Harold Pinter: The Dramatist and His World

Background

Nobel winner, Harold Pinter **(**1930- 2008) was born in London, England in a Jewish family**.** Some of the most recognizable features in his plays are the use of understatement, small talk, distance, and silence. These devices are employed to convey the substance of a character's thoughts.

At the outbreak of World War II, Pinter was evacuated from the city to Cornwall; to be wrenched from his parents was a traumatic event for Pinter. He lived with 26 other boys in a castle on the coast. At the age of 14, he returned to London. "The condition of being bombed has never left me," Pinter later said. At school one of Pinter's main intellectual interests was English literature, particularly poetry. He also read works of Franz Kafka and Ernest Hemingway, and started writing poetry for little magazines in his teens. The seeds of rebellion in Pinter could be spotted early on when he refused to do the National Service. As a young man, he studied acting at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and the Central School of Speech and Drama, but soon left to undertake an acting career under the stage name **David Baron**. He travelled around Ireland in a Shakespearean company and spent years working in provincial repertory before deciding to turn his attention to playwriting.

Pinter was married from 1956 to the actress Vivien Merchant. For a time, they lived in Notting Hill Gate in a slum. Eventually Pinter managed to borrow some money and move away. Although Pinter said in an interview in 1966, that he never has written any part for any actor, his wife Vivien frequently appeared in his plays. After his first marriage dissolved in 1980, Pinter married the biographer Lady Antonia Fraser, whose former husband was the Conservative MP Hugh Fraser. The divorce separated Pinter from his son Daniel, a writer and musician. Vivien Merchant died in 1982. Antonia Fraser's account of her married life with Pinter, *Must You Go?* came out in 2010.

His early plays were: *The Room* (1957) and *The Dumb Waiter* (1957), both one-act plays. His first full-length play was *The Birthday Party* (1958). After his radio play *A Slight Ache* (1959) was adapted for the stage, his reputation was secured by his second full-length play, *The Caretaker* (1960), a realistic play;
Mention must be made of *Encore* journal , the foremost radical theatre journal of the time. The contributors to Encore studied his plays with interest as soon as they arrived on the scene and made powerful sense of them. *Encore* believed that theatre is a social art.

Most of Pinter's works were seriously interpreted and critiqued in *Encore*; he first edition of *The Birthday Party* was published by the Encore Publishing Company. The *Encore* encouraged discussion on a variety of works and included every point of view. For instance, the Irish writer Sean O'Casey attacked *Waiting for Godot*. That Beckett is a clever writer, and that he has written a rotting and remarkable play; but his philosophy isn't my philosophy, for within him there is no hazard of hope; no desire for it; nothing in it but a lust for despair, and a crying of woe.

That was the backdrop or the times when Pinter was writing. Also, in the US, during the early 1950s, the plays of Arthur Miller & Tennessee Williams were free from the constrictive self-censorship of the British plays. British plays were dominated by virtual terror of the "vulgar & working class."
Along with changing post-war social conditions the seeming freedom signaled by the Americans provided an impetus for the rise of the Angry Young Men (pre-eminently John Osborne & John Wesker) from 1956.

The Angry Young Men were a group of young British writers whose works expressed the bitterness of the lower classes towards the established sociopolitical system and towards the mediocrity and hypocrisy of the

middle and upper classes. The trend that was evident in John Wain's novel *Hurry on Down* (1953) and in Lucky Jim (1954) by Kingsley Amis was crystallised in 1956. The most representative work was the play *Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne. The label was extended to all his contemporaries who expressed a rage at the persistence of class distinctions, a pride in their lower-class mannerisms, and a dislike for anything highbrow or phoney. Arnold Wesker and Alan Sillitoe are other dominant figures of this group.

The translation of French absurdist literature, most famously Samuel Beckett (*Waiting for Godot*) and Eugene Ionesco (*The Bald Soprano*) was an important moment for writers across the world. With his success by the early 1960s, Pinter was frequently associated with the social realism of the Angry Young Men and with the absurdism of Beckett & Ionesco (1909-94). Ionesco's *Chairs* (1952) is often compared with Pinter's *The Caretaker*. Likewise, Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (1957) bears resemblance to *Rhinoceros* (1959) in terms of themes & ideas.

In 1970 Pinter declared Beckett to be 'the greatest writer of our time.'

Pinter's plays are often classified as 'comedy of menace.' This is a term first used by David Campton for subtitling his four short plays *The Lunatic View* (1957). What it essentially means is a kind of play in which one or more characters feel that some force that looms large over the play threatens them. For Pinter, this force could be some obscure force, power, or even a personality, which becomes a source of laconic or black comedy.

In his plays, Pinter adds an element of comedy, provided mostly through the brilliant small-talk behind which characters hide their growing anxiety. Many of Pinter's plays involve processes of physical and mental torture which can be seen in a play like The Dumb Waiter Pinter suggests that his earlier plays can be read as political metaphors, implicitly interrogative of the abuse of authority. In his plays, the terror only culminates, the menace is only confirmed when observation is put to an end. Thus, Pinter's plays generate new kinds of ambiguity in relations between dramatic situations and the abstract framing of the political 'facts.' The 50s was a period of sexual mores when sexuality would be hinted at rather than expressed blatantly. The decade witnessed an obsessive interest in the subject , and the surveillance of sexual behaviour became a more; Sex for Pinter is a power struggle and a mind- game in which there is no certain victor, but an endless struggle for dominance'.

Both *The Birthday Party* and *The Homecoming* can be read as dramatisation of violent and authoritarian forces. As readers of Pinter, you should pay attention to the opening of *The Dumb Waiter*, the interrogation scene in *The Birthday Party*, the use of repetition (the opening scene of *The Birthday Party*), repartee (*The Room*), use of farce & aggressive joke-telling (*The Dumb Waiter*).

In *Mountain Language* (1989), Pinter focuses on a prison for political dissidents in an unnamed country, in an unspecified time. The play was advertised as a parable about the torture and fate of the Kurdish people. In this hostile landscape, communication is impossible and the only language that is allowed is the language of the oppressor. By the end, the mountain people are too terrified to use their language.

On silence , according to Pinter, there are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed. When true silence falls we are left with echo but are nearer nakedness. One way of looking at speech is to say that it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness. I believe we communicate well in our silence. In this respect, Pinter has often been compared with Anton Chekhov. In Chekhov, characters often talk across each other, as if encapsulated in private worlds. In contrast, avoidance of communication characterizes Pinter's dialogues. In the works of both playwrights, the most profound expression of feeling is through silence.

Pinter's ***Silence*** (1970) is the most lyrical, most Beckettian, and also the most mysterious and difficult. In ***Silence***, the characters are also - except in the flashback dialogues - physically separated. The stage direction is extremely laconic:

Three areas.
A chair in each area.
So also do the three characters seem to live apart, each in his own room.
Silence.

At this point you should know that Theatre of silence was a theory of drama devised by Jean-Jacques Bernard in the 1920s. Bernard suggested that dialogue is not sufficient---what is important is what characters could not and did not say. Influence of Bernard is found most notably in the works of Chekhov and Pinter.

The characters find it pleasant to be alone; in fact some of them show their dismay and anger at living next door to young people who make noisy music, and noisy love. *Silence* is an attempt to tell a story by a technique which breaks the chronological sequence more decisively than is usually done even in intricately woven patterns of flashback.

Pinter and the philosophers

Apart from Samuel Beckett, Pinter's forerunners at ideational level are Albert Camus (1913-60) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-80). Sartre, the father of modern existentialism, is the most influential among the modern philosophers, whose seminal work: *L'etre et le neant*, that is, *Being or Nothingness* that contains Sartre's famous ideas that man is born into a kind of void (neant) and a mud (le visquex), and that he has the liberty to remain in this mud and thus lead a passive, supine, acquiescent existence (as in Beckett). However, he may come out of this passive situation, Become increasingly aware of himself, experience angoisse (anguish), He would then have a sense of the absurdity of his predicament and suffer despair;
By exercising his power of choice he can give meaning to existence and the universe

Existence precedes essence, in other words, you need existence to have essence. There is no predetermined "true" thing, it has to already exist in order to become what it is.

The practitioners of the theatre of the Absurd, such as Pinter, were also influenced by the existentialists ideas such as Anxiety and anguish. The fear or dread which is not directed at any specific object, it's just there. Anguish is the dread of the nothingness of human existence, the meaningless of it. According to Kierkegaard, anguish is the underlying, all-pervasive, universal condition of man's existence.

By neant, or Nothingness, Sartre meant that there is nothing that structures this world's existence, man's existence, or the existence of my computer. There is no essence that these things are drawn from, since existence precedes essence, then that means there is nothing.

Camus' essay *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (The Myth of Sisyphus, 1942), expounds his notion of the absurd and of its acceptance with "the total absence of hope, which has nothing to do with despair, a continual refusal, which must not be confused with renouncement - and a conscious dissatisfaction". The final chapter of the essay compares the absurdity of man's life with the situation of Sisyphus, a figure of Greek mythology, who was

condemned to repeat forever the same meaningless task of pushing a rock up a mountain, only to see it roll down again. The essay concludes, "The struggle itself...is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy." For Camus, the absurd was not negative, not a synonym for "ridiculous," but the true state of existence. Accepting the view that life is absurd is to embrace a "realistic" view of life: the absence of universal logic. This approach to philosophy is more radical than Nietzsche's "God is dead."

What is "Pintersque"?

Dark and peopled with unfortunates, Pinter's idiom was so distinctive that he got his own adjective: "Pinteresque." The term has come to suggest the irrationality of everyday conversations, its bad syntax, repetitions, *non sequitors* and self-contradictions. Pinter's language suggests that real-life conversations do not proceed smoothly and logically from point to point.

Pinter is an innovator where language is concerned. In his works we find a fusion of the minimal language in naturalism as in the works of Anton Chekhov and the aesthetic expressiveness of the Symbolists. Most importantly, Pinter's plays can only be experienced through listening to the way everyday language gets deflected by, and the way it alienates the speakers from , one another. Speech for Pinter is evocative and disturbing an accurate reflection of colloquial. Pinter's characters' internal fears and longings, their guilt and difficult sexual drives are set against the neat lives they have constructed in order to survive. Pinter juxtaposed the brutal and the banal in plays such as *The Room* and *The Birthday Party* and made an art form out of spare language and heavy silence. In "Introduction" to *Complete Works 1,* he states:

"We have heard many times that tired, grimy phrase: 'Failure of communication'…and this phrase has been fixed to my work quite consistently. I believe the contrary. I think that we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is a continual evasion, desperate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves. Communication is too alarming. To enter into someone else's life is too frightening. To disclose to others the poverty within us is too fearsome a possibility" (1976, 15).

***Read the following excerpt from The Birthday Party*:**

Goldberg. You know there's a lot in your eyes.
Lulu. And in yours, too.
Goldberg. Do you think so?
Lulu (giggling). Go on!
McCann (to meg). Where'd you get it?
Meg. My father gave it to me.
Lulu. I didn't know I was going to meet you here tonight.
McCann (to Meg). Ever been to Carrikmacross?
Meg (drinking). I've been to King's Cross.
Lulu. You came right out of the blue, you know that?

Lulu (to Goldberg). Shall I tell you something?
Goldberg. What?
Lulu. I trust you.
Goldberg (lifting his glass). Gesundheit.
Lulu. Have you got a wife?
Goldberg. I had a wife. What a wife. Listen to this. Friday, of an afternoon, I'd take myself for a little constitutional, down over the park. Eh, do me a favour, just sit on the table a minute, will you? (Lulu sits on the table. He stretches and continues.) A little constitutional. I'd say hullo to the little boys, the

little girls---I never made distinctions---and then back I'd go, back to my bungalow with the flat roof. "Simey," my wife used to shout, "quick, before it gets cold!" And there on the table what would I see? The nicest piece of rollmop and pickled cucumber you could wish to find on a plate,
Lulu. I thought your name was Nat.
Goldberg. She called me Simey.
Meg. (to McCann). My father was going to take me to Ireland once. But then he went away by himself.
Lulu (to Goldberg). Do you think you knew me when I was a little girl? (p. 69).

The Playwright and his Politics

Pinter has always been very politically active and aware. In 1985 Arthur Miller and Pinter visited Turkey on behalf of International P.E.N. They met writers, artists, academics. Many of these people had spent some time in military prisons and had been tortured. They had been imprisoned for their ideas; they had committed no concrete act against the State. They met people whose lives had been ruined, both those who had been tortured and their families. Arthur Miller and Pinter were invited to the American Embassy to meet the Ambassador. They discussed American support for he military regime in Turkey and conditions in military prisons. The Ambassador said to Pinter: Mr Pinter, I don't think you understand the realities of the situation here. You have to take into account the strategic reality, the military reality, the political reality. The reality to which Pinter said he was referring to was that of the electric current attached to your genitals. The diplomat left in indignation. He had found mentions of that reality offensive. According to Pinter, we take refuge in finding offence in "strong language" when it is the reality which is obnoxious, brutal and disgusting.

The "diplomatic" language the Ambassador was employing has been used to justify the gulags in Russia and the torture chambers in El Salvador, Chile, Guatemala, and many more which has regimes supported by the United States.

In June 1989, Harold Pinter and Antonia Fraser visited Vaclav Havel in his farmhouse in Bohemia, overlooked by a 24-hour police guard. Pinter observed, "The US is really beyond reason now. There is only one comparison: Nazi Germany. Nazi Germany wanted total domination of Europe and they nearly did it. The US wants total domination of the world and is about to consolidate that." Antonia Fraser in her autobiography, *Must You Go?* Recalls, "Politics began to feature increasingly in Harold's life now that he had become, in his oft-repeated words, 'the luckiest man in the world.' It has to be said that this was not a popular move in the general estimation. …Nevertheless Harold strongly rebutted the idea that the artist was honour-bound to stick to his art and had no duties as a citizen." (Fraser 2010: 147).

In 2005, Harold Pinter was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, the highest honour available to any writer in the world. In announcing the award, Horace Engdahl, Chairman of the Swedish Academy, said that Pinter was an artist "who in his plays uncovers the precipice under everyday prattle and forces entry into oppression's closed rooms" (see, www. haroldpinter.org). In his Nobel lecture, which focused more on politics than literature, Pinter launched a ferocious tirade against Bush and Blair, saying they were responsible for tens of thousands of deaths in the Iraq war. Pinter accused the United States of supporting "every right wing military dictatorship in the world" after World War II, from Chile to the Philippines. "The crimes of the United States have been systematic, constant, vicious, remorseless, but very few people have actually talked about them," he said. "It has exercised a quite clinical manipulation of power worldwide while masquerading as a force for universal good. It's a brilliant, even witty, highly successful act of hypnosis." Pinter said the U.S. "also has its

own bleating little lamb tagging behind it on a lead, the pathetic and supine Great Britain." He said both Bush and Blair deserve to be arraigned by the Hague, Netherlands-based International Criminal Court.

Pinter's short poem given below eloquently speaks for the playwright's humanitarian concerns:

Where was the dead body found?
Who found the dead body?
Was the dead body dead when found?
How was the dead body found?
Who was the dead body?
Who was the father or daughter or brother
Or uncle or sister or mother or son
Of the dead and abandoned body?
Was the body dead when abandoned?
Was the body abandoned?
By whom had it been abandoned?
Was the dead body naked or dressed for a journey?
What made you declare the dead body dead?
Did you declare the dead body dead?
How well did you know the dead body?
How did you know the dead body was dead?
Did you wash the dead body
Did you close both its eyes
Did you bury the body
Did you leave it abandoned
Did you kiss the dead body

Pinter's contribution to films includes screenplays for *The Servant* (1963), *Accident* (1967), *The Go-Between* (1971), *The Last Tycoon* (1974), *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981), and *Betrayal* (1982). His later plays include *Mountain Language* (1988), *Party Time* (1991), and *Moonlight*(1993).

Suggested website:

- http://www.haroldpinter.org/home/index.shtml
- http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/pinter
- http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4351/the-art-of-theater-no-3-harold-pinter
- http://www.fowlesbooks.com/PinterSpeech.htm
- http://www.studentpulse.com/articles/616/the-politics-of-harold-pinter
- http://www.sccs.swarthmore.edu/users/00/pwillen1/lit/indexa.htm
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Chairs