

Past and the present reality in Harold Pinter's play "Ashes to ashes"

Abstract: The past is the period, which in most cases leads to our present and future. Harold Pinter is the British dramatist who really shows us what a big role the past events have in some peoples' life. The given paper reflects the idea that in his play, "Ashes to ashes", Pinter represents past like present. There are discussed some parts from the play that show us how the characters are confused while reminding the past events, depending on that events, they even can't perceive the reality in which they live. Based on the play there is analyzed the simplicity of Pinter's writing manner, even not mentioned the world "war", with the very detailed moments he clearly brings the reader/viewer to the world's most important event World War II, and at the same time we can realize, that the play is not only about the characters past, but it takes us to the collective memory.

Key words: Past, reality, World War II, Harold Pinter, collective memory.

In his work, "Myth of the eternal return", Mircea Eliade writes, that the desire and willingness of the primitive man is to be released from the memories of the sins committed in the past, and to be free from the "personal" episodes of life, and these episodes make the integrity which creates the history. (Eliade 2017:105) That is what Pinter's characters are trying to do.

Despite the fact that Pinter does not give any previous information about the past of the characters we can say that reader/viewer travels in their past life. So partially, it depends on the reader and the viewer how we think of this character. There are two characters in the play, "Ashes to ashes", Devlin and Rebecca. Devlin tries to help Rebecca in reminding the past. He asks questions and periodically analyzes Rebecca's answers to reach a certain point, the main story. Rebecca tells about her lover, and the only phrase that is constant in the play is connected to the lover.

"Well for example he would stand over me and clench his fist. And then he'd put his other hand on my neck and grip it and bring my head towards him. His fist... grazed my mouth. And he'd say, "Kiss my fist" (Pinter 1996:9).

This is the phrase repeating very often by Rebecca. And she always starts telling about her lover with this phrase. The reader/viewer is a little bit confused, because Rebecca is not able to get to the end of the story. She occasionally forgets where she was and then starts again. At the same time Devlin continues to ask the same question about her lover's personality and asks her to describe him with more accuracy.

Mircea Eliade, also writes that, sometimes people do it specially, trying to forget the past, as well as in the case of Rebecca. The man refuses to give any value to the "memory" and, consequently, the unreasonable events that are actually going on in a particular time. The idea of all this is in the desire to impair the time. If you do not pay attention to it, it will not exist (Eliade 2017:117). Therefore we can think that Rebecca's constant attempt to remind again is the result of intended attempt to forget. However we guess that is impossible to forget your past life episodes.

In the play it often happens that the perception of reality is very hard, since the past was so intense that the feeling of reality has been reduced. And now, in the present, thinking about the past events prevents perception of the reality in which the characters are. One of the researchers of Pinter, Steven Gale thinks that retrospect of time in the play "Ashes to ashes" could be perceive as T.S. Eliot's manner.

"Pinter's drama deals with the subjects of memory, the past, the relationship between the two and their reality as they create the present or are created in retrospect by the present – in manner of T.S. Eliot". (Gale 2009:96).

In four quartets *Burnt Norton's* episodes starts with the words:

"Time present and time past,
Are both perhaps present in time future,

And time future contained in time past". (Eliot 1943:13)

So is Rebecca's character she returns to the same point in the past, and it's hard for her to escape from it. It is really interesting fact that reader/viewer could not fully perceive Rebecca's and Devlin's characters. During the play, we have lots of questions about Rebecca's beloved, Devlin, and Rebecca herself. There are several versions of all these. Should be noted the very first episode in the play, where Devlin asks to Rebecca:

"Do you feel you're being hypnotized?" (Pinter 1996:10)

Rebecca asks, "who? When? Now?" and Devlin responds that he has hypnotized her, but Rebecca does not believe. This fact makes us think, that Devlin could be a psychologist who tries to help Rebecca in reminding past. At the same time Rebecca is a person who can not perceive the reality like it is, because she is hypnotized. Here we can discuss Devlin's another version. There is a moment when he addresses Rebecca with the word "darling".

"Devlin: My darling.

Rebecca: How odd to be called darling. No one has ever called me darling apart from my lover." (Pinter 1996:11)

Based on the final episode too, where Devlin treats Rebecca just the same way as her lover, we can say that another version of his character could be the idea, that he is Rebecca's lover. In some cases both characters Devlin and Rebecca are so unstable, that the reader/viewer couldn't really perceive their personalities.

It is important to note, that during the play, Pinter gives us some details that are understandable only in the final part of the play. For example there is a moment when Devlin says the word "baby" and Rebecca seems to be a little bit nervous because of it. Later we reach the episode, where she tells the story how a man took her baby, wrapped in her shawl, from her arms, and despite this fact she got on the train. We need to note also an episode where Rebecca reminds about her lover that he took her in a factory.

"Rebecca: Oh, it was a kind of factory, I suppose.

Devlin: What do you mean a kind of factory? Was it a factory or wasn't it? And if it was a factory what kind of factory was it?

Rebecca: Well they were making things – just like any other factory. But it wasn't the usual kind of factory". (Pinter 1996:12)

These details connected to the factory are too important to understand some essential issues in the play. Rebecca also, tells about how the workers in the factory where dressed the same way, and how surprised she was when she saw their attitude towards her lover.

"Rebecca: They had total faith in him. They respected his... purity, his... conviction. They would follow him over a cliff and into the sea. If he asked them, he said. And sing in a chorus as long as he led them. They were in fact very musical, he said". (Pinter 1996:12)

Later she says that her lover was walking on the train station and took away babies from mothers' hands. These episodes from Rebecca's past are number of details that are periodically characterized in our minds before the ending part of the play and reader/viewer cannot connect them to each other before it won't get to the essential point of the past.

With his writing manner Pinter gives us opportunity to see the play from the different point of view. One the most important theme which I think is interesting to be discussed in connection to the play is the World War II. In his work "Pinter and the critic", Professor Yael Zarhy-Levo mentions that Pinter represents us the face of "Nazi" with Rebecca's description of her lover. Also, he thinks that it is more connected to the collective memory rather than to one woman's private past.

"Pinter deploys the references to the conduct of the Nazis. These references are presented as fragmented images constituting Rebecca's memories associated with her former lover. Collective memory associated with a vast public domain is thus crossed with an individual woman's personal memories. (Levo 2009:258)

It is really important idea because the collective memory could be the way that will make hard for us to perceive the present reality like it is. And this difficulty in perceiving the reality could be caused from the past events that were too important, like the World War II. Pinter points out these details during the whole play with the words like: factory, sound of the siren, ash, freeze, gay coats and etc.

Connected to the “collective memory”, I think we should mention the author of this phrase, Maurice Halbwachs. He thinks that the main part in developing the memory is mostly connected to the social surroundings in which we live, like the family, friends, school and etc. He says that a man is never alone, but he always is in some kind of surroundings. (Halbwachs 1992:53) All these are somehow connected to the world, which Rebecca tries to explain, that is “elephantiasis”.

“Rebecca: When you spill an ounce of gravy, for example, it immediately expands and becomes a vast sea of gravy... It’s terrible. But it’s all your own fault. You brought it upon yourself. You are not the victim of it, you are the cause of it. Because it was you who split the gravy in the first place, it was you who handed over the bundle.” (Pinter 1996:17)

With this episode we can say that Pinter brings us to the idea that some events are much bigger than we can imagine. Like the World War II, it was some kind “elephantiasis” for human being. It was not only for some people but it made the humans to sacrifice their own personalities. We can easily find out the words that take us to this direction, to the World War II. The name Rebecca itself, is the Jewish name, and she is a woman from the town Dorset. It is known that in 1943 six days before Christmas, one of Dorset’s village was completely evicted to launched military operations.

There is a moment when Rebecca and Devlin are talking about God, and Rebecca says that she feels that god could not feel the ground under its feet. This phrase should be close to the idea, that after World War II, the things that were too valuable for our being are not so important as they were previously, they have lost their meanings.

Depending on all these issues we have discussed, it is clear, that Pinter is an author who can take the reader/viewer to some different ideas. According to some researchers the play “ashes to ashes” is perceived to be written about the gender equality. Based on the essential phrase, connected to the treatment of Rebecca’s lover, another researchers think, that it is about the woman, who is a victim of sexual abuse. But, like some other people, I think that this play has rather deep issues to discuss than the themes I’ve already mentioned. So, in my opinion, Pinter is an author who is interesting not only for the literature, bit also, for the theatre too.

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