

Projection of the Fear of Old Age in *No Man's Land* by Harold Pinter

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Abstract:

Unlike Kafka and Beckett, Pinter, essentially, remains on the firm ground of everyday reality. Even though in some of his earlier plays, symbolic or even supernatural elements are later introduced into the acting, yet in these plays the starting point always a very real situation with the most closely observed real, even hyper-naturalistic dialogue, so that the fantasy element when it does make an appearance is clearly identifiable as the outward projection, the concretization of these very real characters' dreams and anxieties. 'No Man's Land' is such a play by Pinter where the fear of old age is beautifully presented by a man, Hirst. Throughout a man's life, there remains at least the possibility of choice as long as some of youth's flexibility is available. But, there comes a point, with the coming of old age, when that possibility disappears. Then life breezes into the endless winter of the 'No Man's Land', between life and death.

Key words: Harold Pinter, Fear, Violence, Old Age, Life, Death

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“*No Man's Land*”, projects and explores the fear of old age presented by Hirst, a man in his sixties. His situation is that of an old successful writer whose marriage has failed, or who has never been married and who is condemned to a lonely old age, the prisoner of his domestic servants, with liquor as his only comfort. Spooner, another man in his sixties, also has grown old, his marriage too has failed or having never taken place; but he is unsuccessful and poor. Spooner is a free man longing for the bondage of a home, while Hirst is the prisoner of his domestic situation, trying to break out into freedom but unable to master the courage to break his bonds. Throughout a man's life, there remains at least the possibility of choice as long as some of youth's flexibility is available. But, there comes a point, with the coming of old age, when that possibility disappears. Then life breezes into the endless winter of the ‘No Man's Land’, between life and death.

This play, which is in two acts, is set in a room in the comfortable London home of Hirst. Hirst has invited another elderly man Spooner to come in and have a drink. Spooner is evidently in impoverished circumstances, though he talks boastfully about his past and is at the same time extremely inquisitive about Hirst's circumstances. Hirst is already drunk, but he is continuing to drink.

Spooner's words in the very Act I again make us conscious about the importance of a room, which may bring fear and violence to us:

“What a remarkably pleasant room. I feel at peace here. Safe from all danger. But please don’t be alarmed. I shan’t stay long. I never stay long with others. They do not wish it. And that, for me, is a happy of affairs. My only security, you see, my true comfort and solace, rests in the confirmation that I elicit from people of all kinds a common and constant level of indifference. It assures me that I am as I think myself to be, that I am fixed, concrete. To show interest in me or good, gracious, anything tending towards a positive liking of me would cause in me a condition of the acutest alarm. Fortunately, the danger is remote.”

(No Man’s Land, Act I, pg. 2)

Spooner who claims to be a poet, talks a good deal about his inner strength, which, he says, is derived from his detachment from human emotion. For instance, he says:

“I’ve never been loved. From this I derive strength.”

He also claims to be a free man because of his detachment from human emotions. To this Hirst replies: “It’s a long time since we had a free man in this house.”

From this remark, it appears that Hirst considers himself not a free man and that there are others in this house. Spooner now boasts of having kept open house for them in a country cottage where he lived in great happiness with a gracious wife. Hirst thereupon says that he too used to offer his generosity to visitors on the lawn at his cottage:

“Spooner: When we had our cottage....When we had our cottage...We gave our visitors tea on the lawn.

Hirst: I did the same.

Spooner: On the lawn?

Hirst: I did the same.

Spooner: You had a cottage?

Hirst: Tea on the lawn.

Spooner: What happened to them? What happened to our cottage? What happened to our lawns?”

(No Man's Land, Act I, pg. 7)

Thus for both men a country cottage with tea on the lawn is an image of a lost golden past, an age of innocence now gone. These words bring a fearful image of the present.

Like many of Pinter's earlier plays, here, we experience the terror aroused by the appearance of a new and mysterious character. The arrival of this character evokes fear in our mind.

The character is a young man in his thirties. His name is Foster. Foster is soon joined by Briggs who is older than Foster. Briggs recognizes Spooner as the man who collects the beer-mugs from the tables in a pub. There is a situation which evokes fear in the minds of the audience. Through dialogue only, the playwright creates a very effective violence:

“Something is depressing me. What is it? It was the dream, yes, waterfall. No, no, a lake...water. Drowning. Not me. Someone one else...am I asleep? There's no water. No one is drowning...Boris; he's been there for years, blinding shadows then a fall of water.

Spooner: It was I drowning in your dream.

Hirst falls to the floor. They all go to him.”

(No Man's Land, Act I, pg. 12)

When Hirst regains consciousness, Briggs harshly leads him out of the room. Foster also leaves, turning out the light, so that Spooner alone remains behind in total darkness.

Act II opens on the next morning. Spooner is locked in the room and the whole situation with the blending of strange dialogues evokes fear. The playwright starts this in this way:

“Spooner is alone in the room. The curtains are still closed, but shafts of light enter the room.

He is sitting.

He stands, goes slowly to door, tries handle, with fatigue and withdraws.

Spooner: I have known this before. Morning...A locked door.

A house of silence and strangers.”

(No Man’s Land, Act I, pg. 17)

Hirst, it appears, had developed a love-affair with Spooner’s wife, Emily. Spooner retorts by revealing a number of occasions on which he had deceived Hirst. When Spooner questions Hirst’s literary abilities, Hirst feels greatly annoyed. And as he begins to pour whisky down his throat, Hirst again begins to speak about the faces in his album of photographs. Briggs harshly interrupts Hirst’s reminiscences and it becomes clear that Hirst is a prisoner in his own house. Foster appears and orders Hirst to go on his morning walk. Hirst feebly refuses. Spooner her sees an opening for himself. He offers to help Hirst with his literary work.

At this point, Briggs and Foster finally impose their will on Hirst. In a strange poetic passage, it is said that it is now winter and that this winter will last forever. Hirst is, as it were, entombed in the no man’s land between life and death. Once more Hirst recalls the dream about someone who was drowned. And Spooner, who has been silent throughout the whole ritual passage, agrees, saying:

“You’re in no man’s land, which never moves, which never changes, which never grows older, but which remains forever, icy and silent.”

Hirst says: ‘I’ll drink to that.’ He drinks and the play comes to an end.

Superficially, this play gives reverberations of some of Pinter’s basic situations. Like Davies, at the end of ‘*The Caretaker*’, Spooner’s hopes of gaining a foot-hold in a new house are defeated.

As in 'Old Times', a dues of wits is conducted in terms of one spurious reminiscence topping another. Briggs and Foster are a couple of brutal gangsters.

The fear in 'No Man's Land' is coming from some social problems, a social situation, that of a successful and rich aging literary figure who lives with his servants, being dependent on them and gradually becomes their slave. This situation is aggravated by the suggestion that the master is a homosexual dependent on his servants not only for domestic services but also for erotic services.

Hirst, Briggs and Foster have become, as they clearly state, a family. Inside that family there may be tension, even hatred and cruelty but it is a family still, a family on a team. Hirst, Foster and Briggs have to defend themselves against a powerful and subtle intruder, namely Spooner.

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