

**Harold Pinter as an existentialist dramatist par excellence deeply
concerned with socio-psychological problems of human beings :**

An Appraisal

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to describe Harold Pinter as an existentialist dramatist par excellence and also has an excellence playwright of the ambiguous and even an exponent of man's instinctual territorial drive doing justice to his dramatic career picturizing in the complexities of life with fullest literary integrity and richness of expression.

Keywords: existentialist, dramatist , excellence, playwright, complexity,
Integrity.

Harold Pinter has variously been described as an existentialist dramatist par excellence, as “a playwright of the ambiguous” , as “a member of the angry young man” or the “kitchen sink school” of British dramatists and even as an exponent of man's instinctual territorial drive. Each of these descriptions about him and dramatic forte may have some element of truth but none of them exclusively does justice to the complexity and integrity or to the richness and the simplicity of his achievement as a dramatist. What is to be understood is that Pinter emerged as a dramatist at about the same time as John Osborne, Wester, Kops, Alun Owen and John Arden to mention only the best-known of the group of young dramatists who were born around 1930 and who came to the

forefront after 1956. These were the dramatists who replaced the middle-class idiom, which dominated the British Stage with regional and lower-class vernaculars of various kinds thereby shocking many of the older critics and theatre-goers. While the other dramatists could not stand firm and strong in their aims and attitudes so as to fulfill their dramatic techniques and methods. Pinter has remained rather firmly in the forefront of contemporary dramatists and has steadily consolidated his position by making a genuine contribution to contemporary drama, to its style, idiom, and subject matter.

Harold Pinter was born on October 10, 1930 and became remounted all over the world as a great English playwright, screen writer, actor, poet and political activist by the year 1980. For his extraordinary achievement in the field of literature, he was later honoured with *Commander of Honour* and *Commander of British Empire* and was declared *Nobel Laureate of Literature* in the year 2005. He began his theatrical career in the mid – 1950's as a repertoire actor – available to act in plays by other directors using the stage name David Baron. During a writing career spanning over half a century, beginning with his first play, *The Room* (1957), Pinter, is said to have written 29 stage plays; 26 screen plays; many sketches, radio and Tv plays; poetry, some short fiction; a novel; and essays, speeches and letters. He is best known as a playwright and screen writer, especially for *The Birthday Party* (1957), *The Car taker* (1959), *The Home Coming* (1964) and *Betrayal* (1978). Generally speaking Pinter's dramas often involve strong conflicts and stylistically, his plays are marked by theatrical pauses and silences, comedic timing, provocative imagery, witty dialogue, ambiguity, irony and menace or the fear of the unknown and thematically, "his plays remain ambiguous and yet raise complex issues of individual human identity oppressed by social forces, the power of language and vicissitudes of memory. Like his work, Pinter has been considered complex and contradictory" (Billington 388).

Among the younger generation of playwrights, who followed in the footsteps of the pioneers of the Theatre of the Absurd, Harold Pinter,

twenty-four years younger than Beckett, has achieved the status of a major force in the contemporary theatre. As Martin Esslin puts it, "Like Beckett, Pinter wants to communicate the mystery, the problematical nature of man's situation in the world. However natural his dialogue, however naturalistic some of his situations may superficially appear, Pinter's plays are also basically images of human condition" (35). J.L.Stylan also makes the same point when he describes Pinter as "a light-heavy weight Beckett with a firmer sense of theatre" (32). Unlike Beckett's characters, Pinter gives a recognizable personality to his characters. He seems to be more concerned with an obsessive probing into the primeval fears of man. Surely Pinter's plays produce a sense of awe and fear. This awe is conveyed through the most ordinary material objects and ordinary people. There is an "exquisite friction of the nightmare and normality." The menace springs from a collision of man's basic need for security, recognition and acceptance on the one hand and the pressures of society for a deadening conformity on the other. In all his plays, the central figures have reached to the threats of existence by retreating to a protected world, to some place of refuge. No doubt, Pinter's plays are thrillers, full of mysteries that are put with no intention of solving them. "Must vital to an understanding of Pinter's theatre is the symbolism of his characters. In spite of their initial realistic appearance, their cumulative impact embraces the whole of humanity" (Vaidhyanathan 37).

Among the modern British playwrights, Pinter is distinguished not only by his expertise in handling theatrical technicalities, but also by his preoccupation with the problems facing an individual in society. Even though he has introduced a few innovative devices of his own, his main interest appears to lie in dramatizing realistic problems in the context of everyday life. He does not, like some other dramatists of the Absurd Theatre, confine himself to philosophical speculations on metaphysical concepts. However, it cannot be denied that his themes always have a double significance; while they are realistic and down to earth, they also have an archetypal dimension. In fact, as Martin Esslin says, this kind of

concretization and presentation of “a slice of real life paradoxically transforms the real objects and situations to become “archetypes of cosmic significance” (P 107). His first play *The Room* was his first attempt to dramatize the theme of menace – the vague sense of anxiety and fear not easily pinned down to any particular source. The same theme recurs in all his plays as a legit motif and this made Irving Wardle coin the term “Comedies Menace” to refer to Pinter’s early plays *The Birthday Party* his first full-length play enhances this theme with suggestions of guilt and betrayal. *The Dumb Waiter* also deals with menace are *A Slight Ache* also does the theme of menace recur. This theme was still developed further is *Night School*. *The Dwarfs* is “play that raised questions relating to a man’s identity and his ultimate destiny. This seems to be Pinter’s only play to deal with existential problems in somewhat metaphysical terms. The play shows the break-up of two relationship – one between husband and wife and the other between the two friends – both threatened by the women. In *The Lover*, Pinter shows the role of fantasy in a successful marriage. Based on the French proverb that every wife should also be a mistress, Sarah is both wife and whore to Richard. Like Osborne’s Tiru and Jenny in *Under Plain Cover* – produced a year before *The Lover* – Richard and Sarah live out their fantasies indulging in all sorts of erotic games in the afternoon, leaving the nights for the staid married couple. *The Lover* was followed after an interval of two years by Tea Party, a short story converted into a television play. The play was a psychological study of a repressed personality suffering from hysteria. *The Home Coming*, Pinter’s most controversial play shocked many, including Trussler who called it “a modishly intellectualized melodrama” by seeing which “I have felt myself actually soiled and diminished” (P 134). *The Basement* reintroduced the early themes of possessiveness and menace, blended with the new theme of dream fantasies. *No Man’s Land* is a play in which four characters inhabit a no man’s land between time present and time remembered. Here memory, illusion and reality coalesce to form a mystery, obscuring the real from the illusionary. His last play is *Betrayal* which deals with different kinds of

betrayal – betrayal between husband and wife, between lovers, between friends and so on.

It was Martin Esslin who first grouped Pinter with the other dramatists of the Absurd Theatre. All the dramatists of the Theatre of the Absurd seem to have two features in common, namely, the purposelessness of man's existence and the basic inadequacy of language as a medium of communication. Social relationships, psychological problem, illusions and fantasies, failure of communication, death, time, alienation, racial hatred and identity crisis are some of the recurring themes in Pinter's plays.

Though Pinter is not considered a social dramatist like Arnold Wesker (*Roots*) or John Osborne (*Look Back in Anger*). Social themes do occur in his plays frequently. It seems to be a misconception to classify him as a dramatist uninterested in society or the individual's relations to society. Different aspects of marriage are portrayed in his plays – an uneasy and precarious relationship is to be found in *The Room*, *A Slight Ache*, *Tea Party* and *The Home Coming*; incompatibility, yet adjustment to circumstances are to be found in *The Birthday Party*; *Old Times and Night* and a successful marriage is portrayed in *The Lover*. A study of the recurrent themes reveals that Pinter is basically a humanist concerned with socio-psychological problems of human beings.

Eventhough Pinter is not a committed dramatist like Wesker or Osborne, themes of social relationships form a dominant motif in his plays. In a radio interview with Kenneth Tynan, broadcast on 28 October 1960, Pinter claimed that his plays were about characters who stood "at essential turning points in their lives" (Esslin 34). In almost all his plays where Pinter presents his characters as married couples the marriage portrayed is one heading for the rocks. The most common situation in such plays deals with the ways in which the couples face the breakdown of one of the most intimate relationships of social life namely marriage. In some of the plays, the characters watch helplessly, unable to do anything to prevent the disaster from taking place. In others, they make a last desperate attempt – foredoomed to failure – to save the marriage. For instance, *Diana in Tea*

Party does nothing to save her marriage, on the contrary, she ignores her husband and decides to go on a pleasure-trip with her brother instead. But in *The Collection*, Stella makes one least effort to win back her husband. Finding that he is no longer curious about her activities, she tries to provoke his jealousy by confessing that she committed adultery with Bill Lloyds. Unfortunately, for her, James is no longer interested in her – he is more interested in making friends with Bill and so her play fails.

In *The Room*, Pinter's first play, Rose is sixty and Bert fifty, and one of the themes raised here seems to be marital incompatibility. He is a van – driver, coarse and brutal by nature and not given to talkativeness; whereas Rose is a garrulous and sensitive woman – the motherly type. She is over anxious to please him, fetching and carrying for him and promising, "I'll have you some nice cocoa on for what you get back" (*The Room* 10). This anxiety regarding his comfort could be due to her love for him or could be motivated by fear. What is evident is an overwhelming feeling of tension – a tension which suggests that the marriage is not as stable as it appears. It is threatened by forces outside itself, and this blind Negro may be conceived as a symbolic representation of this threat. In *The Birthday Party*, marital incompatibility is also reflected to some extent but not much has done in *The Room*. Meg is totally different from her sensitive, understanding husband Petey. She appears to be a stupid and foolish woman, and though talkative and motherly like Rose, she lacks Rose's intelligence and sensitivity. Yet she wins our sympathy by her frank and sincere feelings for both Petey and Stanley. In *A Slight Ache*, the woman is younger than Rose and Meg, and instead of the mother-wife figure, we find the wife – mistress figure emerging. The triple personality of woman which embodies within it the mother-mistress-wife figure is expounded at length in *The Home Coming*. In *Landscape*, also, we find that the degree marital incompatibility between Beth and Duff is so great that even though they occupy physically the same room, mentally they are far apart.

The exception to all these failures is portrayed in *The Lover* where Richard and Sarah have been married for over ten years and are still happy

together. Based on the French proverb that every wife should be a mistress, Sarah dons the garb of wife and whore for Richard, who in turn is both husband and lover. In the afternoons as the mood takes them, they change their clothes and assume the roles of different characters. For instance, Richard is in quick succession an attempted rapist, a gentleman park-keeper who rescues a dam set in distress and a reluctant man seduced against his will; while Sarah is in turn the innocent damsel pursued by the villain and rescued by the hero, who in turn threatens her and finally she is the Siren tempting “a married man” to commit adultery. As Simon Trussler puts it,

“The ‘lovers’ believing that variety, is the spice
of lust, evidently choose to act out impromptu
rapes or seductions as the mood takes them
during their matinee mating games, and to
reserve the straighter sex for their evening
performances as a married couple” (P 112)

Similarly in *Night*, an old couple manages to steer their marriage through the rocks safely. In the play, they recollect over coffee their first meeting and though they disagree regarding the minor details, in the major issue, they are in perfect harmony as they re-exchange vows of “adoring each other always”. A peculiar feature of Pinter’s dramatic world is that the only strong bond which survives is not parental love or the love between man and woman, but that between brothers and sisters or between brothers. As early as 1957, when he wrote his first play, Pinter hints that love between children is more stable than any other bond. Mr. Kidd does not remember his mother but he remembers his sister with nostalgic affection:

“She used to keep things in very good trim.
And I gave her a helping hand. She was very
grateful, right until her last. She always used
to tell me how much she appreciated all the
little things that I used to do for her” (P 68)

In *Tea Party* also we find a close bond between Disson’s children. Both the boys react identically to situations and neither of them makes a comment

without asking for the other's collaboration. In *The Caretaker*, the title itself suggests the care taken by Mick over his brother Aston. In *The Dwarfs*, Pinter portrays the relationship between three friends, emphasizing their mutual dependency and their mutual distrust of one another. The three friends begin to betray one another in their efforts to win complete possession of each other. For instance, Mark warns Len against Pete, Pete warns Len against Mark and Len warns the other two against the dwarfs. Their tragedy, springs from the fact that they are mutually dependent: "Like Schizophrenics, they must consistently remain in grating contact with one another or face total withdrawal into a solipsistic, catatonic dream world" (Baker 44). If in *The Dwarfs*, "betrayal and mutual distrust" form the dominating motifs of the action, in *The Collection*, it is the presence of trust which forms the chief motive. Pinter deals with the betrayal of friendship beginning with Ben's implied, though not shown, betrayal of his friend-cum-partner Gus in *The Dumb Waiter*. Parental betrayal is portrayed in *The Caretaker* through Aston's speech on his stay at the hospital. To conclude, it becomes clear that while Pinter may not a social dramatist, his plays have a strong social dimension. To Walter Kerr, Pinter is the only dramatist to present his plays in the new existentialist sequence.

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