

An Analysis of Structural Characteristics and Elements in Harold Pinter's *Betrayal* with Reference to Dialogue, Time, and Context

A Research by

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Abstract

This research deals with *Betrayal* (1978) by Harold Pinter (1930-2008) in terms of such elements as dialogue, time, and context, because it is in these elements that some of Pinter's characteristic stylistic features manifest themselves most powerfully. Pinter's dramatic handling of these elements proves him as an original modernist and an avant-grade, self-conscious innovator. The paper will analyze utterances with the said structural features in view. The important issue in the play is the different roles of time, context, and language which are considered the basic constituents of modern drama. This paper intends also to trace how Pinter has made use of time, dialogue, and context, to produce the above-mentioned modern play.

Key words: language, dialogue, time, context, flashbacks

Introduction

Modernism as a period in the history of literature, and as a trend in thought, style of arts, and other disciplines had great influence on drama too. It is a movement which aims at defying the established traditional

conventions. It challenges conventional surface coherence and appearance of harmony in the literary works. It involves a literary structure that departs from conventionality and realism. Drama has not been an exception. Modern drama has taken a step beyond the well-made plays of the classics and further alternative modes of performance and stage presentation and other realistic dramas. This is clear in Pinter's *Betrayal*. Pinter has taken a step to defy the well-made play of his predecessors, including the realistic dramatists like Wilde and Ibsen. Ibsen has been considered as the pioneer of modern drama, initiating the form of the well-made play. But, Pinter has maintained the modernist tradition in his own special ways. Pinter has established his own modern form of drama based on a reversal of the traditional well-made play. *Betrayal* features his characteristically economical dialogue, characters' hidden emotions, veiled motivations, their dishonesty, and (self-) deceptions. Pinter's particular usage of reverse chronology in structuring the plot is innovative; the first scene takes place after the affair has ended, and the final scene ends when the affair begins.

Modern Drama belongs to a period of literature that is truly different from the literary eras preceding it. Modernism had its huge impact on drama technically, conceptually, thematically, and aesthetically. Essentially, Modernism is a movement which aims at defying the established traditional conventions as well as the status-quo. Modernism disputes and defies the conventional surface which bears the semblance of harmony in the literary output. Modernism incorporates a creative structure that departs from conventionality and mechanical, cold, habitual realism. As Abrams states in his *Glossary of Literary Terms*:

...the specific features by modernism vary with the user, but most critics agree that it involves a deliberate and radical break with some of the traditional bases both of Western Culture and of Western Art..... A prominent feature of Modernism is the phenomenon of an avant-garde..... that is, a small, self-conscious group of artists who undertake, in Ezra Pound's phrase, to 'make it new'. By violating accepted conventions and decorum, they undertake to create ever-new artistic forms and styles to introduce hitherto neglected, and sometimes forbidden, subject matters.

(pp.201-202)

Modern Drama went beyond the so-called well-made play of the earlier era, in search of further alternative modes of presentation and stage performances, making changes in the elements, structure, theory and practice of dramatic art. One of the outstanding manifestations of this nature, self-conscious dramatizations of modernism is Harold Pinter's *Betrayal*.

The Conceptual Dimensions of Language, Time, and Place

An important characteristic feature of modern drama is the untraditional role which language, time and place play. Here, time and language have lost their former importance. The modern drama seems to be timeless. It has been affected somehow by its predecessors but ultimately has ended in the Absurd. These changes and influences have been important in producing new forms, styles and contexts within a new framework. This new attitude has been the end which this paper follows. The main problem brought to surface here is the structure of modern drama with special reference to time, place and dialogue.

Since the modern text does not follow the past and traditional conventions, it uses a language which defies the commonly used conventional speech codifications. There is scarcely absolute meaning in dialogue, whether explicit or implicit, and there is no way to make out if a character is honest or dishonest. It is meant to impose a change in drama in general. Altenbernd and Lewis, in their *Study of Drama*, state:

The final meaning of a play, however, is the product of its total impression..... the total meaning is not, however, suddenly impressed upon a play in its most conclusive speech or scene, but is the product of the emphasis, repetition, language, and structural guidance.

(p.63)

Thus, from the above quotation, we can say that the meaning of the play is not the fruit of the speech alone. This proves that Pinter knew well the value of silent pauses in his dramatic meaning structure and system. That is why he used them so often. Malcolm Kelsall, in *Studying Drama* believes

that speechless action and dialogue are equally important in the inter-personal exchange among the characters of a given play:

Most characters in plays reveal themselves through physical interaction and dialogue with other characters.

(p.50)

The long dialogue of the classical drama is replaced with the short one. The Dialogue particularly chosen in the play has two main functions:

1. It magnifies plot and completes it;
- 2 It makes the audience acquainted with characters of the play. It forms the main part of a text; it is distinguished from the text dealing with what is connected to the stage.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle emphasizes the conventional importance of dialogue, particularly in classical tragedy. Time and place also play important roles in the modern drama. Roland Barthes (1915-1980), the French critic, was the first one who spoke untraditionally about time. He believes that time is an unconscious time. He considers the time of the text dependant on the world of the text, and different from the conscious language. Marcel Proust (1871-1922), the French writer, considers the time of the text from an existentialist's point of view; he believes that time is dependent on the world of the text which becomes meaningful with the help of existentialistic, emotional, psychological and historical contexts. Different aspects of time in literature can be studied from three perspectives: First, the time of action which is the conscious and measurable. It refers to the time needed for reading the story. Second, the time of the text which consists of years, months, days, hours and minutes included in the text itself. For example the novel *War and Peace* deals with the details of fifteen and half years of the life of a nation and various characters in the story. Third, the life time: this refers to the real time of events appearing as summaries in the story. Thus, there is always more than one way of how to feel the course of time.

Time is expressed in terms of the sequential relations in the dramatic narrative. Time seems to have its own autonomous entity as a structural element, viewed apart from the dramatic medium. As Jean-Luc

Godard the film-maker declared, he deemed it necessary for a movie or any drama:

to have a beginning, middle, and an end but not necessarily in that order; in classical 'realist' narrative, events are always in that order.

(in Chandler 2007, p.114)

Betrayal

Betrayal is a play written by Harold Pinter in 1978 and was awarded the 1979 Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Play. It is regarded as one of the English playwright's major dramatic works: it features his characteristically economical dialogue, characters' hidden emotions and veiled motivations, and their self-absorbed competitive one-upmanship, face-saving, dishonesty, and (self-) deceptions. The play was inspired by Pinter's affair with BBC Television presenter Joan Bakewell that lasted seven years, from 1962 to 1969.

The plot of *Betrayal* exposes different permutations of betrayal and kinds of betrayals occurring over a period of nine years, relating to a seven-year affair involving a married couple, Emma and Robert, and Robert's "close friend" Jerry, who is also married, to a woman named Judith. For five years Jerry and Emma carry on their affair without Robert's knowledge, both cuckolding Robert and betraying Judith, until Emma, without telling Jerry she has done so, admits her infidelity to Robert (in effect, betraying Jerry), although she continues their affair. In 1977, four years after exposing the affair (in 1973) and two years after their subsequent break up (in 1975), Emma meets with Jerry to tell him that her marriage to Robert is over. She then lies to Jerry in telling him that, "last night", she had to reveal the truth to Robert and that he now knows of the affair. The truth however, is that Robert has known about the affair for the past four years.

Pinter's particular usage of reverse chronology in structuring the plot is innovative: the first scene takes place after the affair has ended, in 1977; the final scene ends when the affair begins, in 1968; and, in between 1977 and 1968, scenes in two pivotal years (1977 and 1973) move forward chronologically. As Roger Ebert observes, in his review of the 1983 film, based on Pinter's own screenplay:

The 'Betrayal' structure strips away all artifice. It shows, heartlessly, that the very capacity for love itself is sometimes based on betraying not only other loved ones, but even ourselves.

The years between 1968 and 1977 occur in reverse order; scenes within years 1977 and 1973 move forward. Scene One is in Spring 1977 where Emma and Jerry meet for the first time in two years. For 7 years they had an affair and a secret flat, and Jerry says no-one else knew. Now Emma is having an affair with Casey, an author whose agent is Jerry and whose publisher is Robert, Emma's husband. Emma says she found out last night that Robert has betrayed her with other women for years, and admits she revealed her affair with Jerry.

Scene Two is in Jerry's House. Jerry meets Robert to talk about the affair. Robert reveals that in fact he learned about it 4 years ago. Since then their friendship has continued, albeit without playing squash.

Scene Three is in winter of 1975. It is the end of Jerry and Emma's affair. They rarely meet, and Emma's hopes that the flat would be a different kind of home are unfulfilled. They agree to give it up.

Scene Four in autumn of 1974 at Robert and Emma's House. Jerry visits Robert and Emma at home. He reveals that Casey has left his wife and is living nearby. Jerry and Robert plan to play squash, but Jerry reveals that first he is visiting New York with Casey.

Scene Five is in a hotel room, summer of 1973. Robert and Emma are on holiday, intending to visit Torcello tomorrow. Emma is reading a book by Spinks, another author whose agent is Jerry. Robert says he refused to publish it because there is not much more to say about betrayal. Robert has discovered that Emma has received a private letter from Jerry. Emma admits they are having an affair.

Scene Six is in the flat, also in summer of 1973. Emma has returned from the holiday with Robert in Venice. She has bought a tablecloth for the flat. Jerry reveals that despite the affair he continues to lunch with Robert.

Scene Seven is in a restaurant, summer 1973. Robert gets drunk over lunch with Jerry. He says he hates modern novels, and that he went to Torcello on his own and read Yeats.

Scene Eight goes back to the flat and summer of 1971. Emma wants to know whether Jerry's wife suspects his affair, and announces that while Jerry was in America she became pregnant with Robert's child.

Scene Nine goes further back to Robert and Emma's House, in winter of 1968. During a party Jerry surprises Emma in her bedroom and declares his love for her. He tells Robert he is his oldest friend as well as his best man.

The Modern Structure of Pinter's *Betrayal*

This section will start first with two samples from the play, followed by a discussion of the structural points in the play. The samples are among the most frequently in dramatic literature's anthologies:

Sample 1:

JERRY: *Look at the way you're looking at me. I can't wait for you Do you know the state of Catatonia? Do you? Do you? where the prince is of absence, the prince of desolation. I love you.*

EMMA: *My husband is at the other side of that door.*

JERRY: *Every one knows. The world knows. It knows. But they'll never know, they'll never know, they're in a different world. I adore you. I'm madly in love with you.... Your eyes kill me. I'm lost. You're wonderful.*

Sample 2:

ROBERT: *I hate brandy It stinks of modern literature.*

As a dramatist, Pinter is considered a pioneer in Modern Drama. His structural practice is untraditional. In fact, in his dramas there is no centre but an empty signifier. The chronological-sequential coding turns the time unit in the bipolarity of setting (time and place) into an empty signifier. In his plays anarchy is the only thing which persists in the world. The dominating theatrical form in Pinter's works related to Existentialism, which is called Theatre of Absurd. His play, *Betrayal*, is also considered a modern drama basically because of its reverse narrative style and structure, i.e., the drama begins from the final scene. It is through this reverse structure that ideas, motivations, and deep layers of characters' behaviors and multiple meanings of actions are determined. The structure of Pinter's drama does not follow conventions of classics. Such elements like time and language are new and different in his drama. In his works, dialogue is that of the daily and common people. He creates his own language. His poetic talent and attention to words, music, meaning, pause, silence and their values have originated a new style called Pinteresque. In his works, dialogues are in the form of prose. Pinter's power in reproducing dialogue is outstanding. This has rendered his dialogues more realistic. Pinter's plays move from reality to the Absurd, which is in

contrast with the nonrealistic text of events. It turns out to be more absurd than when it is shown in another way.

Steven Gale believes: "this fact that the characters speak in a way as if they have promised to keep their daily conversations, among these terrible events, makes no doubt that his dramas are endowed with unnatural aspects. This is one of the basic functions of Pinter's realistic dialogues" (Gale, 2008, 200). Beside using prototype words and repetition, Pause and silence are also two important characteristics of Pinter's dramatic language. It can be said that silence is an expression of internal and final texts of Pinter. There are two kinds of silences in his works. The first one is the silence in which no words are exchanged, and the second one is the silence produced due to the inbreak of words. What we hear helps us think about what we are unable to hear. For Pinter, dialogue serves as a device for covering nakedness. He himself states: "it is in silence that the characters of the drama strengthen their presence ... if we keep our ears away from the old theatrical dialogues and listen to the real talking of people, we will be able to understand that most part of their dialogue consists of silence" (Pinter, 2005, 7). Silence, which in drama is a speechless but meaningful pause, works as part of what Daniel Chandler calls 'meaning structure' (p.185) and 'meaning systems' (p.194).

Another critic, Manfred Fister believes that it was in the modern drama that for the first time pause was introduced. He considers it innovation. These pauses, whether in a dialogue or in between the eighteen dialogues, or through gestures, indicate a disintegration in relationship, the imprisonment of character in his dramatic monologue, and finally the inability to establish communication with others are even to speak. The Bavarian dramatist Frantz Iksafer Krutz points out to the importance of silence and states: "I would like to cut my relationship with this theatrical convention which is non-realistic: one of the most outstanding characteristics of my characters is silence, because their talking is not useful any more...their problems are so old and complicated that they can no more express them through words" (Manfred Fister, 2008, 191).

Likewise, Pinter's *Betrayal* is also packed with pauses and silences. Whenever they appear, the text finds new direction. The pauses present at the beginning of the play between Emma and Jerry show Pinter's ability in discovering and uncovering the mystery of his characters. These pauses are indicative of the internal conflict in these characters, especially Robert; it seems to be a defense against the new challenges. These pauses and silences show the fear and hopelessness of the characters on the one hand, and as a reminder of past memories, on the other hand. It seems that silence does not only serve as a gap between the two dialogues but also it serves as a space, giving the characters opportunity to display the world and the changes taking place around them. Whenever Pinter decides to produce a doubt in dialogue, he uses pause. Even when he decides to change the subject, he uses silence. Nothing happens physically, but it is in sentences and language exchanged between characters that disasters occur. Whatever happens, it happens in the dialogues made by the characters which refer to the evils of their past. Pinter himself emphasizes the priority given to language over the action; he has arrived at the reality of the emptiness and the absurdity of actions, behaviors and interpersonal exchange of expressive silence, pause, and utterances, regardless of their disconnectedness. He states: "I don't intend to focus on the inability of man in establishing relationship. Indeed, relationship between men is so horrible that we are taking distance from it day after day. Instead of talking about the main reasons for our relationship, we talk nonsense" (Quoted in James H. McTeague, 2006, 58).

Malcom kesall, in his *Studying Drama* (p.44) says that in Drama "speech tells us a great deal about the state of mind", particularly when it is "functional speech". This is because "action, words, and therefore character are Style" (p.44). However, there ought to be silence, every now and then, in the play, because "plays are not oratorios....they are not... announcements of plane departures...." (p.43). The modern characters are left alone in their search for identity, and cannot rely on others. They even turn to empty characters that have lost the ability to establish relationship, and the only way is to face a psychological, symbolic, or physical death. These characters, like those of *Betrayal*,

cannot make relationships with others, characters who wear masks which keep them isolated from the rest of the world. Therefore, Pinter has established a new attitude toward using language in a modern structure.

Insofar as dialogue, time, and context are concerned in this play, the playwright demonstrates the presence of added and fresh bearings in connection with the dramatic practice. He reveals the special line of thought, the artistic style in handling the structure, and his awareness and utilization of related epistemological disciplines. Modernism to him is the fruit of knowledge, not ignorance, about the dramatic art and the world at large.

Conclusion

In Pinter's hand, as exemplified by *Betrayal* such elements like language, time and place abandon following the coherent rules of the classical period as inadequate in the modern drama. The modern drama is a kind of play based on language, and the way language, and in particular dramatic dialogue, is used differently, will defy the conventional traditions.

Pinter's play, *Betrayal*, is truly a modern play with a different structure. The text of this play has a reverse structure. It is based on flashbacks which keep the reader updated about the events that had taken place in the past. In this content/context time has lost its conventional meaning. The language used by Pinter is filled by silences and pauses. A kind of language which makes us aware that the reality we are to face is disastrous and is accompanied by fear and humiliation. The characters of Pinter are lost in silences, pauses, repetition, doubt, darkness and apparently meaningless sentences. This skill of Pinter in depicting a reverse narrative refuses to show itself in the form and context, but in depicting the lives of men. Man encounters man, and the result is pause, silence, loneliness and terror. Pinter believes that although the ordinary events and minor details might look unimportant, but with the help of comedy these details can be given proper artistic structure. The struggle hangs in between external appearance and internal reality, or the presence of multi featured characters which form the subject and dramatic technique of Pinter. Another thing is that Pinter uses modern

structure methods to cover the nakedness of his characters. Pinter's characters do not wear masks apparently but in reality, they have masks on their faces which keep them away from the rest of the world. The important issue is that the characters in the play keep on disturbing each other. Pinter succeeds in making his play misty in order to invite the reader or spectator to think of its implications long after the curtain falls to signify the end.

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تحليل للمكونات والخصائص البنائية فيما يتعلق بالحوار والزمن و السياق في مسرحية هارولد بنتر الموسومة الخيانة

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