

Study of Maeterlinck's *Interior* in the Light of Absurdity

Raouf Aminzadeh

Department of English Language and Literature, North Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

Email: Raouf.aminzadeh @gmail.com

Abstract:

This article is an attempt to focus on Interior by Maeterlinck in the light of Absurd tradition. Maeterlinck employed symbols to illuminate nature, spirituality, existence, and the innumerable and invisible forces that shape our existence. Maeterlinck uses symbolism to explore the theme of death that is omnipotent in everyday life. The Interior 's central theme is death. Maeterlinck generates suspense by juxtaposing the characters' uneasiness in the garden with the family's peace and ignorance within the house. In order to reach this aim, the researchers decide to explain the theatre of the Absurd and its elements. Maeterlinck distrust of language is shown in his distrust of words, using repetitions, silences, pauses and some other tactics. The existential theme and contents used in selected play are discussed. Themes such as: death, lack of individuality and lack of communication in mentioned play is discussed. Moreover, this article also contains a comparative study of the structure of the two.

Keywords:

Absurdity; lack of communication; language; death

I. Introduction

Despite the fact that Maeterlinck's name continues to crop up in critical studies from the 1890s and early twentieth century. There is little doubt that he has faded into obscurity. At one point, his plays were at the center of a heated debate. Maeterlinck, on the other hand, had a large following at the turn of the century and had a significant impact on English play and dramatic theory. He played a one-of-a-kind role in England. The English had been aware of the literary agitations in France for some years, but they were in desperate need of someone to interpret the symbolist vision. (Lehmann 56) At the end of the nineteenth century, theatre in Western Europe had become a battleground between supporters of the symbolist movement and opponents of the realist-naturalist orientation. The latter, based on solid but outmoded traditions, had become the major goal of several European cultural hubs, including Berlin (The Free Stage), Paris (The Free Theatre), and somewhere along Europe's eastern border, Moscow (The Art Theatre). (Lehmann 60)

Maurice Maeterlinck is instrumental in the symbolist movement that defined modern theatre. Symbolists preferred to present their artistic perspectives on topics that spoke to humanity, imagination, spirituality, and dreams. Maeterlinck's *Interior* is a play that exemplifies the movement through their employment of symbolism. Maeterlinck, who was a big fan of Arthur Schopenhauer, believed that man was ultimately powerless against fate. Maeterlinck's *Interior* is characterized by a sense of stillness and passivity. There is a terror and an incommensurable grief in Maeterlinck's plays. The only truth in life for him is death. The piece almost became a hymn of light at The Art Theatre, a brave soar into the future, an optimistic

future, reminding, finally, of the victory over darkness. Youth will vanquish blindness, disperse the gloom, and extinguish death. (Lichte 286)

Maeterlinck goes beyond absurdity by breaking the distance between the audience and the actors and finds satisfaction in the intimacy created between them. Following this symbolist line, Maeterlinck worked towards a 'theatre of silence', implicitly dismissing the discussion basis of Pinteresque or Ibsenism problem plays. Words (in an argument that strikingly anticipates Samuel Beckett) automatically substitute habitual reactions for existential awareness; verbalizing emotion deprives it of authenticity; and 'static drama' replaces external conflict, which by definition is superficial. (Innes, *Avant Garde Theatre* 20)

For Maeterlinck drama was not tied to "conflict" as much as it was rooted in what Szondi calls "existential powerlessness," where "a single moment is dealt with the moment when a helpless human being is overtaken by fate." This is not, however, the fate of the Romantics, where human beings are tossed hither and feckless forces of chance. Rather for Maeterlinck, Szondi says, "human destiny is represented by death itself, and death alone dominates the stage in his works" (Szondi, *Theory of the Modern Drama* 146-147).

The researcher tries to show effect of language on making absurdity. What makes Absurd Theatre different from other types of theatre, apart from its distrust to language and lack of communication, are the themes and contents by which Absurd dramatists try to express their feelings about absurdity of the world and human beings' activities. The existential themes and contents used in selected play is discussed. Themes such as: death, lack of individuality, lack of identity lack of communication are discussed in mentioned play.

II. Research Methods

Post modernism does not have a clear and exact meaning. It has a vast of meaning. Postmodernism in drama works in two levels: first concept and the second which is more important than the former one is structure. Sometimes these two elements are tangled with each other, however we see in the early postmodern dramatists that remind us the avant-gardism movements. These playwrights violet the standard and traditional form of the drama. Sometimes there is no interaction between the characters and this achieves through playing on the concept of language. So, in the genre that interaction is regarded as the major element we face long and one-sided monologue that is cut several times to emphasize the incomprehensibility of language. They believe that Man should be considered metaphorically in a wordless language of shapes, light, movement and gesture. Theater should aim at expressing what language is incapable of putting in to words. Therefore, there is a bridge between the avant-garde and the Theater of the Absurd. One of the most important aspects of Absurd drama is distrust of language as a means of communication. Language is as a vehicle of conventionalized, stereotype and meaningless exchanges. Albert Camus in his book entitled *The Myth of Sisyphus* notes that "In Universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile..... This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity" (p.6).

III. Results and Discussion

Maeterlinck's specific success was to identify that stillness, silence and what might be going on in them were worthy of dramatic attention, and in his best plays, he strips away the big rhetoric, the knights and castles, makes the language plain, and the characters ordinary. The result is a collection of one-act plays that evoke a sense of mystery and dread while also evoking a disturbing sense of the mundane. Dialogue which emphasizes word and sound repetition contributes to the ritualistic musicality of his play. He established what he called a static drama in which mood-images replace linear action and stillness and pauses convey as much about the inner state of the characters as much as the outward state of the universe by allowing tone and atmosphere to dominate the structure of his early plays.

Interior (1895) begins at the back of a house. A family sits quietly together in the evening through the windows, unconscious that one of their daughters had drowned. The staging innovations of the Théâtre of Art are very similar to the stage picture in this piece. Moreover, Death, lack of identity and individuality and lack of logic are three important themes, which can be seen in most of the drama in this tradition. There is a zest for death because living is absurd and most of the time characters are searching for death or waiting for it to come since they have nothing better to do. These characters suffer from the lack of individuality; not sure who they are and what they are doing, sometimes try to find out themselves but are unable. They are unable to understand the situations or to comprehend what happens because they cannot find any logic at work. It may be because of their inability to find that logic or simply because there is no logic. Maeterlinck has discussed these themes in his play; in his play characters talk frankly about death, suffer from lack of identity and sometimes look for it and are living in a world, which is devoid of logic and order.

3.1. Lack of Communication in *Interior*

Maeterlinck is aware of the insolvable communication problem of human beings; his plays are as full of detailed confrontations with the obstacles that words put in the way of a good and meaningful communication as the works of Beckett. While language in Beckett's plays express the "break down" and the "disintegration of language" (Esslin 86), it itself begins to collapse in Maeterlinck's. *Interior* is also full of puns, clichés and question marks to show that language has lost its function as means of communication since these questions have turned into statements that do not require an answer. Characters have no control on their speech and their loss of control is mirrored in fragmentation of their language. In its use of silence, hesitation and rich haunting atmosphere it looks forward to some aspects of 'absurd drama' in the 1950s and 1960s. In the opening stage directions of Maeterlinck's *Interior* the introduction to the family is made through their physical separation through a set of windows) the family is seen framed by the windows and "their moments appear grave, slow, apart and as though spiritualized by the distance, the light and the transparent film of the windowpanes" (*Interior* 120). Through the use of two characters, the interior exposes a divide between the stage and the audience (The Old Man and the Alien). They are knowledgeable and comment on events occurring outside the stage as well as the pantomime of characters (a Mother, a Father, Two Girls, and a Child) performed onstage in the house's limited space and watched by the audience. In the following, the reader reads:

old man: Did you see the two sisters' hair flutter on their shoulders?

stranger: They turned their heads this way . . . turned their heads that's all. Was I talking too loudly? (The two young girls resume their original position.) They've turned back now

. . . I went into the water up to my waist and managed to
 grab her hand and drag her onto the bank easily enough
 . . . She was as beautiful as her sisters . . .
 old man: Maybe more beautiful . . . I don't know why, I've
 lost my nerve . . .
 stranger: What are you talking about, nerve? We did all
 anyone could . . . She'd been dead over an hour (Interior 121)
 stranger: We're going to have to tell them eventually . . .
 someone might turn up and tell them straight out . . .
 there was a crowd of farmhands in the meadow where
 the dead girl was found . . . if one of them knocks on the
 door . . .
 old man: Martha and Mary are with the little dead girl. The
 farmhands were going to make a stretcher out of leaves
 and branches; and I told the oldest to come and warn
 us immediately, as soon as they set off. Let's wait till she
 arrives; she'll go in with me . . . we shouldn't have seen
 them like this . . . I thought all we had to do was knock
 on the door, just go in, find the words to say and say
 them . . . But I have spent too long watching them under
 their lamp.
 mary enters.
 mary: They're coming, grandfather.
 old man: Is that you? – Where are they?
 mary: They are at the foot of the last hills.
 old man: Are they coming in silence?
 mary: I told them to pray quietly. Martha (Interior 122)

In his play dialogue breaks down again and again because there is no truly dialectical exchange of thought in it. Maeterlinck has used different techniques such as monologues, repetition of words and synonyms to show the disintegration of language. Mary and Stranger are unable to see the truth or comprehend their situation because they have only words to guide them. In Maeterlinck's play words are acts, as action is verbal. Maeterlinck has been successful to use language theatrically to show the inability of language to bring human beings together. His play is dynamic on stage and their dramatic impact of their language is powerful and unforgettable. Language in absurdist world becomes one more unpredictable, unreliable. They are always misunderstanding each other.

Maeterlinck is aware also of the power of silence and pause on stage. In Interior characters indulge in considerable and meaningful numbers of pauses; pauses that are full of each character's differing thought processes, and give the audience enough time to think about the craft of the playwright. The old man and Stranger are not very frequently silent, but theatrically their silences are very meaningful. On stage that silence moment is more theatrical than the long speeches.

That is why Maeterlinck's characters easily give up the difficult task of communication meaningfully. They try to give meaning to their speeches through their long pauses and silences. This is another strategy that Maeterlinck adopts in order to show his distrust to language and communication. Some questions are in existential tone. There are some examples of long silence and existential questions.

old man: No one comes to the window in the middle . . .
mary: They are looking . . . listening . . .
old man: The older one smiles but doesn't see . . .
mary: And the second has eyes full of fear . . .
old man: Be careful; we don't know how far beyond the
body the soul can reach . . .
A long silence. mary nestles up to the old man's chest and
hugs him.
mary: Grandfather! . . .
old man: Don't cry, my child . . . our turn will come . . .
Silence.
stranger: They've been looking for a long time . . .
old man: They could look for a hundred thousand years and
not see anything, the poor girls . . . the night is too dark
. . . they're looking over here but the bad news is coming
from over there . . .
stranger: Lucky they are (Interior 123)
mary: They're returning to their mother's side . . .
stranger: And the father's eyes are fixed on the great
pendulum on the clock.
mary: It's like they're praying without knowing it . . .
stranger: It's like they're listening to their souls . . .
Silence.
mary: Grandfather, don't tell them, not this evening.
old man: You see how you also lose your nerve. I knew we
shouldn't watch them. (Interior 123)
They're not crying? . . . They . . . haven't you told them?
old man: Martha, Martha, there is too much life in your
soul, you wouldn't understand.
martha: Why wouldn't I?
After a silence, and in a very serious, reproachful tone –
You should have told them, grandfather.
old man: Martha, you don't understand . . .
martha: I'll have to tell them. (Interior 124)
martha: Is she opening it?
stranger: Far from it, she's locking it.
Silence.
martha: Hasn't grandfather gone in?
stranger: No . . . she's going back to sit next to her mother
. . . the others aren't stirring and the child's slept through
the whole thing.
Silence.
martha: My little sister, give me your hands.
mary: Martha. (Interior 124)

Maeterlinck is able to refocus attention to the forces that regulate the action of the play and allow for a comprehensive investigation of the death that surrounds the family and the quiet that follows it. The characters' lives are controlled by the will that is propelled forward by the world's essence. The silent forces dominate the lives of the characters and set their self-determining humanism as secondary. The omnipotence of death that poisoned everyday life is

fully elucidated by the stillness in the dialogue which allows the viewer to join in the omnipotence of death that underpins the plot.

3.2. The Metaphor of Death

Our point of view is that of an Old Man and a Stranger standing in a corner of a garden, watching the family in a lighted, curtainless room, noting every small movement and waiting for the Old Man to summon the courage to enter the room and break the tragic news that one of their daughters has drowned. We are, in a sense, in a godlike position, witnessing the pathos of the family's oblivious enjoyment, their ignorance of the pitying and interested eyes upon them, and of the future that has already been fashioned for them. The mute family's movements should have a dreamy quality, according to Maeterlinck, and they should appear "grave, slow, separate, and as though spiritualized by the distance, the light, and the clear film of the windowpane." Through the scenario of seeing and being watched, he draws up profound metaphysical connotations. The eavesdroppers observe the parents as they watch their youngest kid sleep, musing on the oddity of this recession and reflecting, "We, too, are watched." At such times, the audience, those other observers, are dragged into the experience; it may occur to them to question whether, in some other sense, they, too, are being observed.

Maeterlinck's plays attempted to evoke an emotional response from the audience by offering them the possibility to engage in it. Staging focused on bridging the gap between the audience and the actor and rather creating the entire theatre as a contained space rather than the stage. When the Old Man utters "we too are watched" (Interieur 123).

Even if the individuals in the interior are so enclosed and segregated, so stridently deaf. When the Old Man and the Stranger talk about the drowned girl's hair helplessly lying on the water, her two sisters move uncomfortably in the room, their hair appearing to "tremble," and then they are drawn to the window, where they stand looking into the garden as if they sensed someone there. "No one comes to the middle window," one of the watchers says, and we all get a shiver of fear, as if a shadowy figure, the wraith of the drowned girl, may slowly appear there. Although the family does not discover the news until the Old Man enters the house at the end of the play, tiny movements like the ones I've described show that, as Maeterlinck could remark, the soul responds to unseen pressures; that the interior can never be completely shut off. The play ends, indeed, with the family plucked out of the safe, lighted interior. We see—though we do not hear—the Old Man breaking the news and the family leaving the room by a door at the back of the stage. To create this, Maeterlinck attenuates simultaneously to a surface reality and a parallel inner condition. So, makes us realize that it is only a surface.

old man: They're relaxed . . . they're not expecting her this evening . . .

stranger: They smile without moving . . . but now the father is placing a finger to his lips . . .

old man: He's indicating the child asleep at its mother's breast . . .

stranger: She doesn't dare lift her eyes, for fear of disturbing its sleep . . .

old man: They are not working any more . . . there is a heavy silence.

stranger: They have let the ball of white wool fall to the floor . . .

old man: They are looking at the child . . .

stranger: They don't know that they are being looked at . . .
 old man: We, too, are being looked at (Interior 122)
 mary: Have pity, grandfather . . .
 old man: We can pity them, my child, but no one pities
 us . . .
 mary: Tell them tomorrow, grandfather, tell them when it
 gets light . . . they won't be so sad . . .
 old man: You may be right . . . it would be better to leave all
 this tonight. And light is gentle on sadness . . . But what
 would they say to us tomorrow? Misfortune makes us
 resentful; and those it hits want to be told before everyone
 else knows. They don't like it handled by strangers . . . it
 would be like we'd stolen something from them.
 stranger: Besides, there's no more time; I can already hear
 the murmur of prayers . . .
 mary: They're here . . . they're passing behind the hedges . . (Interior 123)
 stranger: (To the crowd.) Stay here . . . don't go near the
 window . . . where is she?
 farmhand: Who?
 stranger: The others . . . the pallbearers? . . .
 farmhand: They're taking the path that leads to the door. (Interior 123)

When the Old Man meets his granddaughter, Mary, she urges him towards restraint: "Have pity on them, grandfather . . .," to which the Old Man replies, "We have pity on them, my child, but no one has pity on us." She implores him to "Tell them tomorrow, grandfather; tell them when it is light, then they will not be so sad." (Interior 121) Following Schopenhauer's notion that we are creatures who can conceive of death in the abstract (David Krasner 148).

Language for Maeterlinck is incapable of expressing shock or trauma; instead, he looked to the lone figure onstage experiencing unattainable longings and existential angst. In Maeterlinck's words, "There is a tragic element in the life of every day that is far more real, far more penetrating, far more akin to the true self that is in us than the tragedy that lies in great adventure." Maeterlinck searched to reveal the trauma of death and human existence, where the term "trauma" itself moves from its unambiguous external concept of physical wound to what was to become a modernist understanding in the late nineteenth century (David Krasner 149 - 150)

Martin Heidegger maintains, "Death does not reveal itself as a loss, but as a loss experienced by those remaining behind." Because we "do not experience the dying of others in a genuine sense," death is therefore "always essentially my own." The Old Man in Maeterlinck's Interior conveys in Heideggerian terms the existential loneliness and isolation of the human spirit in its oneiric cage; he can "see" the events as we, the audience, see them, but he cannot alter them:

I am nearly eight-three years old, and this is the first time that the reality of life has come home to me. I do not know why all they do appears to me so strange and solemn. There they sit awaiting the night, simply, under their lamp, as we should under our own; and yet I seem to see them from an altitude of another world, because I know a little fact which as yet they do not know . . . Is it so, my children? [...] And even if nothing has happened, it would frighten me to see them sit there so peacefully. They have too much confidence in the world. There they sit,

separated from the enemy by only a few poor panes of glass. They think that nothing will happen because they have closed their doors, and they do not know that it is in the soul that things always happen, and that the world does not end at their house-door. . . . (Interior 123).

The Old Man's bird's eye view of the world is not so much a philosophic fool-on-the-hill as it is a lamentation, similar to Greek tragedy, to be almost sung rather than spoken (David Krasner 150). Maeterlinck completes this process toward death in Interior. Old man and Stranger are preoccupied with the idea of death. From the beginning of the play, death is a major part of the subject matter of conversations between characters and ranges from relating it to physical experiences to more philosophical matters.

3.3. Individual's Relationship with Others

There are different types of relationships established among people; family relationship, friendly relationship, master and slave relationship, etc. However, what makes these relationships valid is the way people respect each other, use each other, and in general, behave each other. All human beings with different types of character have accepted different roles in society and have acted according to them. The same relationships can be between the old man and Stranger. Maeterlinck's characters have opposite personalities. Old man is intellectual, disturbed and incisive, while stranger is placid and contented. Stranger is more passive than old man. Old man analyzes the situation scientifically, while Stranger avoids thinking about them. They are tied one another and cannot be separated; however, to this togetherness raises the question of friendship of fear of loneliness.

3.4. Repetition in Interior

The line, stranger: He can't bring himself to tell them . . . He's looking at us. And stranger: Be quiet! . . . Not a sound. It is repeated on numerous occasions to establish the comic situation. There is no purpose between characters to repeat more and more these sentences. The more words are repeated the deeper gap between characters appears.

IV. Conclusion

Interior have the contents of absurdity within but are not full absurd plays. Maeterlinck believes in the unreliability of language as a tool of communication. By using techniques such as humor, silences and pauses, he demonstrates his distrust to words and language. The theme of death, and lack of logic are also presented in the Interior. But through reading the play, the researcher finds out that the play deals with the nature of reality, the relationship between real life and art. The researcher discovers that Interior has many affinities with the Theatre of the Absurd, but it is not absurd in the sense of Beckett or Ionesco's plays. The fact is that, the situations and happenings of the play are Absurd for the characters, but not for the audience. Their situation does not bring the meaning of Absurdity to the audience. The play mostly shows the roles of chance, fate and outer mysteries in life. It may suggest that life can be surprising and bizarre, but not Absurd.

References

- Basirizadeh, Fatemeh. (2019). A Comparative Study of the Psychoanalytical Portrayal of the Women Characters by Virginia Woolf and Zoya Pirzad. *Britain International of Humanistic and Social Sciences Journal*, 1-8
- Basirizadeh, Fatemeh. Harati, Maryam. (2011). The Role of Metaphoric Language and its Analysis in Tom Stoppard's *the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. *European Journal of Social Sciences – Volume 25, Number 1*.
- Camus, Albert. (1961). *The Myth of Sisyphus: And Other Essays*. Random House.
- Cuddon, Ed. J. A. (1979). *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* London: Penguin.
- Esslin, Martin. (1982). *The Theatre of the Absurd*. London: Pelican.
- Gale, Maggie B, and John F. Deeney. (2010). *The Routledge Drama Anthology and Sourcebook: From Modernism to Contemporary Performance*. London: Routledge. Print.
- Innes, Christopher, and Christopher Innes. (1993). *Avant Garde Theatre, 1892-1992*. London: Routledge. Print.
- Krasner, David. (2012). *A History of Modern Drama*. Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Wiley, UK.
- Lehmann, Hans-Thies. (2006). *Postdramatic Theatre*. New York City: Routledge.
- Lichte, Erika Fischer. (2002). *History of European Drama and Theatre*. New York City: Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data.
- Maurice Maeterlinck, (1904). *Théâtre II*, Paris, p. 56.
- Pronko, Leonard. (1962). *Avant-Garde*. Berkeley, California: California UP.
- Raoufzadeh, N. Basirizadeh, F. Zaheri birgani, Sh. (2019). Budapest International Research and Critics Institute-Journal. www.bircu-journal.com/index.php/birci
- Richard Schechner. (1988). *Performance Theory*. Routledge.
- Szondi, Peter, Michael Hays, and Jochen Schulte-Sasse. (1987). *Theory of the Modern Drama: A Critical Edition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Print.