



## FINDING MEANING IN A MEANINGLESS WORLD IN HAROLD PINTER'S *NO MAN'S LAND*

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### ABSTRACT

*My aim through this article is to propagate that the play No Man's Land by Pinter pictures the world, as a meaningless place to live in without any potential way out. He spotlights on the matter of people's isolation from each other and from the intellect of their own living. They are forced to engage in recreation the nonstop match just because they do not challenge to stop it, and they get fixed in every day routine, as a consequence. The concept of nothingness goes hand in hand with certain human feelings like fear, insecurity and hopelessness. These human characteristics are distinctive Pinter subjects elaborated in his plays. The unfair system and its persecutors find their complement in Pinter's plays of ambiguity, violence, loneliness and loss of identity, all caused by an unidentifiable menace in their world, and these lonely characters, with their destroyed identities and with no support, trying to survive but failing in a hostile world close to the realm of The Theatre of the Absurd.*

**Key words:** *Theatre of the Absurd, psyche, neurotic fears, aching anxieties and meaningless*

### INTRODUCTION

Harold Pinter is extensively acclaimed to be one leading dramatist of the British Absurdist Theatre, for many of his plays imitate the insignificance of life which characterizes most of the works of the Theatre of the Absurd. Pinter is a highly conscientious playwright who concerns himself with the helpless living conditions and psychological plights of human beings. His language is aggressive, ironical, sometimes even barbarous, yet through reading his plays, one cannot help sensing the deep compassion and sympathy he demonstrates for his

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protagonists. His plays generally take place in a solitary and prison-like room which represents the world of its people. Pinter deals with another existential theme are that disaffection of the human being from the self and the others.

Harold Pinter's play *No Man's Land* has remarkable position. There are only four characters in this play the house owner, Hirst, Spooner, the vagrant, and two servants, Foster and Briggs. Spooner's attempt to penetrate Hirst's crypt and save him from a kind of living death and his failure from the plot shows the absurdity of his life. All characters search for the past to protect themselves from the present. The concept of human concern in Pinter's Plays powerfully situates the post-war plays in the context of major historical trauma specifically that associated with the Second World War. *No Man's Land* revolves around a crushing sense of absence and non-belonging which manifests in abbreviation and fragmentation, deprivation and lack, and a characteristic option to replication. In *No Man's Land*, Hirst is the victim of Foster and Briggs while the latter is the victim of former. However, all three is successful over Spooner. In *No Man's Land* Hirst and Spooner harass each other by illuminating the real past to one another. The complete play presents three chances of Hirst's effort to discover a secure contact with Spooner, but they all fail because of the latter's dishonest intrusion and crush on the private refuge of Hirst's inner world. Hirst says:

*I did the same" [giving tea on the lawn], Spooner immediately jumps up to this sign of a possible kinship with Hirst. He cries to him: "What happened to our cottages? What happened to our lawns...You've revealed something....We share something. A memory of the bucolic life. We're both English" (No Man's Land, 29).*

The structures of the play as the observer struggles to find meaning in this meaningless act of sadistic behaviour in the same way the characters must struggle in their own lives. *No Man's Land* is a play about this dialogical force about how people find meaning and purpose through their communications with one another. The awareness of time and space as a completely individual experience is presented in the play *No Man's Land*. The objective condition of man which was the principal material in the early plays, gives way here to the subjective awareness of the condition. In the early plays Pinter offered a 'present' having its roots in an unverifiable past. But here explores the nature of the past as non-existing. Time is viewed as a creation of the human mind.

In Pinter's plays he has used silences and pauses in the dialogs. For this is because his protagonists aim to avoid the terror of facing the stranger or a menace:



The Pinterian hero, especially in the early plays, is often as inarticulate as a pig, stumbling pathetically over every second word, covering a pitifully narrow area of meaning with his utterances, blathering through his life. Yet he does not seem to whine and grunt or giggle or grumble to give an outlet to his instincts, desires, passions or fears. He grunts in order to hide something else. Even when he grunts [...], his grunt is a strategic move, or a lie. (Almansi, 19-20)

The play *No Man's Land* is in two acts, set in the room in the comfortable London home of Hirst, a successful writer in his sixties. On a summer night, Hirst has invited another elderly man Spooner, also in his sixties, to come in and have a drink. Spooner is evidently in improvised circumstances, though he talks boastfully about his past and is also at the same time extremely inquisitive about Hirst's circumstances. Hirst is already drunk, but he is continuing to drink. Hirst by deconstructing Hirst's skill of playing the game of memory and exposing Hirst's personal world openly Spooner, who claims to be a poet, talks a good deal about his inner strength which, he says, is derived from his detachment from human emotion. For instance, he says: "I have never been loved. From this I derive my strength." He also claims to be free man because of his detachment from human emotions. To this Hirst reply, "it's a long time since we had a free man in this house." Spooner now boasts of having been a friend and guide to poets in the past and of lived in great happiness with a gracious wife. Hirst thereupon says that he too used to offer his generosity to visitors on the lawn at his cottage.

Thus for both men a country cottage with tea on the lawn is an image of a lost golden past, an age of innocence now gone. Yet when Spooner probes Hirst claims that Hirst was once married and asks him to describe his wife, Hirst merely replies: what wife? In fact, Hirst becomes so angry at Spooner's question that he throws his glass at him. Having gained something like an entry into Hirst inner life, Spooner now offers himself to Hirst as a friend. In so many of Pinter's earlier plays, we experience the terror aroused by the appearance of a new and mysterious character. This character is a young man in his thirties. His name is foster. He is soon joined by Briggs who is older than foster. Briggs recognizes Spooner as the man who collects the beer-mugs from the tables in a pub. Spooner protests, saying that he does that humble job merely because the owner of that pub is his friend. Having been exposed as no better than a tramp, Spooner invites the two men who are harassing him to visit him in the country where they would receive a warm welcome from his gracious wife and his two daughters. Hirst now reappears, and begins drinking with the three other men already there. Hirst asks who this man Spooner is. Hirst has evidently forgotten that it was he himself who had brought Spooner into the house. Hirst begins to talk about people whom he knew in the past and whose faces he has preserved in an album of photographs. Suddenly Hirst has become very talkative. He now recalls a recent dream about a waterfall in which someone

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was drowning. When Hirst regains consciousness, Briggs harshly leads him out of the room. Foster also leaves, turning out the light, so that Spooner alone remains behind in total darkness. Sartre rightly said:

*I am abandoned in the world, not in the sense that I might remain abandoned and passive in a hostile universe like a board floating on the water, but rather, in the sense that I find myself suddenly alone and without help, engaged in a world for which I bear the whole responsibility without being able, whatever I do, to tear myself away from the responsibility for an instant.(Camus,The Myth of Sisyphus. 710)*

Act II opens on the next morning. Spooner is locked in the room. Briggs serves him a sumptuous breakfast which had been prepared for Hirst's financial adviser who had failed to turn up. When asked by Spooner who the cook is in the house, Briggs confirms that h and foster are the only servants: "we share all burdens." Briggs then tells a long story of how he had met foster when standing at a street corner and how foster, in a car, had asked him the way to a street which was part of an one way system so complex that once one enters a street of that kind one is trapped there forever. When Spooner has finished his breakfast, Hirst briskly enters the room. Hirst now behaves as if Spooner was one of his oldest friends. Hirst orders Briggs to leave them alone, whereupon Briggs leaves. There follows a long account of reminiscences about Hirst's and Spooner's time at oxford university and their amorous adventures before the war. Hirst, it appears, had developed along an affair with Spooner's wife, Emily. Spooner retorts by revealing a number of occasions on which he had deceived Hirst. When Spooner also questions Hirst's literary abilities, Hirst begins again to speak about the faces in his album of photographs. Briggs harshly interrupts Hirst's reminiscences, and it becomes increasingly clear that Hirst is the prisoner in his own house. Foster appears and orders Hirst to go on his morning walk. Hirst feebly refuses. Spooner here sees an opening for himself. He offers to help Hirst with his literary work and says: "let me be with you and be your secretary." But Hirst paid no heed to him and says, "let us change the subject." At this point Briggs and foster finally impose their will on Hirst.

The play *No Man's Land* centres on the subject of human remoteness and loneliness, which is derived from the defeat of connotations and association. In a strange poetic passage it is said that it is now winter and that this winter last forever. This idea is repeated in a kind of incantation, as in a religious ritual. Hirst is, as it were, entombed in the no man's land between life and death. Once more Hirst recalls the dream about someone who was drowned. And Spooner, who has been silent throughout the whole ritual passage, agrees, saying:



*You are in no man's land. This never moves, which never changes, which never grows older, but which remains forever icy and silent. ( No Man's Land ,36)*

*No Man's Land* explores the fear of the old age. Hirst situation is that of an old and successful writer whose marriage has failed, or who has never been married, and who is condemned to a lonely old age, the prisoner of his domestic servants, with liquor as his only comfort. Spooner has also grown old, his marriage to having failed or having never taken place; but he is unsuccessful and poor. Spooner is a free man longing for the bondage of home, while Hirst is the prisoner of his domestic situation, trying to break out into freedom but unable to muster the courage to break his bonds. Throughout a man's life there remains at least the possibility of choice as long as some of youth's flexibility is available. But there comes a point, with the coming of old age, when that possibility is disappearing. Then life freezes into the endless winter of the "No Man's Land" between life and death. Pinter has made traditional naturalism a kind of quick-sand, for existential despair. Arnold P. Hinchliffe is entirely correct when he says:

*Pinter is concerned with humanity, love, necessity, and contingency- not in a lunar landscape but in the slum- dwelling next door. He does not, however, fall into the trap of explaining everything in terms of a poor environment. His stress on impoverished background in the early plays is itself relative, underlining the fact that all material assets have a fundamental paucity. (Hinchliffe: 95)*

Hirst, Spooner, Briggs and Foster are very complex to understand. They try to explain themselves but they fail to clarify. Pinter knows that life is far from being neat, tidy, carefully groomed, and iron-pressed and buttoned up. Life is confusion, an enigma over and above being cheats and disappointment. The recollections of the past unfold a certain world in our mind, a kind of living similar to the lives of these characters, the people seem to be experiencing a state of hangover relating to their past obsessions.

The play is of the failure in human communication and the efforts to exchange the circumstances through conversation, argument, and even surrender. To Pinter, everyone has a private world belonging to no one else but himself, which is the core of one's experience. He said in 1970 that:

*I have a particular relationship with the words I put down on paper and the characters which emerge from them which no one else can share with me. And perhaps that's why I remain bewildered by praise and really quite indifferent*

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*to insult. Praise and insult refer to someone called Pinter. I don't know the man they're talking about. I know the plays, but in a totally different way, in a quite private way. (Esslin, Pinter: A study of his plays,47)*

The number of sociological relationship and processes which affects the psychology of man is much greater than usually supposed. We have seen that a relationship determined by is the antithesis of a social relationship, and that therefore the function of force can go no further than to preserve social relationship against antisocial tendencies. As a playwright Pinter makes his dialogue a definite means to an end which is a dramatic representation of the ache in the psyche of modern man. According to Josephson:

*Confused to his place in the schema of a world growing each day closer, getting more impersonal more densely populated yet in face-to-face relations more dehumanized; a world appealing ever more widely for his concern and sympathy with unknown masses of men, yet fundamentally alienating him even from his next neighbour, today Western man has become mechanized, reutilized, made comfortable as an object. (Josephson, 10)*

The play represents the existential dilemma of its main character in antagonistic world but this predicament, however, has been replaced by the socio-political crisis of the city, which is a corporation of persons and can be said to represent the whole civilization. Therefore the important characters in the play, suffer from existential predicaments for different reasons. Albert Camus examines man's absurd condition in the cosmos in his The Myth of Sisyphus:

*A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This diversity between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.*

*( Keith, Harold Pinter and the New British Theatre,13)*

Pinter's humanist concern is shown not only in his plot collection of a talented future for his characters, but also in the bottomless compassion and sympathy he demonstrates for them. For Pinter, it is not human beings, but the situation of life itself that is essentially absurd. Therefore in his plays, the target of his criticism is the situation of life, rather than human beings. One of the most discernible characteristics of the theatre of the Absurd is no plot or absurd plot. The absurdist's think that since human existence is absurd, it must be expressed with an absurd form. Therefore, they reject the consistent plot of traditional sense; break the

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formula of dramatic conflict, which possesses a procedure of beginning, developing, climax and denouement. In Pinter's plays, neither dialogue nor monologue is consistent or significant. Clichés and some pointless sentences are repeated, but the characters can hardly make any real communication. Sometimes the characters keep silent for a long time. It is completely different from traditional ways of literary theory. Man's predicament is replicated in a covered manner, embarking on his association with the external world, and then moving towards his inner suffering about the self. Esslin states:

*Pinter's people are in a room, and they are frightened, scared. What are they scared of? 'Obviously, they are scared of what is outside the room. Outside the room is a world bearing upon them, which is frightening ... [and] which is inexplicable and frightening, curious and alarming'. (Pinter, 35)*

Dialogue in the play No man's land implies that solution to various complexities is simply not possible and the characters are unmotivated and indistinguishable. Their actions are largely incomprehensible, mysterious and unpredictable. The course of events forces them to question whether their attitudes are worth holding and whether their beliefs are true or false. No man's land is a cryptic and seems to be Pinter's land of imagination. Prentice says:

*In Pinter's work asserting dominance over another remains the primary means characters not only establish identity but survive in a world where to allow oneself to assume a subservient position, for even a moment, can result in annihilation – physical, psychological, or both. (Ethic, 28).*

Menace of identity, which concludes in a sense of collapse, is actually an outcome of other forms of menace mentioned before. He explores the psychological recesses of an individual quest of life itself, trying, thus to sketch the meaning and purpose behind the thinking pattern of human being. Pinter has mainly highlighted the struggle for power both within a human being, and between an individual and an influential device or another dominant person.

The real menace which lies behind the struggles for expression and communication, behind the closed doors which might swing open to reveal a frightening intruder, behind the sinister gunmen and terrorists, behind the violence, the menace behind all these menacing images is the opaqueness, the uncertainty and precariousness of the human condition itself. (Esslin, 51-2)



The concept of nothingness goes hand in hand with certain human feelings like fear, insecurity and hopelessness. These human characteristics are distinctive Pinter subjects elaborated in his plays. The unfair system and its persecutors find their complement in Pinter's plays of ambiguity, violence, loneliness and loss of identity, all caused by an unidentifiable menace in their world, and these lonely characters, with their destroyed identities and with no support, trying to survive but failing in a hostile world close to the realm of The Theatre of the Absurd.

To sum up, the play *No Man's Land* by Pinter pictures the world, as a meaningless place to live in without any potential way out. He spotlights on the matter of people's isolation from each other and from the intellect of their own living. They are forced to engage in recreation the nonstop match just because they do not challenge to stop it, and they get fixed in every day routine, as a consequence.

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