

HAROLD PINTER: THE ULTIMATE REALIST

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Abstract

Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* and *The Room* have very frequently been read as absurdist plays, being Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* the reference work for such interpretation. Nonetheless, the aforementioned plays have scarcely been analysed from the point of view of the realist literary current. Attempting to cover such gap, this article provides an interpretation of *The Birthday Party* and *The Room* as realist plays, revealing the early Pinter as the ultimate realist playwright. By drawing on evidence from the text and reliable literary criticism on the matter, the following lines offer an analysis of two crucial elements of Pinteresque early *oeuvre* that have been frequently tackled, namely the communication between characters and the lack of verification, showing that these are deeply committed to represent real life. Furthermore, the text explores how the political element is expressed in these two plays, inferring, by its non-didactic nature, that Pinter seeks to illustrate real life without interfering on it. As a result, the complete analysis leads to fulfil the premises of the thesis.

Key words: *Pinter, realism, absurdism, The Birthday Party, The Room*

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1. Introduction

Harold Pinter's appearance as a playwright was rather unsuccessful. Despite the initial success of his very first production with *The Room* back in 1957, the arrival of *The Birthday Party* to the stage of the Lyric Hammersmith on 19 May 1958 did not hit the ground running: the reception was awful. The style this work displayed that day shocked both the audiences and drama critics. Gloomy characters, whose intentions and past are uncertain and "speak in non sequiturs, half-gibberish and lunatic ravings" (Billington 2008) contribute to create a blurry picture, where meaning of the play as a whole is difficult to establish and which makes the playgoer feel somewhat uneasy or disconcerted. His detachment from traditional drama, where the audience faces almost no obstacle to follow the storyline and is aware of practically every single thing that is taking place on stage, nearly cost the Hackney-born writer his career as soon as it took off. Nevertheless, facing the overwhelming stream of negative takes on *The Birthday Party*, there stood Harold Hobson, a critic who worked for the *Sunday Times*. Hobson argued that Harold Pinter, "in evidence of [*The Birthday Party*], possesses the most original, disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London". It was, for him, in the vague nature of the play "that its spine chilling quality lies" (qtd. in Scott 10). What took place next is no secret: Harold Pinter would go on to become a renowned playwright with a very solid career, reaching its peak late in his life, when being awarded the Literature Nobel Prize in 2005 for his ability to "uncover the precipice under everyday prattle" (Pinter, Nobel).

Ever since the productions of *The Room* and *The Birthday Party* back in the late fifties, drama critics, playgoers and students around the globe have come up with different theories and approaches to the body of Pinteresque¹ early *oeuvre*. Among those approaches I find renowned drama critic Martin Esslin's the most widely accepted and respected in the field of drama criticism (maybe due to the opaque nature of the works in question). The Hungarian placed Harold Pinter, together with the likes of Eugène Ionesco or Samuel Beckett, under the genre he himself labelled as *The Theatre of the*

¹ "Harold Pinter is generally seen as the foremost representative of British drama in the second half of the 20th century. That he occupies a position as a modern classic is illustrated by his name entering the language as an adjective used to describe a particular atmosphere and environment in drama: "Pinteresque"" (Bio-bibliography).

Absurd (1961). Esslin understood that the characters in plays like *The Room*, *The Birthday Party* or *A Slight Ache* embody the philosophical stance that highlights and conveys the absurd condition of human existence.

My very first approach to Harold Pinter took place when reading *The Room* in an academic syllabus. I was genuinely baffled by the play: I could not infer any meaning from the play as a whole, nor could I understand the behaviour of the characters, but I felt moved and attracted by the style of the play. Due to the fuzziness encountered during the first readings of *The Room*, my personal stance was to adhere to Martin Esslin's theory, bearing in mind Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952) as a reference of absurd drama and establishing some common points in my mind. Further reading made me progressively differ from Martin Esslin, and eventually brought me to the writing of the present essay. The analysis of different characteristic elements from early Pinteresque plays (especially *The Birthday Party* and *The Room*) that will be explained in detail in the following lines made me endorse the absurdist theory for no longer.

As a result, in this essay I will argue that Pinter's comedies of menace *The Birthday Party* and *The Room* are no absurdist² but realist works, thus attempting to provide a different approach in opposition to that of Martin Esslin through the analysis of elements such as Pinteresque communication between characters and the characteristic lack of verification in Harold Pinter's first steps in the world of drama. For the fulfilment of such task, I understand the explanation of the term *comedy of menace* and an in-depth analysis of Martin Esslin's theory on *The Theatre of the Absurd* are very much needed before tackling the main subject of the present essay.

2. **Comedy of menace**

Sometimes I find myself laughing at some particular point which has suddenly struck me as being funny. I agree that more often than not the speech only seems to be funny—the man in question is actually fighting for his life (Pinter, *Art of Theatre*)

² From here on, we will refer to the plays belonging to the Theatre of the Absurd as absurdist, for economic reasons.

The body of Harold Pinter's first plays has always been a controversial subject. For such reason, it appears relevant to establish why it has been decided to use the term *comedy of menace* to refer, throughout the current text, to that epoque of Pinter's career.

It is frequently assumed that the direct source of the expression *comedy of menace* is the critic Irving Wardle but, as Bernard Dukore highlights in his book *Harold Pinter*, the term in question was first coined by English playwright David Campton back in 1957 for a play of his. Irving Wardle used it in his review of Pinter's *The Birthday Party* for the *Encore* magazine in 1958 (25). Much to his dismay -he ended up feeling uncomfortable with such tag-, the term *comedy of menace* has been recurrently used in drama criticism ever since that review.

The term is related to another widely known term: *comedies of manners*. Harold Pinter's comedies of menace are very similar with this genre in that his "drama provokes laughter through balanced phraseology, antithesis, and the language and manners of social classes" (Dukore 25). In the case of the comedy of menace, this comic element is not only entangled with the tragic effect created by the constant sensation of a potential threat, but in fact heightens it. The following excerpt from *The Birthday Party* illustrates this:

MCCANN. What about the Albigensenist heresy?

GOLDBERG. Who watered the wicket in Melbourne?

MCCANN. What about the blessed Oliver Plunkett?

GOLDBERG. Speak up, Webber. Why did the chicken cross the road?

STANLEY. He wanted to-he wanted to- he wanted to....

MCCANN. He doesn't know!

GOLDBERG. Why did the chicken cross the road?

STANLEY. He wanted to – he wanted to....

GOLDBERG. Why did the chicken cross the road?

STANLEY. He wanted....

MCCANN. He doesn't know. He doesn't know which came first!

(*Plays One*, 45)

Here the apparently non-sensical ranting of both Goldberg and McCann during their cross-examination of Stanley provokes laughter in the audience. Pinter's feat here is to

have left the victim-executioner roles somewhat unclear³, thus making the audience not feel Stanley as a sympathetic character and be able to laugh, for an instant, to a situation as such, where an individual is being verbally tortured. However, the audience immediately regains full awareness that Stanley is progressively losing his mind. This reminds the playgoer not to completely drop the guard, for the psychological situation of Stanley could result in a dramatical outburst in any moment. In this sense, the comic element is introduced to deceive the audience, thus, as aforementioned, enhancing the tragic element. As Ronald Knowles brightly notes in his essay *Pinter and Twentieth-Century Drama*, Pinter aims to “induce a retroactive guilt as audience insecurity parallels that of his characters” (78).

As important as defining the concept is the delimitation of the era of comedies of menace in Pinter’s body of work, since it establishes a clear-cut field of study for the current essay. The shift in style that made Harold Pinter move away from the opaque nature that characterizes his first five plays is marked by the play *A Night Out*, produced for BBC Radio and televised via ABC’s *Armchair Theatre* in 1960 (Duguid). According to Bernard Dukore, the very medium for which the play was written is responsible for this shift in style, since it “permits an easier flow through different locales than the stage does” (47). Let us take a close look to the following indication placed by Harold Pinter in *A Night Out*’s second act:

The camera closes on MR. RYAN’S hand, resting comfortably on his knee, and then to his face which, smiling vaguely, is inclined to the ceiling. It must be quite clear from the expression that it was his hand which strayed (Pinter, *Plays One* 355).

Our protagonist Albert Stokes had allegedly touched her workmate Eileen during old and silent Mr. Ryan’s farewell party. Harold Pinter decides to introduce a note for the director and actors so that the audience understands Albert is not to blame for such offence. The scene thus suggests that Gidney, Eileen and Joyce are involved in some sort of set-up towards Albert. As a result, Pinter leaves no room for enigma. The fact that the work is oriented to a TV audience, not generally accustomed to avant-garde content, interferes in the development of the play. The content meant to be televised is

³ Stanley is the one being psychologically tortured, but his behaviour towards characters like Meg and Lulu makes it difficult to elicit sympathy from the audience, whereas Goldberg’s kindness towards Meg distances the audience from fully recognizing him as an enemy.

normally not difficult to digest, it is rather *easy watching*⁴, and Pinter prefers the scene not to be open for interpretation.

This detail, however, albeit revealing, may not appear sufficient to account for the shift in style in Pinter from his comedies of menace to *A Night Out*. It is not only the clarification in the scene of Mr. Ryan's sexual abuse; it is the whole plot that is built towards broader definition and explicitness. Whereas *The Room* and *The Birthday Party* close the curtain posing more questions than answers are brought, this play brings "if not the satisfying resolution of the well-made play, a significance which is clear" (Knowles 75).

Furthermore, the comic element here, albeit present, does not enhance the tragic. That menacing and mysterious element is no longer present and does not lurk behind the protagonist's conversations. Although Albert definitely seems emotionally unstable -probably due to his relationship with his mother-, his speech does not denote uneasiness (expressed through humorous speech) resulting from the fear to an outside threat like Stanley in *The Birthday Party* or Rose in *The Room*.

In a nutshell, *A Night Out*, probably because of his orientation towards radio and TV, draws the line that separates Harold Pinter's comedies of menace, namely *The Birthday Party*, *The Room*, *The Dumb Waiter*, *A Slight Ache* and *The Hothouse* from the rest of his work, which would continue moving away from the avant-garde.

3. Pinter and the notion of the absurd

Though the origins of the notion of the absurd date back to Kierkegaard, it was French-Algerian philosopher Albert Camus' *oeuvre* that was built around such notion. Through his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* -published in 1942 during World War II, when the untouchable beliefs of society were torn apart resulting in an existential crisis- the human condition is compared with the Greek myth where Sisyphus, king of Ephyra, was doomed to endlessly pushing a rock up a mountain, only for it to fall down the hillside repeatedly. Though the notion still remains somewhat vague and subject to debate, Camus' approach to the absurd is widely accepted and taken as a reference when addressing the topic in academical writing:

⁴ According the Merriam-Webster dictionary, *easy listening* describes the kind of music "that is generally pleasing and that is sometimes considered to be lacking in substance". In this particular case, I have adapted the term to describe the rather superficial content that is habitually aired in television channels to engage a broader audience.

While accepting that human beings inevitably seek to understand life's purpose, Camus takes the skeptical position that the natural world, the universe, and the human enterprise remain silent about any such purpose. Since existence itself has no meaning, we must learn to bear an irresolvable emptiness. This paradoxical situation, then, between our impulse to ask ultimate questions and the impossibility of achieving any adequate answer, is what Camus calls *the absurd*. (Aronson)

Drama critic Martin Esslin argues that, while Camus describes the philosophical concept of the absurd "in the form of highly lucid and logically constructed reasoning" (xix), the Theatre of the Absurd -term coined by Esslin himself- brings to the stage the very form and expression of the existential despair that emanates from the recognition of life as absurd precisely by getting rid of any rational device. In these plays language is devaluated, characters just abandon it "as an instrument for the expression of the deepest levels of meaning" (Esslin 230). Furthermore, the grotesque characterization allows the author to keep the audience from identifying themselves with the protagonist, so that a particular cosmivision is presented to the playgoer that witnesses it from an outside point of view. As a result, the audience will decide whether to "turn away or to be drawn into the enigma of the plays in which nothing reminds [them] of any of [their] purposes in or reactions to the world around [them]" (Esslin 302). In Esslin's book *The Theatre of the Absurd*, reference in drama criticism, Pinter is included as one of the playwrights of the genre, together with the likes of Samuel Beckett or Eugene Ionesco. As a reference of what an absurdist play is, we will focus on Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952). Such election is motivated by Esslin's dedication of a whole chapter to Beckett's work and especially to that play in particular, thus emphasizing the relevance of the work within the genre. The principles formulated by Esslin for the Theatre of the Absurd are recognizable in the play.

What Beckett aim appears to be in *Waiting for Godot* is to achieve the ultimate representation of the condition of the absurd. In order to carry out such task, he deliberately focuses on reducing the number of stimuli to almost the bare minimum. As a result, the setting where Vladimir and Estragon wait for the potential arrival of Godot and exchange words is extremely dull: a road surrounded by piles of debris on both sides, with a leafless tree and a grey sky. Furthermore, spoken language is disintegrated, deliberately mystified in order to explore to convey the limitations of it as a tool to communicate thoughts. Conversation seems an activity with no other motivation but to

avoid the boredom caused by the waiting. Albeit being definitely appealing -its success is not by any means an accident-, *Waiting for Godot* does not bear any dramatical tension. There is an emotional vacuum. Samuel Beckett wants the audience to grasp the experience of man in a world where nothing is certain; the play works as a philosophical statement and succeeds as such:

VLADIMIR: (...) (*Silence. Vladimir deep in thought, Estragon pulling at his toes.*) One of the thieves was saved. (*Pause.*) It's a reasonable percentage. (*Pause.*) Gogo.

ESTRAGON: What?

VLADIMIR: Suppose we repented.

ESTRAGON: Repented what?

VLADIMIR: Oh . . . (*He reflects.*) We wouldn't have to go into the details.

ESTRAGON: Our being born?

Vladimir breaks into a hearty laugh which he immediately stifles, his hand pressed to his pubis, his face contorted.

VLADIMIR: One daren't even laugh any more.

ESTRAGON: Dreadful privation.

VLADIMIR: Merely smile. (*He smiles suddenly from ear to ear, keeps smiling, ceases as suddenly.*) It's not the same thing. Nothing to be done. (*Pause.*)

(Beckett 11)

In Pinter's *The Birthday Party* and *The Room*, however, that existential despair is nowhere to be found. There is a clear goal: protection. Stanley and Rose are hiding for an external force that threatens their peace, even their existence. As a result, the life of these characters has a purpose built upon the existence of a threat, which is not only potential, it also materializes. In *Waiting for Godot*, the arrival of Godot is the purpose, but Godot never really appears. The message of the play is built around that eternal promise. Stanley and Rose's behaviour is seemingly lacking logic at times, their speech inconsistent and apparently non-sensical, but that is just the result of a psychological uneasiness provoked by that outside element. Both characters react in different ways to the fear that an outside threat whose arrival is either yet to happen or has already taken place provokes in them. There definitely does not exist any attempt from the playwright to get the audience to grasp that void left by the vanishing certainties of the past. As Michael Scott stated, Pinter's focus is placed "largely on man without reference to the

spiritual void”, while Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*’s “metaphysical concerns [seem] to be involved with the dilemma of man’s existence” (11).

Furthermore, Esslin claims that absurdist plays do not have a plot, they are “a pattern of poetic images” (294). However, *The Birthday Party* does have a plot: Stanley is kidnapped by a mysterious couple. The fact that the play is completely isolated from its context (topic that will be tackled further on), and thus that we do not count on any certainty about the reason Goldberg and McCann take Stanley away from the boarding house does not imply such reason does not exist.

Overall, taking Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* as a reference of absurdist theatre for the aforementioned reasons, it appears rather clear that Pinter’s *The Birthday Party* and *The Room* are not the dramatical expression of the existential despair brought by the sudden awareness of the absurd condition of existence whatsoever. In order to take this analysis one step further, we will now focus on one of the main Pinteresque elements in the comedies of menace that has historically been object of controversy in drama criticism: the construction of language.

4. Language in Pinter

The way Pinteresque characters communicate in the plays that are object of study of this essay is crucial for its development. Traditionally, drama criticism has very frequently described Harold Pinter’s characters as unable to communicate with each other. The concept of “failure of communication” has permeated reviews on Pinter’s comedies of menace. At this very stage, our goal is to prove such failure does not exist -as such- by analysing some excerpts of the plays that represent our object of study.

Accustomed to traditional drama, to tackle the way Pinteresque characters communicate with each other may be a tough task. The playgoer is used to characters that disclose pretty much everything they feel inside and say what they want to say, no matter the circumstances or the context. In Harold Pinter’s early plays, however, although we do not find characters failing to communicate, we do see how they struggle to get their message through in an overt manner. That is, in fact, how communication works on real life. The context and emotional circumstances play a huge role when it comes to communicating with one’s interlocutor. It is not always easy to disclose when there is desire to do so, but neither is it to conceal when there is will for it: what lies beneath words also communicates. The subtext -how things are said, the pauses, the

inconsistencies- is a big part of everyday communication and it is central in Pinteresque early *oeuvre*.

We find a perfectly illustrating example of how Pinter plays with the subtext as *The Birthday Party* begins, with Meg and Pete having a little chat on a piece of news from the paper during breakfast:

PETEY. Someone's just had a baby.

MEG. Oh, they haven't! Who?

PETEY. Some girl. [...]

MEG. What is it?

PETEY (studying the paper). Er—a girl.

MEG. Not a boy?

PETEY. No.

MEG. Oh, what a shame. I'd be sorry. I'd much rather have a little boy.

PETEY. A little girl's all right.

MEG. I'd much rather have a little boy.

Pause. (Pinter, *Plays One* 5)

Behind this apparently empty piece of conversation lies a frustration that inevitably leaks: Meg's unfulfilled desire to be mother to a boy. Her insistence on how she would have preferred to give birth to a boy speaks for herself. The pause is nothing but a sign of Petey not wanting to go further in what seems a too touchy topic to tackle. As Harold Pinter himself would have it, these type of pauses employ "a torrent of language" (qtd. in Raby 78). There are different kinds of pauses in Pinteresque plays, and it is the duty of the director to get them right in order to reproduce the experience aimed by the playwright:

Pinter actually *writes* silence, and he appropriates it as a part of his dialogue. [...] The pause is as eloquent as speech and must be truthfully filled with intention if the audience is to understand. Otherwise the actor produces a *non sequitur*, which [...] makes the character ridiculous. (Hall 163)

Yet this claim could be judged as far-fetched in the light of such little evidence. However, the attitude Meg displays towards Stanley when he joins her after Petey has left for work strengthens the conclusion inferred. First, she addresses Stanley in a very motherly way, as we can see in this childish conversation they maintain over breakfast:

STANLEY. What about some tea?

MEG. Do you want some tea? (STANLEY reads the paper.) Say please.

STANLEY. Please.

MEG. Say sorry first.

STANLEY. Sorry first.

MEG. No. Just sorry.

STANLEY. Just sorry! (Pinter, *Plays One* 11-12)

We can notice how Meg behaves this way to build some kind of mother-son bond in order to weaken her frustration of not having had a biological son. However, it is not only in a motherly way that Meg approaches Stanley. When Stanley pronounces the word *succulent* in relation to the fried bread, Meg finds the sound of the word somewhat appealing and tells him he “shouldn’t say that to a married woman”. The word *succulent*, originally not directed to her, stays in her mind and, once the conversation has moved on, she asks Stan, out of nowhere, whether she really is succulent. This, together with her body language (Meg ruffles Stanley’s hair, strokes his arm and tickles the back of his neck), evidences Meg has, as psychoanalytic theory would have it, a Jocasta complex⁵. Such conclusion would not only support the claim that Meg has an unfulfilled desire to be a mother, but also point out the delicate status of Meg (warm and charming) and Petey’s (withdrawn and dull personality) relationship. Harold Pinter deliberately omits an overt argument of Meg and Petey over her frustrations, as well as a sexual confession to Stanley because that is simply unnatural, artificial: this is the way his characters are expressing themselves in this very moment of their lives. What they feel transpires through their body talk, the way they say things and their pauses. This is as real as everyday communication gets.

In *The Room*, we find Rose carrying out what seems a monologue, since she receives no response whatsoever from Bert. The monologue consists almost entirely of endless praising of the room they live in, together with a harsh critique of the basement of the house. She moves around the room, talking endlessly, but Bert remains silent until he leaves. The situation hints at a potential element disturbing the peace of the couple, since there is no balanced conversation between the two of them. That uneasiness manifests differently in each of them: Rose’s reaction is nervous moving and talking, while Bert’s is distance and cold silence. When a couple arrives to Rose’s room looking for the landlord, these reveal that a man in the basement has let them know that Rose’s room is vacant. That is the very moment where Rose’s genuine fear can be sensed:

⁵ “an abnormally close or incestuous attachment of a mother to her son. It is named for Jocasta, the mother and wife of Oedipus in Greek mythology” (APA Dictionary)

MR. SANDS. The man in the basement said there was one. [...] Number seven he said.

Pause.

ROSE. That's this room.

MR SANDS. We'd better go and get a hold of the landlord.

MRS SANDS (*rising*). Well, thank you for the warm-up, Mrs Hudd. I feel better now.

ROSE. This room is occupied. (*Plays One, 102*)

We can finally identify this element when Mr. Kidd enters the room, once Bert has left. He lets Rose know that there is a man asking for her in the basement. In fact, the man has been waiting for Bert to leave "the whole weekend" so that he can speak to her. The audience can now begin to notice the reason behind Rose's obsession with the room she inhabits as well as her aversion towards the basement. Rose constantly denies knowing this man, but her denial is just an attempt to avoid facing the reality. When Mr. Kidd, worn out by the insistence of the mysterious basement man on talking to Rose and just thinking in the fulfilment of such meeting, threatens Rose with the possibility of the man coming when Bert is home, Rose replies that "he'd never do that" (106), recognizing that she does in fact know the man in question. She finally gives in and asks Mr. Kidd to go and "fetch him. Quick! Quick!" (106). There certainly appears to be some kind of resentment -to say the least- from Bert towards the man in the basement, since it is the menace of his arrival what pushes Rose to provide the man with an opportunity to talk.

The conversation between the man (apparently called Riley and blind) and Rose is definitely the most puzzling part of the whole play, and constitutes the build-up to its climax. Rose keeps telling Riley she does not know him, but she displays an incredibly hostile attitude towards him:

RILEY. Thank you.

ROSE. Don't thank me for anything. I don't want you up here. I don't know who you are. And the sooner you get out the better.

Pause. [...] What do you want? You force your way up here. You disturb my evening. You come in and sit down here. What do you want? (*Pinter, Plays One 106*)

Furthermore, her narrative completely falls apart when Riley reveals his name, to what she replies: “I don’t care if it’s- What? That’s not your name. That’s not your name” (106).

When Bert comes home, he starts boasting about how he drove the van, to which he refers as a woman -“I drove her”, “she went with me” (110)-, and he ignores the presence of Riley. When his monologue about the van comes to an end, he approaches Riley and throws him to the floor. As soon as Riley opens his mouth, Bert calls him “lice” and knocks him several times. At last, the worst omens are fulfilled. The motivation of the fear that leaked from Rose’s nervous speech is materialized.

It could be argued that this analysis does not contribute whatsoever to the search of a meaning of the plays in question as a whole. However, that is not the concern. By uncovering the feelings behind Meg’s, Rose’s and Bert’s behaviour I do not mean to contribute to the analysis of the meaning of the plays. The aim is to illustrate how realist communication between characters is in *The Birthday Party* and *The Room*. It is not realist in the sense that it employs a certain vocabulary linked to a certain social class, but in the sense that characters do not express themselves for the sake of our understanding. Pinter’s characters simply *are*. He has not created them taking into account what the audience may or may not understand. Pinteresque characters are people we all find in some stage of our life -delusional, withdrawn, obsessive-, and in the same way we cannot expect everybody to behave according to our expectations, it is necessary to let these characters be without thinking in our personal satisfaction as playgoers.

5. The impossibility of verification

Very closely tied to the way Pinter’s characters communicate is the lack of context of the action in Pinter’s *The Birthday Party* and *The Room*, which has proven to be a hindrance when it comes to the nearly obsessive search for meaning by playgoers and critics. Pinteresque characters hardly disclose any details regarding their past in relation to what is taking place, and when they do the information revealed is not as strong as to cling onto it. The impossibility to get authentic data on the characters’ past must not be regarded, however, as an obstacle. The fact that the motivations of the characters remain unknown to the audience does not invalidate their experience nor make it less interesting or engaging. This is something Harold Pinter himself highlighted when he had to face the critics cast on his work for the impossibility of verification:

A character on the stage who can present no convincing argument or information as to his past experiences, his present behaviour or his aspirations, nor give a comprehensive analysis of his motives is as legitimate and as worthy of attention as one who, alarmingly, can do all these things. (qtd. in Diamond 70)

An early play from Pinter's career can be approached as a picture picked from an album of photographs. If the picture is good, there is really no need to ask why, where and when it was taken. A good photograph is appealing and worthy of attention whether or not its context is provided. Harold Pinter has been successful at engaging audiences and puzzling them without the need of giving them the background of his characters.

In this context, where the reasons that motivate the characters' behaviour are unknown to the playgoer, it is certainly alluring to embrace the theory of the absurd. However, the analysis of Pinteresque communication has already provided insight into the fears that motivate their actions, whatever the basis of such fears might be.

Verification is not always attainable in real life situations, and Harold Pinter shows that accurately. The reluctance to expose oneself to the other, of being vulnerable, plays a huge role. Stanley seems to be protected in Meg and Pete's boarding house. He counts on the motherly affection of Meg, who looks after him. Yet he displays a cold behaviour towards the elderly woman, and does not reveal any consistent information on his past to her. The fashion in which he constantly and cruelly teases Meg, benefiting off her delusional nature, keeps the audience from being able to trust his narration about the potential offer he has received and his past as a piano player when he claims to have played such instrument "all over the world. All over the country" (*Plays One*, 16). In any case, a humorous inconsistency happens to appear in Stanley's narrative. Such inconsistency constitutes a leap from the lie -maybe pipe-dream- he has sold Meg as real and the sudden reality check:

STANLEY. [...] I've played the piano all over the world. All over the country.
(*Pause.*) I once gave a concert. (*Plays One*, 16)

Here Stanley cannot help but to be drawn to the recollection of a past event that seems to hold some importance in his mind. Its relevance can be inferred because of the pause used by Pinter to mark the shift of tone, as well as the way he speaks to himself when uncovering the details of such event. Furthermore, the fact that the next topic of his conversation is his successful attempt to terrify Meg with the potential arrival of some unknown people with a wheelbarrow -the means used to kidnap Stanley-, revealing

some kind of link between both topics, points out that the concert in Lower Edmonton is the first piece of trustworthy data we obtain to reconstruct Stanley's past. However, his testimony is very vague.

Once Goldberg and McCann have settled in the board house and the first has left the house for a while, Stanley understands that McCann is the most approachable half of the couple⁶ and tries to convince him that he has done nothing wrong and that there is no reason for Goldberg and McCann to fetch him. In this chat we get another clue on what Stanley may have done in the past:

STANLEY. It's a mistake! Do you understand?

MCCANN. You're in a bad state, man.

STANLEY (*whispering, advancing*). [...] Do you know what you're here for? Tell me. [...] Or hasn't he told you?

MCCANN. Told me what?

STANLEY (*hissing*). I've explained to you [...] that all those years I live in Basingstoke I never stepped outside the door. (*Plays One*, 36)

As it should already have been noticed, these pieces of information are a very weak basis to reconstruct the whole puzzle of Stanley's past in relation to what happens in *The Birthday Party*. Though the audience may choose to hold on to these feeble clues in order to attempt to infer a particular meaning of the play as a whole, the truth is that this reconstruction is impossible. As it has been aforementioned, although the creation of every character is obviously arbitrary -after all, they are a product of the playwright's imagination and will-, Harold Pinter does not artificially change the way his characters speak. The temptation to satisfy the need for verification to a lost audience may be strong, but Pinter knows that placing an explicit clarification of Stanley's past in his speech would mean to be unfaithful to reality.

When Stanley recollects what took place that night at Lower Edmonton, not only does he not disclose explicit information for the sake of the playgoer's understanding, he even ignores Meg's presence due to how absorbed he feels by that memory. The trauma left by that event is expressed by the manner in which he talks to himself, how he refers to what happened as some sort of a set up against his person -"a fast one, they

⁶ Stanley tells McCann that he appears to be "an honest man" and that he is "being made a fool of" (*Plays One*, 36). It appears safe to claim that he seems to know Goldberg and does not dare to approach him in the same manner he approaches McCann.

pulled a fast one” (17)- In those circumstances, it would be completely unnatural for him to bring up the details to solve the puzzle such event represents for the audience.

We find a closely related situation with the reference to the town of Basingstoke during Stanley’s chat with McCann, prior to the arrival of Goldberg. Stanley understands that what took place in that particular location is information they both share. As a result, he avoids reporting the full episode. In a real-life situation, when the speaker aims to make a reference to information that both him or her and the listener have, the tendency to economize leads to get rid of superfluous data as long as the message gets through.

As for *The Room*, the opportunities to peep on the past of Bert, Rose and Riley are much scarcer, if not completely inexistent. The span of time that covers the action is considerably shorter than that of *The Birthday Party* and, since the circumstances of the communication between characters do not provide any chance to obtain any valuable information from the characters’ past, the playgoer is not even able to hold on to the slightest clue to reconstruct the past and establish a meaning of the play as a whole.

Verification is, in short, impossible to attain in Pinter’s *The Birthday Party* and *The Room*. The lack of such element contributes, in fact, to most of the dramatic tension that these plays display. The introduction of context for the action that takes place in stage would suck the dramatic strength out of the work, make “the sense of intrigue” (Quigley 7) disappear and displace the focus from what the playwright wants the audience to grasp: the psychological struggle of the characters and how it is represented not so much in the surface but through the subtext. Furthermore, it goes to confirm how realist a playwright Pinter is. The fact that he takes the risk of not modifying the way his characters speak to establish a clear cause-effect link between the actions of the play and their past motivators is a huge proof of his commitment with an accurate depiction of reality. He is focused in this very specific moment of the lives of his characters, stripped of clues that could ease the intellectual effort Pinter wants the audience to make by exploring the complexities of the play. The playgoer is not just a mere observer: the play demands that they read between the lines and fill the gaps.

6. The search of an allegory

In the early days of his career, just as the two plays that are object of study of the current essay saw the light, Harold Pinter showed himself very reluctant to let the critics and the general audience get the slightest information on what his plays could or could not mean. During the interviews, there was a recurrent attempt from him to keep a distance and not talk about elements that were not in his plays. As aforementioned, his early plays asked the audience to participate and make an effort, and providing information alien to what takes place on stage would alter the “purity” of the play in that respect. Though this could easily be interpreted as an attempt to mystify or obscure his work, it rather goes to show that his commitment with drama and reality was to let his plays speak by themselves as a message by themselves and not as the messenger. Pinter was aware that, even if his plays did not *mean* anything, they spoke volumes:

I am not concerned with making general statements. I am not interested in theatre used simply as a means of self-expression on the part of people engaged in it. [...] I can sum up none of my plays. I can describe none of them, except to say: That is what happened. That is what they say. That is what they did. (qtd. in Scott 9)

In a later stage of his career, as his plays began to be much more explicit and overt regarding political issues, Pinter showed himself quite keen on providing more insight into those early plays and what they aimed to convey. He never had any problem on showing how politically committed Harold Pinter the person was⁷, but now it was the playwright no longer refusing to give away any detail on the political content of his early work:

I think Stanley is just an outsider and two people representing the authority of the state and the very hidebound religion [...] are coming to get him because simply won't abide by the rules. (qtd. in Visser 329)

Such shift of attitude towards his own work constitutes an obstacle when approaching it, since it is impossible to establish which view of point is the correct one. In this case, the drama critic appears to have been left with no other choice but to establish one stance as the right by his or her own criteria and solid arguments.

⁷ “From an early age Pinter himself was engaged in the politics of the world around him, at eighteen he registered as a conscientious objector displaying a disgust at Cold War politics and The Labour Party’s endorsement of American nuclear presence on British soil.” (Garner 1)

The truth is that, as it has been claimed by various critics, the echo of Harold Pinter's past is thunderous in *The Birthday Party* and *The Room*. As a Jew child growing up in London during World War II, the threat of the Nazi soldiers potentially arriving to one's door pervaded their everyday life (qtd. in Mskhaladze 390), even if those events took place far from his home. That has been accurately depicted by Pinter in these two plays, and the knock on the door has been understood as the ultimate symbol of the Nazi menace. Nevertheless, acknowledging such fact does not mean going as far as to claim Goldberg and McCann are the embodiments of some certain religion, government or any other factual power. The critic should analyse certain claims considering their historical context. The aforementioned take on Stanley, Goldberg and McCann by its own creator took place in the late eighties, as a result of a change in style that embraced explicit political criticism, which in turn could have been motivated for his need to be more didactic and committed politically in a time that saw him get directly involved in a mission to investigate and protest against the torture of imprisoned writers in Turkey in 1985 as an officer of PEN. It appears, then, necessary to separate the author from the play regardless on how his public comments on it fluctuate on time and to remain loyal to the true nature of the play in question.

The Birthday Party and *The Room* are certainly political plays, but in a much more different fashion than the works Pinter published during the eighties. They are political because they display physical violence and, most importantly, psychological dominance. The most illustrating example of this can be found in an excerpt of *The Birthday Party* that has already been brought up in a previous stage of the current essay: Stanley's interrogation scene. The interrogation starts off with questions regarding the treatment Stanley gives to both Meg and Pete, but soon the pace of the cross-examination increases. Early in the interrogation McCann mentions an organization ("Why did you leave the organization?", "Why did you betray us?" (*Plays One*, 42). He seems too desperate to get answers by him making straight references on the matter that brings them to that very event, but Goldberg has a plan. He starts posing apparently irrelevant questions based on the answers given by Stanley as quick as the latter replies:

GOLDBERG. Why did you come here?

STANLEY. My feet hurt!

GOLDBERG. Why did you stay?

STANLEY. I had a headache!

GOLDBERG. Did you take anything for it?

STANLEY. Yes.

GOLDBERG. What?

STANLEY. Fruit salts!

GOLDBERG. Enos or Andrews!

STANLEY. En—An—

GOLDBERG. Did you stir properly? Did they fizz? (*Plays One*, 42)

McCann mentions the betrayal to the organization one more time but realizes what Goldberg's cruel game is about and joins his trend of cross-examination through reinforcing comments or even taking the lead. The latter escalates progressively to the point that has already been covered in the second section.

Goldberg's aim appears to be the destabilization of Stanley, which he obtains through an exhausting cross-examination that psychologically pushes the subject of interrogation to the edge. Stanley Webber ends up screaming and attacking Goldberg. Furthermore, when they are interrupted by Meg, Goldberg puts on a show to humiliate Stanley, with the unintentional collaboration of a delusional, naïve Meg and Lulu's unawareness of the situation. Stanley stands there, silent but completely out of his mind, while Goldberg gives a grandiloquent speech and playfully flirts with Lulu, clearly enjoying the whole situation. McCann contributes to the humiliation of Stanley by breaking his glasses and putting the drum in his way so that he treads on it when playing blind man's bluff. Stanley finally grabs Meg by the throat and assaults Lulu in what appears to be a rape attempt. The filter of reasoning has left Stanley and he is now nothing but a visceral species, moved only by his primitive impulses.

The political element in *The Birthday Party* is, thus, Stanley's torture and humiliation. Two apparent members of a certain organization come to fetch a former member of it for apparently betraying it. The goal of these two subjects is to make Stanley vulnerable and controllable through an exhausting cross-examination whereby Stanley is dehumanized and brought to his psychological boundaries.

In *The Room*, on the other hand, genre politics are brought to the table, even though its political content is not as present and evident as in *The Birthday Party*. Harold Pinter provides the playgoer with the opportunity to explore Rose's fears but also her relationship with her husband. It seems easy to notice the way Rose takes extreme care of Bert. In exchange, Bert acts as if nobody talked to him, completely ignoring Rose's uneasiness, discernible through her speech. Bert seems to hold no emotional responsibility with his wife whatsoever. There is also a certain kind of

implicit domination in the fact that Rose fears -and rightly so, as the ending of the play shows- the arrival of Riley after her husband gets home. Furthermore, the first and only time Bert utters a word is when getting home after riding the van, to which he refers, as we have already seen, as a woman. Rose represents the traditional wife, who is more emotionally involved with her partner and treated -if not also seen- as property for housekeeping by the husband. On the other hand, Bert seems to embody the traditional prototype of husband, emotionally distanced and looked after by his wife, placing the focus on the activities he enjoys (in this case, the emphasis with which he speaks of driving the van speaks volumes) and disregarding the needs and feelings of her wife.

The political character of Pinter's early work seems, thus, undeniable. However, whichever the shift of attitude towards his own work may be, Harold Pinter is not trying to teach the reader a lesson. He is not attempting to ask the audience to pick a certain side. Unlike his plays in the eighties, his early works *The Birthday Party* and *The Room* are not didactic whatsoever. Whereas in *The Birthday Party* and *The Room* the details of the occupation of each of the characters are vague in most of the cases, in *Mountain Language* (1988) the focus is placed in the very occupation or role in the social scale. Instead of getting proper nouns like Rose or Stanley, the audience meets the Sergeant, the Officer or the Prisoner. As a result, the audience can identify these with real life organizations or governments, drawing an allegory. The lack of verification in *The Birthday Party* and *The Room* makes such thing extremely difficult. Furthermore, the roles of the victim and the executioner are much clearly defined. The hostile behaviour displayed by the law enforcers and the compliance from the mountain people. In this play, it appears much easier for the audience to identify themselves with the oppressed side. In *The Birthday Party* and *The Room*, even if they suffer, Rose and Stanley have the chance to show their dark side with Riley and Meg, respectively. Those roles, in this case are then more vague.

In light of the above, it can be safely concluded that Harold Pinter's later views on his work do not change the original nature of it. In not asking the audience to align with a certain character or side, the author is inviting the playgoer to explore a complex reality where truth is not easily attainable. Harold Pinter's commitment with reality as it is, without artifice, is presenting a reality without intervening on it.

7. Conclusion

The goal of the present essay was to evidence that the Harold Pinter who created *The Birthday Party* and *The Room* is, in light of these works, the ultimate realist playwright, thus challenging the dominant approach in the field of drama criticism on Harold Pinter, that is, Martin Esslin's theory of the playwright belonging to what he called the Theatre of the Absurd.

With such aim in mind and after providing a necessary explanation on Esslin's point of view, the analysis has been started by examining the way the characters communicate with each other in the aforementioned plays, proving that the non-verbal communication plays a huge role as in real life communication. The examination of the dialogues has proven that different factors influence the way characters communicate, keeping them from uttering the right words in the right moment. We have mentioned that traditional literature has accustomed the public to expect this perfection when communicating, but Harold Pinter shows authentic commitment with real life communication by placing the focus on the subtext, on that which is not said but, at the same time, happens to be really eloquent.

That topic being tackled, the focus has been placed in the characteristic lack of verification of these plays, showing that such characteristic is not, by any means, an obstacle as it has often been interpreted but rather an element that strengthens the dramatical tension of the work and its commitment with reality. The analysis has shown that the desirable context for the events of the play is not attainable because of the playwright's will to illustrate a very specific moment of the lives of the characters, without introducing forced explanation to satisfy the confused playgoer.

Last but not least, the analysis has moved on to the political content of *The Birthday Party* and *The Room*, and the evidence has shown that, albeit definitely political, these plays are not didactic, thus not demanding the playgoer to subscribe one truth, but showing a complex reality without interceding on it. Having to deal with Pinter's different points of view on his work, the methodology of analysis has been to remain loyal to the nature of *The Room* and *The Birthday Party*, taking into account the political commitment of Pinter in different stages of his life, and deciding to leave external influences on the work aside.

To conclude, the analysis carried out throughout the essay has attempted to bring a valid and original point of view of two of the greatest early works from Harold

Pinter's career as a playwright. The claims have been made through the support from excerpts of the original works and reliable drama criticism. It appears safe to conclude that the three main parts of the dissertation have been successful in showing Harold Pinter's truthful representation of life without artifice.

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