

# The Psychoanalytic Strategies in the Plays of Harold Pinter

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**Abstract - Harold Pinter, a playwright whose originality was so compelling that it has brought into the lexicon the term Pinteresque, to describe an atmosphere of expectation, where real characters speak "unrealistically," or inconsequentially, as people actually do in everyday life. He evoked that atmosphere of dread simply by having his stage protagonists engage in conversational repetitiveness and seeming irrationally, served up as objects of interest in and by them. This paper shows the art of game and role playing that Pinter to explain the true appearance of human existence and situation. These concepts emphasize the fear lurking just around the corner, the sense of menace that is prevalent due to an impending threat.**

**Keywords - Pinter, threat, menace, psychoanalysis, protagonists, pinteresque**

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## INTRODUCTION

### The Psychoanalytic Strategies in the Plays of Harold Pinter

One of the most important English playwrights of the last half of the 20th century and the most influential of his generation, Pinter writes what have been called "comedies of menace." of fear, horror, and mystery. The peculiar tension he creates often derives as much from the long Using apparently commonplace characters and settings, he invests his plays with an atmosphere silences between speeches as from the often curt, ambiguous, yet vividly vernacular speeches themselves. His austere language is extremely distinctive, as is the ominous unease it provokes, and he is one of the few writers to have an adjective—Pinteresque—named for him. His plays frequently concern struggles for power in which the issues are obscure and the reasons for defeat and victory undefined. He has won many prestigious honors, the crowning of which was the 2005 Nobel Prize in Literature.

Pinter began his theatrical career as an actor, touring with provincial repertory companies. Pinter's work is heavily influenced by Samuel Beckett, who used silence-filled pauses for a revolutionary theatrical effect. In his introduction to *Pinter: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1972), Arthur Ganz writes that Pinter "shares the reluctance of many writers to have the full evocative experience of his work reduced, or altered, to an intellectual formation." In Pinter's case, however, this reluctance is tempered by his conscientiously designing plays that, in Ganz's view, "demand analysis even as he frustrates inquiry." Pinter's willful obscurity was often viewed as a breach of contract between the

playwright and his audience, which left many theatergoers dissatisfied, feeling cheated or foolish, as if they had missed something, while critics and scholars attacked Pinter for his frustrating dismissal regarding the meaning of his plays (5). Much of the confusion surrounding early public reaction to Pinter's work stems from the fact that his plays are neither clearly absurd nor clearly realistic; his style derives its distinctiveness by its quirky combination of elements from both schools. Pinter blends the authentic, mimetic behavior usually associated with realism -- evoking a world that the audience recognizes as the everyday world that it inhabits -- with the absurdist vision of a senseless, purposeless world to create, out of seemingly ordinary situations, symbolic overtones that invite interpretation. For example, the room in his first short play, *The Room*, is a real room, but it is also a symbol of sanctity and violation, of security, betrayal, and displacement. Likewise, in *The Dumb Waiter*, the idea of two men receiving instructions from a serving hatch implies a theme larger than the surface meaning of the play: It details two guilty souls confronting an implacable, unseen, and unreasonable power beyond their understanding. In a similar way, *The Caretaker* is about two brothers and a tramp, but it is also a psychological study of power, allegiance, innocence, and corruption, just as *The Homecoming* is about both a bizarre family reunion and an ironic treatment of Old Testament myth, psychological disengagement, and familial archetypes (34).

The plays of Pinter present psychological and inner realism. They explore the human sub-conscious in depth rather than trying to describe the outward appearance of human existence. These deeply pessimistic plays are an expression of utter despair. It aims to shock its audience out of complacency, to

bring it face to face with the harsh facts of the human situation as these writers see it. But the challenge behind it is to accept the human condition as it is, in all mystery and absurdity. The shedding of easy solutions, of comforting illusions, may be painful, but it leaves behind a sense of freedom and relief. And that is why, in the last resort, the Theatre of the Absurd does not provoke tears of despair but laughter of liberation (Esslin 23).

Pinter uses the techniques of game-and-role-playing to explain the outward appearance of human existence and situation. It refers to strategies that people evolve in order to maximise their gain and minimise their loss. The concept of "game" underlies strategic behaviour of all types and avoids the horrors of true intimacy. Pinter's games, in line with Berne's theory, are usually played as a flight from reality; they are also played to fight reality in terms of "agon", or of confrontation. Michael Kaufman suggests that, in the various forms and contexts Pinter devises, the game emerges as a subtle theatrical metaphor, a complex rite of language and action through which the characters can play out their fantasies, avoid their deepest fears, or find acceptable outlets for their hostile impulses (168)

Pinter lets his characters play certain games—like "blindman's buff" in *The Birthday Party*, the game of throwing knife between James and Bill in *The Collection* and an improvised game of cricket in *The Basement*. Besides, the characters, through their ritualised attitudes and gestures, find themselves involved in a kind of game-playing. Pinter's plays has all the elements of game-playing, such as vying and sparring of competition in a struggle for mastery, rhythms of thrust and withdrawal, flight and pursuit, uncertainty and unpredictability (Taylor 74). Game-playing as we find, involves a simultaneous process of releasing and building up of tension. Blindman's buff is a traditional party-game and therefore is perfectly appropriate to the play that converges on the celebration of a birthday. Stanley's birthday is literally accepted by Meg as the anniversary of his nativity. In course of the festivities, it gets associated with his metaphoric regeneration. He becomes a "new man" fit for society. This regeneration is a parody or reversal of the original regeneration myth because it does not aim at any spiritual transformation, but it results in depersonalisation of Stanley. Meg plays her game to satisfy her wish to be a mother (Anderson 121). When Goldberg and Lulu are together, they release their sexual impulse. When Stanley, at the climax of the game, tries to strangle Lulu, he obviously violates the rule'. He violates it as he finds himself restless under the civilised restraint exercised on him in the name of a game. It is Meg, who starts game playing: "I want to play a game!" (Pinter. "Plays One" 71). Obviously, she plans the birthday party to provide an outlet to her motherly impulses. The game played upon Stanley quells his ontological insecurity by providing him with a role and giving him a context to play that role. But it becomes irritating and exasperating when he finds his essential identity smothered. His violent outburst justifies Pinter's argument : "It is funny up to a point".

The entire game is a trick to avoid truth but ultimately one has to confront the truth as Stanley has to reckon with his hostile impulses. Rose in *The Room* plays the game of everything is all right, in ironic contrast to her tension and anxiety. Her possessing a room, her attempt to preserve a relationship are her ritualised attitudes. When Flora in *A Slight Ache* hands over the match tray to Edward and leads the mute matchseller into her room, she plays fun with Edward. But, at a deeper level, it is a game of confrontation with reality. The bag-snatching incident in *The Caretaker*, which keeps poor Davies dangling between the two brothers Aston and Mick, is a cruel game played on him. This indicates his desperate struggle to hold on to something even while being constantly deluded. Ben and Gus in *The Dumb Waiter* ironically find themselves stuck up in a mysterious game played upon them by inscrutable forces. Stella, in *The Collection*, devises a game out of half-truths and lies in order to release her tension. James, Harry and Bill are irresistibly drawn to it and start playing their own games. The conversation between James and Bill is not an attempt at getting at truth but at releasing each other's tension. Harry perceives the nature of a game in James actions: "Oh yes, he was here, but I've got a funny feeling he wore a mask. It was the same man, but he wore a mask, that's all there is to it. He didn't dance here last night, did he, or do any gymnastics?" Stella's statements, "He's not important", and "It was just something", point to the evasive lighter side of the situation. James also says, "It's just a game, that's all. We're playing a game". Though, he refers to the game of throwing the knife at Bill, it becomes a part of the metaphoric texture of the play. Bill's catching the knife by the blade is his inability to play the game well. "The safest thing to do is duck," Harry advises him. That is why Bill is left forlorn at the end. All the participants have the complete purgation of their tension. "What are you doing, playing a game?" (Pinter. "Plays Three" 28-71).

This is how Sarah in *The Lover* reveals the interaction between her and Max in the afternoon, in which they act as lover and mistress. Tapping the drum, crawling under the table, kneeling together, are all elements suggesting animal games of sex (Ganz 147). In *The Homecoming*, Ruth chooses to play the game of sex and power with utmost finesse. She can maneuver herself into a position of authority. She plays the game of flight from her dull, domestic life as the wife of her intellectual husband and also a game of fight while confronting her desire for vital, passionate life.

Hirst and Spooner in *No Man's Land* (1974) play the power-game. At every stage they try to undermine each other and ensure for themselves a superior position. Hirst, who bursts out, "This is scandalous", violates the rules and is penalised (Pinter. "Plays Four" 135). Driggs and Foster, who are concerned with the interference of Spooner in their household, work very calmly and quietly to keep him off. In *Betrayal*, even the act of betrayal, which is supposed

to be a most disturbing experience, is met with in a playful mood and game-playing attitude. Though, Robert, Jerry and Emma know that they have been betrayed by one another, they never betray their feeling of anger and frustration. Robert, who is the most successful in concealing emotion, becomes triumphant at the end. The game of squash, Robert, Jerry and Cassey play or propose to play, come just after the crucial scenes of confrontation with the fact of betrayal (Brown 161).

Pinter's plays are full of images related to game-playing. Game offers the possibility of the release of tension and hostility. Game becomes a social ritual, enacting social intercourse. In the plays of Pinter, this meaning is modulated into an ironic stance in which game represents a diversion from an acute sense of alienation. Game-playing presupposes a certain system in which individuals play out their prescribed roles. The concept of role-playing is related to Pinter's analogy between theatrical performance and ritual, which echoes the traditional comparison between the stage and the world. The stage for Pinter is emblematic of essential reality, the world is a theatre where the artifice of roles and rituals and the ceremoniousness of games and playing shape men's lives (Kaufman 174)

Thus, Harold Pinter is one of the most innovative figures in mortem British theatre. The wide- ranging, self-indulgent anger of Osborne's heroes and the evenly balanced clashes of order and individualism in Arden have no place in the sparseness of Pinter's isolated rooms, last refuges of menaced nonentities, His characters are rootless and isolated, fearful that some usurper will enter the warm and womblike sanctuaries they have made their own Pinter's victims whose crimes, like those of Kafka's characters, are never revealed. The settings are dilapidated and impoverished; his plots begin virtually at the moment of crisis a disturbed refugee or two, a vague but growing sense of disquiet, and a vast and inchoate vacuum surrounding a room provide Pinter's basic situation.

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