

Pinter's Political Menace and Ashes to Ashes

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Harold Pinter has been generally considered as the foremost representative of British drama, after George Bernard Shaw, in the second half of the twentieth century. His name has entered the English language as an adjective used to describe a particular atmosphere and environment in drama: Pinteresque. The Nobel Prize committee praised him for his contribution to the world literature: "He restored theater to its basic elements: an enclosed space and unpredictable dialogue, where people are at the mercy of one another and pretence crumbles. With a minimum of plot, drama emerges from the power struggle and hide-and-seek of interlocation. Pinter's early plays are usually about a room with two characters who are menaced by intrusion from the outside world. The characters' dialogues are usually unpredictable and full of pauses and silences. They compete with one another for power in the realistic world without any pretence.

Although acting was the first career of Harold Pinter, his stage work was abruptly eclipsed by his prodigious writing talent. Thematically influenced by Kafka and Beckett, the plays of this contemporary master of the comic absurd offer uneasy glimpses into existential struggles for survival and identity in these irrational, inexplicable times. Pinter made inroads to the conventional theatrical junket with disquieting early plays such as *The Dumb Waiter* (1957), *The Birthday Party* (1958), and *The Caretaker* (1960). From their characteristically pleasant beginnings, Pinter's plays slowly shift tonalities. They cloak themselves in the omnipresent colors of anxiety, fear, and pathos, as the characters seek to avoid or to defend against some unknown or self-created danger that is rooted their existential terror of vulnerability. Isolating his

characters in confined spaces, Pinter allows them to wrestle with their neuroses in an open-ended yet realistically drawn universe.

As a playwright, he insists that he can't know everything about his characters, since he's unaware of everything that goes on in his own mind. Because of this problem, which he claims that traditional drama has not addressed, he can only record a situation as it reveals itself. Pinter's legendary absorption in the cadence and effect of everyday speech extends to its subtext: the silences and omissions that are as important as the spoken words. Though astonishingly prolific in several mediums -- screenwriting, poetry, and directing to name a few -- Pinter has by no means forsaken the theater. Later plays such as *Betrayal* (1978), *Moonlight* (1994), and *Ashes to Ashes* (1997) have prompted hardened reviewers to assert, there is no playwright his equal. He is the natural descendent of Joyce, by way of Samuel Beckett. Pinter's sparse poetry reveals a world left bare by what is unspoken. This still-unsettling mixture of mystery, tension, and mounting horror cements Pinter's reputation as one of the finest dramatists of the world.

In 1998 Pinter said in an interview that 'The dead are still looking at us, steadily, waiting for us to acknowledge our part in their murder.' After writing *Old Times* and *Betrayal* (1978), Pinter's writing entered a different phase. *One for the Road* (1984), *Mountain Language* (1988) and *Party Time* (1991) were all dramas directly confronting the audience with oppressive and authoritarian operations of state power. They were greeted by reviewers and critics alike as signalling a shift in Pinter's writings from what Esslin terms 'the highly private world of his [earlier] plays' (1982a: 36) to a concern with the more public terrain of politics. But his political theme is always imbued with the elements of menace. This politicisation, Pinter has claimed, is one that was always present in his earliest plays, which were focused on the 'mechanisms of domination and marginalisation, the social construction of gender and sexuality, and the ideological status of such 'state apparatus' as the family – a focus [...] on fundamentally political issues'. Similarly, the environment of threat permeates all his later plays. There is nothing startlingly new here: Burkman, Esslin, Gabbard, Quigley and Silverstein are all critics who have directed attention to the battles for power that form the centre of Pinter's dramatic action.

Over the years, Pinter's plays became increasingly and overtly political: they extend his pre-occupation with power struggles from the personal to the public. His book *Harold Pinter: Plays: 4*, includes "*Mountain People*", based on the suppression of the Kurds and their language; "*One for the Road*", looks at the relationship between the head of secret police and the victims he has tortured; "*Party Time*" portrays the rich and powerful enjoying a party, while ignoring horrific events in the street outside, for which they are responsible; "*Ashes to Ashes*" (the only Pinter play I've known to be performed in Karachi) merges time to provides a disturbing interplay between a woman tortured by a past, and her husband who assumes the role of interrogator. The play has strong echoes of the Holocaust but Pinter claims its intention was to comment upon a collective history and the recorded brutalities of our age. "*Ashes to Ashes* had to do with me," he said. "I have been haunted by past and present and the impossibility of living in this world. It is a very alarming place — and that is encapsulated by this young woman."

Pinter has remained an outspoken, passionate, vocal critic of political and social hypocrisy and iniquity. The British literary establishment has not always warmed to his political views. Pinter in turn has been critical of an "inward-looking" society which prefers disengagement. To him, politics and literature are clearly a part of the whole. At the Cambridge seminar, he circulated his paper attacking the NATO action in Serbia and US imperial policies. He expressed outrage at the human suffering in Guatemala, El Salvador, East Timor and Iraq and at an "anaesthetized" society, which has failed to respond. In 2005, by now an ardent campaigner for human rights, Pinter implicitly suggested that citizens of democratic countries like Great Britain are in some part responsible for the 'murder, misery, degradation and death' of innocent civilians in other countries through their support of the governments that carry out these acts in their name . This guilt is something that we carry on our shoulders; the act of looking the other way makes us all responsible to those civilians, and all the innocent people throughout history who have been killed in this way. All these resentments of Pinter are clearly reflected in *Ashes to Ashes* through a series of menacing situations.

Pinter implies in *Ashes to Ashes* that failing to articulate any ethical response to events in history must force us to acknowledge our part in these events; we are implicated in all the crimes against humanity committed in the past since they are still being committed today. Through this play, he forces us to recognize how the ‘past [is] present in our lives’.¹ So how can we take responsibility for events over which we have little or no control? *Ashes to Ashes* addresses this precise question; Pinter suggests that as citizens of the world we are responsible for knowing what is happening in it, challenging us to confront the trauma of existing in a world that has seen such atrocities as the Holocaust and Bosnian ethnic cleansing.

It is not until 1996, Pinter’s last ‘political’ play of the period, *Ashes to Ashes*, that we see another woman similar to that of Ruth and Kate. *Ashes to Ashes* amalgamates Pinter’s earlier exploration of domestic gender politics with his later overt engagement with world politics. Hence here is a play that is a more morally focused response to world political history through various menacing tools.

Pinter’s early plays such as *The Room*(1957), *The Birthday Party*(1957), *The Caretaker*(1960), *The Homecoming*(1965), were deeply influenced by the masters of the Theatre of the Absurd, such as Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco. But late his drama has more aptly been characterized as "comedy of menace," a genre of drama which describes the characters’ domination and submission over each other in their daily usual conversations. In Pinter’s plays, the characters live in a limited and controlled space and defend themselves against intrusion from the outside world. Pinter’s works continue the artistic features of the masters of the Theatre of the Absurd in regard to the miserable and lonely characters, isolated and bleak environments and non-communicable language. The characters in Pinter’s plays are usually mysterious people beyond our understanding. What is the relationship between Rose and Riley? Where is Stanley from? Who are Goldberg and McCann working for? What is the result of Ben and Gus? Why does Ruth choose to stay in the house? They live in an enclosed environment, feeling menaced by intrusion from the outside. In spite of their efforts to reinforce and secure themselves from menace by using verbal weapons such as pauses and silences, the weak individuals are vulnerable to the powerful forces of the mysterious outside world.

Pinter's plays express the failure of human communication, the meaninglessness of human life, and the absurdity of human existence. Yet, Pinter differs from those masters in his use of detailed realistic description which makes his works real and concrete. His plays are based on the issues which can be associated with the reality in contemporary Britain, such as the housing problem, the racial tension, the crimes of assassination, and the house caretaker. Unlike the characters in the Theatre of the Absurd who fail to communicate with others, Pinter's characters choose to avoid communication with others because they are afraid of being hurt in doing so. By combining the abstract menace in life with the concrete reality in society to create a sense of verisimilitude, Pinter's plays produce a resonance and understanding in his audiences.

However, Pinter is not only a writer of the Theatre of the Absurd, but also a serious, conscientious and realistic playwright who is concerned with the contemporary society and conditions of human existence. Although in the 1960s he claimed that his early plays are not concerned with politics, his plays actually deal with the political issues from a new perspective, very different from the traditional political one. The issues about intrusion from the outside in *The Room*, the use of violence by assassins in *The Dumb Waiter*, the kidnapping of Stanley by mysterious agents in *The Birthday Part*, the control and anti-control between men and the woman in *The Homecoming*, are actually problems related to authority and power, and they can be considered minimal aspects of politics.

In the 1970s, he felt puzzled by his own ideas and troubled by his marriage crisis. He was incapable of writing "comedy of menace" any more with same intensity. He needed a change in his dramatic creation. From the 1980s, Pinter's political inclination was even clear, so he turned to a new direction—political play-writing. But even his political plays were not devoid of threatening menace. *One for the Road* condemns the crime of the abuse of power in torturing the disobedient individuals in the name of the state. *Mountain Language* deals with the issue of the violation of human rights of using one's own language. *Party Time* criticizes the moral degradation of the social elites and the cruelty of the government in repressing democratic

movement. *Ashes to Ashes* explores the effect of the atrocity of Nazi fascism on people in the post-World War II period. Thus, we can say that all his early comedies of menace were certainly dealing with one or the other kind of contemporary political issues; whereas, all his later political plays bear a profound mark of threat and menace within them.

Pinter does not only use his plays to expose the existing social problems, criticize the unjust situations in the modern world, and explore the human psychology that has resulted in such social problems, but also participates in social activities to protest the dishonorable conducts of the western countries and announces that he will give up his dramatic creation and devote himself to the cause of human rights and social progress.

Pinter has been studied by critics from many perspectives such as linguistic, thematic, gender, psychoanalytical and political. Pinter's dramatic works have always been influenced by his sensitive concerns about the contemporary national and international issues. Some critics have pointed out that Pinter's plays in the early period have shown his political interest, while others consider Pinter a writer who is apolitical.

This chapter studies the differences between Harold Pinter's "Comedy of Menace" and the Theatre of the Absurd in the 1950s for the purpose of analyzing his political concerns dominant in *Ashes to Ashes*. Due to his close reading of Samuel Becket and Kafka, Pinter's works have some characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd. His characters and language are similar to those of Beckett and Kafka. But, Pinter is different from those Absurdist writers in that his plays are based on the realities of the world after the 1950s and are more about the universal human anxieties and securities and dignity than about the concerns with problems about human existence in the works of the Theatre of the Absurd. The issues in his plays can be regarded as the reflection of the problems of the contemporary British society and politics.

In dealing with each other, his characters are involved in a fight for power to safeguard themselves and meanwhile control and dominate the others. Pinter's idea of the struggle for

power is influenced by many sources. The Holocaust of the War, the persecution of the Jewish people, and his personal experiences has contributed to this effect. The analysis of Pinter's conception of power in the early plays is based on Foucault's postmodern theory of power. Power is a relationship, an interlaced network, subjectless and decentered, existing everywhere, related to knowledge and truth and exercised in different ways.

His interest in politics can be inferred from a close reading of his early plays, although it is not the politics that is concerned with international wars and political systems. It is about the relationship between individuals, the relationship between an individual and an organization, and the power struggle for security and identity. Political theme is more evident in the late plays because Pinter feels he can no longer suppress his emotions in face of the more and more violent and abusive powers, such as the repression of democracy, the violation of human rights, the wars against innocent people in the contemporary world. Pinter's political concerns are the result of his rebellious personality, his loyalty to his friends, his marriage life with Lady Fraser, and the influences on him from the national and international situations in the contemporary world. Due to his dislike of politicians since early years, Pinter refuses to write about politics overtly. Pinter's political plays are the result of his life long search for an outlet to express his political concerns in the artistic form.

First presented by the Royal Court Theatre in London in September of 1996, *Ashes to Ashes* is a triumph of power and concision. In the living room of a pleasant house in a university town outside of London, Devlin, threatened by his wife Rebecca's recollections of an abusive ex-lover, questions her relentlessly in his need for a single truth. In her seamless blending of what she knows of violence with the wider violence of the world, Rebecca reveals an eerie communion with the dead victims of unnamed political barbarities.

As with most Pinter plays, the mood is somber and threatening, and the conversation, odd and elliptical. The line readings are flat and artificial with odd silences and pauses, and each audience member, who makes the effort, will have an interpretation of the play that will be at variance to one degree or another with each of his fellow attendees. The setting is a house in the

country; the time is "now." Devlin is an academic type fellow. He questions Rebecca with some anger about a violent, former lover of hers who drove his fist toward her face and made her kiss it, and tightly and painfully closed his fingers around her neck. Devlin's questions initially suggest that he might likely be her psychiatrist. However, the jealousy that Devlin expresses when he becomes concerned that the incidents that she describes occurred after she met him makes him appear to be Rebecca's husband or lover. Rebecca explores dream-like images and memories of extreme cruelty that strongly suggest the deportations, concentration camps, and mass murder which were visited upon European Jews during the Holocaust. Eventually, Devlin will act toward Rebecca in the manner of her former lover.

When a seemingly casual conversation between a husband and wife reveals a sadistic affair, the couple embarks on a sinister journey into the past. Devlin wants to get to the bottom of his wife's possible infidelity. Her lover -- past? present? -- is a violent, powerful man whose emotional hold reaches deep into Rebecca's psyche. As Devlin struggles to separate illusion from reality, he starts to become like the monster she fell in love with.

From the start, we could be watching a play from Pinter's earlier period; two characters in the midst of a seemingly innocent conversation but actually engaged in a battle for domestic power. The two characters, Rebecca and Devlin, are engaged in an exchange whereby Rebecca, in response to Devlin's questions, suggests she has achieved sexual fulfillment from a masochistic ritual she played with a lover. It is an opening image that implies 'a mixture of sexual enforcement and willing submission'.² and establishes the reality of the play: a world of brutality, power and domination but also, with Devlin's incessant questions, one of anxiety and insecurity.

However, through Devlin's insistent request for a 'concrete image', we see that the sexual authoritarianism of Rebecca's lover appears to be an extension of his public role, as Rebecca describes visiting a factory where, despite suggestions of appalling living and working conditions – she mentions the dampness, their inadequate working attire and the lack of a bathroom – the workers doffed their caps out of the 'great respect [...for] his.... purity [and]

conviction'. This 'naked submission'³ in the face of brute masculine power links directly to Rebecca's retelling of her Fascist sexual ritual, and seems reminiscent of earlier Pinter – the use of language to obtain power. The authoritarianism that Rebecca admires, and Devlin comes to envy, becomes dramatically clear with Rebecca's sudden statement: 'He was a guide. He used to go to the local railway station and walk down the platform and tear all the babies from the arms of their screaming mothers.

I have settled on an interpretation that seems too clear cut and simple. However, it satisfies me as being capable of encompassing the play's many threads. Accept or reject all or any part of it. Rebecca is the Jew in the post Holocaust world. Her Jewish everyman carries the memory of the history of her people painfully inside of her. She may gain acceptance and embrace close and loving relationships with the Gentile world, but she remains tortured by the knowledge that what happened before could happen again. Devlin is a symbol of a Gentile world, puzzled by the Jews' fear of it and angered that at anyone who would believe that it could ever again exterminate Jews, even as it demonstrates that if the right buttons were pushed it could.

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