

Absurdist Elements in Harold Pinter's *No Man's Land* and *The Homecoming*

Dr Himanshu Sharma

Associate Professor, Department of English

Dyal Singh College, University of Delhi. Email: himanshusharma.english@dsc.du.ac.in

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Abstract: The seemingly inconsequential happenings of everyday life have rarely been treated as 'nothing' by dramatists belonging to the 'Theatre of the Absurd' because for them the subjective, however inexplicable, was more important than the search for an objective truth and the subjective in the postmodern world is hardly ever easy to understand or portray, leading postmodernist dramatists like Harold Pinter to apply non-traditional methods and techniques. This present research paper is a humble submission to contextualise and elaborate upon the absurdist elements of Pinter's '*No Man's Land*' and '*The Homecoming*'. In both of these plays, we find no dearth of absurdist elements that require careful consideration in order to be fully understood. Pinter, in his Pinteresque style, manages to brilliantly create ambiguous characters, fragmented language, and a comic surface underlying tragedies, which makes these plays interesting but also representative of the subconscious fears and anxieties of the individual.

Harold Pinter's plays have troubled and confused critics and audiences alike for decades because no clear explanation for anything is given, and any explanation that one seems to formulate is just as plausible as any other. His works, in this sense, become a hallmark of the Theatre of the Absurd, which considers the world as inherently fragmented and disjointed but not entirely devoid of meaning. Due to this undeniable influence of the 'Absurd' in Pinter's works, it becomes extremely imperative that we view it in the same light to better comprehend their essential meaning.

Key words: Cruelty, Mental Failure, Conflicts, Brutality, Existence, Alienation, Modernism, Communication, Absurdity, Obscurity, Illusion and Mystery.

Introduction: "His (human's) is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity"¹

Albert Camus (*The Myth of Sisyphus*)

The ability of man to continue through the dark times does not diminish, in the least, his moral dilemmas and psychological conflicts. Simply because one is able to persevere does not mean they are 'alive', in any sense of the word. These dilemmas and conundrums are what dramatists like Harold Pinter tried to portray in their works. But to portray something that is neither traditional nor easy to understand, he had to find refuge in the non-conventional that blurs the distinction between what is real nor what is unreal, what is true and what is false. In Pinter's own words, "There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false."²

Main Text: We find an ample number of elements of the Theatre of the Absurd in *'The Homecoming'* (widely regarded as Pinter's most successful play) and *'No Man's Land'*. Continually, the careful observer can notice that the plays do not offer a concrete 'resolution', remain broadly ambiguous from the beginning and offer a language that confuses more than enlightens. Through the lens of absurdity, one can try to make some sense of both of these plays and, in turn, discern the subjective that Pinter has tried to portray because every ambiguity is nothing but a smokescreen to hide an individual's anxiety, fear and hopelessness.

To fully understand the absurdist undertones in these plays, it is essential to consider the life and stylistic evolution of the playwright himself. Harold Pinter (1930–2008) was a British Nobel Prize-winning playwright, actor, and director, widely regarded as a key figure in modern theatre. Born in East London to Jewish parents, his early experiences during World War II shaped the recurring themes in his work—loneliness, loss, threat, and isolation. His plays are known for their distinctive style—termed "Pinteresque"—marked by fragmented dialogue, silences, and shifting power dynamics. Pinter's exploration of psychological reality, existential uncertainty, and the difficulty of communication aligns his work with the Theatre of the Absurd, challenging audiences to engage deeply with ambiguity.

For Pinter, language has always been a barrier to communication owing to its limitations. Characters in his play often employ meaningless, fragmented and disjointed language that underscores their existential anxiety and dread. To understand the depth of Pinter's characters, one must not look at what is being said but rather at when someone goes silent or is continually repetitive. This phenomenon can clearly be seen in the first act of *'The Homecoming'* when Rose and Lenny are engaged in a circular, one-sided 'dialogue' which is meant to underscore his anxiety at seeing that his brother has managed to make a new family outside the confines of their home, something which he has not been able to or allowed to accomplish.

"Lenny	:	My name's Lenny. What's yours?
Ruth	:	Ruth.
Lenny	:	You must be connected with my brother in some way. The one who's been abroad.
Ruth	:	I'm his wife.
Lenny	:	Eh listen, I wonder if you can advise me. I've been having a bit of a rough time with this clock. The tick's been keeping me up...
Lenny	:	What, you sort of live with him over there, do you?
Ruth	:	We're married" ³

Spooner, in Pinter's *'No Man's Land'*, when articulating his preference of solitude insists upon indifference as his greatest weapon but his description is desperately elaborative. Almost as if Pinter was trying to convey his desperation by constant re statement of the same fact, "I shan't stay long I never stay long with others they do not wish it and that for me is a happy state of affairs my only security you see my true comfort and solace rests in the confirmation that I elicit from people of all kinds a common on constant level of indifference."⁴

Apart from the language, one can also notice in a Pinter play that the characters' life revolves around an endless, cyclic, meaningless routine. These characters have blended themselves with their surroundings to the extent of losing their 'essence of life' and have gained, as a consequence, a tireless routine that resets with every waking day.

In *'The Homecoming'*, before Teddy comes home with Rose, we see a cycle of abuse that takes place between the members of the household, the primary centre of which is Max. And it is not improbable to assume that this routine takes place every day. Max's dissatisfaction with his life and his sons has caused him to become a bitter old man,

“Max : Do you hear what I'm saying? I'm talking to you! Where's the scissors?
Lenny : (looking up, quietly). Why don't you shut up, you daft prat?
Max : Don't you talk to me like that. I'm warning you...
I think I'll have a fag. Give me a fag.
Pause.
I just asked you to give me a cigarette.
Pause.
Look what I'm lumbered with.
He takes a crumpled cigarette from his pocket.
I'm getting old, my word of honour.”⁵

The cyclic routines of characters portray the underlying inability to communicate and existentialist dread surrounding the characters of *'No Man's Land'*. This meaningless and disjointed routine can be seen at any juncture for instance the first encounter of Spooner with Hirst:

“Hirst It's a long time since we had a free man in this house.
Spooner: We?
Hirst: I.
Spooner: Is there another?
Hirst: Another what?
Spooner: People Person.
Hirst: What Other?
Spooner: There are two mugs on the shelf.
Hirst: The second is for you.”⁶

The Theatre of the Absurd relied heavily on the ambiguous and the uncertain to create an atmosphere of confusion for the audience to help them grapple with the unpredictability of life. Pinter, being a master of this dramatic style, employs this device without fail. His creation of ambiguous characters and situations causes the audience to not only question the motivation of the characters and, subsequently, question their view of themselves and the world.

In *'The Homecoming'*, Pinter plays with the audience's perception of Ruth, which keeps changing. In Act I, a woman who is perceived to be the prey to a hoard of vicious barbaric males, shifts to becoming an exploiter herself in Act II. The hint of her future domination of the household is given when Max says,

Max : She won't...be adaptable!
He falls to his knees, whimpers, begins to moan and sob. He stops sobbing, crawls past SAM's body round her chair, to the other side of her.
I'm not an old man.
He looks up at her.
Do you hear me?

*He raises his face to her.
Kiss me.
She continues to touch Joey's head, lightly.
LENNY stands, watching."*⁷

This ambiguity finds its way in *'No Man's Land'* as well time and again. When the matter of Hirst's memory is discussed, one must always remember that the situation is uncertain at best. Spooner further adds to this confusion and creates further confusion when he says:

"Spooner: Carried who away? Yours or mine? [...] I begin to wonder whether you do in fact truly remember her, whether you truly did love her, truly caressed her, truly did cradle her, truly did husband her, falsely dreamed or did truly adore her."⁸

Tragedy and comedy, in a Pinter play, are not opposites but rather supplementary. His creation of comic citations in *'The Homecoming'* and *'No Man's Land'* is done to prepare the audience for the underlying tragedy. When Joey describes Teddy's wife as a 'tease', the audience might come to laugh at first but soon would begin to realise that Rose is not any ordinary woman who can be manipulated very easily.

"Lenny : Lenny (to Joey). How'd you get on?
Joey : Er...not bad.
Lenny : What do you mean?
Joey : I didn't get all the way.
Lenny : (With emphasis.) You didn't get all the way?
Lenny : You didn't get all the way and you've had her up there for two hours!
Joey : What about it?
Lenny : Are you telling me she's a tease?
Pause
She's a tease!"⁹

The trivial exchange between Hirst and Spooner about Spooner never being loved can easily elicit laughter but one must remember that it does a splendid job of concealing a sense of profound and tragic isolation leading to a life of involuntary solitude.

"Hirst : Strength? No.
Spooner : I have never been loved. From this I derive my strength. Have you? Ever? Been loved?
Hirst : Oh, I don't suppose so.
Spooner : I looked up once into my mother's face. What I saw there was nothing less than pure malevolence. I was fortunate to escape with my life. You will want to know what I had done to provoke such hatred in my own mother.
Hirst : You'd pissed yourself."¹⁰

After creating endless ambiguities and disjointed images, it only becomes logical that Pinter ends the play in the same way. When one critically analyses Harold Pinter's works, one would realise that the ending is always left to the imagination without any concrete resolution. This decision by Pinter to leave his plays open-ended serves the same purpose of allowing the audience to craft their own endings and, in doing so, analyse their own beliefs about the world.

At the end of *'The Homecoming'*, Rose decides to stay with Teddy's family as a prostitute but the final image of all the men in the house submitting to Rose leads to further confusion. We cannot be sure who the exploiter is or who the exploited will be.

"Teddy goes, shuts the front door.
Silence.
The three men stand.
Ruth sits relaxed in her chair.
Sam lies still.
Joeu walks slowly across the room.
He kneels at her chair.
She touches his head, lightly.
He puts his head in her lap.
Max begins to move above them, backwards and forwards.
Lenny stands still.
Max turns to Lenny...

Listen. You think you're just going to get that big slag all the time? You think you're just going to have him...you're going to just have him all the time? You're going to have to work! You'll have to take them on, you understand?"¹¹

The conclusion of *'No Man's Land'* is not averse to this conditioning either. The final declaration by Spooner where he reiterates what Hirst previously said about *'No Man's Land'* is the final nail in the coffin where the audience is once again left to craft their own narratives to fill in the gaps in the play. "Spooner: No. You are in *'No Man's Land'*. Which never moves, which never changes, which never grows older, but which remains forever, icy and silent?" Hirst responds "I'll drink to that!" and the lights fade slowly to black."¹²

Finding the absurd elements in *'The Homecoming'* and *'No Man's Land'* is not the daunting task; the troublesome element is the interpretation of these elements. In his own words, Harold Pinter describes that truth in drama as, "forever elusive. You never quite find it but the search for it is compulsive. The search is clearly what drives the endeavour. The search is your task."¹³

Conclusion: Harold Pinter's *'The Homecoming'* and *'No Man's Land'* exemplify the core principles of the Theatre of the Absurd, not merely through fragmented narratives and ambiguous dialogue, but through a deeper engagement with the disorientation and psychological unease that define the modern human condition. As Martin Esslin aptly notes, "behind the satirical exposure of the absurdity of inauthentic ways of life, the Theatre of the Absurd is facing up to a deeper layer of absurdity – the absurdity of the human condition itself in a world where the decline of religious belief has deprived man of certainties."¹⁴ Pinter's plays do not seek to disturb an already fractured world, but to illuminate its uncertainties, reflect its anxieties, and, in doing so, offer a way to endure and confront its absurdities with awareness and resilience.

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