

**HAROLD PINTER AS AN ADEPT IN PROJECTING PSYCHOLOGICAL
PROBLEMS WITH A FOCUS ON POSSESSIVENESS AND JEALOUSY IN HIS
DRAMATIC WORLD: AN APPRAISAL**



DR. S.CHELLIAH, M.A., Ph.D., D.Litt.,
Professor, Head & Chairperson,
School of English & Foreign Languages,
Department of English & Comparative Literature,
Madurai Kamaraj University,
Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India.

Abstract

This article is an attempt to bring in light the theme of psychological problems in Pinter's dramatic world. One is attracted to Pinter for his deep awareness of the precarious human psyche and the treatment of basic issues in his plays. The play *The Lover* (1964) is a psychological study of a repressed personality suffering from hysteria *The Home Coming* (1964) seems to depict a situation in which the sons gratify their sexual fantasies with the mother while the father watches helplessly. Except in *The Caretaker*, where Davies' expulsion from Aston's house could be seen as an echo of Adam's expulsion from Paradise, religious interpretation is rare where Pinter is concerned. Some of his common themes are social relationships, psychological problems, illusions and fantasies, failure of communication, death, time, racial hatred, alienation, and identity crisis. Interpreting Pinter's plays from a psychological point of view, one finds them to be far different from the attempts of other dramatists whose plays are acknowledged to be psychological in nature. A peculiar feature of Pinter's plays is that no single psychological problem can be pointed out as being a sole theme of any of his plays. From the very beginning of his career as a playwright, Pinter has been very popular and his plays have received considerable critical attention which is neatly touched upon here in this paper.

Keywords: absurd theatre, metaphysical concept, distorted images, menace, possessiveness, abnormality, Oedipus complex.

Among modern British playwrights, Harold Pinter is one who is distinguished not only by his expertise in handling theatrical technicalities but also by his preoccupation, with the problems facing an individual in society. In this connection, Pinter appears to occupy a position between Absurd dramatists like Thomas Beckett and Ionesco, who capture our imagination by their technical innovations and social dramatists like Osborne and Wesker, who are more drawn towards contemporary social issues. Despite the fact that Pinter 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, this kind of concretization and presentation of “a slice of real life paradoxically transform the real objects and situations to become archetypes of cosmic significance (Esslin 107).

It was Martin Esslin who first grouped Pinter with the other dramatists of the Absurd Theatre. Almost all 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. Generally speaking, Beckett's plays seem to be philosophical in concept and like him, another playwright Eugene Ionesco deals with treatises philosophical in vain. His central themes seem to be nothing but the loneliness and isolation of the individual, his sense of guilt and search for identity and the certainty of the existence of death and yet another playwright Genet is said to have depicted an image of man caught in a maze of mirrors seeing only his distorted reflection while Genet has portrayed only a distorted image of man, Pinter has portrayed not distorted images but realistic images of lifelike characters who at times seem to live in a distorted world – the world of absurdity.

Pinter's very first play *The Room* (1957) was an 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 occurred in all his plays as a leitmotif and even his very first full-length play, *The Birthday Party* (1957) presented this theme. *The Dumb Waiter* (1957) also dealt with menace. *The Caretaker* (1959), Pinter's full-length play after *The Birthday Party* was a play about “two brothers and a tramp” re-introducing the theme hinted at in *The Room*, the struggle for possession of a room of one's own. This theme was developed still further in *Night School* (1960). His next play namely *The Dwarfs* (1960) is the most obscure of all his play portraying the disintegration of an abnormal mind-Len's and its final recovery. This play also raised questions relating to a man's identity and his ultimate destiny. This appears to be Pinter's only play to deal with existential problems in somewhat metaphysical terms.

The play *The Lover* (1964) is a psychological study of a repressed personality suffering from hysteria *The Home Coming* (1964) seems to depict a situation in which the sons gratify their sexual fantasies with the mother while the father watches helplessly. *The Basement* (1966) re-introduces the early themes of possessiveness and menace, blended with the new theme of

dream fantasies and *Night* (1969) deals with the fallibility of human memory and the play *Old Times* (1970) re-introduces the old theme of a couple being threatened by an intruder from the past (of *The Room*): *No Man's Land* (1974) is a play in which four characters inhabit a no man's land between time present and time remembered, wherein memory, illusion and reality coalesce to form a mystery, obscuring the real from the illusory. This play deals with different kinds of betrayal – betrayal between husband and wife, between lovers, between friends and so on.

Though society may have had a hand in alienating man, Pinter appears more interested in showing the psychological causes leading to such alienation whereas playwrights like Beckett and Ionesco seem more concerned with the end-product than with the causes leading to it. Except in *The Caretaker*, where Davies' expulsion from Aston's house could be seen as an echo of Adam's expulsion from Paradise, religious interpretation is rare where Pinter is concerned. Some of his common themes are social relationships, psychological problems, illusions and fantasies, failure of communication, death, time, racial hatred, alienation, and identity crisis. Though Pinter is not considered a social dramatist like Arnold Weaker (*Roots*) or John Osborne (*Look Back in Anger*), social themes do occur in his plays rather frequently. Like all the playwrights grouped under *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Pinter too is obsessed with the inability of human beings to really communicate with one another. It seems paradoxical that language which should be the prime means of communication should prove itself to be a hindrance to communication. As Pinter says, "we have to communicate in our silence, in what is unsaid" (P 15). A study of his plays would reveal that Pinter is basically a humanist concerned with the socio-psychological problems of human beings offer some neat solutions to the complex problems portrayed.

In his plays, Pinter covers a wide range of themes, both topical and universal. Basically concerned with the human condition, Pinter seems to have concentrated on the "middle-classes" for projecting his ideas. While Beckett and Ionesco concentrated on an indefinable class of character to expound their metaphysical concepts, Pinter concretized his themes by basing them on life-like situations which gave them the appearance of probability. The action as presented in his plays may not really happen in real life. Yet they have a verisimilitude which lends credence to the belief that such things can and do happen. Any analysis will show that more than Pinter's range of themes, it is the depth of insight perceivable in each theme which deserves our attention. For instance, in his treatment of menace, Pinter reveals the different sources of menace, both external and internal. In *The Room*, the fear was within the confines of the room and seemed to emanate from Rose and towards the close of the play was concretized in the threatening figure of the blind Negro. In *The Birthday Party*, the menace sprang from a guilty conscience (Stanley's) and from a fear of retribution. In *A Slight Ache*, it was wholly within Edward's mind. Each play is compactly structured and stripped down to the bare essentials and this gives it a dramatic effect.

Taken chronologically, Pinter seems to have been obsessed with certain themes at certain periods of his writing career. In his early plays, it was "room" and "menace" which dominated; and it was succeeded by themes dealing with the character of "woman" in her various aspects. This was followed by themes centered around the family and members of the family. This, in turn, made way for themes related to "Personality" and the disintegration of personality followed by themes related to the inadequacy of language and the failure of communication. And in his later plays "meaning" and perception merge to form a poetic drama wholly Painterlike in quality. Different aspects of the same theme were dealt with in different plays written during a specific period. So a study of all the plays of a particular period enhances the meaning of each play written during that period. For instance, *The Birthday Party*, one can see the terrorizing aspect of two gangsters, Goldberg and Mc Cann, threatening their victim, Stanley. But in *The Dumb Waiter*, one can see the terror and fear which shadow the terrorizers themselves – and their ultimate fate. It is only after reading/seeing *Tea Party* and witnessing Disson's final collapse as a result of his hallucinations that we can interpret *A Slight Ache* along similar lines and find that the whole play could be a hallucination seen by a schizophrenic character, Edward. If *The Basement* is interpreted as a fantasy vision of wish-fulfillment seen by a lonely individual (Law) then *The Home Coming* could be interpreted as a fantasy of Oedipal wish-fulfillment seen by one of Max's sons.

Interpreting Pinter's plays from a psychological point of view, one finds them to be far different from the attempts of other dramatists whose plays are acknowledged to be psychological in nature. A peculiar feature of Pinter's plays is that no single psychological problem can be pointed out as being a sole theme of any of his plays. As a result, none of his plays can be said to be purely psychological. Moreover, the psychological aspect of his themes is not over. It is found only in the substratum, and that too usually centered on one of the characters.

The main psychological themes perceived in Pinter's plays can be classified as those concerned with menace, possessiveness, abnormality and Oedipus complex. Of these, perhaps the most important is the theme of menace. Pinter's plays have been classified as "Comedies of Menace" (Wardle 51) especially his early plays like *The Room*, *The Birthday Party*, *The Dumb Waiter*, and *A Slight Ache*. These plays had as their central theme the violation of security by an intruder. In these plays, the setting was confined to a single room – and this enclosed space could connote the sanctuary offered by the womb, the tomb etc. But rooms have doors and there is always the possibility that "someone" may enter and destroy the peace within the room. The constant threat experienced by the inhabitants of the room could be termed "menace". The effect of this menace on the audience is based on "the indisputable assumption that all human beings are capable of fear, that most of us have at some time or other feared the unknown Pinter's menace is the more frightening simply because we can read into it our particular bogeymen" (Sykes 7).

In the early plays, Pinter gives “menace” a human form. For instance, in *The Room*, the abstract fear is finally concretized in the form of the blind Negro, Riley. This reduces the tautness of the situation by almost making it an anticlimax. The first part of the play is very effective because one senses the tension in the room and the uneasiness of the relationship between the husband and wife. The tension seems to emanate from the motherly – looking Rose and soon her vague fears are empathetically transmitted to the audience. But Riley's entrance puts an end to the "abstractions" of the menace. By focusing it on Riley the vagueness and along with it, the dramatic quality of Rose's fears is lost. But questions like who Riley is and why Rose fears him and what provokes Bert to violence and leads him to murder Riley are all left unanswered. Thus, it is found that in his first play, only the situation is presented – an old couple, especially the wife, living in dread best something should spoil the security of their comfortable existence. This kind of fear of an unkind fate intervening to spoil present happiness is a fear experienced by all human beings. In this context, it is worth noting that in classical Greek drama, the tragedy is invariably caused by an unkind Fate. As Martin Esslin says, this existential fear is not a vague philosophical abstraction but is ultimately based on "the experience of a Jewish boy in the East End of London, of a Jew in the Europe of Hitler" (P 35). If Rose is a Jewess, then her fear might be a remnant of the fear experienced by all Jews who wanted in dread for the Gestapo to find them. Or, it could be a fear arising from a sense of guilt – for she was living with Bert under false pretenses, that is, if he was unaware that she was a Jewess.

In *The Birthday Party*, the second play of Pinter, this menace is still predominant. Stanley is frightened, so frightened that he prefers to bury himself in a seedy boarding house day and night. He never leaves the house, lives in self-imposed imprisonment within the four walls of the house. Here again, as in *The Room*, his fear is finally focused on the two strangers Goldberg and McCann. Even before they enter, he reveals his anxiety by his behavior and by the questions she put to Mag when she tells him about two new guests being expected. The mock trial of Stanley by Goldberg and McCann, funny no doubt, carries in its overtones of Gestapo questioning tactics. Although the questions are not terrifying in themselves, the fact that they make no sense and the tone in which they are uttered evoke terror.

The Dumb Waiter, one can find a change in the treatment of menace. It is no longer focused on something but left vague. Moreover, the menaced are themselves hired killers who have murdered many victims – similar to McCann and Goldberg in *The Birthday Party*. If Goldberg and McCann appeared dangerous and invoked terror, in *The Dumb Waiter* Pinter shows how far fear operates in the minds of the killers themselves. In *A Slight Ache*, the menace moves further inward. It is still externalized in the form of the Match seller. Yet, in the radio version at least, it appears that Edward was afraid of something within himself for the Match seller was not thought to be really present. To the listeners, it sounded as if he was a creation of Edward's sick mind. Flora saw in him the fulfillment of all her wishes – a picture, perhaps, seen through Edward's eyes.

In other words, the whole play could be a nightmarish fantasy seen by Edward who seems to suffer from schizophrenia. All his fears are projected on to the Match seller, in whose disreputable person. Edward sees everything he fears most. From his monologues, it is clear that Edward is afraid of being ousted from his present comfortable existence by an enemy who would replace him in his household and even take over his wife. Here, the change in Pinter's treatment of the theme of menace is obvious. The cause of the menace is no longer an external force, for the threatening fear is within Edward himself – or rather within the realms of his mind. The claustrophobic fear found in the earlier plays now gives way to obsessive fear within the characters themselves. Menace in other plays had been a sort of fear associated with an external threatening fear.

Though Pinter's fame rests on his treatment of the theme of menace, as he matured as a dramatist, he moved away from this dominating feature of his early plays. In his later plays, he seems to have outgrown this preoccupation with menace and his latest plays deal with such totally different themes as possessiveness and jealousy. Which are features common to humanity? These two feelings are related often leading to violence and aggression. To want to dominate over something or someone is inherent in human nature. The strong character dominates over the weak, and the weak character asserts his superiority over another still weaker and so on. Pinter's dramatic world is inhabited by characters who are dominating and aggressive by nature. This struggle for power to assert one's supremacy over another – is carried on, on different levels in almost all plays. For instance, the semantic quibble over "Light the Kettle" and "Light the gas" in *The Dumb Waiter* is actually a fight for power between Ben and Gus. Ben asserts his superiority, as the leader, yet his unconscious use of Gus's phrase leaves it open to doubt" (P 47). In *The Room*, both the characters are possessive by nature. Rose is very possessive of the room and proud of having acquired it, considering it superior to all the other rooms in the house.

Bert may not care for Rose – he seems to care more for his van – yet she is his and as much should be protected. So Bert's unprovoked violence against Riley may have been due to jealousy and a desire to protect her because she belongs to him. Alrene Sykes says:

"In a naturalistic drama – this would be perfectly understandable anger and possessive jealousy over Rose, akin to Rose's possessiveness towards the room. Like Rose, Bert responds to a threat to his possession by becoming more aggressive; where Rose became shrewish, he takes the more direct action of knocking the negro down" (P 13).

In *A Night Out*, a mother's insensitive possessiveness of her son results in reducing the man to a state of complete inertia. His two attempt to escape his mother's dominating presence are both thwarted and even his attempt at violence fails – for his mother forgives him, being "most understanding about the whole thing". Her possessive behavior over Albert can be compared to Mrs. Morel's smothering love for her son, Paul. In *The Caretaker* jealousy

provokes Mick to violence. He loves his brother and is very possessive of Aston. When Aston brings home a stranger, Mick hides and later when Aston goes out, he enters and threatens the tramp. His violence is provoked by jealousy. In *The Dwarfs*, jealousy destroys the love between the three friends. Marx is jealous of Pete's influence over Len and Pete is envious of Marx's influence over Len. Both try to assert their power over Len, each warning Len against the other. Torn between the two friends, Len becomes more and more suspicious of them, until his mind slowly gives way under the strain. Similarly in *Tea Party* jealousy leading to psychological disturbances of a more serious nature. It is presumed that after his stay in the hospital, Len recovers completely, but in *Tea Party*, Disson's sickness results in hysterical paralysis and blindness.

Disson suffers from an inferiority complex which makes him doubt his wife Diana's love for him. The easy camaraderie between Diana and her brother Willy makes Disson extremely jealous. He hates the memories they have of a shared childhood and tries to share in it by pretending to have been there, in their estate, with them when they were children. His jealousy can be compared to Othello's jealousy. In both their cases, the tragedy sprang from a sense of inferiority – Othello because he was dark in complexion and he could not believe that Desdemona was repelled by his dark skin: Disson because he did not belong to Diana's social milieu by birth. Moreover, Disson's jealousy sprang from the sickness of his mind which led him to distort reality; whereas Othello's jealousy had been provoked and developed by Iago's cunning hints which blinded him to reality and made him see everything distorted in the way Iago wanted him to see things. Jealousy is a homosexual situation is portrayed in *The Collection*. Thus, in the dramatic world of Pinter, possessiveness, and jealousy get projected rather obviously with objective reality.

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