

A Technical Analysis of Narrative Versus Metanarrative in The Ludicrous Story

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No society has been able to abolish human sadness, no political system can deliver us from the pain of living, from our fear of death, our thirst for the absolute; it is the human condition that directs the social condition, not vice versa.

:- Eugene Ionesco

Many a scholar define Metanarrative or Grand Narrative as “narrative about narratives of historical meaning, experience, or knowledge, which offers a society legitimation through the anticipated completion of a (as yet unrealized) master idea” or “a story about a story, encompassing and explaining other little stories into a whole.” To simplify we can say that Metanarrative is a narrative that advocates the idea of conducting a particular system or human condition, in a broader sense, through a fixed pre-set code, be it political, historical, religious or social. Postmodernism, according to Jean François Lyotard, is skeptic of this totalizing nature of this theory, i.e. believing in universal truths rather than going with the depends concept of accepting a variety of individual perspectives.

Postmodernism was a movement that was adopted by art as well as philosophy. Postmodern theatre is the best example of this resistance of metanarrative. Theatre and playwrights are free to give shape to their own ideas and stances and imagination. Their truths are different. Samuel Beckett, the apostle of the Absurdist Theatre and a Nobel Laureate is credited for bringing postmodernism to drama. The logic that Metanarrative gives of predetermined projection of consequences and results is defied in his plays where there is no end and the interpretation is left to the audience and readers. Harold Pinter, Eugene Ionesco, the prime figures of the Absurdist Theatre along with Beckett also display this credence.

Samuel Beckett’s Endgame, Not I, Breath- mock narrative itself. His Waiting for Godot has the role-reversal of master and servant as a warning to the economic and social exploitation

practices. Harold Pinter had suffered a lot of hardship as a consequence of the Second World war, doing trivial jobs for livelihood. That is why he abhors anything like Grand Narrative that magnifies the past and the so called futuristic anticipation about the world. In this paper we have made efforts to elaborate this concept further, which is , Theatre as a resistance to social Metanarrative.

Keywords:- Met narrative, Postmodernism, Theatre of the Absurd, Language game, Human condition.

Many a scholar define Metanarrative or Grand Narrative as “narrative about narratives of historical meaning, experience, or knowledge, which offers a society legitimation through the anticipated completion of a (as yet unrealized) master idea” or “a story about a story, encompassing and explaining other little stories into a whole” or “ a theory that tries to give a totalizing, comprehensive account to various historical events, experiences and social, cultural phenomena based upon the appeal to universal truth or universal values”. Grand Narrative works towards making the world realize that there are certain concepts, theories behind everything. We have Karl Marx who has given The Communist Manifesto and Das Capital in the context of communism, economy, classism, industrialism and capitalism. Plato wrote The Republic about state politics, Sigmund Freud has his multiple grand narratives about human psychology. And, in the field of arts and criticism we have Aristotle's Poetics, I. A. Richards' Principles of Literary Criticism and many more. To simplify we can say that Metanarrative is a narrative that advocates the idea of conducting a particular system or human condition, in a broader sense, through a fixed pre-set code; be it political, historical, religious or social. Postmodernism, according to Jean François Lyotard, as argued in his book The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (1979), is skeptic of this totalizing nature of this theory, i.e. believing in universal truths rather than going with the depends concept of accepting a variety of individual perspectives. He argues that people have become alert to difference, diversity, the incompatibility of our aspirations, beliefs and desires, and forth at reason postmodernism is characterized by an abundance of micronarratives.

Postmodernism, a movement developed in the mid-to-late 20th century, was adopted by art as well as philosophy that stands for its skeptic attitude towards Grand Narrative. That means, a resistance towards ideologies and certainties in almost all fields of life and making way for

individual voices and uncertainties. According to Lyotard Grand Narratives are a feature of the period of “modernity” while Postmodernity’s attitude towards Metanarrative is, in contrast, one of incredulity. Postmodern theatre is the best example of this resistance, especially of social metanarrative. Postmodern Theatre comes philosophy originated in Europe in the middle of the twentieth century. When Metanarrative says human condition, it doesn’t mean to analyze it biologically, rather the focus of study happens to be on the historical, political social aspects. They are all mostly external. This tendency was challenged by the Postmodernist movement. It turned from outside to inside, from society to a man’s home, his mind, his heart. Postmodern Theatre and playwrights are free to give shape to their own ideas and stances and imagination. Their truths are different. They don’t mention man in a social but human context. Essentially, thus, Postmodern Theatre raises questions rather than attempting to supply answers. The accepted norms of seeing and representing the world are challenges and disregarded while experimental theatrical perceptions and representations are created. John Stephen and Robyn McCallum identify Metanarrative as, a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains Knowledge and experience.

Theatre of the Absurd is dramatic works of certain European and American dramatists during 1950-60s in consonance with philosophy of human existence being absurd. Albert Camus in his *The Myth of Sisyphus* put that human situation is devoid of purpose. Beckett, the apostle of the Absurdist Theatre and a Nobel Laureate, is credited for bringing postmodernism to drama. The logic that Metanarrative gives of predetermined projection of consequences and results is defied in his plays where there is no end and the interpretation is left to the audience and readers. In fact, it questions human existence itself, let alone human condition. Harold Pinter, Eugene Ionesco, the prime figures of the Absurdist Theatre along with Beckett also display this credence. While Beckett went against narrative itself, Pinter grossifies social codes. Ionesco, much before Beckett, was the one to feel sceptic about social codes and narratives.

Postmodern narrative, according to John Stephen and Robyn McCallum, will often deliberately disturb the formulaic expectations such cultural codes provide, pointing thereby to a possible revision of the social code. Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame*, *Not I*, *Breath-* mock narrative itself. His *Waiting for Godot* has the role-reversal of master and servant as a warning to the economic and social exploitation practices. When he started he also went for

metanarrative style in the manner of his ideal and mentor James Joyce. Later, he didn't want to take a look at his Dante...Bruno.Vico...Joyce. In Endgame, his phenomenal play after Waiting for Godot, Clov, the servant is made to ask for the story his master Hamm has created. Hamm recites and re-recites the narrative adding more elaboration to it but it fails to please any of them.

Wittgenstein's theory of language game according to which a narrative and the meaning of words of a particular language depend upon the context they are being used in, works as a base for Lyotard's book where he puts Metanarrative to test in the context of philosophy and social sciences. "Wittgenstein's aim is not to show the underlying structure of language but rather to show that all attempts at digging beneath the surface of language lead to unwarranted theorizing and generalization...The most fundamental aspect of language is that we learn how to use it in social contexts, which is the reason why we all understand each other." In Happy Days when Winnie is addressing the audience, telling how happy and contented she is, we understand easily that she is not. It is not the words that convey her, but the context which is obvious. The Structuralist, Post-structuralist and Cultural Studies are woven around this very language game theory, i.e. the process of making and attributing meaning.

Happy Days and Not I, the senseless flow of monologues, a slap in the face to Grand narratives of old schools of drama and especially modern social plays. Words and Music, the two entities try to soothe their master. While Music proves to be the comforter, Words comes out to be a disaster. Words, quite ironically, lack words and meanings,

Theme...[Pause.] Theme...sloth. [Pause. Rattled off, low.] Sloth is of all the passions the most powerful passion and indeed no passion is more powerful than the passion of sloth,...

Again, when the theme is love,

Love is of all the passions the most powerful passion and indeed no passion is more powerful than the passion of love.

Hamm asks Clov in Endgame,

Yesterday! What does that mean? Yesterday?

Clov is furious, That means that bloody awful day, long ago, before this bloody awful day. I use the words you taught me. If they don't mean anything any more, teach me others. Or let me be silent.

While other writers told about the purposelessness of narrative, Beckett literally made it look futile. That is the beauty of his craft. He created a whole play of just three minutes and without a single dialogue! Imagine that! Yet it came out to be a universal one. *Breath* is a play that starts with a horrific cry of a child, an inhalation, the holding of it, and a painful exhalation and the same cry at the end. The stage is rummaged with miscellaneous wastage. Leslie Hill, in his chapter *Poststructuralist Readings of Beckett* refers to the French novelist, philosopher and literary critic Maurice Blanchot,

Blanchot began by binding literatures question not to the past, i.e. tradition, order, certainty and truth, but to the future- the promise and challenge of what lies beyond the horizon of the familiar. Literature's future, in this sense, Blanchot argued, did not consist in a rendezvous with truth, grounded in humanism, religion, history, or philosophy.

Harold Pinter had suffered a lot of hardship as a consequence of the Second World war, doing trivial jobs for livelihood. That is why he abhors anything like Grand Narrative that magnifies the past and the so called futuristic anticipation about the world. His plays fall under the genre comedy of menace, a wordplay upon the Modern era genre comedy of manners.

In his first play, *The Room*, Pinter embeds the seeds of his major themes that would be explored and developed in his plays to follow. Pinter shows man living in a world of uncertainty. Man is able to know neither himself nor others. While he hides himself from others, he is frightened to hide himself. More particularly, Rose in *The Room* hides her true self, and background. She fears of being found in her relatively secure haven, in her room. Trying to bury her past, her memories, and her true identity. Rose hardly ever steps out of her supposedly protective cocoon. With her husband Bert she has built an order for herself. Living inside, although she feels herself secure, she cannot help fearing from the outside. Thus, while the inside signifies security, the outside signifies menace and danger. The outside is a constant threat to the inside and to its inhabitant. However, the inside is confining whereas the outside is not. On the other hand, the door to the room is a bridge between security and insecurity. Sooner or later, the one inside is subject to the menacing outside world by the opening of the door.

In other words, the door which is a gateway between the hunter and the hunted opens and the former upon entering the room breaks down the order of its inhabitant. When the order is

destroyed, in Pinter's world it has to be restored. In *The Room* the door opens and Riley, the blind negro appears as the intruder. Not only does he prove to be the adversary to Rose's "shell" but also he provokes her fears concerning herself and past. Why he comes or who he is never verified in the play as verify is impossible for Pinter. In other words, time past is past and it is unimportant. What takes place in the present is determining and worth dealing with. Besides past is only important as far as it shapes up the present. Rose may be Riley's daughter, former mistress or she may have been a woman of notorious fame. Riley may be signifying only the things she wants to conceal. Riley being black and rising up from the basement room brings along the symbol of a dark past life Rose wishes to forget. No matter what he signifies or who he really is, Riley shatters Rose's world. He pursues Rose and catches her in her shelter.

The Birthday Party was Pinter's second full length play. Written in 1957, the play abounds in the elements of suspense, horror and menace. It chronicles how the life of Stephen Weber at a desolate boarding house is suddenly thrown into disarray by the unexpected arrival of two enigmatic and threatening goons named Goldberg and McCann who frighten him and eventually kidnap him. The protagonist's name is Stanley and he happens to be the only guest at a guesthouse named Peg and Petey when he is told that two new people are coming to stay, soon after a young lady named Lulu arrives with a parcel for him.

When the two mysterious men turn up with sinister motives, they claim they have a job at hand. It happens to be Stanley's birthday, so one of them suggests that they throw a birthday bash to honour Stanley which is of course not their motive. Finding opportunity, they push Stanley to a lonely place and start throwing at him uncomfortable and absurd questions; many of them are meaningless to Stanley. Their method of questioning is so crude and aggressive that Stanley loses his nerves, they ask about a mysterious organisation which he has no idea about. Pinter uses drumming and hysterical laughter to intensify the situation.

Much to the bewilderment of Stanley, they start playing a game of blind man's bluff when suddenly the lights go out, adding to the eerie and tense atmosphere. Meanwhile, Lulu faints, and it seems as if Stanley may have been readying himself to assault her.

The men continue with their inexplicable, mysterious behaviour the following morning. They take away Stanley with him under the pretext that he has suffered a nervous breakdown, and

the play ends. Petey makes a futile attempt to stop the two goons, but of no avail. They threaten him too and bring him to submission.

Irving Wardle famously described the play as ‘a comedy of menace’, while Pinter’s biographer, Michael Billington, calls the play ‘a cry of protest’. Pinter’s comic vision of paranoia and isolation is reinforced by his use of dialogue, including frequent pauses, disjointed conversations, and non sequiturs.

The Caretaker was the first of Pinter’s plays to bring him artistic and commercial success as well as national recognition. Opening on April 27, 1960, at the Arts Theatre in London, The Caretaker was an immediate hit with audiences as well as critics, receiving mostly favourable reviews. In addition, The Caretaker received the Evening Standard Award for best play of 1960. In the many years since its first production, the play has continued to be the recipient of critical praise. It has been adapted for television as well as film and has seen numerous revivals all over the world, including at least one production with an all-female cast.

The real-world origins of the play lie in Pinter’s acquaintance with two brothers who lived together, one of whom brought an old tramp to the house for a brief stay. At the time, Pinter himself had very little money and so identified somewhat with the tramp, with whom he occasionally spoke. Artistically, The Caretaker is clearly influenced in both style and subject matter by Samuel Beckett’s 1955 classic *Waiting for Godot*, in which two tramps wait endlessly for someone they know only as Godot to come and give meaning and purpose to their lives.

Through the story of the two brothers and the tramp, The Caretaker deals with the distance between reality and fantasy, family relationships, and the struggle for power. It also touches on the subjects of mental illness and the plight of the indigent. Pinter uses elements of both comedy and tragedy to create a play that elicits complex reactions in the audience. The complexity of the play, Pinter’s masterful use of dialogue, and the depth and perception shown in Pinter’s themes all contribute to its consideration as a modern masterpiece. The play deals with the themes of isolation, materialism, class structure, racism, absurdity and identity.

If Beckett is a torchbearer in the post-modern era, then Eugene Ionesco is the one who gave the hints of this change. Before Beckett began his career as a post-modern writer, the literary world had already witnessed the traces of stark realism in the plays of Ionesco. This

Romanian-French author, one of the prominent figures of the Absurd Theatre refuted the concept of ideological as well as social realism in there. Ionesco didn't trust an institution like society and social realism like Beckett. According to him a successful society happens to be a positive accumulation of human sensibilities and modern society lacks it the most.

The play by Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*, cannot go ignored. It is one of the best absurdist plays with an equally serious message. A city where everyone is mysteriously turning into rhinoceros except one who doesn't follow the social code of conduct. All the social, well-mannered, punctual people have reasons that kill the human being inside them and they turn into dreadful beasts. More, they advocate the rights of such beasts with a logic that is the dark reality of this world, "Humanism is dead, those who follow it are just old sentimentalists".

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