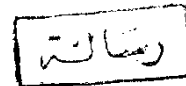


# Tragicomedy in The Major Plays of Harold Pinter

by

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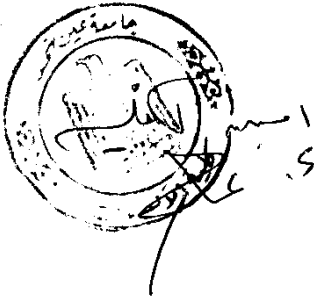
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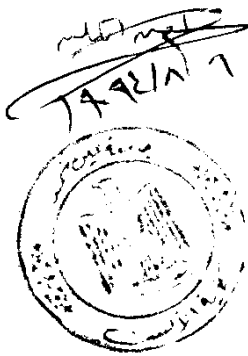
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# INTRODUCTION



## **Introduction**

Over the last years tragicomedy has escalated to the extent that it has been viewed as the common denominator of the twentieth century drama. Its escalation derives basically from the circumstances of today's present life. Tragicomedy has become the dominant dramatic form in the twentieth century, therefore, it has become an important issue for literary research.

This thesis aims at exploring the new trend in contemporary English theatre. Many factors contributed to bring about changes in the theatre. These changes, in turn, led playwrights to tackle different themes and adopt new techniques in their plays to suit the almost new. A particular emphasis is given, in this thesis, to tragicomedy in Harold Pinter's major plays. There has recently been a growing need for some studies to be done on tragicomedy as there have not been enough researches conducted in this field.

Although many writers wrote tragicomic plays, there is no common feature connecting their plays. Also, there is not an agreed definition of tragicomedy. It is as Richard Dutton says: "The problem is that there is no single, agreed definition of 'tragicomedy'. Nor, unlike 'tragedy' and 'comedy', has there been a consistent historical tradition of tragicomedy within which we can look for a definition ..... . As a result, 'tragicomedy'

has become one of the most contentious of all critical terms."<sup>1</sup> A definite definition of the term 'tragicomedy' is impossible . It may be said that tragicomedy is the mixing of the tragic and comic elements in the same context for a special purpose. Beckett in labelling Waiting For Godot a tragicomedy, " invites us to encompass the full nature of human experience as it has dramatically evolved in the mixed mode of tragicomedy."<sup>2</sup>

The twentieth century drama came to recognize the closely interwoven relationship between tragedy and comedy. Tragedy and comedy are two faces of the same coin. Cyrus Hoy says, in his essay Comedy, Tragedy and Tragicomedy : "This is the great irony of life: that man can envision an ideal of good, can passionately desire to achieve it, and yet fails to live up to it. The failure can occasion either tears or laughter: tears in recognition of the fact that this is the way life is; laughter at the folly of those who fail to recognize that this is the way life is .Both the protagonists of tragedy and comedy alike are deficient in their knowledge of human limitations, of what they can hope to achieve and what it is the better part of wisdom not to attempt"<sup>3</sup> Victor Hugo believes that tragedy and comedy must not be separated in drama , "Since man is always both at the same time beast and soul, it would be an unrealistic abstraction to write comedy and tragedy separately"<sup>4</sup>. Hugo

believes that man is a body and soul at the same time, and is a tragicomic creature. Nevertheless, appears comic inspite of his mind and tragic in the contrast between his little body and sublime aspiration. Tragicomedy is the mature stage in the course of the development in the theatre. Tragicomedy is an adequate term to describe the present human condition. As individuals endeavour to understand that condition and to communicate to one another, they become more aware of that condition and thus more tense.

Chapter I depicts the origin and development of tragicomedy until the twentieth century drama placed Pinter as a pioneer in this trend. I will survey the long journey tragicomedy undertook to become the dominant dramatic form of the twentieth century drama. I will also view the different concepts of tragicomedy through the ages. Also, I will view the changes in the different aspects of life, that led tragicomedy to be its appropriate representation .

Perhaps, Plautus was the first ancient poet who calls it by its name . Tragicomedy as a dramatic genre has not been given the seriousness that it deserves by the ancient critics. Aristotle, the father of literary criticism, disapproved any mingling between tragedy and comedy, and his definitions require their absolute separation. Tragedy in classical literature had received the greater attention. In the Renaissance period,

there was much fussing over the meaning of tragicomedy, as Sir Philip Sidney noted with disgust", thrust in the clownes by head and shoulders to play a part in maiesticall matters."<sup>5</sup> Even Dryden who had invented the term 'comic relief' has not given tragicomedy its due support. It was Shakespeare, who had given tragicomedy its due respect and universality. In king Lear, the Fool's jokes accelerate the tensions. In Hamlet, the Gravedigger scene is funny, but what is funny about death; also in Macbeth the Porter is about Hell. But it must be noted, that long before Shakespeare there were great unquestionable tragedies that exploited the relation between the tragic and comic.

Perhaps, since the middle of the eighteenth century the human attitude has shifted a great deal towards the nature of man and thus the attitude towards tragedy and comedy. Instead of showing heroic figures, it studied common man in relation with his society. Many changes justify the twentieth century being described as the century of tragicomedy and that it is tragicomedy that reflects the absurdity of the human condition. I will show how the two World Wars, psychological studies, the rising of the middle classes, contradictions, alienation, and decadent moral traditions, all contributed to shift our attitude towards tragedy and comedy and to establish tragicomedy as the dominant dramatic genre. It is best described by J.L. Styan, "Both experience of life and familiarity with the best of

twentieth - century drama constantly compel us to be aware of the blood relationship of the tragic and comic senses, of the interbreeding of tears and laughter."<sup>6</sup> Today, we have absolutely no reason to be pessimistic or optimistic in our outlook. With all comforts of modern scientific civilization available to us, and with the changed beliefs about God and religion, God is no longer merciless on punishing man for his ignorance, thus there is no reason to be either purely tragic or purely comic.

Most plays of our century are best subtitled not as tragedies or as comedies but as tragicomedies. Writers avoided the tradition of using sublime ideas of good and evil in tragedies and invented a new form that is appropriate to the sociological understanding of modern life . Modern writers had recognized that tragedy and comedy are no longer possible and discovered that tragicomedy is the only appropriate technique to express the menace, fear and human loss. This movement is visible in the works of Ionesco, Beckett and Pinter. Their plays picture the loneliness of man in a disordered world. Their main theme is the absurdity of the human condition. Pinter came to realize that tragicomedy is the proper representation of his time. Perhaps, Pinter acting in Shakespeare's Henry III, made him conscious of the mixed genres. The common thing connecting the old and present tragicomedy, is its concentration on characters controlled by ambiguous forces.

Harold Pinter's plays evoke the dilemma which haunt man in modern age. He is very much concerned with the tragicomic human situation, loneliness, failure of communication, alienation, fear, menace, dread and death.

Harold Pinter is one of the representatives of the Absurd theatre, "Basically this kind of theatre seeks to express the feeling that the world cannot be explained or reduced to a system of values - and there are times when such a theatre seems to be an invention of Mr. Esslin!"<sup>7</sup>

Harold Pinter does not "make any distinction between kinds of writing."<sup>8</sup> When some critics called his plays 'comedies of menace,' he was greatly dissatisfied and said "I never stuck categories on myself, or on any of us."<sup>9</sup> He is convinced that there is more than one dramatic genre in his plays. He is quite conscious of the close relationship between tragedy and comedy in life. He dislikes to classify his plays as comedies, tragedies, melodramas,... etc. Thus he declares: "I think these arbitrary distinctions are very stale by now... My only categories are plays that I like and plays that I don't.. The critic is afraid to either sink or swim when he sees a play; he must grasp the lifebelt of a category."<sup>10</sup> Pinter also believes that the strict separation among dramatic genres must be abolished. A play can contain various dramatic genres .The important thing is whether the work is good or not, inspite of adapting theories. He

says: "Good writing excites me, and makes life worth living."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it can be indicated that the work of art necessitates the mingling of different dramatic genres. Pinter stated that, "The Caretaker is funny up to a point. Beyond that point it ceases to be funny, and it was because of that point that I wrote it."<sup>12</sup> Pinter does not write his plays to adopt a certain theory. Pinter is convinced that comedy and tragedy are closely related in life, thus it should be on the stage. Thus his plays cannot be labelled. as comedies, tragedies.. etc. Such a strict separation in dramatic moods is impossible, for he says: "Everything is funny: the greatest earnestness is funny; even tragedy is funny,"<sup>13</sup> and he goes on to say: "The point about tragedy is that it is no longer funny. It is funny, and then it becomes no longer funny."<sup>14</sup> Such fussing of different moods serves his purpose. Pinter's plays blend the comic and tragic elements for a purpose. It enables him to ridicule the present human condition . Pinter believes that a work of art must contain the comic and tragic elements. As Pinter says: "I write in a very high state of excitement and frustration."<sup>15</sup>

The characteristic dramatic elements of Pinter's drama are the ingredients of tragicomedy, "the acutely naturalistic (Pinteresque) dialogue, which carefully registers the repetitions, hesitations and equivocations of colloquial speech without ever quite sounding natural;