Mountain Language

Mountain Language is a one-act play written by Harold Pinter, first published in The Times Literary Supplement on 7–13 October 1988. It was first performed at the Royal National Theatre in London on 20 October 1988 with Michael Gambon and Miranda Richardson. First performed in 1988, Harold Pinter's Mountain Language, follows a group of prisoners in an unnamed country, trying to find a voice when their native language has been banned.

Inspired by the long history of oppression the Kurds suffered under Turkish rule, the play blends the absurdism and realism found in Pinter's earlier plays. In 2005, Pinter was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Harold Pinter was born on October 30, 1930, in Hackney, a working-class neighbourhood in East London, the only child of Hyman (a tailor) and Frances (Mann) Pinter. Although Pinter seemed to have a relatively happy childhood, he also experienced terror during World War II, during Germany's air attacks on London. Pinter's Jewish heritage also caused problems for him while he was growing up. Gangs would continually menace anyone with Jewish features. Pinter, however, often was able to talk his way out of these confrontations. Feelings of terror caused by an inescapable menace, along with the manipulative power of language later became prominent themes in his works.

Pinter's love for the theatre emerged in his grammar school days when he played the title roles in Macbeth and Romeo and Juliet. He also revealed his literary talents during this period. The Hackney Downs School Magazine published Pinter's essay on James Joyce and two of his poems that showed the beginnings of his distinctive literary style. In 1948 Pinter began his acting studies at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) but soon left. For the next ten years, he wrote poems and short prose pieces and acted on the stage and on television under the pseudonym David Baron. He has noted that his acting experience gave him valuable insight into how successful plays are structured and provided him with a sharp ear for dialogue.

In 1957, over a four-day period, Pinter wrote The Room, a one-act play, for a friend's student production. The successful production of the play sparked his interest in playwriting and soon after he wrote the full-length play entitled The Birthday Party. Although some reviewers took note of Pinter's innovative style in The Birthday Party, the initial popular and critical response was overwhelmingly negative. Two years later, he gained accolades from the public and the press with The Caretaker, which signaled his emergence as one of the British theater's new breed of playwrights. Pinter continues his successful writing career as a playwright, a scriptwriter for radio and television, and a screenwriter in the early twenty-first century. He has won several awards, including the Evening Standard's drama award in 1961 and the Newspaper Guild of New York award in 1962, both for The Caretaker; the New York Film Critics Award in 1964 for The Servant; the British Film Academy Award in 1965 and 1971;

and the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for The Homecoming in 1967. He has also received honorary degrees from many universities in Great Britain and the United States

Summary

Act I: Prison Wall The play opens with a line of women standing up against a prison wall. An elderly woman cradles her hand while a young woman stands with her arm around her. A sergeant and an officer enter. The sergeant points to the young woman and asks her her name. The young woman replies that they have given their names. The two repeat this dialogue until the officer tells the sergeant to ''stop this s——.''

The officer then turns to the young woman and asks her if she has any complaints. The young woman responds that the older woman has been bitten. When the officer asks the elderly woman who bit her, she slowly raises her hand but remains silent. The young woman tells him that a Doberman pinscher bit her. Again he asks the elderly woman who bit her hand, as if he had never heard the young woman's reply. The elderly woman stares at him and remains silent. The younger woman, redefining her response, tells him ''a big dog.'' When the officer asks the dog's name, he is met with silence, which agitates him to the point that he insists ''every dog has a name'' given by its parents. He informs them that before dogs bite, they state their name. He then tells the young woman that if the dog bit the elderly woman without stating his name, he will have the dog shot. When he is met again with silence, he barks, ''silence and attention.''

The officer then calls the sergeant over and asks him to take any complaints. When the sergeant again asks for complaints, the young woman tells him that they have been standing all day in the snow, while the guards have taunted them with the dogs, one of which bit the woman. The officer again asks the name of the dog. The young woman looks at him and answers, ''I don't know his name.''

The sergeant then abruptly changes the subject, informing the women, ''your husbands, your sons, your fathers, these men you have been waiting to see, are s—— houses'' and ''enemies of the State.'' The officer steps forward and identifies the women as ''mountain people'' and tells them that since their language is forbidden, it should be considered ''dead.'' They are only allowed to speak ''the language of the capital.'' He warns that they will be ''badly punished'' if they try to speak the mountain language. He reiterates that this is the law and that their language is dead, and ends by asking whether there are any questions. When the young woman responds that she does not speak mountain language, the sergeant puts his hand on her ''bottom'' and asks, ''What language do you speak with your a——?'' When the officer warns the sergeant to remember that the women have committed no crime, the sergeant asks, ''but you're not saying they're without sin?'' The officer admits that

was not his point, and the sergeant concludes the young woman is full of sin, that ''she bounces with it.''

The young woman then identifies herself by name and tells them she has come to see her husband, which she claims is her right. When she presents her papers, the officer notes that she and her husband do not come from the mountains, and realizes that he has been put ''in the wrong batch.'' The sergeant concludes, ''she looks like a f—— intellectual to me.''

Act II: Visitor's Room The scene opens with the elderly woman sitting next to a prisoner. When she speaks to him in a rural accent, the guard jabs her with a stick, insisting that the language is forbidden. The prisoner tries to explain to the guard that the woman doesn't know the language of the capital but is met with silence. When the elderly woman tells the prisoner that she has apples, the guard again jabs her and shouts that her language is forbidden. The prisoner admits that the woman does not know what the guard is saying. The guard refuses to accept responsibility and concludes, ''you're all a pile of s——.'' When the prisoner does not respond to the guard's questions, the guard calls the sergeant and reports, ''I've got a joker in here.''

The action freezes and, in a voiceover, the audience hears a conversation between the elderly woman and the prisoner, who identifies himself as her son. He voices concern for her bitten hand. She tries to encourage him, telling him that everyone is looking forward to his homecoming. The sergeant then appears, asking ''what joker'' and the scene abruptly ends.

Act III: Voice in the Darkness The scene opens in a corridor where a guard and the sergeant are holding up a hooded man. When the sergeant sees the young woman there, he demands to know who let her in. The guard answers that she is the hooded man's wife. The sergeant first asks whether this is a reception for ''Lady Duck Muck'' then apologizes to her, saying that there must have been ''a bit of a breakdown in administration,'' and so she was sent through the wrong door. He then asks if there is anything he can do for her.

The characters freeze again. In a voiceover conversation, the hooded man and his wife, the young woman, speak lovingly about their lives together and imagine they are on a lake holding each other. When the action starts again, the hooded man collapses, and his wife screams, calling him by name. He is then dragged off. The sergeant reiterates that she has come through the wrong door and informs her that if she has any questions, she can ask the ''bloke'' who comes in ''every Tuesday week, except when it rains.'' She asks whether ''everything [will] be all right'' if she has sex

with this man, and the sergeant replies ''sure. No problem.'' The scene ends after she thanks the sergeant.

Act IV: Visitor's Room This act returns to the visitor's room where the prisoner sits next to his mother, trembling with blood on his face. The guard informs them ''they've changed the rules.'' Until ''further notice,'' they can speak in their own language. When the prisoner translates this to his mother, she does not respond, as if she no longer understands her own language. The prisoner's trembling grows until he falls to his knees, shaking violently. The sergeant appears, sees him and says, ''you go out of your way to give them a helping hand and they f—— it up.''

Characters

Charley

Charley is one of the prisoners. His affection for Sara, his wife, becomes evident during a voiceover, when he and Sara talk lovingly about their union and imagine being together in the future. Toward the end of the play, he collapses in front of her, suggesting that he has been tortured.

Elderly Woman

The elderly woman is referred to as a mountain woman. She has come to the prison to see her son. While she is waiting in the snow for eight hours, a guard dog bites her hand so severely that her thumb is almost detached. She shows her capacity for compassion and nurturance when she brings food to her son. She also tries to comfort him and fill him with hope by telling him that everyone at home is looking forward to his return. Her inability to understand the official language, and therefore the warning against speaking her own language (mountain language), results in her being beaten by the guards.

She ends the play in silence, in an almost catatonic state. When her son tells her that the prison officials have changed the rules and they are now allowed to speak in their language, she does not respond. It is not clear whether she is too afraid to speak or has lost the ability to do so, perhaps due to her son's condition.

Guard

The guard exhibits cruelty when he repeatedly jabs the elderly woman with a stick when she speaks mountain language. He tries to justify his treatment of her by saying that he has responsibilities and that he has a family. The guard refuses to recognize that his prisoner also has a family, and in an effort to punish him, the guard informs the sergeant that the prisoner is a ''joker.''

Sara Johnson

Sara comes to the prison to see her husband, Charley. Although she is not a ''mountain woman'' and obviously is from a higher social class, she forms a bond with the elderly woman. She illustrates her compassionate nature when she comforts the older woman after she has been bitten by the dog and tries to get help for her. Sara reveals her courage when she stands up to the sergeant and officer on several occasions. She refuses an order to give her name a second time and often meets absurd questions with silence.

Sara is smart enough though to answer some of their questions patiently, as when the sergeant asks her again the name of the dog who bit the elderly woman, and she answers that she does not know, which of course should have been obvious to him. When the women are asked whether they have any complaints, she speaks up, noting that they have been standing all day in the snow, waiting to see the prisoners. She insists that it is her right to see her husband.

After accidentally coming across her hooded husband and realizing that he has been tortured, she breaks down. At the end of the play, she admits that she is willing to sleep with a prison official in order to save her husband.

Hooded Man *See* Charley

Officer

The officer is the person in charge of the prison. At times, he appears to follow reasonable guidelines, but his behaviour quickly dissolves into the absurd, along with that of the sergeant. Sometimes he chastises the sergeant for repeatedly asking the women the same question, and he seems to show concern for the elderly woman's hand. However, that concern quickly vanishes in a silly discussion of dogs' names. While he directs the sergeant to ask the women whether they have any complaints, he never acts on those complaints. He reminds the sergeant that the women are not criminals, but he cannot acknowledge that they have not sinned. When the officer discovers that Sara's husband is not a mountain person, he admits that he has been placed in the ''wrong batch'' but does not question his guilt. He tries to assert his authority, and points out the absurdity of his rules when he insists that if the dog that bit the elderly woman did not give his name, he will be shot. He reveals his need for control when, as the women are standing silently, he tells them to be silent.

Prisoner

The prisoner illustrates his compassion when he shows great concern about his mother's

hand. He also tries to explain to the guard that she cannot understand the official language in the hopes the guard will stop hitting her. In an effort to encourage the guard to feel compassion and a sense of brotherhood, he explains that he too has a wife and three children. His boldness, however, is punished when the guard determines him to be a ''joker.'' The blood on his face in the next scene suggests that he has been beaten. When, at the end of the play, his mother appears in an almost catatonic state, he collapses on the floor, gasping and shaking violently, seemingly experiencing a mental and physical collapse.

Second Guard

The second guard appears in the corridor, holding up Sara's husband.

Sergeant

His cruelty and desire for power is exhibited throughout the play. He repeatedly categorizes the prisoners as ''s——houses,'' and he tries to demean Sara, whom he considers a ''f—— intellectual.'' In order to assert his power over her, he puts his hands on her and claims, ''intellectual a——s wobble the best'' and that she ''bounces'' with sin. At other times, he professes to be carrying out the law, as when he tells them that mountain language has been forbidden. Later, he appears in the guise of a public servant when he asks Sara what he can do for her after she accidentally appears in the corridor where she sees her husband with a hood over his face. She does not respond, knowing he will do nothing to help her or her husband. He pretends to be magnanimous at the end of the play, suggesting he engineered the change in the rule forbidding anyone to speak in mountain language but then reveals his true nature when he shows no compassion as he watches the prisoner collapse, exclaiming ''you go out of your way to give them a helping hand and they f—— it up.''

Young Woman *See* Sara Johnson

Themes

Meaninglessness

Pinter illustrates the play's major theme, meaninglessness, in his adroit construction of the play. In the absurd prison world, nothing makes sense. The prisoners, referred to as ''s——houses'' and ''enemies of the state'' are being held for unnamed crimes. The narrative suggests that they have been imprisoned because they are ''mountain

people'' who speak an outlawed language. When the officials discover that Charley, Sara's husband, is not a mountain person, they decide he has been put into the ''wrong batch'' but do not question his guilt.

The play presents an existentialist vision of the condition and existence of men and women as it deconstructs the traditional view that humans are rational beings existing in an intelligible universe. The characters repeatedly question the prison rules, trying to determine a logical structure to the system but are continually thwarted because there is no logic behind a world that contains neither truth nor value. As they face this meaninglessness, they experience isolation and anguish.

Pinter illustrates this sense of meaninglessness in his presentation of the breakdown between language and meaning. Sara continually tries to communicate with the prison officials in order to convince them to treat her and the others humanely and to allow her to reunite with her husband, but her dialogue with them continually degenerates into pointless babble. For example, when she tries to get someone to tend to the elderly woman whose hand has been torn by a dog bite, the officer and sergeant begin a nonsensical discussion about the dog's name and never offer assistance.

Social Protest

Pinter constructs scenes like the one concerning the dog as a form of social protest. Through his characterizations and dramatic structure, he presents a compelling indictment of totalitarian regimes. Pinter has suggested the oppression the Kurds have experienced as a minority group in Turkey inspired his writing of the play (as mentioned by Charles Spencer in the *Daily Telegraph*, but his use of Anglo names like ''Sara Johnson'' and ''Charley,'' along with the indeterminate setting, suggests Pinter is condemning any government that oppresses its people.

Censorship

One of the main ways the prison officials oppress the characters in the play is to censor them. In order to strip them of their cultural identity, they decree that ''mountain language'' is forbidden, that it should be considered ''dead,'' and those who speak it will be severely punished. This censure not only denies the characters a sense of self but also serves to isolate each from the other because communication within the community becomes impossible.

Sexual Abuse

When the officials realize that Sara is not a mountain woman and so cannot control her due to her social status, they find another way to exercise their power over her. After the sergeant identifies her as a ''f—— intellectual,'' he abuses her to assert his power over her. When she admits to the sergeant that she does not speak mountain language, he puts his hands on her and asks, ''what language do you speak with your

a——,'' thus effectively undermining her position in the prison hierarchy. Later, he insists to the officer that Sara is full of sin, that she ''bounces with it.''

Resistance

Sara makes attempts to resist the authority of the officials through her questions and her silences. She insists that something should be done to help the elderly woman after the guard dog bites her, and she insists it is her right to see her husband. She meets the officials' repeated, foolish questions (for example, ''what is the dog's name?'') with silence, refusing to participate in meaningless dialogue. Yet, by the end of the play, her spirit has effectively been broken by the totalitarian system. She finally sees her husband but is powerless to prevent his torture through rational means. As a result, she agrees to prostitute herself so that she can save him.

Historical Context

Theatre of the Absurd

This term, coined by Martin Esslin who wrote *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961), is applied to plays that focus on and reflect the absurd nature of the human condition. The roots of this type of literature can be found in the expressionist and surrealist movements as well as in the existential philosophy that emerged from the theories of nineteenth- century Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard, and German philosophers Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Nietzsche. Dramatists associated with this group include Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Günter Grass, Jean Genet, Edward Albee, N. G. Simpson, and Pinter.

Absurdist plays portray a specific vision of the condition and existence of men and women and an examination of their place and function in life. They reject the notion that humans are rational beings operating in an intelligible universe that maintains a logically ordered structure. Absurdist playwrights present characters who strive but ultimately fail to find purpose and meaning in a world that contains no truth or value. As a result, the characters experience isolation and anguish in the face of the inherent nothingness in their world.

These plays typically lack a conventional structure. Often they incorporate silences and scenes of miscommunication to reinforce the sense of isolation and alienation experienced by the characters. A loose plot is often strung together as a series of fragmented scenes, disconnected images that reflect the characters' experiences.

Repression of the Kurds

Pinter has noted that *Mountain Language* is based on the oppression the Kurds have experienced as a minority group in Turkey. The Kurds, numbering about twenty–five million, are primarily located in a mountainous region in the Middle East, stretching from south eastern Turkey through north-western Iran. They have had a long history of conflict with Turkey, heightened at the end of World War I with the Treaty of Versailles, which gave the Turkish government the right to rule over them. Tensions heightened in 1937, when Mustafa

Kemal Ataturk decreed that religious and non-Turkish cultural expression would be outlawed in Turkey, including the word *Kurd*.

During the next decade, Kurdish schools, organizations, and publications were banned, and any references to Kurdish regions were removed from maps and documents. After the word *Kurd* was outlawed, the Kurds were officially referred to as ''mountain Turks who have forgotten their language.'' They were denied government positions, and the Turkish government confiscated land and property. Kurds launched a series of revolts against the Turkish government, trying to gain widespread support by appealing to traditional religious beliefs and cultural practices. However, Kurdish leaders could not get the cooperation of the various Kurdish tribes. After the revolts were suppressed in 1925 and 1930, the government handed out harsher and more repressive measures. The Kurds remain an impoverished and culturally oppressed minority in Turkey.

In 1996, eleven Kurds, while rehearsing *Mountain Language* with plastic guns, were arrested by London police. They were held until authorities could establish what was actually occurring in the community centre where they were rehearsing. Pinter suggests that this incident is a case of life imitating art.

Literary Style

Structure

Pinter fragments the structure of the play to illustrate the sense of isolation and alienation that the characters experience. The acts present separate vignettes of the women trying desperately to see their men. Act I centres on the women, who have stood in the snow for eight hours, and their interaction with the sergeant and the officer. The absurd dialogue in which Sara must engage with the two officials reinforces her sense of alienation as does the fact that the scene ends before she can see her husband. This opening scene sets the tone of the play and suggests that the women will not be able to be truly reunited with the men.

Acts II and IV centre on the elderly woman and her son. In act II, the two try to talk to each other, but their communication is continually broken off by the guard, who jabs the elderly woman with a stick every time she tries to speak to her son. This sense of broken communication is reinforced in the last act, when the elderly woman does not respond to her son, either due to her fear of being beaten or to her son's shocking physical condition.

The third act takes place in a corridor where Sara accidentally comes upon her husband. The claustrophobic atmosphere of the entire scene suggests that neither Sara nor her husband, who has obviously been tortured by the guards, can escape the absurd world in which they find themselves.

Language Pinter's unique use of language, or lack of it, also reinforces the play's themes. Most of the dialogue between the guards and the women and prisoners appears to make little sense, reflecting the play's focus on communication breakdown and the absurdity of their position. Pinter also uses silences throughout the play to illustrate this theme as well as his focus on the power plays that occur in the prison.

Compare and Contrast

1930s: In the new republic of Turkey, President Mustafa Kemal Ataturk works hard to ''Europeanize'' his people, including the adoption of surnames and giving women the right to vote. This change also includes the abolishment of religion within Turkey, which greatly affects Kurds.

1980s: Torn by internal strife, Turkey's Council of National Security seeks to restore public order through the capture of terrorists, the confiscation of large caches of weapons, and a ban on political activity. A state of emergency is declared in 1987 to deal with the uprising of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

Today: The number of deaths from terrorism drops significantly as Turkey seeks involvement with the European Union. A state of emergency still exists in the six south eastern states that are native to Kurds.

1930s: Theatre sees enormous growth in Turkey after the formation of the republic. The first Children's Theatre is opened. The *Halkevleri* (people centres), established by the State, play a large role in the spread and development of theatre through publications, tours, and courses.

1980s: Drama continues to be popular in Turkey as more theatres open all over the country.

Today: The Turkish government is trying to provide financial support to private theatres in the interest of preserving artistic expression, but this backing is not regulated and is therefore subject to political whim.

1930s: A latinized Turkish alphabet is now the basis of the official written language of Turkey, a nation recently assembled from the remains of the Ottoman empire and including a variety of ethnic groups.

1980s: The constitution adopted in 1982 preserves democratic government and protects basic human rights, including freedom of expression, thought, and assembly.

Today: Twenty percent of Turkey's population is ethnically Kurdish; the remaining eighty percent is Turkish. Ninety-nine percent of the population is Muslim. Turkish is the official language, but Kurdish, Arabic, Armenian, and Greek are also spoken.