

HUMAN INTERACTION/DISOURSE AS COMMUNICATION IN HAROLD PINTER'S THE HOMECOMING

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¹₁₅₇₅₀ ABSTRACT ¹₁₅₇₅₀

The present article attempts an analysis of human behaviour as communication in Harold Pinter's The Homecoming. Though, much has been written on the play from the communication and interactional point of view, most of it only focuses on the behavioural part of the characters. The ways in which they interact with each other reveals a significant part of their communication style. Based on the previous studies in the area, our approach depicts the pattern of human communication in a confined space. It also focuses on how characters behave with each other to convey their message. Pinter has, undoubtedly, shown in The Homecoming that how a certain type of interaction can convey a unique sort of dramatic communication.

Keywords: Communication, Human behaviour, Pinteresque, The Homecoming, Pause.

Introduction

The Homecoming by Harold Pinter has been more frequently analysed from communication point of view than any other of his plays. Hugo Bowles (2009) considers the narrative episodes of the play as a major part of the dialogue. According to him the close analysis of his plays reveal a significant aspect of Pinter's style of writing. The Homecoming has 14 storytelling episodes (Bowles, 2009.). It clearly suggests that Pinter wants to communicate something through these stories but at the same time it, as is the case with Pinter, it is not clear to whom and what. Pinter's plays have unreal reality, or an unrealistic reality (Bernard, 1962). It is a very tenuous task to decipher the meaning of Pinter's play. As Pinter accepts his inability:

I can sum up none of my plays. I can describe none of them, except to say: That is what happened. That is what they said. That is what they did. (Harold Pinter: Plays Three, 1997)

If one has to take out the meaning of characters, it becomes necessary to follow

the character word by word. A separate analysis of an individual character would help to understand the meaning of his message, which he communicates to the audience or characters. Pinter's treatment of the characters is to push them as near confusion as possible. Characters talk and act in unexpected and unexplained contradictions. Communication from character to audience is thwarted (William, 1969). The relationship among characters is not straightforward but symbolic which results into an exercise of obscurity (Arthur, 1969).

It has also been remarked that Pinter's characters do not communicate with the audience but they communicate with each other (William, 1969). Pinter's characters transact rather than connect; they encounter but they do not relate (Michal, 1982). Three types of communication occur in Pinter's plays: information exchanged communication; conscious transmission of trivial information; and communication at the level of relationship, covert communication (Richard, 1975). Scholars such as Susan

Mandala (2007) have also focused on the stylistic features of *The Homecoming*. Alice Rayner (1988) has studied the narrative structure of Pinter's plays; especially "infamous pauses" in order to understand the meaning of his plays. Austin E. Quigly (1978) has analysed the plays of Pinter from the linguistic point of view to understand the utterances of characters as speech acts which affect one another.

Human Communication

As far as human communication is concerned, we have reviewed only those papers, which deal with the behavioural and mental aspect of communication.

The most notable work in the area has been done by Watzlawick et al (1967). In the book, 'Pragmatics of Human Communication', they have studied the interactional patterns of human behaviour. According to them, communication is a relationship that is qualitatively different from the properties of individual involved. Goldstein (1985), in his paper, 'Communication and Mental Events', has studied the feelings and sensations and their role in communication.

Miller (1977) has talked about the linguistic communication and the nature of human mind. He, in fact, questions the nature and the use of the word communication in day to day life.

Donogue (1979) has studied conversation as a part of one way communication. According to Donogue, it is the most complete form of verbal communication. Gauker (1992) has argued about the understanding between the speaker and the hearer during communication.

On the basis of the above existing literature, the present paper, thus proposes to study the patterns of human communication in Pinter's *The Homecoming*. The paper tries to confine itself within the

area of behavioural aspect of communication to understand the meaning of the play.

Pinteresque Style

It would be unfair on the part of Harold Pinter to not mention his style of writing. His style of writing is called Pinteresque, an adjective; very few writers have (Xiao & Wang, 2007). He is a different sort of writer who uses the 'common place' for his settings. The play, *The Homecoming*, is set in a working class area. There is an open invitation of fear and insecurity in his plays. He seems to create meaning of his plays from an unknown tension accompanied with a long silence. It evokes a sense of discomfiture and the atmosphere is filled with horror.

Allison and Wellborn (1973) remark that, his plays are full of intrigue and frustration. It infuriates the reader at times. It will, however, not be inappropriate to assert that Pinter has experimented with a new dimension of dramatic communication.

Rabillard (1991) mentions that critics have, often, found his plot are insufficient in terms of a story line. The entire focus of the play rests on the character. Hence, it lacks motion and results into a static one. According to Stanley Evelyn (Pinter's Stagecraft), "when weeping and words and the occasion brief spasm of violence is over, so is the play".

Martin Esslin, in his *The Theatre of the Absurd*, has famously remarked about Pinter:

...absurdity of the ordinary speech enables him to transcribe everyday conversation in all its repetitiveness, incoherence, and lack of logic or grammar. The dialogue of Pinter's play is the casebook of the whole gamut of non sequiturs in small talk....There are also misunderstandings arising from inability to listen; incomprehension of polysyllabic words...; Pinter's dialogue follows a line of associative

thinking in which sound regularly prevails over sense....there is a deliberate evasion of communication. Communication itself between people is so frightening that rather than do that there is a continual cross talk, a continual talking about other things, rather than what is at the root of their relationship. (pp.244)

Guido Almansi and Simon Henderson in their book, *Contemporary Writers*, establish a significant aspect of the use of language and speech in *The Homecoming*:

The Homecoming is essentially a play about language- about articulating a language and being articulated by a language. In Pinter's world, social control lies ultimately in the power to impose one's language on another. There are layers and layers of meaning in the utterances of the characters in the play. An attempt to adopt a reductionist approach to deduce a "meaning" is bound to be a self limiting exercise. As Peter Hall maintains in "Directing Pinter", *The Homecoming* is as multi faceted as a diamond, and that 'any proposition we draw from one side of the play we can contradict or modify by a proposition from the other side'. (p.61)

At this juncture, it will be judicious to add Pinter's words on the subject of meaning. Almansi and Henderson quote from Pinter's letter written to Peter Wood, London's first producer of *The Birthday Party* "...meaning begins in words, in the action, continues in your head, and ends nowhere. There is no end to meaning. Meaning which is resolved, parcelled, labelled and ready for export is dead, impertinent and meaningless". (p.70)

The above analysis of Pinter's style offers cues and means towards understanding his approach. It appears that for Pinter language is just a medium and not a packet of meaning. They are the subject of transfer. The present proposition would

help us to analyse *The Homecoming* in a better way.

The Homecoming: A Communicational Approach

First of all we will have to understand the nature of communication in the *Homecoming* for which it is imperative to understand all the characters of the play. A close analysis of the play reveals that every character has a past history and without the information of the individual's past the context of his/her communication cannot be understood. Every character has a story which he narrates to the other characters and reveals his identity. In fact, Pinter's character reveals their existence by retelling the unknown past. Pinter's characters oscillate between the past and the present. Pinter has said:

We are faced with the immense difficulty if not the impossibility of verifying the past. I don't 'mean years ago, but yesterday, this morning. What took place, what was the nature of what took place, what happened? If one can speak of the difficulty of what in fact took place yesterday, one can, I think treat the present in the same way. What is happening now? We won't know until tomorrow or in six months time, and we won't know then, we'll have forgotten, or our imagination will have attributed false characteristics to today. A moment is sucked away and distorted, often even at the time of birth. (Writing for Theatre, p. 81)

After acquiring the information about the character's past, their use of language can be analysed. We will analyse the play on the available data given and will try to understand the meaning of their communication, and pattern of interaction as well.

The Plot Analysis of The Homecoming

Pinter's *The Homecoming* was first performed by Royal Shakespeare Company on 3 June 1965. A two-act play, *The*

Homecoming revolves around six characters. It is about four male members in the house who have to deal with the homecoming of the couple returning from America. Two older brothers Max the butcher, a man of seventy; Sam, the chauffeur a man of sixty-three; Max's sons -Lenny, the pimp a man in his early thirties and Joey, the boxer a man in his middle-twenties attend the unexpected return of Teddy, a man in his middle-thirties and Ruth, a woman in her early thirties, a couple. The play is set in an old working class London house. Teddy, a philosophy professor in America, has brought his wife Ruth to introduce her to his family members and show her his birthplace in North London. In fact, the story seems to suggest Teddy's homecoming to London in the beginning and America at the end of the play. Interestingly Ruth, Teddy's wife, doesn't go to America with Teddy and stays back with Teddy's family. The story is divided into two parts: Act one and two.

Act one opens with a verbal fight between Max and Lenny. Then it follows an ironical conversation between Sam and Max. Max, regretfully, glorifies his past life in this part of the story. The scene changes with the arrival of Teddy and Ruth. Teddy subsequently tells about his marriage and visit to America some six years ago; and that he has brought Ruth to visit her family members in London. The story proceeds with a conversation between Teddy and Ruth; and Ruth's desire to go out for a fresh air. Then Teddy meets Lenny and promises him to meet at the breakfast in the morning. Next morning, Max suddenly discovers Teddy and Ruth. Mistakably, Max considers Ruth as a prostitute until he discovers that she is married to Teddy. Act one ends with fatherly love of Max for Teddy.

Act two begins with a familial conversation between Ruth and other family members; especially Max. They talk about

the sumptuous lunch and Max's wife, who is dead, whom he regards as a "backbone of the family". Subsequently, Max narrates about his past life as a butcher.

Ruth relaxes, and tells about her past life. It increases Teddy's discomfiture and he suddenly decides to go back to America. Soon after that, Lenny dances with Ruth. Then, Joey embraces Ruth, and makes out with her on the sofa. Max tells Teddy not to be ashamed of her status, and praises Ruth as a very good lady. Joey and Ruth roll off the couch onto the floor, still embracing each other.

Swiftly, the entire environment of the family changes and Ruth begins to dominate the situation. She demands for something to eat and drink. Apparently, everybody is talking about the sexual encounter between Joey and Ruth, and they also infer that Ruth is not happy with her present marriage. When Ruth comes downstairs, Teddy tells her about the family wish; and then leaves her a choice to stay back or accompany him to America. Ruth decides to stay back on her own terms and conditions. Teddy leaves for America. Suddenly, Sam collapses onto the floor; everyone discovers that he is dead. They leave Sam on the floor and ignore him. The play ends with Ruth sitting on the chair, touching Joey's head softly, Lenny stands, watching her; and Max saying, while looking at her helplessly, that he is not an old man.

We will briefly look at the past of the characters, which forms the basis of their present and, thus, reveals their pattern of communication implied by Pinter. In Act one Max seems to be dominating the conversation. He appears almost eighty-four times; he even initiates the conversation and begins the Act and ends as well. His dynamics of communication can be analysed from the people with whom he interacts.

At the beginning of the play we can infer from the communication between Lenny and Max that they do not share very congenial relationship.

Max: What have you done with the scissors?

Pause

I said I am looking for the scissors. What have you done with them?

Pause

Did you hear me? I want to cut out of the paper.

Lenny: I'm reading the paper. (The Homecoming, p.15)

From the above conversation it is evident that there is a huge misunderstanding between Max and Lenny. Here, actually, words fail to convey the meaning. Words seem lifeless as they appear to be merely a medium of transaction and not communication. They communicate arbitrarily without taking into consideration each other's intention. Afterwards, Max narrates his past story about McGregor and his wife. He tells about his glorious youth.

According to Lockean theory, as Christopher Gauker puts it:

...the hearer's grasp of a speaker's message is mediated by the hearer's knowledge of the truth conditions of the speaker's language. The speaker's primary intention in speaking is the intention to utter words that will be interpreted by the hearer as having certain truth conditions. What enables the speaker to realize this intention is the hearer's knowledge of the truth-conditions of sentences in the speaker's language. (p.305)

Here, Max seems to build truth conditions by giving some real life examples. Even when he talks about his father, he tries to give specific details about him

Our father! I remember him. Don't worry....Then he dandled me. Give me the bottle. Wipe me clean. Give me a smile. Pat me on the bum....Toss me up in the air. Catch me coming down. I remember my father. (The Homecoming, p.27)

The second conversation between Lenny and Ruth reveals a significant aspect. When Lenny asks to hold her hand and she reciprocates with a question, why. Lenny says, "Just a touch". This is a very powerful remark which reveals that the characters are not satisfied with the conversation but they want a human contact. It clearly shows the failure of words to communicate the meaning. There is a striking similarity the way every characters narrates his/her past except the way of narration differs with respect to the listener. For example, when Lenny narrates his story to Ruth or Max narrates to Ruth. When men communicate to a woman i.e. Ruth their entire approach changes. From the conversation between Lenny and Ruth it seems that Ruth is not convinced, as she responds with a question: How did you know she was diseased?

In fact, communication between Lenny and Ruth is about questioning and counter questioning. According to Richard M Coe, this kind of communication is a conscious effort on the part of Lenny to tell some trivial information so that he can assert his power over Ruth.

Lenny: Well, to sum up, everything was in my favour, for killing....in the end I thought...Ah why go to all the bother....So I just gave her another belt in the nose and couple of turns of the boot and sort of left it at that.(The Homecoming, p.39)

The same is the case with Teddy when he says to Lenny that he would never understand his works because he is a professor of philosophy, and they are working class ignominous people.

Teddy: You wouldn't understand my worksYou are way behind. All of you....You are just objects. You just move about. I CAN OBSERVE IT. (The Homecoming, pp.69-70.)

Even, Ruth is aware that if she allows Lenny to take the glass, it would result into a different situation.

The next important aspect of analysis is the analysis of pauses and silences in The Homecoming. Silence, as a dramatic technique was first used by Anton Chekhov. Chekhov used it to reveal the subtext. For Chekhov it was more of a spiritual nature. But Pinter exploited it in a different way, which furthers the interaction. Approximately, pause has occurred for one hundred and five times in act one and one hundred and fifteen times in act two. If we look at the frequency of pauses, it appears more that any character in the play. We would like to study pause not only as dramatic device but as a separate character of the play, which constitutes most part of the play. In Pinter's plays, pauses and silences form the major level of communication. Pinter famously said on silence/pauses:

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 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 silences falls se are still left with echo but are never nakedness. One way of looking at speech is to say it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness.

(Writing for Theatre, 1962)

According to Pinter pauses and silences are not about halt but about the progression. Paul Waltzlawick et al (1967) believe that

from pragmatic point it is impossibility not to communicate. Every action is communication whether it is nonsense, silence, withdrawal, or immobility. The obvious fact is that pauses exists in relation to the character and situation, hence they are not separate. In fact they are the extended form of communication, which cannot be conveyed through language.

We would like to conclude in the words of Paul Waltzlawick et al that behaviour has no opposite. To put it differently, it is impossible not to behave. People even talk to themselves. Thus, existing behaviour possess a message value, i.e., communication. It is also evident from the play that communication can take place even in gaps and silences, whether you want it to happen or not it will happen. Pinter has offered the potentiality of communication in the sense that it can occur in the form of miscommunication or misunderstanding. His dealing of communication is very much realistic and human. A close observation of human behaviour suggests that communication actually happens in an arbitrary form as Pinter has depicted in The Homecoming, that day to day family communication is actually Pinteresque.

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