Harold Pinter’s Silence: Enigmatic Recollection of Memories

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Abstract

The term, ‘Memory Play,’ was originally coined by the playwright, Tennessee Williams, to describe his work, The Glass Menagerie. His other plays viz. A Streetcar Named Desire and Summer and Smoke are also regarded as memory plays. Besides Tennessee, the other major twentieth century exponents of memory plays were: Ibsen, Strindberg, Pirandello, and O’Neill. All these writers are believed to be intentionally or unintentionally influenced by Freud and Jung. Later in the century, other critics including Michael Billington, declared that the plays written by Harold Pinter during the late 1960s and the early 1970s, were memory plays.

Silence, is a very complex, lyrical play by Pinter. The play consists of cross-cut monologues, including the dialogues of two characters at a time, reminiscing their past. Ellen (a girl in her twenties), Rumsey (a man in his forties), and Bates (a man in his middle thirties), are presumed to be sitting in three different areas, recalling their respective images of the similar countryside, they had eventually come from. The play is based on heavily shaped structures relying on the exploration of memory that abandon the normal sequential ordering of incidents. This change implies a different use of time with consequences on the exploration of the past. As we observe, the characters become frozen in the factor of time to alter reality. This paper is an effort to display critically, the enigmatic use of memories by Pinter and also the way his characters try to manipulate themselves through memories, in order to get rid of the guilt engraved in their present.

Key Words: Memories, Lies, Age, Time, Love, Reality

Introduction

In Silence, Pinter masterfully alters reality by making the use of the time factor very appropriately. The three characters: Ellen, Rumsey and Bates are uncertain of their places and times and are consequently confined to their own memories. The complexity in the play comprises not only of its vagueness, its action, but also of the difference in the ages of the characters. Ellen, “a girl in her twenties” (Complete Works III 199), refers to herself as “old.” “She asks me about my early life, when I was young.....I’m old, I tell her, my youth was somewhere else, anyway I don’t remember.” (CW III 204). Similarly Bates, “a man in his mid thirties”, (CW III 200) is referred to by others, as old: “Someone called me grandad and
told me to button it [.....]”. “Where I young?” “Are you nothing but a childish old man, suffocating himself?” (CW III 203-204) and so on.

The age of the three characters, varies from youth to the very end and perhaps, when the shadow ceases (theatrically) they live the chosen events of their interconnected past once again. The play, deals with the themes of love and time. The triangle of Pinter’s earlier plays makes up the plot for Silence. The two characters, Rumsey and Bates, reflect on life while Ellen has a fleeting exchange with each of them. The play reveals the triangle in equipoise. The opening speech of each character, expresses much of their nature, as well as the essence of the play.

Rumsey, a rich farmer, feeding his memories from light and shadow, appears to be a wanderer, a walker, in the countryside. Filled with lyrical and poetical qualities, he is sensitive to the landscape, the animals, the textures of life and light. He has the sense to draw the nectar-wine under nature’s soothing solitude. And the ears to listen its melodious unsounded echoes. On the other hand, Ellen, recollecting the images from the past, recalls her intimate connection with the two men, and lately her preference for the one she wishes to stay with:

There are two, one who is with me sometimes and another. He listens to me. I tell him what I know. We walk by the dogs. Sometimes the wind is so high he does not hear me. I lead him to a tree, clasp closely to him and whisper to him, wind going, dog stop, and he hears me. (CW III 201-202)

So who are the two men Ellen is talking about? The “another” later in the play appears as Bates, the younger of the two men. Rumsey seems to be closely connected with Ellen and might perhaps have married her, when she was young, but did not do so. In the later section of the play when: “Bates moves to Ellen,” (CW III 203) and asks her for a walk, her reply is an insolent, “No.” For when Ellen moves to Rumsey her fragment of memories turns to be more soft, sexual and feminine:

Ellen: When I run........when I run.........when I run…..over the grass…..

Rumsey: She floats.......under me. Floating….under me.


Silence (CWIII 208)

The third character Bates appears to be more rustic and brusque in the revelation of his past memories. Among the three he seems to be more deprived of a healthy relationship. Recollected images from the past reveal his social and mental condition:

Caught a bus to the town, Crowds. Lights round the market, rain and stinking. Showed her the bumping lights. Took her down around the dumps. Black roads and girders. She clutching me. This way the way I bring you. Pubs throw the doors smack into the night. Cars barking and the lights. She with me, clutching. Brought her into this place, my cousin runs it. Undressed her, placed my hand. (CW III 202)
Basically, in the play, what is talked about is remembered things, brief love affairs in contrast with fleeting shafts of fading sunlight, and its effect on their invading age and feebleness. Life has not been really grateful to Bates. For all his life he has been a rider in the buses to the city. He is restless, unsatisfied and desperate for a love he cannot achieve. He also displays his dismay and anger for being called grand-dad by the young people living next door. Their noisy music and noisy love pathetically depresses him. Rumsey at the same time reminisces of being alone in the countryside with his animals. The solitude in nature makes him feel pleasant.

The play confined to its uncertainty of place and time gives us the evidence that Bates is no longer a man in his thirties but an old man. Similarly, Ellen speaks about a drinking companion, an elderly woman who frequently asks her about her past life, marriage and sexual adventures. The way Ellen muses about her appearance: "I'm still quite pretty really, quite nice eyes, nice skin", (CW III 205) which again gives us an evidence that she is no longer in her twenties, but a middle aged woman.

After the characters’ self-assertion of their mental frames of mind, Bates is seen moving towards Ellen’s area. And they enact a scene which Bates had already described in the early part of the play. In a fit of a moment from his memories, he invites Ellen to take a bus to town and then run to a place which his cousin runs. While Ellen’s reply enacted in this flashback is “No.” The scene displays the desperate condition of Bates to seek love from Ellen. He had tried hard to persuade Ellen to go away with him and she had refused, neither of them knowing any reason for such a refusal that could be put into words. Further, Bates indulges in the bitter memories of his past; he speaks about his inability to sustain himself in the real world and his aggression to get rid of his imaginary fragments of thoughts. Besides this he is totally depressed by city lights, and wonders if he could change his life and live by night. He feels confined into his own environment: "I walk in my mind, but can't get out of the walls into a wind. Meadows are walled, and lakes. The sky's a wall."(CW III 208)

Further in the play Bates recalls a walk with a little girl (Ellen perhaps) who saw a shape or shadow in a tree which he identified for her as a resting bird. In a later section of the play his recollection of a child’s vision of a shape, a shadow, is suggestive of some small breakthrough into the darkness, through his final rejection of love: "Sleep, Tender Love? It's of no importance."(CW III 219) It seems he has been robbed of some sustainable breakthrough in the light. On the frequent exchange of memories by characters and their reluctant non-preference for place and time, Martin Esslin excitedly remarks:

Where in the time scale of the play, are we here, in this brief section comprising just one short speech by Rumsey, one by Bates, between two silences? As Rumsey is alone and as Bates is living in the town, we must assume that we are again in a period when they are no longer with Ellen, when, though perhaps not yet very old, they are older than at the time when they were having their relationship with her. Who then might the little girl be, whom Bates took for walks? It seems that this too might have been Ellen at an even earlier stage in their relationship (184).

At some stance, the revelation of memories turns out to be more objective and analytical as Rumsey’s laid-back life style of the countryside and the solitude in its nature, twirls into his most self-conscious monologue on people and time. The monologue precisely reveals the basic instinct of Rumsey regarding human contacts and his approach towards the people he has met in his life. At this stage, Rumsey, appears to be more at peace than either Ellen or
Bates. As he displays a deeper understanding of the memories from his past: “I shall walk down to my horse and see how my horse is. He'll come towards me……..I can't believe it.” (CW III 207) Good times, however, do not elude the three and are worked out in terms of vision.

Subsequently, after Bate’s imaginary walks and Rumsey’s acute observance of the people, a flashback scene between Rumsey and Ellen is witnessed. The scene re-enacts Ellen’s visit to Rumsey’s house. Rumsey in a nostalgic tone asks Ellen whether she could remember the time of her last visit to his house. Ellen’s reply in the affirmative, makes Rumsey add: “You were a little girl.” (CW III 209) Hence, the flashbacks make us assume that Ellen had an intimate connection with both these men (at the same time or at different intervals) as a young girl too. On the peculiar memories of the three and their varied style of interpreting it, Martin S. Regal exquisitely remarks:

The interweaving of moments in time is reflected in the language of the play, in which paradigmatic and alternate syntagmatic deviations exist, indicating a broad-based relativism which extends beyond plot or character. Thus Rumsey says: ‘Now I am ready to walk, her arm in me [sic] her hand in me [sic]’, using an accusative or dative rather than a genitive pronoun, while Bates talks of ‘cars barking’, ‘bumping lights’ and ‘standing [......] in the pissing dark’. Ellen’s dialogue, while less prone to grammatical anomalies, occasionally throws out unusual, lyrical constructions, such as ‘The horizon from the sun’; ‘But I pass through them [people] noticing nothing’; and ‘I walk in this wind to collide with them waiting.’ (74)

Later, in the subsequent flashback, Ellen notices her reflection in the window. The close association between light and vision tends to take place in darkness. She wonders if it gets darker as one goes up higher. And again Ellen reflecting back on her old age contemplates the night and the silence that reflect her age and existence. Stuck in her memories, Ellen talks about the silence and the night that surrounds her. Her old age is clearly reflected, as she is standing alone, feeble, filled with isolation, anxiety and uncertainty in her life. The gloomy black clouds from the old age have covered all the variant lights and colours of her life. Her self-assertion through her monologue reveals the essence of the play:

These, then, are night thoughts, thoughts which are the more resonant for the silence engulfing them - and more in need of reassurance and of certainty. Bates is denied any such comfort. Ellen has sought and thinks she has found it in the one who, “listens to me”. But for that one, for Rumsey, the silence is as sufficient as the self. (Trussler 172)

The play filled with conflicting memories again turns as Ellen moves to Rumsey. She expresses her love and her wish to stay with him. But Rumsey coldly replies that she should find a young man, while she refutes his thought by saying that she hates them all. Finally, Ellen recalls the most intimate, sensual, contact with Rumsey. She recalls a visit to his house. The day Rumsey on his knees, next to the window, asked her whether he could kiss her right cheek and then the left one. On this Ellen excitedly replies in the assertive. So we are assured that Ellen had a physical bonding with Rumsey. After Ellen’s final re-enactment there follows an intensive interaction of memories between the characters. Sight and sound interweave as the three seek their respective connections:

RUMSEY: She was looking down. I couldn't hear what she said.
BATES: I can't hear you. Yes you can, I said.

RUMSEY: What are you saying? Look at me, she said.

BATES: I didn't. I didn't hear you, she said. I didn't hear what you said.

RUMSEY: But I am looking at you. It's your head that's bent.

Silence (CW III 212)

Despite its stasis, the drama contains a tremendous sense of life: the three characters move in their uncertain relationships with their thoughts and desires unresolved. The play suggests the varied possibilities of connection, under the thick layer of truth and lies, mixed in memories. After the intensive re-enactments and flashbacks, the past shifts to the present, when we see the characters confined to their old ages. And what that is left among the three are the dust particles of varied fragments, figments of remembrances. A few repetitive lines followed with frequent silences, extend from the enacted flashbacks.

Conclusion

Silence on a realistic level deals with the natural deprivation of human memory and its consequences on ageing life. As we grow old our most intense emotions and thoughts gradually fade away leaving behind scars of past images. And what that is left behind, is the past which gradually runs out and the rest that remains in silence. Though in the play, Bates is seen to be rejected by Ellen in favour of Rumsey, yet he is not so much of an outsider in the fashion of Pinter’s other characters as he is considered in opposition to Rumsey. Memories of all the three characters are alive in the present and are open to flow to the future. The roughness and physicality of Bates is balanced with the gentler and deeper understanding of Rumsey through whom, by way of Ellen, Bates can somehow share a moment of calm. Pinter also focuses on the way, perception and recollection, are affected by an individual’s psychological needs and their effect on the remembrance of the past. As the past serves as an opportunity to escape from the undesirable present reality, it can also be consciously restructured to create a pleasant present.

Works Cited


