

THEATRES OF THE MIND

A KLEINIAN ANALYSIS OF THE PLAYS OF HAROLD  
PINTER

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## **James Jarrett: Theatres of the Mind:**

### **A Kleinian Analysis of the Plays of Harold Pinter**

#### **Abstract**

For the past fifty years, critics and scholars have been searching for a critical language to explain the work of Britain's most successful playwright, Harold Pinter. One of the richer paths of enquiry has been to analyse the plays using a psychoanalytic vocabulary. In general terms, however, most of these studies have been restricted to using a Freudian terminology.

This study develops the psychoanalytic tradition of Pinter studies by applying the theories of one of Freud's successors, Melanie Klein. The study has been undertaken through an analysis of play texts to develop a synthesis of Kleinian theory and Pinter. Klein's work develops Freudianism by exploring the primitive building blocks of the infant's mind.

Chapter 1 introduces the thesis argument and gives a detailed introduction to Pinter's background and his work as writer. Chapter 2 provides an examination of the fundamental elements of Klein's theories in the context of Freud's own ideas. Chapter 3 uses Klein's theory of dreams to analyse Pinter's earlier work and argues that the plays explore complex unconscious phantasies of relations to bad and good objects. A further contribution is made to psychoanalytic vocabulary with the introduction of the notion of the split object. Chapter 4 explores the manic-depressive aspects of *The Dwarfs*, whilst Chapter 5 is a close reading that argues that *The Caretaker* can be read through the lens of the characters' anxious attempt to repair 'objects' damaged in phantasy. Chapter 6 provides a detailed Kleinian exegesis of *The Homecoming* and then Pinter's later work is considered: his memory plays, and his work after 1980, including his overtly political work and his last plays including *Ashes to Ashes*

and *Celebration*. In this chapters Kleinian lexis is employed to get at the unconscious undercurrents of the plays.

Throughout, along with a specific emphasis on the characters' unconscious anxieties and relations to objects, the relationship between society, the historical moment and the text are considered.

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## Chapter 1

### *An Introduction to Harold Pinter*

#### **Thesis Statement**

In 1962 Harold Pinter, the most important playwright of his generation, gave a lecture at Bristol University during the annual student Drama festival. In this speech Pinter set out to demystify his work; and he did so with an honesty and clarity that belied his public persona as a taciturn or reticent artist. He describes how - in rejecting any urge to exploit the characters' utterances to broadcast his own political or ideological views - he managed to cultivate a space on the page for his characters to live, develop and grow - to be 'free'.

However, because he refused to use his characters to speak for him Pinter's effort to elucidate the psychological motivations of his characters falls short. In allowing them the liberty to exist, to an extent, beyond the control of their own author, Pinter's dramatis personae became increasingly complex and multi-faceted. With a life of their own these individuals seemed to resist any attempt to explicate their goals or objectives. As such, to this day, they remain 'hidden' as Pinter himself put it. He told his audience in Bristol that:

Between my lack of biographical data about them and the ambiguity of what they say lies a territory which is not only worthy of exploration, but which it is compulsory to explore. You and I, the characters which grow on a page, most of the time we're inexpressive, giving little away, unreliable, elusive, obstructive, unwilling. But it's out of these attributes that a language arises. A language, I repeat, where under what is said, another thing is being said.<sup>1</sup>

This study will interrogate this strange 'territory' 'between' Pinter's 'lack of biographical data' and the 'ambiguity' of what is said by the characters. It will demonstrate how powerful unconscious forces permeate Pinter's dramas and shape the outcomes of his plays.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2008/dec/31/harold-pinter-early-essay-writing> [accessed 16 January 2018]

The idea that psychoanalysis might irradiate Pinter's oblique and enigmatic work is not new. Indeed, the psychoanalytic tradition in Pinter studies has a long history. Pinter's plays expatiate the agony of the human condition. They explore sex, death, aggression, passion, love and dreams. Inevitably, numerous critical theorists have tackled the inherent difficulty and complexity of applying a Freudian terminology. Lucina Paquet Gabbard has offered an astute and deft analysis of the 'dream structure' of Pinter's work using Freudian concepts such as 'condensation', 'displacement', 'latent content' to illuminate the repressed wishes of the characters<sup>2</sup>. Lois Gordon's *Stratagems to Uncover Nakedness* is an extensive examination of Pinter's work using Freud's ideas and themes. Her discussion of *The Birthday Party* argues that the menacing gentleman callers 'Goldberg' and 'McCann' symbolise the parental super-ego. They have been sent because:

Stanley's oedipal "dilemma" is at the "heart" of *The Birthday Party* and the crux of "all of Pinter's work": "man is born with certain natural drives, and, as he grows up, he bears the burden of repressing what society then labels his illicit impulses. Unless he can do this, the Goldbergs and McCanns will erupt periodically to punish him for his original sin, his instinctual energies."<sup>3</sup>

Shri Ranjan Jalote has also offered an illuminating dissection of the 'neurotic anxiety'<sup>4</sup> of Pinter's characters whilst Martin Esslin's *Pinter the Playwright* liberally employs psychoanalytic language to explain *The Caretaker* and *The Homecoming*, a play which he tells us 'can be seen' as a 'dream' expressing the son's oedipal wish for 'the sexual conquest

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<sup>2</sup> Lucina Paquet Gabbard. *The Dream Structure of Pinter's Plays: A Psychoanalytic Approach* (Cranbury, NJ, and London: Associated University Presses, 1976). P. 18

<sup>3</sup> Susan H. Merritt. *Pinter in Play: Critical Strategies and the Plays of Harold Pinter* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990). P. 110

<sup>4</sup> Shri Ranjan Jalote. *The Plays of Harold Pinter: A Study in Neurotic Anxiety* (New Delhi: Harman Publishing House, 1996) P. 56



of the mother'<sup>5</sup>. Linda Renton's Lacanian exegesis of Pinter's texts argues we can find a 'fresh approach to Pinter in a single theoretical principle, Lacan's object petit a'<sup>6</sup>. Her work is challenging and lucidly expressed but limited to his screenplays. Even Michael Billington's blend of academic analysis and biography *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter* happens upon psychoanalytic territory by postulating that Pinter's own life experiences played a central role in the development of his work. Billington's supposition, that Pinter's work is partly an expression of his repressed, nostalgic wish to return to the 'private Eden'<sup>7</sup> of his youth, is redolent of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory.

But 'deep psychology' is more than the just the ideas of Freud or even Lacan. It is nearly seventy years since his death and in that time many brilliant and original thinkers have expanded the horizons of psychoanalysis. Essentially, the generation that followed Freud were loyal to the fundamental principles of his theories; and yet they developed their own work in the spirit of open enquiry, seeking to enlarge psychoanalysis into a comprehensive conceptual model, capable of elucidating the very deepest layers of the human mind. Therefore, today psychoanalysis can get at the root of mental illness by describing the development of the human psyche in the very earliest stages of infancy. Thus, the notion that babies experience a rich, kaleidoscopic range of unconscious experience, right from the moment of birth, is now normative within the psychoanalytic paradigm.

Therefore, although the Freudian literature on Pinter is fruitful and insightful the scope of this scholarship is limited. This is because the Pinter theorists have only described the workings of the characters' impulses at the neurotic level: the stage of psychic development that

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<sup>5</sup> Martin Esslin *Pinter the Playwright* (London: Methuen, 1982). P.141

<sup>6</sup> <http://researchspace.bathspa.ac.uk/1441/1/Linda%20Renton%20-%201999.pdf> P. 8 [accessed 16 December 2017]

<sup>7</sup> Michael Billington *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter* (London: Faber, 1996) P. 25

emerges in response to the resolution of the mature oedipal crisis. So far little attempt has been made to address the problem of character behaviour or motivation by articulating the deepest realms of the embryonic unconscious.

Thus, the question remains: how can we fully understand the unconscious motivations and themes of Pinter's plays? It is my contention that we can cast new light on his works by applying the ideas of one of Freud's successors: Melanie Klein. This is the primary thesis of this study – and its principle claim to originality. I will argue that the indeterminate nature of the characters' behaviour can be attributed to the painful, often unsuccessful, unconscious struggle to resist regressive impulses towards the paranoid schizoid position, and to sustain instead creative, loving relations with oneself and other external objects.

As such, this study develops the theme of power in Robert Gordon's recent monograph on Pinter. Gordon's phenomenological methodology 'aims to capture the way that each drama is conceived as a pattern of lived experience to be grasped by the audience in its moment-to-moment presentation in time and space'.<sup>8</sup> Gordon situates his exposition on the desire for power in Pinter within a range of social, political and cultural contexts and institutions, including the family, marriage, and totalitarian societies. But for Klein the need to assert power over others is a primitive, 'manic'<sup>9</sup> defence against unconscious anxiety. It is an expression of the phantasy that one has lost, or will lose, the 'loved' object through one's own destructive attacks. Thus, while Gordon's analysis is an erudite and extensive dissection of the struggle for power within social situations that unfolds before our eyes, my objective is to explore the potentiality of Kleinian psychoanalysis to explain why Pinter's characters are obsessed with power.

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Gordon. *Harold Pinter The Theatre of Power* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2013) P. 9

<sup>9</sup> Hannah Segal. *Klein* (London: Karnac Books, 1989) P.83

But if the primary objective of this study is to enlarge the scope of the psychoanalytic literature on Pinter, I also wish to offer some modest contribution to the evolution of the Kleinian vocabulary. My dream analysis of Pinter's early plays seeks to do this by describing how a phantasy of attachment to a strong, 'good enough' object can emerge through the extremely complicated and contradictory interplay of violent, persecutory and idolatry phantasies. The notion of the attacked object as 'weak' and endangered and therefore in need of protection as a 'good' object is novel in this context.

However, one of the problems with any psychoanalytic interpretation of a text is that the theorist can - perhaps in their understandable enthusiasm to illuminate the hitherto opaque depths of the character's unconscious - neglect to consider that human 'minds' do not exist in a vacuum, and that individuals are almost always members of a wider social group. Klein, who has been accused of focusing far too much on the peculiarities of the infant's internal world of phantasy, was in fact highly sensitive to the fact that the nature of the baby's external environment was critical in determining whether that child could thrive. To be nurtured by a loving, attentive mother was crucial, and disaster could ensue if this process somehow went wrong.

Therefore, throughout this study, I have tried not to disregard the external world of the plays: the social, political, cultural, historical or economic contexts of the works and the ways that they impact upon the characters. Indeed, where appropriate, my objective will be to use the plays to articulate the unarticulated interface between the idiosyncratic specificity of a character's phantasies and their unconscious representation and signification in the external social and cultural environment. Put simply, it is my contention that culture, as well as social and economic structures are partly constituted in the unconscious dialectic between paranoid schizoid and depressive, reparative impulses. Thus, by authoring this study and focusing on

Pinter's texts, I hope to make some contributions to the theory of the relationship between the Kleinian unconscious and society.

## **Methodology**

My approach in this study is to analyse Pinter's texts and to elucidate, where appropriate, instances of unconscious phantasy indicative of Klein's paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions. This means that the style of the prose in the thesis will vary. During analysis of dreams or dream sequences it will be necessary to use a specialised psychoanalytic language. At other times, when unconscious phantasy can be understood within a social or political context, the style of the writing will use Kleinian concepts to illuminate the texts. However, throughout, my goal will be to try to follow Klein's lead when speaking to her young patients by being as explicit and unambiguous as possible.

For example, *The Birthday Party*, Pinter's first full-length play, could be a representation of a pathological projective phantasy. Stanley Weber, the hermit pianist, is often seen as a hero who is taken by the Kafkaesque forces of society, symbolised in the persons of the sinister gentleman callers, Goldberg and McCann. But Stanley's torturous interrogation at the hands of these menacing agents of the system is, in my view, redolent of a phantasy in which the persecuting internal, super-ego object is felt to be within the external object. Goldberg and McCann become Stanley's persecutors, so he can defend himself against the destructive force of his own violent internal world.

For Stanley the stress and pressure of living in such a claustrophobic situation with Meg and without self-defining work, is brought to a head by the disastrous idea of the 'birthday party' itself. This is because birthday parties for people in their late thirties are not the same as parties arranged for a loved and treasured child. For the latter, the pure joy of his existence is celebrated by his dotting family and friends. For a man in middle age, a birthday celebration is

a highly pressured trial by social interaction where the guests conduct a tacit appraisal of the host's achievements: or otherwise.

From a Kleinian point of view we could say that the social stress of Stanley's 'birthday' - Stanley has achieved nothing in life and so is terrified of being exposed as a fraud - causes a collapse into a form of projective psychosis in which persecuting objects in the protagonist's internal world can no longer be contained and instead, must be experienced as a frightening interrogation by Goldberg and McCann:

Goldberg: What have you done with your wife?

McCann: He's killed his wife.

Goldberg: Why did you kill your wife?

Stanley: What wife?

McCann: How did he kill her?

Goldberg: How did he kill her?

McCann: You throttled her.

Goldberg: with arsenic

McCann: That's your man<sup>10</sup>

### **Harold Pinter: Historical Context and Background**

However, I want to use this opening chapter to answer the following questions: Who was Harold Pinter? How did his personal circumstances and the times he lived in shape the development of his art? To find answers I will survey his life and career, and argue that it is a sense of contradiction, paradox, and tension, that is at the core of his work. Pinter's career has at times seemed to defy categorisation and resist any attempts to neatly explain his work.

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<sup>10</sup> Harold Pinter, *Plays 1* (London: Faber, 1996) P.49

Likewise, his personality, at times, has mirrored the indeterminacy and ambivalence of his plays.

For the theatre, the fifties in Britain was a period when a radical, new impulse of drama finally challenged the old order. John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*<sup>11</sup> attacked the theatrical establishment. But it was not that Osborne's 'kitchen sink' drama was new in style. Rather it was the subject matter that the play tackled that shocked its audience. The Second World War had finished eleven years previously, but the older generation who had returned were still clinging onto their relief that such horror was over. Their shared struggle against fascism had shaped their psychology and beliefs. They were happy to enjoy the peace and democracy that they had spilled so much blood to preserve.

What they did not anticipate was the emergence of a feisty, younger generation who did not care for traditional values. Osborne's 'Jimmy Porter' represented something new and frightening because he stood on the stage and questioned where the country was heading, not where it had been. He openly bemoaned his life, speaking of his dissatisfaction at his career and prospects. He didn't care about the war. He didn't care about the peace. He was angry and frustrated: he was bored. But the sixties were only a few years away, and Osborne saw that the sons and daughters of so many war heroes had to shape a new world out of the husk of their parents' deadening complacency.

Soon the age of revolution arrived in Britain. The left was in the ascendancy; and the theatre was a space where new political ideas could be articulated. On the continent, these counter-cultural and political impulses were being expressed through a desire to play with, and eventually deconstruct, traditional artistic forms. Fine art and performance art were taking a radically new direction that was to eventually impact on the theatre as well. A shock-wave of

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Banham. *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) P.828

experimentalist, avant-garde work shockingly transgressed conventional art. Modernist aesthetics attacked traditional art as false, decadent or bourgeois.

Drawing upon these new fashions and modes the new 'Absurdist', such as Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco, wrote plays which deconstructed realism to expatiate a vision of the world in which all forms of action, all modes of speech or language, all charged political rhetoric, all explanatory theological or philosophical narratives, appeared redundant and infantile.<sup>12</sup> This new, metaphysical drama was a cause celebre for a while.

Harold Pinter emerged in the space between British realism and the European theatrical avant-garde. His plays seemed 'realistic' at first and strangely comic. But what the audience did not expect to be confronted with was a vision of humanity as a primal breed, atavistically competing for space and territory beneath the facade of our everyday interactions. With his first plays Pinter showed us that the mundane can be terrifying. He exposed us to the 'precipices'<sup>13</sup> that plunge away beneath the crumbling veneer of our apparently superficial chatter.

## **Biography**

Born on the 10th October 1930, Harold Pinter was the son of Jack and Frances Pinter, a Jewish couple from North London. An only child, Pinter lived with his parents in Hackney<sup>14</sup> at 19 Thistlewaite Rd. Jack Pinter was a self-employed tailor who later went to work for

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Esslin (ed) *Absurd Drama* (London: Penguin, 1965) P. 7-23

<sup>13</sup> *Harold Pinter, Art, Truth and Politics*  
[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2005/index.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2005/index.html) (accessed 15 May 2012)

<sup>14</sup> Brigitte Gauthier (ed) *Viva Pinter: Harold Pinter's Spirit of Resistance* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 1963) P. 128

someone else. Although Pinter was an only child he came from a large family who traced their ancestry back to the Southern European Jews of Portugal.<sup>15</sup>

Pinter has been often described as a London playwright, and he lived in the city all his life apart from a brief period when he was a resident of Worthing. But he did not pronounce on the landscape of his childhood with much enthusiasm when interviewed by *The New Yorker* in 1969. He was particularly disparaging about Hackney. He said it had:

Some big, run down Victorian houses, and soap factories with a terrible smell, and a lot of railway yards. And shops. It had a lot of shops. But down the road a bit from our house was a river, the Lea River, which is a tributary of the Thames, and if you go up the river two miles you find yourself in a marsh. And near a filthy canal as well. There is a terrible factory of some kind, with an enormous dirty chimney, that shoves things down in this canal.<sup>16</sup>

There is sense of violence in this image, with its visceral, almost phallic, description of filth and dirt swilling in canals of water. In *The Homecoming* Teddy remarks to his wife Ruth that he feels that the East End of his childhood is not as 'clean' as America. He clearly feels in the pit of his stomach a peculiar revulsion that he finds impossible to repress.

Pinter's own formative years and the events of his life to some extent reflected the uncertainty and turbulence of his times. Although he lived with his loving and stable parents, he was a British Jew, resident in London, during Hitler's reign of anti-Semitic terror on the continent. He was a child evacuee, sent away to the country to escape the Nazi blitz of his home city. In the first instance, he was exiled to Cornwall to live out a miserable, homesick existence. Peacock tells us that whilst he was there he was present when a boy of his own age

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<sup>15</sup>Penelope Prentice: *Harold Pinter Life, Work and Criticism* (York: York Press, 1991) P.5

<sup>16</sup> D. Keith Peacock. *Harold Pinter and the New British Theatre* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997) P. 13



was told that his parents and baby sister had been killed in a bombing raid<sup>17</sup>. This horrific experience had a profound impact on Pinter. Indeed, it is surely no co-incidence that his plays are often triggered into life by the arrival of a visitor into a room. This visitor is often destructive in some way. On a second occasion the authorities allowed him to be accompanied by his mother, and the bucolic garden of the cottage they resided in provided the inspiration for the setting of his first radio play, *A Slight Ache*.<sup>18</sup>

The London of Pinter's youth and twenties was suffused in darkness. The city was struggling to rise to its feet again having been reduced to smoking rubble during the blitz. The fight against Nazism had been won. But the price paid for this victory was excessive and debilitating. Millions of families tried to eke out existences whilst having to cope with the same gruelling austerity measures imposed on them during the war years. Food rationing didn't cease until 1954<sup>19</sup>.

During the conflict the country had accrued vast sums of high interest debt from American emergency loans which would have to be paid off. The social impact of the war was profound. It was more than simply a case of the population living a daily hand- to- mouth existence: two generations of young men had been destroyed on the battle fields of Europe, their bodies scattered to the wind like leaves. Thousands of their comrades returned to the British Isles wounded and incapacitated for life; others were left psychologically scarred by feelings of guilt, anger and fear.<sup>20</sup> These men, who'd witnessed such carnage, such

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<sup>17</sup> Peacock, *Harold*, 13

<sup>18</sup> Albert Bermel *Contradictory Characters: An Interpretation of the Modern Theatre* (Evanston: North Western University Press 1973) P.228-239

<sup>19</sup> Louise Ryan, Wendy Webster (eds) *Gendering Migration: Masculinity, Femininity, and Ethnicity in Post-war Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate 1988) P. 64

<sup>20</sup> Geoffrey G. Field *Blood, Sweat, and Toil: Remaking the British Working Class, 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) P.291

inhumanity and suffering, were expected to return to normal family life without complaint. Often, years after the war has ended they were left feeling like strangers in their own homes. Many children grew up in abject poverty, bereft of fathers, or in the care of parents who were too sick to provide for them. The family as an institution was under tremendous pressure. Many children were born out of wedlock, the products of ephemeral relationships inspired by the fatalistic immediacy of the moment.

Furthermore, although the implementation of the welfare state<sup>21</sup> by the post-war Labour reformers promised a ‘cradle to grave’ system of support for Britain’s war heroes and their families, the influx of immigrant workers to institute these new services, from all corners of the commonwealth, created definite social and racial tensions. This ambivalence towards peoples of ‘colour’ triggered a sinister rise in a paranoid strain of nationalism. These tensions erupted in the conflagrations of the Notting Hill riots of 1958.<sup>22</sup>

More than this a frighteningly polarised world was emerging from the ashes of conflict. After the ‘Iron Curtain’<sup>23</sup> had descended across the continent, a new ‘cold’ war began. This time the weapons of conflict were limited, paradoxically, by the sheer scale of the devastation they could inflict. Apart from the Korean crisis of 1950, this ‘war’ was fought by strategy and espionage alone: by the clandestine network of covert intelligence agencies, such as the KGB and the CIA. Both were formed in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. In East Germany, the Stasi spied on dissidents and citizens who might oppose the Soviet regime. Its

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<sup>21</sup> Glen O'Hara *Governing Post-War Britain: The Paradoxes of Progress, 1951-1973* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) P.190

<sup>22</sup> Randall Hansen *Citizenship and Immigration in Post War Britain: The Institutional Origins of a Multicultural Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) P.87

<sup>23</sup> Olav Njølstad *The Last Decade of the Cold War: From Conflict Escalation to Conflict Transformation* (New York: Frank Cass) P.45

influence was like a 'giant octopus', probing every aspect of life.<sup>24</sup> In America, McCarthy's paranoid 'red scares' had begun: many ordinary citizens and others of a Socialist or Communist persuasion, including Bertolt Brecht, were hauled up in front of a committee of judicial bureaucrats. They were then invited to defend themselves against accusations of 'un-American activities'.<sup>25</sup>

It would be easy to argue that such social, political and historical upheaval is mirrored in the peculiar edginess and fear that pervades Pinter's early dramas and that is probably true. But for him personally, strangely, the forties were a golden time of plenitude, of rich new discoveries despite all the turmoil that was going on in the world.

A key moment in his life came at the age of eleven when he enrolled at Hackney Downs Grammar School. Here, he was to form an incredibly tight friendship group with a cohort of fiercely intelligent teenagers who shared his blossoming interest in literature, poetry and films. He also met and formed a bond with an inspirational English teacher by the name of Joseph Brierley.<sup>26</sup> Brierley introduced Pinter to Shakespeare, Marlow and most importantly, Webster.<sup>27</sup> At the same time Pinter also gained something of a reputation as the school's 'matinee idol': he produced memorable performances as Macbeth and Romeo.<sup>28</sup> Arnold Wesker, who was in time to become his direct contemporary, and who attended the less

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<sup>24</sup> John O Koehler *Stasi: The Untold Story of the East German Secret Police* (Colorado: Westview Press 1999) P.9

<sup>25</sup> John Fuegi *Bertolt Brecht: Chaos, According to Plan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987) P.99

<sup>26</sup> Joe Brearley *'Fortune's Fool' The Man Who Taught Harold Pinter a Life of Joe Brearley* (Aylesbury: Twig Books, 2008)

<sup>27</sup> Nigel Williams *Arena Harold Pinter* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U80Y05\\_ligU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U80Y05_ligU) [accessed 16 March 2013]

<sup>28</sup> [http://haroldpinter.org/acting/acting\\_earlyexperience.shtml](http://haroldpinter.org/acting/acting_earlyexperience.shtml) [accessed 19 March 2013]

prestigious Upton House School, recalled in later years how he had been dragged to Hackney Downs by a group of swooning girls to watch Pinter in a play.<sup>29</sup>

At school, he also cultivated an interest in sport. Peacock tells us that:

His [Pinter's] interest in literature was closely followed by an interest in sport. During the war, each time he was evacuated, Pinter made sure to take his cricket bat with him, for even as a small boy he was obsessed with the game. He appears to have been good at sport, and in 1946 he broke the school sprint records for 100 and 200 yards. The continuance into his adult life of his obsession with cricket and his general interest and ability in sport explains his repeated references to games and sports in his plays, screen plays, poems, and prose. For the teenage Pinter this commitment to literature and sport was rivalled only by a powerful interest in girls.<sup>30</sup>

But although Pinter was well-known and extremely well-liked at school, he was not everyone's friend. He was in fact a central figure in a very private, very exclusive, friendship clique, and he was torn between his image as a public figure at Hackney Downs and the responsibilities he felt towards his closest confidants.

### **Early Career**

As the end of his compulsory education came into view the possibility of going to Oxbridge was mooted, but without the pre-requisite Latin Pinter's entry was barred.<sup>31</sup> With such a love of poetry, literature and films, and with some success to his credit from acting in plays at school, he decided to become a performer instead. He was offered a place at RADA to train beginning in the year after finishing his exams. However, the proletarian young Pinter despised the atmosphere of the upper-class elite conservatoire and dropped out after only a

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<sup>29</sup> Peacock, *Harold*, 15

<sup>30</sup> Peacock, *Harold*, 15

<sup>31</sup> Penelope Prentice: *Harold Pinter Life, Work, and Criticism* (York: York Press, 1991) P.5

term.<sup>32</sup> He did not, however, tell his parents that he had come to such an important decision and instead spent some time rudderless, traipsing around Hackney with little to do. Around this time, he also rejected the idea of the existence of any god.<sup>33</sup>

In the years that followed he completed his training at The Central School of Speech and Drama. He had a run in with the law after refusing to be conscripted into the army for a term of national service. He declared himself to be a conscientious objector and was prepared to go to prison before his father paid a fee to spare his son from being incarcerated.<sup>34</sup>

He soon became a struggling actor, using the stage name David Baron.<sup>35</sup> Pinter's first serious engagement came when he was employed to work for the last great actor manager of his time, the formidable Aneurin McMaster. He toured Ireland playing Shakespeare with the company in minor roles until he was asked one day to play Hamlet because McMaster was 'tired'.<sup>36</sup> He didn't get the opportunity to play a lead role again but returned a much more experienced, much more accomplished, classical actor.

Moreover, Pinter was captivated by the south of Ireland and its beauty, and his memories of his time in Eire found its way into his plays. In *The Birthday Party* the thuggish Irishman McCann remembers his homeland with a sense of misty-eyed nostalgia. In between bouts of violence, he constructs a fantasy of Ireland as a locus of comfort and plenitude.

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<sup>32</sup> Margaret Rustin, Michael Rustin *Mirror to Nature: Drama, Psychoanalysis, and Society* (London: Karnac, 2002) P.243

<sup>33</sup> Billington, *The Life*, 42

<sup>34</sup> Kimball King. *Western Drama Through the Ages* (Westport: Greenwood Press 2007) P. 475

<sup>35</sup> David T Thompson. *Pinter: The Player's Playwright* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press) P.18

<sup>36</sup> Harold Pinter & Harry Burton talking in Sheffield Oct '06  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TpZEHrjBKW4> [accessed 12th March 2018]

Upon his return, Pinter became a vagabond repertory actor, travelling up and down the country playing roles in plays that were the standard of the day: stock murder mysteries and twee drawing room farces. But Pinter was torn between the world of his profession and the world in his head. In his body, he was an actor, a figure publicly speaking the lines of Terrence Rattigan or Noel Coward. In his private life he was steeped in modernist literature, a poet, and a kindred spirit of Kafka, of Joyce and of Eliot.

He also married a talented actress, Vivien Merchant. Merchant went onto to star in many of Pinter's subsequent plays. She bore him a son, Daniel, who lost touch with his father following his parents' divorce. During the sixties Pinter had an affair with the journalist Joan Bakewell. He was torn between the two women, and his infidelity eventually destroyed his marriage. The guilt he felt at his behaviour inspired his play *Betrayal*.

But the collapse of Pinter's marriage happened much later, when he was an established force in British theatre, and the most successful dramatist of his generation. Before then Merchant and Pinter's start to married life had been impoverished and, unable to afford a home of their own, the young couple had been forced to flit from one residence to another all the time, from place to place - from room to room.<sup>37</sup>

### **Pinter's Artistic Style**

These rooms - their evocative and perhaps at times dramatically charged atmospheres, and the people who moved about them in the shadows - stimulated Pinter's fertile imagination. From time- to- time he saw people come and go but with no knowledge of where they had been or of where they were going. He heard paranoid snippets and snatches of their conversations in hallways and doorways and from behind walls; and he realised that our

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<sup>37</sup> Extract from Nigel Williams' two-part *Arena* film biography of Pinter  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U80Y05\\_ligU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U80Y05_ligU) [accessed 16 March 2017]

experience of life could only ever be mysterious because, ultimately, we could never assess, accurately, the true intentions of others. Pinter realised that there is a limit to what we can ever truly know or understand about other people. One might think that he knows his friend, but how safe and assured can we be of others and their goals? As J.L. Styan puts it: 'part of [Pinter's] achievement has been to find a dramatic way of revealing the threat behind the evasive exchanges of everyday life, and to convey the tension between people who think they know each other'.<sup>38</sup>

Crucially, he also came to see that people did not always speak to relay information as one might reasonably assume. He recognised that people often speak for quite the opposite reason: to avoid communication, and that any dialogue between two characters in a play ought to express that fact. He also saw that, even in the minutiae of a mundane communicative conversation, a strategic, territorial conflict was taking place - but it was not being fought explicitly. Rather it was taking place unconsciously and implicitly. The weapons used were the subtle nuances of posture and gesture: of eye contact, of utterances and their tones and inflections, of silences and facial expressions. One of Pinter's most important insights was to see that the average conversation between A and B was never as cooperative or benign as we might like to think. People were unpredictable: their behaviours, erratic. They would appear to be split between one set of beliefs on the one hand and the opposite attitudes on the other. Pinter tells us that:

We have often heard that grimy expression 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 a continual evasion, desperate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves.

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<sup>38</sup> .L. Styan *Modern drama in theory and practice 2 Symbolism, Surrealism and the Absurd* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) P.135

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.<sup>39</sup>

Pinter once claimed that his plays were about the 'weasel under the cocktail cabinet'.<sup>40</sup> He later renounced this remark after a flurry of critics attempted to explain what he meant. But whatever his intention might have been, he was in fact being very perceptive about his own work. He was using a metaphor to try to get to the heart of what he is depicting in his plays. There are primitive impulses of aggression, of love, and of self-destruction, that lurk beneath the constraints of our civilisation, but these impulses are not always expressed through actual violence. Rather, it 'plays' within our use of language, when we use words to create or destroy others.

### **Early Career as a Playwright**

He brought this vision of language into focus when he wrote his first drama *The Room*, for a friend at Bristol University.<sup>41</sup> *The Room* has a style that mimics real speech. It's as if the writer had imagined what was being said behind the sealed doors of the room down the hallway from him and transposed these mutterings onto paper.

The play was striking because it did not attempt to transmit a political message at a time when theatre was becoming increasingly angry, increasingly polemical. Furthermore, it was unique because it was the first time that Pinter has exhibited his uncanny talent for

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<sup>39</sup> Harold Pinter, *The Echoing Silence*, address to students at Bristol University 1962  
<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2008/dec/31/harold-pinter-early-essay-writing> [accessed 12 January 2014]

<sup>40</sup> Judith Roof (ed) *Talking Drama* (Newcastle- Upon- Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009) P.40

<sup>41</sup> Steven H. Gale *Sharp Cut: Harold Pinter's Screenplays and the Artistic Process* (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press 2003) P.111



reproducing the real speech patterns of real people, who really spoke. Pinter had a 'tape recorder ear':

After *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter* Pinter's first full length play was *The Birthday Party*. The play toured Oxford, Cambridge and Wolverhampton. But this first big break as a writer ended in disaster when the play was kicked out of The Lyric, Hammersmith after a suite of dreadful reviews. Undeterred, he followed up *The Birthday Party* with a detailed synopsis for a radio play entitled *The Hothouse*. *The Hothouse* explores life within the inner sanctums of a strange psychiatric institution. But Pinter abandoned his attempt to write the script, and eventually left it in the bottom of a drawer.<sup>42</sup> Years later, when the text was finally adapted into a stage play, Pinter's vision was finally revealed. The 'patients' were powerless, invisible, degraded and debased victims of the scientists who abused their authority and who exploited their 'human guinea pigs' for their own personal gains. The staff had been dehumanised by their work. They had become virtually schizoid themselves, incapable of feeling empathy or compassionate feelings towards the interns. The play emphasised Pinter's deep suspicion of political and institutional power, and his distrust of those who force others to comply and conform to a preconditioned way of thinking.

### **Career Overview**

Downcast for a while, Pinter reacted with a flurry of new stage and radio plays, and his reputation was redeemed a few years later when he wrote *The Caretaker*. This play, about a cantankerous tramp attempting to lodge with two brothers, was a huge hit. Pinter's status as a major talent in British playwriting was confirmed.

A sustained outburst of creative writing ensued, in which Pinter wrote a myriad of plays, radio plays, film scripts and poems - and sketches. But these short scenes, such as *The Black*

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<sup>42</sup> *Newsweek*, Volume 99, Issues 9-17 1982 An Angry Young Pinter

*and the White, The Last to Go, That's Your Trouble, That's all* and *Trouble at the Works* read like writing exercises, bursts of creative energy. They are not towering achievements in themselves, but they are important in that they reveal the idiosyncratic characteristics of that which we would eventually label Pinteresque dialogue: peculiar repetitions, pauses, word-play, silences, evasions, humour, bathos and, ultimately, loneliness. He even wrote a novel, *The Dwarfs*, which was adapted into a stage play years later.

Although every play is different, we can roughly demarcate Pinter's work into several categories. The 'Comedies of Menace' period is the first. His life as a travelling actor in rep influences these plays. In the words of Christopher Innes they 'presented deliberately ambiguous images of almost anonymous people victimized by nameless forces or threatened by apparently motiveless games of dominance and subservience'.<sup>43</sup>

Soon his works lost their almost supernatural tone and became more mature, more realistic. For example, in a play such as *The Room*, the visitation of Riley is haunting, almost ghost like, a paranoid fantasy. In *The Collection*, a later piece, there is a stronger sense of life as a struggle between human beings, and not against mysterious forces.

Later Pinter became more focused on fantasy, and the subject of betrayal as his marriage was slowly deteriorating. His 'memory plays' charted this breakdown in communication, and the loss of any common ground that two people might share. With *Silence, Landscape, Night* and *Old Times* he depicts his characters as isolated and cut off from one another, cast adrift on the islands of their own fantasies, attempting to repair a past that is slipping through their fingers.

But his final works have a surreal atmosphere. *Celebration* is set in an exclusive London restaurant. Two couples are celebrating a wedding anniversary. As the characters chat and

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<sup>43</sup> John Russell Brown (ed) *The Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre, Volume 1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995) P. 435

banter we overhear the philosophical thoughts of the manager, a female waitress and an apparently unimportant waiter. Pinter proceeds to rupture the realistic aesthetic. He shows us what the characters are concealing behind their social masks: their phantasies and desires. The play concludes with an enigmatic monologue from the young attendant.

As Pinter developed his resume of successful plays so he also began to work in the lucrative market of screen writing. Over the course of some forty years he scripted more than twenty films including *The Quiller Memorandum*, (1965) *The Go Between*, (1969) *Langrishe Go Down*, (1970) *The Last Tycoon*, (1974) *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, (1980) and *The Heat of the Day*. (1988)

One of his most successful projects was his collaboration with the film director Joseph Losey on *The Servant*. The film is an adaptation of Robin Maugham's novel, and describes how a servant hired to work for a wealthy young man aggressively takes control of his master, destroying him.<sup>44</sup> It was perfect for Pinter. Its themes and ideas dovetailed with his own vision of human nature. He could have written the novel himself.

Indeed, there are some striking parallels between *The Servant* and the situation described in *Kullus*, written in 1949 by Pinter when he was eighteen. This prose poem remained unpublished for some twenty years, but it does provide a fascinating early insight into the images that haunted Pinter's fantasies. The situation is given thus: there is a room, a visitor, *Kullus*, and the narrator who welcomes this indistinguishable figure across his threshold, by night:

I let him in by the back door.

There was a brisk moon

-Come in

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<sup>44</sup> James Palmer, Michael Riley *The Films of Joseph Losey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) P.42

He stepped inside, slapping his hands, into the room.

-Go on, Kullus. Go to the fire

He stooped to the grate and stretched his fingers.

-You do not welcome warmth,

Said Kullus

-I?

-There is no meeting. There is separation....

A girl is introduced into the room. Eventually she asks:

-Which is your room?

She said

-I am no longer in my room.<sup>45</sup>

Gradually, but over time and with the greatest of refined ingenuity, the intruder has usurped the narrator. Now, it is they who dominate and therefore control the warm room in the 'house of bells' beyond the chill of the 'open night'. Power has been transacted. The situation has changed - the perspective, altered. The intruder has emerged victorious.

It is this poetic image, of an extremely subtle power struggle between two individuals and a third party within the confines of a shadowy room, that Pinter returns to repeatedly. It's an obsession. Even in his more poetic, lyrical, post *Homecoming* period, it's there, in the linguistic and territorial struggles of the characters. It is the premise of his finest dramatic works.

### **Political Work**

In the second half of the eighties Pinter became profoundly political in his outlook. He immersed himself in the task of being a spokesman for PEN, an amnesty organisation for

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<sup>45</sup> Esslin, *Pinter*, 45

imprisoned and persecuted writers. He became increasingly distrustful of American geopolitical power and came in time to see the abuse of such power as the source of much of the world's strife.

This new found political angst was elucidated in three short, brutal plays: *One for the Road*, (1984) *Party Time* (1994) and *Mountain Language* (1988). Written in anger, these works explored such bleak themes as power and powerlessness, sadism, torture, violence, the violation of human rights and ethnic cleansing. With these plays, Pinter seemed to anticipate the appalling genocides in Rwanda in 1994, the catastrophe of the Bosnian war in 1995 and, the much later atrocities and human rights violations of the Iraq and Afghan conflicts - which he actively and publicly opposed. At left-wing public events, he would often read his poems aloud. His goal was to de-sanitize the idea of war and to force his listeners into startling new recognitions of the sheer devastation of its impact.<sup>46</sup>

As Pinter became more political so he refocused his attention on language, only this time he was concerned with the rhetoric of Western politicians. Brigitte Gauthier reminds us that Pinter postulated that we are surrounded by a 'tapestry of lies'<sup>47</sup> and he was damning about the way politicians corrupt the meaning of words to conceal the unpalatable truth about war in their speeches.<sup>48</sup>

Gradually, Pinter's output became less prolific although he continued to build upon his voluminous output, writing a plethora of short scenes and sketches. Notably, he wrote a suite of political poems which described, in vivid terms, the horrors of war as experienced by its

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<sup>46</sup> Harold Pinter reads from War at Kennard Phillips opening of the Award exhibition at Henry Peacock Gallery, London 2004  
<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=harold+pinter+attacks+war+in+iraq> [accessed 13 April 2013]

<sup>47</sup> Gauthier, *Viva*, 3

<sup>48</sup> 2006: Nobel Laureate Harold Pinter is interviewed on the BBC News Night programme about politics and writing. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=69Jfp7zvypI> [accessed 26 November 2014]

victims. A late play, *Moonlight*, written whilst on holiday with his second wife Lady Antonia Fraser, charts an angry dying man's final thoughts and fantasies as he tries to come to terms with the absence of his estranged sons and the loss of his daughter.

In his final years, he was stricken by a series of illnesses. He was too weak to receive his Nobel Prize in person. He did however address the congregation in Stockholm from London where he proceeded to discuss how his plays began with an image and maybe a line of dialogue. His speech then turned into an angry political diatribe directed at American geo-political power.

Although frail, in 2006 he took on the draining and daunting task of playing the lead role in *Krapp's Last Tape* written by his idol and late friend Samuel Beckett. Pinter's fascination with Beckett began in his twenties. He was already acquainted with the work of Joyce, Kafka, W.B. Yeats, and T.S. Eliot, when he happened upon an extract of Beckett's prose in the journal *Irish Writing*. Later he recalls how lucky he felt to meet Beckett in Paris and the two struck up a friendship that was to last.<sup>49</sup>

Beckett became something of a mentor to Pinter, who would send his manuscripts to France in the hopes of receiving feedback on his efforts. In an interview with Kirsty Wark on *News Night* he discussed an occasion when he'd written to Beckett asking him for notes on a play. Beckett wrote back commending the play, but criticising one passage, without specifying his reasons for doing so. Once the play was in rehearsal Pinter went on holiday and returned to find Peter Hall enjoying the process of rehearsal, but with one reservation. One passage of the play was not working in practice: and Beckett had identified it on paper, months in advance.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Andrea Oppo *Philosophical Aesthetics and Samuel Beckett* (Oxford: Peter Lang 2008) P. 25

<sup>50</sup> BBC, *Newsnight*

## **The Influence of Beckett**

The impact and influence of Beckett shows itself in a variety of ways throughout Pinter's oeuvre. For example, it is manifest in *The Dumb Waiter*: Ben and Gus are clearly based on Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*. *No Man's Land*, a later piece, explores and develops, in a highly sophisticated and complex way, Beckettian themes such as old age, time, nothingness and the breakdown of all assurances and meanings.

But although he was indubitably inspired by his masters, Pinter was a writer of special gifts, with a singular perception and vision; and he has inspired such a remarkable depth and scope of academic enquiry because his plays still seem mysterious. Pinter denied his plays could be understood within any political context, even though he later became explicitly political about his views and his plays. Although he was later labelled as an 'Absurdist' there is little to connect his works back to the likes of N.F. Simpson or Eugene Ionesco. He claimed that his process as a writer was entirely spontaneous and without any other purpose other than for his own enjoyment.<sup>51</sup> And yet, for a man with no avowed plan or design he wrote with a specificity and precision that was legendary. Nothing was left to chance in the final draft.

## **Pinter and the Process of Making Theatre**

There is a remarkable wealth of secondary literature that pertains to the study of Pinter: so much so that navigating it is a scholarly feat. For example, Steven H. Gale has produced a highly detailed annotated bibliography that very usefully charts the evolution of its source material. There is even a book dedicated to Pinter scholarship. But Susan Hollis Merritt's book of 1995, *Pinter in Play*, begins with these opening sentences:

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<sup>51</sup> Harold Pinter: *Plays Two* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991) P-1-5

Critics put Pinter 'in Play'. As if his plays were the objects of sport, critics keep them in play by producing commentary and commentary upon commentary. As Benedict Nightingale observes hyperbolically: (Pinter's) reputation is so high and his dramatic writings are so few these days that he'd simply have to daub a word or two on his bathroom mirror for the world's scholars to jet in with fingerprint powder and glass cutting equipment. Whatever discipline, or mixture of disciplines is mined for explanations of Pinter's "mysteries", scholars become sleuths.<sup>52</sup>

The point is that academic analyses can sometimes run into the problem of becoming bound up in the application of its own specialised language and in the process, ends up mystifying what it seeks to illuminate. As the exasperated Simon Trussler suggests:

.... commentators have tended to pounce upon Pinter's plays like so many crossword-puzzle enthusiasts, dissatisfied until they find a solution which accords with the compilers clues down and across- a solution likely to be full of words for which the layman has to turn in despair to his dictionary. I won't claim that I've altogether resisted such temptation: but I've tried hard to remember that what we are talking about are vividly dramatized actions, intended for performance upon a very solid stage by real human beings before live audiences- at least some of whose members won't be able to tell an uroboros from an omphalos, or a Rembrandtesque technique of Chiascuro from an exfoliation of existential givens.<sup>53</sup>

Today, Pinter's plays are a staple of world theatre, performed in as many different languages as one can imagine. But to produce a Pinter play is still a unique challenge that demands of the participants a range of intellectual, artistic and technical skills.

The problems for the actor may be manifold, but none is quite so awkward as the slipperiness of the meanings behind the characters' utterances. This study provides a complex analysis of their unconscious phantasies. But it would be tendentious to try to press home a view that these theories are immediately accessible to the actor and director in their rehearsal spaces.

The practice of playing Pinter can quickly become a labyrinthine nightmare, a semantic

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<sup>52</sup> Susan Hollis- Merritt. *Pinter in Play: Critical Strategies and the Plays of Harold Pinter* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990) P.5

<sup>53</sup> Simon Trussler *The Plays of Harold Pinter: An Assessment* (London: Gollnancz, 1973) P.14



quicksand and, as opening night looms, the weight of expectation can become backbreaking. What the participants require is a technique, a simple idea, a foothold in the cliff-face. The late Peter Hall, one Britain's most celebrated directors, has provided the most useful and straightforward account of how to prepare a Pinter play that there is. There is no one right way of performing Pinter or rehearsing it, but there are many ways of doing it incorrectly.

The easiest pitfall to tumble into is the naïve notion that one can tamper with the text or alter it to fit one's own preconceptions or interpretations. Hall draws our attention to the specificity in Pinter and trains our attention on the technical capability the actor needs to deliver the lines. Hall explains how – strangely for a playwright often mistaken for a hyper-realist - those with a rigorous classical training in Shakespeare often manage Pinter's vocal assault course with greater ease. It is surprisingly difficult for an actor to 'get their tongue around' the text.<sup>54</sup>

The slipperiness of the characters exacerbates the problem of creating a performance. Nothing that the character says can be taken at face value, and, in most cases, it is safer to assume that what is being said is a pack of lies. Perhaps Pinter's characters are empty vessels, psychopathic, emotionless, unfeeling: automatons incapable of empathy. Hall tells us that this is not the case. On the contrary, he informs us that Pinter's characters are feeling extreme emotions, incalculable pain, fear, and anger. The point is that these emotions cannot be revealed. They must be concealed, because, in Pinter, to breakdown is catastrophic, cataclysmic, 'the end of the world'. Hall tells us that Pinter's characters behave as they are

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<sup>54</sup> R.P. Draper Harold Pinter: *The Birthday Party, The Caretaker and The Homecoming* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986) P. 57

stalking round a jungle attempting to kill one another, but at the same time, trying to conceal the fact that they are trying to do so.<sup>55</sup>

Hall therefore begins a process, in collaboration with the actors, of carefully uncovering the characters' conscious motivations and their emotional responses. Gradually, the picture of what is happening, once indefinite, becomes concrete in the act of exploring the text within its practical context. Hall coaxes his actors to expose and explore these powerful emotions, to feel them. Soon after rehearsal has begun, Hall plays the action as if it were a passionate melodrama: the uncensored, unguarded feelings of the characters are laid bare for all to see. At this point it may be clear what the characters want, who they love, who they are afraid of, and who they despise.

These facts provide the basis for the next phase of development: the character's mask must be constructed. This 'mask' will be the character's main form of defence against the others in the play who are out to destroy him. The mask hides the character's soft underbelly, his emotions, his feelings - and the character must hold this mask in place at all costs, if he wishes to survive. Thus, over the course of four or five weeks, the actor must develop two performances. The first performance is an expression of his inner truth, his raw feelings and emotions. The second is a performance that masks this internal world. Now, under threat of attack, he can cover-up his emotional weaknesses.<sup>56</sup>

Two difficulties for the actor tend to emerge here. Firstly, there is a danger of splitting the two performances, and ending up with a mask with nothing beneath it. But the true challenge for the actor is to recognise that this 'mask' is not impenetrable. The emotional content of a Pinter play emerges when the actor desperately tries to secure their mask as the power of the

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<sup>55</sup> Draper (ed), *Harold*, 48

<sup>56</sup> Draper (ed), *Harold*, 51

character's volcanic passions threatens to tear it from his face. Thus, in my view, the power of a Pinter performance is in the gap between what the character wants to conceal and what they can conceal. The audience can glimpse these feelings beneath the mask; and the fact that they are trying to conceal their true responses, paradoxically, heightens the intensity of their expression. Performing in Pinter is therefore predicated on this tension, this dialectic. The character has feelings which they must obscure; the problem is that they cannot really cover themselves entirely.

Michael Caine (who performed in an early production of *The Room*) once described acting in the theatre as akin to 'surgery with a scalpel'. Acting on film, he tells us, is a much finer operation, a 'surgery with a laser'.<sup>57</sup> Acting in Pinter seems to sit between these two extremes. One needs the vitality and energy, the vocal skills and dexterity to handle the live medium. But equally, the process of hiding the character behind a mask is a delicate process, and the director must work very carefully with the actor to enable this transformation. At the same time, she must orchestrate the rhythm of the production, to shape it, to tune it, whilst allowing the actor the freedom to calibrate a nuanced delivery.

One of the problems for any actor in any production is movement, or specifically, when to move. Actors often feel the need to perambulate instinctively. They feel the world of the play through their tactile interaction with the materials of the set, through their feet. In a Pinter play, however, movement tends to be used with extreme economy, because to move could leave one stranded in the open. The room is like a smoking battleground: over head the air pops and fizzes with verbal tracer. There are shadows and foxholes to hide in. But to move is to make a move, and the consequences of failure could be unimaginable.

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<sup>57</sup> Michael Caine Teaches *Acting in Film* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bZPLVDwEr7Y> [accessed 19 September 2015]

As Hall points out, this resistance to movement not only preserves the character but creates a curious feel to a Pinter play which is certainly not naturalistic, or indeed, even realistic. If most actors are trained in the techniques of European psychological realism, then acting in Pinter may be frustrating. And yet, in spite of all these problems and restraints, actors love acting in Pinter. It isn't simply the theory behind the act of theatre itself, it's how it works in practice, how it can be used. As Trussler reminds us, when acting in Pinter one can:

...put two good actors on the stage and see how it will hum-what deep significance, what frightening overtones, what enigmatic images it will produce. It is perfectly legitimate theatre, of a childish sort, and it is god's gift to the acting profession.<sup>58</sup>

Ultimately, Pinter was a man of the theatre, amongst many other things. Unlike his heroes, Eliot, Beckett, Yeats and Kafka, he was steeped in how theatre works because he was a trained and accomplished actor. One of the problems with Pinter studies is that it occasionally forgets that he wrote for the stage. Any study worth its salt ought not to disregard that fact.

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<sup>58</sup> Trussler, *The*, 182

## Chapter 2

### *Melanie Klein's Theatres of the Mind*

The intention of this chapter is to answer the following questions: What is Melanie Klein's theory of the unconscious? How do these ideas differ to those of Sigmund Freud? How might these theories be applied to Pinter's Drama? The purpose of answering these questions is not merely perfunctory. I shall be using the terminologies outlined here as we proceed. These ideas constitute the basis of the analysis I shall present, and therefore a clear exposition of Klein's notion of the unconscious is essential. Moreover, the explication of these concepts will permit me the space to develop the narrative flow of the study without having to make a series of lengthy detours that explain Klein's ideas, but detract from the reader's concern for the synthesis of psychoanalytic theory and Pinter's play texts.

#### **Context**

Freud's work inspired Melanie Klein to become a psychoanalyst. Although her ideas are important in the field of psychoanalysis, the public are still largely unaware of her work. Today, her influence remains in the tri- partition of The British Psychoanalytic Society. Psychoanalysts identify themselves as being Freudians, Kleinian or 'independents'<sup>1</sup>

The visceral, atavistic content of Klein's ideas has the power to shock the uninitiated. Furthermore, the processes she articulates are so fluid and interchangeable they seem to frustrate any attempt to describe them in a structured way. Her vision of the unconscious as an almost granular swirl of projections, introjections and phantasies is difficult to imagine and thus - unlike Freud who speaks of human subjects relating to whole objects or people - Klein is perhaps more difficult to grasp. Also, the processes she theorises are happening at

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Williams, John Keene, Sira Dermen (eds) *Independent Psychoanalysis Today* (London: Karnac Books 2012) Preface

the very deepest layers of the psyche. As Hinshelwood and Robinson have argued, ‘If Freud had discovered the child in the adult, then Klein believed she had discovered the ‘infant in the child’<sup>2</sup>

## **Biography**

Klein’s early life reads like a tragic drama. A Jewish girl born in Vienna, she had a difficult childhood, where she claimed to have been unplanned and unwanted by her parents<sup>3</sup>. Her family were bourgeois, the father a doctor.<sup>4</sup> She confessed to always harbouring feelings of inferiority towards her elder sister. She idolised an elder brother, Emanuel. He was a tragic character: as Kristeva explains, he was a poet who died early, a victim of childhood illness and his bohemian, nihilistic lifestyle.<sup>5</sup>

Klein had several children but was left bereft after the premature death of a son in a tragic accident. She married for financial expedience rather than for love and endured a lifeless marriage that ended in divorce. Throughout her life, she was forced to suffer interludes of the most debilitating depressions. She had a deeply antagonistic relationship with her daughter who was also an analyst. Indeed Klein’s daughter refused to attend her own mother’s funeral. Kristeva recognises that she nurtured ambitions to be a doctor from the beginning but never acquired a university degree.<sup>6</sup> She was an early twentieth- century woman striving for professional recognition in an intellectual milieu dominated by men. Given the obstacles in her way, the fact that she did achieve her life’s intellectual and professional goals is a

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Hinshelwood, Susan Robinson *Introducing Melanie Klein* (London: Icon Books, 1997)

<sup>3</sup> Serge Sulz, Stefan Hagspiel (eds) *European Psychotherapy 2014/2015: Austria: Home of the World's Psychotherapy* (Volume 12 2014/2015) P.21

<sup>4</sup> Julia Kristeva *Melanie Klein* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) P.18

<sup>5</sup> Kristeva, *Melanie*,19

<sup>6</sup> Kristeva, *Melanie*,19

testament, not merely to her personal fortitude, but also to the quality and durability of her ideas.

Klein begins her analysis by applying Freud's vision of human nature. She recognised that human beings are born with a set of primal instincts. These drives were contained within the Id. <sup>7</sup>Jonathan Lear explains that within the Id the libido, or the 'love drive'<sup>8</sup> powers us towards making loving connections with others, and by doing so we could sustain our existence. When the libido is in affect we were under the sway of the 'Eros', or life drive, and our instincts would drive us towards 'cathexes' with the world that were creative, giving and sustaining. But we are also driven by an aggressive destructive instinct which Freud called the death drive or 'Thanatos'.<sup>9</sup> The death drive worked against the life drive: it was a force deep within that sought to pull us back towards self-destruction, towards non-existence - towards a time before we came to be. Ultimately for a psychoanalyst, the purpose of all life is death. We are born to die, and within us there is a yearning to return to the earth, and to become once again a collection of organic, inert matter.

Klein recognised that these drives were powerful and that they could not be contained. They would be 'evacuated', 'projected'<sup>10</sup> into another object in the external world; and the circumstances of these first transmissions takes Klein, controversially, back to the child's first suckling interactions with the breasts of the mother. In so doing she challenges our assumptions about the 'loving' nature of the relationship between mother and baby and

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Lear, Freud, (London: Routledge, 2005) P.185

<sup>8</sup> Lear, *Freud*, 83

<sup>9</sup> *Freud on Sexuality and Civilisation*, Yale Courses [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjryKz\\_-L68](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjryKz_-L68) [accessed 16 November 2014]

<sup>10</sup> Meira Likierman *Melanie Klein: Her Work in Context* (London: Continuum 2001) P.78

instead offers us a much darker vision of these first few months of life. Indeed, with little clinical experience, Klein quickly realised that:

Although psychology and pedagogy have always maintained the belief that a child is a happy being without any conflicts and have assumed that the sufferings of adults are the results of the burdens and hardships of reality, it must be asserted that just the opposite is true. What we learn about the child and the adult through psychoanalysis shows that all the sufferings of later life are for the most part repetitions of these earlier ones, and that every child in the first years of life goes through an immeasurable degree of suffering.<sup>11</sup>

### *The Psychoanalysis of Children*

Klein's first key departure from conventional psychoanalytic practice was to analyse children. Freud worked almost exclusively with neurotic adults (although he famously gave advice to the father of a disturbed boy, 'Little Hans', telling the worried man that his son was displacing his fear of his father, and his father's penis, onto 'horses').<sup>12</sup> There was however an unease about psychoanalysing children generally. Practitioners were concerned it might 'damage the child or take away their innocence'<sup>13</sup> Klein was essentially unconcerned by this. Indeed, she saw that working with children was most important because:

One of the many interesting and surprising experiences of the beginner in child analysis is to find in even very young children a capacity for insight which is often far greater than that of adults.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Karen *Becoming Attached* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) P.43

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Michel Quinodoz *Reading Freud: A Chronological Exploration of Freud's Writings* (London: Institute of Psychoanalysis) P.82

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Bott-Spillus, *Jane Milton, et al The New Dictionary of Kleinian Thought* (London: Routledge, 2011) P.18

<sup>14</sup> Julie Mitchell, (ed) *Selected Melanie Klein* (New York: The Free Press, 1986) P.46



Freud however rejected the idea that a child under the age of three or four could be neurotic. Freud theorised neurosis, or the excessive compulsion to anxiety and worry, to be a maladaptation of the ego's repressive mechanisms, and that a person would repeat what she couldn't recall. He believed an over-expenditure of psychic energy produced pathological neurosis. But he also believed that without the resolution of the original loss of the desired sexual love of the real parents, repression couldn't take place because, in effect, there was nothing to repress.

Klein challenged this notion. She posited that Freud's results and successes could be replicated by trying to understand the symbolic significance of a child's play. She argued that she could help a child gain control over her neurosis if she applied her theories directly in her consultation room, which she set up as a playroom.

She also postulated that it might be possible to work with psychotic patients. Freud didn't believe his methods could work with psychotics. He refuted Klein's proposition, claiming that psychotic individuals were entirely 'narcissistic' and thus incapable of making 'cathexis', or libidinal connections, towards others<sup>15</sup>. If they could not make connections to others, then a 'transference'<sup>16</sup> during a psychoanalysis could not be made. A transference was an important component of a psychoanalysis, and it came about when the patient transferred onto the analyst their own feelings about another person. This character from their past was a key figure in the psycho-drama the analyst was trying to untangle. If this could not be achieved, then treatment could not take place.

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<sup>15</sup> R.D Hinshelwood *Clinical Klein* (London: Free Association Books, 1994) P. 14-16

<sup>16</sup> Michael Jacobs *Sigmund Freud* (London: Sage Publications, 2003) P.87

## **Early Interactions with the Breast**

Klein begins by returning to the notion of the infant, new-born or thereabouts, at the breast. Freud had begun to understand the psychological significance of this type of mammalian nurturing, beyond the purely biological imperative of the transmission of sustenance. Drawing upon Darwin, he understood that humans had evolved to be born into a state of helplessness and dependence on mother for an unusually prolonged length of time. Essentially, we are born ‘prematurely’<sup>17</sup> with brains far too big for our bodies. Freud recognised that being tethered to mother for so long affected us in a profound way: and that it prepared the ground for the complex, painful and tragic parental drama that was to follow. Klein returns to this idea in her writings to invest in it more weight and theoretical value.

Upon being torn from the warm, insulated casing of mother’s womb, in the glare of so many bright lights, we are thrust onto the stage of our lives: costumed in blood, freezing cold, gasping for oxygen. The agonised cry of the infant is more than a physiological reflex; it a gasp of terror and desperation. Another struggle for survival against the capricious forces of nature itself has begun.

But a powerful and godlike ally is on hand in the mellifluous, undulating shape of mother, who calms us by offering us her milk. She has been gently preparing this oestrogen-powered culture for us months in advance. As we feed from mother we ‘take in’ the milk, this good stuff, this stream of soft, blissful comfort. Suddenly the fear and the hunger dissolve. We become calmly focused, centred on the act of feeding, allowing this magical white elixir to flow through our bodies. Thus, it is here, in these earliest moments of life, engaged in the act of feeding - our virgin skin pressed against mother’s sweetened-scent – our curious lives of

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<sup>17</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1983) P. 132

phantasy begin. We can take this wonderful, life-giving, ‘good stuff’ in. As Lear points out, we can take the object of mother in: the ‘good object’.<sup>18</sup>

During suckling the terror that comes from the violent trauma of being born can be quelled. Furthermore, the act of feeding stimulates the libido within the id to be projected into the breast and then *incorporated* back into the psyche. The ‘good breast’<sup>19</sup> has therefore been internalized in phantasy. So, we can begin to develop a sense of ourselves as being ‘filled’ with the mother breast object: completely immersed in ecstasy: filled narcissistically with our own love drive.

For the child, nothing can pre-exist this moment of pure sensuality or exist as independent from it. The mother-breast is now, in phantasy, inside us, and this object is now used to develop the material of the ego, which was present from birth in an embryonic form.

But of course, this cannot last. We cannot remain fixed to the breast. Suddenly, violently (from the child’s point of view) we are dislocated from the mammary; and this wonderful, glistening orb will not rematerialize until the infant’s hunger becomes overwhelming.

Klein believed that in order to comprehend the development of an individual’s psychic life, we had to try to see this event from the baby’s point of view. A series of rapid scene changes disorientates the child. The breast appears and then disappears. In one moment, the baby is feeding - taking in mother in a state of wholeness and corporeal, oral gratification. The next she is bereft. How can the child make sense of this?

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<sup>18</sup> Lear, *Freud*, 177

<sup>19</sup> Robert Waska *The Danger of Change: The Kleinian Approach with Patients Who Experience Progress as Trauma* (London: Routledge, 2006), P. 208

In short, Klein argues, she cannot.<sup>20</sup> These rapid transitions from one state of connectedness, to another of perceived abandonment, are beyond that which the child can possibly understand. In an instant, feelings of fear and terror overwhelm the infant. Where has its treasured 'object' gone? When will it return? Will it return? The child has no way of making sense of any of this. Indeed, to compound the problem, the baby begins to feel hungry. Its need for the breast becomes ever the more pressing. But it is important to understand that the infant is not merely experiencing that which an adult might recognise as perfectly natural hunger 'pangs'. On the contrary, this hunger is aching, terrorising. The baby cannot read the time periods between feeds in any rational or sensible way. The child perceives itself to be famished, close to death; its need to feed tearing away at its tender insides. Klein theorised that the child would feel as if a monster were literally eating her from the inside out<sup>21</sup>.

In this moment, Klein argues, something peculiar happens. Feelings of utter hatred and visceral enmity seize the child. This 'hatred' is aimed at the fickle part-object: the breast. Mother's magnificent swelling continues to exhibit its proclivity to acts of disappearance, and timely or otherwise reappearance, leaving the infant feeling discombobulated. These bodily sensations of agonising loss stimulate within the child the aggressive drive and the death instinct; and the need to project these intolerable forces within him into the breast. Now, the object is filled with the child's own aggression and terrifying destructive impulses, and the child is confronted by the 'bad breast'. This 'bad breast' is a persecutor, that must be defended against. Moreover, in much the same way that the 'good' loving breast is internalised, so the 'bad' breast is in turn. This notion, of the breast as a threatening introjected object, is a radical reformulation of Freud's idea of the super-ego. Freud famously

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<sup>20</sup> Hanna Segal *Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein* (London: Karnac Books, 1973) P.14

<sup>21</sup> Lear, *Freud*, 177

argued that the super-ego was the 'heir to the Oedipus complex'<sup>22</sup>. He believed that the child could resolve his fear of the father's vengeful castration and overcome his loss of the mother by identifying with the father and thereby entering the social order.

However, he would also internalise the object of the father: and this paternal voice, this 'policeman in the mind' would stay within his psyche for the rest of his life, pushing him to meet society's demands for moral behaviour and productive work.

But Freud is talking here about a process which cannot take place until the child is three or four. Klein develops Freud's theory by arguing that, not only are we born with a proto ego in place, we also have this sense of internal objects as 'persecutors': and this persecutor is a very early form of super-ego.

Now the child begins to harbour a phantasy about defending itself against the tyranny of the 'bad' breast. In this psycho-drama, inflammation and pain in the gums caused by teething stimulate and amplify murderous oral attacks centred upon attacking the mammary: the baby tears, bites, and gouges at the nipple in a deranged fury. This 'bad' breast is 'taken in' and incorporated into the psyche in bits in much the same way as the 'good' breast: both form the basis of the emerging ego. But the critical point about this process of splitting the breast is this: without splitting the object into 'good' on the one hand, and 'bad' on the other, the 'good' object could not be differentiated from the 'bad' object; and, therefore, a sense of a 'good' object upon which the ego might be founded would be impossible. Splitting differentiates 'good' from 'bad' and as such it is a vital mechanism for psychic health.

### **Cycles of Introjection and Projection**

Klein theorises that the ego is 'built up' or constituted through fluid cycles of projection and introjection. We take in – introject or incorporate - the 'good' object and these 'good' objects

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<sup>22</sup> Rosine Jozef Perelberg (ed) *Freud: A Modern Reader* (London: Whurr Publishers, 2005) P.172

form the basis of the ego. But we also introject the 'bad' object or 'bad' breast. To complicate matters we project the 'bad' breast into the breast to defend ourselves against the 'bad' breast. We also project the 'good' breast into the 'good' breast to keep the good breast safe from the bad breast.<sup>23</sup>

The child is utterly fixated and consumed by its love for the 'good' object. But it is also utterly fixated and consumed by its fear and hatred of the 'bad' object. The child cannot exist without the breast, and the depth of these atavistic attachments is perhaps beyond anything that we can comprehend. Here is the essential point. The ego, the sense of self, is in formation, but it has not yet reached maturity. It is fragile and unformed. Unable to cope with the depth and intensity of these paradoxical emotions and anxieties, the burgeoning ego initiates a primitive defence mechanism: it splits into parts, it 'goes to pieces'<sup>24</sup>. Suddenly the child is not one ego, he is two. The baby who confronts the 'good part- object' when it feeds is not the same child who despises the absent breast, and who phantasies about taking out some form of murderous retribution against it.

Klein is not saying that all infants are psychotic, although this is a common misconception. What she is saying is that all infants must pass through a period where they experience themselves as split or fragmented. This is the root of Klein's 'paranoid- schizoid position', and its implications are profound. Splitting in humans is not an aberration or a fault. It is in fact a natural, normal, procedural necessity, built into our evolutionary apparatus.

Psychosis on the other hand is a psychiatric diagnosis, a label used to describe an individual who has been unable to progress along a line of healthy psychological development. But by

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<sup>23</sup> Jaki Watts et al eds *Developmental Psychology* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 2002) P.83

<sup>24</sup> Thierry Bokanowski, Sergio Lewkowicz (eds) *On Freud's "Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defence"* (London: Karnac 2009) P. 144

identifying the paranoid-schizoid position Klein had uncovered the roots of the psychotic malady we refer to as schizophrenia. The schizophrenic's symptoms were often characterised by sensations of the self as severely fragmented, with 'good' and 'bad' parts of the ego, split off, projected, and accompanied by peculiar feelings of unreality and depersonalisation.<sup>25</sup>

The tragedy of the human condition is not that we are born with a set of drives hardwired into us. It's that these drives – namely the libido, the death drive and the sadistic and aggressive impulse - are contradictory and incompatible. We are therefore compromised at birth by this dialectic. At the very core of our being is a tragic paradox and irony: that we are both sustained and destroyed by the same contradictory forces that created us, psychological actors that which we must strive throughout our lives to overcome. We begin life as split. The act of feeding splits us, and we split the object – the breast – by having such violent, aggressive, hateful, but also loving, interrelations with it. As Klein puts it: 'I believe that the ego is incapable of splitting the object - internal and external - without a corresponding splitting taking place within the ego.'<sup>26</sup>

### **The Combined Parent-Figure**

The child's ego has been split. But this bifurcation is not supposed to be permanent: it is a primitive defence mechanism. Very shortly afterwards the child enters a primitive proto-Oedipal phase. Freud imagined this 'crisis' to be experienced through interrelations with the parents.

But again, in the process of explicating these ideas, Klein takes Freud's concept and applies it to a much earlier scene in the child's life. Klein again imagines what the experience of being a baby, helpless and dependent in his crib, is like. Throughout the day, but particularly at

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<sup>25</sup> John Steiner Rosenfeld in *Retrospect: Essays on His Clinical Influence* (London: Routledge, 2008) P.104

<sup>26</sup> Paul Du Gay et al *Identity: A Reader* (London: Sage Publications 2000) P.133

night, this mother seems ambiguous. Like the characters that Pinter sees in his 'rooms', she comes and goes, enigmatically. She feeds the child, and from the moment his screaming, rigid, body relaxes into her soft arms he begins to phantasise. He is supping joyously from the 'good' object: he dreams about taking mama inside his body, and of being back inside her warm womb. Lear offers us a vivid detail of these phantasies: 'he dreams about being mama; about having mama; about letting mama have him; about giving mama a baby of his own'.<sup>27</sup> However, as Klein suggests, these immature phantasies are not carefree and unchallenged. The baby son desires to be inside his mother, but something is awry. He has a troubling intuition that someone else, or something else, has gotten there before him, taking control of mama in the process. Klein designated this object as the 'father's penis', and hypothesised that the act of feeding, which stimulates the baby's first sense of engaging with mother, also arouses the child's first feelings of Oedipal envy triggered by the sense that the object has connections to other objects.

What the child perceives is the part objects of the mother and the father's penis locked in perpetual coitus. This is described by Kleinian's as the 'combined parent figure' or the 'mother with penis.'<sup>28</sup> and in the first instance the child's relations of phantasy with this composite object are likely to be loving. In much the same way as the breast is loved through the projection of the libido during feeding, the combined parent figure is also filled with libidinal projections and is initially imagined to be a locus of paradise. The mother contains not only the loving father's penis which the child desires, but also her unborn babies. Her body is a treasure trove of objects, which the child longs to incorporate into her own ego. As

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<sup>27</sup> Lear, *Freud*

<sup>28</sup> Jean Laplanche, Jean-Bertrand Pontalis *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac 2008) P.329



Segal points out, she does so in phantasy, tearing and scooping out before devouring this bounty<sup>29</sup>.

However, now Klein conjectures that a paranoid phantasy takes hold of the child. Because, in taking in the parents she has also destroyed them: and she fears not only the loss of the parents but also their revenge. In the same way that the bad breast is experienced as a vengeful persecutor who must be violently resisted against, so the mother with penis or phallic mother is now experienced a terrifying monster, a hideous beast of mixed body parts that will destroy the child. This monster is at the centre of the child's phantasy of a 'primal scene [which] comes to include pre-genital and genital formulations of the parents ongoing feeding, beating, cutting up, biting to pieces, messing each other, penetrating, and controlling each other'.<sup>30</sup>

### **The Depressive Position**

Many consider the depressive position to be Klein's most important contribution to psychoanalysis. She conceptualises it thus. Even though the child's earliest encounters with the breast are fraught by terrifying phantasies and experiences of destruction, envy, persecution and extreme violence, the child can in time move beyond these paranoid states and enter the depressive position.

The depressive position is a healthy psychic state and is characterised by an increasing ability to recognise the mother as a 'whole object'<sup>31</sup>, rather than as a series of fragmented body parts. This perception is achieved through continuous loving interactions and interrelations with the mother. Soon, the child will be able to tolerate or 'contain', the notion that

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<sup>29</sup> Segal, Introduction,7

<sup>30</sup> Muriel Dimen, Virginia Goldner *Gender in Psychoanalytic Space: Between clinic and culture: Between Clinic and Culture* (New York: Other Press)

<sup>31</sup> Hannah Segal, *Klein* (London: Karnac Classics, 1979) P.79

perceiving whole objects is inextricably bound up with the ability to tolerate ambivalence in the mother object. For she is one object: both good and bad. Gradually the inner world of hallucinatory phantasy characterised at first by so many bizarre psychotic delusions transforms into something a healthy individual might describe as a balanced experience of reality. 'In the depressive position the infant increasingly relates to an external reality and differentiates it from his internal reality, the reality of his impulses and phantasies'.<sup>32</sup> The child begins to perceive the world as it is - not simple but complex.

This process of psychic maturation, however, leaves behind its residue, a melancholy drama of tragedy and loss. The objects of the parents may have been internalized, and this compensation is the basis for the developing ego. But this doesn't change the fact that the child's mother and father are not, and never will be, available for sexual love in the real world. Thus, the path that society demands that we take in- order- to become psychologically healthy adults is far from easy or clear cut: particularly when we recognise that in- order- to develop we must experience a difficult and acute period of melancholia, as we grieve, as Segal puts it over the 'loss' of the mother.

But this situation could develop a further complication. Now the child has taken the objects of the parents inside himself where he will apply them as the raw materials for his ego. But he could still experience feelings of rage, and a desire for retribution, against the parents as a response to being rejected by them during the Oedipal crisis. Or he may feel an overwhelming sense of loss and guilt imagining himself to have destroyed the parents in a paranoid- schizoid rage in a response to feeling threatened by them.

Thus, this 'depressive position' - this 'achievement' that Freud designated as neurosis' - is built on extremely insecure grounds. Because it is lived through mourning, loss, guilt and

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<sup>32</sup> Hanna Segal *Psychoanalysis, Literature and War: Papers 1972-1995* (London: Routledge, 1997) P.7

ambivalence, it is inevitable that at some point, in moments of stress or anxiety, these complex feelings will become intolerable, and trigger a lapse back into the ‘paranoid-schizoid position’. Now we can take refuge again in splitting the world into clear divisions: into objects that are ‘good’ and objects that are ‘bad’; into objects that are loved and objects that are feared as persecutors. If the neurotic, depressive position is painfully complicated, the paranoid-schizoid is reassuringly simple. The guilt of losing the object through one’s own violent attacks recedes and is replaced by defensive phantasies of power, omnipotence and control. What Klein realised was that the line between mourning and paranoia was a fine line; and that, ironically, the state mind associated with the pain of the depressive position was in fact a paranoid state of mind! The defence mechanisms employed against the pain of the depressive position are the same primitive defences against anxiety that the child initiated before entering the depressive position. ‘Ultimately Klein realised that the depressive position never fully supersedes or overcomes the paranoid-schizoid position and throughout life we may oscillate between the two’<sup>33</sup>

Therefore, Klein asserted that the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions were not fixed and permanent states of psychic being but interchangeable and fluid. She saw that the human subject could be trapped within a negative feedback loop: the pain of the depressive position is too much, and so paranoid defences are mobilized against it; these paranoid defences produce a vision of reality which is paranoid and therefore defences are mobilized against perceived persecutors. Only a psychoanalysis can help the individual push beyond these psycho-pathological states of mind.

The depressive position constitutes the height of human psychic achievement. But even then, this success is not lasting. At any moment, when under duress, we may slip back into a paranoid state of mind.

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<sup>33</sup> Watts, *Developmental*, 82

## **Projective Identification and Play Analysis**

Klein's methodology of play analysis was and is deeply controversial and as such I shall turn to it now. Klein argued that children 'play out' their unconscious dramas using their toys and dolls. This is what Klein claimed to have observed in her experiments with psychotic and neurotic children. She saw that a symbolic transference had taken place where the child's feelings had been projected into the toys they were interacting with. She sensed that they were working through their fears and, most importantly, their anxieties over their relations to the parents' bodies and sexual organs. On the one hand the genitals and part objects of the parents were loved and coveted; on the other they were feared as persecutors that needed to be destroyed.

Upon realising this, what she then did was novel and challenging. She confronted the child, and, in very direct language would point to the toys and describe them as the penises, vaginas, and breasts of their parents. The result was dramatic. The child became more aware of the unconscious nature of his anxiety, and some of the more disturbing symptoms of his psychopathology began to abate.

*But at this moment, it is vitally important for the child to be able to check the nature of objective reality against the internal phantasy, so that they might observe the discrepancy between the two. Put quite simply, the child must see that the parents have not been harmed in material existence, as they have been in the phantasy.*<sup>34</sup>

One of the most significant ways that the mind organism protects itself from badness is through a process Klein termed 'projective identification'. In projective identification, the human subject breaks-off or splits-off parts of the self (or ego) which have become

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<sup>34</sup> Segal, *Introduction*, 17

unbearable and ‘transmits’ them into other people. Through this process the ego projects its feelings into the object which it then identifies with<sup>35</sup>. Projective identification can also serve to keep good internal objects safe from bad internal objects: good object can be felt to be in a ‘safe place’.

Furthermore, not only are we locating pieces of our own psyche into others as a way of expelling, and thereby dispensing with, bad objects, Klein and the object relations theorists argue that others (the objects in the real world with whom we ‘relate’) are complicit in these furtive acts, and even that they solicit the contents of others’ egos. Their unconscious antennae twitch, and they pick up upon these projective transmissions absorbing and incorporating their contents as required. People unconsciously negotiate these projections through a subtle inter-play of verbal and non-verbal communications because:

When we allow ourselves to be receptive to another person, we have the capacity to resonate with the unconscious feelings of that person like a vibrating tuning fork. And when we resonate with those feelings, our whole being is involved-both mind and body<sup>36</sup>

The implications of this theory are intriguing, because it implies that linguistic communication has that much more to it than its informational function. The human subject is not simply swapping data when she converses. We are swapping and mixing projections. We are shaping and modifying the contents of each other’s psyches.

### **Wilfred Bion**

Over several years Wilfred Bion made a series of brilliant contributions to psychoanalytic theory. At times, in drawing upon mathematical schemes, his work seems to have more in

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<sup>35</sup> Mitchell, *Selected*, 20

<sup>36</sup> Barbara O’ Connell <http://iahip.org/inside-out/issue-63-spring-2011/understanding-projective-identification-in-psychotherapy> (accessed 21 January 2014)

common with Lacan than Freud; but, in the end, most critics still situate him within the Kleinian camp. His stand out achievements include his pioneering work on groups, and his theory that a critical part of psychoanalytic therapy involved the analyst resisting the ‘counter-transference’ and instead ‘containing’ the projections of the patient. He theorised that by doing so the analyst could give a painful experience back to the patient in a more manageable form. His genius, however, was in his investigation of some of society’s most disturbed patients. He postulated that severe mental illness was an incapacity – or resistance - to ‘thought’ caused by the traumatised response of the infant to its earliest relations with the breast.

Bion imagines the human baby as having a ‘preconception’ of the mother’s breast and her nipple. When the child is breast fed the preconception of the nipple is met with the reality of its presence and so, in the mind of the infant, a ‘concept’ is created. This synthesis constitutes the basis of thought. Bion believed that psychosis was triggered in part by the child’s inability to cope with the absence of the breast in between feeds, or, as he put it, to the trauma of confronting ‘no breast’. Radically, Bion proceeded to explain how psychosis was a manifestation of the patient’s need to attack the possibility of thought itself within himself. This could be attributed to his earlier constitutional failure to tolerate the notion in phantasy of a primitive Oedipal ‘link’ between the father’s penis and the mother’s breast.

At its best, Bion’s work is a testament to his original and creative genius. His brilliant reconceptualization of both Freud and Klein made psychosis explicable from within a psychoanalytic context. Where appropriate I will be referring to his ideas to support my own readings of Pinter’s plays.

## Conclusion

Although Melanie Klein always saw herself as a loyal Freudian, her theories aggregate to a serious critique of Freud's account of the unconscious. In the first instance, she undermines the Freudian assertion that young pre-Oedipal children cannot be analysed fruitfully. Klein broke-up the tight chronology of Freud's theories, by arguing that children were experiencing immature versions of psychodynamic events virtually from the moment of birth.

But Klein's worst 'offence' was probably her rejection of the rational, scientific basis of Freudianism. Freud viewed himself as a scientist, striving for an explanation of the inner-world of the human mind. He saw psychodynamic theory as an explanation for the neurotic behaviour of his patients, but the implications of his ideas were much larger. Evolution by natural selection had transformed the way that humankind could understand the process of change in the natural world: metamorphosis was no longer enigmatic, but comprehensible. It meant hereditary adaption: adapting to external, environmental pressures.

Freud saw his own contribution to be very much in accordance with the spirit of the zeitgeist. The human Oedipal phase had come about because the great apes had evolved to spend an extended amount of time suckling and parenting. Thus, even though his ideas seemed repugnant, he could justify them by making them work within this new, evolutionary paradigm. The maturing psyche was maturing because it was adapting to the external environment. To survive we had to repress our instincts; we had to move away from the search for 'pleasure' and towards a psychic life ruled by the 'reality' principle.<sup>37</sup>

Severe neurosis was evidence that this linear, structural progression had gone awry; it required rational, doctoral intervention. But ultimately neurosis was civilisation, because

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<sup>37</sup> Donald C. Abe *Freud on Instinct and Morality* (New York: State University Press, 1989) P.6

humankind could only live through neurosis, or, as Eagleton puts it the ‘massive repression of the elements that have gone into our making’.<sup>38</sup> All human cultural activity, from the composing of a sonnet to the building of a skyscraper, was an act of sublimation: a repressive act of neurotic substitution.

Indeed, Freud spent a professional lifetime cultivating an idea that placed the moderating genius of the ego at the centre of his theory. The ego operated to mediate and control the force of the Id. Dreams and the neuroses were the ego’s disguised transformations of the Id’s desires. What was required was not a criticism of this model of the unconscious, but an elucidation of it that was richer and more complete.

But Klein’s theory of unconscious phantasy is her concept of the unconscious. We are characterised, psychically, by so many paradoxical feelings of love, of hate, of guilt, and of the need to repair our damaged relationships with others. We are trapped in a repetitious cycle of phantasies of destruction and the need to repair damaged objects. Furthermore, more than being a mere critique of Freudianism, it opened the way for a new branch of psychoanalysis -object relations theory - which critiqued Freudianism by shifting the point of emphasis away from the enumeration of the egos defence mechanisms and towards a far greater emphasis on the subject’s ‘need to relate to others’.<sup>39</sup>

Ultimately, however, the importance of Klein’s work is in its therapeutic power. It can help those afflicted by mental illness. Her practice was directed towards helping those trapped permanently within the narcissistic paranoid-schizoid position to learn how to stop constantly using others as receptacles for their own projections. Moreover, Klein realised that in the end

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<sup>38</sup> Eagleton, *Literary*, 132

<sup>39</sup> David E. Scharff *Object Relations Theory and Practice: An Introduction* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1996) P. 3



the basis of a healthy psyche was the ability to internalise within the ego a ‘good’<sup>40</sup> object upon which to base one’s own ego. As Britzman<sup>41</sup> points out this object can ‘live on’ inside the psyche for the rest of a human being’s life.

But like Freud she also understood that to eradicate or attempt to deny one’s own neurosis and phantasies was neither possible nor even desirable. Indeed, certain psychotic disorders could have their roots in an individual’s inability to project and use their phantasies. In her seminal exegesis of manic depressive psychosis, she informs us that:

On the earliest methods of defence against the dread of persecutors, whether as conceived of as existing in the external world or internalized, is that of scotomisation, the denial of psychic reality; this may result in the considerable restriction of the mechanisms of introjection and projection and in the denial of external reality and forms the basis of the most severe psychosis.<sup>42</sup>

This is one of the great ironies of Klein and the core of her genius. She shows us that in-order- to- be sane we have to be able to have phantasies so we can compare them to what we see in reality. Then we can work out the difference between the two. Far from denying that our phantasies exist what we must do is to learn how to use our unconscious impulses. To become aware of them, to control them, and to find ways of satisfying and exploring them in our productive daily lives.

In western culture to be called a fantasist is a pejorative term used to describe someone deemed to be out of touch with reality. But Klein recognised that phantasies were not always destructive, or harmful. Not only were they necessary (she realised that without being able to project phantasies and feelings of anxiety, children would be psychically stunted and

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<sup>40</sup> Jan Abram *The Language of Winnicott* (London: Karnac, 1996) P.220

<sup>41</sup> Britzman, *After*, 101

<sup>42</sup> Melanie Klein *Love, Guilt, Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945* (New York: Macmillan Press, 1975) P.17

incapable of relating to the world around them) they allowed us to grow into sensitive, compassionate individuals. For example, feelings of empathy, of being able to feel as another person does, may be dependent on the capacity to project aspects of oneself into another person: to apply one's own feelings to others.

Pinter and Klein shared an ethnicity. They also shared a perspective on human life. Pinter placed human behaviour under a microscope and saw that people were violent, aggressive, split, indeterminate, and ambivalent: but also loving, and erotic in the way that they interrelated with others. He saw that they had paranoid fantasies and delusions, and that they suffered from periodic psychoses and mental crises.

In her work, Klein unwittingly explains Pinter's vision. She saw and transcribed images of human beings struggling with their unconscious fantasies. Driven by a need to understand the human condition, she invested her life's work into developing a theoretical framework that could not only explain what she saw, but also provide a system of palliative relief to treat the afflicted.

In much the same way, her analyses can provide relief to those of us who cannot make sense of the peculiar behaviour of Pinter's characters, because Pinter's characters are reflections of real people. For example, *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Birthday Party* might be interpreted as dream images in which a Kleinian phantasy of the parental objects as 'revengeful' is explored. We can read *The Dwarfs* as a description of 'Len's' psychotic episode triggered by guilt over attacks on the bodies of the parents in phantasy. *The Caretaker* could be seen through Klein's prism of 'depressive reparation'. *The Homecoming* could ultimately be a phantasy of the dead mother's restitution, whom the characters imagine has been lost through the characters' destructive impulses.

Freud once famously summed up his dynamic view of the unconscious with a pithy remark: ‘where ID was, there shall ego be’.<sup>43</sup> To some extent a psychoanalytic analysis of a text can fulfil a similar function. By subjecting a play to such an analysis, the apparently senseless violence in Pinter’s plays becomes explicable, whilst the power of the plays effect on the audience remains undiminished. Thus, it is to these works, and our Kleinian psychoanalysis of them, that I shall now turn.

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<sup>43</sup> Michael J Diamond Christopher Christiansen (eds) *The Second Century of Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac CIPS) P. 50

## Chapter 3

### *Early Plays*

*My psycho-analytic work has convinced me that when in the baby's mind the conflicts between love and hate arise, and the fears of losing the loved one become active, a very important step is made in development (Klein)*

#### ***The Room***

Harold Pinter's early plays have a dreamlike quality and aesthetic. During the 1970s critics used Freud's theories to interpret them. However, Melanie Klein went on to develop Freud's concepts; and these new ideas helped her elucidate her own model of the deepest, most primitive strata of the unconscious.<sup>1</sup> I want to use this chapter to explore how Kleinian dream theory can help us build upon a purely Freudian reading of *The Room*, *A Slight Ache* and *The Dumb Waiter*.

From the moment Freud published *On the Interpretation of Dreams*, psychoanalysis has viewed a patient's sleep hallucinations as clinically significant, truly 'the royal road to the knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind'.<sup>2</sup> Freud believed dreams were a function of the ego. Unconscious Id wishes deemed unacceptable by the super-ego could be satisfied through the experience of the dream. To prevent us from waking up in horror when confronted by our repressed desires, the ego employs symbol and metaphor to disguise the

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Bott-Spillus et al *The New Dictionary of Kleinian Thought* (London: Routledge, 2011) P. 315

<sup>2</sup> Henk De Berg *Freud's Theory and Its Use in Literary and Cultural Studies: An Introduction* (Rochester: Camden House 2003) P. 23

dream's 'latent content' within the 'manifest content'<sup>3</sup>. This manifest content is constituted of information and mental impressions from the previous day. Thus, Freud's theory of dreams compliments his model of the human unconscious. The ego is crushed between the seething cauldron of the ID and the excoriating demands of the super-ego and must satisfy both. The dream is a stratagem for placating both parties.

But Klein saw dreams as using metaphor to explore unconscious phantasies and anxieties. Dream analysis can reveal the bizarre nature of our earliest, most primitive object and subject relations, and our anxieties about them. Thus, in *The Room*, Pinter's first play, the apartment itself could stand for Rose's internal world. Her phantasy is that she must protect the 'good' internal object and the 'good internal self from the 'bad' internal self and the 'bad' internal object. She projects the 'bad' object and the 'bad' self into the outside world, and experiences the city beyond her walls as threatening, full of dangers.

She seems to be concerned with making sure Bert eats his hot breakfast, and this may symbolise a primitive psychotic phantasy that the 'good' internal and external breast - damaged by the 'bad' breast and by the baby's own violent act of tearing at the breast during feeding - can be strengthened through the phantasy of the projective 'gift' of regurgitated 'good' milk and excrements<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, Rose's mothering of Bert turns him into a child. As such this act may be an attempt to restore the 'good' babies of the mother's womb<sup>5</sup>, destroyed and cannibalised in phantasy.

Soon Mr Kidd the landlord appears. In conversion he seems to be losing his memory. He describes how he used to live in Rose's room. Mr Kidd's loss of memory may symbolise the

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<sup>3</sup> De Berg, *Freud's*, 18

<sup>4</sup> Mitchell, *The Selected*, 183

<sup>5</sup> Mitchell, *The Selected*, 74

loss of the 'good' object, or objects depleted through Rose's sadistic oral and anal attacks <sup>6</sup>. Mr Kidd also describes how his mother had a wonderful boudoir until she 'copped it'. This 'lost' mother who has disappeared from the room (Rose's psyche) may represent a 'good' object destroyed.

Mr and Mrs Sands may stand for pre-oedipal part objects which are 'split' and which cannot be linked within the psyche. As 'good', their coital link would cause insufferable feelings of envy and trigger a need to destroy their link <sup>7</sup>. As 'bad', their union would make these part objects more 'powerful' and they might threaten 'retaliation'<sup>8</sup>. In the dream, the Sands describe how they encountered a disembodied voice in the darkness that tells them that room 7, Rose's room, is available. Rose's room as 'vacant' symbolises a primitive anxiety that the 'good' object has been destroyed. Now her own fragile 'good' ego - which is so dependent upon its attachments to the 'good' object - has shattered into a million pieces.

When Bert returns home, he describes his journey in his van. The tone of his speech is sexual; he appreciates the machine's power, but he revels in his control and mastery over 'her'. In the context of the dream, this speech is a symbolic re-enactment of the primal scene<sup>9</sup> with Bert now taking on the role of the father's penis in Rose's phantasy, inside the van/mother, and controlling her body.

Bert's attack on Riley is a projection of Rose's phantasy of attacking and destroying the link between the father/penis and the mother's womb; and at the end of the dream Rose has been

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<sup>6</sup> Mitchell, *The Selected*, 61

<sup>7</sup> Wilfred R Bion *Learning from Experience* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004) P.21

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Bott-Spillus *Melanie Klein Today: Developments in Theory and Practice, Volume 1* (London: Bruner Routledge 1988) P.34 referred to in a discussion of unconscious phantasy in a psychoanalysis

<sup>9</sup> Melanie Klein *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946-1963* (London: Vintage, 1997) P.160

touched by the blindness that afflicts Riley. For Klein, Rose's inability to see may symbolise a phantasy of the 'bad' object's revenge.

But this hysterical symptom serves its purpose. To be 'blind' is, in a mad way, to become the object by incorporating it into the ego. The unconscious reasoning is this: 'if I am the object then the object is not lost, even if I have destroyed it', and I can use it to hold my mind together. It allows the 'good' object to 'live' again. One key to the dream is in the weak/strong image of Riley. He is old and blind. If he is old and blind, then he is weak. If he is weak then he needs to be protected. If he needs to be protected, then he is 'good'; and the 'good' object can be recovered. If he is retaliatory then he is 'bad'. If he is 'bad' then he can be split into 'good' and 'bad'. Furthermore, the presence and sheer 'badness' of the 'bad' object throws into sharp relief the presence and pure 'goodness' of the 'good object'. The 'good' object is recovered not lost.

This 'good' object can then be projected into objects to keep it safe from 'bad' objects, whilst the destructive 'bad' object can be defensively projected into external reality. Rose can defend herself against her own aggression. Rose can also maintain a sharp division between 'good' and 'bad' and this keeps her mind in some shape and order. It prevents a collapse into the undifferentiated chaos of a true psychosis.

Freud argued that a dream always expressed a wish buried in the unconscious. Dreams therefore provide an outlet for the Id drive of the libido. The ego creates the dream to allow the Id to explore the wish but also to gratify its demands. But, from a Kleinian perspective, the wish in the room/dream is to create a phantasy of the 'good' object as 'threatened' and then 'saved'. This is because a phantasy of attachment to 'good' objects is essential if the immature ego is to grow in resilience and strength. And, critically, the phantasy of rescuing the object creates or reinforces the phantasy of the 'good' object's existence, because if the

‘good’ object didn’t exist Rose couldn’t rescue it. The dream work of the play is therefore more than an attempt by the ego to disguise a forbidden wish through the symbolic ‘plastic representation’<sup>10</sup> of images. The ego uses the dream as a tool to strengthen the crucial phantasy of the ‘good’ object’s very existence and Rose’s connective relations to it.

Furthermore, the idea that the ‘good’ object must be saved is, although a paranoid one, a precursor of depressive anxiety in the depressive position. If Rose can ‘hold’ the idea that the object is in danger within her internal space, then, logically, she may also be able to ‘hold’ the idea that the object has a life of its own and can exist outside of her. As such, she may be able to develop a mature sense of concern for the object, as opposed to feeling a terror for herself over its ‘loss’.

### *A Slight Ache*

In *A Slight Ache*, Pinter continues his exploration of our dreams and phantasies. Edward, a philosopher, has a nightmare. He is enjoying a summer morning in his garden with his wife Flora. But he becomes aware of a figure watching him. An old, blind match-seller is standing at the back gate. When Edward finally welcomes the man into his house, to his horror, the match-seller takes over, and there is a reversal of power. Edward, who has been complaining of a dull ache behind his eyes, collapses in the grip of a fever. In the dream’s final image, Edward imagines himself to be totally inhabited by the spectre. His wife hands him the tray. He is now the match-seller and must wait in purgatory at the gate.

At the start of the play the couple are having breakfast. Flora seeks to engage Edward in a discussion about the blossoming flora and fauna in the garden. But Edward is deaf to his wife’s attempts to stimulate a conversation. Rather than compliment and intelligently develop her observations about the blooming ‘honeysuckle’, he chooses to bicker with Flora over the

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xiUi5H0UDd8> [accessed 9th March 2018]



genus of the plant. Although Flora firmly corrects Edward's assertion that the flower at the 'back gate' was 'convolvulus'<sup>11</sup>, Edward remains grumpy and cantankerous in the face of his wife's tutelage. In the first few moments of the play, then, we see that although the garden itself may be a scene of bucolic tranquillity, nothing is blooming in Edward and Flora's relationship. On the contrary, we find them engaging in a gentle, but characteristically Pinteresque, quarrel over language and the precise nature of subjective reality. Put simply, Edward and Flora are not 'on the same page', both metaphorically and literally: and this is exemplified by Edward's desire to disengage from his wife, so he can continue reading his copy of *The Telegraph*. This subtle narcissism, where long term partners retreat into their own subjective worlds, clearly made an impression on Pinter when observing other people and their relationships.

Flora seems to be at ease in her skin and in her environment. She tells Edward that she was out at 'seven'<sup>12</sup> to stand by the 'pool'. This image, of the serenity and coolness of the still water, captures a sense of her calm emotional state. Edward however seems hot, aggravated and irritable. Flora understands this and suggests that the 'canopy' might be put up to shield Edward from the blistering heat of the sun. Soon, though, Edward's petulant mood becomes symbolically concretised both in his 'aching eyes' and in the aggravating intrusion of the wasp. Although Edward claims to be unconcerned by the apparently random and unimportant presence of the insect, the wasp's pugnacious presence is mirrored in the clawing agitation of his internal state. Something inside Edward is buzzing, stinging: irritating. Eventually, Edward decides to destroy the wasp by allowing it to climb inside the marmalade jar and suffocate in the preserve. Then when the wasp shows it can escape, Edward elects to pour scolding water down the 'spoon hole', 'blinding the creature', before squashing it on a plate.

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<sup>11</sup> Harold Pinter *A Slight Ache and Other Plays* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1961) P. 9

<sup>12</sup> Pinter, *A Slight*, 9

In this sequence, we see the paranoid-schizoid sadism and brutality of the couple. The idea that the wasp can choke in the sticky marmalade symbolises an anal, faecal attack on the threatening 'bad' object. Moreover, Edward's vicious 'blinding' of the wasp is a defensive projection, an attempt to rid himself of his own 'aching', ocular misery: once this has been done Edward, however briefly, can share in Flora's sense of freedom. Now he sees that it is a 'beautiful day', 'the longest day of the year', with 'not a cloud in the sky'. He is now liberated because he can attribute his own aggression to the wasp, whom he denounces as a 'monster'.

Soon, however, the pain in Edward's eyes returns and with a vengeance, to the extent that he is forced to skulk in the soothing gloom of the scullery, avoiding the brightness of the day. The deterioration in his condition coincides with the appearance of the menacing 'match-seller' at the back gate.

Who is the match-seller? What does he symbolise? On stage, it is the choice of a director or designer to decide on how he appears to an audience, and so the answer to this question will always be dependent on artistic interpretation. But *A Slight Ache* was written for the radio. As such, Pinter was clearly aiming to trigger the listener's fears and imagination. Is the match-seller a 'grim reaper', an angel of death? On one level the match-seller may represent a myriad of projected neurotic anxieties. In one sense, he clearly manifests Edward's fear of time and what its passing will inevitably bring: the decrepit stage of old age, and the final loss of all his mental and physical vitality. In another way, 'Barnabus' as Flora calls him, may stand for Edward's crushing sense of professional and intellectual failure: his belief that he - and his theories - have not matched up to expectations. Equally, the match-seller may also signify Edward's fear of impotence, and his terror over the loss of his carnal potency. It is no surprise that Edward imagines his wife to be physically attracted to the match-seller. In much the same way, the old tramp fulfils for Flora her dreams of sexual liberation. The fantasy of

taking up with the match-seller allows her to imagine a life beyond the patriarchal prison of her stuffy bourgeois marriage. In that sense, the presence of the intruder also denotes the tragic disintegration of Edward and Flora's love.

But it is the image of Edward's blindness, his diseased eyes, which points so clearly to a disruption and trauma within the stability of the unconscious. In Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*<sup>13</sup> the Theban hero gouges out his eyes when he looks in horror upon his incestuous marriage to his own mother. In Freud's view, the young boy also perceives the father to be a rival for his mother's love, and fears that the father will castrate him in retribution. From Klein's perspective, the matter may be a good deal more complicated.

For Klein, Edward's 'wish' in the dream, strangely, may be to create a phantasy of persecution by the 'bad' object. By engendering this phantasy of persecution within the psyche, the first order of the mind, splitting, can be achieved. Indeed, the 'good' object can emerge out of the definition of the 'bad'. The fear of the 'bad' object leads to a phantasy of defending the self from the object, but the attack on the 'bad' father leads to phantasy that the 'good' father may also have been lost. Furthermore, Edward's psychotic persecutory phantasy is that he has devoured the 'good' object so he can create a phantasy of its 'goodness' introjected and inside him. But in doing this, he also fears that he has destroyed the 'good' pre-oedipal parents by ingesting them. Having destroyed them his need is to repair the combined parent figure<sup>14</sup>.

In the dream, the garden and cottage represent the fecund coitus of the 'good' parental objects and their capacity to make babies. By welcoming the match-seller in, Edward is attempting to reconstitute the coital link between the 'good' mother and the 'good' father's penis.

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<sup>13</sup> Sophocles *Oedipus Rex* (New York: Dover Thrift Editions)

<sup>14</sup> Mitchell, *Selected*, 168

However, having done so Edward is envious of the productive link of 'good' part-objects that he has recreated. He is also fearful that the 'bad' object will also grow in power and strength and seek revenge now that its links have been restored. Indeed, the final image is Edward's phantasy of being totally inhabited by this 'nefarious' 'bad' object.

But this may be another example of the dreamer creating a split within the phantasy of his relation to the object. The match-seller is weak, old and blind. He has been destroyed by Edward's own projected aggression. By looking at the match-seller, Edward can believe that he has rid himself of these dangerous internal forces that he could, in desperation, turn against his own ego. Moreover, if the match-seller is 'weak', he must be 'protected' and, again, if he must be protected, he is 'good'. Now the fragile ego can recover the 'good' object. Furthermore, crucially, the weakness of this 'good' object in relation to Edward's stronger ego allows Edward to control this 'goodness' and then build stronger attachments to it in phantasy.

In *The Room*, Rose goes blind in the dream to create a phantasy of internalising the object. In *A Slight Ache*, Edward becomes the object in the dream in a literal sense; and by 'becoming' the object he can exert a much greater total control over it. He can negate and control the persecutory 'badness' of the 'bad' object by denying that it has a separate presence and individual power of its own outside of his body. At the same time - the 'good' object/the 'weak and blind' split of the match-seller - is now also inside the psyche, saturated through the self to the extent that there is now barely any division between it and the ego. Thus, the ego has been strengthened by the internalised 'goodness' of the 'good' object.

## *The Dumb Waiter*

In *The Dumb Waiter*, two hitmen wait for the arrival of their victim in a basement. Suddenly, they are startled by a serving contraption which springs into life and begins issuing its 'orders'. Frightened, 'Ben and 'Gus' try to placate the machine, and a struggle for power ensues. Then a whistle blows and the 'victim' has arrived. Gus leaves the room and seconds later he is pushed through the door, powerless, having been stripped of his gun and holster. He is the victim. The light fades as Ben trains his gun on his partner.

If the poetic imagery in *The Room* and *A Slight Ache* is somewhat abstruse, in this play Pinter uses the metaphor of the 'machine' in a very unambiguous way to examine the nature of power and powerlessness in a command and control society. Gus is killed at the end of the play because he chooses to question the authority of the organisation. He does not heed Ben's warning to keep his mouth shut and do his job. He does not recognise the very real and present danger of criticising his bosses.

Gus does not seem to understand the brute simplicity of his role. He is required to work. He is required to produce outcomes and to get the job done. He is required to be of use: to shoulder his share of the strain. But, by being obedient, he will strengthen the social, political and economic power structure that has enslaved him. His work will produce profits: 'surplus value'<sup>15</sup> which will be stolen from him by a powerful elite. He will be given back a paltry sum of money, barely enough to support himself; and although these payments will be derisory, he may convince himself that his suffering is merely a temporary state-of-affairs. Furthermore, Gus will be required to give up arguably the most important possession he has: his time. His life will never be his own because he may be forced, at any given moment, to drop everything so that he can be ready to work. Thus, his precious leisure time will

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<sup>15</sup> Karl Marx Marx: *Later Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) P.232

inevitably be consumed by anxieties over this work. And yet, when he tries to express his frustration to Ben, he is not given a sympathetic hearing:

Gus: Well, I like to have a bit of a view, Ben. It whiles away the time.

He walks about the room.

I mean, you come into a place when it's still dark, you come into a room you've never seen before, you sleep all day, you do your job, and then you go away in the night again.

Pause

I like to get a look at the scenery. You never get the chance in this job.

Ben: You get your holidays, don't you?

Gus: Only a fortnight.

Ben: (lowering the paper). You kill me. Anyone would think you're working every day. How often do we do a job? Once a week? What are you complaining about?

Gus: Yes, but we've got to be on tap though, haven't we? You can't move out of the house in case a call comes.<sup>16</sup>

More than this, Gus will need to be flexible: to adapt and to innovate. When the rules of the game change, as they surely will, Gus will be expected to keep up, or go to the wall. He will be required to problem solve, cope with challenges, and handle unexpected difficulties without missing a beat. Thus, on the one hand Gus has been forced to follow orders, without question. On the other, if he cannot think and act in a more sophisticated way he risks being terminated. This places Gus in an impossible situation because he is now expected to fulfil two roles that contradict each other, at the same time. The organisation expects him to be two completely different people. The fact that he has not been equipped with the critical or intellectual faculties to handle such abrupt change is immaterial and will not be accepted as an excuse for failure.

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<sup>16</sup> Pinter, *The Room and*, 40

Gus will also be forced to communicate with his superiors. He will be given targets and if he fails to meet them he will be punished. Even if he does succeed in meeting these objectives in the short term, he cannot rest easy because these 'goal posts' could shift at any moment. He will be forced to cope with new technology and interact with faceless machines. These inanimate – inhuman - objects will mercilessly track, monitor and arbitrarily evaluate his work. He will receive his orders from a strange cacophony of disembodied voices that will speak through electronic devices. These machines may crackle into life at any given moment, and without warning.

Within the organisation Gus has not been educated to understand how his role fits into any 'bigger picture'. He will be ignorant of how the administration functions, and he won't be consulted on how decisions are made. When Gus tries to reflect on who cleans up after the 'jobs' have been completed he is educated by an increasingly exasperated Ben:

Ben (pityingly) You mutt. Do you think we're the only branch of this organisation? Have a bit of common. They got departments for everything.

Gus: What cleaners and all?

Ben: You birk

Gus: No, it was the girl that made me start to think<sup>17</sup>

Gradually Ben and Gus will face yet more stress and insecurity as the pressure to remain competitive leads to 'cut backs on the ground'. Salaries, bonuses and privileges for the bosses will go up. But the workers will look on in despair as their pay and working conditions are squeezed. Over time the organisation will expect the workers to produce more and more output from a shrinking pool of resources. Gus recognises this and complains about it. He

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<sup>17</sup> Pinter, *The Room and*, 53

sees that the organisation doesn't seem to care about their 'comfort'<sup>18</sup> anymore: there is no 'wireless', the toilet doesn't work properly, and the bed sheets they are expected to sleep in 'pong'.<sup>19</sup> And where is the mysterious 'Wilson'? What is his role?<sup>20</sup>

This preposterous situation has eaten away at Gus's emotional equilibrium. The terms and conditions of his employment have deteriorated. The rooms he must work in are dark, there are no windows and the time for leisure and 'relaxation' on the job have diminished because things have 'tightened up'<sup>21</sup>. Pinter shows us that feelings of anxiety, stress and frustration have escalated. In time cathartic outbursts of anger will give way to a more serious and considered attempt to question the authority of the system; to expose its lies, contradictions and hypocrisies. But an isolated individual has little chance of disrupting the status quo. Serious political critique can only become serious political change with the support of a group of comrades who share your views and who can turn your ideas into action.

When the curtain rises on *The Dumb Waiter* we can see that Gus is already starting to realise that all is not as he thought it was. He is beginning to question his own underlying assumptions, and those of other people. As such, he is dangerously close to working out that there is nothing 'natural' or inevitable about the circumstances he finds himself in. Gus is literally 'dumb', an ignoramus, but he may not be for much longer. As such he has become a threat that must be dealt with. Pinter even intimates that Ben may have had the opportunity to eliminate Gus earlier in the day, on the way to the job:

Gus: Eh, I've been meaning to ask you.

Ben: What the hell is it now?

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<sup>18</sup> Pinter, *The Room and*, 41

<sup>19</sup> Pinter, *The Room and*, 42

<sup>20</sup> Pinter, *The Room and*, 51

<sup>21</sup> Pinter, *The Room and*, 43



Gus: Why did you stop the car this morning, in the middle of the road?

Ben: (Lowering the paper) I thought you were asleep.

Gus: I was, but I woke up when you stopped. You did stop, didn't you?

Pause

In the middle of that road. It was still dark, don't you remember? I looked out. It was all misty. I thought perhaps you wanted to kip., but you were sitting up dead straight, like you were waiting for something.<sup>22</sup>

Suddenly, the sinister contraption begins, seemingly out of nowhere, to issue its 'orders'. The organisation does not want Ben and Gus to think because thinking is dangerous. It is counter-productive to the aims of the powerful. Rather than allow the two men to sit around forming their own opinions, the machine realises that it must keep the men distracted by forcing them to jump through one hoop after another. This explains why the contraption forces Ben and Gus to find increasingly exotic and difficult to obtain foods such 'bamboo shoots', 'water chestnuts', and an Ormitha Macarounada<sup>23</sup>. Furthermore, it is not who is speaking that really matters, *but what they are saying that counts*. Gus is a lowly employee, but to allow an unimportant individual the freedom to think and speak for himself could be the 'thin end of a political wedge'.

But when Gus looks to Ben for support he does not find an ally but a foe. This is because Ben has learnt how to survive on such a hazardous knife-edge. He has learnt how to cope with the situation. His lesson for Gus on how to occupy 'time' is a case in point:

Ben: you know what your problem is

Gus: What?

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<sup>22</sup> Pinter, *The Room and*, 41

<sup>23</sup> Pinter, *The Room and*, 59

Ben: You haven't got any interests

Gus: I've got interests.

Ben: What? Tell me one of your interests

Pause

Gus: I've got 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.<sup>24</sup>

Ben has introjected the values of his society. He can distance himself from the brutality of his job because he knows that he will become the victim the minute he steps out of line. For Ben there is no right or wrong in doing 'the job'. The job simply is. It is not a case of personal morality but rather a case of self-preservation. If the 'means justify the ends', whatever they may be, Ben is quietly content to accept the rules and stay alive. Therefore, Ben has trained himself not to question, or to think, or to draw attention to himself. This is why he finds Gus's company not only irksome – he criticises the 'junior partner' for asking some many 'damn questions' – but also deeply unsettling. He senses the danger nearby and realises that Gus is talking them both into peril.

This, then, is Pinter's terrifying image of our world. But the playwright is not trying to imply that by participating in the system we are all killers. Rather, he is drawing upon the inspiration of film noir, Hemmingway's *The Killers* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* to create a play that holds a mirror up to our society: to demonstrate to the audience that being part of this system means being exposed to all kinds of direct and subtle political, social and economic violence.

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<sup>24</sup> Pinter, *The Room and*, 40

Furthermore, although Pinter was writing about the British milieu on his doorstep, he was also referencing the many other command and control societies of his time: including the dictatorships of Nazi Germany and fascist Italy, and the totalitarian nightmare of Stalin's Soviet Union. These societies were built on a plethora of regressive schizoid impulses. They were based on the cultish worship of a megalomaniacal narcissistic individual who promulgated a utopian vision of one's homeland as great, glorious and powerful. Other nations were split into two opposing camps: enemies and friends. Allies were characterised as brave, loyal and courageous. Foes were condemned, their societies imagined to be degenerate vessels of evil. Collective paranoid phantasies of nefarious internal objects lead to the belief that the nation itself was sick, and needed to be cleansed by the Ben's and Gus's of this world because it was 'infested' with Jews, dissidents and degenerates. These enemies of the state were rounded up and subjected to the unspeakable horrors of the death camp and the gulag.

The fact that these atrocities did happen is a testament to the power of fear: it is also a lesson in the kinds of wickedness that men and women are capable of when denied the liberty to think for themselves.

### **Klein, Pinter and Social and Economic Power**

Whilst the vicissitudes of the characters' unconscious provide a dynamic basis for an interpretation of the unconscious mechanisms that drive character behaviour, it is important to remember that individuals are part of a broader society. As such, they are subject to structural power relations pertaining to an historical mode of production. Pinter's deep distrust of capitalism was articulated through his frequent and very public attacks on American foreign policy. If Pinter unwittingly manages to depict an image of human behaviour as a manifestation of primitive phantasy, so he also shows us how these solipsistic phantasies eventually break free of an idiosyncratic mind to reflect the curious nature of how

we think as a society. Thus, Pinter's depiction of the human condition is not only an uncanny study in unconscious phantasy, it also reveals how phantasy shapes our collective social and cultural experience.

For example, *The Room* not only illustrates Rose's need to protect and establish a firm foundation for the cultivation of a 'good' object, it also reveals the paranoid-schizoid and depressive impulses within post war British society. As Rose peeps anxiously through her curtains, the unconscious need to repair the mother/breast of the homeland is being instituted through the introduction of a welfare state and the NHS. After the paranoid-schizoid destruction of 'total' war, so came an attempt by a progressive Labour government to create a 'good enough'<sup>25</sup> society built around the emotional, psychological and physical needs of humans.

Furthermore, although *The Room* was written in 1957, Pinter has told of how he got the idea for the central image in the play two years previously whilst attending a party in Chelsea.<sup>26</sup> 1955 was the year that Rosa Parks<sup>27</sup> refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white person in Montgomery, Alabama. This act of insurrection eventually led to the introduction of civil rights for all African Americans. Riley's soft plea to Rose, to 'come home', recalls his ancestor, the whispering Harriet Tubman<sup>28</sup>, who led so many slaves in the southern United States to freedom in the north, along the underground railroad. In the west the mid twentieth century was a time of social, cultural, political and economic reparation towards the ethnic peoples of the southern hemisphere.

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<sup>25</sup> Donald Woods Winnicott *The Collected Works of D.W Winnicott* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) P.232

<sup>26</sup> Billington, *The Life*, 113

<sup>27</sup> Billington, *The Life*, 113

<sup>28</sup> Romano, *The Civil*, 183

At the same time, however, the successful construction of a new society in The United Kingdom was dependent on immigrant labour from the imperial colonies. In Pinter's drama, Rose and Bert's racism towards these peoples from The West Indies, a prejudice common amongst the white population of London at the time, is a displaced paranoid phantasy of so many 'bad' external objects, or 'others', which have been introjected and which now present a 'menacing' internal presence within society. Although as a young man Pinter lived through the depressive anxiety of Labour's massive 'cradle to grave' reforms<sup>29</sup>, he also saw plenty of examples of paranoia and splitting within the political culture of the 1950s. Indeed, Pinter's claustrophobic specifications for the staging of *The Room*, with Rose apparently sealed within her tomb-like four walls, is the concrete theatrical manifestation of a stifling, culturally engrained paranoid position, an island mentality and a xenophobic fear of outsiders.

We might subject *A Slight Ache* to a similar social, as well as Kleinian, analysis. If at a primitive level of the unconscious Edward's fear is of a rejuvenated 'bad' father that may seek revenge for his son's oral, anal and urethral attacks in phantasy - as well as the paranoid fear of the loss of the 'good' father - at a social level his fears translate into a nagging, aching unease over the stability of his status as privileged and powerful. The basis of bourgeois Edward's social authority, his academic achievements, seems to be in doubt: he cannot find the draft of a paper he is currently working on which expounds on the problem of time and space. The loss of these treatises, and with them his treasured intellectual insights, coincides with the gradual failure of his sight, and presages his collapse into the powerless ignominy of his role as the 'new' match seller. Edward cannot see: Despite his brilliance and erudition, he is somewhat insensitive to the changing world outside the cloistered life he has created for himself, and his ignorance makes him vulnerable.

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<sup>29</sup>Chris Renwick *Bread for All: The Origins of the Welfare State* (publisher unavailable)

In the original version of the popular Christian hymn 'All Things Bright and Beautiful', we are told that social, political and economic inequality is the result of god's divine will in a world designed to slot into a perfect order. What Edward ultimately begins to realise is that the poor man at his own gate might free himself from the purgatory of economic oppression by participating in a socialist revolution - and wrench his 'master' from his castle.

At the same time, any social analysis of a Pinter play ought to compliment, not supplant, a Kleinian reading. The form the playwright uses is also relevant. The fact that Pinter chose to present *A Slight Ache* as a radio play is telling. By choosing to focus on what the audience can hear rather than see, Pinter, through a delicate assemblage of utterances, pauses, silences, and a cacophony of so many peculiar sounds, builds a convincing depiction of a mind in the grip of a paranoia. Furthermore, the effect of having to listen to the play is disorientating. We are blinded, like Edward, and are reduced to having to imagine what it is that Edward is seeing in his dream. We, like a Kleinian psychoanalyst, must listen to the phantasy and make sense of what is being communicated.

With the *The Dumb Waiter* Pinter illustrates the schizoid nature of capitalism and its impact on the workers who must toil to create a stolen surplus value. The bourgeoisies recognise that their power is dependent on their continued ownership of the means of production and distribution and, as such, would be lost if there were to be a socialist revolution. Therefore, in anxious meditation, they have harnessed the ingenuity of new technologies to construct a paranoid society, where the workers can be monitored continuously by the gaze of a machine. This is a manic society, since the distinction between the reality of the pragmatic need to manage the workers, and the emerging narcissistic phantasy of control over them, has collapsed. The workers, for their part, also harbour manic phantasies of control over the bosses and these unconscious impulses emerge during periods of strike action and militant

unionism. This is the nightmarish, modern world of surveillance that confronts Ben and Gus, and it is an Orwellian situation of daily life that we recognise as our own.

Capitalism itself is based on the greedy accumulation of profits and as such it is an oral system – it is no coincidence that British slang for money is ‘bread’ or ‘dough’. Capitalism works through our collective regression into the paranoid-schizoid position, where feelings of emptiness lead to a need to ‘fill’ ourselves by becoming wealthy and owning so many materialistic possessions. At the same time, we are kept in line not only by the presence of the internal super-ego, but through our collective projective identification. We perceive the institutions that control society as threatening and powerful because they contain split off and projected aspects of our own ‘bad’ self and ‘bad’ objects. As we have seen, Ben and Gus are fearful of the machine because it ‘contains’ their own destructive forces.

## Chapter 4

### *The Dwarfs*

#### **Synopsis and Context**

*The Dwarfs* documents the disintegration and eventual collapse of a three-way friendship shared between Len, Mark and Pete. Growing up in a suburb of London the men appear to have been mates for some time. But Len is suffering from a mental illness. He ‘sees’ and ‘hears’ ‘things and his grip on reality appears to be dwindling. He is obsessed with the problem of what we can take at face value as being ‘true’ or ‘real’. He seems to be searching for some solid, irrefutable evidence that his senses aren’t fooling him when he perceives the world at large.

Len’s illness soon shows signs of escalating into an episode of psychosis. His delusions are dominated by one, particularly vivid, hallucination: he has repeatedly observed a frenzied gaggle of revolting creatures scurrying about in his back yard, playing in all the swilling filth and detritus of the city. These vermin are the eponymous ‘dwarfs’. Len tells us that he has recruited the dwarfs to ‘watch’ Mark and Pete. But Len’s infirmity is having a wearying effect on his friends. Pete is tired of dealing with his odd behaviour.

Eventually Len discloses to Mark that Pete thinks he is a ‘fool’<sup>1</sup>. This revelation devastates Mark and he confronts Pete. Pete confirms to Mark that he patronises his ‘mate’ - and always did. With Mark and Pete’s friendship destroyed, Len’s pathology seems to go into a remission. The ‘dwarfs’ have vanished along with the muck they frolic in. The yard has been scrubbed clean. In a state of calm reflection and meditation, Len analyses the world around

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<sup>1</sup> Pinter, *A Slight*, P.116



him. He sees the backyard. For the first time, he can see the plants and flora around him clearly: and a sense of peace descends upon him.

The relationship between the characters in *The Dwarfs* is extremely complicated, and any attempt to elucidate the plays will be vulnerable to accusations of simplicity or generalisation. However, the play is not entirely irreducible, and there are certain observations we may be able to make. At the heart of the play is the stress that Len, Mark and Pete are experiencing as their world is changing. Society is demanding that they move on from being mere young adults and start behaving as mature individuals. Thus, the threesome's friendship, forged through adolescence, has become increasingly problematic. In that sense *The Dwarfs* is Pinter's 'coming of age' play, although the matter is a good deal more complex than it sounds.

Pete is a difficult and complicated character. Compared to his friends, as a city worker he is on a higher rung of the socio-economic ladder. But he has a desire to break free from the past, and to a certain extent, the present. This is exemplified when he vents his frustration at the 'guttersnipes' he has to rub shoulders with in his job. For Pete, 'moving on' means breaking away from all the distracting noise that surrounds him so that he might be able to grasp an idea, an 'efficient idea', one that'll work'. His use of the example of the inefficiency of the nutcracker illustrates not only his subtle - somewhat brilliant - cast of mind, but also his neurotic tendency towards the tortures of perfectionism:

Pete: Look at the nutcracker. You press the cracker and the cracker cracks the nut. You might think that's an exact process. It's not. The nut cracks, but the hinge of the cracker gives out a friction which is completely incidental to the particular idea. It's unnecessary, an escape and wastage of energy to no purpose. So there's nothing efficient about a nutcracker.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Pinter, *A Slight*, 105

In pursuing his holy grail of a 'perfect' concept or idea, Pete can deny the truth about the world he is struggling to face up to and move towards the realisation of the depressive position that nothing is pure, and that everything carries within it the pollutions of so many past imperfections is too painful for him to accept. His dream of an 'efficient idea' is thus a form of defensive splitting: the idea itself can be split off and idolised: imagined to be pristine and unsullied by the mess of his internal world.

Mark is an actor and at the beginning of the play he is apparently away performing in repertory. At the beginning of the play Len and Pete are hanging around in Mark's apartment awaiting his return. Indeed, the idea of performance, of illusions and appearances – of pretence - is an important theme in the play. This is exemplified during an exchange between Mark and Len in Mark's room. Len has an unwelcome habit of grabbing and fiddling with items in Mark's home. When he seizes an ornate mirror, and brandishes it without purpose, Mark seems to be on the verge of losing his temper:

Mark: Put that mirror back

Len: This is the best piece of furniture you've got in your house. It's Spanish. No Portuguese. You're Portuguese, aren't you?

Mark: Put it back.

Len: 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?<sup>3</sup>

The problem of who this actor Mark happens to be is certainly a problem that also worries his rival Pete. Confiding in Len, he tells us that 'sometimes' he thinks Mark is just playing a 'game'.

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<sup>3</sup>Pinter, *A Slight*, 103

Pete: You look at him and what do you see? An attitude. Has it substance or is it barren? Sometimes I think it's as barren as a bomb site.<sup>4</sup>

Pete also fears that Mark might be 'a man of weeds'<sup>5</sup> implying that Mark is a corrupting influence whose malignant force is growing within the friendship group. His use of words is not only poetic; it also recalls Klein's theory of projective identification. Klein hypothesises that projective identification not only allows the projector to imagine that both good and bad objects no longer exist within himself, but within another person. She also identified a third mechanism of projection. Here the subject projecting the object imagines that he has managed through his projection to somehow take control of the other person's psyche, and to an extent, his or her mind. This is projection's 'acquisitive' function<sup>6</sup>. His idea of Mark as a 'weed' suggests that not only is Pete becoming increasingly paranoid, he feels Mark's presence within him as a sinister force, growing in strength. As Klein explains:

Projection, as Freud described, originates from the deflection of the death instinct outwards and in my view helps the ego overcome anxiety by ridding it of danger and badness. Introjection of the good object is also used as a defence against anxiety.<sup>7</sup>

One important debate that surrounds the play is the nature, function, and importance of Len's illness. Throughout the play, Len's pathology is characterised by a strong tendency towards manic and hyperactivity. In this speech he describes his nocturnal activities

Len: At eleven o'clock, two o'clock, six o'clock, ten o'clock and one o'clock. Not bad going. Work makes me hungry. I was working that day. [Pause] I'm always starving when I get up. Daylight has a funny effect on me. As for the night that goes

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<sup>4</sup> Pinter, *A Slight*, 101

<sup>5</sup> Pinter, *A Slight*, 101

<sup>6</sup> Susan Budd, Richard Rusbridger *Introducing Psychoanalysis: Essential Themes and Topics* (London: Routledge 2005) P.29

<sup>7</sup> Melanie Klein *Envy*, P.6

without saying. As far as I'm concerned the only thing you can do in the night is eat. It keeps me fit, especially if I'm at home. I have to run downstairs to put the kettle on, run upstairs to finish what I'm doing, run downstairs to cut a sandwich or arrange a salad, run upstairs to finish what I'm doing, run back downstairs to see to the sausages, if I'm having sausages, run back upstairs to finish what I'm doing, run back downstairs to lay the table, run back upstairs to finish what I'm doing, run back.<sup>8</sup>

This speech is fast, breathless, and disordered, and speaking quickly is typical of the early signs of mania. Len also makes references to nocturnal activities. Insomnia is often characteristic of the early stages of a manic-depressive episode.

But although Len may be sick, he perhaps shows signs of reparative, depressive impulses. He describes how he works at Paddington Station and how he 'gives a bloke half a dollar who does his job, whilst he curls up in the corner and reads the timetable'.<sup>9</sup> Although at first Len seems to be withdrawing into himself, a Kleinian might recognise a depressive, reparative instinct to read about and thus facilitate the process of connecting the trains. This act may symbolise his desire to make connections, to put together trains, to put back together parents, the disconnected or 'damaged objects.'<sup>10</sup> As Klein explains in *Love, Guilt and Reparation*:

As I have said, the dread lest the good object should be expelled along with the bad causes the mechanisms of expulsion and projection to lose value. We know that, at this stage, the ego makes a greater use of introjection of the good object as a mechanism of defence. This is associated with another important mechanism: that of making reparation to the object. In certain of my earlier works I discussed in detail the concept of restoration and showed that it is far more than a mere reaction formation. The ego feels impelled by its identification with the good object (and I can now add, impelled by its identification with the god object to make restitution for all the sadistic attacks that it has launched on that object.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Pinter, *A Slight*, 94

<sup>9</sup> Pinter, *A Slight*, 95

<sup>10</sup> Klein, *Love*, 226

<sup>11</sup> Klein, *Love*, 226

Tragically however this restorative act of trying to put the pieces back together always falls short. The leaving of a train, its delay or cancellation, may symbolise his failure to make connections that can be sustained because, ultimately, his own destructive drives and his guilt over deeds done in phantasy will always be too much to bear. He fears the parents' retaliation. His only defence against the power of his anxiety will be to destroy these objects, therefore preventing this loving act of reparation.

Furthermore, Len's proclamation that he has a 'hole in his side'<sup>12</sup> seems to have religious allusions. Shri Ranjan Jalote's text makes comparisons between 'Christ' and Len. For Jalote, Len is a sacrificial figure who has been betrayed by his friends'<sup>13</sup>

But for Klein the notion of being 'pierced' might reveal an unconscious phantasy of being penetrated or castrated by the father's vengeful destroyed and destroying penis. As one of Klein's most important collaborators Hannah Segal explains in *her Introduction to Melanie Klein*:

These attacks on the mother's body lead to phantasies of its being a terrifying place full of destroyed and vengeful objects, amongst which the father's penis acquires a particular importance<sup>14</sup>

On a deeper level a sense of confusion between split- off and projected parts of the self and the parental object into which projections are directed may be in evidence. In unconscious phantasy, Len may be confused as to which parts of himself are himself and which parts have been projected in phantasy. His sense of a hole in his side, could also symbolise a sense of a hole in the combined parent figure's side containing pieces of his own split off ego; or the

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<sup>12</sup> Harold Pinter. *The Dwarfs and Nine Revue Sketches* (London: Dramatists Play Service, 1999) P.16

<sup>13</sup> Jalote, *The Plays*, 63

<sup>14</sup> Segal, *Introduction*,5

hole could symbolise a collapse into a state of de-personalisation, where he begins to experience himself as depleted, missing pieces of his own mind and body. He is, in phantasy filled with holes. Len also describes how he has become obsessive over mathematics.

Len: [Speaking to Mark] Look! All last night I was working at mechanics and determinants. There's nothing like a bit of calculus to cheer you up.<sup>15</sup>

A Kleinian might posit that the neurotic 'calculus' he scribbles down is also a sublimated, depressive attempt to repair the parents. The numbers and digits represent the destroyed parents he needs to repair, to fit back together. The correct answer is the parents animated, brought back to life in phantasy.

Furthermore, this manic emphasis on academic work may symbolise a powerful 'need to know'. Klein detected in the children she psychoanalysed a powerful impulse towards knowledge and understanding as their therapy progressed. As they played, symbolically repairing objects, they became motivated to explore these phantasies of being inside and outside their parent's bodies in more depth. This desire for more understanding is referred to by psychoanalysts as epistomophilia. As Klein proposes in Bott-Spillus's *New Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*:

The early connection between epistomophilic impulse and sadism is very important for the whole mental development. This instinct, activated by the rise of the Oedipus tendencies, at first mainly concerns itself with the mother's body, which is assumed to be the scene of all sexual processes and developments. The child is still dominated by the anal-sadistic libido position which impels him to appropriate the contents of the body. Thus he begins to be curious about what it contains, what it is like. So the epistomophilic instinct and the desire to take possession come quite early to be most intimately connected with one another and at the same time with a sense of guilt aroused by the incipient Oedipus conflict.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Pinter, *A Slight*, 98

<sup>16</sup> Bott-Spillus, *New*, 326

During the play, Len seems to be obsessed with the nature of reality and the need to verify the truth. Like Descartes in his *Meditations*, the problem of what can be taken as ‘real’ and beyond refutation troubles him. He intuitively understands that in perceiving ‘reality’, what we take for ‘fact’ may be a ‘trick of the light’: time, space distance, and perspective can fool the senses. He describes his tortured anxiety through his recollection of sitting on a locomotive and realising that what he ‘knows’ to be true is not reflected in what he ‘sees’.

Len: The rooms with live...open and shut. [Pause.] Can’t you see? They charge 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. When for example, I look through a train window, at night, and see the yellow lights, very clearly, I can see what they are and I can see that they’re still. But they’re only still because I’m moving. I know that they do move along with me, and when we go around a bend, they bump off. But I know they are still, just the same. They are after all, stuck on poles which are rooted to the earth. So they must be still, in their own right, insofar as the earth is still, which of course it isn’t. The point is, in a nutshell, that I can only appreciate such facts when I’m moving. When I’m still, nothing around me follows a natural course of conduct.<sup>17</sup>

Later, after being told by Pete to ‘buck his ideas up’ or face being locked up, he again complains of being unable to discriminate between what is real and what is false:

Len: No. There is a different sky each time I look. The cloud runs about in my eye. I can’t do it.<sup>18</sup>

But Klein might argue that Len’s inability to make sense of what is real is a consequence of the fact that the human mind colours the external world with its projections. Furthermore, our internal world is also shaped and formed out of the introjections we take in from our external

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<sup>17</sup> Bott-Spillus, *New*, 326

<sup>18</sup> Pinter, *A Slight*, 101

world. As such, our ability to discriminate between what is real and what is false is severely impaired.

Also, Len's illness is characterised by an anxious need to continually remind himself of what he takes to be 'real' and what he takes to be 'false'. Alone at night he obsessively enumerates the surroundings of his room:

Len: This is my table. That is a table. There is my chair. 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<sup>19</sup>.

For Klein, such a need to repetitively remind oneself of what is real and what is false is not just a matter of a posteriori thinking, but also evidence of 'reality testing'. As we have discussed in chapter two reality testing occurs when a human subject compares - or checks - his phantasy against what he encounters in the real world. This process is intimately bound up in the process of mourning for the object. As Klein theorises:

My contention is that the child goes through states of mind comparable to the mourning of an adult, or rather, that this early mourning is revived whenever grief is experienced in later life. The most important methods by which the child overcomes his states of mourning, is, in my view, the testing of reality<sup>20</sup>

Len's illness also has very significant paranoiac aspects to it. Soon the early signs that his mind is beginning to fall apart is evidenced, as he begins to entertain some peculiar fantasies:

Len: 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

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<sup>19</sup> Pinter, *A Slight*, 96

<sup>20</sup> Dan Williams. *Klein, Sartre and Imagination in the Films of Ingmar Bergman* (London: Palgrave Macmillan) P 42



centre of the night and the morning. There is my hundred- watt bulb like a dagger. This room moves. This room is moving. It has moved. It has reached...a dead halt<sup>21</sup>

In this monologue, Len communicates a sense of disorientation, of the ground moving beneath his feet. But the idea of his being ‘ambushed’ is suggestive of a phantasy that ‘bad’, ‘vengeful’, and ‘persecuting’ objects that have been projected into the external world are hiding in wait to destroy him. Equally, there is a sense of calmness about the speech as well, a reassurance that so many ‘good’ objects within his internal world are nonetheless safe from the projected ‘bad’ objects. There is, he observes, no ‘ambush’.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, the hallucination of these ‘dwarfs’ as alive has a powerful, restorative, depressive function. It allows the reparative re-animation of the damaged object and allows Len to entertain the phantasy that the damaged object has been repaired. At this point a tipping back into the depressive position could be happening in phantasy.

But he also splits and projects the persecuting object into Mark and Pete. Now, in his paranoid phantasy, they become his persecutors and a further defence against the ‘bad’ object has been achieved. Now he can defend himself against the object because he has located that object inside someone else. The ‘bad’ object is no longer part of him it lives in someone else, in phantasy. This, then, is the ego’s solution to the ‘problem’ of the menace inside it, to the sinister, creeping ‘badness’ that ‘lurks’ within. Tragically, for Len however, these defensive reactions and counter reactions seem to deepen and exacerbate his paranoid psychosis. Len is consumed by a phantasy that his mind is splitting, breaking apart. His psychosis is reaching a fever pitch; and his only way out of the episode is return to the depressive position by mourning for the ‘loss’ of the object damaged in phantasy.

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<sup>21</sup> Pinter, *A Slight*, 96

<sup>22</sup> Pinter, *A Slight*, 96

Other moments that Pinter describes in the play have a nightmarish quality to them. Len describes a vivid fantasy in graphic terms:

Len: I squashed a tiny insect on a plate the other day. And I brushed the remains off my thumb. Then I saw that the fragments were growing, like fluff. As they were falling, they were becoming larger, like fluff. I had put my hand into the body of a dead bird.<sup>23</sup>

This dream image is grisly, but from a Kleinian perspective this hallucination describes Len placing his hand inside the body of another object filled with the projection of his own death instinct, destroyed by his own aggression. In another incident, Pete describes a nightmare of his own:

Pete: I tell you a dream I had last night. I was with a girl in a tube station, on a platform. People were rushing about. There was some sort of panic. When I looked around I saw everyone's faces were peeling, blotched, blistered. People were screaming, booming down the tunnel. There was a fire bell clanging. When I looked at the girl I saw that her face was coming off in slabs too, like plaster. Black scabs and stains. The skin was dropping off like lumps of cat's meat. I could hear it sizzling on the electric rails. I pulled her by the arm to get her out of there. She wouldn't budge. Stood there, with half a face, staring at me. I screamed at her to come away. Then I thought, Christ, what's my face like? Is that why she's staring? Is that rotting too?<sup>24</sup>

Here, Pete's dream is perhaps reminiscent of the horrors of the blitz. Pinter grew up fearing not just death through bombing, but also having to face the possibility that the Nazis might use gas on urban civilians.

But Klein's theory, that the dream captures the turmoil of Pete's internal and external world, is more helpful. In the dream the people who are 'rushing about, in 'panic' are good internal objects that he feels he needs to keep safe from the threat of other bad objects. But his fear

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<sup>23</sup> Pinter, *A Slight*, 105

<sup>24</sup> Pinter *A Slight*, 102

that he cannot protect them is reflected in the destruction of their faces. His anxiety is that he cannot save them from the power of his own destructive drives.

Pete's nightmare illustrates the neurotic need to contain and sustain objects. Klein noticed this need to protect good internal objects was an important psychic element in a patient she analysed. This patient presented as a hypochondriac. He seemed to be obsessed with his afflictions from all manner of illnesses and would routinely enumerate all the medications he was taking for a variety of complaints.

At the same time, Klein detected a strong love for his mother, his parents and for many other people. Klein suggests that in phantasy an association had taken place, in which external objects have become internalised and felt to be inside the body, like so many 'little people'. In his depressive phantasy, the objects were substituted for his own internal organs. These organs were perceived to be constantly under attack and thus they needed an excessive degree of protection and care. As Klein Explains:

It became quite clear that the different organs he was trying to cure were identified with his internalised brothers and sisters, about whom he felt guilty and whom he had to be perpetually keeping alive.<sup>25</sup>

We may also argue that when Pete sees that the girl's face is falling apart the projection of his own destructive aggression confronts him. When the girl just stands there and looks at him, he has a profound insight, one of the few moments of clarity in the play. He sees that the source of the destruction is himself. The fact that the faces in his nightmare are falling apart, breaking into pieces, also reflects the broken state of his psyche. In the dream his face is splitting apart, falling into fragments - just as his mind is.

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<sup>25</sup> Hinshelwood, *Clinical*, 60

## Conclusion

My interpretation of *The Dwarfs* is predicated on the importance of Len's response to his changing situation. Len can see the solidity of his world crumbling, disintegrating before his eyes. He is sensitive to the fact that the friendship shared between the men is falling apart. Pete's first, surreptitious attack on Mark to Len evidences this before long:

Pete: You knock around with Mark too much. He can't do you any good. I know how to handle him. But I don't think he's your sort.<sup>26</sup>

When Mark visits he confirms that the trust and respect once shared between the two is crumbling. He cautions Len against Pete, inadvertently using almost the exact same words as his adversary:

Mark: You spend too much time with Pete.

Len: What?

Mark: Give it a rest. He doesn't do you any good. I'm the only one who knows how to get on with him. You can't. You take him too seriously. He doesn't worry me. I know how to handle him. He doesn't take any liberties with me.<sup>27</sup>

For Mark and Pete, the ending of a comradeship is a fact of life, painful but true. They can move on to the new lives they have constructed for themselves outside of the other two. But for Len, to lose their friendship could have dire, catastrophic consequences. Len is sick and disabled by his illness. He relies on the care and companionship of the other two and is probably terrified to contemplate how their loss could affect him. Len has no one else whom he can rely on, and Pete makes this abundantly clear in an irritable attack on his friend during a casual visit:

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<sup>26</sup> Pinter, *A Slight*,

<sup>27</sup> Pinter, *A Slight*, 104

Pete: You want to watch your step. You know that? You're going from bad to worse. Why don't you pull yourself together? Eh? Get a steady job. Cultivate a bit of go and guts for a change. Make yourself useful mate, for Christ's sake. As you are, you're just a dead weight round everybody's neck. You want to listen to your friends, mate. Who else have you got?<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, for Len to be abandoned would mean more than the loss of a pair of 'mates' who often help him out with all the practical problems that his infirmity brings. It would mean the end of his youth, his adolescence, and his childhood. It would destroy and ruthlessly dispatch to history and broken memory the last, clinging vestiges of a more innocent time: when the 'lads' played together, chased girls together, listened to music together and fell in love together.

It would mean that Len would have to emerge as an individual in his own right. He would be forced to leave behind the safety and comfort of his previous existence to confront a new, altogether more insecure, altogether more frightening, world. This, then, is the anxious impulse that underlies Len's sickness in *The Dwarfs*. This is the problem causing the stress that is making him regress back towards a more primitive state of mind.

We can see why Len might feel anxious, but we might also see that he feels remorse and guilt. Consciously, he might tell us that this guilt plagues him, because he feels that he is responsible, somehow, for the break-up of the friendship. He might divulge to us that he feels that he has become a strain on his friends because they shoulder the burden of looking after him, constantly. Len might tell us that the two have had enough of being his 'carers' because it is tiring, inconvenient and boring (and, in fact, throughout the play, Pete makes his rising frustration and annoyance with Len transparent):

Pete: Giving up the ghost isn't so much a failure as a tactical error. By elastic I mean being prepared for your own deviations. You don't know where you're going to come

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<sup>28</sup> Pinter, *A Slight*, 109

out of next at the moment. You're like a rotten old shirt. Buck your ideas up. They'll lock you up before you're much older.<sup>29</sup>

What Len would not tell us is that this state of affairs returns him to his childhood and his relationship with his parents. Notice here the triadic connection between the boys that mirrors the relationship a child might share with his parents. Len's mother and father may have loved him; but they also had to care for him, day in day out.

Len may have phantasied that it was the strain of having to undertake this care – the feeding, the washing, the lulling to sleep, the picking up of spilt urine, faeces, and vomit - that eventually destroyed his parent's love for one another. He was a 'dead weight' around the necks of his parents, just as he is a dead weight around the necks of his friends. Len feels that he spoiled his mother and father's relationship, in much the same way as he has spoiled Mark and Pete's friendship. Len got in the way and split up his parents, just as he got in the way and broke down the affection that Mark and Pete - the two more powerful members of the group - had for one another.

Thus, we can detect here a very strong Oedipal anxiety that motivates Len and courses right through the heart of the play. Len wanted to break up his parents, so that he could have either his mother or father and he feels a sense of acute guilt over this. Thus, we might argue that a strong transference from Len onto Pete and Mark has occurred.

We might delve deeper into the more repressed, subterranean depths of the unconscious. From a Kleinian point of view, it was not simply that he wanted to break up his parents' love; he wanted to break-up their coitus. We might note here the connection in the infant's imagination between 'spoiling', 'soiling' and 'breaking up' the parents. Klein recognised that the infant could develop phantasies of destroying his parents' sexual intercourse through the

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<sup>29</sup>Pinter, *A Slight*, 101

bodily impulse to defecate. In the anal phase the child may begin to harbour dreams that he can split up the parents' coitus in the night by soiling his nappy in the next room.

For Klein, this would be the source of Len's depressive guilt and acute anxiety, at the very core of the unconscious, against which manic defences are organized and mobilized. The intensity of Len's feelings of guilt and anxiety in the depressive position pushes him back into a more primitive state of mind, characterised by splitting and multiple projections.

We can also discuss some of the ego's defensive mechanisms. Firstly, we have the father (or the father's penis) that has been damaged by Len's own proto oedipal rage. The sense of guilt over the damage done to this object, as well as the fear of the loss of the 'good' penis itself, is devastating, simply catastrophic. As a defence against this a reversal takes place. The ego transforms the damaged 'good' object or penis into a 'bad' object. This 'bad' object is then identified with and incorporated into the ego, a constituent component of an omnipotent super-ego that 'watches' Len from the inside.

In effect, Len's ego defence has produced a brilliant solution to the problem of his own guilt and anxiety. The damaged object is no longer 'good', it is 'bad'. And now that this object has become 'bad' it does not warrant or merit feelings of fear over its loss, guilt, compassion or sympathy, and the racking, painful feelings of the depressive position disappear. On the contrary, now the object is a cancer, an internal malevolence that now must be attacked and resisted against. Thus, this bad super-ego object of the father is now 'watching' Len: monitoring him from the inside.

But why is Len afraid of the object of the father? What does he fear that the father will discover about his son? In short, and perhaps confusingly, Len is terrified that the 'father' object will find out about his son's oedipal intentions. This is the 'crime' that Len has committed in phantasy against his own inseminating progenitor. He is frightened that the

distrustful object will realise that his own son is plotting to extract him from the mother's insides.

Ultimately the guilt over these 'destructions' and his fear over the 'loss' of the object is so strong he cannot move out of a split, paranoid-schizoid state and into the depressive position. His illness, which shows signs of both manic-depressive and schizophrenic elements, is a maladaptation to his inner turmoil over the destructive powers of his own drives.

The question of what Len's 'dwarfs' themselves are or represent is an important question to tackle. Pinter believed that:

'The dwarfs have emerged out of Len's imagination as the truth of the relationship between himself, Pete and Mark. He sees a savage, predatory, and disgusting world which is his truth. The fact that Pete and Mark's friendship ends so stupidly bears him out'<sup>30</sup>

How might a Kleinian interpret the problem of the appearance of 'the dwarfs' themselves; what are they, or what do they represent? The first thing to consider is that Len repeatedly refers to their presence in the back yard:

Len: Oh don't worry, it's basically a happy relationship. I trust them. They're very efficient. They know what they're waiting for. But they've got a new game, did I tell you? It's to do with beetles and twigs. There's a rockery of red hot cinder. I like watching them. Their hairs are curled and oily on their necks. Always squatting and bending, dipping their wicks in the custard. Now and again a lick of flame screws up their noses. Do you know what they do? They run wild. They yowl, they pinch, they dribble, they whimper, they gouge, and then they sooth each others' orifices with a local ointment, and then, all gone, all forgotten, they lark about, each with his buddy, get out the nose spray and the scented syringe, settle down for the night with a bun and doughnut.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Billington, *The Life*, 61

<sup>31</sup> Pinter, *A Slight*, 106



We may say that they are garden ornaments (garden gnomes, animals) that have ‘come to life’ in Len’s psychotic hallucination. But why should they have come to life? The answer to this may lie in the explanation that Len’s mind is now splitting as he attempts to control the omniscient presence of ‘bad’ internal objects. These objects were ‘good’ and whole but they were destroyed/damaged in phantasy and now their loss/depletion has brought about within Len intolerably powerful feelings of fear over their loss within his internal world and fears that they might seek revenge for his attacks on them.

Back in the paranoid-schizoid position these damaged objects and part-objects can be further split into smaller part-objects and imagined, through a form of reversal to be ‘bad’, persecuting super-ego internal objects that he can defend himself against. By shifting his position in relation to the damaged object, fear and a sense of loss and weakness in relation to the object can be transformed into a strengthened sense of the need to defend oneself against persecuting internal, introjected objects.

His ego now defends itself by projecting these ‘bad’ objects out and into the ornaments and statuettes of his garden, where they can be controlled, managed and kept away from good introjected objects. Within his internal world these super-ego objects threaten him for the crime of destroying the object, spying on him. But in the external world they can monitor and spy on Mark and Pete. The ‘dwarfs’ may be revolting, rancid and hideous. But they work for Len; they are his allies, his comrades, and collaborators. They are in league with their mentally crippled benefactor and have a specific function and purpose which he understands all too well. This is borne out by the role that Len suggests the dwarfs have undertaken. They have been recruited by Len and their job is to watch Mark and Pete.

Len: I've called them [the dwarfs] in to keep a close eye on you two, you see. They're going to keep a very close eye on you. So am I. We're waiting for you to show your hand. We're all going to keep a very close eye on you two. Me and the dwarfs.<sup>32</sup>

Now not only can the super-ego object be felt to be a part of external reality and not within him, the object can then become an ally in his fight against Mark and Pete. Furthermore, the process of overcoming the object reinforces a state of manic, narcissistic, controlling triumphalism, which must be maintained at the cost of a further depletion in his sanity – for the alternative could be a lapse back into mourning for the object which could be catastrophic.

Pete, Mark, and Len all yearn for knowledge, for truth, and for a sense of purpose and direction. Pete believes he can achieve this symbolically through his quest for a perfect idea or theory which is ruthlessly efficient. Len believes he might do the same with his obsessive calculus and philosophising. But in the end, this reach towards knowledge and some degree of spiritual fulfilment fails. An ordinary man, Len is perplexed and bewildered when he confronts the great problems of epistemology. He cannot discriminate between what is real and what is not. Pete's approach, which is to try to affect a cool sense of detachment between the what he thinks and what he feels, is also doomed to failure. In a world where knowledge is failing we are condemned to endlessly pose questions that cannot be answered and to live out our lives seeking an overall design and purpose to existence which is utterly futile. For the Absurdist, if the dwarfs symbolise anything they symbolise the encroaching blackness of nothingness and meaninglessness. At the end of the play Len is alone once again: isolated, cast adrift, cut-off from any meanings he might extrapolate from his life; barely capable of defining who he is - much less work out whether the 'self' has any substance.

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<sup>32</sup>Pinter, *A Slight*, 102

But there is hope for Len. Although he is trapped within a cycle in which his own paranoia protects him from the effects of his own destructive drives in phantasy, there are signs of a strong impulse towards some form of recovery through depressive reparation. For example, although the dwarfs may be projections of his own squalid internal world there is a creative drive behind this hallucination as we have seen. Len also shows a capacity to check his phantasies against reality, and to seek out ways of repairing and reconstituting his internal world.

Ultimately, Mark, Pete and Len all show signs of a pathological states of mind. Mark and Pete also show signs of paranoia and a need to split their external and internal worlds. But they do not recognise these cracks within themselves: unlike Len who instinctively understands that he must protect his friends from the violence of his own projective phantasies. Klein recognised in her practice that when a patient felt that his own projections were a danger to the analyst, the destructive forces of his drives would be unleashed instead on the self.

Moreover, and crucially, in his attempt to understand the nature of existence Len is beginning to realise that nothing is simple, and that one cannot easily split the world into truths and untruths. Although he struggles with his psychoses, he has at least begun to entertain the notion of ambivalence; and for Klein, this is the greatest stride towards psychic maturity one can make. It is not that he has discovered that all knowledge is futile or meaningless. Rather, it is that he has realised that all knowledge is both contingent and emergent. Like the great thinkers of the enlightenment he has embraced doubt and uncertainty; and he has grown psychically and intellectually because of this.

At the end, Len is by himself without the help of his friends as he might have feared. But he also sees an opportunity for new birth and for renewal. As he sits and contemplates the back

yard all the putrid excreta of his faecal projective attacks have gone; and in their place signs of life and of ecological balance are returning, mirroring his internal world. The green shoots of reparation are primed to grow, ready to flourish, now his psychosis is falling into a remission. The dwarfs have also gone. And, in their place Len sees, clearly, for the first time, the simple beauty of a 'shrub' – and a 'flower'.

## Chapter 5

### *The Caretaker*

#### **Synopsis and Context**

The narrative of *The Caretaker* centres on a three-way power struggle. The characters are Aston, a man in his early thirties, Davies, an old man, and Mick, Aston's younger brother. The play begins with Mick, sitting alone in a room, in a house. It is late at night. His eyes scan his surroundings. He says nothing. Suddenly he hears a commotion downstairs. He makes off and Aston, a man in his early thirties, and an old man, Davies, appear. It becomes apparent that Aston has picked Davies up and invited him back to the room after an altercation between Davies and his employer at a café.

It becomes clear that Davies is a tramp who has nowhere else to go. Aston offers him the chance to stay in the room which he gratefully accepts. Aston finds some shoes for Davies, but Davies is adamant that they do not fit. Davies tells Aston that he has been going about under an assumed name. He is known as Bernard Jenkins, but his real name is Mac Davies. Davies tells Aston that he can resolve this problem if he can get down to Sidcup in Kent to see a man who has his 'papers'. He can only do this if the weather breaks and if he can get a good pair of shoes on. The scene ends with Davies in bed while Aston sits fiddling with an electrical plug.

The following morning Aston goes out, and allows Davies to stay in the room, much to the tramp's surprise. With Aston gone, Davies is left to rummage around in the debris of the room until Mick startles him. After a brief struggle, Mick subdues Davies and the act ends on Mick's line: 'What's the game?'

Mick interrogates Davies who stutters his way through a response. Davies is confused by Mick, who presents himself as the owner of the house. Aston returns with a bag for Davies and a three-way- battle for it ensues. Mick leaves and we discover that the bag wasn't Davies' at all. Aston offers Davies the chance to stay on as the house's caretaker. Davies seems reticent about accepting the offer.

When Davies returns to the room a few days later he is again jumped by Mick, this time when he is groping about in the dark for a light. After frightening Davies out of wits, Mick tells the old man that he dreams of turning the house into a trendy flat, packed with beautiful modern conveniences and stunning finishes. Mick offers the Davies the same job of 'caretaker', seemingly undercutting Aston. He also complains to Davies about Aston, implicitly criticising his brother's poor work ethic. Thinking that he has Mick's confidence Davies makes some unflattering remarks about Aston's laziness and lack of a work ethic. Davies seems to strike a tentative deal with Mick until his new employer enquires about references. At this moment, Davies once again brings up the issue of Sidcup and his inability to access his 'papers'.

In the next scene, Davies attacks Aston after waking up. He has slept badly and blames the room for his nocturnal difficulties. Aston confesses that he spent time in a mental institution and the act ends with his long description of the brutal treatment he suffered at the hands of the doctors.

Davies and Mick discuss the flat. Davies complains bitterly about Aston, while Mick lets it slip that he intends to live in the new house with his brother, thereby excluding Davies. Aston re-enters and gives Davies another pair of shoes.

Davies and Aston talk. Davies attacks Aston and divulges his plan to do up the house, conspiring with Mick. He loses his temper with Aston and then claims that he can have his

benefactor thrown back inside the dreaded mental hospital. Aston calmly tells Davies to leave but Davies refuses. He again he brandishes his knife and thrusts it towards Aston.

Davies returns to the room with Mick. Aston is absent. As Davies continues his tirade of dissatisfaction Mick suddenly sides with Aston leaving Davies stranded. When Aston returns, the brothers share a faint smile. Davies desperately pleads with Aston to be forgiven and permitted to stay. Aston refuses to speak. Instead he gazes into the garden through the window as Davies stutters and jabbars himself into silence.

### **Analysis**

We could argue that *The Caretaker* is a theatrical meditation on brotherly love, human relationships and the power of familial bonds. Aston's offer of a job is an oblique request to be looked after by Davies. In return, Aston will 'care' for the old man: he will give him a place to sleep; he will give him clothes; he will give him money. Likewise, Mick, as Aston's closest kin, had been taking care of him. Feeling a sense of responsibility and love for his brother, he has essentially given his sibling a house to stop him slipping into the degradation of homelessness. Now, however, he feels the need to move on. Whilst he doesn't wish to reject Aston he cannot continue to support him in such a way indefinitely. Aston needs someone to take care of him and an individual who can assume that responsibility must be found. By writing the play Pinter examines this problem of the human need to be loved and to be cared for. More than this, he also examines the psychological impact on the carer. In trying to split the brothers, Davies learns to his cost that blood is thicker than water. Mick sets a test for the interloper which he fails. He betrays Aston and therefore shows himself to be someone who cannot be trusted.

But Mick is also testing his brother. To survive without Mick's constant care, he must somehow find the strength from within to expel Davies – which he does. Aston passes this

examination. He needs *a caretaker*, not a parasite like Davies. We live in a world where people will take advantage of us if we don't learn to be strong in the face of their manipulations. We have a choice. Aston, with the help of his brother, finally learns the value of exercising his strength.

Melanie Klein realised that once is in the depressive position, the child will no longer experience violent, visceral feelings towards the parental objects. Instead an all-consuming need will drive him to repair the hurt and damage he feels he has caused upon them. The child, for the first time, feels the agony of remorse.

Klein identified this unconscious need to repair objects damaged in phantasy. She illustrates her theories with an example from her case studies. The case involved a young man who was sent to Klein in some distress. He was suffering from some dreams which were disturbing. They involved his parents.

In his vision, the man's mother and father were elderly and in need of constant care and attention (at the time they weren't quite so frail and disabled). The dreamer found himself in a room with the two. They were bed-bound, but not lying side by side. The ends of their beds were joined together. The young man was struggling to keep his mother and father warm.

After some questioning, Klein concluded that the man's fears and need to protect his parents were linked to the odd positioning of the old couple's beds. Ordinarily they would have been lying adjacent. But they had been split up by someone.

Klein concluded that it was the young man himself who had 'split up' his parents. The reason he had done so was because, in his infantile imagination, he wanted to stop their intercourse. He wanted to interrupt them. However, having done so, he had then been overwhelmed by a



sense of guilt over what he'd done. This was why he was trying to keep the pair warm. He felt that his actions had damaged his parents in some way. He was fearful for them.

Later the young man described the events of the dream in more detail. At one point, he had gotten up and urinated into a basin, whilst his parents watched on: inside the basin was a cylindrical object which the young man had to take care not to urinate into. However, having finished, he noticed that the basin was over-flowing, and this upset him. He also noticed that his penis was very large; and he was deeply concerned that his father should not see it; because, if he did, he felt that the old man would feel defeated, as if he'd been crushed by his own son. However:

At the same time, he felt that by urinating he was sparing his father the trouble of getting out of bed and urinating himself. Here the patient stopped, and then said he really felt as if his parents were a part of himself.<sup>1</sup>

In Klein's analysis the patient articulates a much richer dream sequence, involving a series of imaginative connections and significations: visions of dark passageways with low burning gas-lights emerge from the murk of the dream. The theme of urination, of 'peeing on' objects persists.

Klein concludes the following: the young man was struggling with ambivalent feelings within the depressive position. He was consumed by his own oedipal jealousy and this was why he had split the parents up in his dream. His other phantasy, of urinating, is closely linked to this idea. Soiling the parents represents a form of destructive phallic power over them. At the same time, he feels a deep sense of guilt and shame over these crimes committed in phantasy. He feels that his parents are inside of him, that they are part of his own ego, and that he has damaged these objects with his own paranoid rage.

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<sup>1</sup> Hinshelwood, *Clinical*, 85

He also senses that these objects are growing older - fading and dying. His parents are dwindling into nothingness, and his feelings of sadness and anxiety over this fact are overwhelming. The tragedy of this is compounded by the terrible irony that his own power as a man, naturally superseding the patriarch, seems to be inextricably bound up in this problem. The young man is replacing his father: he is more powerful and dominant. But his fearful determination to 'put the father out' with his urine - to extinguish him so that he can no longer be in sexual union with the mother - is mixed with contrasting feelings of guilt, horror, and remorse.

The question of why the patient is suffering from melancholia can thus be understood as the outcome of his relations with these internal objects in phantasy. He feels the need to repair and restore these damaged internal objects. This feeling of the need to care - to be concerned with the objects - and a deep sadness for the fate of the objects comes to dominate his unconscious. Such is the power of these impulses the young man has withdrawn from his relations with the external world of reality and directed his energies inwards towards these reparations.

At the same time, he is still painfully torn. These feelings conflict with his other wish to prevent his mother and father from being so repaired - so restored - that they might be re-animated back into life. If they are the father might once again stand between the dreamer and his mother.

We can understand *The Caretaker* as an illustration of such anxiety. In the first instance, we have the title of the play. It is the title of the job that Davies is approached to do by both brothers. Davies is asked to 'take care' of the house. The decrepit, broken down dwelling is a material manifestation of Aston's life. He seems obsessed with repairing and mending objects. Furthermore, his desire to build a shed is important:

Davies....You building something?

Aston. I might build a shed out the back

Davies. Carpenter, eh? (He turns to the lawn-mower.) Got a lawn

Aston. Have a look.

Aston lifts the sack at the window. They look out.

Davies. Looks a bit thick.

Aston. Overgrown.

Davies. What's that, a pond?

Aston. Yes.

Davies. What you got, fish?

Aston. No, there isn't anything in there.

Pause

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

Davies. Carpentry, eh?

Aston (standing still) I like...working with my hands<sup>2</sup>

For Aston, the shed will serve a practical purpose. His goal is to do up the house and the room. Therefore, he needs a place where he can work in peace and solitude: a dwelling where he can concentrate on making household items. But the shed will also be a haven where he can repair and restore broken or damaged objects. This explains why the building it is so important to Aston: the shed is symbolic of Aston's wish to mend, fix and restore.

If he can get that shed up, then he can piece his world back together again. This is partly his driving force. He is a broken man: broken by society; broken by his mother's betrayal;

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<sup>2</sup> Harold Pinter *The Caretaker* (London: Faber and Faber, Edition Published 1991) P.17

broken by the doctors; broken by the prejudice of his colleagues who reported his behaviour to the authorities. With the shed up he can then set to the task of repairing and restructuring the room into a haven. Through his own determined efforts, if he can transform the space, maybe he can alter his fate.

But for Klein there is more to it than to say that Aston is an outsider who is hoping to repair his life by reconstituting the surroundings of the room. The desire to restore goes deeper. Here we might argue that Aston is trying to repair the broken internal object of the mother that was damaged in phantasy. The object he truly wishes to repair is inside of him, and his actions in the external world are representative manifestations of that wish.

We might posit that the root of Aston's unconscious turmoil stems from his period of incarceration in the psychiatric hospital. At the end of Act 2 Aston describes how he was abused by the doctors who used electric shock therapy on him:

Aston: They used to come round with these ...I don't know what they were...they looked like big pincers, with wires on, the wires were attached to a little machine. It was electric. They used to hold the man down, and this chief...the chief doctor, used to fit the pincers, something like earphones, he would fit them on either side of the man's skull. <sup>3</sup>

But when it was Aston's turn he resisted, using the strength that he had as a 'younger' man:

Aston: They told me to get on the bed, and I knew they had to get me on the bed because if they did it while I was standing up they might break my spine. So I stood up and then one or two of them came for me, well, I was younger then, I was much stronger than I am now, I was quite strong then, I laid one of them out and I has another one by the throat, and the suddenly this chief had these pincers on my skull and I knew he wasn't supposed to do it while I was standing up, that's why I.....anyway, he did it. <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Pinter, *The Caretaker*, 56

<sup>4</sup> Pinter, *The Caretaker*, 57

Of course, the doctors would not have had the permission to perform such a violent procedure had Aston's mother not signed a form allowing them to do so. Realizing that the doctors' powers were limited because he was a minor, Aston wrote to his mother telling her what the medical profession were planning to do to him. However, the doctors received her consent. They brandished the relevant form with her signature when he 'brought it up'.

Aston felt betrayed by his mother. He was also physically hurt because of the hospital's malpractice. He describes how the therapy left him cognitively incapacitated:

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<sup>5</sup>

It is therefore not difficult to imagine that this episode would have stimulated inside Aston a distant remembrance of a forgotten trauma buried in the unconscious: that sensation, that he was being possessed, inhabited, by two pernicious, duplicitous objects who betrayed him. Viewed in this way, we can see that the entire incident would have re-enacted a terrible phantasy from infancy. It never happened. But Aston's unconscious fears that it did. His mother conspired with his father to have Aston's penis cut off. In this transference psychodrama, the doctors, with their violent penetrating, hypodermic procedures, replace the father, as the duplicitous mother stands idly by.

Having been betrayed and persecuted by his own mother, Aston would have felt a deep sense of paranoia and rage. This rage could have been directed towards the real mother in the external world. But for Klein Aston's desire to attack the mother would have been directed at the internal object of her. As he enters the depressive position, feelings of guilt would have

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<sup>5</sup> Pinter, *The Caretaker*, 57

come to the fore. This is another reading of what Aston is trying to repair by putting the room back together and in one piece. Aston is trying to restore the idealised object of his mother smashed by his own anger and fury.

What then is Davies' role in this psychodrama? Why does Aston pick him up and care for him in the way that he does? Esslin concludes that for Mick and Aston, Davies is a symbolic surrogate for the universal father. He argues that 'the image of the sons chasing the father out of the house might also – on a different level again – be seen as a projection forward of the sons' wish to express their aggressiveness against the father figure'.<sup>6</sup>

Here I should like to offer a slight variation on this explanation. In my view, there is indeed a symbolic significance in Aston's acquisition of Davies. But I shouldn't like to emphasise Davies' expulsion so much as I would like to examine Aston's treatment of the tramp and his decision to invite him into his home in the first place.

Mick's serene meditation on the clutter of the room in Act 1, scene 1 is significant. The action of the drama is structured around the question of how these items will be eventually reworked and revitalized - transformed back into a space fit for human habitation. This is the central problem of the play. It is not simply a case of re-arranging a few 'bits' here and a few 'bobs' there: the room is damaged. It has been neglected. It must be cared for. It must be mended. Its broken pieces must be put back together. The room must receive its share of love. Thus, the space stands for something much more in the imaginations of the characters.

When Mick exits, and Aston and Davies enter, Pinter focuses on establishing the dramatic situation and relationship between the two. The play has begun with Aston having saved Davies from receiving some considerable physical punishment. From what we hear from Davies the 'fight' was something of mismatch. Davies would have no doubt been knocked

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<sup>6</sup> Esslin, *Pinter*, 98

out by the 'large scotch git' with the quick temper. However, Aston was probably in danger as well. Thus, from the outset, we learn that Aston has taken steps to put his own body in harm's way to rescue another person from strife. His need to keep this stranger from harm - to stop him being damaged - could be construed as nothing more than a human act of kindness. However, the fact that Aston did protect Davies is perhaps more significant.

Upon entering the room, Aston immediately roots out a chair for his guest, amidst the debris of his home. Having saved Davies from physical danger, his first thought is to ensure that the old man's legs are rested, cared for - restored somehow. Davies, recognising the importance of this simple gesture, responds enthusiastically.

Aston: Sit down

Davies. Thanks. (Looking Around) Uuh....

Aston. Just a minute

Aston looks for around for a chair, sees one lying on its side by the rolled up carpet at the fireplace, and starts to get it out.

Davies: Sit down? Huh...I haven't had a good sit down...I haven't had a proper sit down...well, I couldn't tell you...<sup>7</sup>

Davies is in a mood after his sacking. He rails against his former employer, whom he feels was 'doing him out of a seat' and 'treating him like dirt'. Aston listens. He then attempts to soothe the tramp with the offer of some rolling tobacco. Davies gratefully accepts:

Aston: You want to roll yourself one of these?

Davies: (turning) What? No, no, I never smoke a cigarette (Pause. he comes forward.) I'll tell you what though. I'll have a bit of that tobacco there for my pipe, if you like.

Aston: (Handing him the tin) Yes. Go on. Take some out of that. <sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Pinter, *The Caretaker*, 7

<sup>8</sup> Pinter, *The Caretaker*, 8

Here Aston builds upon his initial attempt to support Davies' legs by offering him a seat: now he gives him a recuperative smoke to help him rejuvenate. Feeling more relaxed by Aston's hospitality Davies begins to speak. In the hour before he and Aston entered the scene we learn more of why he had been sacked from his position after an argument with another member of staff. The problem, he protests, was that this colleague, who was not superior to him, had tried to give him orders.

When instructed to 'take out the bucket' of food ends Davies had rebelled and been fired on the spot. But whilst Davies rants, Aston moves stage right to get an electric toaster. This small action is important. Having taken the first steps towards putting Davies back together and into one piece, he now turns his attention towards his mending of this domestic appliance. Aston's unconscious need to reconstruct and mend Davies is mirrored in his desire to fix the plug to the toaster. Furthermore, when Davies complains about the fact that he left all his belongings at the cafe, again Aston immediately moves without hesitation to reassure his new associate by promising to 'pop down there sometime' to pick them up.

As the scene develops, it becomes clear that this is hardly the first time that Davies has been involved in such a predicament. As a hobo, he moves from place to place, living from hand to mouth, and chancing his arm where he can to survive. But for a man who exists on society's fringes, or perhaps because he is an outsider, he is concerned to immediately challenge anyone whom he perceives might be trying to undermine his social status or treat him with contempt. His description of how he tried to blag a free pair of shoes from a monastery in Luton, after a tip off from a friend in Shepherd's Bush, exemplifies the point perfectly: for Davies, the world is a persecutory, heartless, brutal place and he – despite all his good intentions and efforts - is an innocent victim of it. He does not see that his own attitudes might be part of the problem though. He thinks nothing of expressing racist opinions when he learns that Aston is living next door to some 'Indians'. This is a sinister and menacing



reiteration of his earlier complaints about the ‘blacks, Greeks and Polacks’ he worked with at the cafe. To him, the immigrants were the recipients of preferential treatment.

Aston, though, seems unperturbed by Davies’ unsavoury attitudes. Indeed, when asked by Davies directly for some shoes, he reacts by going out of his way to rummage around beneath the bed to fish out a spare pair. And even though this latest friendly assistance is rejected by Davies - who claims that the shoes produced for him “don’t fit” - Aston’s enthusiasm for looking after Davies seems undiminished. He promises to fix the problem by obtaining another pair that might satisfy the tramp’s expectations. Aston is being motivated by a need to care for someone; and Davies happens to be on hand to play the part of the lucky recipient.

Aston quietly listens to Davies as he rambles on about all the injustices he has had to endure, before making Davies an offer.

Aston: (attending to the toaster). Would...would you like to sleep here?

Davies: Here?

Aston: You can sleep here if you like.

Davies: Here? Oh, I don’t know about that.

Pause

How long for?

Aston: Till you...get yourself fixed up.

Davies: (sitting) Ay well, that...

Aston: Get yourself sorted out...

Davies: Oh, I’ll be fixed up...pretty soon now...

Pause

Where would I sleep?

Aston: Here. The other rooms would...would be no good to you

Davies: (rising, looking about). Here? Where?

Aston: (Rising, pointing upstage right) There’s a bed behind all that.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Pinter, *The Caretaker*, 16

Although this proposition seems to come out of the blue, it is in fact part of the bigger picture. Aston has presaged his coming offer by making a series of increasingly generous, altruistic gestures aimed at helping the tramp. Before long Davies enigmatically announces that he has been shifting about from pillar- to- post under an 'assumed name': the world knows him as 'Bernard Jenkins', but his name is in fact 'Mac Davies'. His goal (if he can get some 'good' shoes on) is to get down to the Kent suburb of Sidcup to see a man who has his papers. If he can get these changed so that he is, once again, 'Davies', his life will take a turn for the better - he'll be able to sort himself out. The scene concludes with Davies comfortably in bed whilst Aston sits on his mattress 'mending' the toaster plug.

At the heart of this scene is Aston's unconscious desire - or wish - to reconstruct, replenish and repair the objects he encounters in the external world. Consider the nature of the way he chooses to interrelate with the tramp. Aston plucks Davies from the certainty of a sound kicking; he is offered a seat to rest upon; a smoke to ease his anxiety; a bag-rescuing service; some shoes to support and assist his wounded feet; some cash to help him, and finally a bed where he can rest and restore his exhausted bones. Like the malfunctioning plug on the toaster, a need to fix and mend the vagrant's broken components drives Aston. His goal is to repair Davies so that he might be reordered and reanimated back into a functioning whole.

Act 1 scene 2 begins the following morning. Aston goes out, giving Davies some keys so that he might come and go as he pleases. This is another attempt to help Davies. In Aston's absence Davies begins to nosily pick- over the piles and piles of clutter in the room. As he does so he is startled by Mick who has been stalking him, watching him silently through a crack in the door. Applying his instinct for the dramatic, Pinter concludes Act 1 on this cliff hanger.

Act 2 begins seconds later with Mick standing over Davies. Aston's sibling has pounced, catching the old man completely off guard. He then pummels his victim with an avalanche of an interrogation that bamboozles Davies. Here, Mick uses his east end 'patter' - his 'jib' - as a weapon to stymie Davies. His schizoid utterances wrong foot Davies. In one moment, he seems friendly; in the next he is menacing and hostile.

This brutal –but funny - verbal inquisition only arrests when Aston suddenly returns from his outing. Suddenly, for both the audience and for Davies, there is confusion: what is the nature of the relationship between the two younger men? Upon entering the scene, Aston returns to his activity of fiddling with the plug; and as soon as the two brothers do converse, the subject of their conversation focuses on the problem of the leaking roof:

Mick: You still got that leak.

Aston. Yes

Pause.

It's coming from the roof.

Mick. From the roof, eh?

Aston. Yes.

Pause

I'll have to tar it over

Mick. You're going to tar it over?

Aston. Yes.

Mick. What?

Aston. The cracks

Pause

Mick. You'll be tarring over the cracks on the roof.

Aston. Yes

Mick. Think that'll do it

Aston. It'll do it, for the time being<sup>10</sup>

The symbolic content of this short conversation develops the first act's unconscious theme of restoration. Aston also has in his possession a bag which he claims to have retrieved for Davies from the cafe, as agreed. Now a comic three-way battle for possession of the item ensues: Mick, sensing the moment is right to confirm his dominance over Davies snatches the bag away from the old man and taunts him with it. And yet, as is so often the case in Pinter's plays, the laughter of the audience is incriminating; we know that what we are witnessing is not just an amiable 'game' that both participants are taking pleasure in playing. To deny Davies his only possessions is an act of cruelty and actual violence. Davies - half-naked, confused and in a strange place - tries to survive Mick's verbal, and now physical, onslaught.

Mick exits, leaving Aston alone again with his companion and Aston offers the bag to the tramp. But the bag does not belong to Davies. It's not his. His complaints about this echo his earlier dissatisfactions with the ill-fitting shoes that Aston gives to him and symbolises an ingrained belief that nothing in his life quite works. He does not 'fit in' anywhere. Society has rejected him because of this and thus, he has been forced, against his will, to struggle about on its margins. Blinded by his own well-rehearsed sense of self-righteous indignation, he fails to register the import of Aston giving him this new bag. Aston has troubled himself to go and pick up some 'new' clothes for his destitute roommate. It's a new bag for Davies.

Furthermore, in an understated but tender moment, Aston effectively offers Davies the opportunity of a life time. He tells the old man he can stay permanently, if he likes. He can help Aston 'do up' the house; the only stipulation is that he discharges some basic 'handyman' maintenance duties for him as a 'caretaker'.

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<sup>10</sup> Pinter, *The Caretaker*, 37

At first Davies responds with controlled enthusiasm to the offer, but he refuses to be given his own bell with the word 'caretaker' written on it. What if the authorities track him down to the house and discover that has been going under an 'assumed name? His refusal to buy into Aston's vision of his role as authentic and legitimate communicates his reticence to side with Aston and foreshadows his coming betrayal.

But Aston's attitude towards Davies has not changed. His decision to go out of his way to acquire some clothes for the old man symbolises a determined continuation of his desire established in the first act to put Davies back together and into good order. The offer of the job is very much part of that agenda. With a home, a job, some social status (he would even be entitled to his own buzzer with his job role described upon it!) Davies will no longer be damaged goods but a totally rehabilitated, functioning human being: mended, reconstructed. What we might see here, then, is the depressive, symbolic link between Aston's purchase of the wood shaping jigsaw and his acquisition of the bag filled with clothes for Davies. With the machine, he can fashion misshapen wood back into something more usable. With the clothes he can dress Davies: he can iron out his creases.

Throughout *The Caretaker* there are many instances where Aston seems overly and consistently concerned with Davies' welfare. The reason he seems to want to repair the tramp is because Davies stands in for, or symbolises, the damaged father figure; if Davies can be 'cared for' and put back together, then so can the damaged objects of his internal world.

This desire to put things back together and to repair things – to take care of things – is paralleled in the motivations of the other characters. Davies is desperate to get down to Sidcup, to get his papers in order - when the weather 'breaks' of course.

Davies: The weather's so blasted bloody awful, how can I get down to Sidcup in these shoes?

Aston: Why do you want to get down to Sidcup?

Davies: I got my papers there

Pause

Aston: What are they doing at Sidcup?

Davies: A man I know has got them. I left them with him. You see? They prove who I am.<sup>11</sup>

If he can find the man who has his papers, he can put his life back together again: he can become a whole, 'real' person again. He will recover his identity. Like his brother's need to build a shed, Mick also seems to be obsessed with building, repairing and restoring. His dream is to repair the room. But his vision is of a chic and textured 'Shangri-La' of "colours re-echoed into the walls, unglazed blue and white curtains, and bedspreads with patterns of small blue roses on white ground".

Mick: I could turn this place into a penthouse. For instance...this room. This room you could have as a kitchen. Right size, nice window, sun comes in. I'd have...I'd have real blue, copper and parchment linoleum squares. I'd have those colours re-echoed into the walls. I'd off set the kitchen units with charcoal-grey worktops. Plenty of room for cupboards for the crockery.<sup>12</sup>

### **Davies' Expulsion**

When Klein described the atavistic internal world of the infant, she theorised that it was not only the part objects of the mother, such as the breast, that are attacked in phantasy. As we have seen, the infant experiences the part objects of both parents as locked in intercourse,

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<sup>11</sup> Pinter, *The Caretaker*, 19-20

<sup>12</sup> Pinter, *The Caretaker*, 60

deep inside his phantasy. His violent oral, anal, and urethral attack on these objects destroys these 'parents'.

Therefore, if Aston's depressive guilt drives him to symbolically restore the mother, so then the object of the father must also be reclaimed and saved from his fate. In my view it is this unconscious desire that drives to the heart of Pinter's play. Aston is forced to live on the margins of society and is motivated by his guilty desire to reconstitute his parents, whom he feels have been hurt and destroyed through his own vengeful, instincts. Then - and only then - will he be at peace. The room will be repaired. All the hurt, the shame and the fear will be washed away. He will be at home once more, safe and loved in the care of both his mother and his father.

The tragedy of course is not simply that this state of eternal bliss can never be attained in the real world. (Aston will probably spend the rest of his life trapped inside his own sublimations and neurotic activities) In the end, as Freud's work suggests, 'man' is ineluctably condemned to a natural rivalry and struggle with the father, whether he be one's real progenitor, or an insidious object within the internal psychodrama of the unconscious. Ultimately, the real union, the real reparation that Aston desires is with the mother and the good, giving breast. The part object of the father's penis within the breast in phantasy, can therefore, tragically only ever pose an obstructive, castrating threat to his son. Thus, it must be destroyed in phantasy.

Therefore, Davies is expelled. He is apparently kicked out because he betrays Aston. I should like to argue that he is eliminated because that was, in fact, Aston's unconscious intention all along: to bring the father in to join into a repaired union with the mother, only to send him back out into the wilderness again. There can be no place for the father in the dyadic correspondence between the son and the breast. Before the action of the play even begins, the

outcome for those involved in it has been decided. Aston will throw out the father. It is merely a case of how this can be justified or rationalized. In the event Davies makes it that much easier with his vile conduct. Furthermore, this is not the only reason why Aston's attempt to reconstruct the parental objects is doomed to failure. If the mother and father were reanimated in phantasy, the re-creation of the 'good' parents might also bring with it the possibility of the reanimation of the 'bad' parents as well.

In this chapter I have set out to make the case for a psychoanalytic revision of *The Caretaker*. I have suggested that if we wish to understand the motivations and actions of the characters – particularly in the person of Aston – we can do so by applying Melanie Klein's theory of reparation within the depressive position. However, I would like to conclude this analysis with a caveat.

### ***The Caretaker: A Materialist View on Character***

Even if we do elect to explore *The Caretaker* - or any other play for that matter, by utilizing a psychoanalytic vocabulary - in the process of doing so we cannot ignore or neglect to register the social, economic and material forces that also impact on the character's behaviour and sense of being. These characters are, ultimately, living in mid-20th century, post-colonial Europe: an historical moment defined by a material mode of production. This is another crucial facet of the play. Pinter's characters are social beings in a material, corporeal world. Davies is offered a home by Aston. But that home is not in any sense 'free'. The old man's basic, desperate human need for warmth and sustenance will not be met unless he sells his labour at a price fixed and determined by Aston. He is offered a job, after all.

Similarly, Mick's objective in transforming the house is on one important level at least, a bourgeois attempt to add value to his property and produce profits and wealth; and it is Davies who will be required, as a caretaker (or as an interior designer) to work to line Mick's



pockets. For, let it be stated clearly: Pinter's dramatis personae are forced to live in a world where their blood, sweat and tears, indeed their very sinews, constitute a wealth-generating resource for those with economic and social power. Whichever language of analysis is employed to read the play it is tendentious to alienate a subject's unconscious from external social forces.

When we understand this, we might get a clearer sense of the play. Pinter has written a realistic play with a very detailed and accurate depiction of real people, in a real situation, faced with real decisions and choices that must be made. When the rain falls upon Davies' head it is cold and wet: it does disturb him. Davies and the others must live in this real world, there is no other alternative. His anger at Aston's complaints over his snoring and nocturnal muttering and jabbering emphasises this point:

Davies: I'm an old man, what do you expect me to do, stop breathing?

Aston: You're making noises.

Davies: What do you expect me to do, stop breathing?

Aston goes to the bed, and puts on your trousers.

Aston: I'll get a bit of air

Davies: What do you expect me to do? I tell you, mate, I'm not surprised they took you in. Waking an old man up in the middle of the night, you must be off your nut! Giving me bad dreams, whose responsible then, for giving me bad dreams? If you wouldn't keep mucking me about I wouldn't make no noises! How do you expect me to sleep peaceful when you keep poking me all the time? What do you want me to do, stop breathing?<sup>13</sup>

Whatever his dreams may, these are people of flesh and blood. One of the reasons why Davies begs to be kept on is because he understands that being sent back out onto the streets will mean physical suffering. Mick also understands that to survive he has no choice but to keep moving, he must keep selling, and he cannot afford to stand still:

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<sup>13</sup>Pinter, *The Caretaker*, 66

Mick...anyone would think this house was all I got to worry about. I got plenty of other things I can worry about. I've got things. I've got plenty of other interests. I've got my own business to build up haven't I? I got to think about expanding...in all directions. I don't stand still. I'm moving about all the time. I'm moving...all the time. I've got to think about the future. I'm not worried about this house. I'm not interested. My brother can worry about it. He can do it up, he can decorate it, he can do what he likes with it. I'm not bothered. I thought I was doing him a favour, letting him live here. He's got his own ideas. Let him have them. I'm going to chuck it in.<sup>14</sup>

In Act one, Aston's offer of a place to stay to Davies is a moment of human warmth and connectivity that cuts through the dusty, disordered chaos of the room. However, Pinter shows us that the success of this cooperative venture will ultimately depend on whether the two will be able to work together to negotiate the many physical, corporeal obstacles that stand in their way. Therefore, Pinter is careful to train the audience's attention on Davies and Aston's attempt to work together to disentangle Davies' bed from the clutter of the room:

Davies: This is the bed here, is it?

Aston: (moving to the bed) We'll get rid of that. The ladder'll fit under the bed. (They put the ladder under the bed.

Davies: (Indicating the sink) What about this?

Aston: I think that'll fit under the here as well.

Davies: I'll give you a hand. (They lift it) It's a ton weight, en't it?

Aston: Under here.

Davies: This in use at all, then?

Aston: No. I'll be getting rid of it. Here.<sup>15</sup>

To some extent, recognising this fact can also help us appreciate the formal language of the play. The structure of this text is much tighter, more economic than say, *The Birthday Party*. A significant proportion of that text can be read as a dream. It could be taking place inside

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<sup>14</sup> Pinter, *The Caretaker*, 74

<sup>15</sup> Pinter, *The Caretaker*, 18

Stanley's skull. With *The Caretaker*, however, Pinter directs his attention away from the interior fantasies, daydreams and nightmares of the individual towards the outside, material world of hard, objective social relations and exchanges between people.

However, this recognition and acceptance that the characters in *The Caretaker* are, to a very significant degree, shaped by social and material forces seems to supplant the psychoanalytic explanation for character motivation that I have explicated. It would appear to be the case that we have two very different methods and stratagems for understanding why the characters behave in the ways that they do, locked in antagonism, confrontation, and competition. Which interpretation is the most convincing? Are the characters driven by the vicissitudes of the unconscious, or are they essentially socially conditioned, material beings responding to the external, competitive pressures of their environments?

The answer is perhaps that they are both. Freud and Klein's long-term wish for psychoanalysis was always that it should be able to explain as 'neurosis' all sorts of human intellectual, social, cultural, economic, and historical phenomena and artefacts. The stereotyped, culturally ingrained image of the depressed patient supine on a couch being encouraged to expurgate their blocked psyches, captures only the therapeutic, curative aspect of this expansive field of study. Freud understood the grand implications of his idea of the unconscious for the revisionist study of the economy, society and culture - as did his followers The Frankfurt School. For the post-Freudian generation of intellectuals inspired to attempt to synthesize psychoanalysis and Marx, the aggression within the unconscious was a force that drove the violence of imperialism, capitalism and war.

How, then, can we marry our vision of the characters in *The Caretaker* as being driven by their unconscious wishes to repair 'damaged internal objects', with our acknowledgment and understanding of them as social, historical beings?

One way of doing so is to see that, whatever the characters' unconscious desires or wishes may be, they can only be fulfilled or expressed from within the power formations of modern European capitalism. Aston may be unconsciously seeking to reconstruct his internal world but he can only do that by offering Davies a job - where the old man will be forced to sell his alienated labour for the basic requirements of material life. It is telling that Aston described the rooms that cannot be used as 'out of commission' instead of unusable.

The unconscious desire to repair the damaged object may drive Mick but his way of sublimating it is to, again, offer Davies work and then to seek to profit from his efforts. As Baker and Tabanich explain:

Since the flat is not yet worth anything, Mick uses his own dream to bludgeon and humiliate Davies. Mick comes to like the bum only after Davies has demonstrated via his own aggressiveness that he can fit in with Mick's property-owning dreams, becomes a member of that class that conserves property. Mick approves of Davies when he sees his knife brandished – Davies has proved himself a worthy inhabitant of the jungle; Aston disapproves of Davies for the same reason. In smashing Aston's Buddha, Mick demonstrates that he represents the raw commercial principle, while Aston remains the harmless dreamer. Davies stands close to the semi-fascist mock than to Aston: he understands brutality more than he can tolerate charity.<sup>16</sup>

Davies' unconscious wish, which again seems to be to repair, reconstruct and restore, is articulated through his longing to get down to Sidcup to recover his papers. If he can do so, he will be a legitimate member of society - an individual, tax-paying unit of economic wealth-producing resource. Indeed, Davies is obsessed with his social status, or lack of it. His frustration and anger over his treatment at the café leads to the fight from which Aston saves him.

Davies' life consists of an attempt -foredoomed to failure – to convince society that he exists and occupies a legitimate position on the social ladder. Davies obsessive concern with this incident in all triviality reveals how large how large it is for him; the

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<sup>16</sup> Pinter, *The Caretaker*, 81

closer to bottom, the larger each speck of dirt looks. A bottom-class Prufrock, he impotently measures out his life in life in slop buckets and cigarette butts.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, when Aston corners Davies on the verge of being thrown out of the room he tries to assert his rights by brandishing his knife and threatening violence, reduced to the status of a cornered animal. However, ‘nails and claws’ will not do in the legalistic society of London, governed by power and property laws.’

Aston also sees that Davies’ failure to fit in and fulfil his economic function and purpose is unforgivable and can only result in his elimination:

Aston: I...I think it’s about time you found somewhere else. I don’t think we’re hitting it off.

Davies: Find somewhere else?

Aston: Yes

Davies: Me? You’re talking to me! Not me, man! You!

Aston: I live here. You don’t

Davies: Don’t I? Well, I live here. I been offered a job here.

Aston: Yes...well, I don’t think you’re really suitable.<sup>18</sup>

Baker and Tabachnick argue that:

Davies, as respecting of property laws as any Hackney bourgeois -as his battle with Mick over his bag indicates, as well as his desire to know who owns the room expressed immediately upon entering it – finds this the final argument against his presence.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Baker and Tabanich, *Harold*, 72-73

<sup>18</sup> Baker and Tabanich, *Harold*, 76

<sup>19</sup> Pinter, *The Caretaker*, 68

Because ultimately:

Davies wants to fix himself in a world of shifting and ambiguous identities in which people are judged by property such as Mick's apartment and Aston's shed, and of course he does not succeed.<sup>20</sup>

In short Pinter demonstrates with this play that our repressed wishes can only ever be manifested through our responses to the economic, social and material conditions of our environment.

Furthermore, this idea of restoration can also be applied to western culture in 1960. Pinter wrote the play on the cusp of a revolutionary era. Like the characters, society was seeking a new way to rebuild itself in the wake of the Second World War: essentially through an exploration of radical politics. Indeed, Pinter's next great play delves deeper into these tensions between the old and the new, the past and the present – and between phantasy and reality.

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<sup>20</sup> Baker and Tabanich, *Harold*, 77

## Chapter 6

### *The Homecoming*

#### **Synopsis and Context**

*The Homecoming* is set in North East London, where Pinter was born and where he spent his formative years. An old man, Max, lives with his despised brother, Sam, and two of his sons: the sharp witted, acerbic Lenny and the dull, brute boxer Joey. An air of rancour and hatred fills the house. Soon Teddy, Max's third son, returns home in the middle of the night with his wife Ruth. We learn that Teddy is a professor at a University in the United States and that he has dropped by because he is visiting Europe with his wife.

Without any delay, Lenny embarks on an attempt to steal his brother's wife from under Teddy's nose, and he succeeds when Ruth begins kissing and fondling both Lenny and Joey after a series of strange conversational encounters. In these dialogues as much is intimated in the subtext as is said directly by the characters. Max is highly aroused by the prospect of Ruth staying on with the family, providing sexual gratification for all. But the cost of having to keep Ruth in the house disturbs him.

He and Lenny then hit upon an idea. Ruth will earn her stay by working for the family 'business': she will work as a prostitute in the West End, taking on clients for 'tricks'. Thus, she would be employed in selling her body, much like Max's dead wife and the boys' mother, Jesse, used to do. Ruth accepts the seedy offer – but she is hardly an innocent pawn ensnared by the family. She confidently negotiates her terms and conditions, trying to bleed as much out of the men as she can. The play ends with Teddy gone, and with the men crowded around his statuesque wife, pleading for her body.

Throughout *The Homecoming* we can observe many instances of Kleinian unconscious mechanisms in the paranoid-schizoid position. Max seems incapable of progressing beyond a crude tendency to split the object into polarised aspects. In Act 1 Lenny and Teddy are talking moments after Teddy has ‘introduced’ his wife to his father, uncle, and brothers. Max’s reaction to the re-appearance of his son is odd and contradictory. At first, he seems infuriated by their presence, and his snarling attack on Ruth is violently misogynistic and brutal. He accuses her of being a ‘filthy scrubber’ and a ‘whore’ and a ‘disease’, even though he has apparently never met her before in his life. Then, he seems to change tack completely, referring to his daughter in law as ‘lovely’ and as a ‘number one cook’

Max also splits the object of his dead wife. In Act 1 he describes her as possessing a ‘rotten stinking face’. Later, in Act 2, he speaks of the deceased Jessie in glowing terms.

Max: Well, it’ a long time since we were all together, eh? If only your mother was alive. Eh, what do you say, Sam? What would Jessie say if she was alive? Sitting here with here with three grown sons. Three fine grown up lads. And a lovely daughter-in-law. The only shame is her grandchildren aren’t here. She’d have petted them and cooed over them, wouldn’t she, Sam? She’d have fussed over them and played with them, told them stories, tickled them – I tell you she’d have been hysterical.<sup>1</sup>

His exultations of Jessie’s human qualities escalate when he proudly boasts of her salt of the earth character.

I’m telling you. Every single bit of the moral code they live by – was taught to them by their mother. And she had a heart to go with it. What a heart. Eh, Sam? Listen, what’s the use of beating around the bush? That woman was the backbone to this family...<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Pinter: *Plays 3* (London: Faber and Faber 1991) P. 53

<sup>2</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 54



However, seconds later he turns on Jessie again:

Two families! My mother was bedridden, my brothers were all invalids. I had to earn money for the leading psychiatrists. I had to read books! I had to study the disease so that I could cope with an emergency at every stage. A crippled family, three bastard sons, a slut bitch of a wife.<sup>3</sup>

Max could be seen to be operating from within the paranoid-schizoid position for much of the time, splitting the object in his external and internal worlds. However, to understand the play in more depth we ought to move beyond the mere registration of Kleinian psychoanalytic phenomena in the characters. To understand the characters and the play in more depth we should attempt to chart and detail a synthesis of text and theory that excavates the unconscious anxieties of the characters.

*Why does Ruth accept the offer of the family to stay and work for them as a prostitute?*

Why does Ruth turn her back on her two young boys and take up as a prostitute under the auspices of the male brood? We can understand why Ruth decides to abandon her husband by analysing the triangular interaction between Lenny, Ruth, and Teddy.

It is the morning. A few hours earlier Ruth and Teddy had slipped into the family abode and are now confronting Max, Joey, and Lenny. Teddy wastes no time in extolling the virtues of his 'wonderful' life as a professor in America. He is deliberately careful to include Ruth in his eulogising, attempting to impress upon the family the notion that his wife is happy, engaged and perfectly at ease with her life as a suburban housewife:

Teddy: She's a great help to me over there. She's a wonderful wife and mother. She's a very popular woman. She's got lots of friends. It's a great life, at the

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<sup>3</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 55

University...you know...It's a very good life. We've got a lovely house....we've got all...we've got everything we want. It's a very stimulating environment.

Pause

My department...is highly successful.<sup>4</sup>

But it is Lenny who decides to hijack the conversation in- an- attempt to emasculate his brother in front of Ruth. His chosen strategy is to dismantle Teddy by engaging in a philosophical discourse with his sibling: exposing the academic's apparent intelligence as a facade, a sham, a mask of social status:

Lenny: Well, I want to ask you something. Do you detect a certain logical incoherence in the central affirmations of Christian theism?

Teddy: That question doesn't fall within my province

Lenny: Well, look at it this way...you don't mind my asking you some questions, do you?

Teddy: If they're within my province

Lenny: Well, look at this way. How can the unknown merit reverence? In other words, how can you revere that of which you are ignorant? At the same time, it would be ridiculous to propose that what we know merits reverence. What we know merits any one of a number of things, but it stands to reason reverence isn't one of them. In other words, apart from the known and the unknown, what else is there?

Pause

Teddy: I'm afraid I'm the wrong person to ask.<sup>5</sup>

Here, Lenny exhibits a serpent like talent for the subtle art of power play in two ways. Firstly he forcefully pushes Teddy towards a discussion of 'theological ontology', a subject that he seems to know falls outside of Teddy's 'province'. Secondly, he demonstrates a highly perceptive appreciation of the characteristic principles of academic philosophy. Crucially, he

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<sup>4</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 58

<sup>5</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 60

seizes upon the fact that to embrace philosophy as a profession is to embrace uncertainty as a way of life – and he seeks to turn Teddy’s most valued possession, his intellectual humility, against him. His references to the difficulties of epistemology – exemplified by the age old problem of the ‘table’s existence<sup>6</sup> is more than a parody of an intellectual discussion that might be had between two dons in a common room. It is a Socratic manoeuvre designed to unpick Teddy and neuter him in front of his spouse. Ultimately Lenny’s message to Ruth is clear: this man, my brother, is a fake, a phoney, a charlatan who plays with words to legitimate his existence. Look closely and you will see there is nothing behind it all, nothing but hot air, bluff and conceit.

Ruth - whose antennae are finely tuned to the barbed interlocutions of the brothers - suddenly senses that the moment has come for her to decisively intervene and make her choice. She chooses Lenny and the family, and she does so with this subtle attack on her husband’s professional life.

Ruth: Don’t be too sure though. You’ve forgotten something. Look at me. I...move my leg. That’s all it is. But I wear...underwear...which moves with me...it...captures your attention. Perhaps you misinterpret. The action is simple. It’s a leg...moving. My lips move. Why don’t you restrict...your observations to that? Perhaps the fact that they move is more significant... than the words which come through them. You must bear that...possibility...in mind.<sup>7</sup>

What Ruth is saying here is simple, but catastrophic for Teddy. For Ruth, the question of what something is can only exist outside the province of metaphysics. For her it is pointless to argue about what something is because the only thing that we can be indubitably certain of is our free will to choose how we might employ it. Thus, what something is can only be defined by its function, its use in the material, corporeal world. For Ruth, philosophy is a

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<sup>6</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 60

<sup>7</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 61

banal and entirely pointless joust of empty thrust and meaningless parry. To illustrate her point, she takes herself as the object of her example, and she does so for a very specific reason. She has a function, a use: and that function is partly sexual and wholly concrete. She operates as a focus of male libidinal desire. This explains why she mentions her underwear.

Here, by drawing the combatants' attention to one of her possible functions Ruth is implicitly rejecting everything that Teddy's stands for. She tells us that the fact that her lips 'move' is more important than what comes out of them. And yet, crucially, Teddy's life and identity is bound up in what comes out of his lips in lectures. His job is to question and critique, wrestling with philosophical speculations pertaining to epistemology, metaphysics and aesthetics.

Ruth sees that this is not important to her. She yearns for a world that is free of such intellectual chatter, posturing and practised obfuscation. A world where things are the way they are because they are. This is a 'warts and all' world of brute, concrete truths, of animalistic facts rather than theories and ideas. It is the world of Teddy's kin, but it is not Teddy's world. She cuts Teddy off, their shared life together, and everything that he is with one calm speech. Therefore, it is no coincidence that she follows up her intervention with a brief mediation on her surroundings; she notes that she was born nearby, and her comments about the barren American landscape with its 'rocks'<sup>8</sup> and 'sand' and 'insects',<sup>9</sup> pointedly dislodges Teddy's descriptions of a life on campus as 'clean', 'great', 'lovely', 'good', and 'stimulating'.<sup>10</sup> Ruth connects with the world through her sensation of it. Her rejection of Teddy is encapsulated in her cold indifference to his request for help with his lectures.

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<sup>8</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 61

<sup>9</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 61

<sup>10</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 58

In this section, then, we can see Ruth turning her back on her husband. She does so because she holds Teddy's beliefs in contempt, and because she needs to live in the 'real' world. But, she does not take her decision impulsively. An analysis of her first encounter with Lenny in Act one will help us to understand how and why she takes the decision in greater detail. It will also help us explore some possible Kleinian explanations for the play's peculiar imagery and dialogue.

*What is the driving unconscious desire in the play?*

Lenny's first encounter with Ruth in Act 1 contains the seeds of a later outburst about the circumstances of his conception. With Teddy in bed, Lenny seizes upon his chance to 'work' Ruth just moments after the married couple's return. After a few practiced pleasantries, he attempts to provoke Ruth with this strange speech:

Lenny: Eh, listen I wonder if you can advise me. I've been having a rough time with this clock. The tick's been keeping me up. The trouble is I'm not all that convinced it was the clock. I mean there are lots of things which tick in the night, don't you find that? All sorts of objects that, which, in the day, you wouldn't call anything but commonplace. They're as quiet as mice during the day time. So...all things being equal...this question of me saying it was the clock that woke me up, well, that could very easily prove something of a false hypothesis.<sup>11</sup>

Lenny's monologue masquerades as a polite attempt to stimulate a conversation; however, it is anything but. The 'ticking clock' that he claims is disturbing his sleep is in fact Ruth. Her decision not to accompany her husband to the marital bed arouses Lenny from his nocturnal slumbers. Having sniffed out an opportunity to strike at his despised brother, he does not waste any time.

We should note here the sexually charged and latent symbolic content of this short monologue. Lenny equates Ruth with the clock, and, in doing so, his projection endows his

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<sup>11</sup> Pinter, *Plays* 3,36

brother's wife with its qualities. She is a 'bell' active in the dark of the night. She is restlessly 'ticking', pregnant with frustration and ambition, attracting male attentions, ready to 'go off' with a shrill alarm. Furthermore, his apparently playful self-admonition over his 'false hypothesis' is a sly, mocking reference to intellectual pursuits. It foreshadows his later attack on Teddy in Act 2.

Lenny seizes upon his chance to undermine Teddy seconds after meeting Ruth. He also stakes his claim for the woman and opens the bidding with one apparently innocuous speech. But it is the subtle stratagems that he deploys that demands our attention - and Ruth's. By equating Ruth with the alarm clock, he kicks the game off by specifying the rules: his rules. Lenny will proposition Ruth with a series of roles or personas that she might adopt to fulfil his needs. Her task will be to accept or reject these projections based on their fit and suitability. His opening gambit casts her as a time bomb, a machine shuddering with unrealized energy, desire and potential.

However, an alarm clock is more than a simple mechanism for indicating the time. It is a contraption that violently wakes one up for a day of toil at work. It symbolises a form of economic bondage which is virtually inescapable. And, indeed, Lenny's relationship with Ruth will be inextricably tied up in capitalist economic structures. Ruth will work for Lenny and the family, but Lenny will also be forced to work for her if the deal is to hold. It is a world of phantasies made flesh through a necessity to work, labour and profit. For Lenny Ruth symbolises the alarm clock. His projection endows her with its qualities. In his next speech, he will draw Ruth's attention towards his sexual power and prowess.

Soon Lenny enquires about Ruth and Teddy's movements in Europe. Venice is synonymous with romance, but it is also infamous for its association with prostitution. Indeed, tellingly,

Lenny makes no reference to opera or gondolas that glide through tight waterways. Instead

Lenny says this:

Lenny: Not dear old Venice? Eh? That's funny. You know, I've always had a feeling that if I'd been a soldier in the last war –say in the Italian campaign – I'd have probably found myself in Venice. I've always has that feeling. The trouble was I was too young to serve, you see. I was only a child, I was too small, otherwise I've got a pretty shrewd idea I'd probably have gone through Venice. Yes, I'd almost certainly have gone through it with my battalion. Do you mind if I hold your hand?<sup>12</sup>

We should note here the aggressive phallogocentrism of this short speech. Lenny would have 'gone through' Venice with his 'battalion'; and the sexual violence of this imagery works on a range of poetic levels. Let us consider in the first instance his oblique reference to Teddy and Ruth's vacation. Venice is a place for lovers, but for Lenny it is a place he associates with his cruel fantasies of war, of brutality and of conquest. He would have 'gone through' Venice. Soon he will 'go through' Teddy and Ruth's marriage, destroying it with his 'battalion': and that battalion that he refers to is the family. The war - Lenny's war - on his sleeping, dozy, (dozing) brother has begun; the 'campaign' to usurp Teddy is now underway.

Furthermore, Lenny's reference to an army at war anticipates the plot he will hatch to set Ruth up as a prostitute. A sex starved group of fighting men will often partake in sexual debauchery with local prostitutes as they move through a conquered municipality; more than this, in times of war, women will often be raped by the scavenging victors. This is the very scenario that Lenny envisages. He will conquer Ruth and establish her as a source of sensual desire, fantasy and sexual gratification.

So, within the first few moments of their very first meeting a nascent pattern suggestive of a psychic relationship between Lenny and Ruth is emergent. In his first speech Lenny projects onto Ruth a role as a frustrated sexual being, a ticking clock that arouses his attentions. In the

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<sup>12</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 38

second he seeks to specify the terms and parameters of any relationship that the two might share. He will conquer the object, Ruth: he will control her, he will use her sexually; and she will make money.

But on a deeper, more primitive psychotic level, Lenny's speech demonstrates his tendency towards a violent phantasy of matricide and patricide. Although he never uses the words directly he leaves Ruth in no doubt as to what he means. An advancing, pillaging army will perform horrors upon its victims with a phallic rifle and a thrusting bayonet. Here, obliquely, Lenny equates the use of a rifle with a stabbing implement with his aroused penis. Lenny will 'go through' Ruth with his member. He will subjugate her, destroy her: he will eviscerate her. He will also 'go through' Teddy in doing this. He will destroy them, their love, their sex, their coitus.

Lenny's speech indicates a tendency to fracture objects and his own ego into part-objects: into sexual body parts. The intimations in his utterances are nevertheless clear. Lenny 'is' a penis, a gun, a blade, a bomb, a penetrating weapon of annihilation and destruction. In this primitive phantasy, Lenny imagines himself destroying the combined parent figure, the mother with penis.

Immediately after this speech, Lenny makes a pass at Ruth asking her if he might 'hold her hand'. When Ruth asks her brother in law why she might afford him such an unusual physical intimacy, Lenny embarks on two long speeches.

One night, not too long ago, one night down by the docks, I was standing alone under the arch, watching all the men jibbing the boom, out in the harbour, and playing about with a yardarm, when a certain lady came up to me and made a certain proposal. This lady had been searching for me for days. She'd lost track of my whereabouts. However, the fact that she eventually caught up with me, and when she eventually caught up with me she made me this certain proposal. Well, this proposal wasn't entirely out of order and normally I would have subscribed to it. I mean I would have



subscribed to it in the normal course of events. The only trouble was she was falling apart with the pox. So I turned it down.<sup>13</sup>

The logical explanation for why the prostitute wants to speak with Lenny is to enquire about whether he might be able to take her on, to pimp her. To win his ‘protection’, she offers him a sexual encounter so that he might road test the quality of the ‘goods’ on offer. But Lenny refuses to engage in sex, claiming that the woman was suffering from a venereal disease. We cannot be sure whether this happened or not, but we can make certain observations about Lenny’s phantasies.

We should note here Lenny’s description of the woman as being diseased, as ‘falling apart with the pox’. This indicates a paranoid-schizoid phantasy of malignant objects inside other objects and can be understood as a symbolic regression back to baby Lenny’s first encounters with his phantasy of the bad penis inside the mother. Thus, Lenny’s conscious desire to destroy the woman works through an unconscious paranoid phantasy that women are filled up with objects that can get inside you – i.e. the pox virus, the ‘bad’ penis filled with one’s own aggressive drives and death instinct – and that can destroy you.

The setting for Lenny’s speech is also important. He constructs a nautical vista, a glistening panorama of boats, jibs and yardarms that gently undulate on the waves. This setting is not incidental but critical. It symbolises Klein’s ‘primal scene’: the moment when the child is conceived through sexual intercourse. A Kleinian analysis might be this: The men in the harbour with their booms and yardarms represent the father’s good penis moving and bobbing up and down in the mother. The boats also equate to the mother’s body (boats are always referred to as ‘she’) although the image of these boats moving in water that gently laps at the shore, also stands in for the amniotic fluid in the mother’s womb, the water of life,

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<sup>13</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 38

as well as the soft walls of her vagina, anus, and mouth. It is also significant that Lenny is alone under the arches. It is possible that in his phantasy he was alone at the entrance to his mother's vagina, 'locked out' of the intercourse between his progenitors.

Lenny's speech offers us an insight into the layers of difficulty, complexity, contradiction, and anxiety that exists in his psyche. However, for the Kleinian, what does emerge from such an apparently random speech is a coherent unconscious narrative that unthreads the vicissitudes of his unconscious. The speech is more than the expression of extreme violence, delivered in a casual, 'menacing' way. Lenny imagines himself as being locked out of the primal scene that produced him and that exists as separate to him and independent of him. His vision is of his being alone under the arches. The penis inside the mother is a bad object, an object that is consuming the good mother/breast and pushing Lenny's penis out. The result is a paranoid phantasy that the father's penis inside the mother is a malicious, nefarious object that wants to destroy the projected parts of Lenny as well as the life giving 'good mother'. The 'pox' virus is the consumptive insidious penis which he must defend himself against. This aggressive defence against the good mother/bad penis is expressed later when he describes how he gave her 'it' a 'belt in the nose and a couple of turns of the boot.' The pox in the story is the penis and it equates to his phantasy that the bad penis - the disease - has completely consumed the woman/mother.

The event Lenny describes - whether it happens to be truthful or not - is indicative of an unconscious mind locked in the paranoid schizoid position. The strong element of phantasy in Lenny is confirmed seconds after completing the speech when Ruth challenges him on his assertions:

Ruth: How did you know she was diseased?

Lenny: How did I know?

Pause

I decided she was.<sup>14</sup>

So, at first sight, Lenny's speech to Ruth appears to be a strange way of making a simple threat. But it reveals a highly complex, fluid and bizarre world of internal phantasy and anxiety; the surface of which we can only scrape. Ultimately, however, the message communicated is clear: Lenny is warning Ruth not to shut him out of any sexual relationships that she might foster – because for him being 'shut out' as he was, in his primitive, proto-oedipal phantasy – is a crime he will avenge. If he, Lenny, asks for physical intimacy with Ruth, then she must oblige. Soon afterwards Lenny launches another assault on Ruth with a longer speech:

Lenny:..I mean, I am very sensitive to atmosphere, but I tend to get desensitized, if you know what I mean, when people make unreasonable demands on me. For instance, last Christmas I decided go do a bit of snow-clearing for the Borough Council, because we had a very heavy snow over here that year in Europe. I didn't have to do this snow clearing. – I mean I wasn't financially embarrassed in any way – it just appealed to me, it appealed to something inside me. What I anticipated with a good deal of pleasure was the brisk cold bite of the air in the early morning. And I was right. I had to get my snowboots on and I had to stand on a corner, at about five thirty in the morning, to wait for the lorry to pick me up, to take me to the allotted area. Bloody freezing. Well, the lorry came, I jumped on to the tailboard, headlights on, dipped, and off we went. Got there, shovels up, fags on, and off we went, Deep in to the December snow, hours before cockcrow.<sup>15</sup>

There are several points to emphasise here. Firstly, Lenny cannot explain why he took the job in the first place, claiming that he was not 'financially embarrassed'. This suggests the power of the unconscious at work. What he does point out, however, is that he did it because it 'appealed to something inside him'. The anticipation of 'pleasure' drove him on.

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<sup>14</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 39

<sup>15</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 40

Secondly, we ought to consider the background Lenny constructs as the visual setting for his story. In his first anecdote, Lenny imagines a watery landscape that symbolises the mother's nurturing insides poisoned by bad penises; now he re-imagines her body as a crisp, virginal panorama, caressed with snow and ice, a world that he can travel 'deep into' hours before cockcrow' (the arrival of the father's bad penis). Lenny's mention of smoking here - 'fags on' - indicates oral pleasure and symbolises a phantasy of oral bliss at the mother's breast, and libidinally consuming the good penis inside her. Having set the scene for his anecdote, Lenny shifts gears with these words:

..Well, that morning, while I was having my mid-morning cup of tea in neighbouring cafe, the shovel standing by the chair, an old lady approached me and asked if I would give her a hand with her a mangle. Her brother- in- law, she said, had left it for her, but he's left it in the wrong room, he'd left it in the front room. Well naturally, she wanted it in the back room. It was a present he'd given to her, you see, a mangle, to iron out the washing. But she'd left it in the wrong room, she'd left it in the front room, well that was a silly place to leave it, it couldn't stay there. So I took time off to give her a hand. She only lived up the road. Well, the only trouble was when I for there I couldn't move this mangle. It must have weighed about half a ton. How this brother in law got it up there in the first place I couldn't even begin to imagine. So there I was, doing a bit of shoulders on with the mangle, risking a rupture, and this little old lady standing there, waving me on, not even lifting a finger to give me a helping hand. So after a few minutes I said to her, now look here, why don't you stuff this iron mangle up your arse? Anyway, I said, they're out of date you want to get a spin drier. I had a good mind to give her a workover there and then, but I was feeling jubilant with the snow- clearing I just gave her a short-arm jab to the belly and jumped on a bus outside. Excuse me, shall I take this ashtray out of your way?<sup>16</sup>

It is important to note that Lenny is engaged in the pleasure of drinking tea, a milky substance which in the story stands in for his mother's breast milk, when the old woman disturbs him. Lenny is nourishing himself on the job. Lenny is deep in the snow -the mother's body and breast - eating -suckling warm milk- when he is inconvenienced: interrupted and removed from the good breast. This moment of being taken away from his nourishment symbolises the sense of pain he felt when being wrenched away from this 'giving' breast.

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<sup>16</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 41

When Lenny arrives at the house he is unable to summon the required strength to lift the mangle and is infuriated by the little old woman's failure to help. Rather than assist Lenny, the woman nags and seems to bemoan his attempts to make good on his promise to aid her. Here, Lenny's frustration with her represents his frustration at being taken away from his feeding at the good breast, in the 'deep snow' of the mother's body. Now the woman comes to symbolise the bad breast and Lenny's own super-ego object. The bad breast is the breast that refuses to 'give'; it persecutes, victimizes and is relentlessly critical in its resistance to providing pleasure – coercing one away from indulgences in oral delight. We can also see that Lenny emphasises his apparent lack of physical strength and this signifies an emerging lack of self-worth in relation to the woman and the overwhelming power of the introjected bad, super-ego breast.

He tells the woman to 'stuff the iron mangle up her [your] arse'. Here, we can observe clear evidence of aggressive paranoid-schizoid projection. Lenny defends himself against the power of the cajoling, nagging 'bad' breast (the woman) by projecting it back into the object, sticking it back up its own 'arse'. Indeed, the theme of anal sadism emerges earlier in this speech when Lenny notes that the old woman wanted the mangle 'in the back room'. Essentially, Lenny's sense of the woman is as less of a woman and more as a body part – an arsehole - into which objects can be inserted or stuffed. Now he can deconstruct whole threatening super-ego objects: people are reduced and split, once again, back into their genital component elements: penises, breasts, vaginas, mouths, and anuses.

Although Ruth sits and listens to Lenny throughout these yarns she is far from passive. Their dialogue builds towards a bizarre climax. When Lenny tries to take a glass of water from his husband's wife, Ruth makes him this proposal:

Ruth: Have a sip. Go on. Have a sip from my glass.

He is still

Sit on my lap and. Take a long cool sip.

She pats her lap. Pause.

She stands, moves to him with the glass

Put your head back and open your mouth.

Lenny take that glass away from me!

Ruth: Lie on the floor. Go on I'll pour it down your throat.

Lenny: What are you doing, making some kind of proposal?<sup>17</sup>

Ruth clearly understands what is being put to her and she responds in the affirmative. She takes on the persona of a dominatrix subjugating a perverted client for cash. By performing this act, the following complex transference takes place. Firstly, Ruth becomes the whore/mother penis in the story. In the first anecdote Lenny implies that the 'lady' underneath the arches offered him the chance to test the quality of her services. Now Ruth will exhibit a practical demonstration of her own talents and services, picking up where the 'pox ridden' slut left off. By accepting the projection and becoming the 'whore' in the story, Ruth also becomes Lenny's mother who was also a prostitute. She also becomes Lenny's mother through an imaginative association that takes us back to Lenny's fear of exclusion. In phantasy, Lenny was locked out of the coitus between his father and his mother, in much the same way as Lenny is presently locked out of the sexual intercourse between Ruth and Teddy.

Furthermore, by becoming Lenny's mother through this projective identification, Ruth also becomes the split, part- object of her breast. When she suggests that she might pour liquid down Lenny's throat she symbolically takes on the role of the 'good' giving breast, filling

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<sup>17</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 42

Lenny's oral cavity with liquid, allaying his fears of being destroyed by the introjected penis within the mother (in the first story) and of being wrenched from the good, giving breast, (in the second).

Lenny's unconscious anxiety could therefore be described in the following terms. His phantasy is that the mother's body contains (ed) bad objects and bad penises (the river story) and bad, persecuting, super-ego objects (woman/bad breast with the mangle) To defend himself against these objects, he phantasies the phallic urethral destruction of the combined parent-figure (his phantasy of going through Venice, going through Teddy and Ruth) However the destruction of the combined parent-figure leads to a psychotic anxiety that the good mother and good penis have been lost. He therefore needs to overcome this loss by reconstituting the mother/breast. This is the unconscious anxiety that compels Lenny and is the driving force behind his need to take possession of Ruth and transact a transference, replacing the mother destroyed in phantasy.

Furthermore, we could argue that Teddy's unconscious purpose in returning to London is to give up Ruth. By giving up Ruth, Teddy can restore the lost mother to his childhood. He may have lost his wife, but his psychic world has been repaired.

At the same time, the play articulates a deeper conundrum: the prospect of death. For the destruction of the mother's body, and her loss in phantasy brings with it the prospect of the loss of oneself, both through the biological dependence on the mother's body one has, and through the sense that those projected parts of the self that the mother contains have also been lost. However, the death drive within us pulls against this depressive need to survive. This confusion, over whether one should or should not even exist, torments Lenny. He confronts his father with these words:

Lenny: I'll tell you what, Dad, since you're in the mood for a bit of a...chat, I'll ask you a question. It's a question I've been meaning to ask you for some time. That night...you know...the night you got me...that night with mum, what was it like, eh? When I was just a glint in your eye. What was it like? What was the background to it? I mean, I want to know the real facts about my background. I mean for instance, is it a fact that you had me in mind all the time, or is it a fact that I was the last think on your mind?

Pause

I'm only asking this in the spirit of inquiry, you understand that, don't you? I'm curious. And there's lots of people of my age share that curiosity, you know that Dad? They often ruminate, sometimes singly, sometimes in groups, about the true facts of that particular night -the night they were made in the image of those two people at it. It's a question long overdue, from my point of view, but as we happen to be passing the time of day here tonight I thought I'd pop it to you.

Max: You'll drown in your own blood.

Lenny: If you prefer to answer the question in writing I've got no objection.

Max stands

I should have asked my dear mother. Why didn't I ask my dear mother? Now it's too late. She's passed over to the other side.

*Max spits at him*<sup>18</sup>

And during his philosophical encounter with Teddy, pointedly asks this question:

Lenny: But you're a philosopher. Come on, be frank. What do you make of all this business of being and not-being?<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 44-45

<sup>19</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 60



Once Ruth is in the clutches of the family, the men can begin to negotiate the terms and conditions of her lease. But the primal fear of being denied access to her body, to her sex, hangs over the brood. Joey goes upstairs with Ruth, but after several hours of foreplay, he confesses to his brother that he didn't manage to 'go all the way'. Lenny is apparently flabbergasted at Joey's lack of progress with Ruth, although his incredulity directs us towards his own fears that he could yet be shut out of the deal. Pinter concludes the play with the brothers hovering over Ruth. But it is Max, the wizened old man, who through his jabbering, stuttering speech, paradoxically expresses with clarity the very core of the anxiety that permeates right through the heart of *The Homecoming*. With Teddy gone, Max splutters these words:

Max: I'm too old, I suppose. She thinks I'm an old man.

*Pause*

I'm not such an old man.

*Pause*

(To Ruth) You think I'm too old for you?

*Pause*

Listen. You think you're just going to get that big slag all the time? You think you're just going to have him...you're just going to have him all the time? You're going to have to work! You'll have to take them on, you understand?

*Pause*

Does she realise that?

*Pause*

Lenny, do you think she understands...

He begins to stammer.

What...what....what...we're getting at? What...we've got in mind? Do you think she's got it clear?

*Pause*

You understand what I mean? Listen, I've got a funny idea she'll do the dirty on us, you want to bet? She'll use of us, I can tell you! I can smell it! You want to bet?

*Pause*

She won't...be adaptable

He begins to groan, clutches his stick and falls on his knees by the side of his chair. His body sags. The groaning stops. His body straightens. He looks at her, still kneeling.

I'm not an old man.

*Pause*

Do you hear me?

He raises his face to her

*Kiss me*<sup>20</sup>

In this chapter I have argued that *The Homecoming* is not entirely impenetrable. On the contrary, I have suggested and that we can uncover and then trace a clear, if unconscious, narrative beneath the words and actions of the characters. The unconscious structure of Pinter's play explores, in the context of his art, a fear deep in the male psyche; the terrorised persecutory phantasy that the mother has been lost through one's own destructive attacks in phantasy, and that one must repair and reconstitute this lost 'mother'. Thus, my interpretation holds that Ruth's body symbolises a site for the articulation and exploration of the infant's anxiety over the mother's body. And, although it would appear to be the case that the brothers have won, their victory is tinged with a tragedy. Their need in phantasy to orally consume the mother in a greedy, libidinal attack, also produces the shock that such cannibalisation of the mother has destroyed her. She has been lost in phantasy, and this is a loss that can never be made good. The men will be condemned to an unconscious purgatory, forever seeking to repair the whole mother.

The title Pinter uses for the play is ironic. There is nothing 'homely' about Teddy's return to London, but others have returned home by the time the curtain descends. Ruth has come back

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<sup>20</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 89-90

to her 'home', the place where she feels she belongs. Teddy also returns home: back to the University and his life in the States. The house he grew up in is no longer a place where he can feel a sense of peace and solitude : he is an outsider, a stranger in virtually every sense.

But *The Homecoming* is not just about a place, or a house, or a city. On a deeper and far more arcane level, it's a play about returning home to an imagined unification with the mother. It's about our phantasy that once, before we knew of the pain of life, of our separation and dislocation - of being other to her - we were home in the warm interiors of her body, safe from harm, insulated, cocooned, protected from the daily struggle to survive that came upon us at birth. Thus, whilst the aggression, sadism and cynicism in the play is all too vivid, Pinter's characters use such stratagems as a defence against unconscious anxiety; and, ultimately, frighteningly, we are invited to look upon the world that we inhabit with them with an uncanny sense of familiar horror - sharing their gaze of surprise, delight and alarm.

## Chapter 7

### *Memory Plays*

#### *Landscape*

*Landscape* marks as decisive departure away the style of Pinter's earlier plays. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, his work was heavily influenced by his time in repertory theatre, as well as his love of film noir. The absurdism of Kafka and Beckett also inspired his creative imagination. During this middle period, however, Pinter returned to his first love to help him craft his plays: poetry.

*Landscape* is a duologue: a lyrical exploration of time, memory and loss. A man and a woman, 'Duff' and 'Beth', share the stage. They appear to be in a relationship. In time, we come to learn that they used to work together, looking after a house for a wealthy man named 'Mr Sykes'. Duff recalls his work for the old man with pride. He also informs us that Beth was a 'first-rate assistant' who ran the house without 'panic' or fuss.

Beth speaks, but she does not respond to Duff. It soon becomes clear that she is lost in her own memories, her own private fantasies, her own nostalgia. Trapped inside a loveless relationship with Duff, and a powerless life of servitude as a mere housekeeper, she seeks her freedom in the past. Moreover, she is drawn to a powerful memory of an affair she had with a man some years ago.

Beth's memories have a liminal, dream like quality. She tells us of a hot summer's day by the sea. She describes the tactile sensation of being in the ocean which suggests a primitive regression and phantasy. It takes Beth back to a time before the trauma of her birth, in the safety and sanctuary of the 'good' mother's womb, floating softly in the amniotic fluid:

Beth: Suddenly I stood. I walked to the shore and into the water. I didn't swim. I don't swim. I let the water billow me. I rested in the water. The waves were light, delicate. They touched the back of my neck. <sup>1</sup>

Beth recalls how 'her man' slept on the sand nearby:

I walked over from the dune to the shore. My man slept in the dune. He turned over as I stood. His eyelids. Belly Button. Snoozing how lovely. <sup>2</sup>

Beneath the memory of her lover's rest is the unconscious phantasy of attachment to the 'good, loved breast. It is the object that is 'lovely'. She also discusses procreation with her lover as he lays in the sand when she asks him 'Would you like a baby? I said. Children? Babies? Of our own? Would be nice. <sup>3</sup>

The unconscious impulse of her enquiry may be the very primitive, narcissistic, proto-oedipal phantasy of being able to give the 'good' 'giving' breast/mother a 'child' of its own. By giving the breast/mother its own 'child', the baby in Beth can sustain a strong attachment to the 'good' object. As well as keeping safe 'good' parts of the self and 'good' objects through projection, producing a 'child' through giving projections means that the 'good' ego and 'good' objects can be reproduced and replicated, thereby reinforcing the sense a connection to the 'good' object, whilst ensuring the continued presence of this phantasised 'goodness'. Beth then recalls a summer day arranging flowers:

Beth: When I watered the flowers he stood, watching me, and watched me arrange them. My gravity, he said. I was so grave, attending to the flowers, I'm going to water

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<sup>1</sup> Pinter, *Plays*, 174

<sup>2</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 167

<sup>3</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 167

and arrange the flowers, I said. He followed me and watched, standing at a distance from me. When the arrangement was done.<sup>4</sup>

My Kleinian interpretation is to suggest that the unconscious impulse here is a reparative one. The flowers represent the mother's body destroyed in phantasy, attacked, its riches plundered. The act of tending to the plants symbolises the desire to 'repair' the mother. Beth also remembers the presence of her lover who watched at close quarters. He may represent the part-objects of the father. By regenerating the garden Beth is repairing not only the 'destroyed' mother's breast, but the primal scene connection between the 'good' mother's womb and the 'good' father's penis.

Beth's memories of her lover demonstrate a strong need for a sensuous attachment phantasy to a 'good' loved object. Child psychology now recognises the importance of skin-to-skin contact between mother and baby soon after birth. Indeed, Beth remembers how her lover 'touched the back of my neck. His fingers, lightly, touching, lightly, touching, the back, of my neck.'<sup>5</sup>

Beth is a free spirit trapped within a prison-like society that makes unbearable demands on her. She is a passionate, artistic soul, who is rooted in her connection to nature, but chained to her domestic responsibilities. Exhausted by the daily grind of her chores, her way out is to regress into phantasy. From a Freudian perspective, we could argue that Beth retreats to the secretive safety of the 'oceanic' experience of infancy: that blissful time before the child senses that there is a division between its self and the mother. But Melanie Klein critiques this conception. From the very beginning life is a dreadful struggle, a trial by fire and torture

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<sup>4</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 170-171

<sup>5</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 171

in which the baby survives through phantasies of massive projection and introjection. Beth's treasured memories are simply phantasies.

If Beth represents the creative impulse in human nature, Duff seems to symbolise the force of reason and logic. Unlike Beth, he views the world in a characteristically masculine way: applying narrow reason and empirical logic rather than intuition or feeling. He is insensitive to the needs of the artistic, romantic Beth. With Duff, Pinter offers us the very image of a patriarchal dinosaur, who seems to believe life to constitute nothing more than a set of tasks than need to be completed. At the same time, his bluff and misogynistic cant is symptomatic of a society that requires of him the repression of his own creative impulses and urges. Indeed, his precise description of how to brew beer not only exemplifies his prideful, phallic obsession with processes and systems but, also, contains traces of his unconscious mind. As Bion demonstrates, the primitive seed of coherent thinking is constituted through the baby's capacity to tolerate the pre-conceived mental image of the primal breast intertwined – 'linked' - with the father's penis, in violent, sadistic coitus. A Kleinian might pay attention to the primitive sexuality in Duff's explanation of how to prepare a barrel in the cellar:

Duff: The bung is on the vertical, in the bunghole. Spile the bung. Hammer the spile through the centre of the bung. That lets the air through the bung, down the bung hole, let's the air breathe.

Beth: Wetness all over the air. Sunny. Trees like feathers.

Duff: Then you hammer the tap in.<sup>6</sup>

We also sense that he has the capacity to feel depressive guilt and remorseful anxiety; he expresses these feelings when he clumsily attempts to bring up the subject of his past infidelity with an unknown woman. Essentially, however, he is oblivious to Beth's feelings. As a crude literalist, he fails to recognise the symbolism in Beth's banging of the gong as a

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<sup>6</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 183

cry for help. Beth even implies that she may have lost her mind completely at one point. Was she led away to a psychiatric asylum? She describes how ‘they all held my arm lightly, as I stepped out of the car, or out of the door, or down the steps’<sup>7</sup>

Whatever the case may be, she has retreated into a world of comforting solipsism. Duff’s final attack on Beth, where he imagines having rough sex with her in the hallway, is more than a paranoid expression of his need to control Beth by breaking her down into an object that he can humiliate. It exemplifies his abject failure to recognise that Beth needs his love, his tenderness, his care: his depressive concern.

How might we understand *Landscape*? We may choose to focus on how Pinter explores the problem we all have with our past. How does it shape our perception of the present, or our expectations for the future? We might describe the play as a mournful, poetic image that charts the gradual collapse of a human relationship. Pinter seems to show us that men and women are alienated from one another by the way they think and feel. As such they can never truly be at peace with one other. Therefore, we might argue that the play is a classic example of the so called ‘Theatre of the Absurd’, since its principle theme is the failure, or break down, of communication. For Klein, the loss of any connection between Beth and Duff is really a failure of empathy - the absence of any effective projective identification.

Furthermore, tragically, Beth sees that the world around her is somehow inauthentic and corrupted. D.W. Winnicott recognised that the process of disentangling oneself from the primary object of the mother was fraught with difficulty. If the process went wrong, or happened too quickly, the child would be forced to become an independent ‘self-manager’ too soon. The sense of the ego that would emerge would be a ‘false self’<sup>8</sup>. The outer mask of

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<sup>7</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 170

<sup>8</sup> Winnicott, *The Collected*, 162



personality would become a superficial sheen, glossing over an individual's feeling of a dead, lifelessness within. Beth perceives this absence of truth in the relationships of others. She sees the way other women are with their men:

I've watched other people. I've seen them.

Pause

All the cars zooming by. Men with girls at their sides. Bouncing up and down. They're dolls. They squeak.<sup>9</sup>

Ultimately, it is necessary to look beyond any stereotypical pre-conceptions of men and women. Imprisoned within a society that demands that individuals conform to rigid gender expectations, the only escape for Beth and Duff is to regress. Beth does so by creating a powerful phantasy of primary narcissism. The neurotic Duff tries to reason and justify his way out of his powerlessness and anxiety. It is sad vision of human life that Pinter offers us.

## ***Night***

Night is a short play, little more than a sketch. There is no set. A man and a woman sit together on the stage 'with coffee'. They are 'in their forties'<sup>10</sup>. It is getting late, and the pair need to get up early in the morning to attend to their errands and chores. However, the man is casually attempting to engage the woman in a conversation about the embryonic stages of their relationship.

The man wants to relive their first moments of sexual intimacy. He claims to have met the woman at a party. It was winter and, having asked for the pleasure of escorting her home, the man took the woman for their first walk. As they strolled across a bridge they stopped in the

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<sup>9</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 182

<sup>10</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 213

moonlight. A river flowed beneath their feet. The man remembers how ‘lamps lit the towpath’<sup>11</sup>. He touched the ‘small’ of the woman’s back’ and then put his hands inside her coat, ‘under’ her ‘sweater’, ‘undid’ her ‘brassiere’, and ‘felt her breasts’<sup>12</sup>. Afterwards they kept on walking down the tow path and came to a ‘rubbish dump’.

The woman does not remember that first walk in the same way at all. She claims that she walked with the man through some railings into a field. Later, they found the man’s car. She does not recall the man being behind her. She insists on several occasions that her back was ‘against the railings’<sup>13</sup>. She remembers looking down the garden from the house towards the shimmering river, but she does not recall stopping on any bridge. Her coat was closed, not open, because it was cold. There was no amble down the tow path, and they did not happen upon a rubbish dump. She tells the man that this memory must have been from a different time and with a ‘another girl’<sup>14</sup>. She is adamant that no such sequence of events transpired, but the man seems equally determined to argue his point: there was an exciting, erotic encounter on the bridge, and it did happen on the very first time they walked alone together. Indeed, eventually, the woman seems to acquiesce, and acknowledge the veracity of his story. She did wonder how the man might touch her intimately for the first time.

In the theatre, *Night* plays as a funny and evocative piece about the relationships we share and the memories we hold dear. It is no coincidence that Pinter describes the man and woman as middle aged. In our forties, with a storehouse of experience to draw upon, we begin to reflect on our lives, and for many the past becomes increasingly important as a buttress against the uncertainty of the future. At the same time, the satisfaction that comes from being

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<sup>11</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 213

<sup>12</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 216

<sup>13</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 218

<sup>14</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 214

mature is tempered by a melancholy sense of nostalgic loss for the vitality of youth. We become aware of our own mortality, our own inexorable decay.

With *Night*, Pinter seems to suggest that these memories are the product of our imagination. We create our past, and so we can never be totally certain of what happened. Furthermore, Pinter again seems to intimate that men and women recall the past differently. Do men recollect the primal, sexual specificity of an encounter, more so than women? Are women more romantic in the way that they construct their past? Again, we ought to avoid simplistic or deterministic summaries of men and women. *Night* is about how our past experiences are silently present in the now. Moreover, it is a play about the importance, and power, of the primitive unconscious in shaping what we think we remember.

For example, the man describes how, during the party, he smiled at the woman and she responded to his gaze. He recalls an intuitive feeling that she had picked him out as special, with lovely eyes, although this is probably a regressive narcissistic phantasy. His sense that she was drawn to him is a projection of his own feelings towards her.

His recollection of their first encounter is particularly important. We should note here the dream like symbolism of his mind. It is night, and the stage is set for the man to relive his phantasy of the primal scene. The river below represents the mother's water, the fluid in her uterus, her birth canal, the vagina and anus. In the dream like memory he is exploring the woman's body, by placing his hand under her coat. In the man's phantasy he is feeling, rooting around, searching for the 'good' breast, the primal object, before continuing to delve greedily into the contents of the loved object's body, discovering the coital links between part objects. This is the epistemophilic instinct as expressed through the memory: the desire to know, and to explore the mother's body and its riches of unborn babies, faeces and the father's penis. It is also no coincidence that he remembers this first exploration of the

woman's body whilst walking over a bridge. The bridge in phantasy represents the father's penis. The sadistic, proto-oedipal phantasy element of the memory emerges in his act of 'standing on the bridge; on the father's penis', dominating the father's internal penis, whilst orally exploring and seeking to control the loved mother's breast.

The man tells us that the couple eventually ended up at a rubbish dump. Pinter's sense for comic bathos is evident here, but the symbolism of the memory stands out. The man explored the woman's body on the bridge. Underneath the bridge there was a river. The tow path of the river led to a rubbish dump. A rubbish dump is a place where broken articles and used-up or drained objects are discarded. It is also a dirty, festering place, swarming with vermin, bacteria and faeces.

My interpretation is to suggest that the rubbish dump represents the mother's body, her womb and her breast. The man's anxious, persecutory phantasy exists on two levels. Firstly, he is paranoid that the destructive violence of his own birth - represented in the memory by the couple's walk along the tow path, moving down the river - has soiled, used-up and destroyed the 'good' mother's body. (in a difficult birth, faecal meconium is sometimes expelled by the baby as a sign of distress). Secondly, he is frightened that his own greedy, oral and sadistic attacks on the breast and the mother's body (the exploratory act of feeling the woman's breast in the memory) have also contributed towards the destruction of the idolised 'good' object, by sucking it dry of any 'goodness' and 'nourishment'. At the same time, however, the fact that he remembers the mother's body as a 'rubbish dump' also allows the man to further mobilize more paranoid defences against his unconscious anxiety over the loss of the 'good' breast and the 'good' mother. If he can feel that the 'destroyed' object is 'dirty', 'unclean' and 'revolting', he can cope with his anxiety over its loss by feeling threatened by its presence because one could not feel threatened if it wasn't present.

The man also tells us that the scene on the bridge was well lit by lamps that lined the tow path. My Kleinian interpretation here is twofold. On the one hand, the lights along the perimeter of the water may symbolise a primitive recollection of the trauma of the man's birth: the terror he experienced as he was squeezed violently through the birth canal, before being yanked from the mother's body into the rough, clawing hands of the doctors. But I would also suggest that the idea of light is central to the dream like memory. The play is called *Night*, but it not about darkness. On the contrary, it is about illumination. If we recognise memories as disguised expressions of unconscious anxiety, the symbolic significance of the presence of the lights in the dream-memory becomes important. By investigating the roots of our dreams, fantasies and memories, we can come to understand ourselves and our own unconscious patterns of thought. We can become enlightened.

Unlike most of Pinter's plays, *Night* seems to end on a positive note. There is a sense of tenderness, recognition and reciprocity between the two. The woman seems to accept that, even though the man may fantasise about other women from his past she - as the woman he loves - need not feel unduly threatened. Indeed, with *Night*, Pinter seems to strike upon a powerful truth about the role fantasies can play in maintaining a healthy connection to others and to reality. For, if we are to strengthen our capacity to live in the depressive position, we must afford ourselves so many brief, but refreshing, periods of respite in the schizoid wonderland of fantasy. Indeed, without the paranoid-schizoid mechanisms of splitting, idealisation and phantasy, it would be impossible to fall in love - and to cherish one person over and above all others.

Moreover, expressing unconscious phantasy can only come about through activating symbol formation. The 'beta' ID drives, instincts and urges are transformed and processed into a

complex 'alpha'<sup>15</sup> language of metaphor and allusion. By mobilizing anxiety to systemise a language capable of exploring our fears and desires in relation to our parents' bodies, the mind can, in the fullness of time, mature, and tolerate a more sophisticated, realistic and ambivalent way of thinking. For Klein, then, phantasy plays a central role in maintaining psychic health and equilibrium.

### *Old Times*

*Old Times* is a very complex challenging and ambiguous work. It blends elements of Pinter's earlier 'comedy of menace' period with his mid-career 'memory play' style. As the curtain rises, in the dim light we discover three figures on the stage. A man, 'Deeley', is 'slumped'<sup>16</sup> in an armchair, a typically masculine pose. 'Kate' is 'curled'<sup>17</sup> on a sofa. Both are 'still'. Another character, 'Anna' is 'standing at a window',<sup>18</sup> looking out, in much the same way as Aston does at the end of *The Caretaker*. The positioning of the characters on the stage - with two comfortably seated whilst an isolated third is forced to stand - anticipates a claustrophobic power struggle between the three. When the lights go up we hear the conversation of Deeley and Kate, as both sit regressed in the oral gratification of smoking. After a short while we realise that Anna cannot hear the dialogue of the other characters. She has not yet arrived at the home of Deeley and Kate. Her presence is symbolic rather than literal. She is omnipresent in the couple's imagination and phantasies.

Kate and Deeley discuss Anna's impending arrival but seem to adopt very different attitudes toward the matter. Deeley seems excited and intrigued by the very thought of Anna. Like a

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<sup>15</sup> Joan Symington Neville Symington *The Clinical Thinking of Wilfred Bion* (London: Routledge) P.63

<sup>16</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 245

<sup>17</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 245

<sup>18</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 245

schizoid baby, he phantasies over the contents of Anna's body. He asks if Anna is married, unconsciously imagining her possible coitus with the father. He asks if she is a vegetarian, again speculating on the beauty and cleanliness of her insides. He then probes Kate to try to establish the nature of the two women's relationship, their 'link'. Kate is reticent and monosyllabic in the face of Deeley's persistent questioning. He seems to be controlling, a touch manic. He ominously watches Kate.

Anna then arrives, and the pace changes. She immediately launches into a memory of her life with Kate in London. Anna breathlessly describes the cosmopolitan joy of freewheeling late nights, trips to the Albert Hall and Covent Garden. Her memories of her and Anna as comrades who were as 'thick as thieves' contradicts Kate's earlier, much cooler recollections of their time together. Anna reconstructs her earlier life with Kate as a golden time of intellectual, artistic and cultural plenitude, as if the London of their youth were a large university campus at their feet. However, hidden within her excited chatter, she also mentions that the two women were humble secretaries. They were not actors, writers or artists, but outsiders, who eavesdropped the conversations of the 'creatives' from across the bustling cafes and bars.

Instinctively, Deeley interprets Anna's nostalgia as a surreptitious critique of the present, an implicit attack on his status and authority as Kate's husband. The tranquil, pastoral life he has cultivated with Kate in the country represents a decisive rejection of Anna's metropolitan fantasies. He cuts Anna down to size by telling her that he and Kate rarely go to London, before adopting a pose of dominance by standing over Kate's friend as he pours her a brandy. Anna counters by commenting on the 'silence' of the couple's home and its surroundings. Here, she cleverly offers a scathing commentary on the couple's failure to communicate by using the image of rural silence as a metaphor for their married life:

Anna: How wise of you to choose this part of the world, and how sensible and courageous of you both to stay in such a silence.<sup>19</sup>

For Anna, London was a time of noise and activity, a time of freedom and opportunity. Now Kate is trapped in a prison of silence that Deeley has created for her. Again, Anna reintroduces the memory of her life with Kate in London, while Deeley works hard to snuff out the flame of their embryonic reunion. As Act 1 progresses, Kate becomes ever-the-more isolated and objectified, whilst Deeley and Anna continue to wrestle for power and strategic advantage. As the alcohol takes its effect, the combatants form a tentative union for an impromptu sing song; but the act ends with Deeley and Anna in silent conflict, gazing at one another across the room.

In the first act Pinter clearly demonstrates Anna and Deeley's manic need to control Kate through acquisitive projections. For Klein their need to control the object is narcissistic, since they are fearful of losing the 'good' aspects of their own egos and objects they have projected into her. They also need to control her because they have projected into her the 'bad' object and the 'bad' self, and they fear the retaliation of the object – if they can't control it.

Act two begins in the bedroom. Kate is in the bathroom taking a shower. Now Deeley confronts Anna. Trying to wrong foot her, he describes how he remembers her from a pub he used to frequent in years gone by. Although Anna denies it, Deeley recalls how she liked to dress all in black, including her black stockings. One night, Deeley tells Anna that he took her to a party, a gathering of philosophers after buying her a drink. There, like the baby who anxiously phantasies over the contents of the mother's body, he sat and peered up Anna's dress as she spoke with a girlfriend - presumably Kate. Eventually his voyeurism was disturbed by the attentions of the other guests as he tried to gaze at the women's thighs. This

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<sup>19</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 257



passage plays out Deeley's primitive oedipal phantasies. The men play the persecutory role of the father's intruding part objects inside the treasured mother's womb. Moments later, when Kate emerges from the shower, she is more assertive and talkative than in the first act. Although Deeley and Anna continue to bid for her affection, we slowly sense that Anna may be in trouble.

In the final sequence, Kate ends the play by describing her own memories of the past. Firstly, she describes how she severed all her ties with Anna. She recalls how she looked down upon her friend's 'corpse' wrapped in an 'immaculate'<sup>20</sup> sheet, and how she brought a man into her life and room, presumably Deeley. The play ends with a tableau: Deeley slumped in a chair, Anna lying on a divan bed, with Kate sitting on a divan.

The end of *Old Times*, in my view, recalls Kate's collapse into psychosis. For Klein, psychosis is active when the unconscious cannot achieve its first order: the splitting of the self and the object. Kate accidentally intimates to us that her mind is beginning to lapse back into undifferentiated chaos in Act 2 when she tells Deeley and Anna that she does not wish to return to London because it is a world of hard lines. The country, on the other hand is softer. The only pleasant thing about the city is the rain that 'blurs everything'<sup>21</sup>.

The final passage of the play relives schizoid Kate's breakdown. She 'destroyed' the object, Anna, by defensively projecting into her the 'deadness' she feels inside. This deadness may be a phantasy of emptiness. She then took the dirt from the window box filled with 'pretty pansies' and smeared Deeley's face with the soil. This is a primitive act, an attempt to reinforce the 'goodness' of the 'good' object with faecal gifts, the 'good' self and 'good' object, whilst simultaneously attempting to rid oneself of 'bad' objects and the 'bad' self

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<sup>20</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 310

<sup>21</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 297

through anal attacks on the primal object or breast. We might note how the flowers belonged to both and Kate and Anna and, as such, by destroying them, Kate has symbolically destroyed their relationship. The pansies represent Kate's attempts at making reparation towards the object, Anna. Now they are ripped and torn like her mind. The weeping man is Deeley. He cried in desperation as he watched his girlfriend's collapse into massive splitting and paranoia. His response, is to suggest they get married, or to try to facilitate Kate's recovery by leaving. *Perhaps, to go and live in the country.*

*Old Times* is an incredibly complex play. Ultimately it is a play about our desperate need for satisfying human relationships, and the problems that we experience in pursuing these goal.

### ***No Man's Land***

Upon first inspection, *No Man's Land* explores a series of interrelated themes in a characteristically Pinteresque way. Undoubtedly inspired by Beckett, Pinter scrutinises the peculiarity and tragedy of old age, and the crushing loss of one's physical and mental vitality. But, at the very heart of the play, is this problem: why, in our twilight years, is it so hard to come to a full understanding of our lives? For the most part, none of us will ever completely comprehend who we are. We don't really know why we behave in the ways that we do. We cannot truly articulate the reasons behind the choices that we made. Our attempts to explain ourselves to ourselves always seem to fall short. Something is missing, and it is conspicuous by its absence. As such, the story of our lives often seems illogical, perplexing, simply random. It is this confused state of lived experience that Pinter poetically illustrates in *No Man's Land*. By breaking through the constraints of a realistic mise-en-scene, Pinter brilliantly employs the heightened artistic style of experimental modernist theatre to externalise our internal state. The play's form and structure happen to be nonsensical because that is the realm of subjective human experience that Pinter seeks to articulate.

The reason we cannot fully engage with ourselves is because we have repressed much of that which we find troubling, difficult or disturbing. The repressive mechanism protects us from unbearably painful feelings; but, in doing so, we are left with a peculiar, uncanny sense that the story of our lives has only been half-written. A human psychic life is like a black and white photograph in a dark room. Without exploring the unconscious, no amount of bathing in a tray of chemical fluid will ever fully develop the image. Only psychoanalysis, including the contributions of Klein, can illuminate the unconscious depths of the self and provide a fuller final picture. Finally, *No Man's Land* describes human life as too often characterised by wasted potential, the consequence of a lack of self-knowledge.

The play is set in the living room of a comfortable bourgeois residence in Hampstead, North West London. An aging, successful writer, Hirst, dressed in 'well-cut trousers' and 'smart sports jacket, has returned to his home late at night with a loquacious individual named Spooner. Spooner refers to their meeting in a local pub, Jack Straw's Castle. Spooner has a touch of the bohemian about him, with his faded jacket and creased cravat. He claims to be a poet and a patron of the arts. The men drink whiskey and vodka heavily, while Spooner holds court. As the alcohol takes its effect, Spooner confidently probes Hirst. As the two talk they joust with comic wordplay, and the inquisitive Spooner tries to unearth more about his new friend's life and background. As he does so, the vagabond confesses to a history of partaking in anonymous homosexual activity on the heath. This is an important moment because it tells us much about the kinds of lives that both men lead. This image, of the characters stumbling around, disorientated in the woods, in the fading half- light, to meet a stranger, as a stranger, is apposite, since it symbolises perfectly the psychical state of the characters.

Later, when Spooner advises his host that he is a 'free man'<sup>22</sup>, Hirst unwittingly hints that he is not alone in his house. When the guest notes that there are 'two' mugs on the 'shelf', he is told that he is at liberty to drink from the second because 'it' is for 'you'<sup>23</sup>. That empty, abandoned second mug, without an owner, not only symbolises Hirst's loneliness, but also his sense that something within himself is missing, and that he is not complete. Indeed, although Pinter depicts alcoholism in both a tragic and comic way throughout *No Man's Land*, the characters incessant need to charge their glasses until they are thoroughly inebriated points towards a longing to fill up their sense of confused emptiness or, as Pinter himself cryptically puts it, to try to deal with the 'poverty'<sup>24</sup> within themselves.

Other moments within the play point towards an overriding sense of discontinuity, arrested development and incompleteness that transcend the specific context of the utterance. For example, Spooner never manages to finish his anecdote about his encounter with an aristocratic Hungarian émigré at Jack Straw's,<sup>25</sup> never telling us what the man said that shocked him so. Hirst talks of how the 'beams of churches in rural England are festooned with garlands honouring those of the 'parish' reputed to have died 'virgin',<sup>26</sup> their potential never having been realised. Spooner provokes Foster and the surly Briggs with his account of an afternoon in Amsterdam beside the canal, which he claims he decided to immortalise on canvas. With an adroit aplomb, he describes the scene as the captured fish is hoisted aloft in the presence of the waiter, the men, the lovers, the little girl and the enigmatic shadowy figure watching from a nearby table. But when he is pressed on whether he ever actually

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<sup>22</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 327

<sup>23</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 327

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com>

<sup>25</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 329

<sup>26</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 335

painted *The Whistler*<sup>27</sup>, he retreats into his shell. It was never started. Foster's failure to actualise his talents as a poet are mirrored in Spooner's euphemistic acceptance that he has had a 'chequered'<sup>28</sup> career. Although Hirst seems to cherish the photos of his classmates at Oxford, the elegant young faces that confidently gaze back at him are like ghosts, lost, seemingly trapped within the frame.

As a defence against the absence of certainty, or the presence of absence, the characters tend towards increasingly neurotic behaviour. Spooner denies his attachment to an object, claiming to have never been loved or even liked, before accusing Hirst of having an affair with his erstwhile wife, a projection of his own guilty anxiety. The drink-soaked Hirst, who is weary, sombre and reticent at first, employs a 'magical' reaction-formation to reverse his lethargy, becoming bright, convivial, and confident. Hirst also tells us of a dream of a lake. Someone was drowning, and Hirst describes how he tried to save this faceless individual<sup>29</sup>. Spooner claims to be the one being swallowed by the water, using the dream to try to communicate to his much more successful peer his desperation and dire straits. But, at the heart of the dream's imagery is Hirst's own guilty phantasy of destroying the mother through his own watery, urethral assaults.

Although we can compare Spooner to the itinerant Davies from *The Caretaker*, as Pinter's intruders go he is perhaps a little less self-serving and parasitic, a touch more benevolent. He offers the hand of friendship to Hirst in Act one, not purely out of a naked sense self-interest, but because he can see that Hirst is falling apart without the adhesive of self-awareness. When recounting his escapades on the heath, he offers Hirst a tacit piece of advice: too look at events objectively, to maintain a distance between oneself and the object one contemplates.

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<sup>27</sup>Pinter, *Plays 3*, 345

<sup>28</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 393

<sup>29</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 353

Ultimately, his final plea to be taken on by Hirst not only gives the lie to his claim to be indifferent to love, it also illustrates his brilliant intuition that love is the answer in this life - and that without it, one is doomed.

In the end, however, the possibility of Hirst becoming a 'free man'<sup>30</sup> in the sense that he can understand himself and others, truly, cannot be countenanced by the schizoid Foster and Briggs. They intercept Spooner's attempt to use love to free Hirst, and instead impose a terrifying edict upon him. Hirst, the great thinker, the essayist, the writer, will never be allowed to 'change the subject again.'<sup>31</sup> Ultimately, it is they who control and triumph over Hirst, trapping him once again in '*No Man's Land*'.

Pinter's memory plays explore the difficulty and sheer complexity of human relationships. They illustrate the struggles that we have with our past, and the nature of its relationship to the present. The characters must confront their own palpable sense of confusion and epistemological disorientation as they struggle to come to terms with their lives. What precisely did happen all those years ago? What is happening now? How can we really understand it all? As Pinter asserted: 'There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false.'<sup>32</sup> What we can affirm is that Pinter shows us that we all have needs in relation to others, and that it is human nature to want control over other people, to want to possess them, to introject them. Pinter is also astute in evincing how we use our memories to re-write history and control the present. Eventually, Pinter shows us an image of humanity trapped within an endless cycle of power struggles, memories and phantasies.

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<sup>30</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 227

<sup>31</sup> Pinter, *Plays 3*, 395

<sup>32</sup> Pinter, Nobel Prize.org

## Chapter 8

### *Political Plays 1980-1991*

#### *One for the Road*

The 1980s was a decade of great social and political upheaval. Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government transformed Britain. At home Thatcher set out to create a new, revolutionary society of self-interested individuals, driven aggressively by their own aspirations and needs. Abroad, she strengthened the 'special relationship'<sup>1</sup> between the UK and The United States and used the Argentine invasion of The Falkland Islands to wage war and reassert Britain's power and authority on the international stage.

Although the aim of Thatcher's 'Tories' was to free men and women from the 'dead' hand of the state, using new 'monetarist'<sup>2</sup> economic theories, the price of these changes was extreme political confrontation and violence. In the deregulated 'square mile' of 'the city', the trader made fat profits on the stock market floor. In the north, the militant unions, who sought to protect their members' livelihoods in the teeth of Tory cutbacks and closures, took to the picket lines to strike.<sup>3</sup>

In the United States, the Reagan administration set out 'win' the cold war by spending billions of dollars on a massive new cache of nuclear weapons. The intention here was to deter the soviets, but also to force them bankrupt themselves in trying to keep up. But the

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<sup>1</sup> B.C.J Kercher *Britain, America and The Special Relationship Since 1941* (London: Routledge, 2017)

<sup>2</sup> Lanny Ebenstein Milton Friedman: *A Biography* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) P.258

<sup>3</sup> Mark Harvey, Martin Jenkinson, Mark Metcalf, *The Miner's Strike* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword History, 2014) P.29

decision to jettison détente and provoke the Russians left billions of people terrified that the superpowers were finally on the verge of bringing down Armageddon.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, The US were still fearful of soviet imperialist ambitions. Anxious to prevent his adversaries establishing a strategic bridgehead in the middle-east and Latin America, Reagan formed a series of alliances with a grim procession of brutal dictators. The president even became embroiled in a diplomatic scandal. Money obtained from the prohibited sale of weapons to Iran was channelled towards a right wing paramilitary group in Nicaragua known as the 'Contras'. The Contras used violent guerrilla tactics to terrorise the civilian population and destabilise the socialist Sandinista government.<sup>5</sup>

In some ways, Pinter was responding to these events, and attempting to highlight the arrant hypocrisy of western power. It seemed absurd that the Americans could lecture other countries about the need for world peace, whilst arming themselves with such a fearsome arsenal of destructive weaponry. Besides, how could The United States and Britain coerce other nations to become democratic on the one hand, whilst, on the other, supporting war criminals responsible for genocide, simply because it served their purpose?<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, he was also interested in exploring the fate of writers, artists and intellectuals living in totalitarian countries. Inspired by his work for PEN<sup>7</sup>, Pinter recognised that in authoritarian nations, intelligent, sensitive individuals, who were capable of critical or creative work, would be deemed 'enemies of the state' and eliminated.

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<sup>4</sup> BBC-Storyville-Reagan [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aXGjP-v5K\\_s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aXGjP-v5K_s) [accessed 12th Feb 2018]

<sup>5</sup> BBC-Storyville-Reagan

<sup>6</sup> Harold Pinter *Truth, Art and Politics*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PH96tuRA3L0> [accessed 14 April 2018]

<sup>7</sup> Mel Gussow *Conversation with Pinter* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1994) P.65



Equally, Pinter was drawing his audience's attention to the war crimes perpetrated by the west. He understood that that capitalist liberal democracies had blood on their hands because they were also prepared to use torture, rendition and false imprisonment to get their way. He knew that the Americans and British had murdered hundreds of thousands of people in developing countries by bombing them or imposing severe economic sanctions.

Ultimately, then, Pinter felt that he had to tackle the tragedy and horror of geopolitical violence head on. He knew that he could no longer stay silent; on the contrary, he had come to believe that he had an obligation<sup>8</sup> to speak out: using his plays for the first time to really 'tell it like it is'. If his earlier works were marked by a curious indeterminacy that left the audience guessing, these later political plays were explicit and unambiguous illustrations of brutal political power.

*One for the Road* is a short and terrifying play. A man, Nicholas, sits at his desk in a room, perhaps an office. Next door another man, Victor, is being tortured. We soon learn that Victor's family, his wife 'Gila', and his son 'Nicky', have also been imprisoned. Nicholas presses a button and Victor, who is bruised and bloodied, is called in. Nicholas appears to be the chief of a brutal secret police force, although his exact professional role or status is not established. What is obvious is that he derives a good deal of satisfaction from his 'work'.

Nicholas proceeds to torment Victor with a sinister cross-examination. He describes himself as 'civilised'<sup>9</sup> but, as a degenerate drunk, with each gulp of whisky he reveals the true nature of his character to Victor and the audience. Nicholas clearly feels the need to control and dominate his victims, to gratify himself by exercising his power over them. He makes a

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<sup>8</sup> Harold Pinter, *Newsnight*,

<sup>9</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 223

series of oblique but sexually threatening references to Victor's wife, and forces the diminished figure in front of him to follow a series of humiliating instructions:

*Pause*

Stand up

Victor stands

Sit down

Victor sits.

Thank you so much

*Pause*

Tell me something...

*Silence*

What a good- looking woman your wife is. You're a very lucky man. Tell me...one for the road, I think...<sup>10</sup>

Nicholas harbours narcissistic phantasies of omnipotence and paranoid-schizoid power. He believes that he is a vehicle for the expression of God's voice, but he is also eager to explore the idea that Victor doesn't respect him. In due course, he reveals to Victor the extent of his perversion. He loves 'death'<sup>11</sup>, 'the death of others'<sup>12</sup>. His unconscious response is to destroy, not to create.

Nicholas continues to seek out ways to humiliate and intimidate Victor. After mocking his victim with an indecent line of questioning about Victor's wife, we discover why Nicholas has imprisoned the family. Victor has been identified as a political 'troublemaker' by his fascist government. His country has clearly fallen into the iron grip of a psychopathic,

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<sup>10</sup> Harold Pinter, *Plays 4* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996) P. 225

<sup>11</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 229

<sup>12</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 229

paranoid despot who is desperate to destroy any shred of political resistance or opposition. But Victor is not being punished just because of what he might say or write, he is also suffering because of what he is. Nicholas is eager to emphasise the 'fact' that Victor does not share in the 'patriotic' 'common heritage' of the nation. Victor, or so it would seem, is an outsider, perhaps a member of an ethnic, or religious minority. He is perceived as if he were a cancerous, insidious 'bad' object, split off from the body politic. As such, he is being viciously scapegoated for all his country's ills.

We see two further short scenes. In the first 'Nicky' is brought before his cruel namesake, and we learn that the little boy 'attacked' Nicholas's soldiers, 'kicking' and 'spitting'<sup>13</sup> at them. In the second Nicholas interrogates Gila who stands before him in torn clothes. We learn that she has been raped by Nicholas's thugs that guard the prison. In such a regressed society the rape of women and children is never far away. To further degrade and debase Gila, Nicholas tries to probe into the private, intimate circumstances of Victor and Gila's first meeting. The room becomes a battleground as Gila evades Nicholas through a series of monosyllabic responses until she tells her captor that she met Victor in her 'father's room'<sup>14</sup>. At this revelation Nicholas is incandescent with rage. He seems to interpret Gila's recollection of meeting her husband in her father's room as an implicit admission of degenerative sexual conduct. Gila and Victor were strangers who yielded to their lusty desires and besmirched the patriarch's threshold. The image of the two making love excites and externalises Nicholas's nightmarish, envious phantasy of the internal parents violently locked in perpetual intercourse and echoes his previous fascination with the carnal details of Gila and Victor's relationship.

He accuses Gila of grossly disrespecting the memory of her father. It becomes apparent that the dead man was someone that Nicholas greatly admired, even loved. Is Gila a member of a

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<sup>13</sup>Pinter, *Plays 4*, 236

<sup>14</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 240

political dynasty, the daughter of a once powerful political figure? Is she being persecuted because of who she is and what her family represents to the country? Perhaps, but Nicholas is unequivocal on why he despises Gila and Victor with such venom. He tells Gila that he hates them because they 'think'. Put simply, Nicholas seems to detest and fear intellectuals.

In the final scene it is night. In an image redolent of Stanley's nightmare in *The Birthday Party* Nicholas finally confronts Victor. This time, Victor is tidily dressed. It would seem to be the case that he is being released and that maybe his wife is too. Nicholas seems to believe that Victor has been successfully 're-educated'. However, he has been subjected to yet more beatings, and something sinister has been done to his tongue. He tries to mumble but Nicholas cannot understand what he is saying. Soon it becomes clear. In despair Victor has asked after his son, Nicky. As the light fades we learn the appalling truth. The young boy has probably been murdered by Nicholas.

Although *One for The Road* explores political violence and repression, it is also a personal play that articulates Pinter's darkest fears. It is partly about Pinter's background and the historical persecution of the Jews. It is partly an expression of Pinter's hatred of organised, fanatical religion. It is certainly an attack on the British establishment: the high society 'gentlemen' who dined on fine cuisine by night and built their empire upon the broken, bloodied bodies of millions of innocent people by day; (It is surely no coincidence that Nicholas uses cricketing metaphors as he torments Victor<sup>15</sup> ) It also exposes the way our political masters corrupt language by hiding behind dead metaphors, clichés and euphemisms to conceal the brutal reality of their intentions. But, in the end, it is a deeply human play that describes the agony of two parents who must face their worst fears: that they cannot save their beloved son from death at the hands of their barbarian enemies.

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<sup>15</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 225

## ***Mountain Language***

*Mountain Language* was written in 1988, a year before the final collapse of soviet communism in Russia and the reunification of east and west Berlin. It is a powerful play about social, cultural, religious, and racial identity. Moreover, it is an examination of how powerful countries seek to conquer smaller nations or ethnic minority groups by using state sponsored violence.

The play begins outside a prison. Two people, a young and an elderly woman, are waiting to go inside to visit to their loved ones. But the old woman is cradling her hand in pain. She is being comforted by the younger woman. Two soldiers, a sergeant and an officer approach. We learn that, while the two were waiting to be admitted, the old woman was badly bitten by an aggressive guard dog. This has led to a serious injury to the woman's hand. The sergeant barks his orders at the women, but the officer tells him to desist. His response to the news that the woman's hand has been hurt is to adopt a contemptuous attitude towards her suffering and to openly mock her by claiming that a dog is supposed to 'state'<sup>16</sup> its name before it bites anyone. We also discover that, although the women were told to wait outside the gate at 9.00am to be admitted, they have been left waiting for eight hours in the snow and ice. It is now 5.00pm. Obviously, the authorities do not care about the visitors, and feel no sense of responsibility or care for them. Clearly the idea that people have moral obligations to one another no longer applies here. This is a paranoid-schizoid society. We are a long way from a society that manifests the depressive position: a place where people feel a sense of concern for other people.

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<sup>16</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 254

The sergeant decides to explain why their wait was pointless. He describes the men, ‘the fathers’, the ‘sons’ and ‘husbands’ as ‘shithouses’<sup>17</sup>, ‘enemies of the state’. The political authorities evidently believe these peoples to be useless. Because the mountain people have their own culture, their own spiritual and moral beliefs and their own identity, forged over hundreds of years of isolated, agrarian living, they cannot be easily forced to conform to the ways of the modern city. They cannot be used by the system and so they’re effectively worthless – nothing but ‘shit’. Furthermore, traducing the mountain people as human waste expresses a commonly held, but deeply racist, sentiment that ethnic minorities are somehow ‘unclean’. Here Pinter illustrates how the powerful use their authority to decide what constitutes civilised, ‘clean’ behaviour as opposed to that which is deemed ‘unacceptable’, ‘insanitary’, ‘uncivilised’. More than this, human waste is also filled with toxic substances. From a Kleinian perspective the ‘mountain’ people are perceived in the state’s paranoid phantasy as a poisonous presence within the body politic. Without delay, the officer decides to give his instructions to the women before they enter the prison:

Officer: Now hear this. You are mountain people. You hear me? Your language is dead. It is forbidden. It is not permitted to speak your mountain language in this place. You cannot speak your language to your men. It is not permitted. Do you understand? You may not speak it. It is outlawed. You may only speak the language of the capital. That is the only language permitted in this place. This is a military decree. It is the law. Your language is forbidden. It is dead. No one is allowed to speak your language. Your language is no longer exists. Any questions?<sup>18</sup>

By denying the mountain people the right to use their own language in conversation with one another, this military dictatorship has set about dismantling the cultural identity of an ethnic minority. By placing restrictions on how something can be said, the junta are also deciding upon what can be said; strangling any semblance of freedom of speech or expression.

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<sup>17</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 225

<sup>18</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 225-226

Furthermore, if the mountain people can only speak using the language of the capital then, sooner or later, they will begin to think like the people of the capital. And if they think like the people of the capital then, to all intents and purposes, they are the people of the capital.

The goal of the authorities here, then, is to stamp out the mountain people's sense of difference, to suffocate their individuality and creativity. The mountain people must speak, act and think like everyone else; they must become a mirror image of the dominant culture of the country. They cannot be allowed to continue to perceive themselves as different. If they do perceive themselves as different, then they are dangerous, and thus far more likely to engage in subversive activity and political resistance.

Moreover, forcing the mountain people to speak the language of the capital is the expression of a paranoid schizoid phantasy of control. The mountain people are not entitled to their own identity. In a sophisticated, civilised society, under the sway of the depressive position, different, diverse cultural communities can exist within the broader community whilst maintaining a sense of their own independence, freedom and autonomy. Contrastingly, in a totalitarian society, locked in the paranoid schizoid position, the people are not entitled to an identity outside of their rulers and masters. They must be controlled. They are reduced to imitating the powerful, becoming, in the process, a projection of their leader's own narcissistic self-image.

Soon the soldiers sexually assault and harass the young woman, patting her bottom and making a series of crude remarks. It is evident that for them she is nothing but an object for their patriarchal sexual gratification and sadism. Furthermore, they reveal to us their utter contempt and hatred for the woman because 'she looks like a fucking intellectual'<sup>19</sup>. For Pinter, intellectuals will always be persecuted in a fascist state. From a Kleinian perspective,

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<sup>19</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 257

this is because their profession demands of them the capacity to hold an ambivalent position in relation to an argument. Academic work is based on the objective appraisal of evidence and data. As such, academia is a pure expression of the mode of thinking characteristic of the depressive position; and to be able to think in such a way constitutes a major unconscious achievement.

Therefore, the intellectual can maintain a detached, grounded perspective on events. In a society that is beginning to regress into an angry mob, they possess the capacity to move beyond splitting, and to think critically: to formulate contrarian argument, and to articulate alternatives to the prison like societies imposed on their compatriots. Unlike most of the population at large, intellectuals may have the cognitive strength to resist regressive, emotional responses to propaganda and rhetoric. Their ability to endure the pain of the depressive position makes them dangerous.

In scene two, the elderly woman has been taken into the visitors' room where she is finally given the opportunity to speak with the prisoner. But as the two try to communicate a guard stands over them, monitoring their every word. Every time the woman utters she is jabbed with a stick and told not speak the language of the capital. The guard again refers to the mountain people as 'shit'<sup>20</sup>, and makes references to his own family. When the prisoner tells the guard he also has children, the thug in the uniform responds aggressively:

PRISONER:

I've got a wife and three kids

GUARD

You've what?

SILENCE

You've got what?

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<sup>20</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 260



SILENCE

What did you say to me? You've got what?

SILENCE

You've got what?

He picks up the telephone and dials one digit

Sergeant? I'm in the Blue Room...yes...I thought I should report, Sergeant...I think I've got a joker in here.<sup>21</sup>

Suddenly Pinter lowers the lights and the three figures on the stage are still. We hear their dialogue in a voice over. Perhaps they have managed to exchange a few secret words with one another when the guard's back was turned? Or maybe we are witnessing a fantasy. Perchance we are hearing the words that they would say to one another if they could? Either way, we discover that they are mother and son, and there is a tenderness to their words. Although the prisoner is concerned by his mother's injured hand, the elderly woman comforts her son. Her description of the family evokes Klein's notion of the 'good' mother, her 'good' breast, and her protective womb:

ELDERLY WOMAN'S VOICE

The baby is waiting for you

PRISONER'S VOICE

Your hand has been bitten

ELDERLY WOMAN'S VOICE

They're all waiting for you

PRISONER'S VOICE

They have bitten my mother's hand.

ELDERLY WOMAN'S VOICE

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<sup>21</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 260

When you come home there will be such a welcome for you. Everyone is waiting for you. They're all waiting for you. They're all waiting to see you.<sup>22</sup>

Scene three is entitled 'voice in the darkness'. The young woman stands in the space as the sergeant and the guard prepare to torture one of their victims. The unfortunate man is hooded and is clearly being subjected to some form of sadistic punishment. Much to the audience's horror we soon realise that the young woman is his wife. Having been left to roam the prison she has stumbled upon their attack. Suddenly the thugs realise that they have exposed themselves. They have been instructed to carry out their crimes behind closed doors, away from the scrutinizing gaze of witnesses. Now unmasked through their own incompetence, the sergeant realises that the onus is on him to 'manage' the situation. He does so by offering an obsequious, disingenuous explanation for the mix-up, putting it down to an 'administrative' glitch. Clearly, we are in the company of crooks and sadists who, if called to account, will seek to hide behind the inconsistencies in the system to escape justice.

Again, Pinter freezes the action and we hear the thoughts of the married couple. They imagine a time together in a boat, 'out in a lake'. As they gaze into each other's eyes, the man warms her against the chill. Their fantasy (or is it a memory?) again evokes the Kleinian image of the baby's earliest attachment interactions with the loving, 'good' mother: the memory of her looking down into the crib, her soft voice, her breast, her eyes, her embrace:

MAN'S VOICE

I watch you sleep. And then your eyes open. You look up at me and smile.

YOUNG WOMAN'S VOICE

You smile. When my eyes open I see you above me and smile.

MAN'S VOICE

We are out on a lake.

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<sup>22</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 261

YOUNG WOMAN'S VOICE

It is spring

YOUNG WOMAN'S VOICE

It is spring

MAN'S VOICE

I hold you. I warm you

YOUNG WOMAN'S VOICE

When my eyes open I see you above me and smile.<sup>23</sup>

Suddenly, Pinter snaps the audience back into reality. The lights come up, the hooded man collapses, and the young woman screams. In terror she calls out the name of her husband 'Charley'. For her, he is a person, a 'whole object', a man she loves with a name. She watches as her husband's body is hauled away. In desperation, she offers sexual favours to the men to try to save Charley from more punishment. Again, in one of the most graphic scenes in modern drama, Pinter unflinchingly confronts his audience with the sheer horror of political torture in a regressed society. He shows us that proud women are often forced to prostitute themselves to save others.

In scene four we return to the visitors' room. The elderly woman has returned to see her son. Suddenly the guard tells the prisoner that the inmates can speak to their relatives using their own language. The rules have been relaxed. The prisoner tries to engage his mother. He talks to her in their ethnic language, desperately trying to provoke a response. But the elderly woman does not answer him. She sits silently. Traumatized by the wickedness and brutality she has witnessed, her only survival mechanism is to retreat into herself: to become mute, to shut herself off from her emotions. The scale of the inhumanity she has witnessed has destroyed her capacity to speak her language, to express her own identity. When the prisoner

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<sup>23</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 263

realises that his mother can no longer hear him, he suffers a complete mental and physical breakdown. He falls to the floor gasping and shaking violently. The authorities have taken from him the only thing he has left. His sense of an enduring, loving attachment to his mother. As he convulses in despair, the sergeant shows no mercy, but rather mocks the stricken man. ‘you go out of your way to give them a helping hand and they fuck it up’, he sneers. We instantly snap into a blackout and the play is over. Pinter has forced the audience to face the truth about political violence. He has held nothing back.

### ***The New World Order***

First performed on the 19th July 1991, the title of this sketch is taken from a series of speeches made by the US president George H. W. Bush in the same year<sup>24</sup>. It is a black, satirical piece that unequivocally attacks the blatant hypocrisy of American foreign policy in the early nineties. In the aftermath of NATO’s devastating victory in the first Gulf war and the collapse of soviet communism - and with an overwhelming wealth of military, economic, diplomatic and political power at their disposal - the Washington elite saw the chance to shape the world once again in their own image. Their objective was to spread free market capitalism and liberal democracy, and to enforce their vision of international law. In this work, then, Pinter attacks the Americans’ plan in no small measure. He saw that there was nothing altruistic, philanthropic or benevolent about wanting to rule the world. Rather, what we were witnessing was an opportunistic attempt by the powerful to reinforce their authority.

Watching or reading *The New World Older* is a curious experience because of the tension Pinter establishes between the subject of the men’s conversation and the way they speak. The dialogue is sharp and witty, and the two main characters ‘bounce’ off one another like a comedic double act. But there is nothing amusing about their conversation. Two heavies,

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<sup>24</sup> <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=18820> [accessed 10 February 2018]

Des and Lionel, are looking at a blindfolded man who is sat in a chair. We soon learn that they have a plan to torture him. As they chat it is obvious that they relish their jobs. They sadistically take their time to meditate on their victim's terror. The man in the blind fold has no idea of what will be eventually done to him; he can only sit in his chair, sightlessly, helplessly, trying not to entertain his worst fears. These state sponsored brutes are in total control of the situation and derive a cathartic release from their ability to reduce frightened humans to a state of abject misery. On the other hand, Pinter foregrounds the pathetic frailty of the men as well. He shows us that they are locked in a power struggle of their own. Who will be able to seize the initiative and become the superior in the relationship? Pinter holds a mirror up to human nature. Ultimately, the man who can establish his definition of events through the eloquent application of language will be successful and assume a higher status. Furthermore, to be fastidious and precise about language is a neurotic defence. It is an attempt to control others:

DES:

Do you want to know something about this man?

LIONEL:

What?

DES:

He hasn't got any idea at all of what we're going to do to him

LIONEL:

He hasn't, no.

DES:

He hasn't, no. He hasn't got any idea at all about any one of the number of things that we might do to him.

LIONEL:

That we will do to him

DES:

That we will.

Pause.

Well, some of them. We'll do some of them

LIONEL

Sometimes we do all of them

DES:

That can be counterproductive

LIONEL

Bollocks<sup>25</sup>

In dialogue redolent of Ben and Gus's bickering in *The Dumb Waiter* the two continue to jockey for position by trying to have the final word on the extent of their victim's knowledge. Precisely how informed is he? Does he know anything of what is planned for him? Can he anticipate and ponder his wife's dreadful fate? Whatever knowledge he may have will be scant. We learn that there is no free press, no channel of political resistance or critique in this totalitarian society.

Des and Lionel denounce the man as a 'cunt' reducing him to the status that of the persecuting bad mother's vagina. They reflect on the social and professional status of their victim. Is a 'peasant'?<sup>26</sup> Or a 'lecturer in theology'? Again, Pinter emphasises the point that intellectuals are anathema to the despot. Moreover, the men continue to joust over the correct vile insult that must be hurled at their captive. Is he a 'cunt' or is he a 'prick'? Either way, their verbal assault on their victim again illustrates their paranoid-schizoid state of mind. The man is not described as a real person with thoughts, feelings and emotions. He is not perceived as a husband, or a father or a son. He is barely even human. Rather he is traduced

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<sup>25</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 272

<sup>26</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 273

as a part object, a hated, worthless genital that has been ripped out of the phantasy of the primal scene and brutally wedged into reality. Again, Des criticises Lionel's use of words:

LIONEL:

The level of ignorance that surrounds us. I mean, this prick here –

DES:

You called him a cunt last time.

LIONEL

What?

DES:

You called him a cunt last time. Now you call him a prick. How many times do I have to tell you? You've got to learn to define your terms and stick to them. You can't call him a cunt in one breath and a prick in the next. The terms are mutually contradictory. You'd lose face in any linguistic discussion group, take my tip.<sup>27</sup>

The notion that these rent- a- thugs are sophisticated and aesthete enough to have a scrupulous concern for the specifics of language is laughable, and Pinter again draws our attention to the façade of the political criminal who wears his civilised airs and graces as a mask to conceal his barbarian proclivities. Indeed, in the end, Des is eager to explain to Lionel that power as expressed through the fear of violence will always defeat words, reason, logic and argument: the weapons of the rebellious writer, the intellectual, and the artist. To induce a fear of suffering, a fear of pain, a fear of death is all you need to dominate those who might dare to take you on:

DES:

Yes, you do know. Look at this man here, for example. He's a first- class example. See what I mean? Before he came in here he was a big shot, he never stopped shooting his mouth off, he never stopped questioning received ideas. Now – because he's apprehensive about what's going to happen to him – he's stopped all that, he's got nothing more to say, he's more or less called it a day. I mean once, not too long

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<sup>27</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 275

ago – this man was a man of conviction, wasn't he, a man of principle. Now he's just a prick.<sup>28</sup>

In the final moments of the sketch, Pinter gets to the absolute heart of the point he is making. Lionel suddenly begins to weep, as if he has become completely overwhelmed with emotion. Lionel tells a slightly perplexed Des that he feels 'so pure'<sup>29</sup>. Des immediately reads Lionel's outburst as an emotional reaction to the realisation he is doing good, 'keeping the world clean for democracy'.<sup>30</sup>

DES:

I'm going to shake you by the hand.

Des shakes Lionel's hand. He then gestures to the man in the chair with his thumb.

And so will he... he looks at his watch) ...in about thirty- five minutes.<sup>31</sup>

Pinter shows his audience that the idea that the western powers can somehow 'export' democracy is erroneous at best and a fraud at worst. The matter is one of paranoid schizoid power, even if the idea of nation building seems to be reparative: a manifestation of the depressive position in geopolitical terms. Even if those who conceive of such plans had benign or even benevolent intentions, nothing can be achieved by killing innocent people with bombs and bullets, certainly not peace. Violence can only give birth to more violence. Using your power to force others to adopt your values, your beliefs, and your ways of living can only ever end in disaster. Sooner rather than later you will meet die hard, bloody resistance from those who do not wish to be ruled by a powerless puppet government, set-up

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<sup>28</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 276

<sup>29</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 277

<sup>30</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 277

<sup>31</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 278



to do your bidding. These people will have an indefatigable and absolutely committed sense of their own culture, their own identity, their own nation, and their own history. They will see you as invaders and conquerors, who have brought death and destruction to their proud, sovereign motherland; not as benign liberators. They will interpret your presence as a declaration of war. Before long, a vicious cycle of violence will ensue, and, in the inferno of such desperate and fraught circumstances, it will be virtually impossible to hold onto your humanity or your morality. You will regress: becoming the bestial mirror image of the ‘tyranny’ you fought to depose. Now peace, justice, freedom and democracy will mean nothing. They will become ‘magical words’, empty, meaningless platitudes, egregiously taken out of context by the powerful, wheeled out time and again to justify any despicable crime perpetrated by you or your allies.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, this sketch, sometimes overlooked, is an important piece of work that warns us of the consequences of unchecked American power. It calls to mind the illegal gulag at Guantanamo Bay, and the atrocities at Abu Ghraib<sup>33</sup> amongst others. It ruthlessly demolishes the facile assumption that the west will always be ‘the good guys’. Ultimately it is a timely reminder that ‘we’, the supposed torch bearers of democracy and justice, must be held to the same high standards of ethics and morality that we demand of others.

### ***Party Time***

Pinter’s third play in his political trilogy is *Party Time*. The play had its premiere in the Autumn 1991, at The Almeda Theatre in London<sup>34</sup>. Pinter took on the role of director. We

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<sup>32</sup> These words are not Pinter’s. They are mine. It is my hope that they accurately and adequately represent the views of the left who were vehemently opposed the war. Pinter was a member of this group.

<sup>33</sup> Pinter, Nobel Peace Prize Speech

<sup>34</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 280

are in 'Gavin's' flat and a party is in full swing. We can see armchairs and sofas. People are sitting and standing, politely conversing. To the rear of the stage there are two doors. One is never used, but is half open, bathed in a 'dim light'<sup>35</sup>. In the foreground Terry and Gavin are chatting, and Terry is waxing lyrical about the new health club he attends. Dusty, Terry's wife, enters the scene, and we discover that she is concerned for the whereabouts of 'Jimmy'.

Gavin quickly tries to dissuade Dusty from mentioning Jimmy, and the conversation returns to the wonders of the new club. The characters' prattle on about the splendid food, and the attractive men and women who frequent its facilities until Melissa arrives and reveals to the audience that something is amiss outside:

MELISSA

What's on earth's going on out there? It's like the black death.

TERRY

What is?

MELISSA

The town's dead. There's nobody on the streets, there's not a soul in sight, apart from some...soldiers. My driver had to stop at a...you know...what do you call it?...a roadblock. We had to say who we were...it really was a trifle.

TERRY

Oh, there's just been a little...you know...Nothing in it. Can I introduce you? Gavin White – our host. Dame Melissa.<sup>36</sup>

Why are the streets empty? Why did she and her driver have to negotiate a military roadblock? Why do Gavin and Terry anxiously quash the issue before it can be discussed at length? As the group sip wine and exchange banal pleasantries, Dusty again tries to broach

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<sup>35</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 280

<sup>36</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 287

the issue of ‘all’ the rumours she has been hearing. But Terry immediately attacks her for voicing her thoughts out loud:

DUSTY:

I don’t know what to believe

TERRY:

You don’t have to believe anything. You just have to shut up and mind your own business, how many times do I have to tell you? You come to a lovely party like this, all you have to do is shut up and enjoy the hospitality and mind your own fucking business. How many more times do I have to tell you? You keep hearing all these things. You keep hearing all these things spread by pricks about pricks. What’s it got to do with you.<sup>37</sup>

Clearly, Terry has something to hide, and is perhaps privy to more information than he is letting on. He also seems genuinely frightened of the consequences of being overheard speaking about these ‘issues’.

We hear short snatches of conversation from other party members. We overhear a peculiar dialogue between ‘Fred’ and ‘Douglas’. They seem to have some kind of high level, inside knowledge of what is happening in the streets beyond the party. Is Douglas the architect of a nefarious political plot? What are the men talking about when they discuss the importance of obtaining a ‘cast iron peace’?<sup>38</sup> Whatever they are referring to, Liz and Charlotte seem trapped in their own world, oblivious to the danger that may be at hand as they prattle on about the loss of Liz’s latest male squeeze. Here Pinter triggers the audience to genuine laughter with his perceptive and uncannily accurate rendition of the sound of two vain, shallow, privileged women spitefully gossiping about a love rival. Moreover, it is the casual and insouciant way that the women use powerful and emotive words such as ‘love’ and ‘rape’

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<sup>37</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 288

<sup>38</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 292

that belies the apparent seriousness of the conversation and emphasises their vacuous personalities.

Meanwhile, as Douglas and Fred prepare to execute their plan, Dusty is still concerned about the whereabouts of her brother Jimmy, even though Terry seems absolutely determined to force her to desist from mentioning his absence. He would much rather stick to jabbering on about the new club, Mellissa's age defyingly svelte figure, or Gavin's golfing hobby. We can even detect a trace of jealousy in Terry when both Dusty and Melissa respond positively to Gavin's revelation that he likes and owns a boat. Indeed, Terry ends up with egg on his face when he tries to demean his wife and raise a laugh by telling Gavin that his wife doesn't like to be 'fucked on boats'<sup>39</sup>. Melissa's response, which is to imply that she does like to be fucked on boats – 'I thought everyone liked that'<sup>40</sup> - wrongfoots Terry who realises that he has just allowed the attractive Melissa the opportunity to signal to Gavin her possible availability. On the surface it all seems reasonably innocent, although, a few moments later when Dusty is taunting her husband over her sexual attraction to Fred, Terry implies that there is something dark and sinister going on behind closed doors:

DUSTY:

Poor darling, are you upset? Have I let you down? I've let you down. And I've always tries to be such a good wife. Such a good wife.

They stare at each other

Perhaps you'll kill me when we get home? Do you think you will? Do you think you'll put an end to it? Do you think there is an end to it? What do you think? Do you think that if you put an end to me that would be the end of everything for everyone? Will everything and everyone die with me?

TERRY:

Yes, you're all going to die together, you and all your lot.

DUSTY:

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<sup>39</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 296

<sup>40</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 296

How are you going to do it? Tell me.

TERRY:

Easy. We've got dozens of options. We could suffocate every single one of you at a given signal or we could shove a broomstick up each individual arse at another given signal or we could poison all the mother's milk in the world so that every baby would drop dead before it opened its perverted bloody mouth. <sup>41</sup>

Soon we learn that Liz is Douglas's husband and Fred is introduced to her friend Charlotte. It turns out that they know each other. Charlotte even implies that the two may have slept together – Fred gave her 'a leg up'<sup>42</sup> as she puts it - in exchange for a promotion of some sort. Clearly, although Fred claims to be living a clean life, he does not consider using his power to obtain sexual gratification as morally dubious.

Moreover, as the two flirt Fred mentions Charlotte's husband who we learn has died. However, when Fred enquires as to whether it was a short or long illness we discover that he wasn't ill at all. Clearly, he was killed: by something or someone. Indeed, when Charlotte mentions the 'activity' outside in the street Fred brushes off her enquiry menacingly, telling her to leave the street to 'us'.<sup>43</sup>

Soon, Fred, Charlotte, Douglas and Liz are reunited, and Douglas takes centre stage to deliver a gushing eulogy to his wife Liz who apparently played the role of the perfect housewife and mother whilst Douglas slogged his 'guts out'<sup>44</sup> as a travelling salesman. The fact that we know Liz to be quite openly unfaithful betrays his words as a lie from the moment they leave

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<sup>41</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 302

<sup>42</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 299

<sup>43</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 307

<sup>44</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 309

his mouth. As the group congregate, Gavin decides to reveal the dreadful truth of what is going on the streets outside:

GAVIN

Thank you very much indeed. Now I believe one or two of guests encountered traffic problems on their way here tonight. I apologise for that, but I would like to assure you that all such problems and all related problems will be resolved very soon. Between ourselves, we've had a bit of a round-up this evening. This round up is coming to an end. In fact, normal service will be resumed shortly. That is, after all, our aim. Normal service. We, if you like, insist on it. We insist on it. We do. That's all we ask, that the service this country provides will run on normal, secure and legitimate paths and that the ordinary citizen be allowed to pursue his labours and his leisure in peace. Thank you all for so much for coming here tonight. It's been really lovely to see you, quite smashing.<sup>45</sup>

Now, the party is over, but guests do not leave, rather they freeze. The 'light from the door intensifies' as it burns into the room. Now, Jimmy finally emerges through the door and speaks. His monologue finally removes the mystery of what has been going on beyond the walls of Gavin's gathering and it is horrific:

JIMMY

Sometimes I hear things. Then it is quiet.

I had a name. It was Jimmy. People called me Jimmy. That was my name.

Sometimes I hear things. Then everything is quiet. When everything is quiet I hear my heart.

When the terrible noises come I don't hear anything. Don't hear don't breathe am blind

Then everything is quiet. I hear a heartbeat. It is probably someone else's heartbeat.

What am I?

Sometimes a door bangs, I hear voices, then it stops. Everything stops. It all stops. It all closes. It closes down. It shuts. It all shuts. I shuts down. It shuts. I see nothing at any time. Is sit sucking the dark.

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<sup>45</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 313

It's what I have. The dark is in my mouth and I suck it. It's the only thing I have. It's mine. It's my own. I suck it.<sup>46</sup>

With this chilling monologue, Jimmy describes what its really like living in a totalitarian state. He is attempting to articulate to the audience the terrifying experience of another 'round up': crouching in the pitch black, desperately trying to remain hidden, behind a closed door, trying not to breathe, trying not to listen, as your heart pounds in your chest, as another victim is taken away to be tortured and exterminated. He talks about how he had a name, but now, he has been robbed of his identity as a member of humanity. Perhaps, like the prisoners at Auschwitz, he only has a number? Whatever the case may be, he can feel the wickedness and evil of others deep inside him. All he has this introjected 'dark' that he 'sucks'.

In the end, 'Party Time' is an ironic title. There is nothing jocund or celebratory about Pinter's vision. On the contrary, the piece serves as a warning. Pinter's intention is to the demonstrate to his audience unequivocally how those with power and social status can become by dazzled by the trappings of wealth and privilege. They have used their money to insulate themselves from the harsh realities of life. They seem to have no interest or concern for the problems of the ordinary working man or woman. Rather, they have chosen to live inside a glittering bubble of five star exclusive 'clubs', cocktail parties and private islands. Indeed, the party guests are too vain, too narcissistic, too embroiled in their own flirtatious erotic fantasies and entanglements to see the danger that is nearby. Furthermore, these characters, who Pinter skilfully, and perhaps even knowingly, depicts have also exploited their inside connections to smooth their way to the top.

In the face of such vacuous disinterest and cynicism it is not difficult for the violent, forces that surround the guests to tighten their grip on society. The shallow avarice of this 'jet set'

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<sup>46</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 314

has induced in them an extraordinary ignorance and apathy. By pandering to their selfish need to avoid political struggle or discomfort they have contributed to the disaster that is about to befall their society. They are blinded by their own petty concerns and trivia. They literally do not see Fred and Douglas scheming in the corner of the room. Ultimately then, these rich, powerful and well-connected people are complicit in the fall of their society because, at the critical moment when they were desperately needed, they failed to act. Therefore, they must carry their share of the burden of guilt. With all the financial and political resources at their disposal, these extremely well- educated individuals should have known better: they could have sensed what was happening and did all that they could to stop it. But now, it is too late. Terry is the only member of the clique who recognises that Fred has become dangerous. He understands what the old man is capable of and desperately seeks to avoid any contact with him.

Pinter shows us, then, how dangerous political indifference and complacency can be. We cannot sit idly by and take it for granted that peace and liberty will endure if we simply shrug our shoulders and delegate responsibility for it to others. We cannot afford to become distracted by our narcissistic delusions of grandeur. We must be prepared to stand up and speak out against regressive, paranoid schizoid governments that seek to abandon democratic principles.

In many ways the notion of freedom and democracy is a political, cultural and institutional manifestation of the depressive position. This is because it is predicated on the belief that people are free, independent, autonomous human beings with a unique identity outside of the power of the state; and that, as separate individuals, they have the right to choose who represents them. However, ironically, to defend democracy we must be prepared to adopt an unequivocal political stance that mirrors the paranoid schizoid position. We need to be able to see violence, political repression and torture for what it truly is. We must be able to split good



from bad; and, in recognising what is good and what is bad we also cannot close our eyes to the suffering caused by our own violent governments. We cannot live in a state of neurotic denial about the horrors perpetrated in our name. We must face these truths and step out into the world prepared to take the action necessary to bring about real change. Jimmy's entrance at the end of the play therefore forces the audience to look again, with fresh eyes, at the indissoluble connection between political apathy and political violence.

During the 1980s Pinter's work clearly expressed his own political views and, as the years went by, he never changed these opinions in any way. His anger toward American, British and Israeli foreign policy was unrelenting. During the first gulf war, which was seen at the time as a great moral triumph for the west, Pinter was outspoken in his condemnation of the 'atrocities'<sup>47</sup> committed by the Americans and British. He denounced the NATO intervention in Serbia in 1999 as a 'bandit action'<sup>48</sup>. In the aftermath of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 he condemned George W. Bush and Tony Blair as 'gangsters'<sup>49</sup>. This period of Pinter's work, then, is an expression of his desire to use his art to engage with the world, and with history, and to become, in his own words, an active 'citizen'.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UqhPBmDbJNoC4> Iraq war discussion with Edward Pearce and Harold Pinter [ accessed 26th May 2018]

<sup>48</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nwdt55Moz\\_E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nwdt55Moz_E) Harold Pinter - Against the War: The NATO action in Serbia [ accessed 26th May 2018]

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=69Jfp7zvypI> Harold Pinter on Newsnight (Part One)

<sup>50</sup> Pinter, Nobel.org

## Chapter 9

### *Later Plays 1990-2000*

In the final decade of his writing career, Pinter did not continue to write political plays. He did however remain politically active and conspicuously outspoken. He continued to attack western foreign policy, most notably through his poems and sketches which illustrate, in a series of graphic, uncompromising images, the devastating impact of war. And yet, having written three plays which were, by his standards, unambiguous and explicit, in the nineties Pinter reverted to type with a series of difficult, inscrutable, but hauntingly memorable plays.

#### *Ashes to Ashes*

*Ashes to Ashes* was written in 1996, the year the Labour Party were re-elected to power in Britain after sixteen years in the wilderness of opposition. It was a positive and optimistic time, and this sense of excited renewal was captured in the images of a new, fresh faced prime minister addressing the nation in triumph as the dawn broke over the capital. Pinter, however, was not about to be swept up in the euphoria of that year. He seemed to be looking not so much into the future as he was back into the past: trying to come to terms with the Jewish burden of history; trying to process the horrors of the holocaust and articulate the pain of his people.

But *Ashes to Ashes* begins in the present. We are in a country house. It is summer time, in the early evening, and as the play progresses, atmospherically, the glow from the lamplight will intensify but it will not illuminate the room as it gradually darkens. One man, Devlin, is standing, nursing a drink, whilst a woman, Rebecca, is sitting before him. The play commences with a characteristic 'silence' before Rebecca continues to elucidate the intimate details of an erotic sadomasochistic ritual with a former lover:

## REBECCA

Well...for example...he would stand over me and clench his fist. And then he put his other hand on my neck and grip it and bring my head towards him. His fist...grazed my mouth. And he'd say, 'Kiss my fist'.<sup>1</sup>

Devlin's reaction to Rebecca's recollection of these intimate exchanges is to imply that she is being somewhat disingenuous. Evidently, he feels a powerful sense of jealousy, imagining the bodies of Rebecca and her lover passionately intertwined, in an image redolent of his own internal parental figures and objects: at the same time, he cannot seem to desist from trying to force Rebecca to tell him her most intimate secrets. He appears to be offended, incredulous, but at the same time fascinated, by the revelation that this act, so apparently loaded with aggression and sadism, could be tender, loving even.

The first few pages of the play, then, details Devlin's anxious attempt to somehow take control of Rebecca. The sexually charged image of the woman's legs slowly opening to the touch of her lover, is paralleled in Devlin's psychological need to prize open his reticent wife. However, Rebecca's response, is to be consistently inconsistent. At times she is unguarded and specific. At others she remains elusive and enigmatic.

Indeed, Devlin's paranoid sense that Rebecca is somehow slipping through his fingers is confirmed when he nonchalantly calls her 'darling'. Although she recollects that she was once called the same by her lover, she now ruefully refuses to accept this label. 'I'm nobody's darling'<sup>2</sup>, she tells him. Indeed, by confidently asserting her right to be referred to in a way appropriate for her, Rebecca not only impresses upon Devlin her need to be free of his patronising attempts to control her, she also subtly distances herself from the presence of the lover who left because of his work. Moreover, she takes control of the conversation,

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<sup>1</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 395

<sup>2</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 401

relegating Devlin's desire to be furnished with a detailed description of the man's appearance as unimportant: simultaneously answering her husband's slightly odd earlier query about what is, and what is not, a 'legitimate'<sup>3</sup> form of questioning.

The subject of their dialogue shifts when Rebecca begins to describe how her lover had a job at a travel agency. Devlin continues to try to ascertain the specific circumstances of his employ but is flummoxed by a story that seems to be a mish mash of incompatible data. On the one hand, the man was a tourist guide, but this was only a part time job within the business. He was also a powerful individual, high up in the organisation, with power and status. Rebecca describes how she was taken to a 'place,' a kind of 'factory'<sup>4</sup> where the workers 'doffed'<sup>5</sup> their caps to the man for whom they 'great' respect. She even tells Devlin that the workers of the factory sang because they were 'musical'<sup>6</sup>, and that, such was their devotion to their boss they would have 'followed him off a cliff'<sup>7</sup>, and into the sea. It is at this point that Rebecca's stories begins to take on the shape and appearance of a dream with all its dissociative logic and flights of fantasy. Moreover, the image she adumbrates, of rows and rows of obedient human beings, locked into this sort of factory, where the conditions were dank, and with no toileting facilities, desperately eager to please their powerful boss, is both sinister and portentous: instantly evoking a gulag or even a Nazi labour camp.

This notion is confirmed when Rebecca describes how her lover used to work at a 'railway station and walk down the platform, and tearing all the babies from the arms of their

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<sup>3</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 339

<sup>4</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 404

<sup>5</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 405

<sup>6</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 405

<sup>7</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 405

screaming mothers'.<sup>8</sup> This haunting image is suggestive of anecdotes from those who witnessed the horrors of the holocaust. Now the picture of the man Devlin is trying to develop through his insistent questions is becoming clearer. He appears to be a brutal fascist, maybe a Nazi officer.

As the light continues to fade Rebecca hears a police siren becoming louder and then fading away in the distance. She tells Devlin that she feels terribly upset by the sound, but when he tries to tease out the meaning behind her emotional response to a perfectly mundane noise, he is surprised to discover that she feels guilty over the fact that someone, somewhere, is in trouble, and that it isn't her. The sound is getting louder for others but fading away for her. More than this, Rebecca informs Devlin that she has an irrational, peculiar need to somehow own the sound:

REBECCA

I hate it fading away. I hate it echoing away. I hate it leaving me. I hate losing it. I hate somebody else possessing it. I want it to be mine, all the time. It's such a beautiful sound. Don't you think<sup>9</sup>.

This revelation is one key to understanding Rebecca's unconscious turmoil. She seems to need to feel guilty for the suffering of others. Now Devlin seems to relinquish his role as her husband or lover and begins to behave as if he were her psychotherapist. He intuitively recognises that Rebecca is trying to find ways of articulating and, crucially, holding onto her guilty anxiety, and when she recalls an incident where she dropped a pen as if she had dropped a human, he seems to understand how to counter this phantasy. He cleverly helps Rebecca begin to recognise the irrational nature of her guilt by reflecting it back to her, so she can see it more clearly. He does this by accentuating and mimicking her paranoid response to

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<sup>8</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 407

<sup>9</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 408

the pen's descent whilst seeming to embrace the opposite belief that the pen was not 'innocent' but 'guilty'. This stratagem assists Rebecca in momentarily breaking through the subjective fog of her projections to engage once again with reality. She suddenly realises that the pen is just a pen and not a human. It doesn't have any parents and therefore she needn't cling onto a belief that she was responsible for it. Moreover, by attacking the foundation of Rebecca's unconscious phantasy that the world is populated with innocent objects that she has failed to protect, by pointing out that there is no way she could possibly know if other people were innocent or not, Devlin guides Rebecca back towards reality and a more ambivalent, less paranoid sense of her relation to the world and its objects.

Nevertheless, as the play progresses, Rebecca's internal sense of a profound guilt over things she did, or did not do, to prevent a tragedy continue to emerge, even though, when pressed by Devlin to justify these feelings she openly admits that 'nothing ever happened to her or her friends'.<sup>10</sup> She even describes a frightening dream, again strongly suggestive of a holocaust atrocity, where she watches from a window on a warm summer's day as a group of clothed people walk into the sea and are submerged by the tide. At the end of the play we finally discover the source of her anxiety. Rebecca is being plagued by a dreadful phantasy that she handed over a baby that she had responsibility for to her Nazi lover. Perhaps the most shocking revelation she divulges is that she was in love with this fascist who also treated her with compassion because he adored her.

Robert Gordon's perceptive analysis of *Ashes to Ashes* postulates that Rebecca is suffering from a curious form of historical 'survivor's guilt'<sup>11</sup>. She is a member of the post war generation, a group of people who did not live through the most tragic, most destructive period in human history, but were fortuitously born in the aftermath. The principle symptom

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<sup>10</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 413

<sup>11</sup> Gordon, *Harold*, 184

of such a neurosis is a very close, almost indivisible identification with those who did experience catastrophic loss and suffering, to such an extent that the individual's perception of what did and did not happen becomes violently distorted. Devlin, on the other hand, although astute and intuitive in seeming to comprehend the nature of his partner's underlying phantasies, cannot resist the impulse to explore his own unconscious desire to play out an omnipotent phantasy of power over Rebecca. He does this by imaginatively introjecting himself into the sadomasochistic tableaux that his wife describes at the beginning of the play. He will play the role of the loving fascist, but Rebecca refuses to join him in exploring this envious phantasy by rebuffing his suggestion that they might re-enact the scene.

Ordinarily, a psychoanalysis that identifies significant compulsion towards neurotic guilt, effective dreaming and a concern for the fate of objects is considered less pathological than a manic depressive or schizophrenic diagnosis. However, in this instance, Rebecca's sense of guilt is overwhelming; it's as if she is drowning in a sea of persecutory regret. She sensitively recognises that she is suffering from a form of 'mental elephantiasis'<sup>12</sup> and, in her case, the trigger for this crushing anxiety was the moment when she imagines herself handing over of the defenceless infant to the Nazi officer.

She seems to have created a fantasy of her love affair with the fascist to justify her feelings of guilt. Her paranoid guiltiness is an extreme defence against the painful realisation that she feels troublingly ambivalent about the fantasised monster who committed such a plethora of heinous crimes. She loved him and sensed his compassion, and passion, for her. She also felt sexually aroused and liberated during the couple's twisted sadomasochistic role plays. It seems almost unfathomable to imagine that such sickness and perversion could exist alongside such romantic love.

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<sup>12</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 417

Moreover, it is not only the baby that she feels she has betrayed, but an entire generation of innocent people. And yet, from a Kleinian perspective this is not evidence of mental functioning from within the depressive position, but a paranoid schizoid, omnipotent phantasy of power. Rebecca is only one person, a normal, perhaps unremarkable, woman. Furthermore, as she herself is ready to admit, she had nothing to do with the holocaust. It is completely absurd to conceive of the possibility that she could be held in any way responsible for the worst atrocity in human history; and yet she believes this to be true. She believes that she has played a central role in the death of millions of people. And, if one is to believe such a thing to be true, one must also be able to convince oneself that one is possessed of an extraordinary power to impact upon other people's lives. One must perceive of oneself as virtually omnipotent to even contemplate the notion that one could be held accountable for such a monumental tragedy.

In the end, Rebecca's state of mind is schizoid since it is predicted on the unconscious phantasy that she has the power to 'magically'<sup>13</sup> erase the trauma of the holocaust by containing it through experiencing extreme feelings of guilt. She wants to 'own' these feelings as she puts it. She needs to feel a sense of control over the trauma. The helpless and tragic Jewish mothers in her story, who suffered the very real nightmare of having their babies ripped from their arms on the platform, have come to represent her own persecutory phantasy of the good mother's breast destroyed, her womb ripped apart, and her unborn children enviously attacked and devoured.

*Ashes to Ashes* is an extraordinarily multifaceted and challenging play that forces the audience to interpret the action as an expression of a highly complex unconscious phantasy. It also raises a myriad of moral and ethical questions about the nature of the past, the character of the present and the kind of world we want to create in the future. What are the

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<sup>13</sup>Salman Akhtar *Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac,2009) P.6



responsibilities of one generation to another? How can we ever truly come to terms with the holocaust and work to build a world where such unspeakable atrocities could never happen again?

One possible answer is to change the violent course of history by constructing societies based around love, and the human need for loving attachments to other people. Such a world, based on the notion of community and the maturity of the depressive position, may be resilient and durable enough to overcome paranoid schizoid impulses within social, cultural and political contexts; replacing destructive, infantile, monstrous phantasies with the capacity to tolerate and sustain a painful, but realistic sense of ambivalence regarding the affairs of men and women.

### ***Moonlight***

*Moonlight* was written in 1993. It is a play that centres on the experiences of a family as they try to come to terms with the terminal illness of the father, Andy. Throughout most of the play Andy is confined to a bed. At his side is his wife, Bel. We soon discover that their relationship has become poisoned by resentment. Bel, despite her obvious deep disdain for Andy, feels obliged to stand by her husband as he dies. We also meet another couple, Maria and Ralph. Soon we learn that Andy, Bel and Maria were lovers: they enjoyed something of a ménage à trois. Situated on the other side of the stage there is another bed, occupied by Fred, Andy's son. We learn that Fred has had a mental breakdown, perhaps suffering from nervous exhaustion. He is joined by his sibling Jake. Throughout the play, at various intervals, we also meet another character, a young woman by the name of Bridget. Bridget is a ghost like figure. She is the daughter of Andy and Bel and, in time, it becomes apparent that she has died.

*Moonlight* is an extremely intricate, multifaceted, multi-layered work that describes, with great poetic tenderness and vision, the extraordinarily complex nature of family relationships. The elegiac structure of the text accentuates its melancholic atmosphere. At the heart of the play is the painful, almost complete breakdown in Andy's relations with his sons. In this sense Andy is reminiscent of Max in *The Homecoming* and his vituperative broadsides have a similar quality of unbridled disdain. Fred and Jake seem to loathe their aggressive, authoritarian father and appear to want to have nothing to do with him. Indeed, the boys intimate that their hatred comes from a deep sense of injustice. Did Andy gamble away their inheritance, as they imply, on Bognor Regis Pier<sup>14</sup> ? Either way, the two handle their resentment by playfully, scornfully, mocking their father through the banter of a role play that parodies Andy's life and career in the civil service. Their patter is strongly redolent of a 1950s vaudeville skit, or a comic routine lampooning the image of the stuffy, starch collared civil service that one might hear on the radio.<sup>15</sup> They have also devised a cruel way to disarm their mother when she calls to enquire after them. They goad her by answering the phone as if they were minding the desk of a Chinese laundry<sup>16</sup> . Their shared sense of alienation and hostility towards their family is complete. From beginning to end, the relationship between father and son is depicted in *Moonlight* as a remorseless oedipal war of attrition that leaves all the participants broken and exhausted. And yet, we also sense that beneath the mask of vitriolic sarcasm, antipathy and arrogant diffidence, Fred and Jake still love their father.

*Moonlight* explores death in a vivid, elegiac and startlingly emotive way. Andy, the cantankerous father, is understandably bitter that his time has come early, in middle age; through the fog of his caustic rants at the 'dying of the light' we get a sense of a man who

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<sup>14</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 331

<sup>15</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 340-341

<sup>16</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 381

feels desperately unfulfilled as the darkness looms. Moreover, the poor man cannot seem to contemplate the possibility that oblivion awaits him. How could that be? What is the point of struggling through life if there is nothing on the other side? Andy's overwhelming sense of dread at the absurd blackness of death is a natural response from a frightened man. At the same time, it is also a perfectly human narcissistic phantasy. Andy just cannot truly entertain the notion that life will continue without him: that his consciousness is insignificant in the 'grand scheme of things': merely a brief candle that will soon go out. His response to the reality of dying is to veer from anger at the injustice of it all 'why am I dying anyway, I've never harmed a soul'<sup>17</sup> to desperation as seeks to find a 'loophole'<sup>18</sup> to help him overcome his fears that there is nothing but the earth awaiting him.

Bridget's spectral appearances also develop and foreground the theme of death in Pinter's late masterpiece and emphasise the evanescent nature of life. Her account of arriving for a party at a house that is empty and dark, and then standing solemnly in the moonlight, perhaps symbolises her own loss of life, and the morbid notion that, in the end, we must face our death alone. And yet, in my view, Bridget's role in the play is to emphasise the point that the dead are always present in the thoughts, dreams and fantasies of the living. Bridget's untimely death, and her tragic loss, has clearly had a crushing impact on both Andy and Bel. But neither seems capable of finding the words to express their grief.

However, it is not just the presence of the dead that hangs over the family. It is the presence of death itself that the family cannot shake off: the death of Andy and Bel's marriage; the death of Jake and Fred's relationship with their father; the death of the hope for a better future for the family. Andy's illness and petulant black moods are a sobering reminder to all

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<sup>17</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 322

<sup>18</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 358

that death is a fundamental part of life and that, in the end, we will have to face the loss of everything we once held dear.

Andy and Bel's unorthodox marriage provides a peculiar backdrop for the play and throws into sharp relief the question of why Andy's relationship with his sons has failed so completely. It is not entirely clear why the couple chose to include Maria in their relationship, but if they believed that it might permit them a degree of freedom and liberty from within the safe, but sometimes stultifying, structure of marriage then they were wrong. On the contrary, this extramarital liaison appears to have eaten away at any mutual respect, trust and love that the two might have shared.

In establishing the unconventional terms and conditions of their relationship, Andy and Bel seemed to instinctively, if unconsciously, acknowledge the fact that human beings are not necessarily suited to the confines of a monogamous relationship. But their rejection of orthodox sexual practices within their marriage is not necessarily peculiar or idiosyncratic, but indicative of a universal, and natural, human compulsion to make loving links and connections with many other objects. We have a natural urge to be creative, to make life: to explore our narcissistic urge to duplicate ourselves. In the end, however, we are also destructive creatures: envious of the primal scene connection, terrified of exclusion, driven to spoil the good object, dependent on our attachment to the object. We find it difficult to accept the fact that the object can exist independently from ourselves. Moreover, Ralph and Maria's intermittent entrances and exits, and their inability to conceal their pride over the success of their children, serves to accentuate Bel and Andy's own feelings of failure and disillusionment at the state of their own family. Faced with the reality that their approach to parenting has failed to produce grown-up, mature adults worthy enough to bathe in the glow of others' social approval, Andy regresses into a pathetic fantasy, a make believe that he is

surrounded by grandchildren<sup>19</sup>. Bel's response is cling onto her hope that she can re-engage the estranged boys. Her desperate attempt, and agonising failure, is exemplified by a short scene where she calls Fred and the phone rings six times before clicking out.

Perhaps understanding the nature of moonlight can help us make sense of this enigmatic play. Moonlight illuminates the deep, black, darkness of night. But it is not daylight. It has a dreamlike, ethereal quality and feel, a sense of the liminal. In Pinter's play, moonlight represents a no man's land between life and death that all the characters are forced to inhabit. Andy is dying but he is not dead, he still has some life to lead. Bel is trapped between her life as Andy's spouse that she longs to abandon, and her future, which she has yet to create. Damaged by their troubled relationship with their father, Jake and Fred seem to be caught between adolescence and mature adulthood. Their state is one of arrested development; and in failing to face their father as he dies, they reject the chance to free themselves from his shadow. Instead they condemn themselves to remain suspended in an emotional and psychological limbo. Their only defence against the recognition that they have spurned their chance to make a meaningful reparation is to take refuge in their pathetic ritualistic role-plays, which reinforce, rather than confront, their pain. Bridget, who seems to fretfully appear, vanish and reappear, is trapped within her own a liminal prison, demarcated on the stage as a third, shadowy area, suspended between life and death. The experience of death that she articulates is restless and exhausting. She describes how far she has travelled, that she must continue her mysterious, but arduous journey through her grisly underworld of 'thorns, stones, stinging nettles, barbed wire, [and] skeletons of men and women in ditches'<sup>20</sup>. We may infer she will only rest easy when her family can, finally, summon the strength to

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<sup>19</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 379

<sup>20</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 337

confront the pain of her loss and Andy's fate, and endure the difficult process of symbolic and emotional reparation.

### ***Celebration***

*Celebration* is Pinter's last full-length play, written on the cusp of the millennium. Once again it is a complex, enigmatic, but also extremely funny piece. Set in a sophisticated London restaurant, strongly redolent of *The Ivy*, Pinter's rendition of the chatter of a modern metropolitan crowd at dinner is uncanny. It is a busy night, with lots of people enjoying an evening out. On one table is a married couple: Lambert and Julie are wedded, and they sit across from Matt and Prue who are also man and wife. Lambert and Matt are brothers, whilst the women are sisters. The cause for their visit is to celebrate Lambert and Julie's anniversary. As the guests banter and josh, on another table Russell and Suki talk as they dine. As the action evolves, the dialogue is curiously and comically punctuated by the philosophical musings of the successful restaurateur, Richard, a waitress called Sonia, and a young waiter.

Although Lambert finds himself in refined and elegant surroundings, he is obviously a total philistine. A natural buffoon, he latches onto his failure to pronounce the name of an Italian dish, wearing his shame as a badge of honour, before introducing the word 'arsehole'<sup>21</sup> into the conversation, devoid of any meaningful context, to weak comic effect. As the less than cultured couples raise their glasses to quaff their expensive wines, Pinter offers us an enticing glimpse into Russell and Suki's relationship. Russell begins by expressing his hope that 'they' (his company) will 'invest'<sup>22</sup> in him, but he also appears to be trying to get off the hook with Suki having confessed to a brief sexual liaison with a 'secretary'. Concerned that

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<sup>21</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 441

<sup>22</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 442

he could lose his girlfriend, he is somewhat taken aback when she artfully turns the tables on him by making some references to her own wildly erotic past as a secretary. Her monologue, describing these ‘naughty, saucy, flirty’<sup>23</sup> escapades, teeters on the pornographic; it shifts the power dynamic in the scene by totally disarming Russell. He is left feeling disorientated, envious and insecure: uncertain if Suki, or the company he works for, will see him as worthy of long term investment. Money, sex, power: in one short scene Pinter develops an unsettling, but strangely alluring, snapshot of intimate human relationships in the jungle of the modern city.

We quickly return to table one. Julie is moaning about the fact that Lambert doesn’t ‘listen’ and Prue joins forces with her sister to admonish her brother in law. Lambert’s response to being gently hectored is to announce that he has another ‘wife’ under the table (implying, in a misogynistic context, a demeaning act of oral sexual gratification). Julie’s aggressive riposte is to propose to Lambert that he should ‘buy a new car and drive it into a brick wall.’<sup>24</sup> Lambert and Matt react by closing ranks to undermine the apparent sincerity of Julie’s disgruntled badgering. They point out that Julie actually likes ‘cars’ and, in a typically masculine and misogynistic display of swaggering bravado, they use the verse of a tacky song to equate the lines of a new car to the sexually accentuated body of a woman.

This scene evinces the jaded nature of Julie and Lambert’s relationship, representing the pattern of a bored, tired marriage where the participants have lost a sense of their own identity and taken on instead a stereotypical gender role. We get a sense of these guests as nouveau riche, lacking sophistication and poise. Lambert and Matt’s mocking claim that their chauvinistic ditty is a traditional folk song is an ironic comment on their own lack of class, which is confirmed seconds later when they realise that they have drained an entire bottle of

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<sup>23</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 445

<sup>24</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 447

expensive wine. They obnoxiously call the waiter to attention. The materialistic Julie and Prue come across as equally ruthless and arriviste. In league with her sister, Julie's apparent fetish for expensive cars undermines her attempts to portray herself as an honest, salt-of-the-earth type woman who cannot get any sense out of husband. At the scene's conclusion one is left with an image of a group of people playing out a boisterous social dining ritual to conceal and negate their own sense of loneliness and isolation. They appear to be the perfect representatives of a vapid, materialistic, paranoid schizoid modern world, characterised by greed, narcissistic status anxiety, and the fetishization of money. One is left to ponder on what there is, precisely, to celebrate.

On table two the flirtation intensifies, with Suki playfully toying with Russell. However, their banter takes an alarming turn when Suki tells Russell that he doesn't have a 'character'<sup>25</sup>. Pinter seems to suggest that the city has sucked the life out of these individuals, who cannot see beyond their own materialistic avarice and status anxiety to recoup a sense of their own identity. On table one, the braggart in Lambert is quelled when his attempts to boast over his previous year's earnings are met with a tactical silence, and the conversation takes a decidedly oedipal twist when Prue confides in Julie that she was hated by Matt's mother: a jealous tyrant who wouldn't give her daughter in the law the 'dripping off her nose'<sup>26</sup>. This revelation, delivered with a viscerally demotic sense of relish, further destabilises the notion that we are here to celebrate the success of the guests enduring love: rather, the characters can barely conceal their resentment for one another, and are quite prepared to sully the occasion by using it to broadcast their selfish grievances. As they become increasingly intoxicated they stumble across a fundamental truth about the pain of the Oedipus complex, but make a drunken mess of it by claiming that it is the mother who has sexual designs on her offspring.

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<sup>25</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 449

<sup>26</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 452



This interlude concludes when Richard, the owner arrives, and, after a banal, ritualistic exchange of pleasantries, the subject of the quality of the dishes is proffered. Here, Lambert and Matt's appreciation for the food is countered by Prue's bizarre broadside against Richard and the restaurant. She supports her supposition, that Julie's food was as 'dry as dust'<sup>27</sup> with an unsettling monologue full of regressive paranoid schizoid imagery that describes how she witnessed the domestic abuse of her father at the hands of her mother. Her recollection of seeing her father's clothes soaked in blood mingles with an aggressive, envious, urethral phantasy of her sister masturbating and pissing in the soup to produce a better final dish. But when Richard makes to leave he is confronted again by Julie and Prue who now apologise to the proprietor and suggest that they might confirm the intent of their good wishes by 'kissing him on the mouth'<sup>28</sup>. Lambert's suggestion, that the women could 'tickle his arse with a feather'<sup>29</sup>, objectifies and dehumanises Richard as merely a part object, and establishes the group's paranoid-schizoid power over him. Moreover, although Julie and Prue's pass at Richard seems to come out of the blue, it is indicative of Julie and Prue's dissatisfaction with their marriages. Moreover, these moments of surreal erotic confession permit Pinter to destabilise the naturalistic aesthetic of the play, exposing the vapid nature of social identity. It's as if the characters yearn to free themselves from the oppressive bondage of their social personas and explore their own regressive phantasies.

Lambert's emotionally fraught reaction to his wife's improper behaviour evinces to the audience, for the first time, his insecurity. When faced with the irrefutable evidence that his wife desires sexual intimacy with other men, he drops the chauvinistic mask of infantile jocularity. He manages his jealousy over Julie's admiration for Richard by expressing

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<sup>27</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 457

<sup>28</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 459

<sup>29</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 459

admiration for him on the one hand, but at the same time, pointing out to the other guests that Richard doesn't make jokes at the table because it's 'more than his life is worth'<sup>30</sup> : intimating that Richard knows his place as a subordinate and doesn't make jokes at the guests' tables. He then projects his anger over his wife's attraction onto an unlucky client who nags him with a mobile phone call. His furious outrage 'it's my fucking wedding anniversary!'<sup>31</sup> is not only a statement of fact, but also an expression of anxiety, signifying his uneasy feeling that he is on rocky ground and losing control of any power and authority he might have in the situation.

Meanwhile, Russell and Suki are being served by Sonia. Russell's attempt to delve into Sonia's past and her 'upbringing' pushes the boundaries of social propriety, whilst expressing his personal need to feel close to another human being by understanding them. Her polite but unsatisfying reticence fails to fill in the gaps, and leaves Russell to try to dig up the subject of his own past with Suki. Russell disparages his father as a 'arsehole' provoking Suki to offer this titbit of advice:

SUKI

He was jealous of you, that's all. He saw you as a threat. He thought you wanted to steal his wife

RUSSELL

His wife?

SUKI

Well, you know what they say.

RUSSELL

What?

SUKI

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<sup>30</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 460

<sup>31</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 461

Oh, you know what they say<sup>32</sup>

Suddenly a waiter ‘interjects’. Having eaves dropped on the couple’s earlier discussion about T.S. Eliot, he elects to launch into a peculiar monologue. In this speech he claims to be the grandson of a man who was on close personal terms with the great and the good of twentieth century modernist literature: including such esteemed luminaries as Dylan Thomas, Aldous Huxley, Virginia Woolf and Ezra Pound. His interruption ends on an absurd, comic note when the waiter tells Russell and Suki that this man was ‘James Joyce’s godmother’.<sup>33</sup>

This scene develops the theme of unconscious oedipal anxiety introduced by the inebriated ramblings of Lambert and co. Furthermore, the waiter’s strange outburst is more than an ironic comment on Russell’s need to understand another person by delving into their background. It is symptomatic of a world where breeding, status and power matters; a shallow, narcissistic world where people feel the need to create a false identity for themselves to avoid being rejected.

In the next scene Pinter continues to explore the theme of the characters’ pasts. The drink has clearly loosened up Lambert, who suddenly tries to use the time and the place to bring up the subject of a past girlfriend. His romantic memory, of walking with his young lover along a riverbank, is redolent of an incident from Pinter’s youth. But his attempt to place himself in the trust of his family, and be vulnerable in their company, fails when Julie ignores his plea to be listened to and instead imposes her version of the past onto the discussion. By describing how she met and fell in love with Lambert on the top of double decker bus travelling from

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<sup>32</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 466

<sup>33</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 468

‘Fulham Broadway to Shephard’s Bush’<sup>34</sup>, she effectively erases the loved, but lost, girl from Lambert’s history; and, in doing so, she surreptitiously re-authors her husband’s autobiography, narcissistically writing herself into the heart of every scene as the desired object.

Later, in an odd exchange with Suki, Russell confesses that he feels at ease in the restaurant, and not at all ‘psychopathic’. Suki, Russell and Richard all concur that the eatery has a positive ‘ambience’: something ineffable. Seizing on an opportunity to heighten his status, Richard’s waxes lyrical about his childhood, claiming that he got the idea for the concept of his business from a tiny village pub his father took him to. But this effort to authenticate and legitimate the restaurant by appealing to an Anglophilic mythical past of warm beer, cheese rolls, gherkins, and wood beams, rings false in our ears. The most important element of the story is Richard’s recollection that he was shut out and had to peer in on the proceedings. If anything, his story accidently illuminates his own oedipal unconscious conflict, because his chic restaurant is anything but rural, rustic, genuine or ‘authentic’. On the contrary, Richard has built a glittering shrine to metropolitan bourgeois tastes and fads: his work therefore contains within it the implicit, symbolic rejection of the mythical father figure: the hated, unsophisticated old man who sat in the musty pub, drinking warm ale.

Gradually, Pinter skilfully builds the pace and complexity of *Celebration*, and the result is a riotously funny comedy. He achieves this by finding ways to get the characters into trouble; for example, Lambert recognises Suki as a girl he ‘fucked’ when she was eighteen, and in a moment of drunken impulsiveness, invites Russell and his wife over to the table. Now ‘three sheets to the wind’ the dramatis personae engage in an hilarious tightrope walk of social interaction. Their dialogue brims with passive aggressive subtext and puerile innuendo. As the pace intensifies, the waiter continues to intervene to make yet more extravagant claims

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<sup>34</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 471

about his literary heritage. But at the close of the play, after the other characters have ‘drifted off, Pinter gives this young man the last word. The waiter turns to the audience and delivers a monologue:

WAITER

When I was a boy my grandfather used to take me to the edge of the cliffs and we’d look out to sea. He bought me a telescope. I don’t think they have telescopes any more. I used to look through the telescope and sometimes I’d see a boat. The boat would grow bigger through the telescope lens. Sometimes I’d see people on the boat. A man, sometimes, and a woman, or sometimes two men. The sea glistened.

My grandfather introduced me to the mystery of life and I’m still in the middle of it. I can’t find the door to get out. My grandfather got out of it. He got right out of it. He left it behind him and he didn’t look back.

He got that absolutely right.

And I’d like to make one further interjection.<sup>35</sup>

These are the final words that a character in a full-length Pinter play utters. What could they mean?

Ultimately, we cannot be sure, and the point is perhaps that we needn’t be. Throughout this study I have attempted to make sense of Pinter’s work by using Klein’s theories. I believe this method illuminates Pinter. But I also feel that with this speech Pinter is advising us against the excessive use of theory to explain everything. We have an insatiable thirst for knowledge, a desperate, innate, need to know. We are naturally inquisitive, creative and inventive, but at the same time we are frightened when confronted by our own ignorance and incapability. When trying to discern a clear path forward, when trying to make sense of the world, it can feel as if we are trapped in a labyrinth, going around in dizzying circles, trying to tease out a coherent thread from a bewildering tangle of so much contradictory sense data. Perhaps human beings are blinded by their tendency to see teleological patterns in

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<sup>35</sup> Pinter, *Plays 4*, 508

everything? In the end, no one really knows all the answers, and most of the time it is enough trouble for us to have the intelligence to formulate the right questions. No matter what, life is, and will always be, a 'mystery'.

And yet we still feel that, like the waiter's grandfather, that we can get out, that we can find the 'door' out. But what do we feel that we're escaping from? Although theory, reason and evidence can help us understand experiences, perhaps we are misguided in our view that this means it is impossible to reach an answer without the theory. Maybe, sometimes, all that one needs to know is in the experience itself: the moment of the gaze, the smile, the laugh and the pause.

## Chapter 10

### *Conclusion*

#### **Pinter's Achievement**

Harold Pinter's lasting achievement as a dramatist is secure. Although we cannot say it to be the case with total assurance, it is unlikely that the tides of history will sweep away his literature. He can rest comforted by the fact that his name has been canonised along with Ibsen, Chekhov and Beckett; not because he was a great formal poet or actor, but because, like his predecessors, he was a great innovator and originator, he managed to build upon the work of the great realists by violently pushing, pulling, and stretching realistic dramatic language to its breaking point with startling effects.

However, much of the literature that seeks to explain his work was written before his death. If one were to casually pluck a selection of Pinter criticism from a library shelf, one would eventually encounter the ubiquitous tagline that proclaims Pinter to be 'Britain's greatest living playwright'. With his life now over, we can finally see the complete range of his creative and intellectual output. The chase is on to make sense of his work in new and illuminating ways. Thus, in this study I have advanced the thesis that we can use Kleinian psychoanalysis to uncover the unconscious anxiety in Pinter's theatre texts.

#### **Implications of this Study**

The waiter's final monologue at the end of *Celebration* is a coda to Pinter's work and a message to us. Life truly is a 'mystery' and, no matter what we do, we will never be able to know enough, to think enough, or to discover enough. This thesis has contributed to knowledge. But, in doing so, I have not answered all the questions or solved all the problems. I have tried to offer a novel way into understanding the plays, but my intention has not been

to reduce their mystery or diminish the pleasure of the audience in watching a play unfold in the moment. On the contrary, I have tried to enhance the reader or the audience's experience by providing a theoretical context that might help them understand what is happening and why. Indeed, at the heart of psychoanalysis is the recognition that we all have a deep yearning inside us to discover, uncover and learn - a to need to know.

But I would argue that the implications of this study are worth considering in a broader context. Kleinian psychoanalysis can help us explore the deepest depths of a character's unconscious motivations, and the possibilities are endless. However, psychoanalysis is not a new methodology and is perhaps considered in some circles as outmoded. I hope that this study has advanced my view that psychoanalysis should not be disregarded but rediscovered by critics in fresh and exciting ways. In short, I feel we have barely scratched the surface of what may be uncovered in the future. Indeed, the study raises questions about the opportunities ahead. Might it be possible in the future - like the scientist who places cells under a microscope to scrutinise its DNA - for the literary theorist to break a text down into parts so minute that each sentence, each word, each utterance, each pause or silence could be analysed to reveal the nature of the unconscious anxiety that it expresses? Some might argue this to be neither possible, nor advisable, but the question nevertheless remains.

The thesis also raises questions about the kinds of terrains that a critic might explore, and just how deep a reading of a text can be undertaken. On several occasions, I have attempted to make visible the invisible relations between the text and the character, the unconscious and the constitution of modern society. In this regard these areas of the thesis are perhaps the most exciting, because they suggest that there may be a world beneath the text that is still yet to be explored.



## **Suggestions for Development**

However, we might sensibly question what the value of this work is to the practical business of creating performed Drama. Of what utility are discussions about ‘projection’, ‘introjection’, ‘identification’ and ‘drives’ to the actor or director? The answer to this question is not readily available, and there appears to be a stubborn, if perfectly understandable, resistance to academic ideas within vocational circles. The theatre is a pragmatic world of problems that require artistic, workable solutions. It is generally not a place for deep philosophical meditation or reflection. Likewise, academia has often looked down upon vocational pursuits and education, seemingly incapable of shaking off Plato’s pejorative condemnation of ‘work’ as not appropriate for a ‘philosopher king’, and of performance itself, one of the most complete and demonstrable cultural achievements of his civilization, as a mere ‘imitation of an action’. Theatre in elitist circles has often meant textually prescribed accounts of form, theme, and context, with less emphasis being given to texts as blueprints for a three-dimensional performance.

On the other hand, to argue that there can be no conceivable association between a psychoanalytic, theoretical study of theatre, and the daily practices of professional rehearsal and performance, is a flawed assumption. At the heart of western culture’s emphasis of actor training is Stanislavski’s system, which is predicated on the notion of human beings as motivated by goals and objectives. Psychoanalysis deepens and enriches this idea, by arguing that hidden forces may be driving one’s goals, forces of which we are ignorant.

Lee Strasberg recognised this when he developed his own form of the System in the United States. The cornerstone of the work of The Group Theatre’s actor training was ‘emotion memory’ or ‘recall’. In a scenario - reminiscent of a psychoanalysis itself - Strasberg would encourage his actors to excavate their own past, to remember the sensation of an emotion.

This 'emotion' would be akin to the one the character is feeling in the scene. It could then be drawn upon so that the actor might play the scene with real connectedness and emotion. Thus, we have a concrete example of how the profession of actor training has drawn upon the psychoanalytic view of mind; the thesis that individuals are shaped by powerful experiences that we bury in our past.

My suggestion for the future development of this research would be return to the structure of the Pinter's text to detect and reveal the hidden paranoid schizoid and depressive impulses and anxieties within its structure and linguistic register; the movements towards linking and attacks on linking. Furthermore, we can explore the possibility of bringing Klein's theories into the rehearsal room and performance space. It is my contention that we can explore the projective and transference phantasies of the actors, in the moment to moment context of their relations with one another in rehearsal and performance, and in the actor's response to the text and character. We have yet to analyse the nature of the theatre artist's unconscious phantasies or the containing function and counter transferences of the audience.

Ultimately, if we are to be successful in our pursuit of further knowledge, we must take our cue from Pinter and look again at the world with fresh eyes. We must expose what is hidden in plain sight. We need to make the invisible visible and, in doing so, we may be able to uncover the secret, unconscious structures of the text. In the end, Pinter had a genius possessed by all great artists: he had vision. Instead of reproducing what other playwrights saw he told us about what he could see. That is the true mark of his achievement as an artist and as a man.

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