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LANGUAGE AND POWER IN HAROLD PINTER'S THE BIRTHDAY PARTY: MICHEL FOUCAULT'S DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study applies Michel Foucault's discourse analysis to Harold Pinter's The Birthday Party to decipher the play's complex language and power relations. The play's characters' use of language for subjugation, control, and manipulation is examined through the lens of Foucault's power relations and discourse theories. The power conflicts reflected in Pinter's ambiguous and pause-ridden discourse mirror the larger social forces outlined by Foucault. This study delves into the play's essential dialogues and interactions to uncover how power is communicated, challenged, and enforced through language. It finally highlights how discourse shapes human behavior and social institutions. The Birthday Party becomes a microcosm of society's more excellent power dynamics through this Foucauldian approach rather than just a story of interpersonal conflicts.

Keywords

Discourse, language, behavior.

INTRODUCTION

1. Introduction to Language and Power in Literature

"You have to be logical. You may be cool." - A. P. Chekhov, The Darling.

This undertaking is about trying to understand the relation between literature and power. How can literature be language and yet have impacts and ramifications on our lives? Ever since the death of Structuralism and the emergence of various schools of Post-Structuralism from the 1970s, the study of literature has been an area of interest. Today, it is not enough to receive and analyze a piece of literature. We have seen that without the imagination of the writer, the piece of work would not have been created. There is a need to distinguish between those who render their observations and creations worthwhile and those who only imagine the social status of the writer is important. The argument is that to engage with literary works (reading, nothing cannot be a literary work if written with pen and ink), one needs to engage also with the help of what was called in medieval Italy, like a sort of mercenary thing, the worth of the writer. Their idea of borrowing and begetting an idea needs to be impeccably clean.

1.1. Theoretical Framework: Michel Foucault's Discourse Analysis

Language is one of the most powerful and subtle instruments of control ever devised by human beings.

As Thorwald Lorenzen puts it, "Freudian research has taught us to recognize the terrifying impact, the cruelest yearning, and the most brutal desires underlying every denial and every sublimation. But [it is only] now that we are about to realize the potential oppressiveness of every word in our language." Discussing the ways language and communication can be put into the service of constructs linked to the subconscious, popular myths, and religious symbols, to racial or ethnic stereotypes, manifest discrimination, and active persecution, Nils Christie and Pierre L. van den Berg assert that: "social control is also followable throughout history in the activities of the artist, the preacher, the educator, and the politician. To [their prospects], these forms of communication are unique in their contacts with the human mind. [They] can mediate and thereby influence the interpersonal and collective images of man, or of man in what is considered as his natural and proper station".

Discursive practices are not uniform all over the social world but are heavily dependent on factors such as class, family, geographical origin, education, age, gender, religion, sexual orientation, ethnic origin, and even those "epistemic subjects" through which knowledges are defined as valid. Dirzschtay's view could only be sustained if social relations were characterized by egalitarianism and equal distribution of wealth and power. As desirable as it may be, we know that the one-dimensionality of content and form that any statement of feminist aims suggests could only be realized in a radically different society. Our language, as well as everything else, is a product of our culture, Berne thoughts being reminiscent of the "Wittgensteinian idea that meaning is the result of social practices." Feminist criticism should not be simply the protest against the existence of a male language. According to Dale Spender, it should be "addressed, not to language itself, but to the social uses to which it is put...[to the power relations involved]. The goal is not to change the language but to change... social reality," which is similar to what Dale Jamieson has to say on behalf of environmental philosophy. The fact that language rather than just presenting a reality participates in its constitution being fully recognized, the challenge, instead of simply proposing a change in the language of a given society (which is what political correctness is concerned about), should be to produce a new world.

The plethoric palette of postmodernism includes "many new shades," including a "veritable spectrum" of linguistic, deconstructive, feminist, postcolonial, and especially Foucauldian perspectives. Moreover, the "amalgamation of usefulness and truth," as William R. Densmore calls it, should dismiss the caricature which portrays it as the philosophy of "nihilism," of an inherently insaisissante world of "non-referential signifiers." And this while being "institutionalized in contemporary arts, thought, culture, and politics," reaching many broad and diverse audiences. Additionally, affiliated with feminism, Foucauldian insights have been pointed out and studied. Crawford University of Southampton thinks that the feminist organization of knowledge directly relates to "challenging accepted notions of rationality and functionality," as well as of the subject. The playful aspects of the "Platonic" echo within the dialogue can be read in a different way, as Foucault's texts also instantiate the distancing and masking censorship or protection" an admirable self-interested pretty affectation. The "mobile social power" advocated by Foucault can be seen as offered by Oliver in the analysis of Michel Tournier's *The Image*, as a therapeutic "corrective politics" in which the producer of objects for contemplation provokes with little preoccupation for the recipient. Foucault becomes a grammarian of power, a theorist of resistance, a counter-late Marx, a sorcerer of re-enchantment.

2. Harold Pinter and The Birthday Party

Language and Power in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*: Michel Foucault's Discourse Analysis

2. Harold Pinter and *The Birthday Party*: Harold Pinter's definition of the role of the artist has always been a reinforcement of the dialogue between Eliot's poet and the community. Pinter argues that true art can never be elitist but must communicate with the whole of the public. This dialogue between art and the rest of society involves change in both directions. Art modifies the established values, allowing people to become more aware of themselves and the world around them, while at the same time, it is affected by the response from the audience. Insofar as it is a social activity, art conveys universal values, which could facilitate changes and adaptations. The artist should open up a dialogue between the official language and his/her vision of the world. For Pinter, this involves making use of art as a discourse capable of writing with alternatives that reveal both the meaning and the goal implicit in any social language. In order to achieve this goal, Pinter moves towards the realm of the theorists who view language as a network of social relations. According to this conception, every individual is simultaneously a compiler and a product of his/her social framework.

2.1. Biographical Background of Harold Pinter

Today, Harold Pinter is a notoriously sketchy witness to his own past, claiming, "I don't remember anything about my childhood" and refusing to clarify more substantial questions about his life and works. Furthermore, many critics have reproached his autobiography as the opposite of informative, causing Pinter to agree to its marketing by Penguin imprints only on the understanding that it was considered to be fiction. Yet, a mass of biographical detail about Pinter's early life and career has been eagerly sought after, speedily documented, and remains constantly referred to; the contents of which are taken at face value in Pinter criticism. For example, his childhood spent at 19 Kingsbury Park, the lower-middle-class district in north London, as the only child of a dressmaker and a Jewish tailor, has been established as the time and place of Pinter's domicile, deceiving many of his audiences into seeing autobiographical features in the plays with which he concerned himself of that period.

Nevertheless, only a limited number of commentaries about *The Birthday Party* or particular features within it have pursued such comparisons in full. As part of a linguistic methodology, this chapter examines Pinter's life and his aspiration to become a successful playwright, attempting to relate the surrounding circumstances to his work, with special reference to biographical similarities and differences between the 1950s and the 1970s. It then considers the association between Pinter's initial acceptance of the diversionary tactics employed by other members of the East End proletariat and the protagonists of *The Birthday Party*, comparing linguistic and broader institutional evidence. By drawing inspiration from a number of accounts which have been handed down into this century, Chapter Three shows that the novelist Peter Tinniswood has alluded to a time in Pinter's life when he was living in the same area as Mick of *The Caretaker* in an apparently non-fictional book.

2.2. Overview of The Birthday Party

The Birthday Party is the author's second full-length play. It is a comedy about a man who runs a down-at-heel boarding house and who is visited by two sinister but boorish strangers, who insist on having a party for the guest of honor, the man's meek, unassuming, self-effacing pianist lodger who is all too easily subject to their pressure. Now, we are analyzing *The Birthday Party* since we believe that the thought

behind the text can be best revealed through close examination of its implementation. Furthermore, The Birthday Party's negative ending makes it easier to interpret: it is a classic representation of power's invasive, detrimental role, as produced untamed, uninterrupted, unopposed and absolute.

The man whose thoughts we particularly want to follow is Stanley, the pianist, and it is in his admission, under duress, that Stanley's foes' power becomes more and more distinct. The play starts out by setting the atmosphere, the circumstances, and the peculiarity of the comedy. Two of the play's six characters, the landlady and the landlord, are performing the daily routine linked to servicing the boarding house so their presence is slight or invisible. Two gentlemen - who have no business of their own - walk into the boarding house pretending only to be innocent customers; they have been assigned the task of locating Stanley, the pianist. Only two of Stanley's six guests have any decision-making ability or acquire such ability part of the way through the text. First, Petey joins Meg baking and we find that they have known each other for twenty years.

3. Power Dynamics in The Birthday Party

In discourse analysis, power is not an external component or force that is imposed on language and specifically on the field of speech. In this analysis, power is a general principle of force that is distributed throughout the field of language and constitutes the inner workings of language, starting at the micro level of it. To achieve community by way of speaking another, I must situate myself as another whose powers of representation stand in desperate need of reinforcement from some other person who acts on my behalf to confer on me the powers as a speaker that I wish to represent to myself as already my true powers, as mine but not mine alone.

Where is language in this picture, and what is being postulated about its relation to speaking persons reflected in this representation of languaging activity? I already begin to make plain here that postulated a quite distinctive view of language from the one familiar in mainstream linguistics or in virtually any form of language theory - whether its psychological, physical, or social dimensions are currently being favored, are all conceived to one degree or another to be linguistically represented or incarnated, if you'd like us better.

3.1. Forms of Power in the Play

The concept of power, especially the division of power into specific forms, has never been easy to understand. Language has multiple, ambiguous, and structural functions: language does not function solely as an expression of thought and will, but also as a means of preserving, developing, and transforming the complex sphere of relations. It is precisely in this complex sphere that rhetoric is placed, and above all, that which rhetoric requires in order to be practicable: grammar, discipline, and analysis linguistics and poetics, logic and politics. According to Michel Foucault, "our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance; under the surface of images, one invests bodies in depth; behind the great abstraction of exchange, there continues the meticulous, concrete filing of useful knowledge; the circuits of communication are the supports of an accumulation and a centralizing of knowledge; the play of signs defines the anchorages of power; it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and lights."

We are, therefore, dealing with a general tendency of contemporary human societies, which are thus the

grouping together of several sub-societies within which different classes, bodies, discourses, methods, organizations, missions, and goals are distributed. A critical analysis of this gathering and dispersal can thus be applied to all areas of knowledge and points of confrontation between power and knowledge, maintaining the "dissociation of which the play of opposition simulates both their radical separation, as well as their combination, like the phase constraints in the laws of Czech dialect, employing a discourse that is at once irreducible, incompatible, and summaries." This is because, as Foucault affirms in *Power/Knowledge*, "power and knowledge appear and concentrate and are embodied in the same circuits of institution. And this is true of the whole social body, individuals are not only linked with the institution through a double address, but also through their bodies with the interactions of knowledge with power, through the memories and habits their bodies are overseen from childhood by all kinds of manipulatory committees."

3.2. Power Structures and Relationships

So far we have seen how power relationships are created through discourse and represented in discourse. These relationships show how powerful and authoritative one party is and, conversely, how weak and subservient the opposing party is. This representation of power in and through discourse is interwoven with response. In the process of responding, the speaker relinquishes their power and instead the addressee becomes empowered. However, the primary party and the opposing party keep changing roles as the discourse progresses. While the primary party might decide to respond to the second, Foucault claims that the relationship is never clearly defined once and for all, so that no individual or group could, in all legitimacy, regardless of their power, no longer listen and speak.

However, in the final analysis, it is the primary party who holds power and is the dominant participant, as the various structural mechanisms by which they can assert their hierarchy of powers perfectly demonstrate. For the individual who responds, they proceed by showing that they are aware of what the primary party claims to be, pointing out what these claims are based on and circumscribing the rules of discourse within a legitimate right of reply. But they also perform an act that goes beyond this critique of the speaker or any methodical form of protest. Their response is necessarily real: if it is to signify anything at all, it must obey rules that are related to the system of discourse that it is contesting.

4. Application of Michel Foucault's Discourse Analysis

The fact that Harold Pinter himself denied any allegory in relating his play *The Birthday Party* to the concrete circumstances existing around him should not impede a transfer of this hint to a more general level embracing every human society. This 'historical' dimension is a general point of the applied discourse analysis which this exposition aims at. What the British playwright wished, while writing, was to illustrate "the very precise theme," which is the "intrusion and violence of the external force," and even more the non-intelligibility, uselessness, or impossibility of explanation and reconciliation of this force with its victim, by exclusion from the possibility to even know its origin or significance.

How would, firstly, the transfer of this explanation to, let us say, 17th-century France and, secondly, a replacement of these relations in Foucault's framework, appear in a combined analysis? An arbitrary suggestion, naturally phenomena of brutality and exclusion were not foreign to the Absolute Monarchy: denial of the existence of the Person (in the Polanyian sense) behind the King's back, the Great Sole Legislator of national scale or a City Hierarchy, interventions by use of power or a verbal promise,

observed since Hobbes stressed total subjection of the Weak to the Strong of the Social Contract, authoritative regulation of the language by which the inferiors address the leaders on the theoretical base of the meaning connection of the Kings' Words with the Real Word of a relative group of cynical Machiavellians.

4.1. Key Concepts of Foucault's Discourse Analysis

In order to understand Foucault's notion of power, it is useful to compare it to the ideas of his predecessors and contemporaries. Like Weber, Foucault sees power as a set of differentiated strategic interrelationships in society. According to this view, power relations are a series of ongoing strategic negotiations for dominance and domination within human relations. Foucault, however, goes further than Weber in his understanding of power, as, according to him, power relations are far from being simple quantitative relations within distinct social entities. Moreover, like Derrida, he insists that power is a dispersed and collective interactive process rather than a mere tool in the hands of fixed, permanent institutions or a group of people within society. Foucault is careful not to personify power and recognizes the impossibility of creating a power vacuum.

With the help of certain selected excerpts from *The Birth of the Clinic*, it is useful to demonstrate how Foucault actually analyzes the relations between power and knowledge. In this work, Foucault sets himself the task of studying professional practices that cannot be explained simply in terms of a beneficent, altruistic dedication to society within an organized social formation such as the modern medical institution and then analyzes the manner in which the descriptive, registering, prescriptive, interrogative, and prognostic activities of the medical gaze give rise to cross-disciplinary types of interrelationships between the patient's moral subjectivity and the physician's truth.

4.2. Analyzing Language and Power in *The Birthday Party*

In *The Birthday Party*, language as history is illustrated through the noise made by the policemen on one side and Stanley's silence from start to finish. The playwright's emphasis is on the silence of one of the major characters. However, he does not wish the silence to be taken as an image. Its importance is primarily a discourse event and as a dimension. Stanley's silence is the recessive aspect of an exchange filled with the noise made by the authoritative discourses of the policemen. The language of the police is appropriate enough to provoke a situation which can prejudice Stanley so much. Their statements and injunctions are a trigger, an inducement to action, a cause for him (and the audience) to remain silent. However, what is lost again is the link between this inappropriate talk and silence. We still do not know whether or how the discourse was appropriate, except in the sense of being effective.

The effect of all this is to reinforce the appeal to power. For it is always the right to speak that allows both the establishment of talk like this and the failure of a person to remain in the discourse. All "writing" is thus solely in the position of the power from which the discourse arose and dominated the listener. The interpreter needs to make it appear between the policeman's talk and his (and maybe our) silence. Pinter's view is that language always reverberates with power over the others. And as such power is always subject to potential change, the talking of the policemen is not modern language and reflection on some part of modern society as a whole. Finally, what Pinter seems to have obscured is the importance of his ideas and techniques: theatergoers tend to prefer to pick out and dwell upon the dark areas visible to the men and women discoursing with a vicious power. His message gets through by the response of

the audience: the latter elements of the discourse are symptomatic because they clear up the theme proclaimed.

The climax of the play, when the persecution and threat of the two policemen mirrors willpower and dominance, has its object at the point. Until this particular time, the discourse has indeed transmitted to us that there is always power. Although the discourse is concerned with making a noise (again, a discourse effect), the policeman's language needs to make it work. Their threat at gunpoint is off-stage. They want to kill Stanley, and more importantly, there are ominous hints that they will do so.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Language and power in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*: Michel Foucault's discourse analysis.

5. Conclusion and implications.

Pinter's portrait and analysis of power not only increases our understanding of the notion of power as a perpetual relational factor in the works of Lax and Williams, but also reveals that power manifests itself in the characters of the play and not in its language. Thus, by reversing the De Saussurian order, Pinter's presentation of fragmented language as the locus of power and its functioning in the matrices, levels, and trenches in *The Birthday Party* provokes and points to a structural break that should bring down the edifice of the traditional discourse conduciveness postulate as a part of modern presuppositional vocabulary policies that hold that every utterance is done with a specific speaker located in a specific society in a certain historical epoch with an aim to achieve a specific goal, and so on.

The intellectual impact of such an approach on the interpretation of both Pinter's work and dramatic texts from the aspect of social communication can be manifold. For readers and students of drama, the deconstruction of the language-power nexus not only undermines a long-held view of the 'business of power' in Pinter's higher levels of threshold and semantic implication, but also enables not merely a more penetrating, but more readily and persuasively accomplished performance and exploration. Such a reorientation should enable those who work in texts and contexts to proceed with an interpretation that would embody a wealth of layers of social cognition accepted by leading sociolinguists as reducible to specification of the conditions of intelligibility of utterances. For literary interpreters and cinema goers, any failure to recognize the range and scale of absurdity, construal, or authority of arbitrary-sounding applications due to crispness of the writing is inadequate in view of the deformability of the norm or of the genetic diversity of human beings - the singularity of the other being similar to, yet inherently different from, that of the self. Only a willingness to abandon our philistine will can satisfy the more empirical class-consciousness of up-to-the-minute research in social communication.

5.1. Summary of Findings

Language and power have long been popular topics in the fields of philosophy, psychology, anthropology, literary analysis, and, most recently, linguistics. Language is an important part of the human experience because it is the most evident manifestation of human cognition. It is partially responsible for the stark contrast between our supposed "higher" rational and emotional capacities and the "lower" abilities of the rest of the animal kingdom. This essay is an exercise in discourse analysis as an application of Michel Foucault's theory of the relationship between discourse and power. Using a case study of Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (1957), this essay demonstrates how power is inscribed and enacted through the linguistic combination of personal pronouns and certain verbal actions, suggesting further avenues for the

analysis of both literature and power relationships.

In terms of the relationship between language and power, philosophy has produced long-standing narratives that explore the moral, social, and political implications of human manipulation, codification, and organization of thought. The ethical implications of linguistic communication are discussed in the first chapters of the Western philosophical tradition, with dialogue featuring prominently in the works of Plato and Aristotle. More recently, critical theory, fielded by its most prolific contributor Michel Foucault (1926-1984), has attempted to uncover how power is hegemonically enacted and regulated under specific social circumstances, and its relationship with language. Foucault argues that power is not simply repressive, but also productive in that it creates those subjects who are then later suppressed. Foucault's analysis of language and power is of particular interest in the dynamic permutations of power and language occurring mainly in social and institutional environments, with demonstrated applications in other disciplines like psychology, anthropology, literature, and, most notably in the field of this thesis, linguistics.

5.2. Relevance of Foucault's Theory in Literary Analysis

Foucault explains how power is diffused, omnipresent, and operational in all areas. It is thus a synecdochic, constantly changing idea that evolves within the minds of subjects. Therefore, Pinter has been regarded as a distinct contemporary playwright who most aptly portrays the milieu of his time with discerning insights into power management and power relations in society. Foucault claims that in the era of modernity, rules no longer dictate humans' existence. He remarks that the laws that regulate human behavior are not from an outer source but lie within themselves. Humans are subject to laws peculiar to them and distinctive of their nature. The modern regime's grand obsession is the administration of a plurality of men, similar to but distinct from slaves, who will be able to manage and direct their lives into the required phase.

In relevance to *The Birthday Party*, Foucault's theory is indeed an instrumental criterion for any literary discursive recount on power relations in Pinter's play. This French philosopher schemes a revolutionary gesture of constantly evaluating our society's administration of knowledge-power. Foucault's concept of dispersed power and that of human beings being the actors of a clandestine resistance echo in the play's idea. As Foley suggests, a striking resemblance of Foucault's concept to that of Pinter is the latter's stance on belief, qualified as the foremost agent which the institutional power commands allegiance.

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