

Nihilism and Event in Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*

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Abstract— In Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*, Lenny and Ruth are represented as two characters who seek the utter destruction of all moral and social values. By drawing on Nietzsche's concept of nihilism this paper claims that Ruth and Lenny are being totally nihilistic as they are seeking the devaluation of any tradition or system of values that is created within and beyond the spaces they inhabit. This paper explores what constitutes the concept of 'event' by drawing on Alain Badiou and Gilles Deleuze's conceptualization of event to claim that the way Pinter creates event in the play is what gives it its nihilistic aspect. According to Deleuze in *The Logic of Sense*: "The event is always that which has just happened and that which is about to happen, but never that which is happening" (2). However, in *The Homecoming* the event is what is happening, and what had happened with complete disregard to what will happen, thus, the lack of reference to the future makes this play nihilistic. As the characters are constantly trying to destroy present they also become oblivious to future.

Index Terms—ABSURD THEATER, NIHILISM, EVENT, EXISTENCE

I. INTRODUCTION

Reading plays associated with absurd theater from a nihilistic or existential perspective is not new. Indeed, historically, scholars associate this trend in theater most with nihilism; however, studied in context and separately, each author portrays and conveys nihilism differently. Furthermore, absurd theater is most associated with the concept of 'nothingness.' What is this 'nothingness' in Theater of the Absurd? How is it related to nihilism? How and why a character can be labeled as nihilistic? This paper answers these questions in the context of Harold Pinter's famous play *The Homecoming*. This play has been most studied as a context to explore the political dimension of individual power struggles. It is famous for its radical representation of sex and women. However, this essay claims that all characters in the in *The Homecoming* are completely nihilistic. This argument is proven through a close reading of Ruth and Lenny's behavior especially_ and occasional references to all other characters' behavior. By drawing on Nietzsche's nihilism and Alain Badiou's notion of event, this paper claims in this play Pinter creates 'nothingness' by making the characters utterly nihilistic and achieves this

through creating event as something that does not leap into the future. This is in sharp contrast with what Deleuze and Badiou think to be the constitution of 'event' with a liminal spatiality that straddles past, future and never the present.

The Homecoming is set in a rundown house South of London in the early sixties of 20th century British society. The patriarch of the family, Max, suffers from physical ailment due to his old age and early profession as a butcher. He shares the house with Sam, his younger and mentally disabled brother, Lenny, Max's second son, and his youngest son Joe. The entire play is set in the living room and the kitchen with occasional references to second floor of the house that is not visible to the audience. Teddy, Max's oldest son, who lives in the USA returns for a visit with his wife Ruth. Once they arrives, a plethora of events starts to unfold; however, these events take place within the compelling sense of absurdity the characters feel. Throughout the play, Lenny works as a pimp, Joey as constructor, and Sam as a driver— they all seem to be struggling financially. In the past, Max's late wife, Jessy, had an *extra-* marital relationship with Max's best friend. Max is not quite sure if his sons are his. As it is narrated by Lenny, it seems like Max was a violent dad to his kids and he was absent from the house most of the time.

During the play, all characters become quite destructive in relation to themselves and the ones around them. Each tries to exert power over one another only in the hope of destroying any established connection between them. The characters always treat each other with deride and are condescending to one another. Whenever there seems to be a space for reconciliation, an abrupt violent behavior thrashes it into chaos whether verbal or non- verbal. In *The Homecoming* there is no place for moderation. The audience are always shocked by destructive nature of the characters' behavior. The play offers a blatant disrespect to social, religious and political values that are historically expected to uphold individuals. From the beginning until the end, the play oscillates from one conversation (regarded as events in this paper) to another among these family members without bearing conspicuous results that could potentially create inherent changes in their lives. Thus the plot stays flat with little to no place for change.

In *The Homecoming*, all the characters are in an absurd and meaningless relationship with one another. They are family related but are always fighting, and they constantly disrespecting one another. They seem to see their existence as

an absurd concurrence of time and space. The play starts with a conversation between Max and Lenny. The conversation soon flares up to a fight that is filled with obscenity and curse:

“MAX: What have you done with the scissors?

Pause.

I said I'm looking for the scissors. What have you done with them?

Pause.

Did you hear me? I want to cut something out of the paper.

LENNY: I'm reading the paper.

MAX: Not that paper. I haven't even read that paper.

I'm talking about last Sunday's paper. I was just having a look at it in the kitchen.

Pause.

Do you hear what I'm saying? I'm talking to you! Where's the scissors?

LENNY (looking up, quietly): Why don't you shut up, you daft prat?

MAX lifts his stick and points it at him.

MAX: Don't you talk to me like that. I'm warning you.” (1)

Thus the play is filled with conversations of such nature, and such conversations sometimes elevate to acts of physical violence but neither the verbal confrontations nor the fights force any of them to change any aspect of their life or take any action to avoid such situations.

As the play progresses further, Teddy and Ruth come back for a visit from America. Soon after their arrival, Lenny and Ruth develop a sexual affair that all the family members start to be aware of – however indifferent to it. The reason for this is the character's disregard to their existence as being devoid of meaning- therefore, whether Ruth is cheating on her husband or not does not matter because relationships are inherently meaningless and absurd. According to Heidegger in *Being and Time*, we as individuals are thrown in to this world without inherently being equipped to deal with it, and instead we humans create our own specific identity through a process he refers to as individuation. (63) In a paper entitled *Individuation, Responsiveness, Translation: Heidegger's Ethics*, ES Nelson reflects on Heidegger's *Being and Time* and claims that the question of individuation is concerned with 'who' one is instead of 'what' one is. Therefore, for individuation to take place, which is for Heidegger a process through which we become distinct individuals in relation to others, there must a lot of questions regarding who are we instead of what are we(3). Thus the question is strictly related to the notion of self. Furthermore, according to Heidegger time is instrumental in our understanding of being as he claims in *Being and Time*: “Our provisional aim is the Interpretation of time as the possible horizon for any understanding whatsoever of Being” (22). Heidegger strictly connects his understanding of the concept of being to the notion of time and therefore being is only understood in relation to time. In *The Homecoming*, the characters lack individuation and let themselves to be as what they are not who they are. They lack any desire to look for self. In other words, they are reluctant to look for themselves and how they are being in the world as if they can never have an

answer for what their being could mean. Moreover, it is the way the characters perceive their own past, present and future that makes their existence absurd and purposeless. “Rabey in his book *English Drama Since 1940* describes Pinter's plays as a place where “verbal gestures of ostensible accessibility become, in dramatic usage, ironic indications and reiterations of the persistent separateness of individual perspective and interests’ (Rabey 52). Thus, the characters in *The Homecoming* are overwhelmed by disinterestedness in their own affairs in relation to their being and existence.

II. NIHILISM AND *THE HOMECOMING*

The word nihilism originates from the Latin word ‘nihil’ which literally means nothing. The study of nihilism as a philosophical concept and literary theory is vital to our understanding of modernity and modern literature. In modern era, according to Nietzsche:

Nihilism stands at the door: whence comes this uncanniest of all guests? Point of departure: it is an error to consider “social distress” or “physiological degeneration” or, worse, corruption, as the cause of nihilism. Ours is the most decent and compassionate age. Distress, whether of the soul, body, or intellect, cannot of itself give birth to nihilism (i.e., the radical repudiation of value, meaning, and desirability). Such distress always permits a variety of interpretations. Rather: it is in one particular interpretation, the Christian-moral one, that nihilism is rooted. (42)

In *The Homecoming* all the characters are overwhelmed with a sense of distress and discouragement. They are presented as morally and socially corrupted individuals who do not abide by any religious or social values. In fact, the radical violent and uncontrolled scenes of anger outbursts make the audience question the absurdity and the impossibility of the familial relationship that keeps these characters together. For example, when Teddy visits back from the USA this is how he has been greeted by his brother whom he has not seen for the past six years:

TEDDY. Hullo, Lenny.

LENNY. Hullo, Teddy.

Pause.

TEDDY. I didn't hear you come down the stairs.

LENNY. I didn't.

Pause.

I sleep down here now. Next door. I've got a kind of study, workroom cum bedroom next door now, you see.

TEDDY. Oh. Did I ... wake you up?

LENNY. No. I just had an early night tonight. You know how it is. Can't sleep. Keep waking up.

As it can be seen the two brothers treat each other as if they are strangers who ends up running into each other randomly somewhere. This greeting in itself is indicative of the broken familial relation between these characters. Moreover, the absurd relationship among the characters make the audience wonder about the lack of action that can be taken by any of these

characters to change their current situation. According to Nietzsche, nihilism must first be achieved as psychological state, as he puts it when: we all have sought “meaning” in all events that is not there: so the seeker eventually become discouraged” (ibid). Similarly, in *The Homecoming* all the characters are discouraged in seeking meaning in their pursuit toward a meaningful life and this is reflected in their destructive behaviors. The fact that a family that is constituted of four adults, later becomes five after Ruth joins them, decide to share the same space and lead their miserable life as it is without any tendency to change it justifies this psychological state. Nietzsche’s famous claim that: “What does nihilism mean? That the highest values devalue themselves. The aim is lacking; “why?” finds no answer” (44). In the play, when Max decides to beat up his brother Sam, when Lenny develops a sexual affair with Ruth, his sister in law, when Teddy seems to be indifferent about his wife’s betrayal, when we are told about Lenny’s random acts of violence against women on the streets that do not bother him, all these acts devalue any system of values that is traditionally expected to be found in a family. However, with this destruction of values, there should be a plethora of possibilities that could replace what is being destroyed but that fails to happen in the context of *The Homecoming* because of the subtle pervasiveness of nihilism that we sense in their lack of action toward any future, or put more radically, they completely disregard future as having any possibility to exist_ and their preoccupation with the destruction of the present. Thus the world of possibilities become utterly irrational with Pinter’s characters in the play as current situation is devoid of all values. In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche is being pessimistic and his pessimism stems from his deep desire to dismantle all the moral and social values that were invented in Europe by religious and political institutions. It is his recognition of the inadequacy of those values in relation to the reality of human existence and its randomness that pushed Nietzsche to call for the destruction of all values. However, he does never mention that these values can be or not be replaced by other values because nihilism in nature rejects everything. My claim here is that, for the characters in this play those values are only meant to be destroyed without hope of replacement and this make them nihilistic. Interestingly enough though, the constant allusion to the past by the characters and as the source of their subjective power in relation to others attest to some extend the power of the values they are so early aiming at destroy.

Nihilism in *The Homecoming* is situated in my opinion. It is situated in the post war British society where mass killing and genocide of the World War II still had its own shadow. *The Homecoming* and its characters can be seen as a reflection of the pessimism the British society felt after the two destructive World Wars. Existence and that time in Nietzschean words were “freezing” and “agitated” and that events have lost their greatness. It is this lack of hope in the potential of any event that makes all the characters especially Ruth and Lenny destructive and nihilistic. Ruth is the mother of three kids however at the end of the play she decides to abandon them for Lenny simply because Ruth does not see any greatness in the act of being a mother.

Will Slocombe in *Postmodern Nihilism and Theory and Literature* writes: “the term nihilism ‘refers historically to a

perception of something that exists in opposition to particular ideologies, rather than being an ideology of the nihil (nothingness) as such.” (12) Drawing on this claim, nihilism is always a present potent ideology that has the power to negate any given truth thus instantly marking the other idea as ‘truth’ while negating it simultaneously. In *The Homecoming*, nihilism is the only truth that we have. For example, Lenny’s random acts of verbal and no verbal violence inside the house and on the street, as Lenny goes about these acts whether he narrates them or actually acting them on stage, he fails to feel any remorse about them instead only take pride in them regardless of how destructive they are. He sees his destructive acts as if they are inherent to his being and essence. When it comes to existence, the only essence that Lenny and other characters have reached is their destructiveness. Lenny is especially the embodiment of what Nietzsche claims of becoming as he sees his being as absurd or out of harmony and destruction as a part of his duty. Similarly, Ruth realizes how destructive her acts of infidelity is toward the social and religious values that upheld the society, yet she goes on with the decision of establishing an affair with Lenny careless of its destructiveness toward her family and children.

John Valentine in “*Nihilism and the Eschaton in Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot*” states that nihilism is absent from *Waiting for Godot* because the characters, Vladimir and Estragon are constantly bound to Godot and in the hope of meeting him, therefore, the nothingness that they feel in their waiting does not extend to the future. Furthermore he claims: “Given the tramps’ bleak assessment of their situation and their frequent despair, is it appropriate to describe them as nihilists? If by “nihilism” one means the doctrine or belief that life is utterly without significance of any kind, then the answer seems to be “no.”(132) Contrary to this, what takes place in *The Homecoming* is the characters’ utter disregard to the future; which in return deems them nihilistic. Throughout the play, not even once Ruth or Lenny bother to think how their destructive actions would affect the future of themselves and the people around them. When at the end of the play Ruth decides to stay and not return to the USA, the family is only worried about how to feed her and this is the only remark that is made in the play about future. Looking at the nature of feeding, it falls into basic human needs of survival; this moment further reiterates the point that the individuals of this family are only surviving and all their concerns always stays in the basic human survival needs.

The representation of characters in *The Homecoming* is paradoxical; despite that they are presented with an intense sense of being present at any given moment paired with so much reaction toward each other’s behavior, yet they do not seek for any meanings in their behavior, unlike, Vladimir and Estragon who are constantly questioning the significance of their life in relation to their waiting for Godot. In other words, reactions in this place is only for the sake of the present moment irrelevance to the future. Thus future is completely disregarded. Future does not hold any potential. The characters’ reckless behaviors toward one another does not threaten any pattern of their relationship into the future as if they already know that nothing is deemed repairable and are only meant to be destroyed further.

III. EVENT, ABSURD AND *THE HOMECOMING*

What does absurd mean? According to Cambridge dictionary absurd originally means 'out of harmony', in a musical context. Depending on context it could also mean propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical'. Also, 'absurd' may simply mean 'ridiculous.' However when used in absurd theater, it means devoid of purpose, cutting off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots where man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.

One must be careful in relation to the above definition of 'absurd', and that 'absurd' by no means mean 'nothingness.' Absurdity takes its power from its randomness of time and occurrence, and a man's action being deemed 'useless' collectively. It does not equate 'nothingness' therefore, nihilism needs to be detected and studied separately in relation to absurd theater- simply because they are not equal terms.

Absurd theater is often understood as a place where the sense of time is distorted, or the characters always sense a feeling of being disoriented, thus what constitute past, present and future are seen as a mere mystery- take for example, Samsa Gregory's transformation, in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, into a cockroach takes place over night, Beckett's tree grows leaves overnight in *Waiting for Godot*, etc. In *The Homecoming*, the past has power to smudges present but present is incapacitated to have any effect into the future. For example, Max the patriarch of the family can only exist in the present by constantly alluding to his past, interestingly, it is where he always gets his power as a subject instead of staying as an object to the power his son Lenny always exerts on him. According to Martin Esslin in his essay *The Theatre of the Absurd*: "the laws of probabilities and physics are suspended" in absurd theater. Based on this claim, what can originally be seen as a possibility is distorted especially within the characters on stage than to the audience. Esslin outlines certain characteristics that he associates with absurd theater. He claims that in this type of theater the characters lack individuality and the laws of physics are altered (8). Also we are often made to be shocked and bewildered by a scene or a moment yet expected to take it with a light sense of humor; take for example, Lucky's monologue in *Waiting for Godot* or Ruth's decision to stay at her laws and rejection to return to the USA. It is this problematic aspect of individuality (lacking or too much of it), lack of action toward future and disoriented sense of time that prevail in absurd theater I utilize to draw my argument on in regard of the creation of time, absurd and event in *The Homecoming*. The concept of 'absurd' itself within the same playwright or writer from one text to another and/or from one writer to another varies. In *The Homecoming* what is most absurd is the relationship between the characters. Each character acts and lives with an immanent sense of nihilism and thus with nihilism comes the rejection of all system of values, and therefore, provides space for new possibilities. However, paradoxically, in *The Homecoming* the characters fail to feel those possibilities and instead succumbing into their miserable situation and remaining utterly nihilistic. Interestingly however, the sense of impossibilities do not extend to the audience and instead are left with a sense of 'Stuplimity;" a word coined by Sianne Ngai's in *Ugly feelings* where she claims in modern and postmodern art the audience

are often left with an aesthetic experience of shock and boredom simultaneously (225).

What is an event? What constitute event? There are different philosophers who tackled the conceptualization of event such as Alfred Whitehead, Gilles Deleuze and Alain Badiou. In this paper I limit my analysis of event in the context of *The Homecoming* to Deleuze and Badiou's analysis and claim that the nature of event in *The Homecoming* is the opposite of how the aforementioned philosophers assume event to be. Originally Event Theory emerged in philosophy in the twentieth century to tackle and understand the events that created rapture in the world, such as world wars, fall of fascism, fall of USSR etc. However, in the simplest term, event is anything that is happening. It can be a grand thing that create a rapture or it could be something as simple as waving at someone. In *The Homecoming*, the conversations, Ruth and Teddy's return from the US, and occasional moments of physical altercation are all events that take place, however, they are stagnant. By stagnant I mean those events lack any agency or are not becoming effective in the relation to the life of the individuals. Indeed, the entire play is like a repertoire of repetitive acts of conversations that do not lead to any change. It is this lack of change in the paly that gives the play a sense of stagnancy in relation to events. Events in *The Homecoming* are not affective. They do not do anything except for their mere happening, and this is because the characters are nihilistic and see their existence and future as nothing. In the play, Lenny and Max always engage in harsh conversations deriding each other, however, neither before nor after those conversations do any change take place. The events only stay in present and do not leap in to the future with efficacy. In other words they are not effective into the future and their affect dies in the present. Furthermore, the characters' individuality or sense of identity and self does not change regardless of what event they become a part of, instead they go about their daily meanderings as if nothing has happened. According to Alain Badiou in *Being and Event*, for an event to take place it must be recognized by a subject. In other words, the subject should recognize the event as a situation that has agency and creates a medium for transformation (174) however, this fails to take place in the play.

In *The Logic of senses*, Deleuze refers to the events and changes that takes place to Alice in *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, a novel written by Lewis Carroll, as "pure event." (10) Anytime Alice is becoming smaller or bigger, there and within takes place a process of becoming that according to him evade or elude present, and he connects the process of transitioning as a form of "pure becoming." For Deleuze "pure becoming" is the constant mode of change in affective situations. Thus events are affective and must result in change but that fails to take place in *The Homecoming*. In this place present is the only thing that cannot be evaded and it is their only reality in relation to their past (ibid). For Deleuze, becoming takes place in language but in *The Homecoming* language is incapacitated to have the power of transforming or giving any identity to the individual. For example, every conversation in the play is nothing more than a dialogue that starts with a casual talk and ends in deride. The conversations that take place do not force the character to reflect on their being and the situations they are in.

According to Deleuze: ‘the event is always that which has just happened and that which is about to happen, but never that which is happening’ (6). Events have no possibilities of taking place at the present instead it is always something of the past and how it transits into the future, therefore the effect of the past is only in the future. In contrast to this in *The Homecoming* the future is oblivious to the characters.

According to Jean Paul Sartre as explained by Badiou in his essay *The Event in Deleuze* the ‘Outside’ constitute to our being and ‘Outside’ can be seen as event and claims:” This is why the event, as that to which the power [puissance] of a thought is devoted, and/or that from which this power proceeds, has, after Sartre, become a common term for the greater number of contemporary philosophers.(Badiou 1) Therefore, for many philosophers the ‘event’ as it comes from the outside believed to constitute to our identity. Events can be located spatially. In *The Homecoming*, the effect of event is not sensed by the characters and this reflected in their lack of action toward any change regarding bettering their live and also their nihilistic attitudes toward life. In “The Logic of Senses” Deleuze states: “Unlimited becoming becomes the event itself.” (6) It is the lack of becoming that troubles the concept of event in this play and thus leaves no place for possibilities. The characters seem to be reduced only to the state of existence instead of being or becoming. They exist in their miserable life and do not bother to reflect on their current situation in hope of changing their future because they are nihilistic. Future is completely missing from the play. The lack of becoming is what makes these characters accept their destiny as it is. Badiou believes that:” The event is the ontological realisation of the eternal truth of the One, the infinite power [puissance] of Life. It is in no way a void, or a stupor, separated from what becomes. To the contrary, it is the concentration of the continuity of life, its intensification.”(2) Badiou further claims: “the event is not what happens to a life, but what is in what happens, or what happens in what happens, such that it can only have a single Event “(ibid). The question here can be asked is that what happens in the events of *The Homecoming* if they are followed by a situation that is preceded by a situation that is quite similar? And the answer is nothing really happens. Here I would like to elaborate on the ending of the play as it ends with a speech uttered by Max, where all the family member are present. This scene, which is also the last scene, is when Ruth tells them that she decided to stay in with them and that she will not return to the USA. The scene portrays Max’s concerns over their future in relation to Ruth, however, Max negates his own concerns by stating that she will not do anything to them. Max again refutes future and prevents the present event to have any capacity or efficacy into the future:

You understand what I mean? Listen, I’ve got a funny idea she’ll do the dirty on us, you want to bet? She’ll use us, she’ll make use of us, I can tell you! I can smell it! You want to bet?

Pause.

She won’t ... be adaptable!

He begins to groan, clutches his stick, falls on to his knees by the side of her chair.

His body sags. The groaning stops. His body straightens. He looks at her, still kneeling.

I’m not an old man.

Pause.

Do you hear me?

He raises his face to her.

Kiss me.

She continues to touch JOEY’S head, lightly. LENNY stands, watching.

(66)

CONCLUSION

In *The Homecoming* nihilisms and event are created distinctively. For Pinter, Nihilism is established, emerged and projected by the characters through their destructive behaviors towards themselves and the people around them. Events are created in the hope of changing something nevertheless the events stay stagnant. The events are ineffective and do not change anything in the life and identity of the characters. Pinter portrayed both event and nihilism subtle in relation to his character’s daily meanderings and casual interactions. This play is referred to as one of the most important works of Harold Pinter is distinguished by its radical representation of human relations and sex. The play is often studied for its complex portrayal of subjective personal power in relation to others. The play’s portrayal of the life of the Maxes and the return of his oldest son, Teddy, with his wife, Ruth, from the USA is nihilistic. From the beginning till the end the play is set within the walls of a rundown house south of London. All the characters living in this house and they constantly engage in conversations that is casual, mild and normal but almost always lead to insult. This takes place repetitively but no change happens because before and after these conversations the characters stay the same and stay unaffected by the intensity of those exchanges. Furthermore, the play lacks any form of moderation, Max constantly disrespects his kids, Ruth betrays her husband and decides not to return to the USA, Lenny cheats on his brother by developing an affair with Ruth. Thus they all become very destructive in relation to each other. The characters see their existence as means to devalue or destroy anything that can be valued. Moreover, in the play, Pinter creates events that are stagnant and lack efficacy into the future, even Ruth and Lenny’s act of returning is shown as something that happened from the moment they returned. In other words, when Ruth informs us that she stays with the family, this decision seems to have been made from the beginning of the play and in fact everyone knew she would not return. Thus the returning in the *The Homecoming* becomes an unreturning to neither values nor future. And as the characters refuse to return to values or future or themselves, they become nihilistic.

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