

Menace in the early plays of Harold Pinter

I have chosen to write about menace in the early plays of Harold Pinter because it is this that seems to lead to a lack of understanding of the identity of his characters.+ The questions "Who are Goldberg and McCann? Where do they come from?" and "Who is Riley?" arise because readers or audience have no idea of the areas Pinter is exploring.

Pinter himself tends not to assist people in discovering these areas. He'll say his plays deal with the weasel under the cocktail cabinet. When he received a letter which read: "Dear Sir, I would be obliged if you would kindly explain to me the meaning of your play The Birthday Party. These are the points which I do not understand: 1. Who are the two men? 2. Where did Stanley come from? 3. Were they all supposed to be normal? You will appreciate that without the answers to my questions I cannot fully understand your play", Pinter replied as follows: "Dear Madam, I would be obliged if you would kindly explain to me the meaning of your letter. These are the points which I do not understand: 1. Who are you? 2. Where do you come from? 3. Are you supposed to be normal? You will appreciate that without the answers to your questions I cannot fully understand your letter." 1

Pinter's plays can be taken at face value; they can be seen symbolically. No matter how the plays are dissected, Pinter's characters are enigmatic; their past and future are never revealed; the only important aspect of character for Pinter is the consistency of character presentation. It is clearly up to the reader to derive what he wishes: Pinter is only lighting as many areas as the spectator wants lit or relit. It is unimportant to know what Mick in The Caretaker did for a living. Pinter says: "All I know is that whatever he did, he had his own van."² In an interview with Patricia Bosworth, Pinter said: "I hope my plays mean something different to everyone who sees them. They should, because there is never one answer."³

The basic reason for mystification in Pinter's plays is that Pinter is merely suggesting an area of life that he is exploring. Uncertainty about the past of Stanley, the identity of Davies and the existence of his papers; and the existence and location of Monty, makes Pinter's plays frightening. And fright suggests menace.

Menace in Pinter is twofold. There exists the menace of the possibility of the arrival of the unknown or some thing from the past. It is this, and the negro's plea "Come home, Sal" that frighten Rose. Stanley's fear of the unexpected arrival is reflected not only in his apprehension of the outside world but also in his childlike frightening games with Meg. In The

+ The plays discussed are the one-act plays The Room, The Dumb Waiter and A Slight Ache, and the full-length plays The Birthday Party and The Caretaker.

Caretaker, Davies' inability to locate his papers not only points to his sloth but suggests his anxiety of the past - an anxiety suggested again in his worrying about someone getting him when he answers the door as caretaker. This aspect of menace - the intrusion of the outer world into the safe haven - leads to the notion that the menace is in fact the violence of the world outside.

For Pinter, violence exists in the real world. London's East End, in which Pinter grew up, harboured a hatred of Jews, Communists and Fascists and sported milk bottle fights. ⁴ In The Room this violence is expressed in the silent brutality of Bert Hudd towards his wife, and later, in the savage maiming of the blinded negro, Riley. In The Dumb Waiter and The Caretaker, the violence becomes part of the question of dominance and subservience, a question always implicit in Pinter's work. The absolute power gained by some organization and the way it manipulates its employees is effectively suggested when Ben is ordered to kill his partner, Gus. Violence is enacted in The Caretaker with the assault on Davies by Mick at the conclusion of Act One, and in the brilliant electrolux scene where Davies eventually confronts Mick with a knife and the words:

"I keep myself to myself, mate. But if anyone starts with me though, they know what they got coming". ⁵ As Pinter says: "The world is a pretty violent place, it's as simple as that, so any violence in the plays comes out quite naturally. It seems to me an essential and inevitable factor." ⁶

In all his plays, Pinter is suggesting the importance of some form of security to combat the menace and violence of the world.

In The Room and The Birthday Party the security is definitely to be found within the four walls of a room. Rose, in The Room, articulates this sentiment exactly:

"This is a good room. You've got a chance in a place like this." ⁷ Later she reinforces this ideal of her existence with:

"We're very quiet. We keep ourselves to ourselves. I never interfere. I mean, why should I? We've got our room. We don't bother anyone else. That's the way it should be." ⁸ In The Birthday Party, it is Stanley who seems to require the safe haven. He is secluded from the world where "he used to have to (once) play the piano." He is secluded until Goldberg and McCann arrive, ostensibly to stay at the boarding house Meg runs, but eventually to break down Stanley's resistance to them and take him to

Monty for treatment. Stanley cracks as the security of his non-conforming existence is broken by the conforming worldly pressures of eloquent speeches and the observance of birthday parties. Stanley's security has been shattered. His games of pretended terror and violence, suggested in the following scene, turn into real life interrogation by questioners whose incredible questions can't receive satisfactory answers.

STANLEY. Meg. Do you know what?

MEG. What?

STANLEY. Have you heard the latest?

MEG. No.

STANLEY. I'll bet you have.

MEG. I haven't.

STANLEY. Shall I tell you?

MEG. What latest?

STANLEY. You haven't heard it?

MEG. No.

STANLEY (advancing). They're coming today.

MEG. Who?

STANLEY. They're coming in a van.

MEG. Who?

STANLEY. And do you know what they've got in that van?

MEG. What?

STANLEY. They've got a wheelbarrow in that van.

MEG. (breathlessly). They haven't.

STANLEY. Oh yes they have.

MEG. You're a liar.

STANLEY (advancing upon her). A big wheelbarrow. And when the van stops they wheel it out, and they wheel it up the garden path, and then they knock at the front door.

MEG. They don't.

STANLEY. They're looking for someone.

MEG. They're not.

STANLEY. They're looking for someone. A certain person.

MEG. (hoarsely). No, they're not!

STANLEY. Shall I tell you who they're looking for?

MEG. No!

STANLEY. You don't want me to tell you?

MEG. You're a liar! 9

That menace is one of the keys to The Birthday Party was noticed by the first favourable critic of The Birthday Party, Harold Hobson: "Mr. Pinter has got hold of a primary fact of existence. We live on the verge of disaster." 10

The theme of the security found within a relationship seems to have become paramount in Pinter's later plays, particularly The Homecoming (1965), The Collector (1961), The Basement (1967), and Old Times (1971). The theme of security within a relationship is also found in The Caretaker and A Slight Ache. The Caretaker uses the method of disrupting a prior relationship by the introduction of an unknown third character - a tramp. Pinter is interested in exploiting this situation to the fullest and the variety of relationships expressed by sly looks, glances, wry smiles, suggestions of take-overs, are employed by Pinter so well that the final depiction of the baffled Davies, pulled and tugged between the brothers' games, is unforgettable. A Slight Ache is a play that needs careful consideration because as it was originally conceived as a radio play, the existence of the dumb matchseller can be questioned. The Matchseller was brought on stage during the first stage production of A Slight Ache but it is possible to consider

him as a figment of both husband's and wife's imaginations and/or fears. Certainly the play revolves around their relationship with each other. Their frivolous bickering over such matters as whether wasps bite or sting suggests the instability of their marital bliss.

Within both plays the suggestion of unspecified menace exists. Although the Matchseller is the menacing figure from the outside intruding into the security of the house of Edward and Flora, it is not entirely satisfactory to believe that in this seemingly realistic play the Matchseller has been standing near a deserted lane for two months and attempting to sell sodden matches, or the reversal of Edward's and the Matchseller's roles, and the fact that the Matchseller is other than, well, a Matchseller. However the suggestion of the animal nature of the Matchseller, who looks like a bullock, occurs again and again; and just as Pinter seems to suggest that Rose likes the strong, silent Bert; perhaps he wants Flora to accept the Matchseller. All in all, A Slight Ache is a far better radio play than a stage play because of the ambiguity over the presence of the Matchseller.

In The Room, The Birthday Party and A Slight Ache, menace is associated with blindness and partial loss of sight. Riley, the intruder from outside in The Room, is blind, and upon his thrashing (and possible death), passes on his blindness to Rose. Stanley's glasses are shattered in bed and he eventually becomes a sterile conformist - possibly because of loss of vision. Edward's cruelty to the wasp is emphasized by his desire to blind it: "Ah yes. Tilt the pot. Tilt. Aah....down here....right down....blinding him....that's....it." 11

He seems to be in the process of losing sight as well as attempting to blind other creatures.

FLORA. Have you got something in your eyes?

EDWARD. No. Why do you ask?

FLORA. You keep clenching them, blinking them.

EDWARD. I have a slight ache in them.

Pinter's figures of menace are active, enigmatic characters. They appear suddenly and mysteriously from unknown situations and disappear to unknown destinations. They are menacing because of their precise actions, and the fact that their unknown aims and reasons for actions are never established. In other words, they are to be feared. This applies particularly to the Matchseller, Goldberg and McCann, and Riley.

The Dumb Waiter and The Caretaker are more explicit concerning the details of the menace. Gus and Ben are obviously employed by some organization. Davies is being used by the two brothers as the focal point of a sadistic game. Another alternative in interpreting the role of Davies is that he is an allegorical figure - a type of later day Everyman whose subjection to sloth is the plight of humanity. Pinter, however, denied this: "I have never been conscious of allegorical significance in my plays, either while writing or after writing. I have never intended any specific religious reference or been conscious of using anything as a symbol for anything else." 13

These early plays, with their intruding menace (and in the case of The Caretaker the menace existing in the form of the expulsion game Mick and Aston play), pertain to the idea of dominance and subservience. Who controls the house? Who runs the show? Who is in charge? Whom should we believe? Why are some characters expelled at the expense of others? These questions can be directed at all Pinter's early plays, as well as at the majority of the twelve other plays he has written to the present time. As I tried to suggest in the opening argument, the answers to questions like the above, and "Who are those guys?" depend either on your imaginative credibility or your experience in areas suggested by Pinter's world.

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References

1. Both letters quoted in Martin Esslin, The Peopled Wound: The Plays of Harold Pinter. Methuen, London, 1970, pp. 37 - 38.
2. "Probing Pinter's Plays", Saturday Review, 8 April, 1967, p. 97.
3. "Why doesn't he write more?", New York Times, 27 October, 1968, p. 93.
4. A reference to actual milk bottle fights occurs in The Basement (1967).
5. Harold Pinter, The Caretaker, Methuen, London, 1964.
6. Interview with Lawrence M. Bensky, "The Art of the Theatre 111", Paris Review, Volume 39 - 40, 1966 - 1967, p. 30.
7. Harold Pinter, The Room, Samuel French, London, 1960, p. 3.
8. Ibid. p. 13.
9. Harold Pinter, The Birthday Party, Methuen, London, 1963, pp. 24-25.
10. Quoted in Esslin, p. 19.
11. Harold Pinter, A Slight Ache and other plays, Methuen, London, 1970, p. 14.
12. Ibid. p. 12.
13. "Probing Pinter's Plays", Saturday Review, 8 April, 1967, p. 97.