

## Existentialism in the Plays of Harold Pinter and John Osborne

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### Abstract

Post-World War II marked the era of prevalence of insignificance and irrationality among humans. Among different cultural activists, John Osborne and Harold Pinter are identified as the dramatists who in order to understand the human psychology depict the implementation of existentialism in their dramas by discriminating appearance with reality. This study aims at assessing Existentialism in John Osborne and Harold Pinter plays. Osborne by some of his famous plays like “*Look Back in Anger*”, “*The Entertainer*”, “*Luther*” and “*Inadmissible Evidence*” stated the due to social and political situations human does experience feeling of frustration, anger, alienation, and isolation but still through time and experience transformations in human being attitude is possible. On the other hand, Pinter with his plays “*The Room*”, “*The Dumb Waiter*”, “*The Birthday Party*” and “*The Caretaker*” mentions due to social aspects humans experience insecurity, lack of communication, unknowingness fear, and insecurity which worsens anxiety, conflicts and self-knowledge of an individual, is making them a threat for the society.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, Osborne, Pinter, World War II

### Introduction

In 1940s, Existentialism term was firstly used as a label in the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and some other Parisian writers with focus on human existence nature (Webber). Existentialism is defined as “the movement in literature and philosophy with emphasis on freedom, choice, and individual existence”. Marking its beginning in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and reaching peak in 20<sup>th</sup> century, the concept is regarded as the means of defining own meaning in human life and an attempt of making rational decisions despite existence of irrational universe (Mastin).

With the distress accompanied by World War II, there was irrationality and insignificance sense prevalence of human existence. This instability began to be portrayed in dramas and in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century theatre movement i.e. Theatre of Absurd, is started as a reaction to constraints set about highly structured reality accepted prior to world war II based human psychology breakdown. Inspired by idea of Existentialism, many dramatists like John Osborne or Harold Pinter responded individually to the second was war destructive phenomenon (Ghazi).

Former dramatist John James Osborne is the film producer, actor, and playwright born in 1924 in Fulham, England. With having firstly solely written play “*Look Back in Anger*”, the realistic three act play, in 1956, Osborne became the society critic who showcase attitude and lives of his generation. Success of *Look Back in Anger* was followed by another play i.e. “*The Entertainer*” written in 1957 which again is three act play presenting the human behavior associated with war. Focusing on the exploration of human behavior and existence, Osborne further with his play “*Luther*” in 1961 and “*Inadmissible Evidence*” in 1946 focused on the nature of protest in human by working on themes like frustration, anger, alienation, and isolation (Akhavizadegan; Glenton).

The dramatists Harold Pinter is English screenwriter, playwright, political activist, director, poet, and actor who was born in 1930 in London, England. Acting in school plays, Pinter began his theatrical career in 1951 wherein he acted in repertory companies. By 1957, Pinter has written his first play “*The Room*” followed by “*The Dumb Waiter*” in 1957, “*The Birthday Party*” in 1958 and “*The Caretaker*” in 1960 which focused on political insight. Having focus on the strong conflicts among ambivalent character, the writing focused on political plays for highlighting political interest of dramatist and changes in his own personal life (Glenton; Hemingway and Williams).

Osborne and Pinter explore the existentialism aspect by having the presentation of human behavior with respect to the political conflicts like war by having focus on defining the human psychology. With the discrimination of the appearance with reality, the plays explored the freedom of choice available to human beings. As Osborne and Pinter have important contributions in highlighting existentialism phenomenon and both focus on the conflict-based emotions of human, thus, this study focus work on having the examination of the aspect with reference to the plays of these dramatists.

### Discussion

The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche developed Existentialism in recognizable form by considering its role in free choice. For instance, Kierkegaard in his 1843 work “*Fear and Trembling*” stated the knight of faith and Nietzsche in his 1885 work “*Thus spake Zarathustra*” and 1887 work “*Beyond Good and Evil*” mentioned about attainment of transcendence and superiority without other worldliness resorting. Since, 1970s cultural activity in cinema, literature, and art contain existentialist element with books like “*Do Androids dream of Electric Sheep?*” by Philip K.

Dick and *"Fight Club"* by Chuck Palahniuk (Mambrol, *Existentialist Movement in Literature*; Siuli; Malpas). Among these different cultural activists, dramatist John Osborne or Harold Pinter became popular to represent the human behavior and state the change in behavior or responses on human with respect to the post war scenario (Ghazi). Thus, below sub-section would focus on having the examination of existentialism in John Osborne's and Harold Pinter plays.

### Existentialism in John Osborne's Plays

John Osborne was a litterateur of 20<sup>th</sup> century known for presence of existentialist theory in his work. Having the distinctiveness in literary creations, work of Osborne rebel against established political and social stance of society with majority of works projecting the middle-class values in Britishers (Dhanyashree). Developing a completely different style in his first literary work *"Look Back in Anger"*, Osborne instead of using the numerous experimental evasions which was majorly prevalent in modern stage, presented the old realism jug filled with strong heady brew (Vos). This socially critical theatre focused on discussion of young generation disillusionment with establishments. Protagonist of this three-act play, Jimmy Porter, is seen as Osborne's face (Ghazi).

Introductory stage directions presented Jimmy as mixture of sensitive and insensitive traits i.e. cheerful malice, tenderness, sincerity, restless, full of pride, freebooting cruelty, and importance (Mambrol, "Analysis of John Osborne's Plays"). But one trait that is explored through the play is his vitriolic anger which is due to absence of real values and importance due to perceiving alienation, inability to communicate, and isolation. This wrath emerges as lack of commitment and social protest (Gilliard). For instance, Jimmy stated in (p.1075),

*"Nobody thinks, nobody cares, no beliefs, no convictions, and no enthusiasm"*

And in (p.1100) as

*"The injustice of it is almost perfect: the wrong people going hungry, the wrong people being loved, and the wrong people dying!"*

Osborne herein connecting this rebellious anger of protagonist arising from society deficiencies with Angry young men movement, provoke audience to understand the prevailing social alienation sense, growing class tensions, fear of rejection, victimization, or identity crisis among rising lower middle class (Ghazi; John *et al.*)

In *"The Entertainer"*, Osborne characterize main protagonist, Archie Rice, as fiftyish, greying, self-indulgent, paradoxically stoic, professorial, raffish, well educated, and patronizing. Focusing on the modern human perspective, Osborne present Archie as someone who wonder why bother to care. Archie, the entertainer, who is isolated and empty on inside but present himself with smile to communicate with audience. However, due to mutual emptiness i.e. among entertainer and audience, Archie fail to achieve response and conclude *"it doesn't matter"* (Mambrol, "Analysis of John Osborne's Plays"; Gilliard). For instance, once Archie said *"I wish to God I could feel like that."*

The appearance, speech, and mannerism of Archie the entertainer and Archie the family man is similar. Representing split structure, Osborne vison presents relationship between man's modern life and lack of identity and inability to feel present in real life.

In another play, *"Luther"*, Osborne present his protagonist ordinary man of blood and flesh with humanistic traits like desire, fear, guilt, doubt, and hope. Play highlight an ordinary

man Luther who lost faith in God gradually with Protestant Reformation strong influence (Dhanyashree) by stating that *"I listed for God's voice, but all I could hear was my own"* (Moazzam; Dhanyashree)

Slowly with self-realization about power in his community which has provided Luther elevated status, there is regaining of faith in God leading to surrendering of self to almighty i.e.

*"For there is no power but of God, the power that be are ordained of God. Whoever therefore resisteth that power, resisteth the ordinance of God"* (Moazzam; Dhanyashree)

Highlighting the conflict between materialistic outer world and spiritual inner world, Osborne mention about the behavior of individual to deny and regain faith with self-realization.

In his play *"Inadmissible Evidence"*, Osborne presented the perspective that one could suffer damage from own attempts of insulating oneself from guilt past, other people, or hostile world. The protagonist Bill Maitland is deculturized, computerized, and dehumanized and even have personal inability or inadequacy to maintain relationship (Mambrol, "Analysis of John Osborne's Plays"; Moazzam) i.e.

*"I seem to have lost drift and I wish I could see more clearly"* (Gilliard)

Bill consider that the world has discarded him, but reality is he himself has created an instrument of isolation (Akhavizadegan). But by the time he has realized, he no longer could find escape in his work or due to insincerity he has shown, could not clear the messes or mistakes he has made. Osborne herein present the image of human repenting his sins and the need of relationships and love in an individual's life (Gilliard; Mambrol, "Analysis of John Osborne's Plays").

### Existentialism in Harold Pinter's Plays

Harold Pinter belonging to post-war era, is the 20<sup>th</sup> century dramatists witnessing emergence of avant grade theatre in Europe and Britain. Having the focus on the social background, the literary work of Pinter are on the feeling of insecurity, conflict, uncertainty about own identity, and expression of doubt (Gashti). In his first play, *"The Room"*, Pinter shows man's situation absurdity by mingling symbolism with reality. As room is recognized as a place wherein an individual feel safe but due to presence of existential anxieties, protagonist Rose feels alienated from herself and outer world (Wolf; Azizmohammadi). With feeling of comfort and security in known place, Rose state her room as

*"If they ever ask you, Bert, I'm quite happy where I am, we're quite happy; we're all right. You're happy up here"* (Azizmohammadi)

But as an individual encounter other, the imposition of restraints by others bring in anxieties, struggle, perplexity, helplessness, and undermine individual existence moment to moment (Aliakbari and Purgiv; Azizmohammadi). Representing the total ignorance to reality and outside work, Rose highlighted

*"I've never seen who it is. Who lives down there"* (Azizmohammadi)

The insistence of insecurity, nothingness and feeling of guilt control human anxieties. Human is filled with these emotions and the burden of guilt. Though he tries to shape being but with no power or overburdening of guilt and anxiety, hamper your presence of mind and relationship even leading one to submit to what is condemned.

*"The Dumb Waiter"*, like other play of Pinter focused on man-to-man connection. Most human interaction in daily life are

not meaningful but instead just based on the perspective of passing time. Having the mix of dreams with reality, the play presents a two character mainly Gus and Ben wherein Gus ask many questions, attempt to step beyond limitations, and inquire for knowledge. Despite being the one who committed crime, Gus is shown as the one question a lot on possibility of event, its cause, or the motivation of such crime by asking (Roumani; Aliakbari and Purgiv)

“Who advised him to do a thing like that?” (Aliakbari and Purgiv)

The desire of knowledge in human cause catastrophe as the fear of unknown have become real disasters in existing world. With the presence of unknown, omniscient, or powerful threat presence; response of an individual changes to conflict, fear, and anxiety thus leading to worsening the situation. Thus, existential absurdity dominates modern human life.

Pinter’s play “*The Birthday Party*” is a tragedy based on insecurity which focuses on life of Stanley Webber who is young sophisticated and silent modern man with his isolated and unique environment. Suspecting threat of unknown, Stanley has presence of insecurity and fear which nurse’s anxiety thoughts in him due to his failure in marking as pianist and running away from outside world (Mandre; Azizmohammadi and Kohzadi). For instance, this anxiety is could be witnessed when he said

“Look, why don’t you het this place cleared up; it’s a pigsty. And another thing, what about my room? It needs sweeping. It needs pampering. I need a new room!” (Azizmohammadi)

Pinter herein present the disillusionment, personal breakdown, and linguistics terror wherein the incoming of unknown people in the world of Stanley created sense of loss and insecurity. With the loss of individuality and identity, like a free soul an individual due to psychological state become threat to society. Thus, external menace could lead to individual destruction (Olaniyan; Cavus).

“The Caretaker” present the domination struggle as central theme. Highlighting the issues or misunderstanding created among humans due to lack of communication, Pinter uses domestic setting for relieving power of language on human psyche. Working on the psychological condition created by virtue, loyalty, dishonesty, and authority; this three-character play i.e. Davies, Mick, and Aston. Sense of guilt dominates the play by showing search of Davies and his non-satisfaction and rebellious nature even after possession of things (Aliakbari and Purgiv; Cavus).

“It’s not my job to take out the bucket. They have got a boy for taking out the bucket. I was not engaged to take out buckets” (Azizmohammadi)

With the presence of evil in Mick and Davies as rhetoric of victimization and Aston and Mick in secret terror bond, the play mentions about no ending to evil. Thus, Pinter points out human relationships are limited to situations and haunted by past which tend to make the human in existing world as obsessive with desire to be listened but do not want to listen or communicate (Ghazi).

## Conclusion

John Osborne and Harold Pinter both dramatists focus on exploring the existentialism aspect in their plays. Working of these dramatists though is based on human reality by discriminating the behavior with illusions but still aspects of focus vary i.e. Osborne targets the political and social stance of society for highlighting the prevalence of anger among young while Pinter is more social aspect focused by having examination of feeling of insecurity, uncertainty, and doubt.

Osborne being famous for this theory implication state that though things seem to be easy but with anger and issues of isolation, human hamper their relationships. Plays of Osborne highlights the existentialism by depicting presence of possible transformations in human beings through time and experience but with a note that there is presence of lack of self-identity, and inability to feel. Pinter on the other hand also explored human existence but with the focus on the issues of insecurity, lack of communication, and conflicts presence among individuals. Though with time humans tries to overcome these issues but the presence of unknowingness fear and insecurity worsens anxiety and self-knowledge making him threat for himself, others, and society. Hence, despite having different mechanism of working, Osborne and Pinter mention that human in reality is afraid of unknowingness, lack of self-identity, insecurity, or uncertainty which influences the behavior, attitude, and relationships of an individual.

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