

Metatheatrical Tendencies in Harold Pinter's *The Lover*

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Abstract

The term metatheater is coined by Lionel Abel in 1963 which refers to theater about theater. It draws attention to the distinction between the fiction of the play and the reality of performance. A play refers to itself as a play to encourage the audience to perceive it in two ways; as a pretended reality and as dramatic artifice. Metatheater also appears in both comedy and tragedy, where the audience can laugh and empathize at the same time. The paradoxical perspective of fake and real promoting audience instability and this is the role of metatheater. It is an artistic way to examine the interaction between illusion and reality. There is a need to represent reality through artificiality to provide an insight to see the truth of human mind and to illuminate the individual perspective. Within this study metatheater considered as a tendency rather than a technique. It examines the conflict between illusion and reality in Harold Pinter's *The Lover* and focuses on play within the play device. It shows that illusion and reality is the bases of both the subject matter and the dramatic technique of the plays of Harold Pinter who is a revolutionary British playwright. It shows how the play employs the standard Pinter's technique of mixing illusion and reality, presenting a comedy in modern absurd way. Metatheatrical tendencies in *The Lover* traces how people lost simplicity and spontaneity of communication and unable express their real beings.

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1. Introduction

The term metatheater is coined by Lionel Abel in 1963 in his book *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form* which refers to theater about theater “theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalized.” (Abel, P.60). It draws attention to the distinction between the fiction of the play and the reality of performance. A play refers to itself as a play to encourage the audience to perceive it in two ways; as a pretended reality and as dramatic artifice. Metatheater also appears in both comedy and tragedy, where the audience can laugh and empathize at the same time. The paradoxical perspective of fake and real promoting audience instability and this is the role of metatheater. He thinks that the persons who are acting on stage in metatheatrical plays are aware of their dramatic role “unlike figures in tragedy, they are aware of their own theatricality.” (Ibid) There is a need to represent reality through artificiality to provide an insight to see the truth of human mind and to illuminate the individual perspective.

Harold Pinter (1930 – 2008) had twenty nine major plays produced with massive success. Most of them produced more than one time. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature. He is one of the greatest playwrights like Samuel Becket, Edward Albee and Arthur miller who have influence in twentieth century. (Peter Roby, Pp. xii-xix) The conflict between illusion and reality is the basis of both the subject matter and the dramatic technique of the plays of Harold Pinter who is a revolutionary British playwright. This study traces the metatheatrical tendencies focusing on play within the play device in Pinter’s *The Lover* (1965)□. It explores Pinter’s technique of mixing illusion and reality, presenting a comedy in modern absurd way.

Play Within The Play

The dramatic device of play within a play is effectively employed in many plays. It is an important device that re-examines the interaction between fiction and reality. It shows a fictional frame within “a second fictional frame [twice removed from the actual spectator] and a supposedly actual frame.” (Krüger, P.2017) As a device of metatheater, the play within the play has four different potential functions, “metadramatic/metalliterary, philosophical, response- centered and perspectival.” (Gerhard, etal., P.204) This device of metatheater has a reflection

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on the technical, social and political practices and responses to drama in particular and literature in general. The philosophical potential embraces the ontological and epistemological concerns regarding the difference between illusion and reality. The response-centered focused on the reaction of the audience of the inner play which has some influence on the real audience of the outer play. The real audience may be identified and agree with the fictional audience or on the contrary rebel against the comments of the fictional audience to the inner play. Finally the perspectival potential which sheds light on the conflict, theme or story element from different point of view.

The play within the play also has a psychological dimension. Sigmund Freud discusses it psychologically and expresses it in relation to a familiar psychological mechanism as dream within a dream. He says that "What is dreamt in a dream after waking from the dream within a dream is what the dream wish seeks to put in the place of obliterated reality." (Freud, P.338) This means that the dream you see in the dream is a representation of reality, the true recollection while the continuous dream is only the dreamer wishes. He thinks that to include something in a dream within a dream this means that the dreamer wishes, the unconscious desire, that this thing had never happened, "if particular event is interested into a dream as a dream by the dream work itself, this implies the most decided confirmation of the reality of the event- the strongest affirmation of it." (Ibid) From psychological perspective the play within the play is like a dream within a dream. It reflects the philosophical potential of illusion and reality. Everyday life and events in real world continue and we think that the reality is what we experience but in fact not all what occurring is truth, we live in an illusion of reality based on how we perceive it.

The Lover

Like any of Pinter's works, this one-act play contains laughs, tears, and tensions that arise from the social details of modern life. In *The Lover*, love is the main problem. The life of the protagonists is swaying between domestic and wild erotic. The first talk between the two protagonists suggests that it is a comedy of love triangle, Sarah, Richard and Max. Sarah and Richard are a married couple living in a house in the countryside near Windsor. Richard is a business man who spent most of his time at work. Sarah is a housewife bored of her life and tries to have

fun with her lover Max with the agreement of Richard. She used to meet Max at home whenever Richard goes to work. Later it is revealed that Richard is playing the role of Max. As part of their role-playing game, they discuss how they can stand the fact that each one of them has a lover. They talk to each other about their love affairs, teasing each other with details about their lovers. Finally, Richard says that he wants to stop the pretended betrayal, but Sarah objects and Richard resumes his role as Max.

The play starts by Richard amiably asking Sarah about her lover "Is your lover coming today?" (Pinter, 1965, P.5) From their conversation it is clear that she will meet her lover and more than that she will meet him at the house with the agreement of her husband. They reveal this information through odd conversation and continual evasion of real subject which is sex.

Richard. (Amiably) Is your lover coming today?

Sarah. Mmnn.

Richard. What time?

Sarah. Three.

Richard. Will you be going out... or staying in?

Sarah. Oh... I think we'll stay in.

Richard. I thought you wanted to go to that exhibition.

Sarah. I did, yes ... but I think I did prefer to stay with him today.

Richard. Mmnn-hmmm. Well I must be off. (Richard goes to hall u.c. and put his bowler hat) will he be staying long, do you think?

Sarah. Mmnn...

Richard. About ... six, then.

Sarah. Yes.

Richard. Has a pleasant afternoon.

Sarah. Mmnn.

Richard. Bye-bye. (Ibid)

Here, Pinter gives relevant information that prepare the audience to the rest of the play. He begins the scene with a display of traditional domestic life, the husband returns from work, the wife provides the drink and the meal. Everything looks in balance, husband and wife are in their home spending their evening as usual. However, Richard shatters the illusion with the question: "Did you show him the hollyhocks?" (Pinter, 1965, P.6) This surprises Sarah, the conversation continues, as Richard goes deeper and deeper into Sarah's secret relations and starts to display a feeling of jealousy, "Does it ever occur to you that while you're spending the afternoon being unfaithful to me I'm sitting at a desk going through balance sheets and graphs?" (Ibid) Sarah responds to his urging questions with the line "but it's you I love." (Ibid) Her dispassionate response reveals a woman for "whom sex is no more than a business, and who manages simultaneously to conceal or control all emotion." (Cahn, P. 44) Failure of communication is one of the characteristics of Pinter's work but in this opening scene there is a deliberate communication telling information which is proving a stimulant for the couple's sex life but, as a reflection on reality, it actually portrays a startlingly accurate recreation of deceptive language leading to an ultimate truth. Richard and Sarah's conversation reflects Pinter's belief that "we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is a continual evasion, desperate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves." (Pinter, 1999, P. xiii) Sarah's answers reveals her preference to stay in and have sex with another man. This is a perfect reflection of reality in that the truthful information of the situation can be collected, not from straight and honest conversation but from enough information to form reality from an outline of potentials. Pinter's characters often fill out the gaps for each other even if never revealing such knowledge.

Richard and Sarah negotiating love through the conflict in their sex-game which reveal their animalistic part. In another level of conflict Sarah asks Richard about his mistress. Richard starts to play with words "But I haven't got a mistress. I'm well acquainted with a whore, but I haven't got

a mistress. There's a world of difference." (Pinter, 1965, P. 9) Richard reveals his animalistic need, his need to connect with another woman, free from the confines of stability and socially prescribed norms. In *The Lover*, the process of social misbehavior is strongly linked with psychological liberation. Pinter investigates "the complex nature of people and the sadomasochistic quality of many relationship" (Digeatani, P. 103) In the outer play, Richard and Sarah act according to the custom of the middle class while they attempt to overcome in the inner play. They "consciously transgressing sexual prohibitions and taboos, constructing a new semiotic reality, which becomes their shared property." (Manscwicz, P.93)

Richard is afraid of losing their true identities throughout their game. Thus, the two roles end up by mingling into one. Sarah wants to continue the old game to a new situation in order to save their marriage. Alrene Sykes thinks that

...it is not a reassuring ending... From one point of view, Sarah has just managed to save from destruction "the game" which means so much to her, just managed to divert Richard from smashing their fantasy to pieces. What however of tomorrow or 232 the day after? What will happen to their relationship if the fantasy does break down. (Sykes, P.109)

It is evident that although Richard and Sarah are playing the two different roles, they are aware of their duties and responsibilities towards each other and their children. In the final scene of the play, Richard is making an attempt to stop the game and if that is to be carried out it has to be out their domestic life, but Sarah still urges to continue it. The two different personalities appear as one in the end of the play. The game which is played as lovers gets mixed with the domestic life of husband and wife coming together as the same person. The couple love each other and joyfully serve each other but in order to fill their lives with more pleasure, they change their personality and enjoy that part of their existence too. When the different characters appear as one character in the end of the play it is clear from Sarah's desperate answers that mixing up the characters would in a way alter their relationship not only their sex life but their marriage and identities are in danger. The main motif behind the changing of character and personality is part of the game to have more sexual pleasure which reflects the absurdity of their lives. (Borah, P.67)

Play within the play is like a mirror through which the couple can contact. It lets Richard and Sarah uncover their real emotion beneath polite conversation. Pinter creates a play within the play to let the protagonists interact their repressed desires of fear, passion and love. Their game reflects the illusion of life. It makes the audience sort out illusion from reality.

The characters in *The Lover* are identified by their cloths. In outer play Sarah wears a low-heeled shoes and modest dress while Richard wears a "sober suit." (Pinter, 1962, P.6) In inner play Sarah appears wearing a high-heeled shoes with low-cut black dress while Richard comes wearing a casual jacket as he is playing the role of the lover, Max. A. Manswicz states that the " customs both identify and determine the character's conduct" (P. 91)The change of the cloths signifies the change of behavior within theatrical performance. Since "semiotic awareness is usually reserved for the audience and the actors and not for the dramatists personae."(Ibid) Richard's insight suggests his double role as an actor in the outer play and a viewer in the inner play. In metatheatrical moments, Pinter expresses human's feeling and emotion and the illusion of the reality.

A little later Richard looks different from the the liberated, open-minded man that we saw at the beginning of the play. He tries to assert his authority over his wife. He asks Sarah to stop the game. Sarah gets very upset about his decision and she tries to convince him to change his mind but she fails to do so. After this Richard moves towards her, tapping the drum. Sarah restarts playing another game. The play ends with pauses like most of Pinter's plays, nothing is resolved. This uncertainty reflects Pinter's thought that there is no clear distinction between illusion and reality. He has said:

A character on the stage who can present no convincing argument or information as to his past experience, his present behaviour or his aspirations, nor give a comprehensive analysis of his motives is as legitimate and as worthy of attention as one who, alarmingly, can do all these things. The more acute the experience, the less articulate its expression. (P. 3)

This uncertainty heightens the metatheatricality of the play. It is typical of Pinter's style to keep a degree of uncertainty regarding the identity of his characters and also their relationships with each other. His story is

indefinite the same as his characters. He leaves the audience in doubt whether an event has really place or not.

Michael Billington says that *The Lover* is a deceptive play. It starts as social comedy in which the characters appear on stage with explicit social background, then it moves into penetration the illusion that sustains their marriage and release their anxieties and “finally achieve a reconciliation of reality and fantasy” (P. 246) Richard and Sarah find reconciliation in fantasy. Both play double roles, Richard as husband and lover and Sarah also plays a combined figure whore and wife. But then, after a while the games that they play turn boring too, upon which they try to invent a new game. They try new approaches or play other roles. However, they realized that if they cease to play game then they would have to face reality. Metatheater is exploited in mingling illusion and reality to evoke the audience to face reality and decide what they really want from each other and from life.

A. Manswicz claims that in *The Lover*, Pinter does not only create a paly within the play but plays within the play. The play develops on three layers; “the outer play contains the inner play which subsequently evolves into alternative theatrical situation that constitute the third level of meta-drama.” (P. 90) The outer play starts with Richard and Sarah in their house, the second play starts with the beating of drum and the coming of Max and the third play starts when Max asks Sarah for a light as if he does not meet her before. Each play performed with its own place and time of action, in addition each character acts different identity with various passion and themes. This variety allows the characters to express and satisfy their desires and save their relationship.

Manswicz added that in the last scene, the characters become “conscious actors playing role.” (Ibid) The deeper Pinter probes into the human nature and human relationship the more complex and ambivalent the world of his characters becomes. In outer play Richard typifies the middle class male who is interested mainly in his work and cares about his state in society which makes him suppress his real emotion and hide the other side of his personality. In the inner play, the game of illusion, he finds a way to release his repressed desire. When Sarah insists to continue the game or change it, he does not lose his balance. He keeps his rationality and suggests a satisfying solution. Richard and Sarah play their dual roles to hide their reality and live the illusion of their life.

Conclusion

In *The Lover*, Pinter creates metatheatricality to explore the human nature in its fragmented form. It shows that each person is the sum of many reflections. In the outer play and the inner play, Pinter makes his audience experience the need for verification which is seen in the interaction of the characters. There is impossibility to verify reality. For Pinter, the matter is not what happened but how the audience perceive what happened. Richard and Sarah desire to hide their real problem makes them prisoners of the repetitive mechanisms of a role-playing game in which the two alternate in interpreting their respective lovers, in a cycle of endless lies. They use masks in order to hide their real selves out of a sense of some kind of self-protective instinct. They use illusion to preserve reality and relationship. They create their world of illusion as a kind of passing time. They make conversation to hide behind rather than to articulate their realities. Metatheatricality is used to reveal the confusion of illusion and reality and penetrate the boundaries of illusion. Metatheatrical tendencies in *The Lover* shows the lost simplicity and spontaneity of an encounter which succeeds only in fantasy of erotic. It shows that man masks his/her real personality, unable to express in depth being that is blocked by fear of the judgment of others.

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