

Projection of Strong social dimension with a focus on relationship and betrayal in the dramatic world of Harold Pinter: An Appraisal

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Abstract: The present paper tries to describe and analyse the social dimensions in the plays of Harold Pinter. Rather than showing that the personal is political by dissolving the personal into political, Pinter has demonstrated the complex issues of interactions in the more overtly political plays, he also creates situations so that they need to be considered as social – political representation of power.

Key Words: metaphysical, flounders, mutual dependency, mutual distrust, unemotional, desperate, unprepossessing.

It is generally held that Harold Pinter is a dramatist who cannot be classified and pigeon – holed into a “neat” category and no label seems to suit him, for no single label can express adequately the total quality of his themes. In his plays, Pinter covers a wide range of themes – both topical and universal. Basically concerned with the human condition, Pinter seems to have concentrated on “the middle-classes” for projecting his ideas. When Beckett and Ionesco concentrated on an undefinable class of characters to expound their metaphysical concepts, Pinter concretized his themes by basing them on life – like situations like social relationships of which love and said in an interview with Kenneth Tynan, broadcast on 28 October 1960, as:

**“.... his plays were about characters who stood at essential turning points in their lives”
(Qtd. in Esslin 34).**

Which bring about a couple change in the lives of the characters involved. The situations, considered in a social context deal with relations between husband and wife, between friends and between members of

a family. In almost all his plays where Pinter presents his characters as married couples the marriage pictured is one heading for the rocks. The most common situation in such plays deals with the ways in which the couples face the breakdown of one of the most intimate relationships of social life, namely marriage. In some plays, the characters watch helplessly quite unable to do anything to prevent the disaster from taking place. In others, they make a last desperate attempt – foredoomed to failure – to save the marriage. For instance, Diana in *Tea Party* does nothing to save her marriage; on the contrary, she ignores her husband and decides to go on a pleasure-trip with her brother instead. But in *The Collection*, Stella makes one last effort to win back her husband. Finding that he is no longer curious about her activities, she tries to provoke his jealousy by confessing that she committed adultery with Bill Lloyds. Unfortunately for her, James is no longer interested in her – he is more interested in making friends with Bill and so her ploy fails.

In *The Room*, Pinter's first play, Rose is sixty and Bert fifty and one of the themes raised here seems to be marital incompatibility. He is a van-driver, coarse and brutal by nature and not a sensitive woman – the motherly type. She is over-anxious to please him, fetching and carrying for him and promising, "I'll have you some nice Cocoa on for when you get back" (P 10). This anxiety regarding his comfort could be due to her love for him or could be motivated by fear. What is evident is an overwhelming feeling of tension which suggests that the marriage is not as stable as it appears. It is threatened by forces outside itself, and the blind Negro may be conceived as a symbolic representation of this threat. If Riley is Rose's father or an ambassador sent by him to bring her back to her parental home, he could represent a threat to Bert's comfort. If Rose were to leave, Bert would have to look after himself. Even if Riley is interpreted on a symbolic level as representing Death, as Augusta Walker says, "Riley's claim to have been searching for Rose may mean that Death had been stalking Rose for a long time" (P 4). The death of Riley as well as Rose's inexplicable blindness could symbolize the final breakdown of the relationship between Rose and Bert. Now that Rose is blind, their marriage can no longer run along the same lines as before.

In the play *The Birthday Party*, Pinter used fewer symbols to depict the husband – wife relationship, whereas in the play, *The Room*, he had heightened the motif of marital incompatibility between Rose and Bert by subtly contrasting it with the young couple, Mr. and Mrs. Sands, whose relationships show. Similar "signs of tension between a more intelligent woman and a lazy and a dull

man who dominates her by sheer brutality” (Esslin 66). But in *The Birthday Party*, marital incompatibility is only a minor theme. Meg is totally different from her sensitive, understanding husband poetry. She appears to be a stupid and foolish woman, and though talkative and motherly like Rose, she lacks Rosie’s intelligence and sensitivity. Yet she wins our sympathy by her frank and sincere feelings for both Petey and Stanley. She pampers her “unprepossessing boarder” but fails to do the same with her husband, to the extent of even forgetting to give him tea for breakfast. Petey, more intelligent and understanding than Bert, seems to be physically weaker. But he appears to care for Meg and even turns a blind eye to her questionable relations with Stanley Webber. His reluctance to tell Meg about Stanley’s departure seems to show that he hates to be bearer of evil tidings and prefers to put it off as long as possible. When Meg asks about Stan, he seeks refuge behind the newspaper murmuring that Stanley was still asleep and “Let him ... asleep” (187). In *A Slight Ache*, the woman is younger than Rose and Meg, and instead of the mother-wife figure he finds the wife-mistress figure emerging. The triple personality of woman which embodies within it the mother-mistress – wife figure is expounded at length in *The Home Coming* but its beginning can be traced to the character of Flora and *A Slight Ache*.

In *Landscape*, it is found that the degree of compatibility between Beth and Duff is so great that even though they occupy physically the same room, mentally they are far apart. Beth lives in a world of memory – reliving the day she spent with her lover on a nearly deserted beach. She could be recollecting a real experience or fantasizing it. Duff, coarse and brutal by nature, is too insensitive to understand Beth. The coarseness in Duff’s nature can be attributed to Beth’s attitude towards him. She has no time for him and her lady like airs may have acted as a depressing influence on Duff. He may have deliberately sought the society of the local riffraff in the pub in an attempt to find the companionship he lacked in his house. In *The Home Coming*, Ruth and Teddy have been married for six years, had three children and were presumably still in love with each other. Teddy was a lecturer in philosophy in a University in the States. Before her marriage, Ruth had worked as a rude model for atmosphere in the States, nor did she find America an attractive place. She describes America to Teddy’s family as:

**“It’s all rock. And sand. It stretches
So fareverywhere you look. And
there’s a lot of insects there” (P 53)**

If for Teddy, America represents a place of escape from an unbearable family, for Ruth it was a place of exile from where she longed to escape. The degree of incompatibility between them can be assessed to some extent from their reactions to America. Martin Esslin points out that it was to the proposal put forward by Teddy’s family to leave Teddy and become a prostitute in Soho:

“Having failed in her marriage, Ruth is in a state of existential despair, a deep accidie, which is both fully understandable and completely motivates her behaviour. She has tried to fight her own nature and she has been defeated by it. Now she yields to it and surrenders beyond caring” (P 156).

But even though the marriage seems to be temporarily over, there is no suggestion of a complete break. It is true Teddy refuses to pay the expenses for Ruth’s stay in England, but he does not forbid her from returning to him later:

**“Ruth ... the family have invited you to stay,
for a little while longer. As a ... as a kind
of guest. If you like the idea, I don’t mind.
We can manage very easily at home...
until you come back” (T.H.76)**

And as Michael Anderson points out, in spite of everything, “the reserved and aloof Teddy, in the persona of Eddie, seems to maintain a sexual bond with Ruth to which the others never attain and never will” (Anderson 101). In *The Collection*, if Stella’s account of her adultery with Bill is accepted as a story that she made up to make James jealous, then for the first time we find a character making a positive effort to save a marriage. Stella and James had been married only two years yet they had already drifted far apart. But her efforts to make him jealous fail because he is indifferent to her. Nevertheless, his curiosity is aroused and he goes to see Bill to “understand his wife better”. Instead he

himself is attracted to Bill. Mistakenly thinking that Harry's house and possessions belong to Bill, James tries to make friends with him. Though the play ends on ambiguous note with the four characters standing in their respective homes, we get the impression that both partnerships – Harry's with Bill, Stella's with James – are doomed. The exception to all these failures is portrayed in *The Lover* where Richard and Sarah have been married for over ten years, and are still happy together. Based on the French proverb that every wife should be a mistress, Sarah dons the garb of wife and whore for Richard, who in turn is both husband and lover. In the afternoon as the mood takes them, they change their clothes and assume the roles of different characters. For instance, Richard is in quick succession an attempted rapist, a gentleman park-keeper who rescues a damsel in distress, and a reluctant man seduced against his will: while Sarah is in turn the innocent damsel pursued by the villain and rescued by the hero, who in turn threatens her and finally she is the siren tempting "a married man" to commit adultery. As Simon Trussler puts it,

“The ‘lover’s believing that variety is the spice of lust, evidently choose to act out impromptu rapes or seductions as the mood takes them during their matinee mating games, and to reserve the straighter sex for their evening performers as a married couple” (112)

Similarly in the short sketch *Night*, an old couple have managed to steer their marriage through the rocks safely. In the play they recollect over coffee their first meeting and though they disagree regarding the minor details, in the major issue they are in perfect harmony as they re-exchange vows of “adoring each other always”. In *Old Times*, Anna and Kate's friendship appears questionable in the light of Deeley's surprised query that Kata should have shared with Ann. “You Lived together?” he asks Kate and he repeats the question three times” (OT 16). In Tea Party, one can find a close bond between Disson's children. Both the boys react identically to situations and neither of them makes a comment without asking for the other's collaboration. Alrene Sykes comments:

“The most favourable family relationships seem to be between siblings. There is surely quiet affection and silent understanding between Nick and Aston in *The Caretaker*, and Disson’s twin sons in the *Tea Party*, John and Tom, seem to be in complete harmony, so that neither of them will make even the most trivial observation, without calling on the other for confirmation” (P 115).

Moreover, Disson’s main cause of hysteria is due to the close affection he perceives between Willy and Diana. Their love and affection for each other makes him even doubt if they were really brother and sister. His suspicion is inadvertently revealed when he asks Willy to talk about their childhood at Sunderley when they played at being brother and sister.” Though Willy immediately corrects him by saying:

“We didn’t have to play at being brother and sister. We were brother and sister.” (P 39).

In *The Caretaker*, the title itself suggests the care taken by Mick over his brother Aston. There is an unspoken bond of complete understanding between the brothers which makes words unnecessary. In *The Home Coming*, like Mick, Lenny takes care of Joey. And for years, Sam had been shielding his brother Max from finding out that his wife and his best friend MacIver were lovers. And when goaded beyond control, he reveals the secret to Max, it is Sam who suffers more (P 79).

Trust and lack of trust can make or destroy relationships. In a society where values are fast being given up for lust, trust is a must for survival. Where there is no trust, the relationship flounders and fails. The main reason for the failure of the partnership of Ben and Gus in *The Dumb Waiter* was their mutual distrust; each hid their innermost thoughts and feelings from the other. The former relationship can be understood in terms of the existing one between Goldberg and McCann in *The Birthday Party*. McCann trusts Goldberg implicitly, carrying out his orders without question. But Gus has begun to question Ben’s authority. The semantic quibble over the phrase “Light the Kettle” and “Light the gas” has as its underlying basis the question of domination. Ben’s lack of trust is evident in the manner in which he refrains from giving Gus all the details about their job. The fact that he had stopped for a while on the road, when he thought Gus has sleeping, because they were too early, reveals that he know more than he cares to say. Similarly Gus hides food from Ben; a clear indication of the lack of trust on his

past. This lack of trust between the partners seems to lend credence to the interpretation that Ben will shoot Gus when the curtain falls.

In *The Dwarfs* Pinter portrays the relationship between three friends, emphasizing their mutual dependency and their mutual distrust on one another. The three friends have begun to betray one another in their efforts to win complete possession of one another. For instance, Marx warns Len against Pete, Pete warns Len against Marx and Len warns the other two against the dwarfs. Their tragedy, as Baker and Tabachnick say, springs from the fact that they are mutually dependent: “Like schizophrenics they must constantly remain in grating contact with one another or face total withdrawal into a solipsistic, catatonic dream world” (Baker 44). If in *The Dwarf*, “betrayal and mutual distrust” forms the dominating motif of the action, in *The Collection*, it is the presence of trust which forms the chief motive. In this play, James trusts his wife implicitly – a fact she finds unpalatable, because she realizes that this trust springs lack of interest. But in the relationship between Harry and Bill, Harry is jealous and possessive of his young always questioning him regarding his movements. In *The Collection*, Pinter shows that too much of trust is as bad as too little. The marriage of James and Stella breaks up because of James’ excessive trust in Stella’s integrity and the friendship between Harry and Bill appears doomed because of Harry’s suspicious nature.

Man in human and for him, to betray another is a feature inherent in him. Pinter in his plays deals with different types of betrayal, beginning with the fairly innocuous betrayal of a husband by a wife who refrains from telling him her ancestry. If Esslin’s interpretation is accepted as possible, Rose is Jewish who has deliberately hidden her family background from Bert, because she was aware of Bert’s hatred of Jews. In *The Birthday Party*, one can find a totally different type of betrayal. Stanley has betrayed the organization – it does not matter which organization it is – and is punished for it. So one way of interpreting the play would be to consider it as being about Stanley’s crime and retribution, as an instance of gang-revenge for betrayal. Pinter deals with the betrayal a friendship, beginning with Ben’s implied, though not shown, betrayal of his friend – cum – partner Gus in *The Dumb Waiter*. In *Night School*, SoltoCalmy betrays his friend Walter’s confidence and trust by not only seducing the girl in whom Walter was interested and carrying her away, but also by telling him that he was unable to find her and even doubted that she really existed. In *Betrayal* Jerry has no compunctions about betraying his best friend Robert by carrying on an affair with Robert’s wife Emma. He is not bothered so long as

Robert remains ignorant of the affair. But the moment he comes to know that Robert knows about his infamy he is full of remorse. One gets the impression that he regrets Robert's knowledge of the affair more than the affair itself.

Parental betrayal is portrayed in *The Caretaker* through Aston's speech on his stay in the hospital. In stark unemotional tones, he describes his traumatic experience in a mental hospital where he had been subjected to shock-treatment. His faith in his mother had been lost when in spite of all his pleas she had signed the papers approving the application of shock-treatment to her son. Aston's belief that his father would not have done so far probably behind his kindness to Davies in whom he saw a father figure. Unfortunately, Davies proved to be a poor substitute and Aston's realization of it is evident when he asks Davies to leave his house. Thus, it is clear that While Pinter may not be a social dramatist, his plays have a strong social dimension.

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