THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

THE LANDSCAPE OF THE SELF IN PINTER'S EARLY WORKS

by

GERRY HAVERLUCK

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

WINNIPEG, MANITOBA

October, 1972

ABSTRACT

By means of the poetic structure and imagery of his early works, Harold Pinter portrays the individual's quest for a secure sense of self through his struggle for possession of the room. The problem of identity pervades these dramas; however, the security of the room is also seen to imply vulnerability. For the door of the room opens to admit the hostile forces of the outside world. Time and change impinge on the individual's shelter, and the security of the room is lost through a cycle of betrayal, judgement and expulsion or usurpation.

The relation of identity to space also extends to the furnishing and arrangement of the individual's room. He may dwell in a room which he does not possess or in which he is unable to establish his own "arrangement," or he may find himself at the mercy of another's arrangement. The life-space of the individual is often dominated by an ambiguous female figure -- seen as a mother-type -- who subjects the individual through her arrangement and through the language-patterns she employs. Any vision which seeks to transcend this limited sphere is seen to be intolerable and ineffective.

The forces of violence which threaten the self also enter the room in the person of the thug. Through his physical and verbal violence, the thug allies himself with the mother-figure in

subjugating the individual. Even if he is not present physically, the thug is sensed as an ever-present threat to the individual -- as the one who will come to "take him away."

Thus, whether the individual seeks a concrete sense of his own being through his life-space, through the affirmation of others, or through his own memories and dreams, he will fail. Such a secure place ultimately proves untenable.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface

In discussing the work of a writer as young as Harold Pinter, one must first acknowledge that the body of his writing is as yet incomplete, and that therefore no final critical perspective is possible.

The division I have suggested between the "early" and the "later" plays is in no way intended to be definitive, and is used more for the sake of convenience than to argue any strict chronological development. For as I have tried to show, Pinter's method is poetic; the structure of the individual plays and the unity and development of his work as a whole derive from loosely connected patterns of imagery, language and silence. Because his dramas are in this sense poetic, because form and content are so successfully unified, any discussion of the themes of the plays naturally suggests a detailed study of their verbal patterns. Pinter's people use language in self-defense or to assault, to manipulate and to dominate others. The playwright exploits the ambiguity of words and expressions, the alternation in ordinary dialogue between the rational and the irrational, and the use of repetition, variation and stychomythia. However, a detailed study of the use of language in Pinter's plays would be beyond the scope of this thesis, and would require a separate work in itself.[1]

---

[1] Such an analysis has been undertaken in a recent study by

Because Pinter operates as a poet, his images are evocative and his works are rich enough to invite various interpretations. The playwright himself has not responded kindly to the requests of critics and interviewers to "explain" his work.[2] In discussing the plays I have therefore tried to suggest rather than state, choosing to explore the dramas through the imaginations of his characters.

The question of the playwright's "point of view" is also complicated by the fact that Pinter's involvement with his plays does not always end with the written work itself, but often extends to its performance through his directing, acting or screen adaptations. This involvement is to be appreciated, however, as a further contribution to the richness of his work.

Finally, it should be noted that Pinter's success as a contemporary playwright is owing in no small part to his brilliant adaptations of his works (as well as those of others) for the various media of radio, television and screen.

James R. Hollis entitled Harold Pinter: The Poetics of Silence (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970). However, after examining in some detail the language patterns of Pinter's earliest plays, Hollis slips into a rather general thematic commentary on the other works.

[2]Pinter has been quoted in the program note for the performance of The Homecoming, Manitoba Theatre Centre, January, 1972, as saying that when one provides an overly explicit or "neat" interpretation of a dramatic work, ". . . it is easy to put up a pretty efficient smokescreen, on the part of the critic or the audience, against an active and willing participation."

Part One

Life in the Room

Harold Pinter is essentially a poetic dramatist, an heir of Beckett.[1] Like Beckett, he seeks to present through the banal exchanges of his characters images and patterns of the existence of contemporary man, isolated yet highly socialized, pressed to his last refuge in an urban world, groping for an identity yet fearing anything so vast as freedom, or even communication. His characters dwell precariously "at the extreme edge of their living, where they are living pretty much alone."[2] They attempt

---

[1]Pinter has often been compared with Samuel Beckett, and has acknowledged Beckett and Kafka as his main literary influences, according to Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1961), p. 215. In his essay, "Beckett," in the Festschrift entitled Beckett at 60 (London: Calder and Boyars, 1967), Pinter writes that Beckett seems to him "far and away the finest writer writing," quoting a letter he wrote to a friend in 1954: "The farther he goes the more good it does me. I don't want philosophies, tracts, dogmas, creeds, way outs, truths, answers, nothing from the bargain basement. He is the most courageous, remorseless writer going and the more he grinds my nose in the shit the more I am grateful to him " (p. 86).

[2]This remark was made by Pinter in an interview with Kenneth Tynan, and is quoted by Esslin, p. 216. The notion of modern man, and particularly the artist or visionary, living "on the edge" is discussed by Ruth Etchells, Unafraid To Be: A Christian Study

to gather about themselves a secure shelter from the world, a "fixture" or changeless life-space. In A Slight Ache, Edward confesses to an itinerant matchseller:

> Sometimes, of course, I would take shelter, shelter to compose myself. Yes, I would seek a tree, a cranny of bushes, erect my canopy and so make shelter. And rest. . . And then I no longer heard the wind or saw the sun. Nothing entered, nothing left my nook. I lay on my side in my polo shorts, my fingers lightly in contact with the blades of grass, the earth flowers, the petals of the earth-flowers flaking, lying on my palm, the underside of all the great foliage dark, above me, but it is only afterwards I say the foliage was dark, the petals flaking, then I said nothing, things happened upon me, then in my times of shelter, the shades, the petals, carried themselves, carried their bodies upon me, and nothing entered my nook, nothing left it.[3]

Unlike Beckett's tramps, who continue to exist on the thin thread of hope that Godot will come, Pinter's people continue to exist on the equally thin thread of hope that he will not, that nothing will enter their nook. Beckett's characters long for an apocalyptic event to give meaning to the present time, for without it they are too painfully aware of the

---

of Contemporary English Writing (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1969), p. 11. The image occurs in Pinter's play "The Dwarfs," A Slight Ache and Other Plays (London: Methuen and Company, Ltd., 1961), p. 101, where Pete accuses Len: "Every time you walk out of this door you go straight over a cliff."

[3]Harold Pinter, "A Slight Ache," A Slight Ache and Other Plays (London: Methuen and Company, Ltd., 1961), p. 38. All subsequent references to the play will be to this edition and will be indicated in parentheses after the quotations.

futile patterns and gestures of their lives. Pinter's characters, on the other hand, wish to avoid precisely this sort of event, as entrances are all too threatening and shattering; they long for the security of a changeless cosmos--a womb, or paradise.

Inevitably, however, just as they seem to have secured this refuge, time and change break in, and with them often comes the shattering realization of blindness, impotence or death. The security of the room is breached, the little paradise lost. Edward relates:

> But then, the time came. I saw the wind, swirling, and the dust at my back gate, lifting, and the long grass scything together. . . .
>
> (p. 39)

The winds of change and the scything approach of time fill Edward with the same sense of menace and horror as Ibsen's master builder felt hearing the knock at the door.[4] This ancient theme of expulsion is lent a new force by Pinter as he weaves throughout his major plays a cycle of betrayal (through which a relationship of love, or at least security, is breached), judgement (wherein the individual's nameless guilt is confirmed, often in the form of an absurd interrogation or examination) and finally expulsion or usurpation (whereby the individual is in some sense forced out of the role defined for him in the room).

---

[4]Solness has secured not only a life-space for his self, but as an architect, the ability to order space and to erect spires into the heavens. Pinter's man, who is less ambitious, loses even the little that he has hoped for.

The image of the room pervades Harold Pinter's works. In a study of the relationship between the individual consciousness and space entitled The Poetics of Space, Gaston Bachelard notes:

> . . . all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home. . . . For our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word. . . . the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind. . . . Past, present and future give the house different dynamisms, which often interfere, at times opposing, at others, stimulating one another. In the life of a man, the house thrusts aside contingencies, its councils of continuity are unceasing. Without it, man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life. It is body and soul. It is the human being's first world. Before he is "cast into the world" . . . man is laid in the cradle of the house.[5]

The relationship of the individual to the room remains central to Pinter's dramas.

The Dwarfs was begun by Pinter as a novel between 1950 and 1956 (it thus antedates his plays), and was later adapted as a radio and stage play. It gives us an important understanding of the individual's relationship to his life-space. The play deals, as do many of Pinter's works, with three people and their

---

[5]Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, trans. M. Jolas, (New York: The Orion Press, 1964), pp. 4-7.

shifting relationships. Len, Pete and Mark, who have been friends for a long time, are suddenly prodded to examine their friendship anew, and in the course of the play's action they move apart. The two main areas of the set, Mark's living room and Len's room, are important to the movement of the play. They provide a sharp contrast; the living room of Mark's flat is modern and comfortably furnished, with a tasteful sprinkling of his family heirlooms (a brass toasting fork and an old gilt mirror, both Portuguese).

While Mark has integrated his past into his sense of self, and is confident of who he is and where he lives, Len, on the other hand, cannot feel at home in the house he has inherited, furnished with heavy middle-European furniture. He challenges Mark:

> LEN: Where do you find a resting place?
> MARK: Here and there.
> LEN: By consent?
> MARK: Invariably.
> LEN: But you're not particular?
> MARK: Yes, I'm particular.
> LEN: You choose your resting place?
> MARK: Normally.
> LEN: That might be anywhere?
> MARK: Yes.
> LEN: Does that content you?
> MARK: Sure! I've got a home. I know where I live.
> LEN: You mean you've got roots. Why haven't I got roots? My house is older than yours. My family lived here. Why haven't I got a home?
>
> (p. 111)

Len attempts to understand his relationship to his room in order to establish a secure sense of his own self. For he realizes that

this space is the context out of which he thinks, acts and lives.

> I've got my treasure too. It's in my corner. Everything is from the corner's point of view.
> (p. 107)

In a very real sense, the individual takes shelter "to compose [him] self," to use Edward's words. As Len sits in his room, he seeks to assure himself:

> There is my table. That is a table. There is my table. That is a bowl of fruit. There is my chair. There are my curtains. There is no wind. It is past night and before morning. This is my room. This is a room. There is the wallpaper, on the walls. There are six walls. Eight walls. An octagon. This room is an octagon. There are my shoes, on my feet. This is a journey and an ambush. This is the centre of the cold, a halt to the journey and no ambush. This is the deep grass I keep to. This is the thicket in the centre of the night and the morning. There is my hundred watt bulb like a dagger. This room moves. It has moved. It has reached . . . a dead halt. This is my fixture. There is no web. All's clear, and abundant. Perhaps a morning will arrive. If a morning arrives, it will not destroy my fixture, nor my luxury. If it is dark in the night or light, nothing obtrudes. I have my compartment. I am wedged. Here is my arrangement, and my kingdom. There are no voices. They make no hole in my side.
> (pp. 96-97)

In his struggle to understand himself, or the room he lives in, Len evokes various images which recur in Pinter's other plays. He conceives of a natural shelter, as did Edward, in terms of a thicket and deep grass, but fuses this image with the more structured interior space of the room; thus the "garden" becomes a more enclosed space, a "compartment." The walls are

important as that which divides or compartmentalizes but also protects.[6] Time seems to have reached a standstill; no wind enters the room, and it exists between the night and the morning. The room is also a refuge from both the terrifying darkness and the blinding light of the outside world, for it offers the steady, artificial glow of the hundred watt bulb. (This image of the room as the light in the midst of darkness is expanded in the revue sketch "The Black and White.")[7]

Len also speaks of the room as his "fixture" and arrangement. The function of arranging is important to those who dwell in rooms: the individual may be incapable of arranging or ordering his room, as is Aston in The Caretaker, or he may dwell in a room which has been arranged by someone else and so be at the mercy of the other's arrangement, or he may experience the actions of another who enters his room as a threat or challenge to his own arrangement. Len senses this threat when Mark enters

---

[6] The reference to the "eight walls" of the room is illuminated by Pinter's poem "A Glass At Midnight," Poems, 2nd ed., (London: Enitharmon Press, 1971), p. 18, which conveys a similar mood. Here the poet speaks of the room as the corners where the walls meet: "Miles of the poles in the room's corners. / The eskimostars in an octagon. Worlds / Within this box " (p. 18). Gaston Bachelard discusses at length the imaginative appeal of corners as dwelling-places. Just as the room may be seen as the microcosm of the larger world, the corner is the microcosm of the room.

[7] Harold Pinter, "The Black and White," A Night Out, Night School, Revue Sketches: Early Plays (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967). The same image is developed in Ernest Hemingway's short story "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," The Hemingway Reader, ed. Charles Poore, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), pp. 417-422.

his room, ostensibly for "some bread and honey," and he warns Mark not

> to become too curious in this room. There's no place for curiosities here. Keep a sense of proportion. That's all I ask.
>
> (p. 99)

Len also uses his awareness of the arrangement of the object-world of the other's room in an aggressive manner when he methodically removes a mirror, an apple, and a toasting fork from their appointed places in Mark's room. Thus the movement of the most insignificant object becomes highly charged dramatically.[8] So, the objects of the room are invested with a sense of self; the room and its furnishings become extensions of the individual's being, boundaries of his consciousness.

Thus the object-world of the room figures importantly in all of Pinter's plays; there is an unmistakable presence of his people in their beds, chairs and belongings. Similarly, clothes

---

[8] Pinter has been quoted in "Pinter at M.T.C.," Winnipeg Free Press, January 8, 1972, Leisure Section, p. 1, as saying: "I was playing one of Lear's knights, and I remember we were all pretty much in the shadows with (Donald) Wolfit standing on a very high rostrum with his back to the audience, with his cloak. There was a spot-light on him. And at a certain moment--it was the most tingling experience to be on stage with him and watching this happen every night--the cloak would fling right round. It was quite a shattering moment. It's that taking of dramatic moments that was unparalleled. One doesn't see anything like that these days, except for Sir Lawrence Olivier. And so far as I am concerned, there are comparable moments in what I seem to write. The movements are very exact and even very small, perhaps even trivial--as when a glass is moved from there to there. Now, in my terms I feel that this is a very big moment, a very important moment. You haven't got the cloak,but you do have the glass."

and particularly shoes embody a certain aspect of the self, which one "puts on" or which is "put onto" one by another, or even which one aspires to and dreams of. Striking examples are seen in Sara's clothes in The Lover, Stanley's suit in The Birthday Party, and Davies' shoes in The Caretaker.

However, the arrangement of the room as a "fixture" in which one is "wedged," a "halt to the journey," is also significantly a "dead halt." It implies lack of growth--a deadly stagnation. Such is the constant dilemma presented to Pinter's individual; if he does not choose a "resting-place" for himself, he must remain forever "on the road" (as does the old tramp in The Caretaker), fearing the forces of darkness, at the mercy of the elements, and having no concrete sense of self. If, on the other hand, the individual chooses to inhabit a room, to invest himself in a particular place and setting, he fixes himself in a kind of death or limbo, a still-born existence. He also makes himself available to anyone who wishes to confront him in his room, for as Davies says in The Caretaker:

> . . . you don't know who might come up them front steps, do you? . . . All I'd do, I'd hear the bell, I'd go down there, open the door, who might be there, any Harry might be there. I could be buggered as easy as that, man.[9]

To the extent that the individual can be located, he

---

[9]Harold Pinter, The Caretaker (London: Methuen and Company, Ltd., 1960), pp. 43-44.

becomes vulnerable. And so the security of the room becomes tenuous, threatened as it is by entrances and exits. As Len complains to Mark:

> The rooms we live in . . . open and shut. . . . Can't you see? They change shape at their own will. I wouldn't grumble if only they would keep to some consistency. But they don't. And I can't tell the limits, the boundaries, which I've been led to believe are natural. I'm all for the natural behaviour of rooms, doors, staircases, the lot. But I can't rely on them.
>
> (p. 99)

Thus the door becomes a focus of dramatic interest in much of Pinter's work.[10] A knock on the door or a doorbell ringing can have great dramatic impact, conveying a feeling of intense expectation and fear. Thus, the "kingdom" which Len spoke of, the sovereignty of self affirmed by the room, may be lost when others come through the door. Len exclaims to Mark, "I've lost a kingdom . . . Both of you bastards, you've made a hole in my side, I can't plug it!" (107)[11] Strangely, Len feels that his "king-dom"--which has been threatened by his closest friends--is restored

---

[10]Pinter has explained this himself in an interview with Hallam Tennyson. He is quoted by Esslin, p. 199, as saying: "Two people in a room--I am dealing a great deal of the time with this image of two people in a room. The curtain goes up on the stage, and I see it as a very potent question: What is going to happen to these two people in the room? Is someone going to open the door and come in?"

[11]This notion of the other making a "hole" in the individual's world is explored also by Sartre, who describes how the world for the self, pour soi, is transformed by the look or even the felt presence of the other. Jacques Salvan discusses the problem in To Be And Not To Be: An Analysis of Jean-Paul Sartre's Ontology (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1962), pp. 67-69.

only in the impersonal hospital room of the final scene where, as he says, "They treat me like a king. These nurses, they treat me exactly like a king " (p. 115).

Because life in the room, life as a fixed self, involves such vulnerability, it may well seem preferable to exist as a stream of changing reflections, shifting identities. Mark's life as an actor intrigues Len, for the actor is surely the epitome of the man with many faces, capable of shifting his role or identity at will. Len demands:

> What's it like when you act? Does it please you? Does it please anyone else? . . . It's a time-honoured profession--it's time-honoured. . . . But what does it do? Does it please you when you walk onto a stage and everybody looks up and watches you? Maybe they don't want to watch you at all. Maybe they'd prefer to watch someone else. Have you ever asked them?
>
> (p. 98)

Len imagines Mark seated, silent, in his room, striking a pose of which he is aware, the parts of his body in accord with the "posture of the room " (p. 110). This seems enviable--to be able to assume an attitude, to watch oneself doing so, and to take conscious pleasure in the resulting arrangement--and Len's description provides a marked contrast to the passage (quoted earlier) where Len names the objects of his own room, attempting to gather a presence around himself.

The play of words and action around the old gilt mirror[12]

---

[12]See The Dwarfs, pp. 102-103 and p. 104.

belonging to Mark focuses our attention--as do mirrors in several of Pinter's works[13]--on the problem of the manifold reflections or images of the self. When Len picks up the mirror, Mark betrays some fear lest it be broken, saying, "Mind that. It's not insured." Len challenges him:

> Look at your face in this mirror. Look. It's a farce. Where are your features? You haven't got any features. You couldn't call those features. What are you going to do about it, eh? What's the answer?
>
> (p. 103)

The answer is of course not forthcoming, but the question is defined explicitly, as problems rarely are by Pinter's characters:

> The point is, who are you? Not why or how, not even what. I can see what, perhaps, clearly enough. But who are you? It's no use saying you know who you are just because you tell me you can fit your particular key into a particular slot, which will only receive your particular key because that's not foolproof and certainly not conclusive. Just because you're inclined to make these statements of faith has nothing to do with me. . . . What you are, or appear to be to me, or appear to be to you, changes so quickly, so horrifyingly, I certainly can't keep up with it and I'm damn sure you can't either. But who you are I can't even begin to recognize, and sometimes I recognize it so wholly, so forcibly, I can't look, and how can I be certain of what I see? You have no number. Where am I to look, where am I to look, so as to have some surety, to have some rest from this whole bloody racket? You're the sum of so many reflections. How many reflections? Whose reflections? Is that what you consist of?

---

[13]For example, The Birthday Party, The Collection, and A Night Out. Luigi Pirandello also makes use of the mirror as a dramatic device.

> What scum does the tide leave? What happens to the scum? When does it happen? I've seen what happens. But I can't speak when I see it. I can only point a finger. I can't even do that. The scum is broken and sucked back. I don't see where it goes. I don't see when, what do I see, what have I seen? What have I seen, the scum or the essence?
>
> (pp. 112-113)

The problem of knowing"who you are" is thus a complex one;[14] it constitutes the major theme in all of Harold Pinter's dramas. The commonplace assurances are seen as mere "statements of faith"; appearances (to the self and others) are ever-changing, and any real intuition of the other is ultimately inexpressible. Not only are we unable to tell the scum from the essence; we are unable to tell that there is an essence. Underlying our anxious attempts at verification, there lies a fearful suspicion of inner poverty. "Sometimes I think[he]'s as barren as a bombed site " (p. 101).

Pinter's individual is thus caught in a painful contradiction--he feels the need to know others (and to be known) but finds the possibility of this meeting very threatening; he seeks through words to touch the other but at the same time uses those very words to cover himself. This struggle is but another aspect of the contradictory struggle for the room, whose security becomes

---

[14]James R. Hollis, Harold Pinter: The Poetics of Silence (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970), p. 7, has quoted Pinter as saying dryly: "Whenever anything is answered simply, you must be asking the wrong question."

isolation, death. For the walls that protect also separate. Pinter has said:

> We have heard many times that tired, grimy phrase: "Failure of communication" . . . and this phrase has been fixed to my work quite consistently. I believe the contrary. I think that we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is continual evasion, desperate rear guard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves. Communication is too alarming. To enter into someone else's life is too frightening. To disclose to others the poverty within us is too fearsome a possibility.[15]

And yet at times, as if by tacit agreement, Pinter's characters do glimpse each other's selves. Len says:

> Occasionally I believe I perceive a little of what you are but that's pure accident. Pure accident on both our parts, the perceived and the perceiver. It's nothing like an accident, it's deliberate, it's a joint pretence. We depend on these accidents, on these contrived accidents, to continue. It's not important then that it's conspiracy or hallucination. (p. 112)

The notion of "conspiracy" or "joint pretence" is expanded in Pinter's later plays (as we shall see in The Caretaker) to include various social games where the participant struggles to play the other's games, to enter into the joint pretence--although the rules are often vague, ambiguous, or even loaded. Pirandello, who dealt with many of the same themes as Pinter, also spoke of the "deceit" of communication as his subject and suffering:

---

[15]Quoted by Hollis, p. 69.

> . . . the passion and torment which for so many years have been the pangs of my spirit; the deceit of mutual understanding founded on the empty abstraction of words, the multiple personality of everyone corresponding to the possibilities of being to be found in each of us . . .[16]

Len is painfully aware of the bankruptcy of social interchange -- of his own inability to juggle and balance the many reflections of being, his own and others'. Like a much earlier protagonist, Shakespeare's Hamlet,[17] he finds that "There is a different sky each time I look. The clouds run about in my eye. I can't do it" (p.101). Len is hampered, as are other tortured individuals in Pinter's works,[18] by the ability to see too clearly, to see beyond the social pretence and thus to be unable to participate in it, to see through the mirror and thus to be unable to focus on the surface image. He explains to Mark:

> I can't see the mirror I have to look through. I see the other side. But I can't see the mirror side.
>
> (p.104)

This visionary capacity, the role perhaps of the artist in society, is not only painful for the individual but threatening

---

[16] Luigi Pirandello, as quoted in the work Playwrights On Playwrighting: The Meaning And Making Of Modern Drama From Ibsen To Ionesco (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), p. 208.

[17] See Hamlet's exchange with Polonius in Act III, scene iii, ll. 385-391.

[18] For example, Aston and Stanley.

to those around him. Len is hospitalized, according to Pete, for "kidney trouble " (p. 114), but he has been given an ominous warning earlier in the play: "Buck your ideas up. They'll lock you up before you're much older " (p. 101).[19] Similarly, in The Caretaker, Aston has been taken away against his will and subjected to electric shock treatments.[20] In The Birthday Party the threat is even more explicit and sustained; ultimately, Stanley, a former pianist, is taken away in a big car by Goldberg and McCann for "proper care and treatment."[21] The unsettling implication in all these instances is that those who see too clearly cannot be tolerated in society and the most sane among us are treated as insane.[22]

The pain of Len's perceptions, of his inability to change the order of things (" . . . to break it, all of it"), of his awareness that he is thought to be losing his grip, and even of

---

[19]Len has also been cautioned by Pete: " . . . pull yourself together . . . You'll be ready for the loony bin next week if you go on like this." (p. 94).

[20]The threat does not cease with this initial "treatment," however, for as Davies warns Aston, "They had you inside one of them places before, they can have you inside again. . . . Anytime. All they got to do is get the word. They'd carry you in there, boy. They'd come here and pick you up and carry you in!" (p. 67)

[21]Harold Pinter, The Birthday Party (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1960) p. 82.

[22]This notion is also dealt with in contemporary American literature, most strikingly by Ken Kesey in One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1962).

his realization that in the end he will be the only one to suffer from all of this,[23] leads him to denounce the false friendship of Mark and Pete. In an image which is reminiscent of Hamlet, he sees them "standing behind my curtains, moving my curtains in my room." Len exclaims:

> . . . I'm cursed with the two of you, with two Black Knight's [sic], that's friendship, that's this that I know. That's what I know.
>
> (p. 113)

Len's friends have made a hole in his side; they have inhabited his corner. Mark is a "spider," arranging his web to "suck in all comers" (p.110), Pete a scavenging gull, tearing at the rat's corpse (p. 109). They are both seen by Len, in a series of vividly grotesque visions, as dwarfs or as "kites in a city disguise" (p.102) who have taken him "into their gang, on a short term basis" (p.102), and delegated him as their caretaker, "to attend to the abode, to make their landscape congenial" (p.106). He has found the task impossible, however, as these scavengers constantly spew out piles of excrement which he can only stir about. And so "the yard as [he knows] it" which is

> . . . littered with scraps of cat's meat, pig bollocks, tin cans, bird brains, spare parts of all the little animals, a squelching squealing carpet, all the dwarfs' leavings spittled in the muck, worms stuck in the poisoned shit heaps, the alleys a whirlpool of piss, slime, blood, and fruit juice. . . .
>
> (p. 118)

---

[23] He says to Mark, "But when the time comes, you see, what I shall do is place the red hot burning coal in my own mouth" (p.100).

is relinquished for a final order which, like that of Beckett's Endgame,[24] is one of sterile isolation:

> Now all is bare. All is clean. All is scrubbed. There is a lawn. There is a shrub. There is a flower.
>
> (p. 118)

The Room,[25] the first of Pinter's plays to be staged, is a seminal work containing many of the themes which concern him in his later writing. The importance of the room and its significance as the dwelling-place of the individual's consciousness are felt through Rose, a middle-aged woman who inhabits the room with her husband, Bert. Her apprehensions about the world outside heighten the sense of the room's seclusion, as she repeatedly goes to the window to look out, or straighten the curtain.[26] The outside elements, although vaguely defined, are seen as cold, dark, and violently hostile. Perhaps their very lack of definition, the darkness of the unknown, makes these forces seem all the more threatening. When asked what it is that his characters are afraid of, Pinter will say only that

---

[24]Samuel Beckett, Endgame: A Play In One Act (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1958).

[25]Harold Pinter, "The Room," The Room and The Dumb Waiter (London: Methuen and Company, Ltd., 1960). All subsequent references to the play will be to this edition and will be indicated in parentheses after the quotations.

[26]This characteristic gesture is also seen in Pinter's screenplay of Penelope Mortimer's novel, The Pumpkin Eater, which opens with a woman looking broodingly and apprehensively through a curtained window.

> Obviously they are scared of what is outside the room. Outside the room there is a world bearing upon them which is frightening. I am sure it is frightening to you and me as well.[27]

Rose comments: "Just now I looked out of the window. It was enough for me. There wasn't a soul about. Can you hear the wind?" (p. 7) This statement is very similar to Vladimir's exclamation in Waiting For Godot: "Not a soul in sight!"[28] and conveys the same sense of the soullessness of the world "out there." In such a hostile environment, the insecure self must perish. As Rose says (and Mrs. Sands later echoes), "It's very cold out, I can tell you. It's murder " (p. 7).[29]

In the face of the darkness, cold, and wind, Rose constantly affirms the security, warmth, and fixed nature of the room in which "you know where you are " (p. 8). She remarks:

> If they ever ask you, Bert, I'm quite happy where I am. We're quiet, we're all right. You're happy up there. It's not far up either, when you come in from outside. And we're not bothered. And nobody bothers us.
>
> (p. 9)

---

[27]Quoted by Hollis, p. 21.

[28]Samuel Beckett, Waiting For Godot (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1954), p. 47.

[29]A similar line occurs in Jules Feiffer's play Little Murders (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1971); it carries the same implications. The father, on entering his home, states: "It's murder out there " (p. 62). Feiffer, working in a rather different vein from Pinter and in an American context, explores the way in which the family home becomes a fortress against the world outside.

As she fusses over Bert's supper, urges him to eat up, drink his tea, and dress warmly, Rose is continually reinforcing the many little patterns of their life in the room, and also her own role in perpetuating them. She tells him how he likes his tea ("I like mine a bit stronger. You like yours weak " [p. 11]), and how he likes to spend his evenings ("I could put the fire in later. You could sit by the fire. That's what you like, Bert, of an evening" [p. 9]). Like Len in The Dwarfs, Rose seeks assurance in the familiar proportions of the room:

> This is a good room. You've got a chance in a place like this. I look after you, don't I, Bert? Like when they offered us the basement here I said no straight off. I knew that'd be no good. The ceiling right on top of you. No, you've got a window here, you can move yourself, you can come home at night, if you have to go out, you can do your job, you can come home, you're all right. And I'm here. You stand a chance.
>
> (p. 11)

Just as the strengths of the room have been established, however, the knock on the door sounds, and the door opens to admit first Mr. Kidd, then later Mr. and Mrs. Sands, and still later Riley.

Bachelard, in his "topoanalysis" of the house, discusses its "centrality" and "verticality." We have seen in Len's view of his room the image of the dwelling-place "as a concentrated being" which " . . . appeals to our consciousness of centrality." The house in which Rose lives may be further understood as it "differentiates itself in terms of its verticality."[30] Bachelard

---

[30]Bachelard, p. 17.

notes that the polarities of the house are the cellar and the attic; one may

> . . . oppose the rationality of the roof to the irrationality of the cellar. . . . Up near the roof all our thoughts are clear. . . . As for the cellar . . . it is first and foremost the dark entity of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces.[31]

Significantly, of the whole house in which she lives, Rose knows--and wishes to know--only the one small room which she occupies on the ground floor. As we have noted, Rose takes satisfaction in the fact that her room is located on the ground floor: "It's not far up . . . when you come in from outside " (p. 9). Psychically, too, she attempts to live with her feet on the ground, in the realm of commonsense and common sensations, fearing the basement and never having ventured into the upper regions of the house. (She is unable to say, for example, where Mr. Kidd lives.) In fact, we learn that in this house one cannot be sure of reaching the top of the house, as a locked door on the stairs bars the way. If, as Bachelard suggests, the top of the house represents in poetic form a realm of structured clarity and rationality, then one would not expect Pinter's characters to inhabit this area.

However, it is the basement which holds the greatest source of fear and concern for Rose. She speaks of those who dwell in the basement as "asking for trouble" (p. 7) and "taking a big chance " (p. 9). When Mr. Sands asks her if she has never

---

[31] Ibid., p. 18.

been down there, Rose replies, "Oh yes, once, a long time ago." He says, "Well, you know what it's like then, don't you?" But she answers only, "It was a long time ago " (p. 21). Rose's repeated allusions to the basement[32] and her questioning of the young couple betray her suspicion that the basement is inhabited, and suggest that she has some intuition of the nature of its inhabitant ("Was he old?" [p. 24]). Her curiosity also prepares us for the revelation that there is indeed someone who has been waiting in the basement to visit her, "Just lying there. In the black dark. Hour after hour " (p. 27). As a disembodied voice from behind a partition, he has been heard by Mr. and Mrs. Sands to say that room number seven, Rose's room, is vacant. She is sufficiently unsettled by this that she feels obliged to ask Mr. Kidd, the caretaker, "Is this room vacant?" (p. 25)

The appearance in the play of Riley, the blind Negro, has been much criticized as an example of crude symbolism. The playwright himself denies emphatically any symbolic intention.[33] Certainly Pinter treats a similar theme far more subtly and effectively in a later play, A Slight Ache; in the original version

---

[32]See p. 8, p. 9, p. 11, p. 14, pp. 21-22, p. 24.

[33]He is quoted by Hollis, p. 51, as saying: "I've never started a play from any kind of abstract idea or theory and never envisaged my own characters as messengers of death, doom, heaven or the milky way or, in other words, as allegorical representatives of any particular force, whatever that may mean. When a character cannot be comfortably defined or understood in terms of the familiar, the tendency is to perch him on a symbolic shelf, out of harm's way. Once there, he can be talked about but need not be lived with."

of A Slight Ache, the matchseller is "present" only as visualized by Edward and Flora. Riley is commonly seen as a symbol of death, beckoning Rose to "come home." Riley's blindness, shared in the final scene by Rose, does convey a sense of mortality and decay.[34] One might say that Riley functions, if not as a messenger of death, then as an abrupt reminder to Rose of time and change, for he seems to impress upon her an urgent sense of the lateness of the hour. Before Mr. Kidd brings Riley to Rose, she demands, "What's the time?" The caretaker replies that he doesn't know. Rose says, "Fetch him. Quick!" (p. 28) When Riley has delivered his message, saying: "Your father wants you to come home " (p. 30), Rose seems suddenly aware of the time, for she says, "Home? Go now. Come on. It's late. It's late " (p. 30).

Riley, the man from "another district " (p. 27), (possibly from the depths of Rose's past, as he knows her by another name), has confronted Rose and touched her: "Now I touch you " (p. 30). She has been moved to voice in starkly simple terms the poverty of her existence: "I've been here. . . . Long. . . . The day is a hump. I never go out. . . . I've been here " (p. 31). Having confronted and felt him (physically), Rose goes blind.

This pattern of the stranger (although not entirely strange) who enters one's room (although not entirely against one's will) with blinding effect is to be seen throughout Pinter's works.

---

[34]While he remains a very real being for Rose, Riley may also be seen as a figure that rises from that dark area of her conscious-

While the individual may not always be physically forced out of the room, he is in some sense expelled from it, as he will no longer be able to dwell in it in the same way; this effect may be seen in its most dramatic form as a sort of "birth" out of one's self (as in The Birthday Party) or death (as in The Dumb Waiter), for the world outside the room will wreak violence upon the self. Pinter relates[35] that he had originally intended to end The Caretaker with the old tramp's death, but then realized that this was not necessary. Sufficient violence had been done to him in the realization that he would not be able to remain in the room (although, like Rose, he does not exit in the final scene). In Pinter's most recent plays, this final movement of expulsion or usurpation becomes increasingly less explicit.[36]

That Rose is not entirely unwilling to admit Riley is pointed up by his polite insistence that Mr. Kidd ask her if she will see him. After protesting strongly, she acquiesces. In several other Pinter plays (for example, Tea Party, A Slight Ache, and The Basement), we also sense that the individual feels almost

---

ness--of the house in which she lives--which Rose wished to blot out.

[35]See Esslin, p. 212.

[36]It is, however, no less disturbing; Pinter has remarked (as quoted by Esslin, p. 206): "The more acute the experience the less articulate its expression."

compelled to invite the intruder into his room. Although Rose insists that she does not know the man, she objects when he gives his name as Riley: "What? That's not your name." (p. 28). He has some association for her with the days of her childhood, for she demands:

> What do you think you've got here, a little girl? I can keep up with you. . . . You've got a full-grown woman in this room, do you hear?
>
> (p. 28)

Riley's message links him with her father; his words are ambiguous enough to suggest that he may even be her father. For he says first, "Your father wants you to come home." (p. 30), and then a few lines later, "I want you to come home."

Bert's return and his violent attack on Riley still the old man's claim on his wife; however, after Riley has been beaten into silence, Rose cries out: " . . . I can't see." (p. 32). In Bert we meet the first of a number of violent male figures in Pinter's dramas[37] who seem able to operate without fear in the outside world; "I go where I go," (p. 32), says Bert. If anyone is seen to have a degree of power or control over existence, his own and that of others, it is this type of the thug who operates through violent and often destructive means. Here Bert unquestioningly silences the presence which was so disturbing to his wife.

---

[37]Including Gus, Ben, Mick, Gidney, Goldberg and McCann.

His action is all the more forceful as he had previously appeared to be merely passive, entirely unresponsive to Rose's words and ministrations. In fact, their relationship in the opening scene seems more one of mother and child than husband and wife, particularly as Rose is older than her husband. While she urges him to eat up and dress warmly, gives him nursery tea, answers Mr. Kidd's questions to him, and finally dresses him to go out, Bert utters not a word.

The duality of the woman's role as wife-mother in Pinter's plays and, ultimately, the merging of all female roles in each woman, is hinted at in the character of Rose. By remaining within the room and ordering the life-patterns of the man, by providing the pleasurable sensations of food and warmth,[38] the woman subtly exercises a certain domination over the man[39] and gains affirmation of her own being through him: "I look after you, don't I, Bert?" (p. 11) We see a potential Rose in Mrs. Sands, who comes to the door with her husband in search of a vacant room. She addresses her husband by a childish name, "Toddy," and insists

---

[38]For example, Rose repeatedly assures Bert that she will have some cocoa heated for him when he gets back. See p. 10 and p. 16.

[39]The identification of the female figure with the life-space of the room, and her domination through it of the man are beautifully captured in a cartoon by James Thurber reproduced by Carl Jung in his edition of Man And His Symbols (New York: Bell Publishing Company, Inc., 1968), p. 67, showing a diminutive man entering his home, from which emanates the vast and overpowering figure of his wife. Chagall also portrays in his painting entitled "Mother," illustrated in Jean Cassou's study, Chagall

that he sit by the fire because he "must be cold" (p. 18); later she quibbles over whether he sat or "perched" on the table. The authority of language, and the control gained by possessing the right expression figure importantly in Pinter's work, as we shall see in The Dumb Waiter. This argument culminates in the following exchange:

> MRS. SANDS: I didn't bring you into the world.
> MR. SANDS: You didn't what?
> MRS. SANDS: I said, I didn't bring you into the world.
> MR. SANDS: Well, who did then? That's what I want to know. Who did? Who did bring me into the world?
> (p. 22)

We see here a comic confusion of wife and mother. Mr. Sands can also be heard in these lines to protest the very condition of existence.[40] As a young man, however, he has not yet submitted entirely to his wife's domination. When Mrs. Sands mentions that she thinks she saw a star outside, he seizes upon this insignificant remark (and upon her uncertainty) to insist that she definitely did not see any star.

(London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), p. 177, a huge female figure rising from the structure of a house, and as house-mother, clasping the man-child to her.

[40]Soren Kierkegaard's figure Constantine Constantius in Repetition: An Essay in Experimental Psychology, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 114, similarly demands: "Where am I? Who am I? How come I here? What is this thing called the world? What does this word mean? Who is it that has lured me into the thing, and now leaves me there? Who am I? How did I come into the world? Why was I not consulted, why not made acquainted with its manners and customs

Mr. Kidd, although he has lost track of how many floors he has, recalls a time when his house was in order: "That was when my sister was alive." She used to "keep things in very good trim" and he explains that he "lost track a bit, after she died" (pp. 14-15). The caretaker stresses his sister's resemblance to her mother: "I think she took after my mum. . . . Yes, she had a resemblance to my old mum " (p. 15). There is also an element of sexuality in Mr. Kidd's recollection of this sister-mother figure: "She had a lovely boudoir. A beautiful boudoir " (p. 15). Rose remarks, "I don't believe he had a sister, ever " (p. 16), implying that his memories are solely of his mother. Clearly, however, he is alone now, out of touch with the house and unable even to locate himself in one room. When Rose mentions a housekeeper, Mr. Kidd replies, "I haven't got any woman. . . . No women here." (p. 12).

Through Mr. Kidd, who we are told once lived in Rose's room,[41] and also through Mr. and Mrs. Sands, who are interested in taking the room, we are given the impression of a continuous and relentless cycle of inhabitation and usurpation; one searches for a room, inhabits it for a time, and then loses it. The young couple has time to become Rose and Bert (the initial patterns are

---

but was thrust into the ranks as though I had been bought of a 'soul-seller' ?"

[41]See p. 13.

already there). Mr. Kidd, however, has lost his room--"the best room in the house" (p. 14)--and now, alone, functions as the caretaker of other people's rooms. We are to meet this old caretaker figure again in the full-length play entitled The Caretaker.

In The Caretaker, generally acknowledged to be one of Pinter's finest works, the full cycle of betrayal, judgement, and expulsion is felt most forcefully. Davies, a homeless old man who is a mixture of insecurity and stubborn prejudice, is offered a place in the room, a function in the world. Assigned the task of caretaking (the task given, in a sense, to all men in the world), Davies betrays the trust placed in him and so is judged and expelled from the room. This most basic of human themes is worked out so effectively through the character of the old tramp that in the final act,

> . . . his ejection from the dingy room that could have become his world assumes almost the cosmic proportions of Adam's expulsion from Paradise.[42]

The Caretaker involves, as did The Dwarfs, three characters and their interrelationships. In the course of Harold Pinter's work, this may be seen as the distillation or essence of his drama; he is most often dealing with the effect on a relationship between two people by the entrance (or the felt presence) of a third. And so the room comes to function not only

---

[42]Esslin, p. 211.

as an image for the individual consciousness but as that which contains two people. In a sense, whenever three people are gathered together in Pinter's world, one of them (at least) acts in some way as a "go-between." This notion, hinted at in The Dwarfs, is developed in The Caretaker in the character of Davies, and finds its fullest expression in Pinter's screenplays based on two novels--Robin Maugham's The Servant and L.P. Hartley's The Go-Between.

Davies constantly shifts his loyalty and declared friendship between Aston and Mick, seeking his own best advantage and security. The two brothers are so diametrically opposed in their natures and actions that they seem almost shadow sides of the same being.[43] This impression is heightened by the fact that in the first act they never appear together.[44] Certainly the treatment which Davies receives from the two brothers can be directly contrasted. Aston rescues the old man from a scuffle and brings him into the room, giving him a place to rest, some tobacco, money, shoes, and the keys to the flat; he accepts Davies' eccentricities unquestioningly. Mick, particularly on his first encounter with

---

[43] There is also a suggestion in The Homecoming that the men who inhabit the room of Ted's family home together "make up a unit," comprise one being. See Pinter's The Homecoming (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1965), p. 65.

[44] Such brothers appear in mythology as the Twins or Gemini, containing in their dualism the opposing tendencies which together comprise the oneness of life: one may be seen as white and the other as black, one as a "peaceful shepherd" and the other as a

Davies, is continually challenging and probing: he demands who Davies is, grabs his trousers from him, interrogates him about all the points which Davies has shown himself to be sensitive about, and asks for his credentials.

Aston consistently treats the old man with respect and dignity, offering him the shoes which Davies sees as essential to getting himself "sorted out" and "fixed up," and buying a bag of clothing for him when Davies complains that he has lost "every lousy blasted bit of all my bleeding belongings" with his last job (p. 10). Aston shows him how to operate the electric fire (which Davies regards with fear and suspicion) and reassures him that the gas stove is harmless. Finally, he offers Davies a permanent place in the room as caretaker, giving the man a white overall to wear for the job. (Davies has shown himself to be very concerned that his status be clearly distinguished and his clothing appropriate.)

"fierce hunter," one as creative and the other as destructive, one as love and the other as hate, one as paradise and the other as inferno, one as life and the other as death. However " . . . most commonly," according to J.E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, trans. J. Sage (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1962), "one of the twins signifies the eternal side of man, his inheritance from his celestial father . . . in short, his soul, and the other twin indicates the mortal side " (pp. 336-337). The Twins are discussed by Cirlot (pp. 111-112, p. 145, pp. 336-337) as embodied in various figures of mythology. Edith Hamilton in Mythology (Toronto: The New American Library of Canada Ltd., 1963) also gives a helpful discussion of Castor and Pollux (pp. 41-42).

Mick, on the other hand, methodically strips Davies of his human dignity, reminding him of his animal nature. This is calculated to be most disturbing to Davies, for his pathetic pretensions of respectability are vitally important to him. He declares in the opening scene of the play:

> I might have been on the road a few years but you can take it from me I'm clean. I keep myself up.
>
> (p. 9)

He then relates how he left his wife after finding her dirty underthings in a saucepan. He has interpreted the meagre meal given to him at a monastery as a denial of his human worth:

> A bird, I tell you, a little bird, a tiny little bird, he could have ate it in under two minutes. . . . Meal? I said, what do you think I am, a dog? Nothing better than a dog. What do you think I am, a wild animal?
>
> (p. 15)

This, of course, is precisely how Mick treats him, pinning him on the floor with his foot and making him remain in his underwear, groping for his trousers. He also strips Davies of his assumed name, Jenkins, by repeatedly breaking it into syllables until it is emptied of meaning. He tells Davies that he stinks, again exposing the old man's animality. This kind of accusation also occurs in The Dumb Waiter and The Birthday Party and functions as an uncomfortable reminder of one's animal nature.[45]

---

[45]As we shall see in discussing The Birthday Party, the statement that an individual stinks or "pongs" is also assosciated with his nameless guilt which, like the smell that emanates from his body, he is helpless to control.

Mick asks Davies if he has had to get up in the night, the sort of question one would ask of a child. He then suggests that Davies is a foreigner (p. 33); as we have seen, the old man projects much of his resentment and insecurity onto foreigners--"Poles, Greeks, Blacks, the lot of them, all of them aliens" (p. 8)--and prides himself on being an Englishman (p. 27). Mick further suggests, by a series of nonsensical reminiscences, that Davies reminds him of his uncle's brother[46] who "married a Chinaman and went to Jamaica" (p. 31), of a "bloke I once knew in Shoreditch" (p. 32), and of a fellow he "bumped into once, just the other side of the Guildford by-pass " (p. 34). The implication is that Davies could be anyone, and is therefore no one.

Rather than help Davies with the objects he finds threatening in the room, as did Aston, Mick terrorizes the man by disconnecting the electric light, kicking away his matches, and advancing upon him in the dark with a vacuum cleaner. Thus, while Aston offers the warmth and steady light of the room, Mick allies himself with the forces of darkness. And when he finally offers Davies the job of caretaker, he does so only to expose the man as an "impostor" (p. 72) and to point out his complete lack of "qualifications." Much of Mick's violence towards Davies is verbal

---

[46]One wonders if this might be a euphemism for the word father. Mick adds that he never called the man "uncle," but "Sid." "My mother called him Sid too " (p. 31).

and his command of technical terminology (for example, that of real estate, law, and finance in the hilarious diatribe culminating in, "Who do you bank with?" (p. 36) is a study in domination through language.

The conflicting intentions of Aston and Mick towards Davies come to a head in the complicated bag routine (reminiscent of the hat routine in Godot) which significantly ends by Aston relinquishing the bag to Mick, who then gives it to Davies, thus foreshadowing the outcome of the drama in which Mick's intentions are dominant over Aston's. Both brothers realize that essentially every "bag of belongings" that an individual gathers and holds to himself is like every other. Aston's realization takes the form of a kindly lie; he substitutes a bag he has picked up for the one Davies lost. Mick, however, declares accusingly to Davies, "I've seen this bag before," and "This bag's very familiar," thus threatening to strip him of his meagre garments as he did previously by suggesting that Davies resembled any one of a number of people. When Davies protests, "That's mine," Mick challenges, "Whose?" (p. 38) and thus returns to the basic question: Who are you?

Davies, while he initially insists, "I got my rights . . . nobody's got more rights than I have " (p. 10), cannot prove any verifiable identity either to himself or to others. Lacking what a sociologist would call his "paper identity," Davies has assumed

another name, and under this false guise that he presents to society he has "no rights":

> . . . I changed my name! Years ago. I been going around under an assumed name! . . . But it's no good me going on with that name. I got no rights.
>
> (p. 20)

He has left the proof of his real self with a man in Sidcup during the war,[47] and so his proposed journey to Sidcup embodies the hope of regaining that original verifiable identity.

Yet Davies continues to procrastinate over making the trip. He repeatedly declares that he could get down to Sidcup "If only the weather would break " (p. 19). Like Rose, he feels himself to be utterly at the mercy of the external elements.[48] He notes to Aston:

> It's different when you're kipping out . . . Nothing but wind then. . . . yes . . . Gets very draughty . . . I'm very sensitive to it . . . Always have been.
>
> (p. 11)

For a character who is "on the road" without the protection of a room or fixture, the elements are penetrating and threatening. Aston, too, seems to be "sensitive to it," to have known this situation, for he sympathizes with Davies.

---

[47]Similarly, a character in Elie Wiesel's novel, The Gates of the Forest (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966) has given his name to another during the war. He states: "In times of war millions of men live under false names; there is a divorce between a man and his name. Sometimes the name has had enough and goes away. Is that so hard to imagine?" (p. 19)

[48]Davies also states, as does Rose, that he "[has]n't been so well lately " (p. 9).

We soon come to realize, however, that the external obstacles which Davies sees as preventing him from getting to Sidcup are reflections of his inner reluctance to make the trip. In a humourous interchange, Aston wakens his guest and says:

> You said you wanted me to get you up.
> DAVIES: What for?
> ASTON: You said you were thinking of going to Sidcup.
> DAVIES: Ay, that'd be a good thing, if I got there.
> ASTON: Doesn't look much of a day.
> DAVIES: Ay, well, that's shot it, en't it?
> (p. 52)

Before even setting out for Sidcup, Davies feels it is essential that he get "a good pair of shoes," of hardy leather and a comfortable fit. He does not, however, attempt to get them for himself, but asks Aston (and later Mick) to find a spare pair for him. He declares to Aston, "Shoes? It's life and death to me" (p. 14) and says, "I can't go on like this " (p. 16). Davies relates how he has journeyed to a monastery near Luton, having heard that they gave away shoes there. But the religious institution does not have a "stock of shoes" to give away, as Davies had expected. He is, in fact, told to "piss off," and then grudgingly given a scant meal. Davies characteristically sees his treatment by the monks as a statement of his own human worth. (Other characters in Pinter's works also see the food, crockery, and furnishings they are given as a judgement on their selves.) When Davies, having pleaded "I'm worth a bite to eat, en I?" is

given a meal which he thinks fit for a wild animal, he protests:

> What about them shoes I come all this way here to get I heard you was giving away? I've got a good mind to report you to your mother superior.
>
> (p. 15)

Comically, Davies assumes that even in a monastery the highest authority will be a "mother superior." As we shall note later, there is a tacit assumption by many of Pinter's characters that the governing principle behind all human security is female.

One would expect someone in Davies' position to accept whatever was given him, but his irrational prejudices and vanities constantly prevent him from being satisfied with what he is offered. He complains about a suede pair of shoes (instead of a leather pair), a brown pair (which are too pointed) and a black pair (with brown laces). His present sandals, which are worn and exposed, reflect the old tramp's situation in the world, but he explains that although they are "gone," these shoes at least fit:

> So I've had to stay with these, you see, they're gone, they're no good, all the good's gone out of them . . . but at least they're comfortable.
>
> (pp. 15-16)

Beyond Davies' allusions to Sidcup and his mention of having been "on the road a few years " (p. 9), his origins are vague and unexplained. When Aston, hearing the name "Mac Davies," asks if he is Welsh, the old man refuses to locate himself even at birth and evades the question, seeing in it perhaps a suggestion that he

doesn't belong where he is, that he has no native rights:

> ASTON: You Welsh?
>
> Pause.
>
> DAVIES: Well, I been around, you know . . .
> what I mean . . . I been about . . .
> ASTON: Where were you born then?
> DAVIES (darkly): What do you mean?
> ASTON: Where were you born?
> DAVIES: I was . . . uh . . . oh, it's a bit
> hard, like, to set your mind back . . .
> see what I mean . . . going back . . .
> a good way . . . lose a bit of track,
> like . . . you know . . .
>
> (p. 26)

Davies later reveals that he has lost track of the origins of man in general, and how he came into the world. Mick exposes this when the old man, led on by Mick's amiability, attacks his brother:

> DAVIES: I tell you he should go back where
> he come from!
> MICK (turning to look at him): Come from?
> DAVIES: Yes.
> MICK: Where did he come from?
> DAVIES: Well . . . he . . . he . . .
> MICK: You get a bit out of your depth
> sometimes, don't you?
>
> (p. 71)

But even a dislocated character like Davies who cannot say where he came from and whose desires are vague and conflicting, Pinter argues, is perfectly valid:

> A character on the stage who can present no convincing argument or information as to his past experience, his present behaviour or his aspirations, nor give a comprehensive analysis of his motives is as legitimate and as worthy

> of attention as one who, alarmingly, can do all these things.[49]

Aston, on the other hand, is a character who has been overly communicative to others--"I talked too much. That was my mistake." (p. 54)--and has discovered the dangers not only of revealing oneself but of having one's revelations listened to seriously. Aston relates to Davies a series of confidences, increasingly more intimate, first about ordering a mug of Guinness then about being approached by a woman, and finally about his treatment in a mental hospital. If we view Aston, like Len in The Dwarfs and Stanley in The Birthday Party, as an artist-figure--one who can see and articulate things very clearly--then his treatment in the hospital suggests the fate of the artist or visionary in society. Aston says,

> . . . I used to . . . talk about things. And these men, they used to listen, whenever I . . . had anything to say. . . . I used to have kind of hallucinations. They weren't hallucinations, they . . . I used to get the feeling I could see things . . . very clearly . . . everything . . . was so clear . . . everything used . . . everything used to get very quiet . . . everything got quiet . . . all this . . . quiet . . . and . . . this clear sight . . .
>
> (pp. 54-55)

He is consequently taken away against his will and subjected to an "examination"; then he is informed by a man he supposes to be the "chief doctor" (p. 56)--"the head one . . . he was quite a man of . . . distinction" (p. 55)--that he has a certain "complaint" and

---

[49]Quoted by Hollis, p. 3.

must therefore in his own best interests be treated for it. This elusive figure of the doctor or head man of the organization emerges again as "Wilson," the employer of Gus and Ben in The Dumb Waiter, and as "Monty," to whom Goldberg and McCann take Stanley in The Birthday Party. He is seen as a man of distinction --"Someone with a few letters after his name. It makes all the difference"[50]--although his actual qualifications are left quite vague. He is whoever we see him to be, a figure of power, expertise and authority, to whom we assign the control of all the unnamed forces that govern our lives. Like his equivalent in the world of Kafka's novels, he is rarely seen but is felt to operate through his representatives--for example, Gus and Ben, Goldberg and McCann. His authority (like the symbol of the conch in William Golding's Lord of the Flies[51]) operates only insofar as we recognize it and therefore the individual like Aston, who "wasn't so sure about that" (p. 55) must be dealt with and forcibly brought to recognize it.[52] His attempts at escape and resistance having failed, Aston is subjected to shock treatment. As a result, his

---

[50]Birthday Party, p. 71.

[51](London: Faber and Faber, 1962).

[52]R.D. Laing in The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1967) notes that "Sanity today appears to rest very largely on a capacity to adapt to the external world--the interpersonal world and the realm of human collectivities. As this external human world is almost completely estranged from the inner, any personal direct awareness of the inner world has already grave risks." (p. 116).

sense of balance is affected and he has trouble formulating his thoughts:

> The trouble was . . . my thoughts . . . had become very slow . . . I couldn't think at all . . . I couldn't . . . get . . . my thoughts . . . together . . . uuuhh . . . I could . . . never quite get it . . . together . . .
>
> (p. 57)

Before he can "get it together" again Aston feels he must build his shed in the garden.

Just as Sidcup holds the promise of regaining his real name for Davies, the shed symbolizes for Aston the basis for a new sense of self; when he has gotten the shed up, he will be able to order his room and build the appropriate partitions. The emphasis on Aston's carpentry and his affinity for the "well made" statue of Buddha[53] suggests his reflective spiritual dimension. He dwells in a garden that is overgrown, and the pond has no fish, but Aston is quietly confident that he will be able to reclaim it:

> DAVIES: Where are you going to put your shed?
> ASTON(turning): I'll have to clear the garden first.
> DAVIES: You'd need a tractor, man.
> ASTON: I'll get it done.
>
> (p. 17)

In the meantime, Aston's room is littered with an odd assortment of junk which he has gathered together.[54] He explains:

> I picked it up. Just keeping it here for the time being. Thought it might come in handy.
>
> (p. 17)

---

[53]See The Caretaker, p. 17.

[54]Davies claims angrily that anyone could tell by this that Aston

The phrase "for the time being," which Aston uses several times throughout the first two acts of the play, helps convey the impression that he is dwelling in a sort of limbo, tinkering with odd bits of the junk and preoccupied with acquiring the right tools to begin his work. However, as the third act begins we learn from Davies that something has been done to the cracks in the roof of the room, and the leak has been stopped. Davies has heard someone walking around on the roof, and although he cannot be sure, he suspects that it was Aston tarring over the cracks. Significantly, Aston has also stopped confiding in Davies: "Don't say a word to me " (p. 58).

Mick also has plans for the room. He relates to Davies a "Better-Homes-and-Gardens" vision of how he would decorate it:

> I'd have teal-blue, copper and parchment linoleum squares. I'd have those colours re-echoed in the walls. I'd offset the kitchen with charcoal-grey worktops. . . . You could put the dining-room across the landing, see? Yes. Venetian blinds on the window, cork floor, cork tiles. You could have an off-white pile linen rug, a table in . . . afromosia teak veneer, sideboard with matt black drawers, curved chairs with cushioned seats, armchairs in oatmeal tweed, a beech frame settee with a woven sea-grass seat, white-topped heat-resistant coffee table, white tile surround.
>
> (p. 60)

He concludes, " . . . it wouldn't be a flat it'd be a palace " (p. 60). Mick has evoked a world with his words, but a world that

---

was insane: "They'd take one look at all this junk I got to sleep with and they'd know you were a creamer." (p. 67).

Davies will never inhabit. When the old man asks, "Who would live there?", Mick replies, "I would. My brother and me " (p. 61). The kingdom he has envisaged will not include Davies.

When Davies turns on Aston as a "creamer," claiming that he has treated him "like a bloody animal" while Mick has been his "true pal " (p. 67), Aston tells him to leave. But the old tramp again misunderstands the situation by considering himself hired as caretaker, and insists, "You! You better find somewhere else!" (p. 68) At Aston's suggestion that he go down to Sidcup, Davies exclaims, "You build your shed first! . . . You build your stinking shed first!" (p. 68) But Aston turns him out, saying bluntly, "You stink. . . . You've been stinking the place out. . . . For days " (p. 69). Davies appeals to Mick, but is again exposed as an impostor. The accusation carries some truth, for while Davies has not claimed to be an interior decorator, he has been going about under an assumed name. Mick pronounces a final, scathing condemnation of the old tramp; this condemnation may be seen as a judgement upon man in general:

> What a strange man you are. Aren't you? You're really strange. Ever since you come into this house there's been nothing but trouble. Honest. I can take nothing you say at face value. Every word you speak is open to any number of different interpretations. Most of what you say is lies. You're violent, you're erratic, you're just completely unpredictable. You're nothing else but a wild animal, when you come down to it. You're a barbarian. And to put the old tin lid on it, you stink from arse-hole to breakfast time.
>
> (pp. 73-74)

Mick hurls the Buddha against the stove, shattering it, and Davies' desperate plea, "What about me?" (p. 74), is left unanswered. The play closes in silence, with Aston, his back towards the old man, looking out the window.

The impact of The Caretaker derives partly from the fact that it echoes a theme very basic to human experience. The individual's longing for a place of his own, the securing of such a home, and his expulsion from it through his own guilt, are seen here as a full cycle. The play is perhaps Pinter's most satisfying work, in that we are made to feel Davies' guilt through his own actions, from his petty vanities, prejudices and prevarications to his betrayal of the stranger who took him in. Thus, his expulsion seems less shocking and inexplicable than that of Pinter's other characters, but it is all the more moving as the possibility so nearly within reach is lost. While there is a positive movement suggested in Aston's start on his task of rebuilding, it has come only through the death of that impulse which led him to take the old man into his room. He has realized that his own bed is "the only bed he can sleep in" (p. 76), and that he must build his shed by himself. Mick smashes the statue of Buddha, and Aston finally turns his back on the old man.

In the short story "The Examination,"[55] the notion of the

---

[55]Harold Pinter, "The Examination," The Collection and The Lover (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1963). All subsequent references will be to this edition of the story and will be indicated in parentheses after the quotations.

examination or interrogation of the individual--a notion merely suggested in The Caretaker--is explored more fully. The story involves two characters, Kullus and the narrator, and is similar in theme to the poem "Kullus"[56] and also to The Basement.[57] The examination takes the form of a series of talks, in which the possession of the room passes, to the narrator's surprise, from him to Kullus. The narrator begins from a position of confidence, not only inviting Kullus to enter his room, but compelling him to do so:

> . . . it seemed at this time, that the advantage was mine. Had not Kullus been obliged to attend this examination? And was not his attendance an admission of that obligation? And was not his admission an acknowledgement of my position? And my position therefore a position of dominance?
>
> (p. 90)

And so, recalls the narrator, " I observed the man I had welcomed, he having crossed my border " (p. 89). He is conscious of how he has arranged the "selected properties" of the room: the window, the curtain, the blackboard and the stool, and is conscious of Kullus' reaction to the arrangement, assuming:

> . . . I was naturally dominant, by virtue of my owning the room; he having entered through the door I now closed. To be confronted with the especial properties of my abode, bearing

---

[56] Poems, pp. 41-43.

[57] Harold Pinter, "The Basement," Tea Party and Other Plays (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1967).

> the seal and arrangement of their tenant, allowed only for recognition on the part of my visitor, and through recognition to acknowledgement and through acknowledgement to appreciation, and through appreciation to subservience.
>
> (pp. 89-90)

Therefore the narrator, "confident . . . in the outcome of [their] talks " (p. 90), decides to allow Kullus intervals in the examination. At first he initiates these periods of silence. But we soon discover that not only does the room have boundaries, language and silence also have their boundaries which, like those of the room, can be changed and controlled by the other.

> Kullus was aware . . . of the scrutiny of which he was the object, and was persuaded to resist it, and to act against it. He did so by deepening the intensity of his silence, and by taking courses I could by no means follow, so that I remained isolated, and outside his silence, and thus of negligible influence.
>
> (p. 91)

While Mick was skillful in using language as a weapon, Kullus has mastered the use of silence as a weapon. The narrator feels exposed in the silence which he does not control. Pinter has explained that

> When true silence falls we are still left with echo but are near nakedness. One way of looking at speech is to say that it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness.[58]

And so, as Kullus comes to initiate the intervals at his own inclination, the narrator follows him "in his courses." He

---

[58]Quoted by Hollis, p. 15.

records:

> My devotion was actual and unequivocal. I extended my voluntary cooperation, and made no objection to procedure.
>
> (p. 92)

He acquiesces to Kullus' changes in the arrangement of the room, "For we were now in Kullus's room " (p. 92).

The narrator of "The Examination" states that he wished in conducting the examination "to avoid the appearance of subjection; a common policy, I understand, in like examinations " (p. 89). In the humourous revue sketch "Applicant,"[59] we see the subjection of the individual take a more familiar form in the guise of a job interview. In this sketch the innocent Mr. Lamb is led to the slaughter by Miss Piffs, who is described as "the essence of efficiency " (p. 103). She proposes to "subject him to a little test to determine his psychological suitability" (p. 103) and proceeds to fit electrodes to his palms and earphones to his head, and to "plug in," all in a manner reminiscent of the chief doctor in Aston's horrific experience. Miss Piffs grills the applicant on every possible mood he may have felt, hinting that in each he is in some way culpable:

> After your day's work do you ever feel tired? Edgy? Fretty? Irritable? At a loose end? Morose? Frustrated? Morbid? Unable to

---

[59]Harold Pinter, "Applicant," A Night Out, Night School, Revue Sketches: Early Plays (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967), pp. 103-106. All subsequent references to this sketch will be to this edition and will be indicated in parentheses after the quotations.

> concentrate? Unable to sleep? Unable to eat? Unable to remain seated? Unable to remain upright? Lustful? Indolent? On heat? Randy? Full of desire? Full of energy? Full of dread? Drained? of energy, of dread? of desire? (p. 100)

Lamb is unable to reply to such a vast catalogue of contradictory demands. Miss Piffs returns to her questions about women, demanding whether he is "virgo intacta" and whether women frighten him. Her interrogation is punctuated by a piercing hum and flashing lights. Miss Piffs' final series of demands recalls the staccato onslaught of Ionesco's professor,[60] and Lamb, propelled from his chair by another buzz through the earphones, "falls, rolls, crawls, totters, and collapses " (p. 106), reduced finally to total subjection and silence.

In The Dumb Waiter,[61] we are presented with an extended examination of and judgement on Ben and particularly on Gus. The two men are professional thugs, hired killers who pass through an endless procession of rooms in endless unnamed cities, staying in each place only long enough to carry out their job. They are dwellers of basements, confronting face-to-face the powers of darkness which so terrified Rose, the agents but also the victims of these powers. Gus summarizes their position in these words:

> I mean, you come into a place when it's still dark, you come into a room you've never seen

---

[60]Eugene Ionesco, "The Lesson," Plays Vol. I, (London: John Calder, 1958).

[61]Harold Pinter, "The Dumb Waiter," The Room and The Dumb Waiter

> before, you sleep all day, you do your job,
> and then you go away in the night again.
> (p. 40)

Their current room, sparsely furnished with two beds, has two doors and, as we soon discover, a serving hatch or dumb waiter, all of which serve as ways into the room. But it does not have the usual "way out" (even if only a visual and imaginative escape) provided by a window. Gus complains:

> I wouldn't like to live in this
> dump. I wouldn't mind if you had
> a window, you could see what it
> looked like outside.
> BEN: What do you want a window for?
> GUS: Well, I like to have a bit of a view,
> Ben. It whiles away the time.
> (pp. 39-40)

Ben is the senior partner of the two. He seeks, as do several of Pinter's characters, to keep a firm grip on verifiable realities by reading and re-reading his newspaper. (Len similarly found solace in his calculus,[62] and the two old women in "The Black and White"[63] take comfort in the reliability of the bus routes and schedules.) Ben relates to his partner incidents reported in the newspaper, stating with conviction, "It's down here in black and white" (p. 36) and, "It's a fact " (p. 38). In a

---

(London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1959). All subsequent references to the play will be to this edition and will be indicated in parentheses after the quotations.

[62]See The Dwarfs, p. 98.

[63]Harold Pinter, "The Black and White," A Night Out, Night School, Revue Sketches: Early Plays (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

humourous way, he is dismayed by the violent deaths of an eighty-seven year old pedestrian and a cat. Gus, however, questions the report of an eight-year-old girl's killing a cat as improbable, and the two men decide that the real story was different; her eleven-year-old brother, who is said to have watched the incident from a toolshed, killed the cat himself and blamed it on his sister.

Thus we see that even the last stronghold of verifiable truth, of "black and white" facts, the daily newspaper, is suspect. In fact, suggests Pinter with a degree of self-irony, any "truth" that we may seize upon is open to endless permutations:

> There are twenty-four possible aspects of any single statement, depending on where you're standing at the time or on what the weather's like. A categorical statement, I find, will never stay where it is and be finite. It will immediately be subject to modifications by the other twenty-three possibilities of it. No statement I make, therefore, should be interpreted as final or definitive.[64]

Ben also seeks to secure himself and fill the emptiness of time with his "interests," suggesting to Gus that his trouble is a lack of interests:

> BEN: Look at me. What have I got?
> GUS: I don't know. What?
> BEN: I've got my woodwork. I've got my model boats. Have you ever seen me idle? I'm never idle. I know how to occupy my time, to its best advantage. Then when a call comes, I'm ready.
>
> (p. 40)

---

[64]Quoted by Hollis, p. 36.

Ben embodies the kind of homey wisdom and easy platitudes also found in Nat Goldberg in The Birthday Party. When Gus, uneasy in the constant void of waiting, asks "Don't you ever get a bit fed up?", Ben replies, "Fed up? What with?" (p. 40) [65]

Gus's discomfort with his role is suggested in the opening scene of the play where, finding his shoes uncomfortable, he takes off each one in turn and examines it--as does Estragon in a similar scene in Godot. Gus also has difficulty with the object-world around him; things seem not to work for him. This sort of awkwardness is often an indication in Pinter's protagonists that they are beginning to lose their grip on the "normal" world.[66] Throughout the play, Gus is heard to pull the lavatory chain without effect. When he mentions the problem to Ben, however, his partner is able to name the faulty part:

---

[65] This interchange recalls a similar passage in Beckett's Endgame, p. 5:

HAMM:
Have you not had enough?
CLOV:
Yes!
(Pause.)
Of what?
HAMM:
Of this ... this ... thing.
CLOV:
I always had.
(Pause.)
Not you?

[66] Len, for example, toys with a broken recorder in the opening of The Dwarfs.

BEN: It's got a deficient ballcock, that's all.
GUS: A deficient what?
BEN: Ballcock.
GUS: No? Really?
BEN: That's what I should say.
GUS: Go on! That didn't occur to me.
(p. 39)

A certain satisfaction is found in a familiarity and facility with the names of things.[67] For by putting a name to something, one can in a sense gain control over it. To be in control of esoteric or idiomatic expressions is often, for Pinter's people, to be in control of the situation.[68]

Gus also feels uneasy about the manner in which the room has been furnished. As one who constantly lives in rooms furnished by someone else, in another individual's arrangement, Gus sees this arrangement as a reflection and perhaps a judgement upon himself. He notes with some indignation that the condition of the rooms provided for them seems to be worsening and complains, "It's not much of a bed," and "I could have done with another blanket too " (p. 39).

> No, I mean, I say the crockery's good. It is. It's very nice. But that's about all I can say for this place. It's worse than the last one. Remember that last place we were in? Last time, where was it? At least there was a wireless there. No, honest. He doesn't seem to bother much about our comfort these days.
> (p. 41)

---

[67]Compare The Caretaker, pp. 24-25.

[68]A whimsical treatment of some workers' disenchantment with highly specialized machine parts (all having complex technical

And when he realizes that his bed-sheets may not have been fresh, Gus declares:

> Eh, that's taking a bit of a liberty, isn't it? I don't want to share my bed-sheets. I told you things were going down the drain. I mean, we've always had clean sheets laid on up till now. I've noticed it.
>
> (p. 42)

But Ben suggests that the "pong" Gus has noticed may be his own.[69] When the gas runs out and neither of them has any money for the meter, Gus complains that "it's his place, he could have seen there was enough gas for a cup of tea " (p. 51). Ben reasons that the room does not necessarily belong to the person who gives them their orders; he may have just rented it. But Gus's certainty that the room belongs to "him" cannot be dealt with reasonably; he states:

> I know it's his place. I bet the whole house is. He's not even laying on any gas now either.
>
> (p. 51)

There is indeed a sense conveyed that, as Ben puts it, "Things have tightened up " (p. 43). Whereas the two thugs used to have time for "a bit of relaxation" (p. 43) between jobs, they

---

names) is seen in Pinter's sketch "Trouble in the Works," A Night Out, Night School, Revue Sketches: Early Plays (New York: Grove Press, 1967). Mr. Fibbs, the manager, is "flabbergasted" when the machine parts (some of which he has created and named himself) are no longer accepted unquestioningly by the workers, for he has lost control of the situation completely.

[69]As with Davies in The Caretaker, the suggestion of the individual's smell or animal nature is disturbing as it goes beyond his pretensions of human dignity.

are no longer permitted this. The football teams that Gus suggests they go to see are all "Away. They're all playing away " (p. 45). There is no longer even enough gas for a cup of tea. As in Beckett's Endgame, things are running out: "There's no more pain-killer." [70] The amenities of life, the little things that softened their daily round, are gradually being removed. An envelope of matches which is mysteriously slid under the door seems promising, but proves only a frustration when there is no more gas to light. Gus comes to feel increasingly, as does the player of Beckett's Act Without Words,[71] that he is the plaything of a malevolent external power beyond his control.

He resists the "dumb" obedience required of him, however, and begins to question Ben about why he stopped the car that morning, what city they are in, and when "he" is going to get in touch with them. As we saw in The Room and The Caretaker, such questioning presages the violent subjugation of the individual. Ben's violent reaction to Gus's probing first erupts in an argument over language: whether one says "light the kettle" or "put on the kettle." When Ben tells his partner to go and light the kettle, Gus objects:

> You mean the gas.
> BEN: Who does?
> GUS: You do.
> BEN(his eyes narrowing): What do you mean,
> I mean the gas?

---

[70] Beckett, Endgame, p. 21.

[71] Samuel Beckett, "Act Without Words," Endgame (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1958.

GUS: Well, that's what you mean, don't you? The gas.
BEN(powerfully): If I say go and light the kettle I mean go and light the kettle.
GUS: How can you light a kettle?
BEN: It's a figure of speech! Light the kettle. It's a figure of speech!
GUS: I've never heard it.
BEN: Light the kettle! It's common usage!
GUS: I think you've got it wrong.
BEN(menacing): What do you mean?
GUS: They say put on the kettle.
BEN: Who says?

(p. 47)

Gus's final recourse is to the ultimate authority--mother: "I bet my mother used to say it " (p. 48). But Ben prevails, clinching his argument with one of those illogical leaps which Pinter captures so well:[72]

Nobody says light the gas! What does the gas light?
GUS: What does the gas--?
BEN(grabbing him with two hands by the throat, at arm's length): THE KETTLE, YOU FOOL!

(p. 48)

Ironically, the whole point of their argument is destroyed initially when Gus uses Ben's expression, "light the kettle," and again when Ben wearily falls into Gus's phraseology: "Put on the bloody kettle, for Christ's sake " (p. 49). This comic struggle for possesion of the idiom has serious implications, however, for Ben feels his position threatened by Gus's attempt to correct him. He demands, "Who's the senior partner here, me or you?" (p. 48) Ben is struggling to maintain his place in the chain of authority. Pinter notes that in such humourous passages,

---

[72]Similarly Davies in The Caretaker, p. 60, when awakened by

> . . . more often than not the speech only seems to be funny--the man in question is actually fighting a battle for his life.[73]

Like Len in The Dwarfs, Gus seems more sensitive than his partner to the repugnant aspects of their work, to the messiness of life (and in this case, death). He muses over their last victim:

> She wasn't much to look at, I know, but still. It was a mess though, wasn't it? What a mess. Honest I can't remember a mess like that one. They don't seem to hold together like men, women. A looser texture, like. Didn't she spread, eh? She didn't half spread. Kaw!
> (p. 53)

Ben is not entirely untouched by this recollection for he clenches his eyes, a symptom which in Pinter's other protagonists[74] seems to suggest having seen too much, or too clearly.

When Gus wonders aloud who their next victim will be, Ben demands:

> What's the matter with you? You're always asking me questions. What's come over you?
> GUS: Nothing.
> BEN: You never used to ask me so damn many questions. What's come over you?
> GUS: No, I was just wondering.
> BEN: Stop wondering. You've got a job to do. Why don't you just do it and shut up.
> (p. 49)

Aston for making noises in the night, claims indignantly that if he has made noises it is due to having been awakened.

[73]Quoted by Hollis, p. 83.

[74]Compare Edward in A Slight Ache, Disson in Tea Party and Stanley in The Birthday Party.

The proper attitude is clear; one is to wait dumbly. But Gus continues to question the nature of his work--"Who clears up after we've gone?" (p. 53)--and the nature of his employer, who is known only as Wilson. Although one must wait for Wilson, it is never sure that he will come; he may just send a message instead. Gus complains, "Half the time he doesn't even bother to put in an appearance . . . " but Ben retorts that "He's a busy man " (p. 51). Gus ponders the fact that Wilson is not only elusive but unapproachable when he can be confronted:

> I find him hard to talk to, Wilson. Do you know that, Ben? . . . There are a number of things I want to ask him. But I can never get round to it, when I see him.
>
> (pp. 52-53)

As Gus persists in his questioning, the dumb waiter descends to the basement with a great clatter and the two thugs, conditioned in their responses, draw their guns. When the hatch is opened, an order is disclosed for "Two braised steak and chips. Two sago puddings. Two teas without sugar " (p. 53). Before the men can respond, however, the dumb waiter goes up, and Gus cries, "Give us a chance!" (p. 54) While Ben thinks the order a bit odd, he quickly finds an explanation. He supposes that the upstairs part of the building was formerly a café, and has changed hands. Gus, however, demands to know "WELL, WHO'S GOT IT NOW?" (p. 54)

But the question of who is in control remains unanswered, as the dumb waiter descends with another order, this

time for "Soup of the day. Liver and onions. Jam tart." (p. 54). Ben looks into the hatch and, of course, discovers nothing. However, when Gus steps forward and looks up the hatch, Ben "flings him away in alarm." (p. 55). Again the correct attitude towards those in control, which is so clearly sensed by Ben, is transgressed by Gus. The senior partner asserts firmly that they had "better send something up." (p. 55). And so Gus's little bag of provisions is ransacked, and although the contrast between what they send and what has been ordered is comic, they give all that they have.

When Gus suggests holding back his one Eccles cake, he is chastised:

> GUS: Well, they don't know we've got it, do they?
> BEN: That's not the point.
> GUS: Can't I keep it?
> BEN: No, you can't. Get the plate.
> (p. 56)

And when Ben discovers that his partner has been holding out a packet of crisps, he reacts violently, hitting Gus on the shoulder and saying: "You're playing a dirty game, my lad! . . . I'll remember this." (p. 56).

The box goes up before they can put their offering in it, and Gus continues to question, "What's going on here?" and "What happens when we go?"(p.57) As the box descends a third time, with an order for "Macaroni Pastitsio. Ormitha Macarounada" (p. 58), they hasten to put in their food. Citing the brand names and quantities to add a ring of authority, Gus calls up the hatch:

> Three McVitie and Price! One Lyons Red Label! One Smith's crisps! One Eccles cake! One Fruit and Nut!
>
> (p. 58)

But again Ben reprimands him for failing to show the proper deference; Ben says, "You shouldn't shout like that." Gus asks, "Why not?", and is told that "It isn't done " (p. 58). When Gus complains of having nothing to sustain him, Ben replies that he is getting "slack," and advises him, "Buck your ideas up, will you?" (p. 59) (The same advice is given to Len in The Dwarfs when he becomes overly reflective.)[75]

A fourth order descends for "One Bamboo Shoots, Water Chestnuts and Chicken. One Char Siu and Beansprouts " (p. 60). Significantly, the orders are becoming more and more exotic, moving from a typical English meal to foreign dishes which are quite outside their terms of reference. Gus remarks, "I wouldn't know where to begin " (p. 60). With this last order, part of their offering is sent back, but to Ben's consternation, no explanation for the rejection is given. Ben decides that they must make known their impoverished state, and has Gus use the speaking-tube which he has discovered. Gus again shows a complete lack of deference, stating in blunt and desperate terms, "The larder's bare!" (p. 61) Ben quickly grabs the tube and with the proper tone of polite respect, amends:

---

[75]See The Dwarfs, p. 101.

> Good evening. I'm sorry to--bother you, but we just thought we'd better let you know that we haven't got anything left. We sent up all we had . . .
>
> (p. 61)

The judgement is returned that their Eccles cake was stale, their chocolate melted, their milk sour, and their biscuits mouldy.

At the order to "light the kettle" for tea--an order which confirms Ben's authority--Gus loses his patience completely, and demands:

> What about me? . . . I'm thirsty too. I'm starving. . . . I could do with a bit of sustenance myself.
>
> (p. 63)

He then begins to question his own reflexive response to the demands from above: "Why did I send it up?" (p. 63) Ben, shaken, insists that they go over the procedure for the job, and they rehearse the familiar litany of instructions. Ben corrects Gus once in his response, but significantly misses out a point himself. When Gus reminds him, the order is momentarily reversed, and Ben repeats Gus's words.

Gus continues to contemplate the events they have just passed through, and asks deliberately, "Why did he send us matches if he knew there was no gas?" He presses Ben: "Who sent us those matches?" (p. 67)

> GUS(thickly): Who is it upstairs?
> BEN(nervously): What's one thing to do with another?
> GUS: Who is it, though?
> BEN: What's one thing to do with another?
>
> (p. 67)

Gus is demanding to know who is in control; he is seeking to form a coherent picture of the world in which he operates. But Ben resists all such connections between things, determined to dwell only in that small fragment of the picture which is his given "job." He rejects the presupposition that one thing has anything to do with another, finally telling Gus to "Shut up!" (p. 67) When he is unable to silence Gus, Ben begins to hit him viciously.

Gus, having made certain connections, has sensed the "game" in which he has unwillingly participated, the examination to which he has been submitted:

> What's he doing it for? We've been through our tests, haven't we? We got right through our tests, years ago, didn't we? We took them together, don't you remember, didn't we? We've proved ourselves before now, haven't we? We've always done our job. What's he doing all this for? What's the idea? What's he playing these games for?
>
> (p. 68)

When a final order descends, Gus calls up, "WE'VE GOT NOTHING LEFT! NOTHING! DO YOU UNDERSTAND?" (p. 68) In alarm, Ben hits him hard and commands, "Stop it! You maniac!" (p. 68)

He returns to his newspaper and resumes the ritual of commenting on the news, but Gus's responses are made in a dull, low, and finally almost inaudible voice. His torrent of questions has ceased, and he has been subjugated even before the final realization comes that he is to be killed. As always in Pinter's best writing, the movement of the drama is echoed and in fact

embodied in the very patterns of language and silence which emerge. Having questioned the powers which control his life, Gus has been judged by the ludicrous but terrifying "game" of the dumb waiter. He has been weighed and found wanting. All his worldly possessions have been required of him, and the judgement has come down that they are not sufficient.

Part Two

Mother and the Thug

In contrast to the basement realm portrayed in The Dumb Waiter, A Night Out,[1] an early television play by Pinter, presents in an entirely recognizable setting the struggle of a young man, Albert Stokes, to escape from the constrictions of his home[2] and his mother's domination. Perhaps more than any other character in Pinter's works, Albert seeks to throw off the strictures of the room and the role embodied for him in it.

In Mrs. Stokes, the pattern of "mothering" seen in Rose and also present in Meg in The Birthday Party, is fully developed. Through the patterns of language and actions which she initiates and perpetuates, Mrs. Stokes holds Albert fast to the role she has defined for him in the room of her small London house, and thus

---

[1]Harold Pinter, "A Night Out," A Slight Ache and Other Plays (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1961). All subsequent references to the play will be to this edition and will be indicated in parentheses after the quotations.

[2]An old man who has seen Albert in a coffee stall notes that he is looking "compressed" (rather than "depressed"); his error is apt, as the boundaries of Albert's room are indeed pressing in on him.

affirms her own function of arranging and ordering his room. Her use of language is repetitive and deadening. In the first scene of the first act, for example, she tells Albert repeatedly that she has been calling him, that she will "have to put the flag out" (p. 3) as he is cleaning his shoes, that the light bulb has burned out in Grandma's room, and that his dinner is almost ready. She asks obvious questions--for example, "What are you doing?" (p. 3) as she watched him polishing his shoes--for the sheer satisfaction of eliciting a response. When Albert resists or evades the expected response, she reminds him of her position: "Answer me, Albert. I'm your mother" (p. 7). She stresses that her existence hinges solely upon his:

> You're all I've got, Albert. I want you to remember that. I haven't got anyone else. I want you . . . I want you to bear that in mind. (p. 6)

Thus he is made to feel responsible for the implications his actions have for her, and guilty for leaving her sphere of influence. Albert, however, habitually gives the expected responses in phrases which seem to be part of a longstanding ritual exchange between the two: "I'm sorry . . . I raised my voice" (p. 6), and "I've got to go . . . I don't want to go. I'd much rather stay with you" (p. 6). Significantly, both of them refuse to go down into the cellar, which is dark and dirty, to fetch a light. Their reluctance recalls that of Rose in The Room when she is unwilling to confront the dark areas of her own consciousness.

Albert's mother states that "The bulb's gone in Grandma's room" (p. 3) and is upset when Albert notes that it is really just a "junk room" (p. 4), Grandma having been dead for ten years. His refusal to keep the light burning in Grandma's room is also in a sense his denial of her presence in the room and in the house, a presence which his mother affirms strongly. The grandmother is perhaps a symbol of the mother-figure taken to the highest power--the ultimate authority, the source of all being. In The Dwarfs, Mark traced his inheritance to his grandmother on his father's side. In The Birthday Party Goldberg declares to McCann:

> Seamus--who came before your father? His father. And who came before him? Before him? . . . (Vacant--triumphant). Who came before your father's father but your father's father's mother! Your great-gran-granny. (p. 78)

One suspects that if Pinter's characters could affirm an external deity it would be in the form of a "great-gran-granny"! Davies does, as we have noted, conceive of a "mother superior" of the monastery.

Mrs. Stokes is not only repetitious in her own comments, but makes it necessary for Albert to repeat himself endlessly--"Just because you never listen" (p. 7). The mother's use of language in general is deadening; relying on such vacuous adjectives as "nice," and "good" constantly repeated, she creates in effect a simplistic dichotomy between the "nice," "Warm," "clean," "good"

and "proper," and the "cold," "dirty," "bad" and "disgrace[ful]," thus associating the interior space of the room with the former conditions and the outside world with the latter conditions. The world of light and of pleasurable sensations is set against the dark fearful realm outside. This is the sort of language one would employ with a child, and it is this language-world which Mrs. Stokes imposes on Albert.

By skipping out of the expected card game with his mother, then, Albert is eluding the much larger "game"--"our game" (p. 8)--which constitutes their relationship. Appropriately, his mother lays out a game of "patience" to await his return. Seeley and Kedge (in Act One, Scene Two) discuss a football game played the previous Saturday in which Albert, by "play[ing] a game foreign to him" (p. 51), or departing from his usual moves, let the firm's team down and particularly irked Gidney, the team captain. Gidney has all the social marks of a man in possession of himself and in control of others. As well as being captain of the team, he is chief accountant and "a charmer" (p. 16). Seeley compliments him on his shoes, saying, " . . . you carry your feet well" (p. 20). Gidney in fact goads Albert by suggesting a vast difference in their "qualifications":

> GIDNEY: I was saying, with my qualifications
> I could go anywhere and be anything.
> ALBERT: So could I.
> GIDNEY: Could you? What qualifications have
> you got?

ALBERT: Well, I've got a few, you know.
. . . . . .
GIDNEY: These people who talk about qualifications. Just makes me laugh, that's all.
(p. 62)

Albert's very presence and difference seem an affront to Gidney, who says to Joyce:

No, he just irritates me, that bloke. I . . . I haven't got time for a bloke like that.
JOYCE: He's just quiet, that's all.
GIDNEY: Well, you see if you can wake him up.
(p. 21)

In order to wake him up,[3] Gidney first tests Albert by having Joyce and Eileen "lead him a dance" (p. 21). He explains, "I want to see his reaction, that's all, I just want to see how he takes it" (p. 21). Gidney's test of Albert involves setting the girls on him; they further question his relationship to women by suggesting that he has "been living it up. Women" (p. 24), and then asking him if he lives with his mother. Mr. Ryan unwittingly furthers Gidney's cause when he touches Eileen, for the group thinks Albert has done it. Gidney closes in on Albert, despite Seeley's defense of him, and confronts him in the hallway:

Wait a minute, Stokes . . . I haven't been satisfied with your . . . sort of . . . behaviour for some time, you know what, don't you? . . . For instance, there was that bloody awful game of football you played when you threw the game away last Saturday that I've got on my mind, besides one or two other things!
(p. 28)

---

[3]Goldberg in The Birthday Party similarly sets out to bring

When Albert resists Gidney's vague accusations and veiled threats (and Seeley points out their groundlessness), Gidney claims he is "responsible" for Eileen and acts as the defender of woman. He addresses Albert by his first name, and adopts a condescending, motherly tone, telling him not to "behave like a boy of ten in mixed company" and saying, "Don't be childish, Albert" (p. 29).[4] When he accuses Albert of being a "mother's boy" (p. 30), Albert hits him and, after a short scuffle, leaves the party.

Driven home, Albert is confronted by his mother, who launches into a series of accusations about his appearance and behaviour. She complains that

> Not for years, not for years, have you come up to me and said, Mum, I love you, like you did when you were a little boy. You've never said it without me having to ask you.
>
> (p. 33)

Albert's resistance to the ritual of submission is again emphasized. His mother interestingly sees "the firm" as an upholder of "respect" and an extension of the values of the family. Gidney has allied himself with the firm, claiming to be its representative when accusing Albert:

Stanley "out of himself" (p. 33), although Meg uncomprehendingly promises: "Stan, they won't wake you up" (p. 35).

[4]Gidney also accuses Albert of "Acting like an animal all over the place" (p. 30).

> I'm talking to this man on behalf of the firm! Unless I get a satisfactory explanation I shall seriously think about recommending his dismissal.
> (p. 30)

Gidney, the organization man, is in embryo the type of the violent thug which Nat Goldberg embodies.

Thus the forces of the firm or organization and the mother combine to suppress and condemn Albert;[5] he escapes into the night after threatening his mother with the kitchen clock. He is approached on the street by a girl who invites him back to her room, but as soon as they have crossed the threshold her manner has perceptibly "changed from the seductive" (p. 34), and Albert is again confronted with a mother-figure: directive, condescending, complaining, and accusing. The girl, a prostitute, has woven a myth about herself and her past, claiming that she has a daughter attending school in Hereford. She states:

> I'm a respectable mother, you know, with a child at boarding school. You couldn't call me . . . anything else.
> (p. 41)

When she accuses Albert of being "childish" and "almost retarded" (p. 41), he deliberately drops his cigarette on the carpet and as she reaches for it, stops her, ordering her to sit down and be quiet. When she resists, he threatens her, as he did his mother, with an upraised alarm clock, and says viciously:

---

[5] The narrator of Kesey's One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest refers to this sort of alliance of those in control as "The Combine."

> Who do you think you are? You talk too much, you know that. You never stop talking. Just because you're a woman you think you can get away with it. . . . You're all the same, you see, you're all the same, you're just a dead weight around my neck. It's the same as this business about the light in Grandma's room. Always something. Always something.
> (pp. 42-43)

Albert's claim, "You're all the same," does seem to have some basis. For Pinter continually suggests that woman's role is ever shifting; while her urge to dominate through mothering is often predominant, woman simultaneously sees herself as little girl, wife, mistress or whore. Rose, Meg (in The Birthday Party) and Flora (in A Slight Ache) are wife-mother figures, and Meg and Flora also act seductively at times. The prostitute who invites Albert to her room wishes to be a mother, but, through her fantasy, also idealizes herself as a young girl, as do Meg, Flora and Lulu in The Birthday Party, Diana in Tea Party and Anna in Old Times. Similarly, the night club hostess in Night School aspires to be a mother-figure, claiming that she teaches in a primary school. The most complete and successful merging of these roles is seen in Ruth in The Homecoming.

While Albert's resistance to and even subjugation of the girl seem complete, he leaves her to return to his mother's house. His breezy, confident entrance in Act Three provides a sharp contrast to his previous caution and stealth in Act Two; however, when his mother's voice sounds his name and the barrage of questions

begins again, Albert's body freezes, his gaze is lowered and finally his body remains slumped and impassive in the chair. As in "Applicant," his final posture betokens complete submission. His mother promises to forget his gesture of defiance, and suggests they "go away . . . together" (p. 47). He is left under the crushing weight of his mother's ignorance of his real being; she lapses once again into her childish terminology:

> It's not as if you're a bad boy . . . you're a good boy . . . I know you are . . . you are, aren't you.
>
> (p. 47)

In The Birthday Party, Meg, who with her husband runs a boardinghouse in a seaside town, has a similar relationship with Stanley, who lives in her house. Meg employs the same sort of language patterns as does Mrs. Stokes, asking obvious questions and expecting obvious answers, using the same overworked adjectives repeatedly. Hers is a sort of "canned" motherhood; nevertheless, she takes it quite seriously. In the opening breakfast scene, Petey, her husband, dutifully responds to her questions in the proper way, assuring her that the cornflakes and fried bread were "nice." However Stanley, when he finally gets up, is more discerning and insists on making distinctions:

> MEG: What are the cornflakes like, Stan?
> STANLEY: Horrible.
> MEG: Those flakes? Those lovely flakes? You're a liar, a little liar. They're refreshing. It says so. For people when they get up late.
> STANLEY: The milk's off.
>
> (pp. 14-15)

When Meg asks if the fried bread was nice, Stanley, playing with language, replies: "Succulent" (p. 17). She coyly objects that he shouldn't say this word to a married woman. Stanley half-seriously chides her for being "a bad wife," for not making her husband any tea, and "Giving him sour milk instead" (p. 16). But she defends herself, saying: "You won't find many better wives than me, I can tell you."[6] Later Stanley bursts out violently:

> Look, why don't you get this place cleared up! It's a pigsty. And another thing, what about my room? It needs sweeping. It needs papering. I need a new room!
>
> (p. 19)

Meg continues to intersperse her mother-child patterns of conversation with sensual remarks and gestures. She makes him say "please" and "sorry," calls him "Stan" and "Stanny," and subjects him to the most humiliating of motherly routines,[7] asking him: "Did you pay a visit this morning?" (p. 23) The pains of submission are evident as Stanley recoils, groans, and slumps forward. Putting in question his own identity and their relationship, he demands:

> Who do you think you're talking to? . . . Tell me, Mrs. Boles, when you address yourself to me, do you ever ask yourself who exactly you are talking to?
>
> (p. 21)

Meg's casual remark that she is expecting two gentlemen

---

[6] An amusing implication of this statement of Meg's is that all wives are equally bad.

[7] Mick similarly asks Davies if he has had to get up in the night. See The Caretaker, p. 32.

visitors disturbs Stanley visibly. He tells her of his former career as a pianist when, after his first successful concert, "They carved me up." He arrived for his next concert to find the hall closed and shuttered. "They pulled a fast one" (p. 23). He asks Meg, "Have you heard the latest?", and states knowingly, "They're coming today."

> STANLEY: They're coming in a van.
> MEG: Who?
> STANLEY: And do you know what they've got in that van?
> MEG: What?
> STANLEY: They've got a wheelbarrow in that van.
> MEG(breathlessly): They haven't.
> STANLEY: Oh yes, they have.
> MEG: You're a liar.
> STANLEY(advancing upon her): A big wheelbarrow. And when the van stops they wheel it out, and they wheel it up the garden path, and then they knock at the front door.
> MEG: They don't.
> STANLEY: They're looking for someone.
> MEG: They're not.
> STANLEY: They're looking for someone. A certain person.
> MEG(hoarsely): No, they're not!
> STANLEY: Shall I tell you who they're looking for?
> MEG: No!
>
> (p. 24)

The vision Stanley conjures is central to the fear of anyone who inhabits a room[8]--even Meg is moved; however, when Goldberg and McCann arrive, she does not connect them with Stanley's apprehensions. In the poem "A View of the Party" Pinter writes,

---

[8]In Pinter's revue sketches "The Black and White" and "Request Stop," A Night Out, Night School, Revue Sketches: Early Plays (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967) the fear of being "taken away" is similarly voiced.

> The thought that Goldberg was
> A man she might have known
> Never crossed Meg's words
> That morning in the room.
>
> The thought that Goldberg was
> A man another knew
> Never crossed her eyes
> When, glad, she welcomed him.[9]

Meg indeed welcomes the pair, and even volunteers information about the man they are seeking. The two professional thugs are among Pinter's most vividly drawn characters; their relationship is similar to that of Ben and Gus in The Dumb Waiter with the senior man reassuring his junior partner about the job. McCann's initial concern is dealt with by Goldberg in "a quiet, fluent official tone" (p. 30) similar to Ben's--the language of the "organization." Throughout the play, Goldberg remains the master of the right turn of phrase, the appropriate sentiment.

When Meg declares that it is Stanley's birthday, Goldberg is quick to suggest a celebration:

> He's got a birthday today, and he's forgotten about it. So we're going to remind him. We're going to give him a party. . . . We'll bring him out of himself.
>
> (p. 33)

Meg is enthusiastic, saying, "Oh, I'm so glad you came today" (p. 32). Her co-operation with the thugs echoes Bert's defense of Rose, Gidney's re-inforcement of Albert's mother's influence, and the collusion of Aston's mother with the "chief doctor" in

---

[9]Pinter, Poems, p. 34.

signing the permission form.

Goldberg affirms this alliance as he reminisces about his own mother, "a mother in a million" (p. 42). He recalls how he used to go for a walk with a girl he knew, a "good," "pure," and "beautiful" Sunday School teacher with whom he took no liberties, and returning home hear his mother shouting for him to hurry: "Simey . . . quick before it gets cold" (p.43). When Petey comments, "Yes, we all remember our childhood," Goldberg declares:

> Too true. Eh, Mr. Webber, what do you say?
> Childhood. Hot water bottles. Hot milk.
> Pancakes. Soap suds. What a life.
> (p. 43)

The experience of childhood is seen to contain all the pleasurable sensations provided by a mother. And, as we see by Goldberg's confusion of wife with mother, the wife continues in this role to provide the same sort of existence; he later tells Lulu that when he returned home, " 'Simey,' [his] wife used to shout, 'quick, before it gets cold' " (p. 59). Goldberg looks at Meg and comments,

> A good woman. A charming woman. My mother
> was the same. My wife was identical.
> (p. 71)

Thus, when Goldberg speaks of waking Stanley up, of celebrating his "birth," he is speaking of a very limited and blinkered birth into a mother's world of pleasant sensations and unquestioning obedience and respect. It is a world of comforting sensations which must shut out the notion of life's messiness, filth and decay in

order to exist:

> What a thing to celebrate--birth! Like getting up in the morning. Marvellous! Some people don't like the idea of getting up in the morning, they say, what is it? Your skin's crabby, you need a shave, your eyes are full of muck, your mouth is like a boghouse, the palms of your hands are full of sweat, your nose is clogged up, your feet stink, what are you but a corpse waiting to be washed? Whenever I hear that point of view I feel cheerful. Because I know what it is to wake up with the sun shining, to the sound of the lawn mower, all the little birds, the smell of the grass, church bells, tomato juice . . .
>
> (p. 45)

Goldberg, the man of "position," makes it quite clear that he has reached his present position by complying unquestioningly with the dictates of society, as felt through the family and particularly the all-powerful figure of the mother:

> All my life I've said the same. Play up, play up, and play the game. Honour thy father and thy mother. All along the line. Follow the line, the line, McCann and you can't go wrong. What do you think, I'm a self-made man? No! I sat where I was told to sit. I kept my eye on the ball.
>
> (p. 77)

He relates his father's deathbed message:

> Go home to your wife. Do your duty and keep your observations. Always bid good morning to the neighbours. Never, never forget your family, for they are the rock, the constitution and the core! . . . I knew the word I had to remember--Respect! Because McCann . . . who came before your father? His father. And who came before him? . . . Who came before your father's father but your father's father's mother! Your great-gran-granny.
>
> (p. 78)

Goldberg's identification with this great mother-figure is such that at one point he declares: "If you really want to know the truth, Webber, you're beginning to get on my breasts" (p. 46).

As the party begins, Goldberg calls upon Meg to propose a toast to Stanley. As with other social rituals,[10] Pinter reveals how the toast ironically involves the individual's subjection rather than his elevation. For Stanley is made to sit without a drink and with a spotlight on his face while the others stand over him enjoying their drinks. As with the party itself, celebration becomes destructive.[11] Meg's toast, however, turns out to be a tribute not to Stanley but to her own devotion to him and mothering of him.[12] As the toast dissolves in sentimentality, Goldberg voices his approval, saying, "Beautiful! A beautiful speech" (p. 55). He asks rhetorically:

> How often, in this day and age, do you come across real, true warmth? Once in a lifetime. . . . What's happened to the love, the bonhomie, the unashamed expression of affection of the day before yesterday, that our mums taught us in the nursery?
>
> (p. 56)

---

[10]For example, the "game" of asking a person to be seated before you speak to him, which is worked out fully in the struggle between Goldberg and McCann and Stanley. See pp. 45-47.

[11]In Old Times (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1971) Anna says to Deeley: "I would like you to understand that I came here not to disrupt but to celebrate" (p. 68). However her celebration of a former relationship with Deeley's wife proves destructive, for it threatens both his present marriage-relationship and his memory of their courtship.

[12]Willy's toast in Tea Party and Mr. King's toast in A Night Out

Goldberg concludes that this highest form of love and devotion which one finds "once in a lifetime" (that is, as a child in the nursery) is not lost but is embodied in Meg. "Lucky is that man who's at the receiving end, that's what I say" (p. 56). McCann, too, in his sentimental recollections of his homeland, suggests that the most secure place a man may know is under a mother's care. He says, "I know a place. Roscrea. Mother Nolan's" (p. 60); when asked for a love song he sings, "Oh, the Garden of Eden has vanished, they say, / But I know the lie of it still" (p. 61). Paradise remains in mother-love.

Pathetically, Meg's devotion to Stanley, which is lauded by Goldberg as the deepest and warmest human relationship possible, is based on a profound misconception and ignorance of his real being. As may be seen through the language-patterns she employs, the mother-figure can be as destructive and violent towards her subject as the thug. For while the thug dominates the individual through verbal thrusts and by piling upon him an insurmountable heap of technical or "official" language, the mother destroys the meaning and distinctions of language by glossing over all differences and imposing the deadening language structure of the child. Meg's ignorance of Stanley as an artist is shown by her substitution of a boy's drum for his piano, of the most primitive noise for music. Typically, she is pleased with the result.

---

also deviate from the proposed subject of the toast.

Thus, for Pinter the individual (and particularly the artist) is threatened and dominated by the violence of both the mother and the thug. R.D. Laing notes that

> Love and violence, properly speaking, are polar opposites. Love lets the other be, but with affection and concern. Violence attempts to constrain the other's freedom, to force him to act in the way we desire, but with ultimate lack of concern, with indifference to the other's own existence of destiny. We are effectively destroying ourselves by violence masquerading as love.[13]

The use of the game in this, as in other of Pinter's plays, is a dramatically powerful device which focuses the conflict and contains the violence that is always near the surface.[14] It also unites effectively the sense of comedy and menace; the game is funny-serious. The women's choice of blind man's buff during the party is apt, as is the sequence of the game. Meg designates McCann, and he touches Stanley; the scarf and the accompanying state of blindness also pass from Meg to the thug to Stanley. At the buffet of a blind person, one becomes blind.

The suggestion that the thug and his victim share a past, a common humanity, makes the violence seem all the more shocking and pointless. Stanley tells McCann that he knows Ireland well,

---

[13]Laing, p. 93.

[14]Nelvin Vos in a chapter entitled "Games and Ritual" in his work Eugene Ionesco and Edward Albee: A Critical Essay (William B. Eerdmans, 1968) discusses the use of the game in modern drama.

and they whistle consecutive bars from the song, "Mountains of Morne."[15] But when Stanley puts his hand on McCann's arm, the thug warns, "Don't touch me" (p. 42), and strikes him in alarm. Stanley also seems to know something of the same landscape as Goldberg, for they both speak of a Fuller's teashop and a Boots library, and mention Basingstoke.

Goldberg and McCann, in their interrogation of Stanley, demand that he account for his use of time, his relationships with women: Meg, Lulu, a wife (whom he allegedly killed and deserted), his mother (whom he left in a sanatorium), his appearance, his job, his change of name, the nature of freedom--"We admit possibility only after we grant necessity" (p. 50)--and his recognition of the existence of an external force. They accuse him of contaminating womankind, being a "mother defiler" (p. 51), betraying "our land" (p. 52), "our breed" (p. 52), and "the organization" (p. 48), and of leaving the organization. Goldberg declares: "No society would touch you. Not even a building society" (p. 51). Ultimately, Stanley's guilt seems to consist in no more and no less than the fact that he is human: "You stink of sin" (p. 50).

However, as the thugs prepare to take him away in their

---

[15]Stanley later starts to whistle the tune again, but McCann does not join in (p. 47). The common landscape of melodies is developed by Pinter in Old Times.

car[16] to "Monty" for "special treatment" (p. 85), they promise to make "a new man" (p. 81) of him:

> MCCANN: We'll provide the skipping rope.
> GOLDBERG: The vest and pants.
> MCCANN: The ointment.
> GOLDBERG: The hot poultice.
> MCCANN: The fingerstall.
> GOLDBERG: The abdomen belt.
> MCCANN: The ear plugs.
> GOLDBERG: The baby powder.
> MCCANN: The back scratcher.
> . . . . . .
> GOLDBERG: We'll make a man of you.
> MCCANN: And a woman.
> GOLDBERG: You'll be re-oriented.
> MCCANN: You'll be rich.
> GOLDBERG: You'll be adjusted.
> MCCANN: You'll be our pride and joy.
> GOLDBERG: You'll be a mensch.
> MCCANN: You'll be a success.
> GOLDBERG: You'll be integrated.
>
> (pp. 83-84)

The reactions to the ordeal of the birthday party are varied. Goldberg admits to being a bit "knocked out. . . . It's unusual" (p. 76), and seeks inspiration from McCann. McCann seems shaken by what Stanley has said to him, and at one point refuses to enter Stanley's room again. As in The Dumb Waiter, certainty and security seem to fail even for the thugs at times. Petey senses something of Stanley's experience, but is assured by Goldberg that he has simply had a "nervous breakdown" (p. 71), that "with certain people . . . it's a foregone conclusion" (p. 72), and

---

[16]Goldberg's big car and his affinity for it (pp. 70-71) recall Bert's van and also Mick's van. The thug's vehicle affirms his status and suggests his mobility in the outside world.

that "sometimes they recover, in one way or another" (p. 73). When Petey objects further, Goldberg says menacingly, "Why don't you come with us, Mr.Boles?" (p. 85) Lulu, too, states, "I've seen everything that's happened. I know what's going on. I've got a pretty shrewd idea" (p. 81), but she retreats from McCann's injunction to "Confess!" (p. 80) Stanley, himself, who appears dressed in a white shirt, dark suit, and bowler hat,[17] can only clench his eyes and garble inarticulately before lapsing into complete silence. Only Meg remains unaffected and uncomprehending; as the play closes, she tells her husband, "I was the belle of the ball" (p. 87).

A Slight Ache[18] is the first of a number of Pinter's plays in which betrayal occurs between husband and wife. Like Meg and Rose, Flora is a wife-mother figure, while her husband, Edward, is an academic who is writing an essay on "space and time." He remarks: "I've been engaged on the dimensionality and continuity of space . . . and time . . . for years" (p. 17). His choice of words, however, suggests that Edward's engagement in space and time is dubious. He prefigures Teddy of The Homecoming,

---

[17]Here as elsewhere Stanley's "trial" recalls that of Franz Kafka's character, "K.," in The Trial (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1953).

[18]Harold Pinter, "A Slight Ache," A Slight Ache and Other Plays (London: Methuen and Co., 1961). All subsequent references to the play will be to this edition and will be indicated in parentheses after the quotations.

who claims that he is not "lost in it." The "intellectual equilibrium" that Teddy maintains by choosing not to inhabit things or invest himself in space and time is of questionable value, however. For one can avoid being dispossessed only by never possessing.

The opening incident of A Slight Ache in which a wasp is trapped in the marmalade pot, mirrors Edward's and Flora's relationship. The wasp is slowly being smothered in sweetness; Flora comments, "What a horrible death" (p. 12), but Edward replies to the contrary. They blind the trapped insect with hot water, killing it, and squash it on a plate. As in The Room, The Dumb Waiter, and The Birthday Party, the struggle over language reflects the relationship between the two people. Edward insists on exactness of expression, while Flora fails to make distinctions. When she repeatedly warns her husband that the wasp will bite him, Edward objects:

> If you don't stop saying that word
> I shall leave this table.
> FLORA: But wasps do bite.
> EDWARD: They don't bite. They sting. It's snakes . . . that bite.
> FLORA: What about horseflies?
> (Pause)
> EDWARD(to himself): Horseflies suck.
> (p. 13)

Edward, however, is not conversant with the names of the plants that grow in his garden, and thus not in control of what grows in his garden. He must be told the names of the plants

by Flora, who has clearly ordered the garden. And while he speaks of venturing out (under the protection of a canopy) to work, as is his habit, Edward does not go out of the house but sends his wife instead to speak with the matchseller. Although Flora notes that it is the height of summer, "the longest day of the year" (p. 10), Edward experiences the weather as "treacherous" (p. 10).

The matchseller, an enigmatic figure, appears all the more disturbing to Edward as he is able to weather the elements; Edward remarks:

> There was a storm, last week. A summer storm. He stood without moving, while it raged about him. . . . He remained quite still, while it thundered all about him.
>
> (p. 21)

Edward feels compelled to invite this threatening figure into his study, for while he insists that the man is harmless, and does not interest or alarm him,[19] he also declares, "I really can't tolerate something so . . . absurd, right on my doorstep" (p. 19). The "slight ache" in his eyes persistently testifies that the vision is disturbing to him. Edward compels Flora against her wishes to make an overture to the old man, thus bringing together the two who will betray and usurp him.

---

[19]In emphasizing that the matchseller does not alarm him (p. 27), Edward echoes other characters in Pinter's plays who deny that the dark areas beyond the security of the room hold any fear for them. Edward claims to have had an "uninterrupted" sleep (p. 12) just as Davies in The Caretaker claims that he never dreams.

As in Albert's defiance of Mrs. Stokes and Stanley's criticism of Meg, however, there is a suggestion in Edward's actions and words that he fails to acknowledge and appreciate the role of the wife-mother. He speaks roughly to Flora, seizes her and claims: " . . . you're a woman, you know nothing" (p. 29). Flora reminds him with quiet dignity,

> You should trust your wife more, Edward. You should trust her judgement, and have a greater insight into her capabilities. A woman . . . a woman will often succeed, you know,where a man must invariably fail.
>
> (p. 30)

This is also the lesson which is brought home to Ted (and his family) with such effectiveness by Ruth in The Homecoming. As she speaks to the matchseller, Flora weaves about him a series of fantasies at once brutal, sexual, tender, childlike and romantic. She sees in him a young bullock a poacher from her childhood, a lover, an old man and a child.

Edward feels a different sort of bond with the matchseller (whom he sees as both an old man and a "stripling" p. 39). While he clearly intends to subjugate the matchseller by inviting him into his study, and impressing upon him a knowledge of places and a facility with language, Edward also recognizes in the potential usurper his own former self:

> Yes, I . . . I was in much the same position myself then as you are now, you understand. Struggling to make my way in the world. I was in commerce too. . . . Oh yes, I know what it's like--the weather, the rain, beaten from pillar to post, up hill and down dale . . .
>
> (p. 24)

Edward has taken the place of the old village squire whose daughter he seems to have married[20]; his position was achieved through another's loss. Now the cycle of usurpation continues, with the matchseller becoming the object of Flora's affections and ministrations. She promises to give him "A lovely lathery scrub" (p. 32) and to show him the intricacies of her garden. Her mothering and her arrangement are simply re-directed towards a new object. She says to the matchseller, "I've polished the whole house for you" (p. 40).

Edward, broken, can only recall nostalgically the time when he was secure in her arrangement:

> When I tell you how well I remember this room, how well I remember this den. . . . Ha. Yesterday now, it was clear, clearly defined, so clearly. . . . The garden, too, was sharp, lucid, in the rain, in the sun. . . . My den, too, was sharp, arranged for my purpose . . . quite satisfactory. . . . My desk was polished, and my cabinet. . . . I was polished. . . . I could pour hot water down the spoon-hole, yes, easily, no difficulty, my grasp was firm, my command established, my life was accounted for, I was ready for excursions to the cliff, down the path to the back gate, through the long grass, no need to watch for the nettles, my progress was fluent, after my long struggling against all kinds of usurpers, disreputables, lists, literally lists of people anxious to do me down . . .
>
> (pp. 35-36)

---

[20] While Flora is never explicitly identified as the squire's daughter, Edward recalls that the squire's daughters had "flaming red hair" and were "The pride of the county" (p. 22). He particularly recalls the youngest, whose name he has forgotten; he calls her "Fanny. A flower" (p. 28). But his reminiscences of Flora

Now, however, the time has come, the wind of change has entered Edward's nook, and the clarity of his landscape has been blurred.

In Pinter's later plays, the landscape of the individual's self becomes increasingly less clear and secure. For as the threat of the outside world and its violence becomes internalized in the room, the individual clings more to an inner landscape, seeking a secure sense of self in the eyes of a lover, in memory or in the past.

Edward's question to the matchseller in the final scene of A Slight Ache foreshadows the movement of Pinter's later plays. He asks:

> Why did I invite you into this room? That's your next question, isn't it? Bound to be. . . . Well, why not, you might say? My oldest acquaintance. My nearest and dearest. My kith and kin.
>
> (p. 36)

The choice to invite the stranger into one's room, seen in Pinter's early plays as almost involuntary, disappears as the usurper, far from being "strange," takes on the guise of one's "nearest and dearest," his "kith and kin." The terms "kith" and "kin" reappear in The Homecoming, where Teddy, through a brutally casual arrangement between his wife and his family, becomes superfluous in both roles; Ruth is received as "kin" and her husband can only depart to return to America.

---

suggest that she is this daughter: "Fine figure of a woman, she was, too, in her youth. Wonderful carriage, flaming red hair" (p.24).

In becoming wife-mother-whore to Teddy's father and brothers, Ruth takes the place of the deceased Jessie, and in a sense completes the cycle implied in Pinter's earlier mother-figures. However, with The Homecoming, the structure of the room which informs the earlier plays is destroyed. Teddy notes: "Actually there was a wall, across there . . . with a door. We knocked it down . . . years ago . . . to make an open living area." [21] Thus the door no longer serves as the primary focus for the threat to the security of the individual's room. In the "open living area" which Pinter's later characters inhabit, the forces of violence are no longer as concentrated but are more diffuse.

The wall has also been knocked down between the present and the past, and so the last refuge of the imagination -- the past remembered -- is lost. Pinter's most recent play, Old Times, explores the way in which memory is open to change and may be given a new reality by the self or another. Anna muses: "There are things I remember which may never have happened but as I recall them so they take place." [22] Thus one is made painfully aware of the presence of the past.

---

[21]Harold Pinter, The Homecoming (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1965).

[22]Harold Pinter, Old Times (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1971).

Throughout Pinter's later works, the movement of the drama, as well as its landscape, becomes more subtle; in The Collection, The Lover, Tea Party, and The Basement, conflicting memories and fantasies vie with each other, and in Landscape, Silence, and Night the staging of the plays heightens the impression that even in the realm of fantasy and memory, lovers never quite meet. As Beth says in Landscape:

> I drew a face in the sand, then a body. The body of a woman. Then the body of a man, close to her, not touching. But they didn't look like anything. They didn't look like human figures. The sand kept on slipping, mixing the contours.[23]

Pinter's individual ultimately finds security neither in the room, nor in the eyes of another, nor even in his most intimate memories. For the door always opens, admitting violence. Love will be betrayed, judgement is inescapable, and one will finally be expelled from every secure place he seeks on this earth. As Nat Goldberg declares,[24] with the characteristic humour that mitigates Pinter's otherwise bleak vision:

> How can I put it to you? We all wander on our tod through this world. It's a lonely pillow to kip on. Right!

---

[23]Harold Pinter, "Landscape," Landscape and Silence (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1969), p.20.

[24]The Birthday Party, p.56.

Bibliography

Amend, Victor E. "Harold Pinter -- Some credits and Debits," Modern Drama, X, ii (September 1967), 165-174.

Bachelard, Gaston. The Poetics Of Space. trans. M. Jolas. New York: The Orion Press, 1964.

Beckett, Samuel. Endgame: A Play In One Act. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1958.

_____. Waiting For Godot. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1954.

Boulton, James. "Harold Pinter: The Caretaker And Other Plays," Modern Drama, VI (September, 1963), 131-140.

Brook, Peter. The Empty Space. New York: Avon, 1968.

Brown, John Russell. "Dialogue In Pinter and Others," Critical Quarterly, VII (Autumn 1964), 225-243.

_____. ed. Modern British Dramatists: A Collection Of Critical Essays. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968.

_____. "Mr. Pinter's Shakespeare," Essays In The Modern Drama. ed. Morris Freedman. Boston: D.C. Heath and Co., 1964.

Cassou, Jean. Chagall. London: Thames and Hudson, 1965.

Cirlot, J.E. A Dictionary of Symbols. trans. J. Sage. New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1962.

Dick, Kay. "Pinter And The Fearful Matter," Texas Quarterly, IV, 257-265.

Esslin, Martin. The Peopled Wound: The Plays of Harold Pinter. London: Methuen and Co., 1970.

_____. The Theatre of the Absurd. New York: Anchor Books, 1961.

Etchells, Ruth. Unafraid To Be: A Christian Study Of Contemporary English Writing. London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1969.

Feiffer, Jules. Little Murders. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1971.

Golding, William. Lord of the Flies. London: Faber and Faber, 1962.

Gordon, Lois G. Stratagems To Uncover Nakedness: The Dramas of Harold Pinter. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1969.

Hamilton, Edith. Mythology. Toronto: The New American Library of Canada Ltd., 1963.

Hayman, Ronald. Harold Pinter. London: Heinemann Educational Books, Ltd., 1968.

Hemingway, Ernest. "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," The Hemingway Reader. ed. Charles Poore. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953.

Hinchcliffe, Arnold P. Harold Pinter. New York: Twayne, 1967.

Hoefer, Jacqueline. "Pinter and Whiting: Two Attitudes Towards The Alienated Artist," Modern Drama, IV (February 1962), 402-408.

Hollis, James R. Harold Pinter: The Poetics of Silence. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970.

Ionesco, Eugene. Plays. vol.I. London: John Calder, 1958.

Jung, Carl. ed. Man And His Symbols. New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1968.

Kafka, Franz. The Trial. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1953.

Kerr, Walter. Harold Pinter. New York: Columbia University Press, 1967.

Kesey, Ken. One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest. New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1962.

Kierkegaard, Soren. Repetition: An Essay in Experimantal Psychology. trans. Walter Lowrie. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941.

Lahr, John. "Pinter and Chekov: The Bond of Naturalism," The Drama Review, XII, ii (Winter 1968), 137-145.

Laing, R.D. The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1967.

Marowitz, C., Milne, T., Hale, O. eds. The Encore Reader: A Chronicle of the New Drama. London: Methuen, 1965.

Pesta, John. "Pinter's Usurpers," Drama Survey, VI (Spring-Summer 1967), 54-65.

Picard, Max. Man and Language. Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1963.

Pinter, Harold. "Beckett," Beckett at Sixty. Calder and Boyars, 1967.

_____. The Birthday Party. London: Methuen and Co., 1960.

_____. The Caretaker. London: Methuen and Co., 1960.

_____. The Collection and The Lover. London: Methuen and Co., 1963.

_____. Five Screenplays. London: Methuen and Co., 1971.

_____. The Homecoming. London: Methuen and Co., 1965.

_____. Landscape and Silence. London: Methuen and Co., 1969.

_____. A Night Out, Night School, Revue Sketches: Early Plays. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967.

_____. Old Times. London: Methuen and Co., 1971.

_____. Poems. London: Enitharmon Press, 1971.

_____. The Room and The Dumb Waiter. London: Methuen and Co., 1960.

_____. A Slight Ache and Other Plays. London: Methuen and Co., 1961.

_____. Tea Party and Other Plays. London: Methuen and Co., 1967.

Pirandello, Luigi. "Pirandello," Playwrights On Playwrighting: The Meaning and Making of Modern Drama From Ibsen To Ionesco. New York: Hill and Wang, 1961.

Salvan, Jacques. To Be And Not To Be: An Analysis of Jean-Paul Sartre's Ontology. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1962.

Taylor, John Russell. Anger and After: A Guide To The New British Drama. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1963.

_____. Harold Pinter. Harlow, Essex: Longman's, Green and Co., Ltd., 1969.

Valency, Maurice. The Flower and the Castle: An Introduction to Modern Drama. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963.

Vittorini, Domenico. "Pirandello's Philosophy of Life," Essays In The Modern Drama. ed. Morris Freedman. Boston: D.C. Heath and Co., 1964.

Vos, Nelvin. "Games and Rituals," Eugene Ionesco and Edward Albee: A Critical Essay. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1968.

Wellwarth, George E. The Theater of Protest and Paradox: Developments in the Avant-Garde Drama. New York: New York University Press, 1964.

Wiesel, Elie. The Gates of the Forest. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966.

Williams, Raymond. Drama from Ibsen To Brecht. London: Chatto and Windus, 1968.