

## Language and Being in Harold Pinter's Plays: *The Room* and *The Caretaker* as a Case Study

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### Abstract

Most of us are forgetful of being, in the sense that though, as humans, we are capable of experiencing the wonder and mystery of it, we are also immersed in it, and do not think of it as something which needs to be interpreted. We are surrounded by particular things in existence, but we sometimes forget to question existence itself. Pinter is a playwright whose writings, suggestively, attempt to interpret what we are immersed in, and opens our eyes to the essence of the word existence and its significance through language. This article is, therefore an attempt to examine Pinter's characters or actors' use of language to explore themselves and their being in the absurd world and undefined system of life. Focus is put on some extracts from the two plays: (*The Room*) and (*The Caretaker*) in which communication between people lead but to solitude and wondering about belongingness and nothingness. This article also scrutinizes Pinter's characters in their struggle to define their being and determine their position in this absurd universe through their language.

**Key Words:** Absurd, being, language, Pinter, theatre, *The Room*, *The Caretaker*

### الملخص

معظمنا لا يدركون أن تكون ل ه غامضة وغموضا، ونحن نعيش في دون فهم حقا. على الرغم من أننا ندرك وجودنا، ونحن لا نشكك حقا عن "الحياة الظاهرة." وهكذا، فإن الكاتب المسرحي. بينتر حاول الخوض في هذه المسائل من خلال استكشاف في مسرحياته وخلال الحوار. سنحاول في هذه المقالة لدراسة شخصيات بينتر وهم يكافحون من أجل تحديد وجودهم وتحديد موقفهم في هذا العالم العبثي من خلال لغتهم

### Introduction

At the very beginning of his career as a playwright Harold Pinter's audience, spectators as well as his readers were completely mystified by his absurd dramatic artistic creations. Many critics and viewers qualified his plays as resembling « crossword puzzle where every vertical clue is designed to put you off the horizontal » Milton Shulman of Evening Standard (1958) seems to aver. (as cited in Esslin, 1973, p. 18.) Others would simply dismiss him as a writer whose actors and characters lacking the possibility to

express and explain their actions, thoughts, or feelings. They often behave more like figures in a dream than like persons. This would make it very hard to the readers to identify with them. Having mixed the real with the surreal, Pinter's characters suggest that the exact portrayal of life and its evocation lies very deep beneath the surface. Who people are and whether one can truly perceive their essence; are issues in several of Pinter's plays. Any attempt from their behalf to fathom themselves they fail to clarify. The more detail they employ, the less convincing they become. Pinter once opinionated that like most people, his characters are usually "inexpressive, giving little away, unreliable, elusive, evasive, obstructive, unwilling" Tynan (1962), (as cited in Ionesco, Notes & Notes, 1964, p. 95). Pinter's drama then deliberately evolves in an atmosphere of mystery whose patterns remain obscure. This would certainly affirm the absurdity in his plays which is easily resonated in the Camusian notion of existentialist absurdist. This research work focuses on Camus's concept of the Absurd and Heidegger's existentialism through which Pinter works out his works foregrounding the influence of existential philosophy on the Theatre of the Absurd. Nevertheless, many critics would point out that Absurdist playwrights demonstrate the existential philosophy better than Sartre and Camus did in their own plays. This theater, as Esslin has averred, "has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being — that is, in terms of concrete stage images of the absurdity of existence" (Esslin, 1968, p. 23).

Despite the avalanche of books, articles and theses that have made use of the terms "being, existence, and absurdum", they remained problematic or succumb to abstraction because of their diametrically opposed practices in different disciplines. Heidegger, for example has insisted that his philosophy is primarily concerned with « being » rather than with existence (Reinhardt, 1952, p. 121). But whether Heidegger is to be concerned with being or existence nobody would fail to find out that existence is related to nothingness or to being as nothingness. Sartre's *No Exit*, (1944), on the other hand, foresees the Theatre of the Absurd. His Being and Nothingness is a seminal work on existentialism. Yet, Sartre has endeavored to demonstrate the difference between "the existentialist" and "the Absurd". The former expresses the incomprehensibility and the irrationality of the human condition in the form of a comprehensible and logically constructed reasoning, whereas the latter abandons the old dramatic conventions and goes on to invent a new form to express the new content. Therefore, these opposed practices constitute the backbone of this article. It is meant to bridge the gap between the philosophers' notions of being, and absurdity through the works of a playwright, Harold

Pinter. Focus is also put on how Pinter has taken the basic premise of existential philosophy and combined it with dramatic elements to create a form which presented a world that was unexplainable and a life that seemed absurd. Thus, a close reading of his use of language in his plays would reveal how the existentialist themes have influenced much of Pinter's absurdist work. Thus, the existential fear that some of his characters, Davies in *The Caretaker*, for example, experience, is a fear of nonexistence and it can be touched in a wide portion of his plays. This why a few of them (characters) who are aware of it veer away toward silence. It is out of these attributes, therefore, that this research work traces the intimate connection between language and being Pinter's plays and show how they cannot be understood when set apart from one another. From the aforementioned discussion, our research enquiries fall on the ensuing research questions which are presented as follows:

1. How does Pinter understand language and to what extent it is related to the being-question?
2. What it means to manipulate a language to bear a human existence throughout everyday conversation?
3. How does Pinter, under the influence of Heidegger's philosophy of being and Sartre and Camus' existentialism, work out the question of being subsequently opening language to the meaning of being ?

Taking into consideration the above questions, the following hypotheses can be put forward:

1. Pinter's dramatic use characters frequently show dissatisfaction with the limitation of language, this research paper is expected to pave the way to other future research mainly the way Pinter uses the language as part of his theatrical skill. The way Pinter's characters become more increasingly manipulators of language and are increasingly themselves manipulated by language to prove their being, may also sound and aspiring area of research.

### **Pinter and the Limits of Being**

It may be suggested that in the process of reading and understanding Pinter's plays, one is likely to be in the grip of a mood which actually transforms his way of seeing the world and his place in it. Perhaps this hypothesis seems strange or hard to believe in at

first glance. Yet if a reader pays a close attention to the way Pinter expresses the theories and individual's experiences in most of his plays, he/she will immediately be convinced. For in many occasions, apart from his plays, Pinter has acknowledged his wariness and preoccupations with man at the limits of his being. Pinter once replied to an interviewer that he was dealing with the people in plays at the extremity of their lives:

There is no reason to suppose at one time or another they didn't listen to a political meeting, or they might even have voted[...]I'm dealing with these characters at the extreme edge of their living, where they are living pretty much alone, at their heart, their home heart[...]we all, I think may have sexual relationships or go to a political meeting or discuss, ideas, but when we go back to our rooms and we are faced with a bed we are either alone or with some else, then[...]I don't think we go on long about ideas or political allegiances[...]I mean there comes a point surely, where this living in the world must be tied up in living in own world, where you are—in your room[...]Before you manage to adjust yourself to living alone in your room...you are not terribly fit and equipped to go out and fight the battles[...]which are fought mostly in abstractions in the outside world. (as cited in Esslin, 1978, p. 34)

We have inserted Pinter's speech fully for the solely reason that it contains the basic and necessary elements that are to shape and crystallize most of his work. Moreover, it reveals his attitudes which tend to be that of an existentialist. Like Martin Heidegger, Pinter wishes to refer to Man's position in time, standing at the present moment, but very consciously aware of both past and future. In each dimension there is that fundamental anxiety and fear from non-being and nullification. Indeed, comparison of aesthetic matters is a dangerous activity which, if carried too far, may lead straightforwardly to the absurd and to the imaginative. However, the relationship between Pinter and Heidegger is embodied in the aim they both wish to reach i.e. to arrive at the essence of man and of man's being in the world. The former argues the proper way to pursue the subject would be to consider man's everyday language which is full of confusions, contradictions, and absurdity. For man's language reflects his identity and his personality, particularly in moments of fear and anxiety which are always omnipresent. The way one says something can describe exactly what one is. In short, his language in everyday life is nothing except the version of the whole human condition (the three characters in the Caretaker (1963), for instance, have no contact with the outside world. They discuss the eternal questions about the meaning of life, which they will never be able to understand).

Martin Heidegger, on the other hand, has made of language itself the absolute or major focus of his investigation. "His first writing", as George Steiner wrote, "concern themselves with the vocabulary and corresponding logical and ontological categories of Duns Scotus and the medieval schoolmen" (Steiner, 1978, p. 14). He is more and more concerned with different ways of understanding Being, and has increasingly been given to the attempt to extract from language, and especially, from the language of poetry, an insight into the truth of Being. So whilst their perspectives are very different their aims amazingly locate them on the same side in a number of the debates. To be more precise and explicit, the only difference between Heidegger and Pinter is that the former proposed the nature of being as prior the subject matter of philosophy, and the latter approaches being through the consideration of the nature of man, who stands in a peculiar relation to Being as a whole. He is the only Being who is capable of considering as a whole. He is in a way exposed to it. In other words, Pinter attempts to intertwine, integrate, or weld the subject matter and the form in which it is expressed. This is in fact what Esslin in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1964) suggests- "separates the Theatre of the Absurd from the Existentialist Theatre" (25).

### **Pinter's Use of Language**

Pinter sees language as that concept through which one's existence can be explored. For Man, Pinter believes, is subjected-in a certain way at some points in time-to various social pressure and persecutions which prevent him from establishing a peaceful life. These social hardships eventually predetermine one's attitudes and behaviors. In fact, Pinter's absurd use of language is a weapon pointed at a profound and a deeper perception of human existence. It depicts a more complex reality that is not comprehensible at the superficial level; namely such themes as loneliness, lack of communication, fear of the world outside. Pinter then, is going to take Man's confrontations, his uncertain and unknown surroundings, his confrontations with oneself and his nature of being as the starting point of his investigation and exploration. Pinter (1959) here says:

[...]but in our present day world, everything is uncertain and relative. There is no fixed point; we are surrounded by the unknown. And the fact that it is verging on the unknown leads us to the next point which seems to occur in my plays. There is a kind of horror about and I think this horror and absurdity go together.

(p. 242)

As aforementioned in Pinter's quoted words above, the uncertain and the unknown world which his characters are afraid of, aware and have great thirst to know about, is expressed almost in all his plays. It is a source of absurdity, anxiety and fear from which his characters seem to imbue their confusions and ambiguities. As a result, Man will certainly in a way or another try to free himself from this situation. He will wonder and attempt to understand his own self. In other words, he tries to explore his being in relation to the outside world. And to explore his being, would be to find an answer to the question why thing at all and in what manner do they exist? Concerning this point Heidegger writes: "Man alone of all existing thing experiences the wonders: that there are things in being" (Warnock, 1970, p. 52.)

To keep the same pace of reasoning, it is very advantageous then, to go back to Pinter's plays and see how Man wonders and tries to explore his existence through his speech.

In his play *The Room* (1957), we are provided by a case of Man's wonders and fears in a very arbitrary situation: a room. Right from the first starting moments of the play Pinter illustrates Rose's anxieties and fears through her frequent insistence on the pleasurable and warmth of the room, as opposed to the moisture and obscurity of the flat which was offered to her and her husband at the basement. She wonders about what is outside and who is living outside, away from her world (the room), which is the source of all her assurance.

Just now I looked out of the window. It was enough for me. There wasn't a soul about. Can you hear the wind? (She sits in the rocking-chair) I have never seen who it is. Who is it? Who lives down there? I'll have to ask. I mean, you might as well know, Bert. But whoever it is, it can't be too cozy.  
(p.4)

In increasingly, it is in *The Room*, that Pinter investigates man's life that is not always perceivable, tangible and predictable. The two prominent states of being such as security and peace are in constant peril. No stability is guaranteed, and danger is lurking outside the door. As Pesta reaffirms, "In Pinter's drama there is typically a menacing "usurper", a figure who undermines the existential security of those about him while his own existence is simultaneously being undermined" (as cited in Gale, 1971, p. 67).

There is a great emphasis on the safety and comfort of the room as compared to the cold, the dark and the hostility of the outside world. Rose is terribly afraid of the world outside the room. Now, Pinter is already building-up an atmosphere of uncertainty, doubtfulness, and haziness around his character Rose and around the setting of the play: the room. What he attempts to convey through this uncertain situation is that Man, in any given moment of time, is jeopardized by the issue of being, and the threat of non-being.

So, Rose's inevitable existential fear and anxiety are something "real", in the ordinary sense that they are acceptable as an everyday occurrence? Yet Rose's fear is not negative at all, in the contrary, it is one of the criteria by which living are distinguished from non-living things. Here fear may be an evidence of her more highly developed sensitivity and general superior adaptation to her environment. Moreover, Rose's fear can be interpreted as a basic drive that assists her chance of survival. As long as the fear responses are within normal bounds, fear is a highly desirable emotion; it keeps one from rushing in where the unafraid do not fear to tread. Increasingly, Rose's fear indicates that she is responsible and aware of her being in relation to the outside world. She provides herself comfort-taking care and much concerned with herself: "It was enough for me." And "the basic relationship between human beings and the world is that of 'care' or 'concern'" (Warnock, 1970, p. 53).

This is undoubtedly a certain way of exploration of the self. Rose in *The Room* has isolated herself in her single bed-sitting room. The window is the only means of her contact with the outside world. She is extremely frightened to near hysteria by any noise outside the door or any stranger coming in. Her exile from the outside world is so much that she cannot be sure whether the couple who come into the room tell the truth or not. Her rejection of any normal relationship with people has compelled her to stay inside the room; she has returned to the womb in order not to face the stark realities of life.

### **Pinter and the Request of Being**

To touch on the heart of the matter, one has to assert what Pinter once said to an interviewer: "Sometimes, I don't know who I'm looking at the mirror. There is no explanation of motivation. Who am I?" (Esslin, 1978, p.38)

It is this question "who am I?" which inspires Pinter to shape his ideas about Man his uncertain and unknown motivations. Thus, he always and in most of his plays, tackles his characters without any consideration to their historical background, and personality. In

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other words, he deals with his characters as existent beings. For in “real” life as Esslin (1964) writes: “we deal with people all at the time whose early history, family relationship, or psychological motivations we totally ignore...” (p. 242).

This will astonishingly lead us to mention that Pinter’s preoccupation with Man at the limit of his being is closely linked with his use of language. This latter (language) has become the center of interest of many writers like Ionesco and Antonin Artaud. Both see language as a version of human conditions since its “reality” in the unknown and absurd world about which they have been writing, conceals rather than reveals. Thus most of their literary productions have been devaluing language to the point where it seems losing its impact on the printed page. And this is Ionesco’s speech summarizing Antonin Artaud’s views:

As our knowledge becomes separated from life, our culture no longer contains ourselves (or only insignificant part of ourselves), for it forms a ‘social’ context into which we are not integrated. So, the problem becomes that of bringing our back into contact with our culture, making it a living culture again. To achieve this, we shall first have to kill ‘the respect for what is written down in black and white’...to break up our language so that it can put together again in order to re-establish contact with ‘the absolute’, or as I should prefer to say, ‘with multiple reality’; it is imperative to push human beings again towards seeing themselves as they really are (Esslin, 1964, p. 409).

Ionesco and Artaud including Pinter have been obsessed with language and its falseness. It is the solely means to approach the reality of man, and to explore his essence. In Ionesco’s theatre, for instance, death is always present, in the sense that the fear of not being imbues its sense of being. In other words, and as Martin Esslin wrote: “[...]The inevitability of death” is “the absurdity of human existence itself” (Esslin, 1964, p. 177).

Increasingly, if we go back to Ionesco’s speech and analyze the last sentence in the quotation, “to push beings again towards seeing themselves as they really are,” one may notice that he wishes to make existence authentic. He wants to put human beings face to face with the realities that of language. Thus, in some of his plays he dramatizes the futility and failure of human existence. His play *Victimes du Devoir* (*Victims of Duty*) (1953), is his situation-victim of the world, and which comes close to Pinter’s *The Caretaker*. In Ionesco’s play, he suggests that man is nothing, always falls into nothingness as Esslin points out: “Man is nothing because he has the liberty of choice and therefore is always



that which he is in the process of choosing himself to be, a permanent potentiality rather than actual being..." (Esslin, 1964, p.156). This can be applied to Davies in *The Caretaker*.

As we have already half-suggested, Pinter is also obsessed with language. He has increasingly been given to the attempt to extract from language and particularly from everyday life, an insight into the 'truth' of being; and above all, he has attempted to present a man as a questioning problematic object in the world of his own.

The fact that Pinter stands as an observer, in a way that he does not impose or interfere with his characters, reveals a kind of objectivity. He once said,

Given characters who possess a momentum of their own, my job is not to impose upon them, not to subject them to false articulation, by which I mean forcing a character to speak where he could not speak, of making him speak of what he could never speak.

(Esslin, 1978, p. 45)

Pinter's attitudes towards his characters compel us to correlate his philosophical views with Soren Kierkegaard's. For, according to the latter, "the objective tendency" is that which "proposes to make everyone an observer, and in its maxims to transform him into so objective an observer that he becomes almost a ghost" (Warnock, 1970, p. 8).

Being an observer, Pinter may have devoted his attention to individual as he raises questions about his own place in the world. In *The Caretaker*, Pinter has laid much stress on this phenomenon. He provides us with a case in which an old tramp called Davies, who wants to prove his existence as well as his identity. He is a man who wants to reserve a place in this world. Right from the first act, the readers or the audience is confronted with the old tramp's enigmatic situation where Davies has lost not only his place in the world, but also his identity:

Davies: (with great feeling). If only the weather would break! Then I'd be able to get down to Sidcup!

Aston: Sidcup?...

(Davies then said). I got my papers there!...A man I know has got them. I left them with him. You see? They prove who I am! I can't move with them papers. They tell you who I am.

(Pinter, 1959, p. 17)

Having established the impossibility for Davies to journey back to Sidcup to prove his identity, Pinter has already reminded us that Davies still exists. For Davies' ignorance arose from his awareness of himself as an individual, thinking alone to play off the two brothers: Mick and Aston against each other. He thinks of himself as an existing concrete individual, set down in the world, raising the problem of identity. Warnock suggested:

This ignorance is the precursor of the absurd, the irrational and inexplicable fact that individual lives in the world he does live in it. The absurd is that part of man's situation which is intractable to generalizations or system-making. It is the brute fact that he exists as a concrete thing in the world.

(p. 14)

Apart from the confusing reactions of the characters in the play, Pinter is exploring the human condition, the alienation of man, solitude, quest of identity and his own self. At the end of the final act, Pinter seems to emphasize Davies' silence, which may be interpreted as an evasion of the suffering and anguish that spring from his self-deception; and from facing the reality of his condition. For Davies immediately realizes that he has no right to take liberties in the brother's house, as he has no chance to stay in. There is, here, a strange and astonishing confluence Jean Paul Sartre's philosophy and the productive impulse of Pinter in *The Caretaker*. Both of them see man as having some possible choices to move forward from one condition to another. Man, for them, knows that he needs not to live as he does. If it happens for Davies to accept his condition unthinkingly, including the moral code which he lives by, as if it were inevitable, it is only a "bad faith". This is actually what comes out at the final lines of the play. Davies then, has become an image of what Sartre calls "bad faith" (Blackham, 1961, p. 16) in the sense that Davies in spite of his endeavors and the possible chances that are at his disposal, is unable to help himself. Nevertheless, he deceives no one except himself.

It is these mysterious situations that confront the individual in his daily life that preoccupied Pinter: the paradox of instability and stability, the mysteriousness of existence,

absurdity and necessity. These characteristics are quite delineated in Davies' behaviors. For it seems that nothing changed in his situation. He comes to the brothers' house with no identity and still leaves without it.

In short, The Caretaker reveals a sense of the tragic difficulty of becoming aware of one's own identity and one's own being in a world in which everything is uncertain and the boundary between "reality" and dream is ever transforming. It also expresses a kind of hopelessness and self-deception that arise from the difficulty to establish friendly relationships. It shows to what extent all human being carry the origins of their depression and disintegration inwardly, deep in their personality. Pinter himself has stated that he wanted to end his play with the death of the old tramp Davies:

The original idea[...]was to end the play with the violent death of the tramp[...]It suddenly struck me that it was not necessary. And I think that in this play[...]I have developed, that I have no need to use cabaret turns and blackouts and screams in the dark to the extent that I enjoyed using them before. I feel that I can deal, without resorting to that kind of thing; with a human situation[...]I do see this play as merely[...]a particular human situation, concerning three people and not, incidentally[...]symbols.

(Esslin, 1978, p. 249)

## Conclusion

A better way of summing up our ideas about language and being; would be to say that Pinter's creative intuition conveys Man's mysterious wonder at the odd world; and Man's preoccupations with his own self and his essence. Pinter once says through his character Len in The Dwarfs (1960)

The point is, who are you? Not why, or not how, not even what...you are the sum of many reflections. How many reflections? Whose reflections? Is that what you consist of? What scum does the tide leave? What happens to the scum? When does it happen? I've seen what happens[...]The scum is broken and sucked back. I don't see where it goes, I don't see when, what do I see, what have I seen? What have I see, the scum of the essence?

(as cited in Esslin,1978, p.262)

Basically, Pinter's constant questions about Man and his essence communicate or rather prove his tendency to understand and to explore Man when he is confronted with danger in the process of his adaptation to his own self. This would enable him/her to journey into the world to confront and face the pressures of the society. Thus the aspect of existence in Pinter's theatre remains the basic and the fundamental issue. This probably what drives Keer to consider Pinter as the only dramatist today who "writes existentialist plays existentially" (cited in Esslin, 1967, pp.3-9).

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