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Harold Pinter's Socio- Political Criticism of the Western Scene as it Appears in His Plays: (An Analytical Study)

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In the Name of Allah, Ever Gracious, Ever Merciful

قال تعالى:

"قُلْ إِنَّ صَلَاتِي وَنُسُكِي وَمَحْيَايَ وَمَمَاتِي لِلَّهِ رَبِّ
الْعَالَمِينَ"

*Say, "Surely my prayer, and my rites, and my
living, and my dying are for Allah, The Lord of
the worlds". (Surat Al-An'am 162)*

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Harold Pinter was born in Hackney, East London October 10, 1930. He was the only son of Jack Pinter, who was a hard working Jewish ladies' tailor. Due to his harsh economic conditions, Jack Pinter worked twelve hours a day, lost his business, then went to work for someone else, and served as an air raid warden during the war. In his childhood, Pinter's mother Frances was everything to him, as she prepared him for life. She kept a lovely backyard garden, one happy site of his earliest boyhood imaginings. Both father and mother shaped Pinter's life.

During his early childhood, Pinter was greatly influenced by his Jewish parents stressing that the relationship between them helped to shape the first social part of his personality. Pinter was influenced greatly by his living conditions. In his book, *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter*, Michael Billington (1996) points out that the Pinter family was part of the immigrant wave of Jews that arrived in the East End around the turn of the century, and there were marked differences between the two sides of Pinter's family: his father's relations were the cultivated ones, while his mother's were the more cheerful, and fun loving (2).

Pinter was exposed to art since an early age as he spent his childhood in the East End with a family interested in the arts, especially music; as his father was a champion Charleston dancer in the 1920s. In an article entitled "The Most Provocative, Poetic and Influential Playwright of His Generation" published in *Times* (2008) Billington says that Pinter's grandparents were Jews who had fled persecution in Poland and Odessa. His father, Jack, had artistic leanings: his mother, Frances, came from a convivial, extrovert and spiritually skeptical clan.

And it was not difficult to trace in Pinter's own complex personality elements from both sides of the family. He balanced his father's faintly authoritarian nature with his mother's instinctive generosity (1). Thus, Pinter's affection for arts started since an early age because of his family's affection for arts.

This affection for the arts helped Pinter to master some artistic abilities since he was young. Pinter manipulates all the living conditions around him to start writing pieces of art at the age of six or seven. In the introduction to her book, *The Pinter Ethic: the Erotic Aesthetic* (2000), Prentice Penelope confirms that Harold Pinter honors his childhood in the East End as spent in a "living community" with "a living language." He started to write drama since an early age in the back garden which was maintained by his mother, Pinter began to make up stories with imaginary characters, and "to have long dramatic interludes," and "a very real relationship with them" (xxxix).

Pinter's writings were influenced by his childhood conditions. He started to write in order to be away from the harsh living conditions around him. From the age of nine to fourteen, Pinter, as well as other children, was evacuated to a castle Cornwall to be away from the threats and dangers caused by World War II. During Pinter's evacuation, his parents visited him whenever they could. Visiting him was a load to his parent's economic burden as they had no money. World War II resulted in bad circumstances and destruction to the place he was living in. In 1944, Pinter returned home from Cornwall to see his first flying bomb in the street. It looked like a tiny airplane. It was an innocent-looking thing. It just chugged along. And then he saw it come down. At other times, he opened the backdoor to find the garden in flames (qtd in Prentice 2000: xxxii).

In 1944, Pinter passed the required examination of Hackney Downs Grammar School, which was one of the state grammar schools that offers free education till the age of eighteen. He spent four years in that school. Pinter was an only child, but he discovered his social potential as a student at Hackney Downs School. Spending those four years at that school helped to shape some of the social values Pinter adopted throughout his life. Billington (1996) refers to Pinter's life at the school and the influence of the school on his social beliefs. He says: "Partly through the school and partly through the social life of Hackney Boys' Club . . . he formed an almost sacerdotal belief in the power of male friendship. The friends, he made in those days . . . have always been a vital part of the emotional texture of his life" (11).

At Hackney school, Pinter acted in dramatic school productions. His education at Hackney Downs Grammar School brought him into a lively-minded group of energetic and intellectually adventurous teachers and fellow-students, in which theatre seems to have been an important influence. A major influence on Pinter was his inspirational English teacher Joseph Brearley, who directed him in school plays and with whom he took long walks, talking about literature. In his book *Pinter: a Study of His Plays* (1971), Martin Esslin says that "The young Pinter began his love affair with the theatre. His English master, Joseph Brearley, is the person that Pinter credits with introducing him to drama. Brearley directed the sixteen-year old boy in *Macbeth*, and also as Romeo" (13).

At school; one of Pinter's main intellectual interests was English literature, particularly poetry. At the age of twelve, he began to write poetry, and in spring 1947, his poetry was first published in the Hackney Downs School Magazine. After leaving the school, he joined the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, in 1948,

where he studied acting, but left after two terms to join a repertory company as a professional actor appearing under the penname David Baron in provincial repertory theatres until 1959 (*Online Encyclopedia Britannica*).

In Pinter's teens, he became a leader of a group of Hackney friends who were interested in literature, as well as cricket and discussion. Most of those friends became a distinguished actor, like Henry Woolf, a famous writer, like Mick Goldstein, or a professor of English, like Morris Wernick. Pinter made a great friendship with them. This friendship became one of the points of departure for his drama. This leads Billington (2008) to stress that Pinter "also had a gift for friendship: he became the centre of an itinerant, intellectually voracious Hackney clan - Henry Woolf, Mick Goldstein and Morris Wernick - who stayed in close touch for the rest of their lives" (2). In "Afterword: Harold Pinter and Cricket," John Fowles stresses Pinter's admiration of cricket as a game. He says that after having lunch with Pinter and his wife, it becomes clear to me that Pinter "has a deep love for cricket". He supposes that cricket is "responsible for the mature playwright Pinter" (310-311)

Pinter's childhood affected his writing style greatly in the way that it set the roots of his basic assumptions. In 1949, Pinter was eligible for national service, but he refused. He risked jail as a "conscientious objector," because he opposed the politics of the Cold War but was fined £125 after refusing a medical check instead. Esslin stresses that: "Pinter's radical pacifism, which led him . . . to risk a prison sentence rather than do his national service, was a reaction to this experience of violence in the years of his boyhood and adolescence" (33).

In 1951, Pinter was admitted to the Central School of Speech and Drama. In the same year, he won a place in a new McMaster's famous Irish repertory company, renowned for its performances of Shakespeare's works. From September 1951 to the fall of 1952, Pinter toured Ireland, playing Shakespeare. In 1953, he joined Donald Wolfit's company. While he was with this company, he happened to meet the actress Vivien Merchant for the first time. Pinter toured again between 1954, and 1957, using the stage name of David Baron (Hinchliffe 1981: 15).

Pinter never went to a university and never spent any of his time in drama schools, but he started his career as an outstanding playwright; a career which gives some cues that, since an early age, he appreciated the aesthetic values of literature, and that he succeeded in establishing himself as one of the best dramatists of his generation. Although he started to write since 1951, he became one of the best dramatists of the 20th century. Pinter began his theatrical career as an actor, touring with provincial repertory companies. He has continued to act throughout his career, working on stage, in films and on radio and television (Drabble 2000: 793).

In 1956, Pinter, again, met Vivien Merchant and they were married. Lawrence Bensusan points out that Pinter's wife, the actress Vivien Merchant, who became an accomplished interpreter of his plays, toured England and Ireland with him, but when she became pregnant in 1958, it was necessary for them to find a home, and they took a basement room in London's shabby Notting Hill Gate section, in a building where Pinter worked as a caretaker to pay his rent (2).

After marrying the actress Vivien Merchant in 1956, Pinter began to write plays, short stories and monologues. In 1957, at the suggestion of a university

friend, he wrote his first one-act drama, *The Room*. Even in this initial short play, there can be detected themes and echoes, which were to reverberate through his subsequent work. There is a sense of confinement, a sense of territory in danger of being violated by unseen outside forces, a sense of menace (Walford and Dolley 2006: 120).

In *The Pinter Ethic: the Erotic Aesthetic* (2000), Penelope Prentice says that Pinter had earlier mentioned the play [*The Room*] to his friend, the actor Henry Woolf, then a student in the drama department of Bristol University. When Woolf solicited the play for production, Pinter said he hadn't written it yet and couldn't possibly write it in time. He wrote it in four days. Pinter wrote it under influence of a situation happened to him. Pinter's first dramatic image came at a party in London when he was taken to a room where he saw one loquacious, literate man serving food to another man, burly and silent. Those two people became Rose and Bert in *The Room* (xlii).

In *The Room* (1957), which is a one-act play, Pinter had worked on themes and ideas that he would apply on *The Birthday Party* and some of his other plays. Among these themes are the failure of language to serve as an enough tool of communication, the use of the enclosed place as a sanctum that is violated by menacing intruders and the surrealistic confusions that obscure or distort fact. Esslin (1971) says that the production of Pinter's first play, *The Room*:

. . . was so successful that the Bristol Old Vic company also produced it, and entered it in *The Sunday Times'* student drama competition. Pinter captured the attention of Michael Codron after an article about the production, written by Harold Hobson, a critic with *The Sunday Times*, appeared in the newspaper (16).

In 1957, Pinter also wrote *The Party* (later titled *The Birthday Party*). Pinter adored being at rehearsal, in part because he was such a consummate actor himself. The notes he gave us as we worked on *The Birthday Party* were so precise, so behavioral, so "actable," he immediately gave lie to the notion, which a Pinter play lived in the zone of the "abstract," or the "absurd." When Jean Stapleton asked Pinter why Meg was so desperate for her husband Petey to read the newspaper aloud to her 'Was it the only lifeline in their otherwise empty marriage?', Pinter thought for a moment, and then replied: "I think she's forgotten how to read." That was something Jean could run with (Esslin 1971: 18)

Codron was impressed with Pinter, and asked him if he had any more plays. Pinter submitted *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter* for his approval. Codron expressed his interest in *The Birthday Party*, and he bought an option on it in January, 1958. It was first produced three months later at The Arts Theatre in Cambridge. In May of that year *The Birthday Party* was produced for the second time, this time for London audiences. In his *Letter to Peter Wood*, Pinter says that "*The Birthday party* is a comedy because the whole state of affairs is absurd, and inglorious. It is, however, as you know, a very serious piece of work" (5).

When *The Birthday Party* was published and performed, it has been criticized, because in it we run into some characters, who were trying to escape their life attempting to find a shelter of security away from their original society. Gillen (2004) states: "In his early works, like *the Birthday Party*, Pinter demonstrated not only the menace, but the personal disintegration and decay, which is the result of such a retreat" (95). This leads Esslin to mention that *The Birthday Party* was criticized severely by the reviewers stressing that what all this

means, only Mr. Pinter knows, for as his characters speak in non- sequiters, half gibberish, and lunatic ravings, they are unable to explain their actions, thoughts, or feelings (17-18). Harold Hobson came to Pinter's defense in the 25 May, 1958 *Sunday Times*: "I have as a judge of plays by saying that *The Birthday Party* is not a fourth, not even a second, but a first, and that Mr. Pinter, on the evidence of his work, possesses the most original, disturbing, and arresting talent in theatrical London" (qtd. in Esslin 19).

Though Pinter has been criticized greatly, he never quit writing. In 1959, Pinter wrote *The Caretaker*, which presents a picture of isolated individuals at loose ends, men who lack a sense of who they are, where they belong, and what their place is in the scheme of things. The play shows the three men encountering each other, jockeying for position, and desperately attempting to reach out and make some sort of contact that will serve as an anchor or a framework by which they can define themselves. Mohamed Hefni refers to the major themes in the play, which are some of the major themes that Pinter tries to apply throughout his plays. Hefni says:

The themes of *The Caretaker* retain a force that derives from the close contact reserved with primitive impulses and ways of feelings. There is a polarization in the play between good and evil, characteristic of primary and fundamental relationships. The duration of the play is a fortnight. Its plot could be described, simply, as the process of first taking Davis in, and then getting him out (26).

In 1960, *The Caretaker* opened at the Arts theatre in London. It is a grim nightmare complete with gallows humor which is about love and lack of love. One critic wrote about the play:

A fine play, consistently carried through apart from a few puzzling, but not important details . . . a particular virtue is that nowhere does Mr. Pinter treat non-communication as an extraneous, rather banal 'point' to be made (compare Ionesco's *The Chairs*, 1952). It is knit with the people and the action. Yet one must still say that this plunging of audiences into the world of the shut-off mind is something that leads away from the main stream of art-whose main business, surely, is with the adult relationships we painfully try to keep and deepen. It is a fascinating byway and Mr. Pinter's work literally fascinates; but one hopes he will move on (Esslin 1971: 22).

In February 1959, *The Dumb Waiter* had its first performance in Germany at Frankfurt-am-Main. *The Dumb Waiter* (1959) is a funny play filled with ultimate horror. Pinter is able to disturb the audience by asking them to reflect on the doors of their lives that they use, and believe in. Pinter certainly leaves open the possibility of doors in audience lives that lead to nowhere certain, but he also forces them to confront the possibility of doors that lead to nowhere at all - doors , in other words, that merely look like doors, but only dupe audience into believing in their expected function.

In *The Dumb Waiter*, Ben and Gus stare in stunned silence eying warily towards each other till suddenly they become prey. Pinter has a unique style of starting his plays. Kuska (2006) says that Pinter's plays begin in a light, often comical tone that gradually changes to one of anxiety, conflict and fear where the threat of an unknown, powerful, often omniscient danger prevails. This dark presence controls everything, including the characters' lives. The characters' reaction to this danger is the source of conflict and action in his drama (6).

The Dumb Waiter is a play where nothing happens. Two men lie on beds with iron bedsteads in a room without windows. The walls are in need of painting, a photograph of a cricket team is on the door. It could be a prison cell. One man, Gus, reads the headlines of the newspaper loud. The other man, Ben, tries to busy himself waking up and putting his shoes on. Gus is apparently more confident, more self assured, more relaxed than Ben. They discuss the problem of how to make tea with no money in the gas meter for gas. Suddenly a dumb waiter appears and introduces the menus. The introduction of the menus presents new challenges for the two men as they feel they have to comply by asking for the order. Both men, towards the end of the play, dress in their suits, gun holsters and check their semi automatic guns.

Pinter's *Betrayal* (1960), leading from the beginning of an illicit affair to an emotional conclusion, begins with the lovers dining at a cafe two years after they ended their romantic relationship. The story's ending occurs nine years earlier with the gentleman's initial admission to his best friend's wife that he is in love with her. What we get in this play are the traditional ingredients of a love triangle played back for us in reverse order: the break-up, the husband's knowledge of how his wife and friend have betrayed him, the lovers' purchase of a flat in which to engage in their illicit activities, and the first encounter.

In 1963, Pinter wrote *The Lover*, in which he uses traditional comic material which is full of ambiguity. *The Lover* has a fairly simple premise exploring role-playing within the marital state. At first, there is much comedy from the respectable married couple openly discussing their ongoing infidelity. Then frank acceptance starts to appear, there is the revelation that their adultery is a pure