

Language of Silence in the Plays of Harold Pinter

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Abstract

Harold Pinter is one of the exponents of The Theatre of the Absurd. His plays are distinguished from all others by their sense of mystification, suspense and ambiguity. This springs from the gap between the text and the subtext-surface action and underlying meaning, built-up illusions and hidden reality, and a multiplicity of meanings and significances. Pinter has achieved this by using the strategy of pause, three dots or silence in his plays. These devices control the spatial and visual dimension of the play over and above the written text. The difficulties that characters experience with language are underlined by the pauses and silences in dialogue. These breaks in fluent speech are marked on the printed page in three ways: a pause, a silence and three dots.

Harold Pinter (1930 -2009) is one of the exponents of The Theatre of the Absurd. Pinter's plays are distinguished from all others by their sense of mystification, suspense and ambiguity. This springs from the gap between the text and the subtext-surface action and underlying meaning, built-up illusions and hidden reality, and a multiplicity of meanings and significances. The dialogue of Pinter's plays is perhaps as notable for the pauses as the words.

Pinter has used the strategy of pause, three dots or silence in his plays. They are part and parcel of Pinter's dramatic dialogue. These devices control the spatial and visual dimension of the play over and above the written text. The difficulties that characters experience with language are underlined by the pauses and silences in dialogue. These breaks in fluent speech are marked on the printed page in three ways. A speech can be broken by three dots, or by the stage directions Pause or Silence. These pauses always contribute to the rhythm of the dialogue. They also indicate something of what is going on. There is a difference in Pinter between a pause, a silence and three dots. Peter Hall describes the difference in Pinter between a pause and a silence and three dots. He states:

A pause is really a bridge where the audience thinks that you're this side of the river, and then when you speak again, you're the other side. That's a pause. And it's alarming, often. It's a gap, which retrospectively gets filled in. It's not a dead stop – that's a silence, where the confrontation has become too extreme, there is nothing to be said until either the temperature has gone down, or the temperature has gone up, and then something quite extreme happens. Three dots is a very tiny hesitation, but it's there, and it's different from a semi-colon, which Pinter almost never uses, and its different from a comma. A comma is something you catch up on, you go through it.

And a full stop's just a full stop. You stop.¹

A pause in Pinter is important sub-textually. It causes the mind to hold its comprehensive process for some quiet moments during which manifold shades of suggestions flash across the mind of the listener. The audience holds its breath at the cross-section of perplexing, insulated meaning, which inheres only in the direct impact of on-stage action. The audience then proceeds with caution,

without any dialogue to follow the right track of comprehension. In Pinter “dramatic pause is essentially a means of implanting a dramatic impression.”² Instead of giving any details of a character’s inner-goings, a pause is used to denote the silent interplay of the conscious and the sub-conscious.

A silence is a dead stop. It falls when confrontation at the psychological level becomes quite extremely heated up. Nothing can be spoken by anyone until the dramatic tension dissipates or mounts up in such a way that quite new happens. ‘Three dots’ indicate a very tiny hesitation. It is also different from a comma. A comma is something that is to catch up on for a while, to go through it the very next moment. A ‘full-stop’ requires a stop in the process, and puts an end to the issue for the time being. As an absurdist Pinter does not think that any meaning is final and complete. In his plays he puts before the audience certain occurrences which have any number of implications. The audience is to draw according to their individual capacity such implication as the drama progresses. Teddy’s nervousness on his arrival to his home after a gap of six years with his wife Ruth whom he married without the approval or even knowledge of his family is explicit in his dialogues. That he appears to console Ruth is rather ridiculous, as it was he, not she, who got nervous. “Look, it’s all right, really. I’m here. I mean...I’m with you. There’s no need to be nervous. Are you nervous? (Homecoming 31). The dialogue here is quite meaningful. Three dots register Teddy’s hesitation, and the question ‘Are you nervous?’ at once applies to the speaker himself. Through this brilliant dialogue, Pinter brings out Teddy’s sub-conscious fear. Teddy’s statements are stratagems to cover nakedness. The words he uses are a smokescreen for his own suppressed fear.

Pinter in using incoherent, halting prose tends to be almost musical and is suggestive of poetic meanings. Pause and silence come as naturally as in music. They create a rhythm and a musical pattern:

LENNY. Just give me the glass.

RUTH. No.

Pause

LENNY. I'll take it, then.

RUTH. If you take the glass I'll take you.

Pause

LENNY. How about me taking the glass without you taking me ?

RUTH. Why don't I just take you?

Pause

LENNY. You're joking ...

She picks up the glass and lifts it towards him.

RUTH. Have a sip. Go on. Have a sip from my glass Sit
on my lap. Take a long cool sip

LENNY. What was that supposed to be? Some kind of proposal?

Silence (Homecoming, 42-43)

What was not said often spoke as forcefully as the words themselves. 'Silence' in a Pinter play has a deep significance; when the conflict between the characters get tense nothing can be said till the intensity of the tension is lessened. Mostly, after such a silence, the dialogue moves towards a different episode, not related to what immediately precedes it.

Pinter has spoken of speech as a stratagem designed to cover the nakedness of silence, and these aims are often evident in the dialogue of Gus and Ben in The Dumbwaiter. Ben's most prominent response to Gus' constant questions about the nature of their jobs is silence. Lurking underneath this silence is always the threat of violence, the anticipation of something deathly - the play ends as Ben trains his gun on Gus in silence.

In a sense, the looming presence of Wilson is the most dominating silence in the play. Assuming Wilson is the one sending the men messages through the dumb waiter and the speaking tube (and Gus does say at one point that sometimes Wilson only sends messages), then the audience never gets a chance to hear him, but only hears him through a secondary mouthpiece as the men read or repeat his orders. His mysteriousness is one of the more sinister components of the play, for

Wilson seems to be everywhere through his multi-tiered organisation. He performs an off-stage role similar to that of Godot in Beckett's Waiting for Godot, but whereas Godot symbolizes a neutral god-like figure for whom the characters wait, Wilson is a malevolent god whom the characters wait for in violent silence.

Pinter employs different kinds of silences in his dialogue in The Birthday Party. His silences are perfectly timed to fit characterisation and create a rhythm. The Birthday Party starts with a silence. Petey enters and sits at the table and begins to read. Pinter breaks the silence with words from an unseen source, so arousing a further curiosity:

MEG. Is that you, Petey?

Pause

Petey, is that you?

Pause

Petey?

PETE. What?

MEG. Is that you?

PETE. Yes, it's me. (Birthday Party, 3)

After 'Is that you, Petey?', a pause repeats the exploitation of theatrical vacuum and still further develops the audience's desire for it to be filled. Pinter does not let go of this tension until line six, with Petey's 'Yes, it's me,' and then Meg appears on the stage.

Pinter is not merely withholding information, for the repetition of words has been carefully judged. Meg's first three questions seem at first to repeat the same inquiry, but the slight changes in the uses of words reveal progressively that the questions she asks are not truly questions at all, but a challenge. 'Petey' is first placed at the end of the sentence, then more commandingly at the beginning, and then becomes the single questioning word. Her questions, statements, and action all establish that she wishes to make him acknowledge her presence and his dependence.

The pertinent silence which prevails in between the question and the response is essentially a means for the playwright of implanting a dramatic impression and schooling the audience to hear and see what the author wants them. For, to react fully to any single effect, the audience ought to be given a certain span of time, during which it can consider that single given effect to the exclusion of anything else. Any sentence or part thereof which is intended by the dramatist to convey a particular message, or to impart a particular effect, should be followed by a pause or an appropriate silence so that the particular message or effect may have time to sink into the consciousness of the audience. Pinter has mastered the use of pauses, and by a clever manipulation of them, he is able to create doubt, suspense, shock or thrill in the mind of the audience. The continuing thought process and the mounting tensions in the mind of Stanley, Goldberg, McCann, Meg, Petey and Lulu are excellently portrayed through this subtle device of pauses, one of the forms of silence. Simple hesitation, uncertainty and the stress and tensions in the minds of characters of The Birthday Party have been indicated through three dots (...). Silence marks the end of one movement and the beginning of another. Goldberg's long speech to McCann about his father's death-bed advice gets broken with a silence in the middle and then it is began in a fresh note harping on the secret of his success lying in his keeping his health fit like a fiddle. Similarly Petey's question "Where are you taking him?" is followed by a pertinent, sinister silence.

GOLDBERG. Still the same old Stan. Come with us. Come on boy.

PETEY. Where are you taking him?

They turn. Silence.

GOLDBERG . We're taking him to Monty.

PETEY. He can stay here.

GOLDBERG. Don't be silly.

PETEY. We can look after him here.

GOLDBERG. Why do you want to look after him ?

PETEY. He's my guest.

GOLDBERG. He needs special treatment.

PETEY. We'll find someone.

GOLDBERG. No, Monty's the best there is. Bring him McCann.

(Birthday Party, 79)

The silence in itself is highly meaningful. The response that comes after the prevailing silence is equally mysterious. Both ‘Monty’ and ‘special treatment’ create a menace of their own, meaningful only to the careful audience. Hence, as soon as Petey intervenes in the smooth operation of Goldberg and McCann, the situation becomes grim with serious implications. It is the play’s final moment of recognition. The clean-shaven, well-dressed Stanley is being forcibly taken to some unknown destination. The henchmen encounter the very first resistance ever, from Petey – ‘where are you taking him,’ from the time they came to the lodge. The stunning silence helps the audience to have a feel of the crucial moment – the moment of recognition before the end. Through three dots, pauses and silences Pinter transports the audience to the world of horror by making them share the psychological stress and tensions of his characters.

Pinter’s dramatic language in Landscape demonstrates how adroitly he exploits the gaps in language. Thereby he also shows that language itself has become the active barrier to communication in spite of which communication is an unending process. Pinter’s speeches in this play rest on gaps resembling a pattern of no-speech. He uses this language of the gaps in the following passage in Landscape:

BETH

I would like to stand by the sea. It is there.

Pause.

I have. Many times. It’s something I cared for. I’ve done it.

Pause

I’ll stand on the beach. On the beach. Well...it was very fresh. But it was hot, in the dunes. But it was so fresh, on the shore. I loved it very much.

Pause.

Lots of people...

Pause

People move so easily. Men, Men move.

Pause

I walked from the dune to the shore. My man slept in the dune. He turned over as I stood. His eyelids. Belly button. Snoozing how lovely.

Pause.

Would you like a baby? I said. Children?

Babies? Of our own? Would be nice.

Pause

Women turn, look at me.

Pause

Our own child? Would you like that?

Pause.

(Landscape, 167)

The form of the play is static and as Esslin points out, “The characters remain seated almost throughout the action, the drama is entirely in the language, the evocation of moods.”³ The language poetically evokes the feeling of separation and solitude. Genuine verbal exchange does not take place between the characters. Rather the play offers crosscut monologues.

The uniqueness of Pinter’s play lies in his peculiar way of using common man’s language. Pinter exploits the vitality and raciness of common man’s language. He creates an effective linguistic tool, even poetry. He is adept in poetic orchestration of pauses and silences.

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