

The Use of Subtext in Pinter's A Slight Ache

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Abstract

This paper aims to survey how in a short one-act play entitled *A Slight Ache*, the Nobel prize-winning playwright, Harold Pinter manipulates the use of context beneath the superficial surface of language in the technique called “subtext” as a means to convey his philosophy that deep down inside a human heart, at which is crucial to the core of our being human, much is left unsaid and incapable of being communicated through language, whereas what is said out loud is merely the cocoon of emptiness used to cover up our embarrassing silence.

บทคัดย่อ

บทความซึ้นนี้มีจุดมุ่งหมายที่จะสำรวจการใช้รูปแบบการประพันธ์ที่เรียกว่า “subtext” ในบทละครสั้นขนาดองค์เดียวชื่อ “A Slight Ache” ของ แอร์โลด์ พินเตอร์ นักเขียนบทละครชาวอังกฤษรางวัลโนเบลในศตวรรษที่ยี่สิบ ในบทละคร ดังกล่าว แอร์โลด์ พินเตอร์ได้แสดงให้ (เรา) เห็นถึงความล้มเหลวของภาษา ตามรูปแบบดังเดิมในอันที่จะใช้สื่อสารถึงความหมายระหว่างมนุษย์ด้วย กันได้อย่างมีประสิทธิภาพ ภาษากลับเป็นเพียงเปลือกนอกห่อหุ้มใจกลางจารีต อันว่างเปล่าเอาไว้ ดังนั้น ในบทละครของพินเตอร์ ถ้อยคำที่เปล่งออกมากของ มนุษย์จึงไม่ได้เสนอซึ่งสารตัตถะอันแท้จริงที่พากษาต้องการที่จะสื่อสารต่อกัน ในทางตรงกันข้าม ความเงียบกลับลือถึงความจริงแท้ของความหมาย ยังใจกลาง แก่นแท้อันเป็นหัวใจของความเป็นมนุษย์ได้อย่างดงามลึกซึ้งกว่า

In reading Harold Pinter's plays, one must temporarily set aside one's traditional moral standpoint and logical expectations. Pinter, like Samuel Beckett, Tom Stoppard and existentialist writers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, realizes the futility of logic and the crumbling of traditional values, particularly as found in language. Like the Existentialists, Pinter does not believe in the static essence of things. For him, there is no ultimate truth, not even in human characters.

Language as a repository of all crumbling values is the main target that most Existentialist thinkers and modern playwrights attack. What is worth noticing is that while writers like Sartre in *Nausea* attack traditional values with eloquent language, modern playwrights like Eugene Ionesco, Beckett and Pinter use a non-rhetorical and illogical style to undermine them. Pinter, in his use of a subtext, goes a step further than Beckett and Ionesco. He clearly mentions this in his speech "Writing for the Theatre"

We have heard many times that tired, grimy phrase : "Failure of communication"...and this phrase has been fixed to my work quite consistently. I believe the contrary. I think that we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is a continual evasion, disparate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves. (Pinter, 1976 : 15)

Therefore, in using a subtext, Pinter invents a means to convey the feeling, the thought that is imprisoned inside the cocoon of dead terminologies. With this technique, he deconstructs the rhetorical tradition in western drama and replaces it with the realistic language that goes beyond realism. Also, by employing a Chekhovian "oblique style" or the indirect mention of triviality or banality to avoid the real fundamental issues beneath the surface, Pinter creates "a language, when

under what is said, another thing is being said" (Pinter, 1976 : 14) and conveys "the thing known and unspoken below the word spoken" (Pinter, 1976 : 14) Stanislavsky's definition of subtext can perfectly sum up Pinter's :

Beneath the words of text, giving them life and basis for existence...a web of innumerable, varied inner pattern...all sorts of figments of the imaginary inner movement; objects of attention, smaller and greater truths and a belief in them, adaptative, adjustments and other similar elements. It is the subtext that makes us say the words we do in a play. (Brown, 1968 : 133)

In this article, I try to demonstrate and analyze the use of subtext in Pinter's *A Slight Ache*. This short, one-act play initially written as a radio play for the BBC and was broadcast in July 1959 but was not staged until eighteen months later. Unlike Pinter's other plays, *A Slight Ache* does not take place within the confinement of one room, but moves from the garden to the room. Still, it preserves the dichotomy between inside and outside, and deals with the intrusion of the mysterious, unknown "other", Pinter's recurring theme.

The play opens in a garden of a country house of an uppermiddle class couple, Edward and Flora. The stage direction describes a beautiful, calm atmosphere of a blooming garden. We find out later on, as in most Pinter's plays, that the peaceful atmosphere paradoxically hides anxiety and dissatisfaction underneath.

Obviously, the opening dialogue between husband and wife in *A Slight Ache* reminds us of the similar dialogue between Petey and Meg in *The Birthday Party*. Here again, Pinter uses the subtext to convey the emptiness and slight discord in the relationship of the couple. It can be seen that their superficial dialogue about the flower and the

weather is not meant to convey any meaning. They use it to cover the silence and emptiness in their relationship. Their dialogue is only cliché, a conventional, rhetorical etiquette that people sometimes bring up when they cannot find anything particular to say to each other. Still, underneath this trivial argument over whether the flower is a honeysuckle or a convolvulus, one can detect the friction in this marital relationship and the domineering nature of the husband.

Edward : Is that honeysuckle? I thought it was...
 Convolvulus or something.
 Flora : But you know it's honeysuckle.
 Edward : I tell you I thought it was honeysuckle.
 (Pinter, 1976 : 169)

Quite ingeniously, in spite of all this triviality, Pinter makes us feel that under the deceptive complacency of a beautiful garden and nice weather, complication and anxiety develop as the play advances.

Having been a poet before becoming a playwright, Pinter employs poetic technique fully and effectively as his subtext. As he said in his “Writing for the Theatre”, our language is locked up in a prison of cliché. It covers up our real feeling and blocks our communication with other human beings. Thus he has to invent a new means to convey his ideas and nothing works better than poetic technique. By putting words out of their ordinary context and using things that carry emotional associations, Pinter succeeds in escaping the emptiness of language.

After the dialogue about the garden and the flowers, Edward talks about the weather. Quite strikingly, he uses the word “treacherous” to describe the weather. We realize that “treacherous” is applied to human qualities rather than to the weather. In using a word out of

its ordinary context, Pinter creates a subtext which conveys the hidden attitude of Edward toward his wife. Also, it is a foreshadowing of Flora's disloyalty at the end of the play.

And as the couple is sitting in the garden talking about beautiful flowers and nice weather, a wasp flies into the teapot. Why does it have to be a wasp? Why not a nightingale if the relationship of the couple is as smoothly happy as it deceptively appears to be? The wasp carries an association of feeling of pain and irritation. The wasp stings, it hurts, it annoys. Worth noticing is that Pinter spends almost four pages of his short play describing "the execution" of the wasp, the imprisonment of the wasp in the teapot, the drowning of the wasp in the marmalade, and the cruel scalding of the wasp by hot water. During this violent "wasp" scene, Edward brings up out of the blue his "slight ache" in the eyes. Obviously, Pinter in a quite Chekhovian manner, intricately puts these things together to create the feeling of anxiety, irritation and suffocation that lie submerged under the complacency and triviality of everyday life.

Moreover, Pinter employs repetition or tautology to emphasize the ironic situation. After the cruel killing of the wasp, Edward repeats over and over again how the weather is nice and how the day is good :

"What a beautiful day it is. Beautiful."

...

"Ah, it's a good day. I feel it in my bones. In my muscles. I think I'll stretch my legs in a minute. Down to the pool. My God, Look at that flowering shrub over there. Clementis. What a wonderful...[He stops suddenly.] (Pinter, 1976 : 174)

Quite at the right moment, before Edward finishes his phrase “What a wonderful...”, his complacency is interrupted by the mysterious appearance of the matchseller. Apparently, Pinter wants to tell us that one cannot have a real sense of well-being in the modern world. There will always be some unknown force that intrudes into our private lives. It irrigates, frightens and even intimidates us with its irrational mysteriousness. In this play, this irrational force adds an anxiety to Edward’s “slight ache”

Edward [pacing up and down] : For two months he's been standing on the spot, do you realize that? Two months. I haven't been able to step outside the backgate.

Flora : Why on earth not?

Edward [to himself] : it used to give me great pleasure, such pleasure, to stroll along through the long grass, out through the back gate, pass into the lane. That pleasure is now denied me. It's my own house, isn't it? It's my own gate. (Pinter, 1976 : 175-6)

The origin of the matchseller is unknown. His appearance is irrational. The couple defines him as the matchseller from the tray of matches that the old man carries. They try rationally to find the definition of this being but realize later on that this being is against all logic and resists all kinds of categorization. Edward himself admits this :

As for the matchseller-how ridiculous to go on calling him by that title. What a farce. No, there is something very false about that man. (Pinter, 1976 : 179)

The matchseller's character shifts and changes both in appearance and in essence. He is a screen on which Edward and Flora

project what they want his essence to be. The matchseller himself has no essence. This Pinterean characterization is done in a very Existentialist manner which Walter Kerr points out aptly :

If existence does indeed precedes essence, if an actual thing precedes an abstract concept of that thing, then it should also do so on the stage. Exploratory movement in the void, without preconception or precommitment, should come first. Conceptualization should come later, if at all. (Kerr, 1967 : 6)

I also agree with Kerr who said that in this play “the contrast between category and movement is more simply and swiftly outlined” (Kerr, 1976 : 6). To use a traditional dramatic term, I think Edward and the matchseller work as perfect foils to each other. Edward, in trying to rationalize and categorize the existence of the old man, represents the world of cliché, establishment, hollow logic and empty rhetoric. The matchseller frustrates Edward by refusing to be anything that the former wants to “put a brass tack on.”

Edward : A little. A little. He's had various trades, that's certain. His place of residence is unsure. He's...he's not a drinking man. As yet, I haven't discovered the reason for his arrival here. I shall in due course...by nightfall. (Pinter, 1976 : 188)

The old man, having no background, no biographical data, no essence whatsoever, radically shifts even from old to young. Here at this point, Pinter's play goes beyond realism.

You look younger. You look extraordinarily...youthful. (Pinter, 1976 : 199)

His play fascinatingly fluctuates between the area of true and false and transcends that. What is true and false anyway? Pinter himself suggests that “there can be no hard distinction between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false.” (Pinter, 1976 : 188) The protean quality of the old matchseller or even of Flora who changes and shifts from wife/mother to whore demonstrates Pinter’s philosophy of relativity of truth. As he said in “Writing for the Theatre”.

So I’m speaking with some reluctance, knowing that there are at least twenty-four possible aspects of any single statement, depending on where you’re standing at the time or on what the weather’s like. A categorical statement, I find will never stay where it is and be definite. (Pinter, 1976 : 9)

From Edward’s dialogue with Flora, we know that he is writing an essay on space and time. But then it is not quite certain because his wife also argues that she thinks he is writing about the Belgian Congo. Everything seems to contribute to ambiguity and confusion. At this point, Edward reminds me very much of Roquentin, Sartre’s main character in *Nausea*. Roquentin, who also used to believe in logic, the past, the firm establishment of things, researches the autobiography of Monsieur de Rôlebon, a French aristocrat in the seventeenth century. But eventually at the end of the novel, he realizes the futility of the past and the invalidity of the autobiographical data. To use the Sartrean Existentialist term, Edward is in bad faith as much as Roquentin in *Nausea*. His speech with the old man reveals his belief in the secure world of logic, firm establishment and absolute value.

I was polished [nostalgic] I could stand over the hill and look through my telescope at the sea. And follow the path of the three-masted schooner, feeling fit, well aware of my sinews, their suppleness, my arms lifted holding the telescope, steady, each, no trembling, my aim was perfect, I could pour hot water down in the spoon-hole, yes, easily, no difficulty, my grasp firm, my command established, my life was accounted for, I was ready for my excursion to the cliff, down the path to the back gate, through the long grass, no need to watch for the nettles, my progress was fluent, after my long struggle against all kinds of usurpers...(Pinter, 1976 : 195-6)

Obviously, the more voluble and rhetorical Edward's speech becomes, the more it reveals the emptiness of his words and values. Besides, Pinter creates a strong dramatic impact by contrasting Edward's grand style with the silence of the matchseller and lets the latter's eloquent silence undermine the established rational universe of the former. Thus, paradoxically, underneath the silence of the old matchseller, a lot is said, while behind the torrent of Edward's rhetorical language, nothing is said. Pinter mentions that :

There are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed. The speech we hear is an indication of that which we don't hear...When the silence falls we are still left with echo but are nearer nakedness. (Pinter, 1976 : 14)

At the end of the play, the old man's silence and irrational existence eventually undermines Edward's confidence in his "raison d'etre" or his reason of existence in a secure universe. Edward's voluble, grand rhetorical speech degenerates into a stumbling halt as he starts to realize the invalidity of the ultimate essence of things and their changeabilities. Noticeably, this realization aggravates his "slight ache" in the eyes.

I've caught a cold. A germ. In my eyes. It was this morning.

In my eyes. My eyes.

Pause. He falls to the floor.

Not that I had any difficulty in seeing you, no, no, it was not

So much my sight, my sight is excellent-in winter I run

About with nothing on but a pair of polo shirts-no, it was

Not so much any deficiency in my sight as the airs between

Me and my object-don't weep-the change of air, the

Currents obtaining in the space between me and my object,

The shades they make, the shapes they take, the quivering,

The eternal quivering. (Pinter, 1976 : 198)

His loss of the volubility in speech manifests his complete loss of confidence in his status quo. The matchseller's silence and irrationality totally deprives Edward of his speech.

You want to examine the garden? It must be very bright, in the moonlight. [Becoming weaker.] I would like to join you...explain...show you...the garden...explain...the plants...where I run...my track...in training...I was number one sprinter at Howells...when a stripling...no more than a stripling...like yourself. (Pinter, 1976 : 199)

At the end of the play, there is only "nothingness" left to Edward. The matchseller steals his wife, his speech, his identity. Before leaving with the mysteriously rejuvenated matchseller, Flora gives the tray of matches to Edward. By trading Edward's identity with the

matchseller, Pinter hints to us his recurring message : is it possible for us to know who we really are?

All in all, I think Pinter's *A Slight Ache*, like many great plays, can create a powerful dramatic impact without any stage production. Particularly, with the use of subtext as has been elaborated in this article, this play can be rendered effectively as a radio play or as a literary text where silence can be perceived palpably and eloquently.

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