

Being and Becoming in the plays of Harold Pinter

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Abstract

The plays of Harold Pinter show an influence of the existentialist philosophers like Heidegger, Camus and Sartre. They deal with the meaning or meaninglessness of life. Critics have broadly categorized his plays into three categories – the drama of menace, the plays of memory and the political plays. The emphasis in the plays belonging to different types may vary but the basic focus in them remains the same – the issue of being and becoming. In traditional plays of different varieties written before 1950, the dramatists thought it necessary to provide at least preliminary information about the background of his major characters. Like other dramatists of the Theatre of the Absurd, Pinter does not provide any information about his leading characters. We empathize with these characters not because we approve of their behaviour but because we recognize the predicaments that frustrate their existences. Pinter in his plays shows a character's attempt at coming to terms with the dilemma of being and becoming. This is what puts him in the category of an existential dramatist.

Key Words: Human Life, Existentialism, Theatre, Absurd

Harold Pinter is one of the greatest English playwrights of the second half of the 20th century. He was certainly the most staged English dramatist of this period. The Nobel Prize for Literature conferred on him in 2005 was a just recognition of his greatness as a dramatist. All his plays like the *The Birthday Party*, *The Homecoming*, *The Caretaker*, *No Man's Mind and Betrayal*, *Old Times*, *A Kind of Alaska*, are the best examples of struggle for Being and Becoming. In Pinter's plays psychological war between winners and losers is of a great value. Many of the characters try to exert power over others through various means such as sex and politics . Even though in his works he captures human beings at a given moment of time, his vision encompasses both their past and future. And what they are likely to be in future is also rooted in their past and present. In fact, the whole story of a man's life is the story of his being and becoming. An existentialist like Sartre holds that existence precedes essence. Human life does not have a predetermined meaning; it is man who gives meaning to his life. So the journey from being to becoming is the whole story of a man's life. The decisions that he makes, the steps that he takes to give his decisions a practical shape and the way he responds to his environment and reacts to the pressures exerted upon him by the external forces ultimately determine the course of his life.

The plays of Harold Pinter show an influence of the existentialist philosophers like Heidegger, Camus and Sartre. They deal with the meaning or meaninglessness of life. Critics have broadly categorized his plays into three categories – the drama of menace, the plays of memory and the political plays. The emphasis in the plays belonging to different types may vary but the basic focus in them remains the same – the issue of being and becoming. In traditional plays of different varieties written

before 1950, the dramatists thought it necessary to provide at least preliminary information about the background of his major characters. Whether it is Shakespeare or Shaw, Congreve or Ibsen the audience is provided with background who they are, what their ambitions or problems are and he waits eagerly for the outcome of the conflict in the light of this background information. Like other dramatists of the Theatre of the Absurd, Pinter does not provide any information about his leading characters. But unlike most Absurdist dramatists, he does not leave us at the point where we had begun. For example, in *Waiting for Godot* we are completely clueless about the characters that come before us. We only know that two of them are tramps and are waiting for someone called Godot. Who these tramps are or who Godot is and why they are waiting for him – we are completely clueless about these basic questions. These and other such questions remain unanswered even at the end of the play. This does serve the dramatist in emphasizing the meaninglessness of such questions and thereby underlining the absurdity of existence itself. Pinter also refrains from giving detailed information about his characters or situations, but we do get a glimpse into where these characters started from and where they have reached in their existential journeys and also in which direction they are moving at present. For example, in *The Room* we are introduced to the present situation of Rose. She is living in a room of a building with her husband, Bert and feels cosy and protected there. She feels threatened when she has apprehensions of being evacuated from there. We are informed about a blind Negro, Riley who is stationed in the dark and damp basement of that building and is waiting to meet Rose. The landlord has no inkling about the identity of that person or about his purpose of meeting Rose. When he comes before an unwilling Rose, she seems to be denying any acquaintance with him. Riley says that he has a message for her and later reveals that he has a

message from her father who wants her to return home. He calls her by the name, ‘Sal’ and requests her to go back to her home with him. Thus we do get information about Rose’s past. The information may be very scanty and it does not tell us why she has left her home or what her relationship with Riley has been, but this is enough to explain Rose’s present desperation to stick to her present situation of security. She is running away from her past whatever it might have been. This gives us an insight into where she had begun and what she has become now. Her turning blind at the end of the play indicates her future. The focus of the play is on Rose’s essential being and her becoming something else, and Pinter does succeed in conveying her story of being and becoming effectively.

In *The Birthday Party* also Stanley, like Rose, is running away from his past. Like Riley, Goldberg and McCann are men from his past and have come to reclaim him. Pinter gives us no information about these men. We do, however, have enough clue to assume that Goldberg and McCann are men from the underworld and taking back Stanley to whatever place they are taking him is a ‘job’ they have been assigned. Even though we do not know what Stanley has been we do know what he has become. He has chosen to become a non-entity and live in a limbo. He has been living for a year in an obscure guest house in a small sea side town, run by an elderly couple. The arrival of the two men unsettles his present existence. He resists them but their violent method subdues him. He is broken in body and spirit. At the end of the play Stanley follows meekly in a wheelchair to the van in which they are taking him away. A worried Petey, the old landlord, urges him in vain, “Stan, don’t let them tell you what to do.” (80) Thus Stanley’s failure to break up from his previous existence does not allow him to move in the direction of becoming something else.

Pinter's *The Caretaker* is a brilliant portrayal of this existential dilemma. All the three characters of the play – Mick, a man in his late twenties, Aston, in his early thirties, and Davies, an old man, are grappling with their existential problems. Davies, the tramp who does not have his papers of identification and who confesses that he has changed his name, has nowhere to go. His existence is confined to the present, living from day to day. But he cannot shake off his past, as his guiles and prejudices reveal. Aston, who had been to a mental asylum, is seeking meaning of his life in his own way. Mick might come across one minute as sadistically brutal and the next as his brother's compassionate benefactor. Unlike an absurdist play, *The Caretaker* has a story line and a progression of action, not just circular movement of action. Aston, the good man at heart, gives shelter to Davies in the basement room of his brother's house where he lives. Davies is soon involved in machinations to get a permanent foothold in that house and has no compunctions in even inciting Mick to oust Aston from it. Mick, though youngest of the three seems to be worldly wise and protects his brother, Aston from the guiles of Davies. In the play, Davies alternates between the devious and the pathetic. Even Aston, though he maintains our sympathy throughout, can certainly stretch our patience. With no stable emotional location for empathy, our consequent experience of such a play in performance is fragmented. Our recognition of the human dilemmas being portrayed is nevertheless clear. Aston's trust and Mick's distrust of Davies, and the tramp's very real need for recognition, all combine to create an imbalanced network of needs and desires. There might be no traditional crisis in operation in *The Caretaker*, but its theatricality provokes in us a desire to see the structural flaws of this network resolved.

Aston is living in a limbo between being and becoming. His mental debility hampers him from giving his existence a meaning, though his ambitions are clearly more realistic and immediately realizable. And yet, his collected junk visibly conveys his burden, and the thickness of his defenses. His plans to decorate his brother's property seem of crucial importance to him and the task seems intrinsically linked with the trauma he recounts of electric shock treatment. In order to move on, to prove that he can cope, he holds out his ambitions for the flat as an enticing distraction from the possibility that much of it might be beyond his abilities. Before he can decorate the flat he has to build his shed, and before he can build his shed he needs to clear the garden, and before he can attend to this there will doubtlessly be a list of trivial tasks to accomplish such as mending the plug to the toaster which we witness taking a fortnight, no less, of his attention. Many of us might not be capable of interior decoration, or of constructing a shed from planks of wood, but few would be overcome by changing a plug. Reconciling this awareness with hearing Aston's words and watching his deeds, we cannot help but feel both admiration and despair for the character. It is in the last speech of Aston that we get to know the touching story of his life, how he came to be what he has become.

In his play *Landscape* Pinter presents the theme of being and becoming through a different technique of memory and dreaming. There are some of the basic principles of drawing that the character of Beth recalls in the play. In the context of her daydreaming remembrance of a day spent on the beach with a lover, these principles take on poetic dimensions, for when Beth speaks of a shadow's shape being only indirectly affected by that of its casual object , or of shadows that have no cause, she is clearly no longer speaking simply of the principles of

drawing. The objects that cast these memories are incidents, people and emotional states. Here, specific memories take on the characteristics of shadows; formless, shifting and entangled, like the images of a man and a woman that Beth remembers etching in sand which ‘kept on slipping, mixing the contours’. In this way Pinter articulates his own fascination with memory as a function of the emotive conscious mind, one that inexorably invades and defines the present moment. *Landscape* was the first step Pinter took in this new direction, leaving his reputation for ‘Comedies of Menace’ behind him.

Pinter’s *The Homecoming* is a brilliant dramatic exposition of the theme of being and becoming. It deals with the search for self as the basic existential problem. The play revolves around the homecoming of Teddy, a professor of philosophy in a university in America, with his wife, Ruth. He grows nostalgic when he reaches his home in London in the middle of a night. In that house his father, Max, an old man of seventy, lives with his two other sons, Lenny, a man in his early thirties, and Joey, a young man in his mid-twenties. The fourth member of the house is Sam, Teddy’s uncle who is aged sixty three. Max is a retired butcher who lives at home and does cooking for the other members of the family. Joey holds a job with a demolition company, but he is also an amateur boxer and hopes to become a professional. Lenny is smart and intelligent but it is not quite clear what his occupation is. Max’s brother Sam is a hire-car driver. Max talks a great deal about his late wife, Jessie. He also talks about his old friend, MacGregor, now dead. Lenny treats his father rudely, who in his turn is quite rude to his brother, Sam. This home has been without a woman since the death of Jessie, quite some time ago. The arrival of a woman, Ruth, now unsettles the nature of existence in this home and forces them to come out with the basic nature of their being. In the

process, Ruth, who has been leading a half-realized existence with her husband also comes to terms with her essential being.

Pinter's *A Night Out*, with other existential concerns, also deals with the issue of being and becoming. It has the longest dramatis personae among Pinter's plays but the focus of the play is on Albert who is a young man working in the firm of Mr. King. He is living with his mother, a widow who is very possessive about her son. She does not want to loosen her grip on her son. For this she takes recourse to her dependence on her and keeps invoking the memory of his dead father. Albert does not want to hurt his mother but this situation is obviously stifling his own existence. He wants to wriggle out of it and create a life of his own. At his workplace there is another person, Gidney who is his senior and who has for reasons unexplained taken an aversion to Albert. So both at home and outside, Albert is facing an atmosphere which is uncongenial for the growth of his self. The dramatist outlines the situation in the very beginning of the play. Albert is going to attend a party thrown by Mr. King in honour of an old employee of the firm, Mr. Ryan who is retiring from service. He had informed his mother about it a week ago and that morning also. But the mother behaves as if she had not heard about it.

Conversations keep Albert chained to his mother, to the house and to his dead father. He is mentally not free to chart out his own course of life. His friends, Seeley and Kedge are helpful, but they can help him only in his official or social matters. In his relationship with his mother they cannot help him. Problems await Albert outside his home also. Gidney makes him play in the wrong position in a football match and then puts the blame of the debacle of the team on him. In the party also he takes the help of the girls who work in the office to humiliate him.

Finally, Albert and Gidney are involved in a scuffle. Albert leaves the party without taking his dinner. When his mother, who has been waiting for him till late in the night, sees him in that condition, she straight forward accuses him of enjoying with girls. Stuck in a position like this a man is unable to give any substance to his existence. He cannot rebel openly as the accumulated burden of filial love, sense of duty and his innate decency do not allow him to do so. He can only fret and fume. The little gestures of defiance do not make any difference to his basic position. This is what happens to Albert in the play. When his situation becomes unbearable Albert picks up the clock from the table and raises it above his head violently as if to hit his mother with it. We also hear a stifled scream from the mother. In Act Three of the play, when a drunken Albert meets a prostitute quite late the same night, he encounters the same sly attempts of domination by another woman in one night. But this woman is not her mother.

He sees a similarity in the approach of both the women – his mother and the prostitute. They both try to dictate terms to him. They both give an emotional touch to their attempts by invoking the images of the dear ones. Albert's mother puts her dos and don'ts in the name of his dead father. The prostitute takes the name of her absent daughter who in the end proves to be non-existent. They both put so many injunctions before him as if he were a child to be taught how to behave. So Albert mixes his references while talking to the prostitute. At one moment he refers to his conversation with the prostitute a few moments ago and then he refers to his talk with his mother that evening. He is so strained that he can no longer demarcate between the two encounters. He, however, recollects how he had dealt with his mother.

Albert thinks that he has killed his mother, but when he returns home almost at dawn his mother meets him in the hall. She reprimands him mildly for his threatening gesture of the last night. She goes on speaking and a broken Albert says nothing. He has failed to muster courage to be even violent to assert his free will, whether it is with his mother or with the prostitute.

Traditionally, a playwright first establishes defined characters and then makes them behave relatively predictably in the resolving of some crisis between them. The ‘theatricality’ of this type of drama was the manner in which the audience would be emotionally engaged with the characters and the tensions and releases that could be engineered within that attachment, bringing about satisfaction when the dramatic crisis was resolved. Pinter’s manner of presenting his characters and allowing them to develop unpredictably before us is central to his own distinctive theatricality, one that operates by extracting our association with characters outside of any moral structure that a crisis might usually construct. In other words, we empathize with these characters not because we approve of their behaviour but because we recognize the predicaments that frustrate their existences. Pinter in his plays shows a character’s attempt at coming to terms with the dilemma of being and becoming. This is what puts him in the category of an existential dramatist.

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