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Pinter's use of silence, pause and language in *The Birthday Party*

Enamul Kabir Pasa

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sripat Singh College, Jiaganj, Murshidabad, West Bengal, India

* Corresponding Author: **Enamul Kabir Pasa**

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Abstract

As a dramatist Harold Pinter occupies a unique place. His plays are ordinary, simple, yet fascinating and enigmatic. *The Birthday Party* is a very popular play of Pinter. Pinter provides very little information about the background and motives of his characters here. We can not be sure about anything in the play. One important aspect of the play is the lack of communication, the characters resorting to silence and pause. Apparently, these silences and pauses are break in the communication. But Pinter has a definite strategy in using these. They can communicate what cannot be communicated through words. This paper attempts to review the use of silence, pause and nonsensical language in *The Birthday Party* and Pinter's objectives and strategy behind the abundance of silences and pauses in the play.

Keywords: communication, nonsensical language, pause, silence

Introduction

The paper attempts to focus on the use of language, silence and pause in Harold Pinter's play, *The Birthday Party*. As a playwright Pinter was fascinated by the multifarious use of language as a means of communication – words and their rhythm, repeated use of silences and pauses in his plays etc. The problems that will be addressed here are – why are Pinter's plays full of baffling language, silences and pauses? Are they means of non-communication? Or, are there some underlying subtexts behind these breaks in communication? The main aim of this assignment is to delve deep into the language, silences and pauses used in the play, *The Birthday Party* and to investigate Pinter's intentions behind all this peculiarity. Through textual analysis, the paper attempts to verify the hypothesis that Pinter's use of apparently nonsensical language has certain logic and his silences and pauses are not break in communication but they communicate too well what cannot be communicated through words.

Harold Pinter-the Playwright

Harold Pinter (1930 – 2008), the Nobel Laureate in Literature, was a playwright, a poet, a producer and a versatile actor. He was not only a playwright but he spent a number of years as an actor mostly touring and working during the 1950s. As an actor Pinter had the opportunity to be enriched with the theatrical performance and dramatic art. While acting Pinter had a closer view of the dramatic world. When he started writing for the stage, Pinter became specially interested in ordinary domestic life, simple characters and the conversations. These conventions of simple naturalism, where everything appears to reflect normal life, extend back to the social-realist playwrights of the 19th century. Though Pinter is generally considered to be an absurdist playwright, his plays often starts with simple, familiar and homely situations and characters. The action of most of his plays takes place in a room or home, which is the central metaphor in Pinter. 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.

As a playwright Pinter's position is interesting and unique. His world is different from that of the social-realist or naturalist playwrights. Pinter does not primarily concentrate on the social problems unlike that of the social-realists. He is more concerned with the basic 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 people in the post-war time have lost their identities and certitudes. However, 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 psychology to how characters speak and behave in Pinter, but not everything is explained in an obvious way. When Pinter's plays were staged for the first time, they created mixed reactions among the audience. Many could not grasp at the meaning and intention of the plays. However, gradually Pinter became very popular and people began to think about the themes and issues of his plays. Pinter's genius as a playwright can be understood from his plays like *The Room*, *The Birthday Party*, *The Caretaker*, *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Homecoming*, *Old Times* etc. In all his plays Pinter presents some characters and situations without clearly specifying them. That is why he is sometimes charged of deliberately withholding information. However, the apparently baffling and bewildering elements can be explained from several perspectives.

Introduction

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. As Pinter has said of his characters, "It is in the silence that they are most evident to me."

Pinter's language has been so off-beat, so different and so unique that it has attracted almost each and every critic of his plays. 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.

Discussion

The Birthday Party is a complex and apparently confusing play by Pinter. The events take place in a bizarre manner and the characters act in an incomprehensibly baffling way sharing a completely off-beat dialogue among them. However, there are certain logic behind these apparent nonsensical language and baffling events. The play, in fact, highlights the essential human condition of a lonely, terrified individual confronting the dark, mysterious, inscrutable, hostile universe. As far as language of the play is concerned, Pinter has undoubtedly achieved distinctions. Throughout the play, because of the intentions of the characters, the language is studded with round sentences, repetitions, silences, pauses, whispers, grotesque sounds and oblique constructions of the dialogues. The illogicality of language is full of meaning mainly because of their intentions behind it.

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. 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?" (Pinter, 9). 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.

Behind the apparent normal exchange of views between the husband and wife, there lies before us the hopeless condition of a couple in the modern mysterious world. The dialogues between them become covers under which both these characters try to evade their actuality. They earnestly try to break the oppressive monotony of their life with each other:

Meg: Is it good?

Petey: Not bad.

Meg: What does it say?

Petey: Nothing much.

Meg: You read me out some nice bits yesterday.
(Pinter, 10)

So, the words spoken by Meg and Petey are not so important as the intention behind these words. Both these characters help each other in distracting their attention from the fact that they are leading a dull life. Thus, language becomes a strategy through which they want to shroud their actual condition. That is why behind the seemingly superfluous dialogues, there lies the hidden intention on the part of the husband and wife to thwart the ennui and boredom of their life.

When Meg says that she is going for shopping for she needs "to get things in for the two gentlemen" (Pinter, 19), Stanley's behaviour suddenly changes at the mere

mentioning of the two visitors. And there is a pause before he reacts. Without using any word this pause communicates a lot – Stanley’s supposed hiding in the house being preoccupied with threat, his past guilt, his apprehension that he is going to be caught. Stanley gets almost hysterical and repeatedly says “they won’t come” (Pinter, 20-21). But a complete change in Stanley’s behaviour is indicated by Pinter not only through his words but by his gestures and posture, his groaning and grunting, and more eloquently by his silence as mentioned in the stage-direction: “Silence. He groans, his trunk falls forward, his head falls into his hands” (Pinter). The last pause used in the play is also of great significance. Here Meg desperately attempts to keep her illusion intact:

Meg: I was the belle of the ball.
 Petey: Were you?
 Meg: Oh yes. They all said I was.
 Petey: I bet you were, too.
 Meg: Oh, it’s true. I was.
 Pause
 I know I was. (Pinter, 87)

This final pause of Meg before the play ends, indicates that Meg wants to hang on to the illusion that everything is still as it was. She desperately tries to be away from the realization that Stanley has been brain-washed by Goldberg and Mc Cann and taken away to an unknown place. This is too depressing a news for her to bear. All her frustrations and sorrows are crystallized in this final pause. It does not suggest that she is inarticulate, unable to talk; rather a lot is said behind this apparent break in communication. In a pause like this Meg seems to be employing a torrent of language. Here no words can substitute her pause where she seems to have touched the climax of her struggle – a struggle between her warm illusion and the hard reality. The beginning of a new drama at the end of it is subtly hinted at by this pause before the final sentence in the play.

Conclusion

Through this analysis of language, pauses and silences in *The Birthday Party*, it is apparent that Pinter is skeptical about the utility and reliability of words. He does not believe in the honesty of words and often finds them discreditable in communicating the truth. He knows very well that we hide instead of revealing, through language. That is the main reason behind the abundance of silences and pauses in his plays. Pinter believes that the characters in his plays are able to communicate even the unspeakable and unspoken thoughts and feelings through silences and pauses. When words fall short and cannot express the required thing, silences and pauses do that instead. All this has been exemplified in *The Birthday Party* where language does play a sinister function. The language used by Pinter, as we have seen, becomes a vehicle of the thematic import of the play. Pinter knows very well that the real speech of our people is full of complexity, ambiguity and contradiction just because of the fact that it is an inseparable part of our chaotic existence. Thus, Pinteresque silence and pause, as have been discussed, are not dead gaps in the communication process, but they communicate something which cannot be communicated through words.

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