett and Pinter* say, “It is in the notion of absurd plays to depict life as it is, in the way that it is never done before. In doing so, what is reflected is but the anguish of the obligation of living a life which is completely absurd. What is seen and felt on stage is not different from the lurking sense of despair that we try to avoid in the course of lives...” (Matosoglu, 2012)

Conclusion

To summarize, Absurdity lies in this very reiteration, the monotony of suffering and the helplessness increased with the fall of each day. The Absurdist Theatre features these attributes personified in the manner of Miracle and Morality plays of the European Middle Ages. Pinter’s ‘Pinteresque’ plays create this magic within the four walls of a house. A single set up, a few characters, and the unthinkable happens. It doesn’t even need the quintessential of drama. Words are no bar, silence bespeaks the unsaid, no heroes are made out of the characters, life happens as it is- devoid of glorification.

Harold Pinter and other Absurdist writers were the aftermaths of the World Wars. The hollowness of claims of unity, the world being a beautiful place, greatness and development, and above all, humanity shattered with the two World Wars. People needed to express what they felt, how they tried to cope up with a whole new concept of country, society, religion, individuality and such. Pinter shows man as himself only, his real self, a ‘social animal’, social yet animal. Who has some basic needs and he lets his ‘animals’ voice and fulfill these needs. Dr. Kaushik Kr. Deka in his article *Exploring Absurdism in Harold Pinter’s Plays* says, “As Pinter focuses more sharply on the wriggle for existence, each of his successive hero victims seem more vulnerable than the last. Villain assaults victims in a telling and murderous idiom...If Pinter has repeatedly been name as Beckett’s heir on the English stage, it is precisely

because the characters of both lead lives of complex and unique desperation, - a desperation expressed with extreme economy of theatrical resources.” (Deka. 2019. p 420-421)

A human being is a hero, villain, victim- all in one. He fights for survival as the sole motive. That is what they call as ‘absurd’ as we cannot differentiate a man from his struggles. They shape his character, his motives, his individuality and Pinter portrays this complex mix on the stage with proficiency.

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