

Harold Pinter's Silence: The conflict vanishes

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Abstract

Harold Pinter who is Nobel Laureate for Literature (2005), is well-known as one of the greatest writers in a body of literary work that consists of thirty-two plays, twenty-one film scripts, one novel, and numerous poems. Besides being a productive writer, he has been a director, an actor, and a political activist in the second half of the twentieth century. This paper handles Pinter's characterization in the first one-act play that denotes Pinter's second phase of writing, *Silence* (1968). The paper hypothesizes that Pinter throughout his second stage of writing has tried to give the impression that the conflict which has been appearing throughout his first stage of writing is vital to get full-life characters. And without such conflict, there will be neither protagonist nor antagonist. Character analysis will be the implement of discussion. The argument concludes that Pinter has used out of touch characters to indicate the idea that conflict is an essential part for life continuation and character's construction.

المستخلص

يعد هارولد بِنْتِر الحائز على جائزة نوبل للآداب عام 2005 أحد اعظم الكتاب بارث ادبي يتألف من 32 مسرحية و 21 نص فلم ورواية واحدة وعدد كبير من القصائد. اشتهر أيضا بكونه مخرجا وممثلا وناشطا سياسيا في النصف الثاني من القرن العشرين. يتناول هذا البحث طريقة بِنْتِر في رسم شخوصه في مسرحية الصمت (1968) وهي أولى مسرحياته ذات الفصل الواحد ضمن المرحلة الثانية من سيرته ككاتب مسرحي. يبني البحث تحليلية على فرضية ان بِنْتِر وخلال هذه المرحلة كان يحاول إعطاء الانطباع بان الصراع الذي ميز المرحلة الاولى من كتاباته المسرحية حيويا لبناء شخوص تملؤها الحياة. وانه بدون هكذا صراع لم يكن ليوجد ابطال ولا انذال. سيعتمد البحث على تحليل الشخصيات أساسا لتحليله. توصل البحث الى ان بِنْتِر استخدم شخوصا غير اعتياديين لنقل فكرته التي تفيد ان الصراع جوهري لاستمرار الحياة وبناء الشخوص.

Introduction

According to the Swedish Academy which awarded him Noble Prize for literature: "Harold Pinter is generally seen as the foremost representative of British drama in the second half of the 20th century. That he occupies a position as a modern classic by many critics is illustrated by his name entering the language as an adjective used to describe a particular atmosphere and environment in drama: "Pinter-esque." Or "Pinter-ish" " (<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/pinter.html>)

Harold Pinter, the Jewish playwright, was born on October 10, 1930, in Hackney, East London to father Jack Pinter and Frances Moskowitz. In his early life before World War II, he experienced many instances of anti-Semitism in London, which had a deep impact on his writing and his theatrical works.(Ibid) From this experiences, he adopted the concept of alterity in the relation with the other which is reflected throughout his writing. When the war began, he was evacuated from London for three years, and upon his return a few years later he was accepted at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. He began publishing his first poems in 1950. In 1951, he earned an acting position with a famous Shakespearean repertory company.

This paper is committed for analyzing Pinter's one-act plays which is chronologically located in the middle period between the early and late plays. The selected one-act play for this study is *Silence*(1968). This play shows a distinguished form and content which differs from that of preceded plays. Though it is different in the way Pinter uses to manipulate things and characters, however, it is devoted for the same central idea, Pinter previously exposes but this time with reversed and revised form: the other is of value for the character to live actively.

The second phase of Pinter's work begins with two plays so radically different from anything Pinter had previously written there might seem to be no connection: *Landscape* and *Silence*. In these two plays Pinter has shifted his interest from the private level to the public one. Harold Hobson claims that " *Silence* is universal; it is a comment, a verdict, rather, on the whole of life; whilst *Landscape* is about a particular marriage". (Hobson, 1969, N.P.)

The modernist limited→ controlled/postmodernist controlled→ controlling conflict that has been appearing in the writing of the first stage nearly vanishes but with surprising consequences. The overall arc of the play's conflict which *Silence* shows is mirrored in each detail but with a difference from the previous works: this time with public consequences. Never, throughout the whole of Pinter's work, does the conflict expressed become repetitive or assume a merely mechanical form. For each play its function and form are specific to the nature of the modernist limited→ controlled/postmodernist controlled→ controlling conflict.

To have a good play there should be characters with clear objectives. All characters, including minor ones, need their own objective. This helps generate conflict. Otherwise they exist only in response to the main character. (Aristotle, In *Silence*, all that the audiences have is characters without objectives and, thus without conflict or life.

Silence contains the experimentation with both form and memory which begin now to give the right to be heard to some public consequences of the private conflict at the heart of all Pinter's plays. Time is of value for Pinter that he uses correctly to indicate change. Dilek Inan asserts that " Each decade has confirmed a continuing movement in his work. There was a move from East London (in many of his pre-1970 plays) to North London (his post-1970 plays), from menace to mannerism. The significance of his move from the plays' original working-class milieu towards a world of intellectual and professional middle-class culture made him a cultural icon in the 1970s". (Inan, 2005, N.P.) *Silence* broke Pinter out of one room and away from his reliable power-play source of tension.

In using setting in a different form, Pinter illustrates that the period of the closed rooms has ended. The setting plays an outstanding role in understanding *Silence*. Pinter has shifted the focus from the closed rooms to an un-walled space that can be anywhere.

In *Silence*, Pinter has given his audiences a different form of relation, if one can say it is a relation at all. The conflict is not there for power and dominance or for anything else. Mel Gussow in an interview with Harold Pinter states that "*Landscape* and *Silence* [the two short poetic memory plays that were written between *The Homecoming* and *The Old Times*] are in a very different form. There is not any menace at all" (Gussow, 1996, 18). Besides lacking the menace in *Silence*, in a very formalistic way the character can be described neither as protagonist nor as antagonist for there is nothing to be gained. The quest-line for each character is not portrayed throughout the play. At the end of the play the audiences realize the core of the idea Pinter tries to reach: without the differences between the characters and their stimulus there will be no relation and no life. Without any consideration for the other, there will be no continuation of life.

In *Silence* Ellen, a young woman in her twenties recalls relationships with Rumsey, a man in his forties, and Bates, a man in his thirties. Her dialogue crosscuts theirs as she conflates the men, moves forward and back in time. They make parallel focus shifts, evoking a lyrical, erotically charged remembrance of times past. Pinter was excited with this break from past constraints, claiming that the one-act *Silence* took longer to write than any of his full-length plays. (Prentice, 2000, 170)

Silence as well as all the plays of the middle period of Pinter's writing shows Pinter's shifted view as the critic, Dilek Inan assures that Pinter has journeyed:

from the room to the outside world, from the private to the public social space, and has identified an inescapable sense of pessimism and alienation, and investigated an alarming world of atrocities. There are cities and landscapes beyond Pinter's rooms, cities peopled by wandering, displaced figures surveying the self-estranged city that is modern consciousness and landscapes where his people retreat into the private realms of memory and fantasy. (Inan, 2000, iv.)

Pinter's dramas which often involve strong conflicts among ambivalent characters fighting for verbal and territorial dominance and for their own remembered versions of the past with *Silence* have shifted to something else. Stylistically, the plays which are marked by theatrical pauses and silences, comedic timing, provocative imagery, witty dialogue, ambiguity, irony, and menace converted to plays with silence and pauses without dialogue and without conflict.

With an ambiguous atmosphere, the play raises complex issues of individual human identity oppressed by social forces, the power of language, and vicissitudes of memory. Like his work, Pinter has been considered complex and contradictory (Billington, 2007, 388).

Only in the most subtle sense does *Silence* dramatize the characters' play for power; more obviously they portray Pinter's concern with time, space, and the mystery of identity as choice continues to connect with self-knowledge. But the absence of power occupations here develops with unexpected ramifications: not as a good but it's opposite. *Silence* carries the implication that the absence of the conflict may be as destructive as its presence, and the dramatized it.

In the introduction to the first volume of his *Complete Plays* 3, Pinter wrote:

There are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed. This speech is speaking of a language locked beneath it. That is its continual reference. The speech we hear is an indication of that which we don't hear. It is a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smoke screen which keeps the other in its place. When true silence falls we are still left with echo but are nearer nakedness. One way of looking at speech is to say that it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness. (Pinter, 1978, 3)

It is throughout *Silence* that Pinter exposes the nakedness that he felt as one of the features separated in the world of the inactive characters. It is this very nakedness that Pinter tries throughout *Silence* and the plays of the middle stage of his writing to warn the audiences from the indulgence in it.

Discussion

The play's first page in the script starts with the list of characterization in which only the names and the age of the characters are mentioned. This list shows clearly that there is no detailed relationship among the three characters of the play. Nobody means anything to anybody else. The setting is of great importance for this play. Formalistically speaking, the location for any scene is vitally important when writing dialogue. It can draw the audiences in and provide visual imagery that will help determine the tone and pace of the plot. Hence, Pinter's presenting a shift of the setting of the play occurs to illustrate that there are three areas in the stage and that there is a chair in each area. Again there is no closed room in this play. There is no shelter for the characters in *Silence*. The setting is of no specification, so that it could be any place.

The level of the relation in this play is a very puzzling one. It is not a private level nor a public one. The characters, though all are on the same stage but they do not have something in common as a group. They try to make their own reminiscences that gather them but all in vain. They do not have aim to reach or a quest line to achieve. No body is a protagonist nor antagonist. There is no clear conflict among the characters nor within any character's self. There is only paralysis and inactiveness. Pinter with *Silence*, has presented an expected form of plays as David Hare in *Harold Pinter: A Celebration* has stated:

"Pinter did what Auden said a poet should do. He cleaned the gutters of the English language, so that it ever afterwards flowed more easily and more cleanly. We can also say that over his work and over his person hovers a sort of leonine, predatory spirit which is all the more powerful for being held under in a rigid discipline of form, or in a black suit...The essence of his singular appeal is that you sit down to every play he writes in certain expectation of the unexpected. In sum, this tribute from one writer to another: you never know what the hell's coming next."(Hare, 2000, 21)

Silence, in which time remains a movable function of memory in the minds of Ellen, Rumsey, and Bates, pushes the boundaries of memory and silence even further by means of a wholly non-realistic setting where the three lives intersect only briefly, primarily to underscore failure and parting. The three characters move forward or back in time at will, enlightening the nodes of failure in their relations which the audiences see but they miss.

The press associated writer, Baisley Dodds suggests that "in "Silence" and "Landscape," Pinter moved from exploring the underbelly of human life to showing the simultaneous levels of fantasy and reality that occupy the individual". (Dodds, 2008, N.P.) Unlike *Landscape* where silence dramatizes a dead relationship between two living people, the silence of *Silence* echoes with a reminder of mortality although the characters in *Silence*, like almost all of Pinter's characters, remain as unconscious of death as they do the source of failure in their relationships. What is not said is often just as important in a scene. According to Pinter:

"We communicate in our silence. Silences are desperate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves. Communication is too alarming. To disclose to others the poverty within us is too fearsome a possibility." (Kelly, 2007, N.P.)

Silences contain major subtext messages that 'shout out' the unheard. Pauses and silences can control the rhythm and pace of the dialogue. They can also be a threat or a moment of tension. A silence can be an extreme crisis point or a change in the nature of the relationship. As it is clear in the play, the disappointment is at once apparent in Rumsey's insistence that he is content to be alone:

I watch the clouds. Pleasant the ribs and tendons of cloud.
I've lost nothing.
Pleasant alone and watch the folding light. My animals
are quiet. My heart never bangs. I read in the evenings.
There is no-one to tell me what is expected or not expected
of me. There is nothing required of me. (203)

There is no real life, that there is nothing required from these characters. But being alive requires something. Only the heart of the dead "never bangs." Rumsey's

self-proclaimed peace is really a horrifying separation grown out of a choice he made when he rebuffed Ellen. Moreover, his rejection appears an consequence of defensiveness (which damages more than it preserves). When Ellen approached Rumsey, he told her,

Rumsey: "Find a young man,"

Ellen: "there aren't any"

Rumsey: "Don't be stupid"

Ellen: "I don't like them"

Rumsey: " you are stupid"

Ellen: " I hate them"

Rumsey: "Find one"

[Silence] (212-13)

He is suggesting he quit before he was fired. Rumsey, like others in Pinter's plays who do not get what they want, avoids risks. He remains unaware that time in old age will further reveal his safe choices as cowardice and a retreat that turns his existence into a characterless case. When he earlier asked:

Rumsey: " Can you cook now? "

Ellen: " Shall I cook for you?"

Rumsey: " Yes"

Ellen "Next time I come. I will," (209)

But next time may be never since the last time, as Rumsey reminds her,

"You were a little girl." (209)

Even the sexy stimulating proposals of lovemaking between Ellen and Rumsey, though joyful, seem to occur between intangible, ethereal beings without grit that do not touch:

ELLEN: When I run...when I run...when I run...over the grass....

RUMSEY: She floats...under me. Floating...under me.
(208)

Ellen as an old woman also insists she is satisfied to be alone:

"I like to get back to my room. It has a pleasant view" (204)

Though she is described in the list of the characters as "a girl in her twenties," (200) she clearly moves forward in time into her old age when she says:

It isn't something that anyone could ever tell me, could ever reassure me about, nobody could tell from looking at me, what was happening. But I'm still quite pretty really, quite nice eyes, nice skin.(205)

She seems almost unaware that she is aging, that time is passing as she continues to insist that she is still beautiful girl. She needs to be told, to be convinced she says:

I seem to be old. Am I old now? No-one will tell me. I must find a person to tell these things. (211)

Here there is a reference that the characters around her means nothing that she cannot depend on them to tell her about anything. How does it feel to be seventy? In many ways no different from twenty. Yet as viewed from the perspective of her old

age, Ellen's relations with the men in her past no longer matter, for when asked by a friend "for the hundredth time" if she had ever married, she arbitrarily decides:

This time I told her I had. Yes, I told her I had. Certainly.

I can remember the wedding.

[*Silence*] (213)

Bates, the only one to admit vague discontent, happily recalls life in the country though he now lives in the city where his youthful neighbors make too much noise and too much love. But he, too, finally concludes, "It's of no importance." (45) Unlike Rumsey in his relations with Ellen, Bates actively pursues her. But he allows his indecisiveness and hers to rule, finally permitting Ellen to elude and spurn him. When he asks Ellen what she wants to do and she says she doesn't know, he offers her a drink and a walk:

ELLEN: No.

[*Pause*]

BATES. All right. I'll take you on a bus to the town. I know a place. My cousin runs it.

ELLEN. No.

[*Silence*](207)

There are many questions this conversation raises: Does she want something more? Does he fail to propose or provide it? Does she? The exchanges between them mark missed opportunity. *Silence* ends their brief encounter. Whatever wounds Bates suffered in youth may or may not have left marks—his fondest recollections as an old man are of his walks in the country with a little girl. Ellen? Perhaps a walk in the country holding a little girl's hand was the extent of his heart's desire, in contrast to Rumsey, the older man who nevertheless does not trust his own greater desire enough to seize the young woman he wants. Again here, is a reference to self-underestimation.

The assertion of power in these plays, so subtle it seems almost absent, occurs primarily at junctures to underscore the failures in the relationships, junctures where Rumsey spurns Ellen, (202) where Ellen spurns Bates (196), and when Bates impotently cries out at his noisy young neighbors (192) and is reminded of his own (mis)spent youth. In this regard the American critic, Penelope Prentice argues that *Silence* forms:

A *momenta mori* portraying those who not only sit out their lives (rarely a posture to be admired in Pinter's work) but who sleep through life. Like those fence-sitters in Dante's *Inferno*, these characters suffer from unlived lives; failure to choose, inability to act, however lyrically recalled, consigns them to a living purgatory they choose to interpret as contentment. The characters remain without influence in the public sphere, and hardly exert impact on the private. (Prentice, 2000, 171)

The characters remain as out of touch with one another as with themselves. But their loss momentarily illumines the audiences'. In, *Silence*, the critic, Dilek Inan states that the characters retreat into their own realms of memory, perhaps to

reflect a sense of loss, regret or a desire to live in a fantasy world because the reality of present time is unbearably

oppressive. In order to survive in a setting where the character is faced with the naked truth, Pinter's characters usually withdraw into the realm of memory instead of responding to the immediate question as a tactic. This in itself creates a drama of distress and desperation which is part of everyday life. Lambert and Julie immerse into different memories which reflects their lack of connection.(Inan, 2011, N.P.)

It is not surprisingly the near absence of the limited →controlled/ controlled → controlling conflict does not produce a paradise but a life devoid of that vitality that seems a concomitant of the desire for love and power. These characters, which may seem to represent an ethical advancement toward peace in Pinter's work, have simply retreated from the conflict rather than confront their own desires. Jean Baker Miller in her work *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, written almost four decades ago, noted that women as a subservient group and as nurturers and keepers of peace in a society which does not value those virtues, must not only confront conflict but initiate it. (Miller,1971, 767-775) Her conclusion aptly addresses the seeming peace these characters gain at the expense of all else. The failure to confront any conflict here results only in perpetuating illusion.

Confronting conflict is very essential in keeping progress of life. The existence of different kinds of characters: the modernist limited → controlled and the postmodernist controlled → controlling is demanded to give value for the motivations that derive their actions and reactions. Conflict helps in appreciating the ethics that generate certain behavior. In juxtaposing the two kinds of characters in the same play, Pinter shows the importance and the inevitability of their existence together to have normal life.

In *Silence*, Pinter presents the another face of the life that differs from what he used to register in previous works to show by contrast the essence of life that derived by ethics. In portraying characters as neither controlled nor controlling and neither modernist nor postmodernist, Pinter insists that their existence will be felt and valued only if it occurs at the same time. He predicts postmodernism before its time by giving the audiences postmodernist characters while he is talking about modernist ones.

Silence is very important in tracing Pinter's opinion in his middle stage of writing because it exposes clearly Pinter's opinion regarding the inevitability of the existence of the modernist\postmodernist characters at the same context. By presenting one-act plays that lack the conflict which inspires the features of modernist limited→ controlled\postmodernist controlled→ controlling characters, Pinter has exposed inactive characters who are unable to have a full life. Moreover, Pinter's characters in *Silence* are lacking the relation with the other, so that they cannot progress or even live. In this sense, Pinter has conveyed the idea that postmodernism is not but a complement of modernism.

In *Silence*, love is increasingly portrayed as failing to connect the lives of the characters whose separateness is further emphasized in past, often failed attempts to love. Love here is not linked with accepting the other and with the concept of Alterity, thus it fails to form a connection link among characters. Love, in *Silence*, is

connected only with the emotional erotic state rather than with the psychological-behavioral as well as rational states. Thus, it is not connected with accepting the other.

Even those who apparently loved and married, Beth and Duff are no closer than those who have lost their chance to love, Ellen, Rumsey and Bates. *Silence*, like *Landscape* and all autumn plays, portrays characters past youth without the hopeful springtime and summer of acceptance in a form of love, seasons which are nevertheless suggested in the lush rain wet landscapes of Duff's narrative in *Landscape*, in Rumsey's and Bates's talk of the little girl and the birds. Here Pinter intertextualizes *Silence* with *Landscape* successfully.

The almost total absence of the power occupations in this one-act poses an interesting question. Does the absence of the struggle for dominance reflect an absence of a quality essential not only to drama but to life? This is an outstanding question that is raised during this period of time, the middle period, to show Pinter's deep concern with exhibiting the conflict as a necessity for progress, life-continuation, as well as self-knowledge. The three things Pinter has given them great interest throughout his early plays.

The thematic implications of the modernist limited → controlled/postmodernist controlled → controlling conflict in Pinter's early work suggest that the struggle grows out of feelings of inadequacy and results generally in destruction rather than creation or growth of human relationships from the modernist limited → controlled character's point of view. Whereas, the postmodernist controlled → controlling character gets a great benefit of that struggle by achieving self-knowledge. In this regard, it might be supposed the absence of the struggle for dominance would signal a positive turn in Pinter's work. Without the struggle and without the correlative desire to attain a position or role, however artificial or arbitrary, these characters seem only half alive. Without attempts to fulfill desires, they remain isolated into an almost death-in-life existence.

Having a relation with the other in Pinter's plays seems both integrally connected and opposed to blood lust and violence. The only peace in Pinter's work, purchased in *Silence* at the expense of powerlessness, is portrayed as self-delusion. In this sense, Prentice states that Pinter's portrayal of acceptance in a form of love and violence mirrors

the most fundamental physical structure in the human brain governing love and violence to convey a force resembling fate. Deep within what some term the primitive brain resides the core of strongest emotions, the amygdale, center of love and rage. Where Pinter's early plays show how the quest for love and respect, when thwarted, can so easily trigger anger and violence, the reverse applies here—without a quest neither love nor anger is fully activated in the present living moment, and action thus dead ends. (Prentice, 2000, 178)

These characters who claim to be complete within themselves, as is typical in Pinter's work, only to call that completeness into question. *Silence*, directly confronting the power conflict by suspending it, signal a shift in attitude toward that

conflict. Even more disturbing than the battle for power is the dramatization of how quickly one can inhabit one's routine and assume habits not consciously chosen, but simply fallen into. The characters remain carelessly innocent of the choices they made in their lives which gained them their current identities. The younger Ellen says she does not know what she wants; Bates wants her; Rumsey rebuffs her. The audiences see that at some level they all desire acceptance from the other, yet each in the end each is left advertizing a happy isolation which evinces the opposite: an unresolved loss.

Silence, written by a master of dramatic conflict, takes an audience further to the edge of life lived in the absence of conflict than any of his work written after. Implicit in such wholly solipsistic, inner-directed identities is some recognition that the healthy woman and man exist in a larger society, requiring some balance between the inward- with the outward-directed self, some vital engagement with the world, what Bertrand Russell simply calls "zest." Thus the near absence of Pinter's concern with modernist limited → controlled/ postmodernist controlled→ controlling relationships in *Silence* calls for a person possessing an honest self-knowledge, a consciousness of choices, and an ability to confront conflicts in the larger community in order to act to gain what is desired for the self and others.

conclusion

In *Silence*, the characters retreat into their own realm of memory, perhaps to reflect a sense of loss, regret, or a desire to live in fantasy world because the reality of present time is unbearably oppressive. In fact, they are not living at all, because they do not have a present to move through or a future that they are looking forward to reach.

Pinter shows in *Silence* characters who seek to continue their living at any cost. In order to survive in a setting where no great values and ethics dominates, Pinter's characters usually withdraw into the realm of memory instead of responding to the immediate question as a tactic. This in itself creates a drama of suffering and anxiety which is part of every day life.

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