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The World of the Absurd Characters in the Plays of Pinter

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Harold Pinter often maintained silence on the information about characters. Pinter's writing process is one of 'finding out' about his characters by following how they proceed from his initial image of them. Pinter is an acute observer of human behaviour and is well aware that the individual psyche is very complex and does not always operate according to reason. Pinter's approach to characterisation may be found in the list of characters given in the beginning of the text. Age and sex of the character is only mentioned, nothing more. The information of the characters lies at the heart of the plays. The unfolding drama of each play is an ongoing process of exploring how the characters relate to each other, and what the true extent of an actual relationship is.

Pinter's characters just talk. One can take little they say at face value. Pinter's characters may contradict themselves; they may have more than one name; what they say is open to several interpretations. To say that they fail to communicate is only partly true. More often they refuse to communicate. Fearing to expose or reveal themselves, they use words as 'a violent, sly, anguished smokescreen which keeps the other in its place. Pinter calls this smoke screen 'A stratagem of nakedness.'

…I am interested primarily in people: I want to present living people to the audience, worthy of their interest basically because they are, they exist, not because of any moral the author may draw from them …I want as far as possible to leave comment to the audience; let them decide whether the characters and situations are funny or sad.[1]

Harold Pinter often maintained silence on the information about characters. For some time he was criticized for deliberate obscurity, in offering contradictory information about characters or no information at all. Many playwrights provide an exposition early on, which informs audience about the characters and about their dramatic function. Pinter doesn't do this. His approach to 'character' has a different starting point.

Pinter's writing process is one of 'finding out' about his characters by following how they proceed from his initial image of them. Bill Naismith points out: "There is a psychologic to how characters speak and behave in Pinter, but not everything is explained in an obvious way."[2] Pinter is an acute observer of human behaviour and is well aware that the individual psyche is very complex and does not always operate according to reason. Pinter stands aloof from the insistent expository devices in order to chalk out the details about characters and incidents, which may serve as clues for the audience to get at the message of the play. As Pinter himself says:

Finding the characters and letting them

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speak for themselves is the great excitement of writing. I would never distort the consistency of a character by a kind of hoarding in which I say, 'By the way, these characters are doing this because of such and such.' I find out what they are doing, allow them to do it, and keep out of it. Then it is up to the audience to decide how much is Truth and how much is lies.[3]

Pinter maintains his detachment. He presents the audience with implied and insinuated clues and withdraws. It is left for the audience to draw their own inference.

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Pinter does not give lengthy or detailed physical descriptions of his characters. The audience see them purely as they make their appearance on the stage, with very little information being given about their past history. In this Pinter makes a departure from the standard conventions of drama. Another characteristic is the choice of characters who do not speak fluently and with intelligence. Instead, they are often incoherent. The characters have no superhuman or extraordinary abilities. They inhabit a world which is recognizably real. When they speak, they do it in ordinary colloquial language. According to Pinter,"My situations and characters aren't always explicit. Well, I don't see life as being very explicit. Our personalities are too complex to be cut and dried and labeled."[4]

The real motives of other people are not known to us. Even our own motives are pretty obscure. Pinter does not believe that a dramatist can know his characters, for people can hardly be precisely known in our living and moving life. On the contrary, he holds that what life offers to us is fragmented, mysterious and suggestive.

In Pinter's theatre menace is evoked through the indefinable nature of the characters and their maneuvers. The behaviour of the character, their defensive tactics and how they react physically and verbally when confronted with a vital challenge holds the attention of the audience.

For Pinter, the past is a continuous mystery, a place where both good and bad experiences can be remembered, more or less vaguely. This leaves one in the present in a state of insecurity. Naismith observes, "Personal insecurity leads many of Pinter's characters to devious evasions, linguistic strategies to protect themselves or language games."[5] The characters in the Pinterian play do not wish to be known. They rarely offer a convincing explanation of themselves. "His characters have conflict with each other, but they have conflict with themselves and that's what's really exciting,"[6] said Lia Williams who played the roles of Mrs. Sands and Suki respectively in the 2000 New York Pinter Festival double bill of The Room and Celebration and the part of Ruth in the 2001 revival of The Homecoming.

Pinter's characters do not inform anything. His characters can neither say what they know, nor know what they say. Neither they nor the audience can trust words. What Mick speaks for Davies in *The Caretaker* applies to all his characters: "I can take nothing you say at face value. Every word you speak is open to any number of different interpretations" (Caretaker, 71). His characters use words which refer only to the partly known.

When Pinter's characters try to explain themselves, they fail to clarify. Pinter knows that life is far from being neat, tidy and carefully groomed. Paul Rogers, who first played Max in The Homecoming, says, "The wonderful thing about Pinter is that he really writes about people. And the extra ordinary way in which ordinary people's minds work. Ordinary people don't behave like people in a well-made play, where

you follow one line of direction."[7] Life is a mess. The world is completely irrational and gratuitous. Pinter's characters are unmotivated and vague. Their actions are largely incomprehensible, mysterious and unpredictable. Their verbal idiom registers the frivolity and frailty of their existence.

Unreliability of memory is a major theme of Pinter's plays. It is one reason for the difficulty of verifying what a character says. In 1962, Pinter spoke of the immense difficulty, if not the impossibility, of verifying the past. I don't mean merely years ago, but yesterday, this morning.... A moment is sucked away and distorted, often even at the time of its birth. 'If people share a common ground,' it's more like quicksand.' For they interpret experience differently. As in life, Pinter's characters either cannot remember, are uncertain of the accuracy of their memory, or recognise that what ever they recall is true mainly for the present, however false it may be for the past. While their memories are unverifiable guides to the past, they create dramatic present that affects others and that audiences verify before their eyes.

What people are and whether one can truly perceive their essence are issues in several of Pinter's plays. When his characters attempt to explain themselves they fail to clarify. The more detail they employ, the less convincing they become. Each piece of information about background and motivation proves to be partial information and raises new issues. The problem is not that one questions their reality but that one fails to understand them - a failure that is the dramatic point. Pinter objects to 'the causes of drama' and asks, 'What reason have we to suppose that life is so neat and tidy.' Like people, he, points out, his characters are usually 'inexpressive, giving little away, unreliable, elusive, evasive, obstructive, unwilling. Not only does this reversal create greater realism, but also it provides direct impact upon spectators and readers who are in the position of the characters.

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There is no future for the characters of Pinter. In play after play, the curtain comes down on a terrible state of states in which the only possible development for the individuals concerned is, at best, continued stagnation, at worst, putrefaction. This is not a matter of accident. The characters frequently refer to the future. Yet the future which they imagine is quite clearly beyond their grasp. Their visions are perpetually betrayed by their actions - and their actions, as the audience come to realize, are conditioned by their history. This steady elimination of the future by the slow revelation of old times is the most distinctive mark of Pinter's dramatic technique. Its most interesting aspect is the way in which he subtly corrupts his audience into abandoning all hope for the characters.

The menacing atmosphere of the plays is a product of the way in which the spectator is left prey to the pity and terror naturally associated with an unexpected visit to the inhabitants of inferno.

Characters on the traditional stage use dialogue as a definite theatrical strategy for pushing the action forward. They reveal their true selves in the monologues which reveal to the audience what is inside them. Pinter's characters can hardly be trusted whether they are talking to others or to themselves. There is no soliloquy or aside.

Characters created by Pinter are never cardboard ones. They have their own dimension to move about and grow entirely out of the words they exchange. By means of his stage language the playwright builds those characters, who, as Pirandello's character Father finds in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, "Springs into life

up here on the stage face to face with each other."[8]

Pinter has an acute concern for the visualisation of characters, to be achieved mainly through the spoken interactions aided by gesture and movement. What Pinter is interested in, does not lie in the mere factual details about men and women around us; he rather concerns himself with the cosmic or universal truth that cuts in the human condition in any time-oriented sequence in our life in this world. His characters remind of Pirandello's views that, when the actors come on stage "they must not be actors any longer, they must be the characters in the play they are acting. That way they will have a reality in their own right that is absolute not relative: it won't be the false Truth of the stage, but the positive undeniable truth of life."[9]

As a playwright Pinter never assumes the roles of an omniscient narrator of events, or of a reformist, propagandist, or even of a psychoanalyst. His characters are neither conceptualized, nor pre-conceived. He say's: "I don't know what kind of characters my plays will have …well, until they are. Until they indicate to me what they are."[10]

Rose in *The Room* is a woman of sixty is tormented by dark forebodings and existential fears. The woman is completely devoted and absorbed in attending in the man. Bert just sits there, reads the newspaper, and allows himself to be fed and looked after. She chatters incessantly perhaps to hide her fears or to show her importance. She frequently harps on the room's warmth and seclusion as against the dark and cold outside. And the dank and cold basement preoccupies her. Rose's entombed withdrawal is, in fact, subject to endless interruption.

There is uncertainty about Rose's past; her antecedent mystery shrouds her dual response of repulsion and attraction towards Riley. Past is invoked, and sometimes recreated to suit the present need. Irrationality is prevented from being senseless and meaningless by the characters consistent attempt to counter it with illusions of rationality and order. The characters try to impose a mental construct on the shapeless and formless chaos that seems all set to engulf them.

Rose is talkative and appears possessive, and even demonstrates her concern for her husband Bert. Conversation for her is a kind of escape from loneliness and a kind of illusion. It is "a constant stratagem to cover nakedness" for her.[11] As long as she keeps a conversation going, she is active in a structured situation which gives her a temporary role, a confirmation of identity and an escape from the terror of unstructured isolation. Bert's indifference may be one of the reasons for her feeling of insecurity. She treats her husband as a baby and she is very much attached to the room. She talks of the warmth and is quite happy in her room. But security of her identity inside her room proves to be an illusion when a succession of intruders barge in.

Kidd, the first one, claims the ownership of the chairs, Mr. And Mrs. Sands claim for the room and finally the third intruder, Riley, claims her. This is a gradual, insidious and sinister move to invade her territory and her own self. Rose can no longer hold her fortress of illusion and succumbs to 'implosion'.

Mr. Kidd, the elderly man, whom Rose treats as the landlord, does not even know the number of floors in the house. "To tell you the truth," he confesses, "I don't count them now" *(Room, 92)*. The ostensible landlord seems hilariously vague about his present, his past, his place of abode and even his origins. He says about his mum, "I think my mum was a Jewess. Yes, I wouldn't be surprised to learn that she was a Jewess."*(Room, 93)* Rose tries to question Kidd about the tenants down in the basement floor, but he does not answer her questions, perhaps because he is deaf or perhaps for some other, sinister reason. Kidd talks communicates nothing, thereby confusing the audience and creating an atmosphere of menace. When Kidd comes for the second time

and informs Rose about someone waiting for her in the basement, she ignores the information but goes on talking about two people who told her that her room was vacant.

Bert is a van driver. Bert sits unnervingly silent at a table reading a magazine as the play opens while Rose chatters incessantly. Bert's silence arouses one's curiosity. He breaks his silence when he makes his second entry on the stage. This time he channelises his emotion to his vehicle, which he treats as his mistress. He indulges in it to make good his own sense of inadequacy, but his passion is aroused when he finds Riley getting close to Rose. In a mood of despair he furiously attacks Riley without asking him anything. Bert represents the typical Pinter man who is "haunted by a sense of insignificance, and tries to counter it by imposing his authority on other vulnerable characters or by fantasizing his own sense of importance."[12]

Riley the blind Negro, wants to take Rose back for reasons not known. Riley's desperate pleading with Rose to go back home with him indicates his helpless dependence on her. Rose, the supposed victim becomes the victimizer. Rose could be having a shady past; Riley could be the agent of the organization, of the dark unconscious force, or of fate, which dogs the fugitive Rose. The transference of blindness from Riley to Rose suggests that the intruder is less of a human being and more of a subversive dark force.

The blind Negro has been lying in the basement for days and has brought a message for Rose from her past. He has been lying down below and had foreknowledge of the future, that room number seven would soon become vacant. The Negro must therefore be a being from beyond this world; he may be a dead man or a messenger of death, perhaps Rose's own dead father. His blackness and his blindness reinforce these allegorical implications.

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