CHAPTER 4

Everything is funny; the great=
est earnestness is funny; even
tragedy is funny. And I think
what I try to do in my plays is
to get to this recognizable
reality of the absurdity of what
we do and how we behave and how
we speak - Pinter, in an inter=
view with Tennyson

4 HAROLD PINTER

The definition or circumscription of contemporary comedy developed in the preceding chapter may be fruitfully applied to Pinter's work and may well serve to illuminate certain confusing elements in his drama. It will be demonstrated in the present chapter that most of the pre-occupations found in the work of Pinter's contemporaries are to be found in his work as well, although usually in a more highly individualized form: a form which has at times tend= ed to alienate both critics and audiences, but which may, within the perspective of the contemporary comic vision, be regarded as residing at the further end of the comic spectrum.

It will also be demonstrated that while Pinter's work is allied closely, generically speaking, to the works of many of his contemporaries, there is a definite developmental trend in his comic vision. From the earliest *comedies of menace* his vision has consist= ently been developing and his style changing to that of the *comedy of manners*. It is important to note, however, that the central concerns are much the same: what is occurring is a change in style and in the choice of dramatic devices, dramatic locales and characters. He is still concerned with people "at

the far edge of their living, where they are very much alone", even while trying to adapt to the abra= sive business of living with and among people in a sometimes bewildering, seemingly hostile social en= vironment.

4.1 *The Birthday Party*

This play can be regarded as belonging to the group of plays customarily called the *comedies of menace*. It is Pinter's first full-length play.

The approach to a Pinter play is often dominated to an extraordinary extent by linguistic considerations. Gareth Lloyd Evans (1977) has stated that "... if we seek, in twentieth-century criticism, for anything approaching the extent of the detailed verbal ana= lysis of Pinter's plays, we find it only in commen= taries on Yeats, Eliot, and Christopher Fry" (p. 166). He refers to Pinter as "the deceptive poet", and says ultimately that "... when we enter into a Pinter room we have to accept a format which embraces states of feeling rather than impersonates the real world ... our experience of this is very different in qua= lity but it is very similar in kind to that which we get from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* - a play which seems constantly to be aspiring to the condition of a poem" (p. 176). There is perhaps a more than oblique significance in his comparison of Pinter's work with the most perfect of Shakespeare's comedies.

Evans' views are found in more dramatically explicit form in Quigley's perceptive study. Quigley's approach will be used to a large extent, and some useful critical terms coined by him will also be pressed into service.

Quigley (1975) has maintained, and rightly so, that "the language of a Pinter play functions primarily as a means of dictating and reinforcing *relationships*."[1] This use of language is not, of course, exclusive to a Pinter play ... but, in giving this use such extensive scope, Pinter has simultaneously achieved his own individual form of stage dialogue and made his work unavailable to any critical analysis based on implicit appeals to the reference theory of meaning" (p. 52). He elaborates on this idea, saying that "the considerable prominence of developing relationships is in large part dependent on the ways in which relationships function in the *development of a self-concept*"[2] (p. 54).

He regards the establishment of relationships as a process of negotiation. "The processes and consequences of these negotiations are central to the linguistic function at issue here. For this reason, the term *interrelational* seems not unsuitable" (p. 54).

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1 & 2. Both ideas are of course integral to any consideration of the comic vision.

Quigley's approach also has important implications within the perspective of Pinter's own views. Pinter has denied the validity of the latter-day critical cliché about non-communication and the inability of people to communicate. Rather, he feels that "I think that we communicate only too well, in our si= lences, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is continual evasion, desperate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves. Communication is too alarming" (in Hinchliffe, 1967, p. 43). In this context, Quigley has observed that "if silence is an important moment in the interrelational func= tion of language, then so also is the avoidance of silence. A great deal of the humor in the plays is based on the characters' need to confirm the status quo of their relationship by conversing after the fashion of a tennis practice ... Lonely people ... as long as they can keep a 'conversation' going ... are active in a structured situation that gives them a temporary role, a confirmation of identity, and an escape from the terror of unstructured isolation" (p. 58).[1)]

Quigley closes his discussion of Pinter's language with the crucial observation that "the conflict that is essential to all drama is generated by the inter= relational coercive dialogue of characters who are

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1. The establishment of identity and the adaptation to socie= ty together with the fear of the void, the "unstructured isolation" have been shown to be important issues in con= temporary comedy.

at crucial points of adjustment between themselves and the environment to which they are currently ex= posed" (p. 67).

In the opening scene of *The Birthday Party*, there= fore, it can be seen that Meg and Petey indulge in a conversation which functions as a means to avoid silence while being at the same time an elaborate skirmish to determine the nature of their relation= ship. Meg emerges as a painfully uncertain woman, Petey as a long-suffering but fumblingly and casual= ly kind respondent (it will emerge at the end that Petey is the only one to have any real concern for and understanding of Stanley). They talk endless= ly about Petey's cornflakes being *nice*. The word *nice* becomes a litany and fulfils a double function. It helps to establish the tone of unbelievable te= dium while at the same time generating humour because of Meg's not entirely apposite use of it. She re= fers to the cornflakes ("I thought they'd be nice"), his paper ("You read me out some nice bits yester= day"), the weather (Is it nice out?"), the cornflakes again ("Were they nice?"), Petey's fried bread ("Is it nice?"), her boarding-house ("I keep a very nice house and I keep it clean")[1] and Stanley's fried bread ("Was it nice?"). From her indiscriminate use

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1. A patent untruth, as witness Stanley's incredulous res= ponse: "Whoo!", and his explicit complaint later: "Look, why don't you get this place cleared up? It's a pigsty!" (p. 19).

of this bland adjective there is an abrupt transfer to particularity when Stanley calls the fried bread *succulent*, a word used throughout with overtly sexual overtones:

> Meg : Don't say it!
> Stanley : What's the matter with it?
> Meg : You shouldn't say that word to a married woman.
> Stanley : Is that a fact?
> . . . . . .
> Well, if I can't say it to a married woman, who can I say it to?
> Meg : You're bad.[1)]

When Meg presumes upon the relationship, however ("She takes his plate and ruffles his hair as she passes. Stanley exclaims and throws her arm away") (p. 18), he uses what she regards as an implicit compliment as a bludgeoning instrument by saying:

> Stanley : Get out of it. You succulent old washing bag.
> Meg : I am not. And it isn't your place to tell me if I am! (p. 19).

She immediately tries to heal the incipient rift by saying wheedingly:

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1. Meg's ambivalent relationship with Stanley is clearly demonstrated in this exchange. Somewhat earlier, when she goes to wake him up, she returns "panting and arranges her hair" (p. 14), and she addresses him with obvious endearment as "Stanny" and "little monkey".

Meg : Am I really succulent?
Stanley : Oh, you are. I'd rather have you than a cold in the nose any day
(p. 19).

Into this world in which they spar desultorily and in which hostilities are known and contained, an alien presence intrudes. Pinter prepares for it skilfully by having Petey mention to Meg casually:

Petey : Oh, Meg, two men came up to me on the beach last night ... They wanted to know if we could put them up for a couple of nights
(p. 14).

Stanley is immediately on his guard. Meg furthers the suspense and the indefinable but real aura of anxiety by responding to Stanley's earlier hostility with malice:

Meg : I've got to get things in for the two gentlemen ... they asked Petey if they could come and stay for a couple of nights
(p. 20).

Stanley is inordinately alarmed, seeking to deny the possibility of their arrival. His insidious awareness of menace makes him grovel ("They won't come. Someone's taking the Michael. Forget all about it. It's a false alarm") (p. 21) and then turn on Meg with renewed fury, seeking to establish a relationship in which he has the whip hand as a means of exorcising his fear:

Stanley (quietly): Who do you think you're talking to?
Meg (uncertainly): What?
Stanley : Come here.
. . . . . .
Meg : No.
Stanley : I want to ask you something.
. . . . . .
Tell me, Mrs. Boles, when you address yourself to me, do you ever ask yourself who exactly you are talk=ing to?
(p. 22).

Meg evades the issue by undercutting Stanley's de=fence with devastating if unintended accuracy by asking nervously:

Meg : Stan? When are you going to play the piano again? Like you used to?
(p. 22).[1]

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1. Stanley's piano-playing past haunts him in the same way as other contemporary comic heroes are haunted by the past, a fact adding significantly to the inability of these heroes to move forward into the future in the tra=ditional fashion of comic heroes. The *time-context* of traditional comedy is usually present/future; that of comtemporary comedy is past/present, with paralysing im=plications for a present so hopelessly compromised by the detritus of the past. Nigel Alexander (1974) has said in this context that "there is no future for the characters created by Harold Pinter. In play after play the curtain comes down on a terrible state of stasis in which the on=ly possible development for the individuals concerned is at best continued stagnation, at worst putrefaction" (p. 1). This ties in very well with the idea that in con=temporary comedy the idea of redemption has vanished irrevocably.

This enquiry leads directly to one of the most illu= minating and pathetic yet at the same time funniest scenes in the play. Pinter allows Stanley to expose himself fully and uncompromisingly in a devastatingly effective piece of theatre craft. Having just been faced with a crisis of identity (a recurring thematic concern), Stanley begins to build up a highly exagge= rated and idealized picture of a career with glitter= ing possibilities:

> Stanley : Berlin. A night club. Playing the piano. A fabulous salary. And all found
>
> (p. 23).

Meg's mundane query "How long for?" seems to trigger ever wilder dreams, and he is off, mouthing Athens, Constantinople, Zagreb, Vladivostok, "a round the world tour" in an ever-mounting frenzy, counterpoint= ed by Meg's mundanely practical interjections. She finally overrides him and in a shattering, anti-climactic admission, Stanley capitulates:

> I've played the piano all over the world. All over the country. (Pause.) I once gave a concert.

This concert, it transpires, was held at Lower Edmon= ton. Meg's query about what he wore is once more evaded with Stanley going off tangentially into what

may be regarded as a seminal speech:[1)]

> They came up to me, and said they were grateful. Champagne we had that night, the lot. (Pause.) My father nearly came down to hear me. Well, I dropped him a card anyway. But I don't think he could make it. (Pause.) Yes, Lower Edmonton. Then after that, do you know what they did? They carved me up. Carved me up. It was all arranged, it was all worked out. My next concert. Somewhere else it was. In winter. I went down there to play. Then, when I got there, the hall was closed, the place was all shuttered up, not even a caretaker. They locked it up. (Takes off his glasses and wipes them on his pajama jacket.) A fast one. They pull= ed a fast one. I'd like to know who was responsible for that. (Bitterly.) All right, Jack, I can take a tip. They want me to crawl down on my bended knees. Well, I can take a tip ... any day of the week (p. 23).

This tortured revelation leaves him wide open for the moment, so that he turns to Meg and for a moment solace seems offered to his bruised sensibilities, his overly resigned attitude:

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1. This is a recurring device: as soon as a character finds himself trapped and revealed, he almost compulsively starts to reveal himself even more mercilessly by going off into a narrative which often contains both pathos and violence.

Stanley : Look at her. You're just an old piece of rock cake, aren't you? That's what you are, aren't you?

Meg : Don't go away again, Stan. You stay here. You'll be better off. You stay with your old Meg

(p. 24).

Stanley's groan frightens off Meg, who, hovering on the edge of understanding, retreats into banality:

Meg : Aren't you feeling well this morning, Stan? Did you pay a visit this morn= ing?

(p. 24).

Immediately the situation becomes a skirmish again: Stanley seeks to establish his own dominance over Meg and with unconscious prophetic accuracy threatens her progressively:

They're coming today.
. . . . . .
They're coming in a van.
. . . . . .
And do you know what they have got in that van?
. . . . . .
They've got a wheelbarrow in that van ... 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.
... looking for someone.
... a certain person.
Shall I tell you who they're looking for?

(p. 25).

A sudden knock at the door shatters the mounting ten= sion. When Meg goes out, Stanley "sidles to the door and listens" (p. 25). Meg's "Is it nice?" from the front door, followed by a strange voice confirming "Very nice" seems to be an invocation of some kind.

Immediately following this Lulu enters with a bulky parcel. Stumbling in this way on Stanley's extreme measure of emotional disarray, she devastatingly com= pletes the picture of his degeneration by commenting on the squalor of his person and his surroundings:

Lulu : It's all stuffy in here.

Stanley's immediate rejoinder that he scrubbed out the place with Dettol that morning becomes a battle= ground for supremacy again.

Stanley : Don't you believe I scrubbed the place out with Dettol this morning?[1)]
Lulu : You didn't scrub yourself, I suppose?
Stanley : I was in the sea at half past six.
Lulu : Were you?

The pattern of evasion and rejection is developed more fully:

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1. A very ironic statement in view of his own earlier com= plaint about the squalor of the place.

Stanley : I think it's going to rain today. What do you think?
Lulu : Why don't you have a shave?
Stanley : Don't you believe me then, when I tell you I was in the sea at half past six this morning?
Lulu : I'd rather not discuss it
(p. 26).

Lulu's awareness of her growing involvement causes her to go on to the attack abruptly:

Lulu : ... what do you do, just sit around the house like this all day long? Hasn't Mrs. Boles got enough to do without having you under her feet all day long?
(p. 27),

an attack countered by Stanley with the devastatingly effective and funny literal rejoinder which contrasts so tellingly with the deeper awareness of menace:

Stanley : I always stand on the table when she sweeps the floor
(p. 27).

This very typical skirmish lends credence to Pinter's own contention that there is not so much a lack of communication as a deliberate evasion of real and effective communication by people, and that dialogue is most often a stratagem to cover our nakedness most effectively (while, paradoxically, mercilessly revealing short-comings and deficiencies) (in Hinchliffe, 1967, p. 43).

Lulu has by now been effectively alienated, so that Stanley's queries about Meg's earlier guests are blandly ignored. She ends with a coolly wounding

> You're a bit of a washout, aren't you?
> (p. 28),

leaving Stanley to fumble ineffectually with his appearance (in a more pathetic approximation of Butley's behaviour with the cotton wool).

The arrival of Goldberg and McCann at this stage heightens the tension. Stanley's prophetic words gain ironic impact with their concrete presence. A great deal of critical controversy has centred on the "real" identities and purposes of these two emissaries of threat who finally "reshape"[1] Stanley (in a particularly telling inversion of the redemptive pattern of traditional comedy). They have been regarded as anything from Mafia thugs to IRA hit men. Critical explication has also fastened on to their being Jewish and Irish respectively, the customary down-trodden and persecuted figures in twentieth-century European history. Their dramatic

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1. Irving Wardle comments tellingly on this aspect of the play: "Goldberg and McCann seem as much furies emerging from Stanley's night thoughts as physical creatures. His downfall is swift. Scrubbed, shaved, hoisted out of his shapeless trousers, and stuffed into a morning suit he is led away at the end in a *catatonic trance*" (1958, p. 40): the typical stance of the contemporary comic hero at the end of the play.

purpose, however, should be regarded in broader terms. It is exactly right that they should exude an *indefinable* and *intangible* air of menace - the very amorphous quality of the threat gives it a contemporary validity beyond anything more concrete. The faint overtones associated with persecution in the present century strengthen the awareness of menace without defining it, thus rendering it doubly horrible.

There is a terrible fascination in the contrast between Goldberg and McCann, with the grisliest variety of humour hovering over their exchanges. Goldberg exudes a kind of ghastly *bonhomie*, reflecting on his past and advising McCann on relaxing exercises at one and the same time in a manner that can only be described as slimily avuncular:[1)]

> Goldberg : The secret is breathing. Take my tip. It's a well-known fact. Breathe in, breathe out, take a change, let yourself go, what can you lose? Look at me. When I was an apprentice yet, McCann, every second Friday of the month my uncle Barney used to take me to the seaside, regular as clockwork. ... (Reminiscent.) Uncle

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1. Goldberg's indulging in nostalgic recollections (as also on p. 46: "Childhood. Hot water bottles. Hot milk. Pancakes. Soap suds. What a life") is very much in tone with contemporary comedy. There is a subtle difference, however, because in the indiscriminate and uncorrelated recollections Goldberg passes around there is clearly an ironic reflection on the theme of truth and relativity so prevalent in modern drama.

> Barney. Of course, he was an impec= cable dresser. One of the old school. ... Respected by the whole community. Culture? Don't talk to me about cul= ture. He was an all-round man, what do you mean? He was a cosmopolitan
>
> (p. 29).

Into this tedious homily McCann interjects his aware= ness of his fears and limitations. As it dawns on the audience that he worries about his reputation as a "hit man" an edge of hysteria creeps into the pro= ceedings. It is also at this point where Pinter's comedy parts company with much that is broadly far= cical in other contemporary comedies, for in farce the tacit assumption is that it is a game and nobody is really hurt - whereas in this scene it becomes in= creasingly and horribly clear and possible that the game is in deadly earnest, and that participation is not voluntary:

> McCann : How do you know that this is the right house?
> Goldberg : What makes you think it is the wrong house?
> McCann : I didn't see a number on the gate.
> Goldberg : I wasn't looking for a number
>
> (p. 29).

The terrifying certainty of the nemesis that is over= taking Stanley is convincingly underlined by Gold= berg's assurance, and is redoubled with shocking force by Stanley's evidently agonized awareness of guilt in

the interrogation scene[1] (pp. 50-56), and in Goldberg's bland assurance later (p. 35) that "If we hadn't come today, we'd have come tomorrow".

McCann's uncertainty about his powers is ludicrous:

McCann : Isn't it about time someone came in?
Goldberg : McCann, what are you so nervous about? Pull yourself together. Everywhere you go these days it's like a funeral.
McCann : That's true (p. 30).

McCann's doleful agreement makes for broadly comic effects, taken to the limits of absurdity:

McCann : Yes, it's true, you've done a lot for me. I appreciate it.
Goldberg : Say no more.
McCann : You've always been a true Christian.
Goldberg : In a way (p. 31).

At this point McCann's fears break through and for a moment one has the almost vertiginous awareness of dislocation: One feels acute pity and sympathy for poor McCann:

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1. In this scene of utter implausibility and wildly disparate accusation and denial the audience alternates between wild laughter and a sickening visceral awareness of kinship with the hapless Stanley - battered yet submissive because of an obscure sense of guilt haunting characters throughout contemporary drama.

McCann : This job - no, listen - this job, is it going to be like anything we've done before?

. . . . . .

No, just tell me that. Just that, and I won't ask anymore (p. 32).

The atmosphere of surreal horror is heightened im= measurably by Goldberg's totally evasive and yet utterly committing reply:

Goldberg : The main issue is a singular issue and quite distinct from your previous work. Certain elements, however, might well approximate in points of procedure to some of your other activ= ities. All is dependent on the attit= ude of our subject. At all events, McCann, I can assure you that the assignment will be carried out and the mission accomplished with no excessive aggravation to you or myself. Satis= fied?

McCann : Sure. Thank you, Nat (p. 32).

The precise enunciation of these inanities further bludgeons the audience into an awareness of the con= tingent and ambivalent nature of reality.

The scene dissolves into absurdity with Meg's entrance and her pathetic fastening onto Goldberg's patently insincere flattery. She is led to divulge Stanley's life story with humiliating ease, and her selective rendering of his previously garbled tale is a hilar= ious and yet sobering counterpoint to the theme of the relativity of truth:

Meg : In ... a big hall. His father gave him champagne. But then they locked the place up and he couldn't get out. The caretaker had gone home. So he had to wait until the morning before he could get out. (With confidence.) They were very grateful. (Pause.) And then they all wanted to give him a tip. And so he took the tip. And then he got a fast train and came down here

(p. 34).

This is compounded by Goldberg asserting of the dour and doleful McCann that he "is the life and soul of any party" (p. 35) when Meg enthusiastically plans a birthday party for the unwitting Stanley.

Meg's evident jubilation at Stanley's return about having gained the upper hand (stunning him with the news of the new lodgers settling in) represents ano= ther manoeuvre in the running battle their skirmish= ing for position degenerates into. Stanley's for= lorn reception of the news prompts her first into an effort to be consolatory:

Meg : Stan, they won't wake you up, I pro= mise. I'll tell them they must be quiet.

. . . . . .

You mustn't be sad today. It's your birthday

(p. 38).

Meg's evidently cherishing attitude towards a birth= day, representing her clinging to formula and com= forting ritual, is woefully and incongruously

inadequate to Stanley's real needs. The presen= tation of the drum (as a substitute for a piano) becomes, in its very ludicrousness, his signal for surrender to the state typified by Heilman as over-acceptance.[1)] For a moment at the end of the act Stanley seems disposed to oppose the furies ("... banging the drum, his face and the drumbeat now savage and possessed"), but this is merely a glimpsed manifestation of what Kaufman (1973) has referred to as "the brute animality of unaccommodated man" (p. 176). The glimpse of the bestial, as at the conclusions of the next two acts, is brief but terrifying in its implications. It leads one to accept Kaufman's further observation that "in this play man's only protective ambiance is the game which alone may provide a viable identity and may transform those instinctive urges into regulated and civilized forms" (p. 177). The concept of play gains greater validity as the play progresses, and the exploitation of the idea of play, of the game, culminates eventually in Pinter's choice of a more mannered and stylized society as a dramatic micro= cosmos. The observance of the rules of the various games, the meticulous care taken in the verbal negotiation of relationships - these constitute the prime motive forces in his increasingly mannered style of comedy. It also ties him in to the main= stream of contemporary comedy, for from Osborne

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1. "His shoulders sag, he bends and kisses her on the cheek" p. 38).

(*Look Back in Anger* and *The Entertainer*) onwards, the element of play has been used with disturbing implications, for at times the game becomes a sub= stitute for a life that has become altogether too bruising and abrasive.

Act II

What is of paramount significance at the opening of Act II is that in a very real and horrible sense there is no more suspense left in the sense of plot development. As in the skilfully contrived plots developed later (cf. *Betrayal*) Pinter also achieves a sort of Chinese-box arrangement in this play with Act I spanning the gamut of action and emotion, with Act II packed inside as a following layer represent= ing merely the *fait accompli* of Stanley's destruction (while, however, at the same time releasing bonding material between the layers through added informa= tion), and Act III, with Stanley stricken dumb re= presenting the rotten core, the empty void that con= fronts man when he has finally peeled away all the layers.[1)] One feels one's grip slipping, Stanley

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1. When Ibsen's Peer Gynt has peeled away all the layers of the onion, he finds at the core nothing but tears.

   Esslin (1973) has said of this act that it contains "the ritual of Stanley's destruction by his two pursuers" p. 78).

becomes an ever more tenuous reality slipping away (off the map, in a cartographers' conspiracy, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern).

This impression of the structure is strengthened by an analysis of the concluding parts of the three acts. Act I closes with Stanley playing the drum savagely and still asserting himself. Act II close with Stanley, prevented from raping Lulu, giggling inanely and retreating under the glare of the torch=light (a light used earlier in the interrogation scene to simulate the nightmate of interrogations without number in the present century). Act III ends, not with a bang but a whimper: Stanley is led away incoherent and in an immeasurably sad coda Meg and Petey resume their vapid relationship, with Petey gallantly shielding her (and her treasured illusions) for a brief while longer. In a sense then one can describe the end of the play as having imploded upon itself.

Stanley's eventual confrontation with the two emis=saries from the "enemy" is substantiating rather than innovating. His grim and prophetic expectation of their arrival, his evident fear and seeming accept=ance of their grim purpose all tend to make his fate a foregone conclusion.

In Act II the tone of menace heightens perceptibly and tension crackles in the air as McCann, the hulk=ing brute, sits tearing a newspaper sheet into equal strips with ludicrously painstaking precision. His tension is evident in the preposterously incongruous protectiveness he shows about these strips of paper,[1] and he uses this as a device to unnerve Stanley. The scene is beautifully modulated in the way in which Stanley is demolished. From his bravado at first:

> I'm sorry. I'm not in the mood for a party tonight.
> . . . . . .
> I'm going out to celebrate quietly, on my own
> (p. 41),

he is faced by McCann's insistence on *honour* (the social cliché gaining a menacing implication):

> McCann : I had the honour of an invitation.
> Stanley : I wouldn't call it an honour, would you? It'll just be another booze-up.
> McCann : But it is an honour.
> Stanley : I'd say you were exaggerating.
> McCann : Oh no. I'd say it was an honour.
> Stanley : I'd say that was plain stupid.
> McCann : Oh no
> (p. 41).

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1. Whenever Stanley, fidgeting nervously, aimlessly picks up a strip of paper, McCann warns him:
   Mind that! (p. 42);
   Mind that! (p. 43);
   Your cigarette is near that paper (p. 44); and
   You want to steady yourself (p. 45).

McCann's quiet insistence that "it's all laid on" (p. 42) drives Stanley to attempt escape (unsuccessfully). What follows is a hilariously funny and yet painfully inadequate attempt by Stanley to fit McCann into a comforting and acceptable milieu. His evasive tactics take on a manic quality as he is in turn supplicating(1), threatening(2), condescending(3) and fawning(4):

1 I mean, you wouldn't think, to look at me, really ... I mean not really, that I was the sort of bloke to - to cause any trouble, would you? (p. 43).

2 I've explained to you, damn you, that all those years I lived in Basingstoke I never stepped outside the door (p. 45).

3 Haven't you found that out yet? There's a lot you don't know. I think someone's leading you up the garden path (p. 44).

4 I know Ireland very well. I've many friends there. I love that country and I admire and trust its people. I trust them. They respect the truth and they have a sense of humour. I think their policemen are wonderful ... What about coming out to have a drink with me? (p. 46).

At this point, however, they are interrupted by Goldberg, who proceeds to add his share to the softening-up process started by McCann. Goldberg compounds the horror by indulging in a welter of nostalgic reminiscence, setting himself up as the very essence of bourgeois morality and respectability. In a parallel to his Uncle Barney reminiscence in Act I,

his love and *bonhomie* reminiscence (p. 59), his roll=mop reminiscence (p. 62) and his chilling final reverie (pp. 80-81), he evokes a past blurred by spurious romanticism. His air of smug and complac=ent *petit bourgeois* contentment drives Stanley to a fury ("Don't mess me about!") and leads to a sinister game played in deadly earnest. In an elaborate manipulation of responses, the three men try to force each other to sit down, with Stanley, after a brief initial victory, finally buckling under (predictably and chillingly). His pose of insouciance does not deceive anybody and leaves him vulnerable to the interrogation which follows.

A great deal has been made by critics of possible symbolic interpretations of specific accusations con=tained in the interrogation scene. The charges levelled at Stanley, however, are wildly incongruous, contradictory and in no way related even to the lit=tle we know about him. The scene has a wildly sur=real quality that has the unexpected effect of allow=ing Stanley's vague awareness of guilt to become crystallized. His identity is suddenly and shock=ingly forsworn:

> Goldberg : Why did you change your name?
> Stanley : I forgot the other one (p. 53),

and the wild charges culminate in the ultimate ac=cusation:

Goldberg : What makes you think you exist?
. . . . . .
You're nothing but an odour
(p. 55).

The scene explodes into incoherent violence, a vio=lence dissolved temporarily by Meg's appearance in her party dress. (This sudden break in the tension is very similar, structurally speaking, to the knock on the door terminating the tense encounter between Meg and Stanley in Act I.)

The toast proposed to Stanley also takes on a threat=ening tone when the torch is shone into his face in a lighthearted approximation of a spotlight, catching the overtones once more of interrogation techniques. Stanley becomes curiously still and compliant. Goldberg's reminiscence falls into this silence with redoubled effect:

Goldberg : What's happened to the love, the bon=homie, the unabashed expression of the day before yesterday, that our mums taught us in the nursery?
McCann : Gone with the wind.
Goldberg : That's what I thought, until today.
. . . . . .
How can I put it to you? We all wan=der on our tod through this world. It's a lonely pillow to kip on
(p. 59).

If one should regard the structure of the play as a spiralling inward with Act I providing the outer circle, this movement will lead, in Act III, to

Goldberg's final reverie which,[1)] taken in conjunc= tion with this scene, invites acute pity for the tor= mentor (the hunter seems as haunted as the hunted): a device which is largely responsible for the ambi= guity and ambivalence of audience response but which through its very disparateness invites the descrip= tion of comic for it evokes a comprehensive reality.

The party is largely dominated by Goldberg's lasci= vious attentions to Lulu (a conquest viciously deni= grated to her face the following morning) and the game of blindman's buff entered into with a notable lack of enthusiasm on Stanley's part.

Kaufman (1973) has made a very interesting and to my mind valid suggestion for the interpretation of the game scene. He finds significance both in the im= plications of blindness in the physical and spiritual sense and in the etymological implications of the word *buff*. "Literally, blind man's buff means the blows the blindfolded pursuer inflicts on those who seek to avoid his tag. But Pinter's deeper meaning becomes clearer when the punning alternative is understood, for the etymology of *buff* conveys the notion of nakedness. Within the economic metaphor of the game with its simultaneous images of aggres= sive alienation, blind man's buff expresses Pinter's

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1. And you'll find - that what I say is true.
Because I believe that the world ... (Vacant) ...
Because I believe that the world ... (Desperate) ...
BECAUSE I BELIEVE THAT THE WORLD ... (Lost) ...

understanding of human activity as a perpetual 'stratagem to uncover nakedness'" (p. 169).

The game thus becomes an elaborate image of Stanley's existence - and in this context he is closely akin to other comic heroes of the sixties and seventies. There are also, in this scene, more troubling and sinister implications, for when Stanley's glasses are broken and he is blindfolded, he tries to stran= gle Meg, rape Lulu and he steps, disastrously, into th drum placed in his way by Goldberg. His savagery is thus released briefly, only to be dissipated in his inane giggle and finally dissolved in his speech= less acquiescence to the further horrors visited upon him.

Thus Act II represents the actual accomplishment of Stanley's capture - a capture forecast in Act I, and acknowledged and accepted implicitly and resignedly in Act III with Meg's hesitant query about a wheel= barrow in the boot of the car (p. 71), in which she echoes the same query, cast as a threat, expressed in Act I.

Act III

The opening part of Act III parallels Act I, with some significant twists and differences. Meg has run out of cornflakes and has given the two gentlemen "the last of the fry" (p. 69). Her getting Petey *something nice* has to be delayed because of her splitting headache, but Petey seems clumsily eager to get her out of the house and to the shops - to pre= vent her from going into Stanley's room. She com= municates her fears to him obliquely by her queries about the car and the wheelbarrow (cf. p. 271 above). Superficially reassured, she leaves to do her shop= ping, leaving Petey and Goldberg sparring desultorily and ineffectually around the matter of Stanley:

> Petey : Is he any better?
> Goldberg (a little uncertainly): Oh ... a little, I think, a little better. Of course I'm not really qualified to say, Mr. Boles. ... The best thing would be if someone with the proper ... mnn ... qualifications ... was to have a look at him. Someone with a few letters after his name. It makes all the dif= ference (p. 73).

Goldberg's uncharacteristic hesitancy increases, to culminate in his vacant reverie (p. 80). Petey's uneasiness mounts as he recollects sounds heard the night before, and Goldberg's refusal to let him call a doctor as well as McCann's breakdown signals great tension. McCann seems shattered by Stanley's re= sponses, and his quiet narrative imbues the scene with

a tangible awareness of menace, evoking once again the disconcerting ambivalence of emotion in which one feels deep pity and sympathy for the hunter:

McCann : I gave him his glasses.
Goldberg : Wasn't he glad to get them back?
McCann : The frames are bust.[1]
Goldberg : How did that happen?
McCann : *He tried to fit the eyeholes into his eyes. I left him doing it*
(p. 76).

The horror is not dispelled by Petey's ludicrous and ineffectual solution:

Petey : There's some Sellotape somewhere. We can stick them together
(p. 76).

Grasping at the comforting artefacts of society seems to Petey to do the same as Butley achieves by shoring up his ruins with little fragments of allusion. The fact that technology fails and seems monstrously inadequate to the demands of the situation would seem to add to the incongruity of the situation. The very lostness and forlornness of men when faced with the demands of life and society invite the compassion so integrally part of true comedy.

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1. Act II: "McCann backs slowly across the stage to the left. He breaks Stanley's glasses, snapping the frames" (p. 66).

The scene does not improve when McCann challenges Goldberg about his assignation with Lulu. McCann's assertions about her having had nightmares are met by Goldberg's bland and patently ludicrous assertion that she was having a singsong:

> Goldberg : Sure, you know how young girls sing. She was singing.
> McCann : So what happened then?
> Goldberg : I joined in. We had a few songs. *Yes. We sang a few of the old ballads and then she went to bye-byes* (p. 77).

The obviously invented quality of the italicized part represents to my mind an ironic reflection on the theme of truth and relativity so persistently present in this play. McCann's implicit acceptance of what is ultimately a game with its own sinister rules is evidenced by his silence.

McCann's incipient breakdown, barely preceding Goldberg's and heralded in an almost ritual fashion by his tearing paper into strips (in a parallel of the previous scene where he does this to escape his suffocating awareness of the job and its implications) has a hysterical edge to it. He insists with quiet desperation:

> Let's finish and go! Let's get it over and go. Get the thing done. Let's finish the bloody thing. Let's get the thing done and go! (p. 79).

His own fears, however, are quickly dissolved in his perception of Goldberg's vacillation, and a new rela=tionship is negotiated with startling rapidity, leav=ing McCann on top for the moment:

> Goldberg : I thought you weren't going to go up there again?
> McCann : What do you mean? Why not?
> Goldberg : You said so!
> McCann : I never said that!
> . . . . . .
> I'll go up now!
> (p. 79).

Quigley has said of the compromises precariously effected through this style of negotiation that they can be "of dangerously balanced, rather than resolved tensions" (1975, p. 80). The quivering tension generated by this *volte-face* is one of the most effective revelatory devices Pinter uses, for it pre=cipitates Goldberg's *Lost* speech (p. 80), in which he shows a painful uncertainty and forlornness, evok=ing pity and compassion in the typically dislocating way Pinter has evolved. He is restored to some semblance of his jaunty self by another elaborate ritual beginning with McCann testing his health, then blowing into his mouth and finally handing him a chest expander, which Goldberg breaks, proving his strength and virility and his control (contemptuously expressed) over the artefacts of society. The farcical quality of the scene resolves some of the preceding tension and allows the impact of the next scene to be felt with maximum effect.

Goldberg's wanton and detachedly vicious destruction of Lulu's pretensions underlines his recovery and cuts nearer to the bone in its effective revelation of a character. Lulu is drawn into the disintegrating core. On the surface the scene has hilarious possibilities - Lulu's passionate use of soap-opera banalities being neatly deflated by Goldberg's glib facetiousness:

> Lulu : You made use of me by cunning when my defences were down.
> Goldberg : Who took them down?
> Lulu : That's what you did. You quenched your ugly thirst. You took advantage of me when I was overwrought. I wouldn't do those things again, not even for a Sultan!
> Goldberg : One night doesn't make a harem.
> . . . . . .
> Lulu : You didn't appreciate me for myself. You took all those liberties only to satisfy your appetite.
> Goldberg : Now you're giving me indigestion (p. 84).

Lulu's use of genteel euphemisms (such as *overwrought* for dead drunk) is doubly incongruous in the light of the niggling anxiety entertained by the audience after McCann's careful solicitude. That something terrible happened to Lulu is clear - and is ironically underscored by her comparison with her first love:

> He was my first love, Eddie was. And whatever happened, it was pure. With him! He didn't come into my room at night with a briefcase! (p. 83).

Lulu's dismissal is swift and contemptuous, and the threats she ineffectually mouths evaporate:

> Lulu (retreating to the back door): I've seen everything that's happened. I know what's going on. I've got a pretty shrewd idea
>
> (p. 85).

The dwindling force of her threats is the most eloquent device employed to indicate her reduction and to expose her most mercilessly. Her terse "I'm going" underscores her bleak acceptance and her choice of non-commitment.

Upon Stanley's appearance, shaven and neatly dressed, Goldberg and McCann start to comment on his breakdown and his need for a fundamental change:

> Goldberg : You're on the verge.
> McCann : You're a dead duck.
> Goldberg : But we can save you.
> McCann : From a worse fate
>
> (p. 86).

Their preposterous suggestions as to how to renew Stanley's life constitute a particularly keen ironic reflection on the theme of regeneration and redemp= tion as contained in traditional comedy, an irony pointedly underscored by Stanley's incoherent babble:

> Stanley : Uh-gug ... uh-gug ... eeehhh-gag ... (On the breath.) Caahh ... caahh ...
>
> (p. 89)

and by his final posture:

> Stanley's body shudders, relaxes, his head drops, he becomes still again, stooped (p. 89).

Stanley's weary and incoherent acquiescence becomes, in a somewhat surreal fashion, a paradigm for modern man's torpid acquiescence to the buffeting demands of little-understood social and material forces. The quiet melancholy (holding hints of continuing tension) of the final coda between Meg and Petey seems a fitting conclusion to a play in which ambiguity, ambivalence and verbal manoeuvring and manipulation[1)] constitute powerful comic devices.

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1. The verbal manoeuvring and manipulation will develop ultimately in the fiercely destructive exchanges contained in a play like *Old Times*.

4.2 *The Caretaker*

The Caretaker is usually included in the category of plays called "comedies of menace" (together with *The Room*, *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter*). The play represents an important development in the essential vision, however, in the sense that the in=definable air of menace has been replaced to a large extent by a recognizable psychological entity. The characters in this play are the victims not so much of a nameless threat, an unfocussed dread, as of a very real need for contact and warmth and reassur=ance.

Generally speaking, *The Caretaker* is a much more ac=complished and polished play than *The Birthday Party* with its thematic concerns emerging more clearly and with its character revelation and language usage having a clarity of impact leading to the *visceral response* identified by T.E. Kalem (1978) (cf. p. 427 below).

The play deals with the negotiation of social rela=tionships, involving in the process the agonized quest for identity. The painful and largely inef=fectual efforts of the three characters to come to terms with themselves, their companions and with life are evoked in a poignant and disturbing fashion.

Pinter's concern in this play is, in the most compre=
hensive sense, with man locked in combat with socie=
ty, technology and the terrifying forces exerted on
him by these entities. His comment, however, is
couched in impeccably theatrical and poetic terms.

An important aspect of Pinter's work needs to be men=
tioned at this stage. Having been first of all an
actor, and having graduated to a respected position
as a director, his attention to the extra-lingual
aspects of a play needs to be carefully considered.
His sparse and economic use of highly effective and
evocative stage directions is an important consider=
ation in dealing with the play.

The opening instructions, describing the material
chaos and the squalor of Aston's room, fulfil an im=
portant function. Some critics have sought to im=
pose a pattern of symbolism on the play based
amongst others on the objects scattered incongruous=
ly around, but Pinter is particularly unrewarding
from this point of view. The bucket hanging from
the ceiling, for example, is brought into the action
more than once and does seem at one stage to accom=
pany and underscore Aston's hesitant movement towards
coherence. It does not crystallize fully as a sym=
bol, however. In the same way the Buddha on the
gas stove has been variously interpreted, but would
seem to have no intrinsic significance beyond adding
to the somewhat surreal quality always discernible
in the these plays and being a visual device to

strengthen the effect of incongruity or, in Heil=man's term, disparateness.

Quigley (1975) has suggested the effectiveness of the visual device (the crowded room) very succinctly by maintaining that "the possibility of discovering or imposing order and pattern on this environment is a constant counterpoint to the efforts of the characters to establish significant structures in their own rela=tionships. The potential links between the characters are as tentative and exploratory as those between the various objects that Aston keeps bringing home; a new object, like a newcomer, provides different possibili=ties of permutation among what is already at hand" (p. 113). The random chaos in the room is thus an image for the universe they inhabit and in which they have such indifferent success as imposing order and coherence.

The action of *The Caretaker* is often farcical and seems to inculcate in the audience a sort of hysterical hilarity. Gale (1977) deals with this view by quoting Pinter himself: "In answering the criticism by Leonard Russell in the *Sunday Times* that the audience laughed at *The Caretaker* as if it were a farce, Pinter wrote: 'Certainly I laughed my=self while writing *The Caretaker*, but not all the time, not "indiscriminately". An element of the absurd is, I think, one of the features of the play, but at the same time I did not intend it to be merely a laughable farce ... As far as I am con=cerned, *The Caretaker* is funny, up to a point.

Beyond that point it ceases to be funny, and it was because of this point that I wrote it'" (p. 93). This point has been accurately perceived by Gallagher (1966) as residing in the somewhat surreal world open to frightening invasions which these men inhabit: "Hyper-reality added to realism creates an absurd microcosmos in which unexpected distortion becomes acceptable, and comedy bears a burden of savagery" (p. 248). Pinter's way of allowing brute animality to just surface frighteningly from time to time seems to be an oblique comment on the lack of real love and compassion existing in this world and which lends these plays their bleak and unredeemed air (in common with other contemporary comedies). Gallagher seems to have effectively isolated this quality in Pinter's work by observing that "Mick reduces Davies to a comic figure whose pretensions give way to abject grovelling. No human should treat another that way. It is undignified! It is immoral! But Pinter shows that people treat one another in just that degrading manner" (p. 248).

The action in the play revolves around the efforts of the three characters to achieve satisfying rela= tionships and resolves itself in rejection and dis= integration with the virtual destruction of Davies. Mick has won a token victory implicitly assumed to be shared by Aston, but as in *Plaintiffs and Defen= dants* (Gray) nobody wins and everybody is left sus= pended over the same old void as before.

Act I

As in *The Birthday Party*, the structure is not so much linear and temporal as spatial: the same tendency towards an inward-spiralling movement is observable. From the expository scenes of the first act one can see Davies' inevitable rejection emerging as a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy arising from his self-centred vision of life.

Aston's offering Davies a seat at once releases a flood of hysterical xenophobia[1] which Pinter uses as an ironic revelatory device in dealing with Davies. It serves as a vehicle for humour while at the same time painfully underlining Davies' weaknesses:

> Davies : ... I couldn't find a seat, not one. All them Greeks had it, Poles, Greeks, Blacks, the lot of them, all them aliens had it, ... All them Blacks had it, Blacks, Greeks, Poles, the lot of them, that's what, doing me out of a seat, treating me like dirt (p. 8).

---

1. It is perhaps significant that Davies' adversary is *Mick* seeing that it is a common appellation for an Irishman, and keeping in mind that the thug in *The Birthday Party* is also an Irishman: the connotations of pugnacity are obvious.

This becomes a sort of mournful litany to which Davies reverts whenever he feels threatened and pro= portionately unable to express himself. Talking about his boss, he replies to Aston's solicitous in= quiry:

> Aston : What was he, a Greek?
> Davies : Not him, he was a Scotch. He was a Scotchman
> (p. 10).

Moreover, this *Scotch* soon becomes *that Scotch git*, out to get him.

Davies' inability to accept Aston's generosity with= out suspicion leads him also to denigrate Aston's room:

> Aston : Family of Indians live there
> Davies : Blacks?
> Aston : I don't see much of them.
> Davies : Blacks, eh?
> (p. 13),

and this goads him to digress while telling a tale

of woe (calculated to touch Aston's heart)[1] and to dwell once more on this treat:

> Davies : How many more Blacks you got around here then?
> (p. 14).

The gulf between Davies and Aston which both are trying to bridge is nowhere as apparent as in the scenes dealing with this prejudice. Whenever Davies harps on this theme, Aston implicitly refuses to negotiate a relationship and so things are stale=mated:

> Davies : I mean you don't share the toilet with them Blacks, do you?
> Aston : They live next door.
> Davies : They don't come in? (Aston puts a drawer against the wall.)
> Because, you know, ... I mean ... fair's fair ...
> (Aston goes to the bed, blows dust and shakes a blanket.)
> Do you see a blue case?

---

1. In terms of Quigley's theory that Pinter's characters use language to negotiate and sustain relationships, this type of ludicrous and incongruous digression is very im=portant because Davies' patent insincerity of purpose, revealed increasingly in the relationship with both Mick and Aston in the course of which he frequently changes tack in trying to anticipate and manipulate responses is obliquely revealed through his involuntary revelation of obsessive and stultifying concerns. Quigley says that "to a large extent, Davies is a victim of his own expect=ations. His verbal strategies are predicated upon the assumption that every companion is a potential threat and a potential master, and the unfortunate result is that these are the only companions he can countenance" (p. 127).

Davies' most ludicrous use of this rejective device occurs when Aston remarks that Davies' "jabbering" kept him awake:

> Aston : You were making groans. You were jabbering.
> Davies : Jabbering? Me?
> . . . . . .
> You got hold of the wrong bloke, mate.
> Aston : No, you woke me up. I thought you might have been dreaming.
> Davies : I wasn't dreaming. I never had a dream in my life.
> . . . . . .
> I tell you what, maybe it were them Blacks.
> Aston : What?
> Davies : Them noises.
> Aston : What Blacks?
> Davies : Them you got. Next door. Maybe it were them Blacks making noises, coming through the walls.
> Aston : Hmmnn
>
> (pp. 22-23).

The prejudices become interwoven with Davies's central concern in the play: fetching his papers (which will establish his identity) from the man in Sidcup. Sidcup becomes a kind of unattainable Utopia, with all his attention directed at getting there, but he is constantly, monotonously, prevented by such calamities as uncomfortable shoes and bad weather. All the characters in the play are striving ineffectually but with pathetic dignity to attain certain ideals: Davies the papers which represent identity and security, Aston the shed he wants to build as a prelude towards doing meaningful work and

Mick the smart decorating job he dreams of for the apartment. All the dreams are patently impossible to realize, and the action dwells with ironic insistence on their efforts at moving in the right direction. Their entrapment by the very paraphernalia of the environment they seek to master is the source of much humour but also constitutes the truly moving appeal of the play. Pity and compassion are extracted in large measure, not gently but probingly, and the effect is often stunning in the most literal sense of the word.

Much as Davies is revealed in all his vulnerability by his obsessive racism, Aston is revealed through his obsessive tinkering. Unable to master the environment in any meaningful sense (such as getting on with it and building the shed) he submerges himself instead in small particularities. Tinkering with a plug, repairing a toaster, buying a jig saw: all these activities suggest a contact with the enemy through which he can persuade himself that he is mastering what to him is essentially a hostile world.

The communicative "contract" between Aston and Davies is a very fragile affair, maintained at all costs but foundering on their mutual misunderstanding. Pinter's own view that language is at best a stratagem to avoid silence is operative here, and might be reinforced by his further opinion (in an interview with J.R. Taylor, quoted by Quigley) that "... people, knowing perfectly well what gulfs they are skirting,

do their best to keep things going, to let them work themselves out" (p. 125).

Aston uses silence to negate the contract when he is unconvinced by Davies' fabrications and hysterics. Davies uses "evidence" from his own past to corrobor= ate Aston's stories, thus casting doubt on the inte= grity of Aston's recollection of his own past. When Aston diffidently tells an extraordinary story about a conversation with a woman which she allegedly con= cluded by saying:

> .... and she said, how would you like me to have a look at your body?
> (p. 25),

Davies first says incredulously:

> Get out of it (p. 25),

but embroiders on it as he goes, ending with

> Women? There's many a time they've come up to me and asked me more or less the same question
> (p. 25).

Davies' implicit rejection of Aston's individuality forces Aston into an aggressive and retaliatory stance:

Aston : What did you say your name was?
Davies : Bernard Jenkins is my assumed one.
Aston : No, your other one.
Davies : Davies. Mac Davies.
Aston : Welsh, are you?
Davies : Eh?
Aston : You Welsh?
(Pause.)

This pause introduces the familiar wrenching awareness of dislocation as Davies is forced to the wall and has to reveal his most deeply hidden fears and anxieties. Aston asks where he was born, and Davies is suddenly incoherent:

> I was ... uh ... oh, it's a bit hard, like, to set your mind back ... see what I mean ... going back ... a good way ... lose a bit of track, like ... you know ...
> (p. 25).

There is an almost irresistible implication here that the practically unshod Davies is in fact the unaccommodated man clinging to shreds of dignity but hopelessly compromised by his incoherent imperfection. His lostness is further underlined by his morbid fear of the appliances in the flat: he is afraid of the electric fire, of accidentally turning on the switches of the (disconnected) gas stove (and in Act II he is terrified when Mick calculatedly chases him in the dark with a vacuum cleaner).

When Aston leaves, Davies furtively starts inspecting every inch of the room. He does not observe Mick's entry, and for a while the mood is one of utter hilarity as he snoops and fusses, muttering to him= self. This mood, however, is shattered in a typical fashion when Mick jumps Davies and savagely forces him to the floor. Davies is still trouserless - thus doubly defenceless, a fact that Mick coldly ex= ploits by throwing away his trousers. The Act ends on an explosive note with Mick demanding of Davies:

What's the game? (p. 29).

This is a crucial question in terms of the action of the play. What happens between any two characters (in what Quigley has referred to as a binary rela= tionship) does have the nature of a game dictated by set rules.[1)]

The intrusion of a third person into this binary re= lationship has a shattering effect. Mick is Aston's brother, he is concerned about him and has high hopes for him (as witness the grandiose plans for the flat). He thus demands a certain response from Aston which inevitably compromises the existing

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1. The view of the game as a paradigm for living becomes ever more intricate and disturbing, until in *Betrayal* there is the shattering awareness at the end of the play that the whole intricate pattern of betrayal might in fact have been an elaborately manoeuvred game of complic= ity and shared guilt.

relationship between Davies and Aston. Davies' self-serving duplicity is thus not only self-defeating but destructive of Aston, for Davies' defection to Mick, whom he senses might serve his interests better, further discourages Aston, who has already been battered beyond recognition through personal betrayal and physical disintegration (having been forced to undergo a lobotomy).[1]

Mick subjects Davies to an interrogation similar to the one in *The Birthday Party*. Through this Davies' vague fears solidify and he becomes totally submissive in the face of Mick's arrogant self-possession and domination. The rapid switches in his accusations once more seem to dislocate reality and produce in Davies incoherent anxiety and fear. Mick changes without warning from straight abuse:

> I can run you to the police station in five minutes, have you in for trespassing, loitering with intent, daylight robbery, filching, thieving and stinking the place out
> (p. 36),

to a smooth business patter involving issues of high finance, but a patter equally terrifying to the obviously indigent Davies:[2]

---

1. The lobotomy becomes a sinister symbol for the levelling and suffocating forces contained in the hostile universe (cf. Ken Kesey's use of it in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*).

2. As in *The Birthday Party* this type of patter is used as an evasive technique (cf. Goldberg) and as a technique of alienation.

> Unless you're really keen on a straight=
> forward purchase. ... if you prefer to
> approach it in the long-term way I know
> an insurance firm in West Ham'll be
> pleased to handle the deal for you.
> No strings attached, open and above
> board, untarnished record; twenty
> percent interest, fifty percent depo=
> sit; down payments, back payments,
> family allowances, bonus schemes, re=
> mission of term for good behaviour,
> six month's lease, yearly examination
> of the relevant archives, tea laid on,
> disposal of shares, benefit extension,
> compensation on cessation, comprehen=
> sive indemnity against Riot, Civil Com=
> motion, Labour Disturbances, Storm,
> Tempest, Thunderbolt, Larceny of Cat=
> tle all subject to a daily check and
> double check. Of course we'd need a
> signed declaration from your personal
> medical attendant as assurance that you
> possess the requisite fitness to carry
> the can, won't we? Who do you bank
> with?
>
> (p. 36).

The indiscriminate mingling of jargon from various financial fields together with the sneaking references to a prison sentence reduces Davies to silence. Aston's entry shifts the attention, with the drip in the bucket serving as a focal point for the exchange between the brothers:

> Mick : You still got that leak.
> Aston : Yes.
> (Pause.)
> It's coming from the roof.
> Mick : From the roof, heh?
> Aston : Yes.
> (Pause.)
> I'll have to tar it over.

Mick : You're going to tar it over?
Aston : Yes.
Mick : What?
Aston : The cracks.
(Pause.)
Mick : You'll be tarring over the cracks on the roof.
Aston : Yes.
(Pause.)
Mick : Think that'll do it?
Aston : It'll do it, *for the time being.*
Mick : Uh.
(Pause.)
Davies (abruptly): What do you do ...?
They both look at him.
What do you do ... when the bucket's full?
(Pause.)
Aston : Empty it.
(Pause.)
Mick : I was telling my friend you were about to start decorating the other rooms
(p. 37, my italics).

Into this brief scene many important considerations are crowded. In the first place, Mick's sympathetic echoings of Aston's words have a double purpose: he is at once gently supporting his brother and trying to fill him with purposiveness. They do, for the moment, enter into a mutually satisfactory contract. There is also an interesting structural consideration in this. Later in the play the bucket is not needed anymore, the drip having been successfully blocked. In a direct development from this scene one finds that the relationship between Mick and Aston is ulti= mately the stronger and Davies is rejected. There is, however, the constant and troubling implication that "It'll do it, *for the time being*" (p. 37), so that any possible sense of permanence is hopelessly

compromised.

Davies' wilful intrusion into the conversation is implicitly rejected by Aston's coldly logical and rejective answer: "Empty it" (p. 37). In a sense, then, this scene reveals the essence of the action of the play: need is revealed and appreciated between Mick and Aston, while Davies' intrusion, inexcusable in the light of his offensive behaviour, is coldly rejected. Davies' savage expulsion at the end is thus merely an intensification and logical conclusion of what is implicitly known and accepted throughout. The violence lurking under the veneer of civilization surfaces abruptly and shockingly when a childish game erupts around Davies' bag. The situation becomes farcical but the deadly serious undertone is sustain= ed by Mick, who warns Davies:

> Watch your step, sonny! You're knock= ing at the door when no one's at home. Don't push it too hard. You come busting into a private house, laying your hands on anything you can lay your hands on. Don't overstep the mark, son
>
> (p. 38).

For the moment Aston, not yet betrayed and denied by Davies, supports him, but a renewed sound of dripping in the bucket arrests the action momentarily.

Mick leaves, and in the ensuing silence Davies tries his alienating technique again by talking about Mick with concealed but growing disparagement:

Davies : Who was that feller?
Aston : He's my brother
Davies : Is he? He's a bit of a joker, en'he?
Aston : Uh.
Davies : Yes ... he's a real joker.
Aston : He's got a sense of humour.
Davies : Yes, I noticed.
(Pause.)
He's a real joker, that lad, you can see that.
(Pause.)
Aston : Yes, he tends ... he tends to see the funny side of things.
Davies : Well, he's got a sense of humour, en'he?
. . . . . .
I could tell the first time I saw him he had his own way of looking at things
(p. 39f).

Aston evades the issue, seeming stricken by paralysis, musing about his good intentions:

> When I get that shed up out there ... I'll have a workshop, you see. I ... could do a bit of woodwork. Simple woodwork, to start. Working with ... good wood ... I think I'll put in a partition ... I could knock them up, you see, if I had a workshop
> (p. 40).

He tentatively reaches out to Davies again, offering him a position as a caretaker. Davies, however, having lived a life of evasion and distrust, seeks for a concealed negative motive and the conversation grinds to a painful if ludicrous halt, with Davies' anxieties zeroing in on an insignificant physical problem:

Davies : But it'd be a matter ... wouldn't it ... it'd be a matter of a broom ... isn't it?

Aston : Yes, and of course, you'd need a few brushes.

Davies : You'd need implements ... you see ... you'd need a good few implements ... (p. 43).

With Davies in a state of virtual disintegration Mick pounces on Davies with the vacuum cleaner, terrifying him out of his scattered wits. Davies' threatened retaliatory attack with the knife is averted with insulting and ridiculous ease and Mick proceeds to subjugate Davies with linguistic coercion to the point where Davies "performs as required, fabricating evidence for whatever image Mick desires of him" (Quigley, 1975, p. 141), to the extent of abjuring Aston:

Mick : I mean, you're my brother's friend, aren't you?

Davies : Well, I ... I wouldn't put it as far as that (p. 47),

which is a shocking denial in the light of Aston's patently sincere and generous attempts to help Davies and to make friends.

Mick, with diabolical cleverness, leads Davies into trap after trap, finally offering Davies the position as caretaker. Davies, perceiving Mick to be more potentially useful to him, promptly transfers his allegiance to Mick (expressing this transfer in terms

of cadging a sandwich off Mick).

When Aston returns he is faced with a barrage of complaints by Davies, a Davies exhibiting rather hilariously Bergson's dictum about inelasticity by saying about the window that is letting in the rain:

> It isn't me has to change, it's that window. You see, it's raining now (p. 53).

(This in reply to Aston's mild suggestion that he could sleep the other way around.)

Aston, pathetically misinterpreting the nature of the relationship between himself and Davies, launches into his longest speech, relating his past in an asylum. This speech has a stunning impact and once again the effect of dislocation is created. Gallagher has said of this speech that "the exigencies of exposition do not require such a drawn-out revelation. The explanation goes far past what reality of representation demands, and beyond what an audience would normally be expected to support" (1973, p. 246).

Quigley isolates one element adding greatly to the poignancy of the speech scene by saying that "one of the great ironies of the play is that, after a long period of not talking to people, Aston decides to unload his terrors and needs on a character who is incapable of displaying the generosity of spirit that

might help him, a character who sees weakness solely in terms of its possible exploitation" (p. 152).

The speech is ultimately a reminiscence involving a struggle for an image together with an appeal for sympathy and an excuse for failure. As the heart of this speech is another recurring agony of the modern comic hero: a struggle to identify the significance of the *past* and to find in it valid pointers to the present.

Pinter's use of mental illness as a device (in the sense that it is seen as a mode of response to the unmanageable complexities of life) in line with that of other contemporary authors such as Orton, Nichols and Stoppard, is very effective. The almost surreal horror of man at the mercy of malevolent forces, re= presented by the "men with pincers" in the asylum is evoked with wrenching clarity in this scene. The ending of the act is particularly effective as Aston's isolation is explained and shown to be permanent *unless* he can rouse himself from the typically catatonic state of the contemporary comic character:

> The thing is, I should have been dead. But I don't talk to people now. I don't talk to anyone ... like that. I've often thought of going back and trying to find the man who did that to me. But I want to do something first. I want to build that shed out in the garden
>
> (p. 57).

Aston and Davies share a debilitated desire for revenge - a desire incapable of fulfilment but which will always inhibit any fruitful action. They are both trapped in the characteristic stance of the period. There is thus a satisfying structural sym= metry in having Davies break down at the end of the last act in a painful complement to Aston's breakdown at the end of the second act. Aston has been temp= orarily redeemed (through his alliance with Mick) but there can be no illusion about the transitoriness of this redemption.

Act III opens with a great many complaints expressed by Davies in his attempts to deny Aston and ingra= tiate himself with Mick. His complaints culminate once more in his obsessive xenophobia which has by now become a familiar echo to the audience and which triggers an awareness that Davies is once more approaching the "far edge of living" where he is very much alone that Pinter has spoken of:

> But he don't seem to take any notice of what I say to him. I told him the other day, see, I told him about them Blacks coming up from next door, and using the lavatory. I told him, it was all dirty in there, all the banis= *ters were black.* But what *did he do?* He's supposed to be in charge of it here, he had nothing to say, he hadn't got a word to say
>
> (p. 59).

Mick senses this vulnerability and it induces in him the need to dominate more completely. He launches into a rapt description of his grandiose plans for the apartment. Davies enters into the spirit of the thing and is unwittingly drawn into ever more damaging behaviour. His complaint about not having a clock culminates with shocking suddenness in an admission of lostness:

> It's when I'm *in* ... that I haven't the foggiest idea what time it is. (Pause.)
> No, what I need is a clock in here, in this room, and then I stand a bit of a chance
> (p. 62).

Mick's rejection of Davies' frantically treacherous overtures is implied in his ironic invitation:

> You must come up and have a drink some time. Listen to some Tchaikovsky
> (p. 64).

Aston's offer of a pair of shoes is spurned by the irate Davies - while one has the appalled awareness that he is really cutting himself off from all con= tact. The difficulties that he faces are painfully real to him (p. 65) and yet, in Quigley's terms, one cannot miss the "increasing precariousness of Davies' situation and his constant inability to see beyond the myopic limits of his own self-seeking" (1975, p. 158). This myopia becomes ever more destructive, for Davies, annoyed by Aston's mentioning his

"noises", attacks savagely in his very weakest part. He launches into a ranting tirade, hammering away at the idea of Aston's having been committed to an asylum:

> They can put the pincers on your head again, man! ... They'd come here and pick you up and carry you in! They'd keep you fixed! ... They'd take one look at all this junk I got to sleep with and they'd know you were a creamer. ... You're up the creek! You're half off! ... Treating me like a bloody animal! I never been inside a nuthouse!
>
> (p. 67).

Davies' going for his knife underlines the terminal quality of this speech. He drives matters to a head by viciously attacking Aston's treasured illusion:

> Davies : You build your stinking shed first!
>
> (p. 68),

evoking Aston's stung retaliation:

> Aston : You've no reason to call the shed stinking.
> . . . . . .
> You stink.
> . . . . . .
> You've been stinking the place out.
> . . . . . .
> For days. That's one reason I can't sleep
>
> (p. 69).

A remark by Pinter himself seems particularly appos= ite in this context. "I'm not suggesting that no character in a play can ever say what he in fact means. Not at all. I have found that there invar= iably does come a moment when this happens, where he says something, which he has never said before. And where this happens, what he says is irrevocable, and can never be taken back" (1962, p. 25).

In a very real sense Aston and Davies have come to the point where no relational contract can be possi= ble. Aston's dependence on the building of the shed to bolster his self-image has been the only focus for optimism in his dreary life and has been indispens= able to his attempts to cope with dreary failures day after day. Davies, fairly beaten, turns to Mick again, not knowing that Mick has the most devastating blow of all in store for him. Seeming to accept him, he says:

> Mick : If you stank I'd be the first to tell you
>
> (p. 71),

but follows this up with

> You get a bit out of your depth some= times, don't you
>
> (p. 71),

and becomes more overtly menacing with

> Well, you say you're an interior decorator, you'd better be a good one (p. 71).

The fact that this charge is patently ridiculous only intensifies the threat. Davies has never claimed to be a decorator, but in the light of all his claims and fabrications even this charge seems to be a valid one for use as a clincher - and Mick uses it for this purpose:

> You're a bloody impostor, mate! (p. 72).

Davies' wild claim that Aston is "nutty" really unleashes Mick's wrath, so that he rains abuse on Davies' head:

> Ever since you came into this house there's been nothing but trouble. ... You're nothing else but a wild animal ... You're a barbarian. And to put the lid on it, you stink from arsehole to breakfast time (p. 73-74).

At this climactic moment, Mick suddenly breaks down. He flings the Buddha down to shatter and breaks into a tirade against Aston too, ending with a passionate:

> I'm going to chuck it in (p. 74).

Davies' worried

is met by faint smiles from both brothers. Quigley claims that "the smile, however slight, suffices to re-establish the priority of the link between the two brothers" (p. 166). Whatever the reason, however, the binary relationship now existing between Mick and Aston is for the moment impervious to any attempt by Davies to butt in. Davies' renewed efforts at coer=cion are heartrendingly pathetic and ineffectual, for now when it is too late he tries to show a concern for Aston's activities:[1)]

> That ain't the same plug, is it, you been ...?
>
> (p. 75),

and finds only silence in reply to his agonized efforts. He becomes increasingly incoherent and then disintegrates:

> But ... but ... look ... listen ... listen here ... I mean ...
> . . . . . .
> Listen ... if I ... got down ... if I ... was to ... get my papers ... would you ... would you let ... would you ... if I got down ... and got my ...
> *Long silence.*

---

1. Aston, on seeing the broken Buddha, resumes work on the broken plug, in a compulsive desire to subdue his mater=ial environment by dealing effectively with part of it at least.

Quigley has accurately described the situation existing at the end of the play. "The silence that settles upon each character in turn is not a recognition of the limitations of language but of the limitations of self" (p. 170). Of Davies he says that "on the brink of a confrontation with self-knowledge, Davies reaches the limits of his verbal resources. The road to Sidcup has become the road to silence" (p. 170). Similarly, at the end Aston is faced with nothing so much as a terrifying awareness of the fact that there is no escape from the problems facing him. There is rather a helpless acknowledgement of his lasting inability to resolve anything, giving him the typically resigned and over-accepting stance of the contemporary comic hero.

At the conclusion of the play one is left with some issues that need to be dealt with still. Criticism of the early plays often rested on charges that Pinter's characters are too petty, or in Amend's terms, not only grubby persons, but with grubby souls too (1967, p. 174). Hollis (1970) has countered this charge persuasively by maintaining that "Pinter's characters show us our ironic stature in the war with ourselves in a time when the gods have withdrawn" (p. 126).

The concept of the withdrawn gods is a crucial one in dealing with this drama, for in the absence of the gods there is an accompanying absence of hope, of a sense of redemption, and this contributes

significantly to the sense of stasis so obtrusively present in this drama. Together with this also inevitably goes the time-structure of contemporary comedy: there is a fixedness in the present, with the past seen to be hopelessly compromising the present, inhibiting any meaningful action and movement towards the future.

The silence settling upon the characters also has great significance. Pinter himself has spoken of the nausea induced in him by words, because such tritenesses are conveyed by them. He avows his artistic purpose obliquely, however, by maintaining that it is vital to confront this nausea, "to move through it and out of it" (in Hollis, 1970, p. 129), and to achieve something in this way. Hollis comments on this statement by observing that "to confront this nausea is the crucial problem of the age. The artist cannot heal our shattered bones or mend the rent fabric of our society, but he may make it possible for us to remain human amid the silence of our infinite spaces" (p. 129) - and the comic attitude is the most apposite one perhaps, because of its essentially ironic nature.

4.3 *The Collection* and *The Lover*

The two television plays, *The Collection* and *The Lover*, will be looked at briefly because they represent an important step in Pinter's development. Several shifts occur in these plays. In the first place the characters have ceased to be derelicts and are now members of the fairly affluent upper middle class. This has an important bearing on the dramatic language used in the plays. Secondly the thematic stress has shifted in the sense that the interrelational struggles are now more overtly linked to sexual relationships. The awareness of menace has been replaced by a stronger element of manners. Essentially, however, the preoccupations are still the same. Hirst has said that "Pinter explores the ambiguities and jealousies which arise from sexual misunderstanding and duplicity with a more marked existential emphasis" (1979, p. 69).

Hinchliffe (1968) has observed of these plays that they are "comedies; and their endings are on the whole as happy as the endings of comedies usually are" (p. 176). This statement needs a little qualification, for the endings of both plays are as ambiguous and relative as any other ending in a Pinter play. Sykes, for example, finds that Pinter shows a marked resemblance to the Noel Coward of the thirties[1]: specifically in the obsession with despair

1. Hirst (1979) develops this idea persuasively and in much greater detail.

that marked Coward's work in this period. Thus, under the facade of what Sykes calls "modern Restoration innuendo" lurks the quality of despair so typical of contemporary man.

Thematically the plays still tie in with his earlier work and to a large extent anticipate later plays such as *Homecoming*, *Old Times* and, most significantly, *Betrayal*. Hollis (1970) has perceptively observed that "*The Collection* is a semicomic exploration of the old problem of verification, of discrimination between truths which seem equally plausible" (pp. 70-71).

The sickening awareness of the relativity of truth permeates the entire play - a play which consists ultimately of a number of stratagems to get at the truth. Thus the old awareness of this theme is given fresh impetus in being worked out in the context of possible love triangles. In a world in which everything seems to be in flux the efforts to get at what might be regarded as the truth are doomed to ignominious failure. Tener (1975) has observed that "Pinter has used his insight into the inner man and his impulses to generate comic conflict; he has set the condition of man's always becoming against his desire to be fixed. And in doing so, he has shown how a man's language and games structure his reality and provide for him the necessary new myths

to fracture fixed existence" (p. 178).[1] Together with the idea of the relativity of truth, Pinter explores the theme of man's quest for identity. It would seem as if to some extent the theme raised in *The Collection* is fully realized in *The Lover*: in the first play Stella plays around with the idea of adultery and various possibilities as to what happened in the hotel in Leeds are shown to exist in the minds of the various characters. All the subterfuges and pretences, however, serve but to indicate a crucial deficiency that she experiences within her relationship with James and which she seeks to eradicate through pretending a fuller involvement and commitment. In *The Lover*, which might be regarded in a sense as a complex image of what the ideal marriage might be like, should all the various levels achieve simultaneity of being, this implicit longing has been externalized to the extent that it has become the motive force underlying the elaborate game played by husband and wife to simulate their having affairs, thereby adding spice to an insipid relationship.

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1. Man's essential state of *becoming* is denied in contemporary comedy, for being as hopelessly compromised by the past as most contemporary comic heroes are, they become mired in the desire to be *fixed* which turns out to be nothing more than stagnation. *Becoming* would imply a forward movement impossible to attain to in the context of hopelessness and stasis found in the plays.

The Collection consists of a series of encounters elaborately patterned and curiously like a set dance. These encounters, progressively throwing light on the characters themselves, function as a thin veneer of order which barely contains the violence which often lurks just below the surface.

The two couples are James and Stella, a married couple, and Harry and Bill, a seemingly homosexual couple. The relationship between James and Stella is early on revealed to be somewhat strained. Their initial encounter is very reminiscent of a cautious and unresolved skirmish.

The scene switches smoothly to Bill and Harry's ménage. Bill plays the housewife, pacifying Harry and absorbing his nagging. Unexpectedly, however, it is Bill who is subsequently accused of having had an affair with James' wife Stella. This carefully nurtured ambiguity of sexual roles is a further constituent of the search for identity. The unmistakeable attraction which later on develops between Harry and James further bears out this statement.[1)]

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1. The careful exploration of all possible gradations of male friendship is a common feature in the drama of the sixties and seventies, as witness also the works of Gray, Orton and Nichols.

The play, primarily intended for television production, utilizes visual elements very effectively. Mostly the two ménages are shown in juxtaposition: often an object gains great dramatic value because of its associations. In this sense the kitten that Stella cuddles all the time becomes a powerful image of her need and her forlornness. Directly after seeing the kitten, the audience is confronted with her possible adultery. Bill seems too shocked to effectively deny the charge levelled at him and James thunders on, only to have his words peter out ineffectually to the point where he mutters that

> You comforted her, you gave her solace, you stayed
>
> (p. 20).

When Pinter uses an expression like this, with its curiously outdated sound, it is usually effective on more than one level.

Solace might be an elaborate and embarrassed euphemism: it is also true that when Pinter uses inappropriate or old-fashioned words they jar on the senses, often producing an awareness that the speaker is being either cunning or insincere. The rest of the scene bears out this idea, for Bill ironically questions James about the sordid minutiae of the supposed seduction to the point where James applauds him in an implicit acknowledgement of the skill Bill shows in an intricate game. The game takes on a grim tone with alarming suddenness, however, when Bill first

rejects James' overtures by using a boyhood word like *scrumptious* to describe a drink. The tension suddenly mounts and when James playfully pushes him, he falls over a pouffe. Prone on the floor he is suddenly at a disadvantage and is also suddenly and irrationally terrified. In a neat parallel to this scene, in which Bill vigorously denies being scarred, the last scene involves Bill and James again, with James "playfully" throwing a knife at Bill, scarring his hand and adding another permutation to the already bewildering situation. James finally, in this early scene, extracts a "confession" from Bill and leaves.

Following this, James goes to Stella and quarrels abrasively and futilely with her: in an ironic parallel this happens between Bill and Harry too. There is a quick switch to James and Stella again, with James mercilessly castigating his wife about the lover she has told him about. He embroiders freely and woundingly on the facts he knows, taunting Stella that he might even find happiness with *her* lover - thus negating the value of her escapist fantasy, which was to sustain her.

When Bill and James meet again they have the crucial *mirror* conversation[1)] which can legitimately be re=garded as a perspective on the theme of the relativi=ty of truth.

When Harry meets Stella, she suddenly professes com=plete ignorance and innocence:

> I mean, Mr. Lloyd was in Leeds, but I hardly saw him, even though we were staying in the same hotel. I never met him or spoke to him ... and then my husband suddenly accused me of ... it's really been very distressing (p. 36).

---

1. James : I wouldn't exactly say I was broad either.
Bill : Well, you only see yourself in the mirror, don't you?
James : That's good enough for me.
Bill : They're deceptive.
James : Mirrors?
Bill : Very.
James : Have you got one?
Bill : What?
James : A mirror.
Bill : There's one right in front of you.
James : So there is.
(James looks into the mirror.)
Come here. You look in it too.
(Bill stands by him and looks. They look togethe and then James goes to the left of the mirror, an looks again at Bill's reflection.)
I don't think mirrors are deceptive (p. 34).

James' refusal to go along with Bill's simple observation ties in with the concept of the manipulation of relation=ship, as it constitutes an implicit refusal to participat and a rejection of Bill at the same time.

Attributing James' over-reaction to strain because of overwork, thus hiding her emptiness from an out= sider, Stella retreats. Harry's raptures about the kitten, however, allow the "probable truth" of the situation to intrude painfully for the moment.

James' insistent harping on the subject grates on Bill's nerves, so that he says irritably:

> Surely the wound heals when you know the truth, doesn't it? I mean, when the truth is verified? I would have thought it did
>
> (p. 39).

This is especially ironic in the light of the highly ambivalent impression that Pinter creates with regard to the whole question of the relativity of truth.

James refuses to talk at this point, turning instead to knives and overt action. Harry returns with the news that Stella has admitted making everything up, and Bill's smug reply that it amused him to go along with the deception James is made to labour under un= expectedly releases a tirade from Harry, in which he

violently rejects Bill.[1)]

Suddenly there is still another permutation possible when Harry ingratiates himself with James. Bill refuses to be silenced and tells yet another version of the truth. James confronts Stella with this ver= sion and she starts the cycle of deception all over, maintaining the impression of the fluid nature of reality:

James : You didn't do anything, did you?
(Pause.)
He wasn't in your room. You just talked about it, in the lounge.
(Pause.)
That's the truth, isn't it?
(Pause.)
You just sat and talked about what you would do if you went to your room.
That's what you did.
(Pause.)
Didn't you?
(Pause.)
That's the truth, isn't it?

---

1. Harry : He's got a slum mind. I have nothing against slum minds *per se*, you understand, nothing at all. ... but when this kind of slum mind gets out of the slum it sometimes persists, you see, it rots everything. That's what Bill is. There's some= thing faintly putrid about him, don't you find? Like a slug. There's nothing wrong with slugs in their place, but this one won't keep his place - he crawls all over the walls of nice houses, leav= ing slime, don't you, boy? He confirms stupid little sordid stories just to amuse himself, ... all he can do is sit and suck his bloody hand and decompose like the filthy putrid slum slug he is (p. 43).

(Stella looks at him, neither confirming nor denying. Her face is friendly, sympathetic.
Fade flat to half light.
The four figures are still, in the half light.
Fade to blackout)

(p. 45).

The play ends on a note of utter ambiguity. The very openness of the ending is also a powerful image for the way in which Pinter sees the world he peoples so convincingly with people at the far edge of their living, where they are very much alone. Tener can rightly observe in this context that "Pinter dramas show man as infinitely complex and infinitely absurd" (1973, p. 182).

In *The Lover* the woman has actively sought to fill the empty spot at the core of the relationship by the invention and maintenance of an elaborate game. Hollis has said of this that "the game gives them ... the illusion of significance" (1970, p. 67).

The game entails a double deception. Sarah is regularly visited by her lover, with the seemingly complacent permission of her husband. With punctilious considerateness, the husband keeps out of the way on these adulterous occasions. Upon returning home, he is evidently in the habit of inquiring about the afternoon's events in a perfectly amiable and solicitous tone. On this occasion, however, he

suddenly and disconcertingly departs from the script: he touches on seemingly taboo subjects regarding their own relationship.

> Richard : ... I'm not completely forgotten?
> Sarah : Not by any means.
> Richard : That's rather touching, I must admit.
> (Pause.)
> Sarah : How could I forget you?
> Richard : Quite easily, I should think.
> Sarah : But I'm in your house.
> Richard : With another.
> Sarah : But it's you I love.
> Richard : I beg your pardon?
> Sarah : But it's you I love.
> (Pause. He looks at her, proffers his glass.)
> Richard : Let's have another drink
> (p. 54).

This exchange seems to set Sarah's nerves jangling, so that she brings his mistress into the matter. He denies having a mistress, however, thus upsetting the careful gradations of the game they are playing.[1)]

> But I haven't got a mistress. I'm very well acquainted with a whore, but I haven't got a mistress. There's a world of difference
> (p. 55).

---

1. The intricate game playing, intended to mask the committed realities of a real relationship, is very reminiscent of the game playing indulged in Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, where the return to the game at the end of the play seems to signal acceptance of a hopeless situation through its ironic suggestion of reconciliation and redemption.

Further adding to Sarah's upset, Richard bitterly exhumes what must have been an ironic dictum held to throughout their lives and living together:

> You've never put it to me so bluntly before, have you? Frankness at all costs. Essential to a healthy marriage, don't you agree?
>
> (p. 56).

A certain touch of acrimony enters their conversation, filling the audience with unease at the spectacle of a disintegrating relationship. When it emerges, however, that the visiting lover is Richard himself, and that the elaborate game has the purpose of filling the empty spaces in their marriage,[1] the unease turns to pity. They play out the scenario, which includes playing with a bongo drum, pretending a "pick-up" and a "rescue", and an episode in a park-keeper's hut (shades of Lady Chatterley?). Richard (as Max) starts voicing reservations about the entire issue, filling Sarah with renewed apprehension at the idea of his defection from the sustaining game. When Richards "returns from work" he is still in a carping mood, telling Sarah "to ask him to cease his visits from (he consults calendar) - the twelfth inst." (p. 78). Sarah attempts frantically to coax him back into the game:

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1. The play might be interpreted on one level as a dream about the total and fulfilling relationship in which the wife is, simultaneously, wife, mother, whore and mistress.

> You've had a hard day ... at the office. All those overseas people. It's so tiring. But it's silly, it's so silly, to talk like this. I'm here. For you. And you've always appreciated ... how much these after= noons ... mean. You've always under= stood
>
> (p. 78).

Richard suddenly threatens violence, always an im= portant clue in a Pinter play that a breaking point has been reached. Sarah attempts to use his anger to bait him. He retaliates by calling her an adulteress and by bringing into the open the appur= tenances of seduction (the drum, etc.). He tries at one level to integrate dream and reality and to fuse the whole complex image.

Sarah rejects this overture, clinging instead to her game. Richard's attempt to superimpose the style of the afternoons of dalliance on the evening produc= es the familiar effect of dislocation one finds in Pinter's work. Sarah seems momentarily satisfied that the game has been preserved:

> Aren't you sweet? I've never seen you before after sunset. My hus= band's at a late-night conference. Yes, you look different. Why are you wearing this strange suit, and this tie?
>
> (p. 83),

and she enters into the spirit of things, content in the knowledge (perhaps ironically so) that she can

manipulate the game to her satisfaction again the minute Richard stops his silly reservations about wanting the relationship to function at a more com= plex and satisfying level of commitment:

> Sarah : Would you like me to change? Would you like me to change my clothes? I'll change for you, darling. Shall I? Would you like that?
> (Silence. She is very close to him.)
> Richard : Yes.
> (Pause.)
> Change.
> (Pause.)
> Change.
> (Pause.)
> Change your clothes.
> You lovely whore.
> (They are still, kneeling, she leaning over hom
>
> (p. 84).

This is at best an arbitrary ending, leaving nothing really resolved.

Both these plays are relatively slight. They are important, however, in the sense that they are the first plays revealing a concern with another social class, with the added consideration of greater arti= culateness. The exploration of sexual relationships, which up to now has received only oblique considera= tion, will be a central issue in the later plays, so that the element of menace will increasingly become less obvious and the mannered element more prevalent in his work. Gordon (1969, p. 7) has observed that "Pinter lampoons the contract *between* man and

society" and this contract will be seen to be more and more civilized, stylized, but no less disturbing in its implications, as despair and forlornness re= main the inevitable concomitants of the heroes of these plays.

4.4 *The Homecoming*

The Homecoming remains Pinter's single most baffling and troubling play. Within the context of the pre= sent study it lies at the furthest end of the comic spectrum, for it constantly slips disconcertingly out of the mode ascribed to it.

The strongest reservations about the play have remain= ed centred on its (lack of) moral structure. A pas= sage from Schroll (1969) might serve to underline this. "Commentators most frequently claimed that Pinter's 'vision' fails in *The Homecoming*. Harold Hobson, though he praised the play for having no 'aesthetic defect', noticed what he called a 'moral vacuum' in the piece. The playwright never comment= ed on the characters or on their fantasies, and Hob= son found himself 'troubled by [this] complete ab= sence from the play of any moral comment whatsoever ... Writing in the *City Press*, C.B. Mortlock said that attempts to discover 'some esoteric interpreta=

tion' for the play 'will not make its inescapable crudities palatable'. He concluded: 'I hope I may never see a nastier play'" (pp. 56-57).

Hollis (1970) also deals with the issue of the morality of the play, providing a useful perspective in the process. "The issue of morality has often been raised in connection with *The Homecoming*. At the superficial level [it] is a shocking play, an affront even to the morality of those who live in a morally fluid age. But the characters ... are no more concerned with moral issues than a dog is self-conscious about his relationship to a fire hydrant ... they are dramatizations of a region of human consciousness which lies below volition and is amoral in character" (p. 110). Hollis has also quoted Pinter on the play, where he maintains that "there is no question that the family does behave very calculatedly and pretty horribly to each other and to the returning son. But they do it out of the texture of their lives and for other reasons which are not evil but slightly desperate" (p. 110).

This play has been described as a comedy of manners by more than one prominent critic. Hinchliffe (1967) decides that the play is "not merely shocking but seriously disturbing" (p. 157), for "we are confronted with material and a plot out of Zola or Dreiser which are treated like a comedy of manners. In fact, *The Homecoming* is a kind of contemporary Restoration comedy where the vernacular wit should

compel us into some sort of point of view from which a moral judgment is inappropriate" (p. 157).

The most recent critic to refer to the play in these terms is D.L. Hirst (1979) who sees Pinter's work as belonging to the mainstream of the manners tradition in English drama. To his mind the play reveals an interest "in the playing of deadly serious social games according to carefully defined rules" (p. 74). He closes his discussion with a specific reference to Restoration comedy: "Pinter's uncompromising exposure of the bases of human conduct is deeply disturbing, the more so as Ruth's complete sexual and monetary victory is concluded with a calculated precision reminiscent of the 'proviso' scene in *The Way of the World*. This modern Millamant, however, is more than a match for all her admirers, the strongest of whom can in the end merely accede to her demands" (p. 76).

The comparison Hirst draws between Ruth and Millamant serves to my mind to underscore one of the most important contrasts between traditional and contemporary comedy. In the "proviso scene" between Mirabell and Millamant a hard bargain is driven, but a bargain ultimately based on love and consideration. The relationship negotiated between them allows both closeness and privacy, an ideally balanced relationship providing both breathing space and security. The final impression one has of this Restoration Comedy *par excellence* is of harmony and redemption -

they are set fair to achieve happiness, and Milla= mant does declare in pretty confusion that she loves him "violently".

Any similarity that one might find between Millamant and Ruth will then have to be heavily ironic. Con= greve uses wit and manners as a device for his cha= racters to deal effectively with the demands of the world, and as something to shield behind until such time as it would be safe to reveal one's true feel= ings (as happens between Mirabell and Millamant). The characters in *The Homecoming* use their approxima= tion of social manners, the rules of the game, as a paradigm for existence (not life), and so an essen= tial emptiness remains, pin-pointed accurately by Dukore (1976). He says that Ruth has been "won" from her husband, "yet this final scene suggests not the ending of comedy, *in which love makes everyone content*,[1)] but the hollow victory of tragicomedy, as the queen bee rules the men in the hive" (p. 42).

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1. My italics. This is precisely the point at which con= temporary comedy diverges from traditional comedy, for without love for self and others there can be no redemp= tion. Thus it is not so much the addition of the tragic (and thus tragicomedy) that one finds in contemporary drama, but a deficiency of love, which leaves the broken centre so consistently evoked in contemporary drama.

This play is thus included in the discussion because it retains so many of the characteristics of contemporary comedy even while, through its really "black" moments, it tends to slip off the furthest end of the comic spectrum. The obtrusive violence, both verbal and physical, tends to colour it too strongly in places, threatening the quality of detachment customarily found in comedy. It is also true, ironically, that the threatening quality of the lurking violence inhibits the responses of both pity and compassion, with important consequences. Lewis (1971) has gone so far as to say that "the characters in *The Homecoming* cease to be psychologically valid human beings. They are transmuted into symbols of men debased, surviving on primeval instincts in an age in which love and compassion no longer exist" (p. 326).

Act I

This play is a much more nakedly aggressive battle for supremacy within a social context than any other Pinter play. The characters are concerned with establishing themselves and reinforcing their positions, although they are constantly shown up as being painfully vulnerable to the onslaughts from without. Quigley (1975) has spoken, in this context, of characters who "seek to find a situation in which they

can be what they wish to be" (p. 176). Once they have attained what they regard as their proper iden= tity they seek to structure their environment, so that their own structures may be imposed on each other.

The title of the play has been variously interpreted. Most critics now agree that the *homecoming* referred to is that of Ruth[1)] who returns to a way of life she led before and which obviously has more appeal for her than the one she is currently leading in America.

Quigley seems to a large extent to account for the dislocating effect of the opening scene. Max talks to his son Lenny, and is immediately viciously in= sulted. He responds to the insults by swearing equally horribly and continually. In Quigley's terms, "the opening glimpse of the London family re= veals a situation far removed from any abstract ideal of a social group, with shared needs and reciprocal responsibilities. Instead these are distorted into a system of mutual exploitation ..." (p. 182).

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1. Much has been made of the biblical connotations of Ruth's name, and her adoption of a new fatherland, fol= lowing the lead of the mother (Jessie) by also acting like a whore. From the play itself, however, it would seem as if such a claim rests on very tenuous grounds.

Max shows a pathetic eagerness to establish some form of rapport with his son. He "oscillates between emotional security and vulnerability" (Quigley, p. 180), and he is constantly under threat, unable to form a consistent self-image. To this extent the play is a comedy: the various characters all seek to understand themselves and the world and to come to terms with life in a way often ludicrously inadequate to the demands made. Max's revelation of self in the face of Lenny's hostile indifference is funny and pathetic. The more Lenny obliquely rejects his overtures, the wilder his claims and assertions become, to become edged with desperation when irrational and crude violence surfaces. He talks first of their mother, his wife Jessie[1], seeming to anticipate the revelation of her unfaithfulness made at the end of the play:

> Mind you, she wasn't such a bad woman. Even though it made me sick just to look at her rotten stinking face, she wasn't such a bad bitch. I gave her the best bleeding years of my life, anyway
>
> (p. 9).

Lenny's vicious

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1. This first mention of Jessie is important, as she becomes an obsessive concern of both Max and Sam until there can be no doubt any more about her gross infidelity.

> Plug it, will you, you stupid sod, I'm trying to read the paper
> (p. 9)

evokes an equally vicious response, as Max's fury seems practically incoherent:

> Listen! I'll chop your spine off, you talk to me like that! You under= stand? Talking to your lousy filthy father like that!
> (p. 9).

Some critics have sought to justify this exchange (and the much cruder later ones) as a sort of affec= tionate invective, a form of banter among relatives. To my mind, however, it is precisely at these moments of mindless viciousness that the play slips out of the orbit of comedy.

The play is re-admitted as a comedy in Max's rambling monologue which follows, when he reminisces about his early life and rapidly progresses into a world of fantasy:

> He talks to me about horses. You only read their names in the papers. But I've stroked their manes, I've held them, I've calmed them before a big race. I was the one they used to call for. Max, they'd say there's a horse here, he's highly strung, you're the only man on the course who can calm him. It was true. I had a ... I had an instinctive understanding of ani= mals. I should have been a trainer. Many times I was offered the job - you

know, a proper post, by the Duke of ... I forget his name ... one of the Dukes. But I had family obligations, my family needed me at home
(p. 10).

He resembles the Davies of *The Caretaker* here and seems touchingly human and sympathetic in his reverie. His frail sense of worth, however, is cruelly dashed by Lenny, who mockingly refers to Max's cooking as being fit for dogs only. Max, goaded beyond endur= ance, threatens to hit Lenny, whereupon Lenny enacts a ghastly parody of the grovelling Max seems to ex= pect:

Oh, Daddy, you're not going to use your stick on me, are you? Eh? Don't use your stick on me, Daddy. It wasn't my fault, it was one of the others. I haven't done anything wrong, Dad, honest. Don't clout me with that stick, Dad
(p. 11).

When Max's brother Sam appears on the scene Lenny starts a mocking inquisition of the one character in the play who constantly elicits sympathy. Max's sense of inadequacy is fuelled again by Lenny's re= jection. He pathetically says:

Max : I'm here too, you know.
(Sam looks at him.)
I said I'm here too, I'm sitting here.
Sam : I know you're here.
(Pause.)
I took a Yankee out there today ...
(p. 12).

He is resolutely excluded from the conversation. He attacks Sam cruelly in his most vulnerable spot in retaliation:

> Max : It's funny you never got married, isn't it? A man with all your gifts. (Pause.)
> . . . . . .
> Sam : There's still time.
> Max : Is there?
> (Pause.)
> Sam : You'd be surprised.
> Max : What have you been doing, banging away at your lady customers, have you?[1]
>
> (p. 14),

and resorts to ever cruder taunts:

> Max : In the back of the Snipe? Been having a few crafty reefs in a layby, have you?
> Sam : Not me.
> Max : On the back seat? What about the armrest, was it up or down?
> Sam : I've never done that sort of thing in my car.
> Max : Above all that kind of thing, are you, Sam?
> Sam : Too true.
> Max : Above having a good bang on the back seat, are you?
> Sam : Yes, I leave that to others.

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1. Sam's unrequited love for Max's unfaithful wife Jessie leaves him painfully vulnerable to Max's taunts. At the same time there is an ironically prophetic quality to the taunt that Max uses in the light of the revelation Sam makes at the end of the play.

Max : You leave it to others? What others?
You paralysed prat!
Sam : I don't mess up my car! or my ...
boss's car! Like other people.
Max : Other people? What other people?
(Pause.)
What other people?
(Pause.)
Sam : Other people

(p. 15).

This exchange becomes a further anticipation of the shocking revelation Sam is going to make, and which in reality later comes to be only a confirmation of a suspicion long harboured.

The scene explodes into the mindless violence that is a hallmark of the play and which seems to militate effectively against its having a consistently comic vision. Dukore (1976) has said that "in this savage play, whose violence is verbal as well as physical, comedy too is savage, for the characters - sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly - taunt each other. While their mockery amuses the spectator, its under=lying destructiveness also shocks him ... As the characters battle for dominance over each other, laughter accompanies their manoeuvres and the cessa=tion of laughter accompanies the climaxes of these enounters, particularly the victories" (p. 43). It will accordingly emerge that Ruth and Lenny, locked in a battle for supremacy, elicit the least sympathy and laughter for their manipulation of their environ=ment is too obsessive and coldly successful.

Glimpses appear in this play of the concern with *care* and *need* which can be traced in *The Caretaker*. Joey, the boxer ("in demolition in the daytime") tries just as pathetically as Max to assert himself and to gain his father's approval. Max responds to his overtures with a devastatingly funny, portentous and wholly meaningless bit of advice:

> What you've got to do is you've got to learn how to defend yourself, and you've got to learn how to attack. That's your only trouble as a boxer. You don't know how to defend yourself and you don't know how to attack. (Pause.) Once you have mastered those arts you can go straight to the top
>
> (pp. 17-18).

Joey shows his painful awareness of the failure to establish contact:

> I've got a pretty good idea ... of how to do that
>
> (p. 18),

providing one of the truly moving moments in the play.

Sam also unexpectedly reveals a streak of unmitigated bitterness and violence when he talks about Max's friend MacGregor (who, it will emerge, committed adultery with Jessie in the back of the hapless Sam's cab):

> Old Mac died a few years ago, didn't he? Isn't he dead?
> (Pause.)
> He was a lousy stinking rotten loud=mouth. A bastard uncouth sodding runt. Mind you, he was a good friend of yours
> (p. 18).

This outburst, while perhaps subject to the same re=servations expressed earlier (about the so-called affectionate abuse) is more justified than some of the others, for Sam always loved Jessie in his un=assuming way and has had to bottle up his bitterness over the years. When he finally makes the climac=tic revelation, he collapses, and once again the response seems to be valid and justified.

There is a curiously ambivalent concern with the whole matter of parenthood. Marriage and childbear=ing are both implicitly but unmistakeably questioned as institutions. Max talks about his own father, using the same kind of spurious and fatuous style Goldberg uses in *The Birthday Party*:

> Our father? I remember him. Don't worry. You kid yourself. He used to come over to me and look down at me. My old man did. He'd bend right over me, then he'd pick me up. I was only that big. Then he'd dandle me. Give me the bottle, wipe me clean. Give me a smile. Pat me on the bum. Pass me around, pass me from hand to hand. Toss me up in the air. Catch me com=ing down. I remember my father
> (p. 19).

The questioning attitude is continued in the curious attitude revealed by all towards Ruth and Teddy's marriage and by the inconsistent views and attitudes of everybody regarding parenthood (cf. Lenny's insistent and obsessive interrogation of his father regarding the night of his conception. At one level this concern can be linked very clearly to the theme of the quest for identity so prevalent in contemporary drama).

When Ruth and Teddy arrive, it soon becomes clear that their relationship is in a state of flux. There seems to be a process of dissolution eroding the foundations of their marriage, revealed in the way in which they negotiate an almost totally meaningless verbal skirmish. Their verbal strategies at this stage are elaborately evasive if not outrightly rejective.

When Lenny and Teddy see each other for the first time in six years, they greet each other in a fashion that is totally casual and unsurprised, producing the familiar effect of dislocation so often found in Pinter's work. However, Lenny's concern with the ticking of the clock, ludicrously overdone, reveals his taut and tense consciousness of the threats all round (a tenseness exploding in the scenes of jarring and totally gratuitous violence that he talks about compulsively). Lenny is clearly in command in the scene with Teddy, forcing him on the defensive by keeping quiet and thus leading Teddy to go on

mindlessly volunteering information implicitly sneered at by Lenny:

> Teddy : How's the old man?
> Lenny : He's in the pink.
> (Pause.)
> Teddy : I've been keeping well.
> Lenny : Oh, have you?
> (Pause.)
> Staying the night then, are you?
> (p. 27).

The situation is abruptly, ironically, and amusingly reversed when Ruth appears. She never blinks an eye while preparing to dominate Lenny utterly and humiliatingly. By using familiar and mundane ob= jects such as a glass and an ashtray, she intimidates him and subjugates him. In the best tradition of the comedy of manners Ruth manipulates her world and comes out victorious, but it is essential to note that there is no redeeming quality in Ruth and that her total control coupled with her complete lack of moral outrage ultimately inhibits the comic impulse informing the play in part.

There is a certain amused gratification in watching Lenny being forced onto the defensive. Whereas Max, when on the defensive, tells an elaborate story about working with horses, Lenny under the same con= ditions tells a weird and horrifying story about assaulting a woman:

> ... when she eventually caught up with me ... she made me this certain proposal. ... The only trouble was she was falling apart with the pox ... she started taking liberties ... so I clumped her one ... So I just gave her another belt in the nose and a couple of turns of the boot and sort of left it at that
>
> (p. 31).

Ruth implicitly rejects his inclusion of her into his world of pimps and prostitutes by asking delicately:

> How did you know she was diseased?
> (p. 31).

This starts a disconcerted Lenny off on a different tack, another of his strategies having failed. He tells another equally horrifying story, a real tale of mayhem, but fails signally to make Ruth respond in any cringing manner. Instead she immediately demolishes him, forcing him to give up the initiative and start yelling at her. The battle for supremacy has clearly been lost, and to Lenny's intense chagrin he wakes up his father, who dashes in to protect his house from supposed burglars. Quigley says that "the comic figure of the aged Max hurtling downstairs to defend his home against possible burglars succeeds the tense confrontation between Lenny and Ruth" (p. 198). Max's aggrieved attack evokes Lenny's mocking and yet anguished query about his begetting:

Lenny : That night ... you know ... the night you got me ... that night with Mum, what was it like? Eh? When I was just a glint in your eye? What was it like? What was the background to it? I mean, I want to know the real facts about my background. I mean for instance, is it a fact that you had me in mind all the time, or is it a fact that I was the last thing you had in mind?

(p. 36).

This links the theme of the quest for identity with the further theme so prevalent in contemporary drama: the numbing awareness of the past and its inhibiting effect upon man. Max's irascibility is in full spate the next morning (when he indulges in ever wilder flights of fancy and clothes his ideas ever more incongruously in clichés):

I respected my father not only as a man but a number one butcher! And to prove it I followed him into the shop. I learned to carve a carcass at his knee. I commemorated his name in blood. I gave birth to three grown men! All on my own bat. What have you done?
(Pause.)
What have you done? You tit!

(p. 40).

There is something comically wistful in this scene[1] which for the moment adds the missing dimension of

1. The scene is repeated on a much more intense level when Max later starts another tirade, cursing his past and his present life indicriminately (p. 47).

compassion to the play.

Teddy and Ruth's late, sheepish entrance provokes another avalanche of abuse from Max. In another moment of abrupt and effective dislocation, Max up= braids Teddy for bringing a prostitute into the house, his claims becoming ever wilder and more extravagant:

> Max : Who asked you to bring tarts in here?
> . . . . . .
> Who asked you to bring dirty tarts into this house?
> . . . . . .
> We've had a smelly scrubber in my house all night. We've had a stinking pox-ridden slut in my house all night.
> . . . . . .
> I haven't seen the bitch for six years, he comes home without a word, he brings a filthy scrubber off the street, he shacks up in my house!
> Teddy : She's my wife! We're married!
> (Pause.)
> Max : I've never had a whore under this roof before. *Ever since your mother died.* My word of honour. (To Joey.) Have you ever had a whore here? Has Lenny ever had a whore here? They come back from America, they bring the slopbuc= ket with them. They bring the bedpan with them. (To Teddy.) Take that disease away from me. Get her away from me
>
> (p. 42).

The ambiguous qualification (in italics) immediately raises the question of Jessie's real character again. Max, discharging his passion in a violent and unpro= voked attack on Joey, hitting him in his frustrated

rage at Teddy and Ruth, does a disconcerting *volte-face*, asking Ruth about her children in a civilized, controlled tone of voice. This is thematically very important, because in one sense Ruth, as wife-mother-whore is a fuller realization of the Sarah of *The Lover*: she is shown to be able to enact all the con=stituent aspects of complete womanhood.

The culminating conversation between Max and Teddy, with its fawning tone and yet its unmistakeable menace is a bitterly ironic comment on the father-son relationship. Max's final chuckle:

> (Max begins to chuckle, gurgling. He turns to the family and addres=ses them.)
> Max : He still loves his father!
> (p. 44),

has a chilling effect, while on the surface there is a gloatingly complacent quality to the boast which reminds one uncomfortably of Goldberg's ghastly *bonhomie*.

As this point in the play, then, battle-lines have been drawn up, most noticeably between Ruth and Lenny, and various relationships, in states of naus=eating flux, have been outlined.

Act II

Act II opens on a scene of amusing gentility and civility. All the members of the family are drinking coffee after lunch, the men smoking cigars. For the moment there is a precariously balanced peace, and Max comments on it hesitantly:

> Well, it's a long time since the whole family was together, eh? If only your mother was alive. Eh, what do you say, Sam? What would Jessie say if she was alive? Sitting here with her three sons. Three fine grown-up lads. And a lovely daughter-in-law. The only shame is her grand-children aren't here. She'd have petted and cooed over them, wouldn't she Sam? ... I tell you, she'd have been hysterical
>
> (p. 45).

Max, however, seems to be uneasily aware of the very temporary nature of this truce. He is responsible for the first slide back into darkness himself when he makes the highly provocative and ambiguous remark that

> She taught them all the morality they know. I'm telling you. Every single bit of the moral code they live by - was taught to them by their mother
>
> (p. 46).

He reverts to a reverie disconcertingly like the "pancakes and soapsuds" speech of Goldberg in *The Birthday Party*. The reminiscence is ludicrously unlikely, but the nostalgic quality is strong enough to give it the ring of truth, so that the theme of the relativity of truth is seen to operate again and to come into play effectively. The carefully worked-out details of the dream of the past echo the details *anticipated* by Mick in his decorating dream in *The Caretaker*:

> I remember the night I came home, I kept quiet. First of all I gave Lenny a bath, then Teddy a bath, then Joey a bath. What fun we used to have in the bath, eh, boys?
> . . . . . .
> I made Jessie put her feet up on a pouffe - what happened to that pouffe, I haven't seen it for years - ... and I said to her ... I'm going to buy you a dress in pale corded blue silk, heavily encrusted in pearls, and for casual wear, a pair of pantaloons in lilac flowered taffeta. ... I remem= ber the boys came down, in their pyja= mas ... all their hair shining ... and they knelt down at our feet ... I tell you, it was like Christmas (p. 46). [1]

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1. Bigsby (1977) has said of this use of language, so ob= viously at variance with Max's normal language, that "the disjunction between social class and language is the source of much of the humour in Pinter's work; it is al= so an indication of the inadequate control which his cha= racters maintain over the world which they inhabit" (p. 631).

The nostalgic evocations of both Christmas and a birthday party gain ironic force in Pinter's use of them.

Max is soon goaded again to the point where he loses his temper - the fragile peace shattered as much by his acute awareness of the instability of the peace as by anything else. He falls into a ranting and preposterous reminiscence:

> I worked as a butcher all my life ... To keep my family in luxury. Two fa= milies! My mother was bed-ridden, my brothers were all invalids. I had to earn the money for the leading psychia= trists. I had to read books! I had to study the disease, so that I could cope with an emergency at every stage. A crippled family, three bastard sons, a slutbitch of a wife - don't talk to me about the pain of childbirth - I suffered the pain, I've still got the pangs - when I give a little cough my back collapses - and here I've got a lazy idle bugger of a brother won't even get to work on time
>
> (p. 47),

And the venom of his invective, directed at the hap= less Sam,[1)] increases. The intensity of the

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1. Sam : I can only drive one car. They can't all have me at the same time.
   Max : Anyone could have you at the same time. You'd bend over for half a dollar on Blackfriars Bridge. (Max points his stick at Sam.) He didn't even fight in the war. This man didn't even fight in the bloody war!
   Sam : I did!
   Max : Who did you kill? (p. 48).

diatribe is ludicrously out of proportion to the extent of Sam's "offence", constituting a particularly painful moment of revelation which leaves Max naked and defenceless.

In the now-familiar *volte-face*, Max turns to Teddy, solicitously asking questions about his marriage and extravagently praising Ruth in an obviously newly-developed stratagem. Ruth responds to the new situation by undercutting Max and Teddy, confessing to a past with seemingly lurid associations:

> I was ... different ... when I met Teddy ... first
>
> (p. 50).

Teddy tries desperately but without any great measure of success to counter this threatening defection into the manner of the past by hesitantly listing all the "advantages" they are enjoying in their new life in the New World:

> Teddy : She's a great help to me over there. She's a wonderful wife and mother. She's a very popular woman. She's got lots of friends. It's a great life, at the University ... you know ... it's a very good life. We've got a lovely house ... we've got all ... we've got everything we want. It's a very stimulating environment
>
> (p. 50).

The tension in the room increases perceptibly when Lenny turns to Teddy, and interrogates him about his work:

> Lenny : Eh, Teddy, you haven't told us much about your Doctorship of Philosophy. What to you teach?
> Teddy : Philosophy.
> Lenny : Well, I want to ask you something. Do you detect a certain logical incohe= rence in the central affirmations of Christian theism?
>
> (p. 51).

Teddy rejects this by coolly saying that "that ques= tion doesn't fall within my province" (p. 51). (Somewhat later, when Ruth is coldly negotiating her future with the family, she asks Teddy whether his family has ever read his critical works. He makes the rejection complete then:

> You wouldn't understand my works. You wouldn't have the faintest idea of what they are about. You wouldn't appreciate the points of reference. You're way behind. All of you. There's no point in sending you my works. You'd be lost
>
> [p. 61].

He escapes from the circle, and a new grouping is effected in a sickening parody of the usual pattern of social integration in traditional comedy.)

Lenny for the moment strikes a curiously vulnerable figure when he talks about the need of reverence,[1] linking this question to his first one. The same effect of dislocation that could be observed in *The Caretaker* is suddenly in operation, for Lenny, the man always moving on the periphery of the family group, stands defenceless and bereft.

At this point, Ruth allies herself to Lenny by making him aware of her physical presence. Simultaneously, she rejects her life in America:

> It's all rock. And sand. It stretch=
> es ... so far ... everywhere you look.
> And there's lots of insects there
> (p. 53).

This picture of barrenness and inhospitality is a reflection on Teddy as well as an invitation to Len= ny. Teddy attempts to talk her out of this, tempt= ing her:

> Teddy : It's so clean there ...
> . . . . . .
> The fall semester will be starting soon.

---

1. Lenny : Well, look at it this way. How can the unknown merit reverence? In other words, how can you revere that of which you're ignorant? At the same time it would be ridiculous to propose that what we know merits reverence. What we know merits any one of a number of things, but it stands to reason reverence isn't one of them (p. 52).

. . . . . .

You can help me with my lectures when we get back. I'd love that. I'd be so grateful for it, really. We can bathe till October ... Here there's nowhere to bathe, except the swimming bath down the road. You know what it's like? It's like a urinal. A filthy urinal!

. . . . . .

You liked Venice, didn't you? It was lovely, wasn't it? You had a good week. I mean ... I took you there. I can speak Italian.

Ruth : But if I'd been a nurse in the Italian campaign, I would have been there be= fore

(p. 55).

Upon Lenny's return, the alliance becomes much more explicit. Quigley has observed that Ruth and Lenny evolve "an ironic solution to the problem of domes= tic and extra-domestic roles" (p. 213). The inte= gration of the pimp and the prostitute into a new social unit seems to constitute an unrelievedly black parody on the usual comic solution, so that even within the flexible limits of the contemporary comic vision this play goes out of bounds. Essentially both Ruth and Lenny are involved in a search for self. Teddy's roles of dutiful son/dutiful father/husband/ successful professor do not seem to fuse, so that he cannot cope adequately with any of the situations with which he is confronted. He then chooses flight, going back to America.

Ruth, on the other hand, gains confidence by the minute and in rejecting her unsatisfactory old life turns with gusto to a new one. She uses her sexuality as a means of fulfilment and as a weapon to bludgeon the others into submission. (In the "proviso scene" she bargains coolly and effectively to establish the best possible terms, thus controlling her social milieu to her entire satisfaction. The comparison with Congreve's proviso scene referred to earlier is thus not quite valid from another point of view as well, for, against the background of balance and harmony achieved at the end of *The Way of the World*, in this play the power is all concentrated in Ruth. The element of the game is still there, for a deadly serious social game has just been completed according to the rules, but darkness shrouds it. In the final grouping, after Lenny has rejected Teddy, Lenny remains personally untouched, while Max and Joey grovel pathetically for favours.)

The play abruptly turns darker when Joey returns downstairs after a prolonged episode with Ruth in the bedroom. When it emerges that he "didn't go the whole hog" (p. 66) Lenny is outraged because Ruth is evidently a "tease". In a ghastly show of brotherly concern Lenny consoles Joey and the two embark on a highly suspect story of a sexual conquest, indulged in by the "solicitous" Lenny to salve Joey's wounded feelings. It is at this point when it suddenly seems a good idea to "keep" Ruth and even to make her pay her way. Lenny suggests:

> We'll put her on the game. That's a stroke of genius, that's a marvellous idea. You mean she can earn the money herself - on her back?
> (p. 72),

and the fantasies get wilder and ever more preposte= rous: Max finally even suggests that once Ruth is settled in her flat, called something "reserved" ("like Cynthia ... or Gillian"), Teddy might even supply clients from among visiting Americans:

> Lenny : No, what I mean, Teddy, you must know lots of professors, heads of depart= ments, men like that. They pop over here for a week at the Savoy, they need somewhere they can go to have a nice quiet poke. And of course you'd be in a position to give them inside information.
> Max : Sure you can give them proper data. You know, the kind of thing she's wil= ling to do. ... I mean if you don't know, who does?
> (Pause.)
> I bet you before two months we'd have a waiting list.
> Lenny : You could be our representative in the States.
> Max : Of course. We're talking in interna= tional terms. By the time we've finished Pan American'll give us a discount.
> (Pause.)
> (p. 74).

As ever in Pinter, however, the wilder the fancy the more improbable its attainment, and the more disturb= ing the implications. Curiously, then, when Teddy puts the proposition to Ruth, he says that

We can manage very easily at home ...
until you come back

(p. 75).

This suggests that the new life for Ruth will not be a solution but "an option to be tried" (Quigley, 1975, p. 223). The fluid and vacillating quality of the ending is thus underlined. Quigley has suggested that there is no reconciliation but only a suggestion that new conflicts now face those involved in the new family situation. This is illustrated in the illu= minating and searingly painful ending when Max dis= integrates upon realizing that she is not going to be flexible and malleable.[1] The ending is very reminiscent of *The Caretaker*, with the aged Max grovelling in the extremity of his need. To his sensibility, there must be an unbearably strong paral= lel between Ruth (wife/whore/mother) and his own dead wife Jessie. It is significant that right at the end, when he sees the imminent destruction of another marriage Sam forces himself to tell his ghastly, long-kept secret:

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1. Max : You understand what I mean? Listen, I've got a fun= ny idea she'll do the dirty on us, you want to bet? She'll use us, she'll make use of us, I can tell you! I can smell it! You want to bet?
(Pause.)
She won't be adaptable!
(He falls to his knees, whimpers, begins to moan and sob. He stops sobbing, crawls past Sam's body round her chair, to the other side of her.)
I'm not an old man

(pp. 81-82).

> Sam (in one breath): MacGregor had Jessie in the back of my cab as I drove them along.
> (He croaks and collapses. He lies still)
>
> (p. 78).

When they discover that he is not even dead, their contempt for him increases. Max says that Sam "has a diseased imagination" (p. 79), and Teddy callously dismisses the episode, merely regretting that Sam cannot now drive him to the airport. At this moment all possibility of a predisposition towards laughter disappears. It might be possible, at one level, to see a certain balance asserting itself anew in Max's disintegration at the end of the party, but the bleakness seems very much unrelieved. All the cha= racters have been stripped to an essence in which the animality of human nature is stressed to the detri= ment of all other qualities. Sam, the only voice for sanity, the pathetic and faithful admirer-from-afar of the unfaithful Jessie (Pinter here makes a mockery of both the dream and the object of the dream) is destroyed, leaving the others in control - although the control is sickeningly precarious, as emerges from Max's final actions.

A.P. Hinchliffe (1968, p. 1745) quotes "a woman's response" to imputations about the obscene implica= tions of the play:

> To a woman the play is a detached and witty parable. It meticulously peels off the layers of hypocrisy, concealing the prevail= ing attitudes to woman's morality. It says that in the context of this increasingly criminal society a woman can be a wife, mother and, if she wishes, whore. And that men will like her that way. This may be a nightmare to some men but many women must have felt a sense of relief to discover a modern classic relevant and true to life as a woman knows it to be.

This might be a valid view at one level, but the dark undertones of the play are too unmistakeable to allow one to regard it as merely an analysis of men's atti= tudes. The total absence of the redeeming qualities of love and compassion, to my mind, colours the tone too darkly. The play then moves in and out of the comic vision disconcertingly. Stylistically it re= mains in the shape of the comedy of manners: thema= tically it plunges too deeply into darkness.

4.5 *Old Times*

This play is a continuation on one level of a newly insistent pre-occupation that Pinter had with the past and the forces of memory. It follows on *Landscape* and *Silence* (as well as on the film-script of *The Go-Between*[1]) and explores, superficially speaking, the reminiscences of three people regarding their past in postwar London. The tension of the play hinges on the conflicting nature of the memories of the three people involved - there is an intense underlying rivalry as the three people jockey for positions and as they fiercely compete for emotional possession of one or the other companion. Martineau (1973) has attributed the strength of the play to a recognition of the many levels of tension in the dialogue, "the close alliance between humour and personal exposure; talk of the past as possible action in the present; the intensity of the possessive desire" (p. 295).

Hirst (1979) has referred to the play as Pinter's "most sustained example of the mannered comedy, though the themes of sexual conquest and friendship are interrelated in a vitally original way ... as the play develops, these interrelated allusions become

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1. In all these works memory functions as a paralysing force. There is also disconcerting evidence that memories of the same events are as subject to the contingent and relative nature of truth as anything in the world.

more subtle in their application so as to constitute a refinement of verbal gamesmanship reflective of complex emotional issues" (p. 77). Similarly, Martineau has referred to the "memory game" played by the participants, a game that ultimately becomes a complex exploration of reality and the nature of truth.

The main themes to be explored in the play are those familiar both to Pinter's work and to the wider context of contemporary drama. The element of the game is particularly strong: Esslin (1973) has referred to the game in the sense of an ever-shifting relationship (p. 189). This element leads to the expression of the theme of the relativity and contingent nature of truth (in which the manipulation of memory is a powerful comic device) and the prevalent theme in contemporary comedy of the ambivalence and ambiguity of sexual roles and identity. To this one may add a refinement of the idea of violence, for the play traces, under the facade of being "remarkably funny" (Martineau, p. 288) a process of disintegration which prompts one to discover the "relationship between laughter and destruction" (p. 288). It is a "still" violence that is generated in part also by the lack of any kind of total response - there is a severe restraint which is broken only at the end by Deeley's quiet sobbing (which assumes a horrifying impact). Pinter also explores in ingenious fashion the themes of nostalgia and friendship.

The characters in this play continue the trend discernible in Pinter's movement away from an absorption with human derelicts in the early plays towards a definite pre-occupation with more sophisticated and literate characters. Deeley seems to be involved in film-making and Anna and Kate (at least in their youthful days together in London) reveal definite artistic and cultural pretensions. They constitute a homogeneous group: they are all in their early forties and they speak in the same idiom, although within this framework language is still used (as will be pointed out in the analysis) as both a battering-ram and a powerful alienating device.

The play has a curiously static quality. The action consists mainly of a duel of wits which represents a "battle for the affections of a woman" (Esslin, 1973, p. 183). Esslin takes this idea even further by maintaining that Kate represents "an ideal of purity" (p. 188), so that one could see in their striving to possess her the eternal unsuccessful struggle of the comic hero to attain perfection. The almost paralytically unresolved state of affairs at the end of the play supports this view.

Alexander (1974) interprets this static quality in an interesting fashion. He talks of the structure of the play, "in which each act seems eternally repeated until the action ends, before the curtain comes down, in what seems like a still from a film" (p. 16). This stillness is echoed by most other

contemporary comic characters - the typical catatonic stance at the end of the play is described by Alexander in the following terms: "The quiet decrepitude of their marriage seems close to a state of death. The arrival of Anna has taken them back to the point where the man sat sobbing in the room" (p. 17).

Alexander makes a further profoundly significant observation. The title, to his mind, reflects the only possible time-scheme within which they can function - as in most plays which will fall within the contemporary vision of comedy there is an awareness of being a captive of the *past*, helplessly compromised within the *present* by the débris of the past.[1] In this context, then, Alexander observes that "an art which eliminates the future is not likely to allay the anxieties of its audience" (p. 17), and in this lack of alleviation resides the peculiar wrenching quality to be found in contemporary comedy. Alexander echoes Walter Kerr's ideas when he says of these characters that "cabinned, cribbed, and conditioned by the past, they are never totally crushed by it. Their belief, despite all the evidence, that they can still win at the odds shows a *heroic folly*[2] which may be indistinguishable from fortitude" (p. 17).

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1. The traditional ending of comedy, with the reconciliation and the redemption symbolically enacted in the marriage, involved a time-scheme of *present* and *future*.

2. My italics.

Act I

The play opens with three figures barely discernible in dim light. Deeley and Kate are gradually lit up with Anna remaining in dimness. The quiet, static quality of the opening section is very nearly paral= leled in the closing scene - with the characters still (again) slumped and obviously out of contact with each other.

In desultory fashion Kate and Deeley discuss Anna, Kate's erstwhile friend. The discussion shows a pre-occupation with the idea of friendship which will be exploited more fully in *No Man's Land* and especial= ly in *Betrayal*. It is a concern with the establish= ment of worthwhile bonds and relationships and the integrity of these is looked at carefully. In a lightly humorous vein Kate reminisces about Anna stealing her underwear, but she also reveals that she is not looking forward particularly to meeting Anna again. Deeley's insistence on seeing Anna, be= cause it will reveal things about Kate also, prompts Kate to deny having any real memories - and it prompts her into using language in the manner Quigley has described as actively negotiating a specific rela= tionship. Kate senses Deeley's interest in her and starts an evasive action. This acts as a fore-runner of the elaborate skirmishes that will develop when Anna and Deeley compete for Kate's attentions and

affections.[1] Kate's evasive techniques are based on a deliberate vagueness and a maddening use of platitudes:

Kate : Of course she's married.
Deeley : How do you know?
Kate : Everyone's married.
Deeley : Then why isn't she bringing her husband?
Kate : Isn't she?
(p. 13).

Deeley perceives this as a deliberate strategem and brings his anxieties out into the open in an ambiguous query:

Deeley : You met then?
(Pause.)
(Abruptly.) You lived together?
Kate : Mmmnn?
Deeley : You lived together?
Kate : Of course.
Deeley : I didn't know that.
Kate : Didn't you?
Deeley : You never told me that. I thought you just knew each other.
Kate : We did.
Deeley : But in fact you lived with each other.
Kate : Of course we did. How else would she steal my underwear from me? In the street?
(p. 17).

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1. The fact that Anna competes with Deeley for possession of Kate has given rise to elaborate speculations about the possibly lesbian relationship between Kate and Anna. This should be treated with great circumspection (cf. Gray on *Butley*). To my mind it would be accurate to say that this is an instance of contemporary playwrights' concern with the ambiguity of sexual roles as a corollary of the quest for identity.

This effectively silences Deeley, and in its scornful humour it reveals a measure of Kate's aggression towards Deeley. He perceives this, hesitantly revealing even more about his fears and uncertainties:

> I knew you had shared with someone at one time ...
> (Pause.)
> But I didn't know it was her
> (p. 17).

In a theatrically effective fashion, Anna effortlessly enters the conversation at this point, turning and speaking and giving the impression that quite some time has passed. The effect of dislocation is very striking, because it leaves one with a vivid impression of Deeley's fear and at the same time reveals Anna in the midst of a reminiscence which establishes a very persuasive claim on Kate:

> Queuing all night, in the rain, do you remember? my goodness, the Albert Hall, Covent Garden, what did we eat? to look back, half the night, to do the things we loved, we were young then, of course, but what stamina, and to work in the morning, and to a concert, or the opera, or the ballet, that night, you haven't forgotten? ... and the cafés we found, almost private ones, weren't they, where artists and writers and sometimes actors collected, and others with dancers, we sat hardly breathing, so as not to be seen, so as not to disturb ...
> (p. 17).

Having established, through the rose-coloured glas= ses of selective nostalgia, her erstwhile hold on Kate, Anna delicately underscores the contrast with the present by condescendingly referring to their house and surroundings:

> How wise you were to choose this part of the world, and how sensible and courageous of you both to stay perman= ently in *such a silence*
> (p. 19).

The deliberate contrast of *such a silence* with the breathless and dynamic life described in Anna's long speech is aimed at undercutting Deeley. It is eminently successful, for Deeley is now on the defensive:

> My work takes me away quite often, of course. But Kate stays here
> (p. 19).

Deeley moves in for a counter-attack. When Anna pretentiously uses the word *lest* as part of the pro= cess of condescension, Deeley makes fun of it. Bat= tle has been joined, and even though Kate tries re= peatedly to enter the conversation, they are practi= cally oblivious to her. Anna talks of Kate but uses the wrong word by mistake:

Anna : You have a wonderful casserole.[1]
Deeley : What?
Anna : I mean wife. So sorry. A wonderful wife.
Deeley : Ah.
Anna : I was referring to the casserole. I was referring to your wife's cooking (p. 20-21).

As soon as Anna has established her admiration for Kate's cooking and reassured Deeley, she disparages it implicitly by stressing the altogether more refined and cultural pursuits she and Kate indulged in years ago:

> We weren't terribly elaborate in cook= ing, didn't have the time, but every so often dished up an incredibly enormous stew, guzzled the lot, and then more often than not sat up half the night reading Yeats (p. 22).

Deeley and Anna enter into an elaborate dissection of Kate's qualities, claiming for themselves certain of the traits. Kate attempts futilely to intrude on the conversation - they disregard her utterly, talking about her as if she weren't there, and work= ing up to a climax in the battle for possession. At this stage Kate is the helpless onlooker while they jockey for possession. Gradually, however,

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1. At the beginning of the play the casserole assumes a dis= proportionate importance because it represents the only objective and fixed thing Deeley and Kate can talk about.

she is going to assume command, subjugating them be=
cause of their very need of her, holding them in
thrall at the end.

Deeley picks up another affected word used by Anna:

> Anna : ... she was quite unaware of my gaze.
> Deeley : Gaze?
> Anna : What?
> Deeley : The word gaze. Don't hear it often.
> Anna : Yes, quite unaware of it. She was totally absorbed
> (p. 26).

As was the case when she used *lest* with conscious affectation, Deeley's pouncing on it disconcerts her, but she does not flinch. They start a new round al= most immediately: both sing snatches from popular songs which deal with love, possession and memory.[1] Anna first reflects on the fact that she and Kate used to play this game. Not to be outdone, Deeley reiterates that the game belongs to him and Kate as well. Significantly, Deeley comes out on top in this contest. He caps Anna's quotation (p. 28) by interposing the last line, and he follows up Anna's last nostalgic and sad line[2] by asserting that "they

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1. For a detailed outline of the song titles, cf. Dukore (1976), pp. 52-53.

2. Anna's lines mostly have a ring of farewell to them: "The park at evening when the bell has sounded" and "The waiters whistling as the last bar closes" (p. 28).

don't make them like that anymore" (p. 29). Deeley follows up his tactical advantage immediately by launching into a humorously digressive monologue about his first meeting with Kate, claiming exclusivity in his getting to know her.

Martineau (1973) concentrates on a discussion of this speech. He remarks of the play that "at the outset, it is above all remarkably funny" (p. 288), and finds that in dealing with the strikingly dramatic quality of the play one has to consider the "relationship between laughter and destruction" (p. 288). This is entirely apposite in the present context, for Deeley and Anna are locked in an almost mortal combat but Deeley indulges in a rambling speech full of digressive embellishment (which is highly amusing) while maintaining his deadly serious interest in the battle.

He talks of walking in a vaguely familiar neighbourhood one afternoon. He suddenly recalled, while walking, that he had been given his first and only tricycle there. From this he incongruously jumps to a memory of a fleapit cinema and two sleazy usherettes, one stroking her own breasts to the manifest disgust of the other. The film was *Odd Man Out*, a very apposite title to be talking about. Kate, the only other person in the cinema, was sitting at the dead centre - Deeley was "off centre" and has "remained so". He made a real pickup, "a true-blue pickup", and came to know Kate, so that at "a slightly later stage our naked bodies met" (p. 30). Anna

counters this obvious victory viciously by antici=
pating Deeley's crying at the end: she talks of coming back one night to find a man crumpled in the armchair, sobbing, while Kate sat apart, coolly drinking coffee.

At this stage several important structural details have to be considered. In this long speech Deeley claims to have met Kate while seeing this film. A little later (p. 38) Anna mentions that she and Kate had gone to see this film once (together), so that doubt is cast suddenly and devastatingly on Deeley's story and his triumph is nullified. Similarly, within this speech, he mentions being off-centre - having remained so, with Kate at the dead centre of his existence. This description becomes more and more apposite as the play progresses, for Kate in= creasingly assumes a quietly dominant role, easily subjugating the other two. In the space between Deeley's account (p. 30) and Anna's counter-claim (p. 38) the theme of the relativity of truth is strongly underlined, for there seems to be no fixed point of reference to test whether either reminis= cence is correct or valid. Ironically at this stage Deeley imputes aimlessness and vacillation to Kate, talking of his doubts about marrying her, a girl "who lacked any sense of fixedness, any sense of decisive= ness, but was compliant only to the shifting winds" (p. 35).

Kate implicitly rejects Anna when she speaks of their early life together and says that "I was interested once in the arts, but I can't remember now which ones they were" (p. 37). At the same time this is a re=jection of Deeley, because Anna has just said with great condescension that "when I found out the kind of man you were I was doubly delighted because I knew Katey had always been interested in the arts" (p. 35). Anna is launched on a feverish reminiscence of visits to the Tate - her speech culminating in the claim that they had seen *Odd Man Out* together. This claim is met by silence - Deeley deliberately shifts to another battleground by calmly averring:

> Yes, I do quite a bit of travelling in my job
>
> (p. 38),

as if Anna had asked a question about it. Anna is not put out. She sees this instead as a chance to accuse him of leaving his wife alone too much. Dee=ley counters this by asking about her husband being left alone were she to come and live with Kate to "comfort" her.

The talk becomes desultory and deals with domestic details. Kate now enters the conversation, supplant=ing Deeley who tries loudly to assert himself, suc=ceeding in the process in revealing much about him=self and leaving him vulnerable to the women's con=temptuous indifference. He talks of his work ("I had a great crew in Sicily ... We took a pretty

austere look at the women in black. The little old women in black", p. 42). When he is resolutely ig= nored, he becomes abusive ("I have been associated with substantial numbers of articulate and sensitive people, mainly prostitutes of all kinds", p. 42). Even this draws no response from Kate, so that Anna is greatly encouraged and in a reversion to old times proposes to Kate:

> Don't let's go out tonight, don't let's go anywhere tonight, let's stay in. I'll cook something, you can wash your hair, you can relax, we'll put on some records
>
> (p. 43).

Deeley is now resolutely excluded and even when he talks of the casserole in a pathetic effort at invit= ing response from Kate, she remains oblivious. Anna offers to run her bath, but Kate declines and as the act ends,

> (Deeley stands looking at Anna.
> Anna turns her head towards him.
> They look at each other.)

At this stage they are still locked in mortal combat, but the circle has only been drawn halfway. When it is completed Kate will stand at the centre, the other two rejected, off-centre and locked in the catatoni= cally frozen position of all the losers in contempo= rary comedy.

Act II

In this act the sparring continues. The tension builds up as both wait for Kate to come out of the bath. Anna and Deeley are now both at the point where personal revelation, total exposure of every weakness, has become a very real and perilous pos= sibility. Martineau has spoken of the inner drama= tic strength of the play as residing in "the close alliance between humour and personal exposure; talk of the *past* as possible action in the *present*; the intensity of the possessive desire" (p. 295).

Both Anna and Deeley seek to assert themselves and to confirm their identities through possessing Kate. Kate, however, denies both the comfort of the past and asserts a totally different identity in the pre= sent which is strong and destructive: both are beaten into submission cruelly and humiliatingly.

When the act starts, Deeley attempts to beat Anna in= to submission by a contemptuous reminiscence in which he claims to have *gazed* at her in the Wayfarers Tavern (many years ago) and that "you found my gaze perfectly acceptable" (p. 51). Deeley seeks to reduce Anna to the status of a casual object for lechery and he attempts to include Kate:

> Then a friend of yours came in, a girl, a girl friend. She sat on the sofa with you, you both chatted and chuckled, sitting together, and I settled lower to *gaze* at you both, at both your thighs ...
>
> (p. 51).

Anna escapes this attack by talking about Kate having her bath. Deeley's response is immediate:

> Well, you know what she's like when she gets in the bath
>
> (p. 53),

and he goes on tauntingly, in a certainty of possession, to describe, in intimate detail, what she does before emerging "as clean as a new pin" (p. 53). Nothing daunted, Anna chimes in, revealing her past knowledge of intimate details and forcing Deeley to acknowledge the possibility of Anna and Kate's relationship having been a lesbian one. This threat is a new and unacceptable one, and Deeley counters by reminding Anna of her age and the deterioration of her looks:

> You must be about forty, I should think, by now.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> If I walked into the Wayfarers Tavern now, and saw you sitting in the corner, I wouldn't recognize you
>
> (p. 57).

Thus brutally he reminds Anna of the fact of his present possession of Kate as well as the unlikeli= hood of her wanting Anna again after so long.

When Kate appears in a bathrobe, the contest re-opens in earnest. A new series of song lines is sung, this time more obviously in the shape of entreaties aimed at Kate:

Anna : The way your smile just beams ...
. . . . . .
The way you haunt my dreams ...
Deeley : The way we danced till three ...
. . . . . .
No, no, they can't take that away from me ...
(p. 58).

Kate expresses her neutrality first of all (Ganz has referred to her as being "psychotically withdrawn"), and also sounds a warning note by referring to the softness, the absence of edges and hardness in the world around her.[1] Anna tempts her ("You can have

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1. Kate: I feel fresh. The water's very soft here. Much softer than London. I always find the water very hard in London. That's one reason I like living in the country. Everything's softer. The water, the light, the shapes, the sounds. There aren't such edges here. ... I don't care for harsh lines. I deplore that kind of urgency ... the only nice thing about a city is that when it rains it blurs everything, and it blurs the light from the cars, doesn't it, and blurs your eyes, and you have rain on your lashes. That's the only nice thing about a big city (p. 59).

a nice room and nice gas fire ...") but Kate merely asks absently whether it is raining (p. 59). Anna follows up what she obscurely perceives to be an advantage by recalling old days,[1] while Deeley solicitously inquires:

> Have you dried yourself properly, Kate?
>
> (p. 60).

He follows this up with a reference to her smile:

> That's the same smile she smiled when I was walking down the street with her, after *Odd Man Out* ...
>
> (p. 61).

Kate rebuffs both him and Anna - her smile is differ= ent and Anna's proffered coffee is cold.

Suddenly, however, as if to punish Deeley for his insistent reference to her smile, she turns to Anna and deliberately refers to old friends from the past. Her use of the present tense in what is a reminis= cence is disturbing, because now suddenly the life shared between Anna and Kate assumes a much stronger reality. Kate refers to one particular friend (Christy) in terms of affectionate endearment, in what may seem to be a calculated slighting of

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1. Anna : I could do the hem on your black dress. I could finish it and you could try it on (p. 60).

Deeley's qualities:

> He's so gentle, isn't he? And his humour. Hasn't he got a lovely sense of humour? And I think he's ... so sensitive. Why don't you ask him around?
>
> (p. 63).

Deeley aggressively re-enters the conversation and Anna challenges him anew as they reflect on Kate's alleged resemblance to the Brontës. Deeley delibe= rately misunderstands at one point and asks in astonishment:

> Was she a parson's daughter?,

but Anna blandly sidesteps with

> ... If I thought Brontë I did not think she was Brontë in passion but only in secrecy, in being so stub= bornly private
>
> (p. 64).

She punishes Deeley anew by recalling Kate's first blush, which had been the result of Anna's borrowing Kate's underwear. Once more the disturbing over= tones of lesbianism drive Deeley to real concern - a concern which expresses itself in a very articulate disgust. He develops dangerously in the direction of an outburst in the course of the conversation:

Anna : ... And so she listened and I watched her listening.
Deeley : Sounds a perfect marriage.
Anna : We were great friends.
(Pause.)
Deeley : You say she was Brontë in secrecy but not in passion. What was she in passion?
Anna : I feel that is your province.

Anna's belated acknowledgement goads Deeley into a fury:

> You feel it's my province? Well, you're damn right. It is my pro= vince. I'm glad someone is showing a bit of taste at last. Of course it's my bloody province. I'm her husband.
> (Pause.)
> I mean I'd like to ask a question. Am I alone in beginning to find all this distasteful?

He launches into an impassioned attack, accusing Anna of neglecting her husband in her quest for Kate:

> What worries me is the thought of your husband rambling about alone in his enormous villa living hand to mouth on a few hardboiled eggs and unable to speak a damn word of English (p. 67).

Anna responds to the patently ridiculous picture that Deeley evokes by meticulously disposing of the least of the difficulties:

I interpret, when necessary
(p. 67).

When Deeley waxes more and more eloquent, evoking haunting glimpses of the jetset world,[1] Kate interposes cruelly and cuts to the core of his problem by warning him curtly:

If you don't like it go.

She has intuitively divined his dissatisfactions and his uncertainties. Upon his ironically asking her where to go, she starts on a somewhat ludicrous exchange:

Kate : To China.[2] Or Sicily.[3]
Deeley : I haven't got a speedboat. I haven't got a white dinner jacket.
Kate : China then.
Deeley : You know what they'd do to me in China if they found me in a white dinner jacket. They'd bloodywell kill me. You know what they're like over there
(p. 68).

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1. "He's there alone, lurching up and down the terrace, waiting for a speedboat, waiting for a speedboat to spill out beautiful people, at least. Beautiful Mediterranean people. Waiting for all that, a kind of elegance we know nothing about, a slim-bellied Cote d'Azur thing we know absolutely nothing about"(p. 67).
2. China had figured largely in the conversation in the Wayfarers' Tavern where Deeley claimed to have met Anna.
3. Sicily: where Anna lives.

Into the pause occasioned by this totally incongruous response, Anna extends a smooth social invitation:

> You are welcome to come to Sicily at any time, both of you, and be my guests
>
> (p. 68).

This launches one of the most potentially disturbing and destructive conversations in the play. Deeley tells Kate about meeting Anna and buying her a drink. In a grotesque parody of Anna's affected reminiscence of arty activities, visiting cafés frequented by artists and dancers,[1] Deeley talks of taking her to a party (after her having "amiably allowed me a gander. Trueblue generosity. Admirable in a woman", p. 69). This party was "given by philosophers. Not a bad bunch. Edgware Road gang. Nice lot" (p. 69). When Deeley seeks to include Kate condescendingly in his subjugation of Anna: "She thought she was you, said little, so little. Maybe she was you, having coffee with me, saying little, so little" (p. 69), Kate retaliates viciously but subtly:

> Kate : What do you think attracted her to you?
> Deeley : I don't know. What?
> Kate : She found your face very *sensitive*,[2] vulnerable.

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1. "... we sat hardly breathing with our coffee, heads bent, so as not to be seen ..." (p. 18).

2. Cf. reference to Christy, p. 384, above.

. . . . . .
She fell in love with you.
. . . . . .
You were so unlike the others. We
knew men who were brutal, crass
(pp. 70-71).

The confusion that descends upon Deeley is one manifestation of the way in which increasingly in contemporary drama the present is seen as being hopelessly compromised by the past. Kate's confident assumption and self-centred manipulation of Deeley and Anna's reminiscences destroy them as Kate is elevated and finally reigns supreme. While Deeley is still wondering about what has been meted out to him, Kate launches a frontal attack on Anna:

I remember you lying dead ...
(p. 71).

She describes in detail a nightmare? reminiscence? dream? in which Anna's corpse lay on a bed (in immaculate sheets) and where Kate gloated over her, finally having a bath to cleanse herself.

Kate continues with her hypnotic tale, recalling her joy at finding Anna's body gone at last and replaced by a man's body, live and passionate. However, Deeley's reprieve is transitory, for instead of being "sexually forthcoming" (p. 73), Kate "recalls" plastering his face with dirt from the window-box. Deeley apparently "suggested a wedding" and "a change of environment" (p. 73). With a grotesquely wounding

indifference, Kate delivers her last broadside:

> Neither mattered. ... He asked me once, at about that time, who had slept in that bed before him. I told him no one. No one at all (p. 73).

Kate thus effectively resigns. After this, no further word is said. The play drags on to its dreamlike, static ending. Deeley starts sobbing. Anna quietly withdraws. Deeley wanders in a daze: towards Anna's divan, to the door, towards Kate's divan. "He sits on her divan, lies across her lap" (p. 74). At last he has to get up and he walks to the armchair where he sits slumped. The circle has been completed, except that in two characters, Deeley and Anna, destruction is a *fait accompli*. Pinter brilliantly highlights the denouement through a vividly effective theatrical device:

> (He sits, *slumped.*
> *Silence.*
> Lights up *full sharply.* Very bright.
> Deeley in armchair.
> Anna *lying* on divan.
> Kate *sitting* on divan.)[1]

Martineau has commented perceptively on this ending, for he says that Kate's speech "first deprives them of language and then of movement, and Pinter's final stroke of mastery is to bring the slowly fading

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1. My italics.

lights to a sudden blaze of intensity, paralysing all three in an unbearable white glare" (1973, p. 296).

Ganz concludes his discussion of the play by observing that "Pinter shares with Ibsen a kind of grim humour, but more significantly, an essentially ambiguous view of the human condition. Both have given us figures possessed by a desire for self-aggrandizement, dominance, fulfilment, yet forever held back in a state of psychic paralysis" (1973, p. 178).

The *coup de theatre* at the end of the play highlights this paralytic state, and once more vividly reveals the over-acceptance so prevalent in contemporary comedy.

4.6 *No Man's Land*

Gale (1977) has said of this play that it is "marvellously wrought, with its intricate structure and sustained humour, and is an effective mode of expression for Pinter's concerns" (p. 221).

The concerns that Pinter deals with in this play are those that have become familiar: the quest for identity, the need (increasingly noted in his work) for friendship, for interpersonal contact on an emotionally imaginative level, the increasingly insistent stress on the nature of time, on the influence that the past has on the present, and as a concomitant to this the contingent and relative nature of a truth hopelessly inhibited and compromised by recollection, and a hopeless nostalgia for a settled past.

There are four characters in the play: Hirst and Spooner, the two old men, anachronisms within the age, and Briggs and Foster, two younger men whose presence in the affluent Hirst's house would seem to be ambiguous to say the least.

Hirst (1979) has implicitly commented on what Gale has called the "pattern of need" in these later plays. He regards *No Man's Land* as being "principally concerned with friendship" (p. 78). Pinter traces the relationship between the two men very imaginatively and he creates the familiar effect of dislocation when it would seem that more than one

construction might be placed on any account of the past given by the two men.

At first it would appear that they have just met: in fact, it is suggested that the wealthy Hirst picked up the vagrant Spooner on Hampstead Heath and brought him home as an act of misguided charity. Once one gets well into the play, however, there are distinct reminiscences which indicate that they used to know each other intimately, that they were in fact at one time involved in an intricate game of *ménage à trois* with varying partners. In this way Pinter succeeds in creating the idea that truth is a contingent and relative thing and that the present is compromised by the past to the extent that no real progression is possible.

Ultimately, this awareness will lead, at the end of the play, to the accustomed stance of catatonic stillness that all characters exhibit at the end.

The play opens in "a large room in a house in North West London", which exudes an air of casual luxury and elegance. The outside world is excluded by the "heavy curtains across the window".

In the opening scene the play is strongly reminiscent of *The Caretaker*. One man leads another into his domain, his sanctuary, and offers him hospitality, only to have his position as host insidiously usurp= ed. The scene has shifted, however, to the socially

more pretentious part of London where Hirst lives.[1] Hirst is "precisely dressed", whereas Spooner is obviously down on his luck, dressed "in a very old and shabby suit, dark faded shirt, creased spotted tie" (p. 15).

Pinter's sustaining comic device in the first part of this act is his creation of the way in which there is an inversion, kept up carefully, of what could be tacitly assumed to exist between the two men. Spooner, contrary to expectation, uses the language and expressions associated with the social conversational style of the upper classes;[2] Spooner carefully *sips* his drink, whereas Hirst tosses down his vodka *in one gulp* (p. 15). This contrast leads one to wonder whether Spoóner's present squalor might not indeed be a comment on man's situation - stripped and ludicrous, clinging to the shreds of civilization.

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1. It is to be noted that London is consistently the setting of these plays. Even in *Old Times*, where the setting is the country, London is obtrusively present through the recollections of the various characters.

2. Spooner : As it is, yes, please, absolutely as it is.
. . . . . .
Thank you, How very kind of you. How very kind.
. . . . . .
Terribly kind of you. Your good health
(pp. 15-16).

Spooner at once launches into an articulate but incongruous monologue, revealing himself and his essential situation in reminiscences very similar to (if more articulate) than those of Davies in *The Caretaker*.

Spooner first effusively thanks Hirst for inviting him in:

> May I say how very kind it was of you to ask me in? In fact, you are kindness itself, probably always are kindness itself, *now and in England and in Hampstead and for all eternity* (p. 17).

The garbled allusion to Eliot's *Four Quartets* in the italicized section is in line with the use of literary allusion in the works of Pinter's contemporaries. It is also a powerful dramatic device in Pinter's portrayal of the influence of past over present. In Gray's *Butley*, Butley talks of shoring up his ruins with the fragments gleaned from the past, and a sturdy (literary) tradition. In the constant allusion to great English authors (in the course of this play, at least to Shakespeare, Marlowe and Eliot) there is a strong supportive structure for the theme of nostalgia for the past, insistently present in the work of dramatists from Osborne onwards. Spooner implicitly acknowledges awareness of being suspended on the edge of the abyss when he says that "all we have left is the English language. Can it be salvaged? That is my question" (p. 18).

His awareness that the quicksands of existence can only be traversed by clinging to the language is also a powerful integrating theme in contemporary comedy (cf. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*: "Words. Words. They're all we have to go on"). The fact that this nostalgia that is so intrusively part of these plays carries more than a twinge of irony is a strong indication of the fact that the traditional culture has failed these characters, and that they feel that loss as part of the general forlornness discernible in the contemporary scene in drama.

Spooner's self-revelation is simultaneously funny and disturbing. He comments that "my only security, you see, my true comfort and solace, rests in the confirmation that I elicit from people of all kinds a common and constant level of indifference. It assures me that I am as I think myself to be, that I am fixed, concrete. To show interest in me or, good gracious, anything tending towards a positive liking of me, would cause in me a condition of the acutest alarm" (p. 17).

This revelation of his essential aloneness, as linked to the paradoxical security sought in a deliberate yet irksome alienation would seem to typify the condition of man as Pinter perceives it. He adds, a little later, a frightening dimension to it, underlining the fact that he sees life essentially as a stretch of quicksands to be traversed and negotiated precariously:

Spooner : I have never been loved. From this I derive my strength. Have you? Ever? Been loved?
Hirst : Oh, I don't suppose so.
Spooner : I looked up once into my mother's face. What I saw there was nothing else than pure malevolence. I was fortunate to escape with my life (p. 26).[1]

Spooner goes on to disparage the hold of the past, with a sideways swipe at the psychologists.[2] He claims that the "present will not be distorted. I am a poet. I am interested in where I am eternally present and active" (p. 20). The elusive and illusory dream world sought by the comic hero seems here to be the *present and active*: two mutually ex= clusive entities as seen within the contemporary framework.

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1. Upon Spooner's nudging Hirst to provide a reason for this malevolence, the ensuing unsettling conversation takes place:
Hirst : You'd pissed yourself.
Spooner : Quite right. How old do you think I was at the time?
Hirst : Twenty-eight.
Spooner : Quite right. However, I left home soon after (pp. 26-27).
The implicit barb aimed at psycho-analysis and its pre= mises ties in with the more outrageous satire in Orton's *What the Butler Saw*.

2. "I leave experience to psychological interpreters, the wetdream world. I myself can do any graph of experience you wish, to suit your taste or mine. Child's play" (p. 20). This is a powerful comment on the theme of the con= tingency and relativity of truth as revealed in reminis= cence or recollection.

When Spooner comments to Hirst that "there are two mugs on that shelf", Hirst blandly replies that "the second is for you" (p. 21). In doing this, the playwright succeeds in several things at once. Spooner becomes at once an expected guest, he becomes somebody known by Hirst, and in the spirit of earlier Pinter plays he might even be a menacing, though expected, intruder. Hirst's acknowledgement also suddenly has the effect of a change-over, for now suddenly Hirst becomes increasingly loquacious. When he makes an explicit enquiry, asking Spooner:

> Tell me ... do you often hang about Jack Straw's Castle?
> . . . . . .
> Do you find it as beguiling a public house now ...
> (p. 23),

he launches Spooner on a patently ridiculous, preposterously detailed reminiscence of an encounter with a Hungarian émigré in a pub (Jack Straw's Castle).[1] Spooner's imaginative and garrulous rendering is cut

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1. Gale (1977) speaks of this speech as reading "like a B-movie plot told in S.J. Perelman style and [containing] the same kind of ridiculous material as related by Pinter's previous storytellers - Davies, Mick, Lenny et al" (p. 204). In previous plays these stories often contained accounts of extravagant and gratuitous violence, but since *Old Times* most of them seem to be tempered by an exhausted awareness of pathos. The delusions of grandeur held by the narrators often throw increasing doubt on the recollections, strengthening the theme of the contingent nature of truth.

short by Hirst's insistence on knowing irrelevant detail. This dries up Spooner's account: in Quigley's terms of the negotiation of relationships this would seem very feasible and dramatically effective.

This implicit snub leads directly to Spooner's account of his mother and her hatred of him. He is wholly on the defensive now, and is forced into another reminiscence, another recollection strongly tinged with the ironic nostalgia so prevalent in contemporary drama:

> But with windows open to the garden, my wife pouring long glasses of squash, with ice, on a summer evening, young voices occasionally lifted in unaccompanied ballad, young bodies lying in the dying light, my wife moving through the shadows in her long gown, what can ail? I mean who can gainsay us? What quarrel can be found with what is, *au fond*, a gesture towards the sustenance and preservation of art, and through art to virtue? (p. 28).

Spooner's recollection of the cottage links him with Hirst as a relic from the same age. Spooner urges Hirst not to hold back:

> We share something, a memory of the bucolic life. We're both English (p. 29).

They indulge in a moment of utterly ludicrous ques= tion and statement until Hirst retreats. Spooner forces the issue suddenly by interrogating Hirst about his wife in terms of a cricket game.[1] In an audaciously and overtly salacious tone he wants to know

> How beautiful she was, how tender and how true. Tell me with what speed she swung in the air, with what velocity she came off the wicket, whether she was responsive to finger spin, whether you could bowl a shooter with her, or an off-break with a legbreak action. In other words, did she google?
> (p. 30).

He follows this up with a sustained assault on the veracity of Hirst's recollections, going from open doubt ("Is she here now, you wife? Cowering in a locked room, perhaps?") to a more fundamental ques= tioning of the nature of the relationship:

> I begin to wonder whether you do in fact truly remember her, whether you truly did love her, truly caressed her, truly did cradle her, truly did husband her, falsely dreamed or did truly adore her. I have seriously questioned these propositions and find them threadbare
> (p. 31).

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1. Hirst and Spooner's names come from English cricketing history of the thirties, a fact adding credence to the element of game and play in the drama.

He taunts Hirst into throwing his glass at him "in=effectually" (p. 32), and Spooner then gleefully asks

> Do I detect a touch of the hostile?
> Do I detect - with respect, a touch
> of too many glasses of ale followed
> by the great malt which wounds?
> *Which wounds?*

The ambiguity and intensity of the last two words at once acknowledge Spooner's awareness of the fact that they are locked in battle and also evoke from Hirst the painful admission that there are in fact wounds:

> Tonight ... my friend ... you find me
> in the last lap of a race ... I had
> long forgotten to run
> (p. 32).

Spooner drives home his temporary advantage, under=lining Hirst's fear and sense of insecurity. He mockingly and allusively advises him to "put your money where your mouth is, to pick up a pintpot and know it to be a pintpot, and knowing it to be a pint=pot, to declare it as a pintpot, and to stay faith=ful to that pintpot as though you had given birth to it ... Do forgive me my candour. It is not method but madness. So you won't object if I take out my beads and prayer mat and salute what I take to be your impotence" (pp. 32-33).

Both madness and impotence would seem to be constants in the contemporary vision of man. Spooner's words have a paralysing effect on Hirst, for he "grips the cabinet, rigid" (p. 33), and is stunned into a broken denial by Spooner's next allusive attack:

> You've lost your wife of hazel hue,
> you've lost her and what can you do,
> she will no more come back to you,
> with a tillifola, tillifola tillifo=
> ladi-foladi-foloo
> (p. 34).

The playful echo of Elizabethan poetry moves Hirst to a feeble denial and then to a moving evocation of the world as it now appears to him:

> No man's land ... does not move ...
> or change ... or grow old ... remains
> forever ... icy ... silent
> (p. 34).

This virtual paralysis is physically enacted when Hirst "crawls towards the door, manages to open it, crawls out of the door" (p. 34).

Spooner is left alone and says in a statement which has a hint of *déjà vu*:

> I have known this before. The exit
> through the door, by way of belly and
> floor (p. 34).

At this stage it might be fruitful to stand still at this and other solitary incantations by Spooner. On several other occasions[1] he uses this incantation which is an allusion to Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. The themes of failure and the awareness of mental and spiritual paralysis are as integral to this play as to the Eliot poem, and gain added force through the allusive usage. These allu= sions are all made by Spooner, but he is linked to Hirst on the linguistic level by Hirst's allusion to the same poem:

> It's good to go to sleep in the late afternoon. *After tea and toast* (p. 44).

Foster intrudes on Spooner's reverie. He is brisk and breezy, but he alienates Spooner as he does other people:

> Foster : Taxi drivers are against me. Some= thing about me. Some unknown fac= tor. My *gait*, perhaps (p. 35).

The unexpected use of *gait* is as strong an alienating device as the use of the words *lest* and *gaze* in *Old Times*. Foster has how established his hostility to

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1. On pp. 59, 60, 68.

Spooner[1] and when Briggs enters, Spooner is subject=ed to an insulting and destructive interrogation in which Briggs talks of his collecting beermugs in a pub (a very demeaning occupation, Briggs implies). They indulge in contradictory, alternately fawning and threatening recollection, until they provoke Spooner into another preposterous reminiscence which becomes a weapon in their hands. Spooner's tale rests on his being a painter, which prompts Briggs to sneer:

> Ever painted a beermug?
>
> (p. 49),

and to Spooner's invitation to see his collection (of paintings) he retorts

> What of, beermugs?

Spooner, with commendable dignity, invites them to his house in the country where his wife and two daughters would welcome them warmly:

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1. Foster could not help but notice Spooner's shabbiness, and so he uses a deliberate snub in his culturally pre=tentious reference to his master:

> He was going to stay at home, listen to some *lieder*. I hope he had a quiet and pleasant evening (p. 35).

Foster : What about him?
(Spooner looks as Briggs.)
Spooner : They are remarkably gracious women (p. 42).[1]

Foster is now forced into a preposterous tale of the past which promises fair to turn into the type of story told by Lenny in *The Homecoming*, but the potential violence evaporates disconcertingly:

> ... a kind of old stinking tramp ... asked me for a few bob ... He was a complete stranger. But I knew immediately he wasn't a man to trust. ... So I threw him some sort of coin. He caught this bloody coin, looked at it with a bit of distaste, and then he threw the coin back. Well, automatically I went to catch it, I clutched at it, but the bloody coin disappeared into thin air. It didn't drop anywhere. It just disappeared ... into thin air ... on its way towards me. He then let our a few curses and pissed off, with his dog (p. 42),

so that Spooner pityingly tells him that "you would be wise to grant the event no integrity whatsoever" (p. 42), strengthening the theme of the contingent nature of truth in recollection.

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1. The quiet snub reminds one irresistibly of Osborne's account of the gate-crashings by Jimmy and Hugh Tanner in *Look Back in Anger*, together with Alison's account of the punctiliously polite treatment the two hooligans received from the members of the upper classes on these occasions, to their frustrated fury.

Hirst's return brings an air of renewed tension and a fresh assault on several of the central pre-occupations Pinter deals with in the play. He seems to be totally disoriented after a brief sleep and describes a dream of a waterfall in which he was terrified at the same time as showing his retreat into a safe world:

> It was the dream, yes. Waterfalls. No, no, a lake. Water drowning. Not me. Someone else. How nice to have company. Can you imagine waking up, finding no-one here, just furniture, staring at you? Most unpleasant (p. 44).

Vacuously, he indulges in a process of self-revelation pitiful in its intensity and even more pathetic than Spooner's earlier: he makes a powerful statement of what Gale (1977) has called the pattern of need when he states that "I tried laughing alone. Pathetic" (p. 44). He refers to his album yearningly, slipping into a past where what informed the scene was "a tenderness towards our fellows, perhaps" (p. 44). He retreats wholly into the past, talking of a youth that "existed. It was solid, while ... transformed by light, while being sensitive ... to all the changing light" (p. 45). He talks brokenly, in images and sentences strongly reminiscent of Beckett (p. 46). In these broken images, the lonely meanderings, Pinter creates a striking image of man perched on the edge of the abyss, or of man hesitatingly and terrifiedly attempting to traverse the quicksands which constitute life. Spooner

intuitively recognizes this pattern of need and at= tempts to join Hirst:

> It was I drowning in your dream (p. 47),[1]

provoking Foster and Briggs into an attempt to oust him:

> Foster : Christ.
> . . . . . .
> Briggs : He thinks he is a waiter in Amsterdam.
> . . . . . .
> Whereas he's a pintpot attendant in The Bull's Head.
> . . . . . .
> Foster : Our host must have been in The Bull's Head tonight, where he had an unfor= tunate encounter. (To Spooner:) Hey, scout, I think there's been some kind of misunderstanding. You're not in some shithouse down by the docks. You're in the home of a man of means, of a man of achievement. Do you under= stand me? (p. 48).[2]

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1. Spooner : He has grandchildren. As I have. As I have. We both have fathered. We are of an age. I know his wants. Let me take his arm. Respect our age. Come, I'll seat you.
   Foster : Christ.
   Spooner : I am your true friend. That is why your dream ... was so upsetting. You saw me drowning in your dream. But have no fear. I am not drowned.
   Foster : Christ
   (pp. 47-48).

2. The disjunction (Bigsby's term) between social class and language which is used as a comic device functions here in Foster's position in regard to Hirst and his obvious cru= dity and vulgarity.

When taunts and jeers do not succeed, Foster turns to an outright threat:

> Listen, chummybum. We protect this gentleman against corruption, against men of craft, against men of evil, we could destroy you without a glance, we take care of this gentleman, we do it out of love
>
> (p. 49)

Foster's bland presumptions about love seem to have the same sinister implications as Goldberg's seeming=ly solicitous promises to Stanley in *The Birthday Party*. In a ludicrous yet menacing parody of Hirst's evocations of the past, Foster attempts to exclude Spooner:

> You've just laid your hands on a rich and powerful man. It's not what you're used to, scout. How can I make it clear? This is another class. It's another realm of operation. It's a world of silk. It's a world of organdie. It's a world of flower arrangements. It's a world of eight=eenth century cookery books. It's nothing to do with toffee apples and a packet of crisps. It's milk in the bath. It's the cloth bellpull. It's organization
>
> (p. 49).

His use of the word *organization* rather than the ex=pected *establishment* has sinister implications, with all the unfortunate (criminal) connotations assumed by this word since the thirties.

Foster's next speech is of central significance. He warns Spooner:

> Mind you don't fall into a quicksand (p. 50),

which underlines the idea that Pinter sees his characters as precariously negotiating and traversing quicksands. To this insulting warning[1] he adds the unnervingly dislocating coda (addressed to Briggs):

> Why don't I kick his head off and have done with it? (p. 50).

This incongruous conclusion to his affected gentility, as well as the quickly surfacing violence, drives Spooner to the lame iteration that

> I'm the same age as your master. I used to picnic in the country too, at the same time as he (p. 50).

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1. Foster and Briggs, the serving-men, seem to fulfil, in another idiom and in another guise, the essential role of the scheming and conniving servants in seventeenth-century comedy of manners. These servants, such as Waitwell in *The Way of the World* and Lucy in *The Country Wife*, ironically imitate their masters' follies and affectations, but they are generally in full control of themselves and the world they inhabit - as Briggs and Foster seem to be in their world.

Foster's warning to Spooner to keep clear contains one central issue (recurring in contemporary drama):

> Don't try to make a nonsense out of family life
>
> (p. 50).

The issue of the breakdown in family life, the awareness of the disintegration of the fundamental social unit and accompanying rootlessness have come to be examined in detail in the plays of Gray, Stoppard, Griffiths and Nichols as well as in more individualistic form in Pinter's work.

At the point where the menace becomes physical ("Briggs moves to Spooner and beckons to him, with his forefinger", p. 50), Hirst interposes petulantly:

> Where are the sandwiches? Cut the bread!
>
> . . . . . .
>
> It is not cut! Cut it!
>
> (pp. 50-51),

causing Briggs to slink out submissively. Left alone with Hirst and Spooner, Foster defensively launches into another apocryphal narrative. Gale has said that "with the atmosphere of menace broken, Foster expands the mood of incongruity through a series of contradictory statements" (1977, p. 213). Foster's tale involves "a man walking along carrying two umbrellas. Two umbrellas. In the Australian outback" (p. 52). He "nearly asked him what he was up to,

but I changed my mind" (p. 53), because "I decided he must be some kind of lunatic. I thought he would only confuse me" (p. 53). Into this atmosphere charged with an awareness of dislocation and confusion, Pinter drops what Gale has called his most effective curtain line:

> Foster : Listen. You know what it's like when you're in a room with the light on and then suddenly the light goes out? I'll show you. It's like this. (He turns the light out.) BLACKOUT.

This physical theatrical device has the same almost nauseating and vertiginous effect of Stoppard's opening use of it in Act III of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. It has a powerful impact on the audience, underlining the impression of uncertainty and isolation that the characters have all the time.

Act II

Gale (1977) has commented provocatively on the opening scene of Act II by stating that "the lighting as Act II opens, '*shafts of light enter the room*' through the windows, like the lighting of O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, supplies subliminal cage imagery and accentuates the fact that Spooner is a prisoner in the locked room. Finding himself in this situation does not appear to be uncommon in Spooner's

experience: 'I have known this before' (p. 59)" (p. 214).

Spooner is presented in the guise of a prisoner, albeit a coddled one. The impression has more than surface significance: he has perhaps been literally imprisoned, yet there is also the suggestion that being imprisoned is part of the human condition:

> I have know this before. Morning. A locked door. A house of silence and strangers
>
> (p. 59).

Added to this is the doubly unsettling awareness that nowhere is safe (Briggs has just unlocked the door):

> I have known this before. The door unlocked. The entrance of a stranger. The offer of alms. The shark in the harbour
>
> (p. 60).

Briggs, in a guise of perfect obsequiousness, brings Spooner a magnificent breakfast and launches into his own extravagant narrative which by now one has come to accept as a defensive gesture. He implicitly acknowledges the possibly relative nature of his narrative, beginning it with:

> I should tell you he'll deny this account
>
> (p. 62),

and ending it with

> His story will be different
> (p. 63).

The elaborate story contains an account of a set of directions into a one-way traffic system "easy enough to get into. The only trouble was that, once in, you couldn't get out" (p. 62), so that "the people who live there, their faces are grey, they're in a state of despair, but nobody pays any attention, you see" (p. 62).

Pinter casts an ironic light on this by allowing Briggs himself to give his story a spurious air through the use of a clichéd expression:

> All people are worried about is their *illgotten gains*. I wrote to *The Times* about it
> (p. 62).

The passage contrasts ludicrously with Briggs' normal strong-arm style, and Spooner counters with an equally ludicrous account:

> I know my wines. (He drinks.) Dijon. In the thirties. I made many trips to Dijon, for the winetasting, with my French translator. Even after his death, I continued to go to Dijon, until I could go no longer
> (p. 63).

His hilariously funny disclosure that his French translator was

> Hugo. A good companion
>
> (p. 63)

leads into the excruciating interchange between Briggs and Spooner:

> Spooner : You will wonder of course what he translated. The answer is my verse. I am a poet.
> (Pause.)
> Briggs : I thought poets were young.
> Spooner : I am young. (He reaches for the bot=tle.)
> Can I help you to a glass?
> . . . . . .
> Translating verse is an extremely dif=ficult task. Only the Rumanians re=main respectable exponents of the craft
>
> (pp. 63-64).

There is a spin-off from this into an eminently plau=sible explanation by Spooner about his connection with the pub[1] - they are having a meeting there to discuss a new literary magazine, as "the landlord is a friend of mine" (p. 65). When Briggs volunteers the information that Hirst is a poet, Spooner is brisk and businesslike:

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1. Earlier Briggs had established some form of superiority over Spooner by taunting him with his lowly position and disreputable connections at the pub.

> A poet? Really? Well, if he'd like to send me some examples of his work, double spaced on quarto, with copies in a separate folder by separate post in case of loss or misappropriation, stamped addressed envelope, I'll read them
>
> (p. 67).

Spooner and Hirst have now been linked on the surface level as well, as being poets. Spooner also picks up the subliminally established link between them by reiterating the *Prufrock* allusion just prior to Hirst's entrance:

> I have known this before. The voice unheard. A listener. The command from an upper floor
>
> (p. 68).

Hirst enters briskly and, disconcertingly, he appears to be a totally different man from the disintegrating wreck who had left the room earlier on.

Hirst is suddenly loquacious, practically verbose. He recalls the past with a wealth of detail which would seem to defy alternative interpretation. Hirst attacks Spooner (seeming to know him from old, yet calling him Charles now), and he drives home his attack with a minutely detailed yet callous account of his seduction of Spooner's wife:[1)]

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1. This might be in retaliation for Spooner's earlier reflection on Hirst's alleged treatment of his wife.

> How's Emily? What a woman. ... What a woman. Have to tell you I fell in love with her once upon a time. Have to confess it to you. Took her out to tea, in Dorchester. Told her of my yearning. Decided to take the bull by the horns. Proposed that she betray you. Admitted that you were a damn fine chap, but pointed out I would be taking nothing that belonged to you, simply that portion of herself all women keep in reserve, for a rainy day. Had an infernal job persuading her. Said she adored you, her life would be meaningless were she to be false. Plied her with buttered scones, Wiltshire cream, crumpets and straw= berries. Eventually she succumbed. Don't suppose you ever knew about it, what? Oh, we're too old now for it to matter, don't you agree? ... I rented a little cottage for the summer. She used to motor up to me twice or thrice a week. I was an integral part of her shopping expeditions. You were both living on the farm then. ... She would come to me at tea-time, or at coffee-time, the innocent hours. That summer she was mine, while you imagined her to be solely yours (pp. 69-70).

The insistence on the details of seduction is very reminiscent of much of Gray's work as well as being anticipatory of *Betrayal*, in which the sordid mechan= ics of infidelity are exposed with a meticulous attention that evokes nausea and a limitless sadness at the same time.

Hirst becomes grossly insulting and hurtful as he continues to batter Spooner:

> While you were doing your exercises she came to me. Her ardour was, in my experience, unparalleled. Ah well (p. 70).

They go on to a seemingly desultory exchange of reminiscences about their war experiences, but Spooner is limbering up for a retaliatory attack. He launches into a convoluted account of Hirst's infamous seduction of more than one girl from their own class, their own circle, and Hirst's narrow escapes from the wrath of assorted friends and brothers:

> [Bunty] threatened to horsewhip you (p. 74).

Spooner carefully marshals his forces to release them devastatingly upon Hirst in an account of a counter-seduction:

> Hirst : Are you trying to tell me that you had an affair with Arabella?
> Spooner : A form of an affair. She had no wish for full consummation. She was content with her particular predilection ... (p. 76).

Spooner coldly counters Hirst's threats ("I'll have you blackballed from the club!") with a weary catalogue:

> Oh my dear sir, may I remind you that you betrayed Stella Winstanley with Emily Spooner, my own wife, throughout a long and soiled summer, a fact known at the time throughout the Home Coun= ties? May I further remind you that Muriel Blackwood and Doreen Busby have never recovered from your insane and corrosive sexual absolutism? May I further remind you that your friendship with and corruption of Geoffrey Ramsden at Oxford was the talk of Balliol and Christchurch Cathedral?
>
> (p. 76).

This speech has important anticipatory implications: in *Betrayal* the issue of *who-told-who-what-when* be= comes a central dramatic device in the portrayal of the theme of the contingent nature of truth and in the exploration of the fundamental assumptions under= lying relationships between people at all levels.

The scene between Hirst and Spooner erupts into broad farce, with the ostensibly comic exchange act= ing as an overlay to cover the darker undercurrents:

> Spooner : It is you, sir, who have behaved scandalously.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Hirst : I, sir? Unnaturally? Scandalously?
> Spooner : Scandalously. She told me all.
> Hirst : You listen to the drivellings of a farmer's wife?
> Spooner : Since I was the farmer, yes.
> Hirst : You were no farmer, sir. A weekend wanker.
> Spooner : I wrote my Homage to Wessex in the summerhouse at West Upfield.
> Hirst : I have never had the good fortune to read it.

Spooner : It is written in terza rima, a form which, if you will forgive my saying so, you have never been able to master (p. 77).

Hirst now retreats, suddenly denying any acquaintanceship with Spooner:

> You are clearly a lout. The Charles Wetherby I knew was a gentleman. I see a figure reduced. I am sorry for you (p. 78).

Hirst falls into a sad reverie, referring to his photograph album, finding that everyone worthwhile is dead - confusing at this level the dead and the "blank", and wondering about arousing them. He finds a terrifying parallel, and in an ironically allusive statement he says:

> And so I say to you, tender the dead, as you would yourself be tendered, in what you would describe as your life (p. 79).

This reverie is followed by a brief, inconclusive skirmish between Hirst and Briggs over the whisky bottle. Hirst seems subdued, but rouses himself to oppose Foster, who wants to take him for his morning walk. He launches himself draggingly into work:

> I can't possibly. I have too many things to do. I have an essay to write. A critical essay. We'll have to check the files, find out what I'm supposed to be appraising. At the moment it's slipped my mind
> (p. 83).

Spooner is prompted to wheedle a position out of him (cf. Davies in *The Caretaker*).[1] For the moment he is firmly excluded. Hirst warns him obliquely:

> There are places in my heart ... where no living soul ... has ... or can ever ... trespass
> (p. 84).

Then Hirst draws Briggs and Foster (who are quietly brawling[2]) into his circle:

> We three, never forget, are the closest of friends
> (p. 85).

---

1. Spooner : I have the nose of a ferret. I can find anything in a file. Secondly, I have written any number of critical essays myself. Do you actually have a secretary? (p. 83).

2. In their brawling, Foster and Briggs repeatedly use popular Anglo-Saxon abuse of the four-letter variety. Gale has expressed reservations about Pinter's use of these in a seemingly gratuitous fashion. It might be plausible, however, to accept that they do express the latent violence contained in these two characters.

Spooner attempts to re-enter the conversation in the face of Briggs' inspired and voluble abuse (p. 88). Upon Hirst's least encouragement, Spooner uses the provocatively allusive

> Let met live with you and be your secretary
>
> (p. 88).

He follows this with a catalogue of virtues - services he could possibly render. His rhetoric becomes flowe= ry:

> Nevertheless I am I and have survived insult and deprivation. I am I. I offer myself not abjectly but with ancient pride. I come to you as a warrior. I shall be happy to serve you as my master
>
> (p. 89)

and allusive

> I am your Chevalier. I had rather bury myself in a tomb of honour than permit your dignity to be sullied by domestic enemy or foreign foe. I am yours to command
>
> (p. 89).

Spooner's extravagant plans for poetry readings by Hirst are strongly reminiscent of Mick's extravagant plans for the apartment (in *The Caretaker*) - and they smack as obviously of implausibility and failure as did Mick's grandiose schemes:

> Perhaps you might agree to half a dozen photographs or so, but no more. Unless of course you positively wished, on such an occasion, to speak. Unless you preferred to hold, let us say, a small press conference, after the reading, before supper, whereby you could speak through the press to the world. But that is by the by, and would in no sense be a condition. Let us content ourselves with the idea of an intimate reading, in a pleasing and conductive environment, let us consider an evening to be remembered, by all who take part in her
>
> (p. 91).

Hirst obviously perceives the spurious nature of this dream and abruptly rejects it:

> Let us change the subject.
> . . . . . .
> For the last time.
> . . . . . .
> (Pause.)
> . . . . . .
> What have I said
>
> (p. 91).

His conversational manoeuvre, meant to be an evasion of Spooner's schemes, suddenly assumes the signifi= cance of a negation of a dream, for, abruptly and shockingly, he is caught in a desert of his own making. He has changed the subject for the last time, and now snow

> Will fall forever. Because you've changed the subject. For the last time
>
> (Foster, p. 93).

Foster creates a terrifying vision:

> Foster : So that nothing else will happen forever. You'll simply be sitting here forever.
> Briggs : But not alone ...
> Foster : No, we'll be with you. Briggs and me
> (p. 94).[1)]

Hirst attempts to surface out of this terrifying stillness and stasis:

> But I hear sounds of birds. Don't you hear them? Sounds I never heard before. I hear them as they must have sounded then, when I was young, al= though I never heard them then, al= though they sounded about us then
> (p. 95).

He expresses an awareness of a whole world of loss and regret in this speech, regretting the lost youth so insistently referred to in the play. Hirst implicitly acknowledges the evanescent quality of life in his last speech, the fleeting awareness as well as the empty realization that there is really nothing:

> I am walking towards a lake. Someone is following me, through the trees. I lose him, easily. I see a body in the water, floating. I am excited.

---

1. As McCann and Goldberg would seem to remain with Stanley in *The Birthday Party*.

> I look closer and see I was mistaken. There is nothing in the water. I say to myself, I saw a body, drowning. But I am mistaken. There is nothing there
>
> (p. 95).

Spooner puts the seal on Hirst's awareness:[1)]

> No. You are in no man's land. Which never moves, which never changes, which never grows older, but which remains forever, icy and silent
>
> (p. 95).

This would be a tailor-made description of the cata= tonic state the contemporary hero of comedy finds himself in at the end of the play. Hirst's ironic= ally heroic and nonchalant rejoinder:

> I'll drink to that
>
> (p. 95)

is in its very resignation a perfect example of the over-accepting attitude revealed by this comic hero, and one can see him in the figure of Hirst as the play ends:

> (He drinks.)
>
> SLOW FADE.

---

1. Gale (1977) has suggested that "Hirst is limited by his intimations of mortality. He relies on his view of the past to endure the present" (p. 221). This is a very valid interpretation of both Hirst's character and of the way in which an awareness of the past acts as an inhibit= ory and compromising influence in most contemporary comedy.

4.7 *Betrayal*

Pinter's latest play was first produced and subsequently published in November, 1978 and represents an important landmark in the development of his comic vision. The play is his most explicit comic statement yet and is cast completely in the mould of the comedy of manners.

The critical response to the play has revealed the usual puzzlement and ambiguity. T.E. Kalem, reviewing the play for *Time*, expresses a sense of letdown. He regards the play as "blessed in its stars" (p. 66), but avers that "few playgoers can have left *The Caretaker* and *The Homecoming* without being viscerally shaken up. Quite a few may leave *Betrayal*, with its anaesthetized passions, feeling vaguely shaken down".

Elsom (1978) is somewhat more discerning. He reports that "the new slimline Pinter ... has taken everyone by surprise by being so straightforwardly about what it seems to be about ... betrayal ... and your common-or-garden betrayal at that, adultery among Oxbridge and Hampstead types" (p. 700). Elsom does find a deeper meaning and contends that the play "is not as lightweight as it appears; and Pinter's wonderful sensitivity for dialogue provides many delights" (p. 701). He finds a deficiency in the play in the fact that Pinter "is describing a process of evasion and self-protection which goes on, in everybody's life, all the time; and to limit it so specifically to an

affair robs his play of surprise and fresh insights" (p. 701). To my mind, however, Pinter's vision is almost unbearably acute, and the process of evasion and deception which he gives specific shape through casting it in an affair becomes a paradigm for existence in the modern world. For this reason, the review by Kroll (1978), would seem to be the most worthwhile judgment available so far.

Kroll maintains that "Pinter has never written anything simpler, sadder or funnier than *Betrayal*" (p. 41). He finds significance in the choice of the subject-matter ("the oldest story in the civilized world") and finds that Pinter adequately traces "the ecstasy and pain in its spiral of desire and deception" (p. 41). Kroll finds a great deal beneath "its smooth pastel surface",[1] for he sees man "as a creature trapped in an orbit of betrayal that sends him circling around the ideal without ever reaching it" (p. 42). This is a very accurate depiction, in fact, of the state of the contemporary comic hero. The world he inhabits is a desolate one, and Pinter seems to have extracted the essence and given exquisite dramatic shape to something that could have degenerated into "a sloshing mess of ordinary emotion" (p. 41). Instead, one has to admire Pinter for

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1. An accurate perception, for beneath the equally smooth and deceptive surfaces of the Restoration Comedies of Manners lurk the same fundamental issues.

having found "a grim but delicate beauty and humor in such desolation" (p. 41). Furthermore, the play is "brilliantly simple in form and courageous in its search for a poetry that turns banality into a melancholy beauty" (p. 41). Kroll uses a particularly provocative image to evoke the structure of the play, for it is "like watching a flower blossom backward, its petals inexorably closing" (p. 41). The structure of the play does seem to be a spiralling inward towards a kernel where suddenly and shockingly even the innocence of a beginning is tarnished and corroded in retrospect, to remind one inevitably of Peer Gynt's onion, with only tears left when all the layers have been peeled away.

The play consists of nine scenes intricately interwoven to become a tunnelling backward in time. Pinter has here succeeded in what Gale (1977) longingly anticipated in his book, for "it would seem that the culminating play in the dramatist's exploration of the relationship between time and human mind is still in the future" (p. 221). Elsom (1978) comments on the time structure as well in saying that "Pinter is not concerned with what will, but with what has, happened" (p. 701). This is a striking confirmation of the fact that in contemporary comedy the time pattern has come to be an interpretation of man's essential stance: caught in a static, almost catatonic stance, in the present, compromised by the past and thus with no hope for the future.

Scene 1. Pub. 1977. Spring.

If the action of this play were to be seen in strict=ly chronological terms, this scene would be the second last one. The fact that Pinter has put it in this backward-unfolding structure is aesthetically highly satisfying. What literally happens in this scene is that Jerry and Emma, the adulterous couple, are desultorily and yet hurtfully raking over the ashes of a dead affair and assimilating (in Jerry's case) the retrospective shock of a double betrayal, for Em=ma tells him that Robert, her husband, now knows of their past affair. Jerry is shocked and hurt,[1)] but in the next scene, in chronological terms the last one, Robert coldly informs Jerry that he has known for at least four years, opening up to the appalled Jerry unimaginable vistas of deceit and betrayal and confirming the fact that an intricate and vicious game had been going on in which Robert and Emma could enjoy, in a curiously distilled and abstracted form, the blissful ignorance in which Jerry lives.

The tension throughout the play is almost tangible as the deceptions and counter-deceptions mount.

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1. Jerry : You told him everything ... about us?
Emma : I had to.
(Pause.)
Jerry : But he's my oldest friend.

This is a reference to another major issue in the play - that of male friendship, an issue linking this play thema=tically to other contemporary plays.

Jerry and Emma meet two years after their affair has ended. They seem to be at a loss for words, desul= torily talking, trying to recall past events:

> Emma : I'm fine.
> (She looks round the bar, back at him.)
> Just like old times
> (p. 12).

She is deceived in this, however, for the old rapport has broken down, and they experience a breakdown (which in Quigley's terms would be a refusal to nego= tiate a relationship, expressed in linguistic terms).

> Jerry : You remember the form. I ask about your husband, you ask about my wife.
> Emma : Yes, of course. How is your wife?
> (p. 15).

Another pause follows the exchange of information about their children, to be broken by Emma's explicit enquiry:

> Emma : Ever think of me?
> Jerry : I don't need to think of you.
> Emma : Oh?
> Jerry : I don't need to *think* of you
> (p. 17).[1)]

---

1. Jerry here underscores the fact that will be reiterated later on - that he is the more involved and therefore the more vulnerable of the two partners. Curiously, it would later seem that the fact that Jerry's wife Judith loves him and cares and keeps the family happy makes him more sentimental in his vision of Emma. Robert, it emerges later, has been betraying Emma all the time anyway, and their marriage is on the verge of a breakup now, years after the affair has ended.

They again evade the issue and start talking about Emma's daughter Charlotte, who fills a pivotal role in their recollections:

Emma : Do you remember that time ... oh god it was ... when you picked her up and threw her up and caught her?
Jerry : She was very light.
Emma : She remembers that, you know.
. . . . . .
Jerry : She doesn't know ... about us, does she?
Emma : Of course not. She just remembers you, as an old friend.
. . . . . .
Jerry : It was in your kitchen
Emma : It was in your kitchen

(pp. 19-20).[1)]

Emma absently recalls driving past the place where they used to have a flat to accommodate the affair and Jerry sadly comments that "we haven't been there for years" (p. 22). This recollection prompts him to express another hurtful fear: that Emma has been "seeing" Casey, one of Jerry's own "discoveries" (Jerry is a literary agent). Jerry seems curiously resentful of the fact that people are now gossiping about Emma and Casey, whereas:

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1. This recollection is repeated twice and assumes the signi= ficance of a reproach and an agonizingly vivid underscor= ing of the betrayal on the levels both of marriage and friendship. Jerry invokes this incident in particular on being told that Robert knows of the affair (p. 29) and it is used early on (Scene 6) to indicate the defective quality of their recollection even then (p. 101).

> I felt ... irritation that nobody gossiped about us like that, in the old days. I nearly said, now look, she may be having the occasional drink with Casey, who cares, but she and I had an affair for seven years and none of you bastards had the faintest idea it was happening
> (p. 23).

Jerry is still secure in the cherishing of his secret. Emma's hint of duplicity is lost for the moment but will spring to mind again with redoubled force as the successive layers of betrayal are lifted and minutely and hurtfully examined:

> Emma : I wonder. I wonder if everyone knew, all the time
> (p. 23).

Jerry's maudlin jealousy of Casey is momentarily forgotten when Emma tells him that she is getting a separation from Robert because "he's betrayed me for years. He's had ... other women for years" (p. 25). This prompts Jerry to reminisce about his earlier friendship with Robert and the fact that he never once suspected him of betrayal:

> The funny thing is that it was me who made the ... calls to you, when I left him boozing at the bar. That's the funny thing
> (p. 26).

The really funny thing is, of course, that Robert knew that Jerry was making those calls to Emma, and he could sit and indulge in his tormented and curiously rarefied enjoyment of stealing a march on Jerry even at his own expense.

Emma at this point attempts to invest the affair with some sort of meaning, albeit in retrospect:

> Do you remember? I mean, do you remember?
>
> (p. 28),

but Jerry withdraws when he realizes that she has stepped outside the bounds of the game, suspending the rules, by telling Robert. In this world they inhabit, a meticulous observance of the rules is called for, otherwise the whole intricate structure collapses, and Jerry gives voice to this in his appalled, ludicrous and yet totally sincere rejoinder:

> But he's my oldest friend. I mean, I picked his own daughter up in my own arms and threw her up and caught her, in my kitchen. He watched me do it
>
> (p. 29)

Emma's comment is illimitably sad and forlorn:

> It doesn't matter. It's all gone
> (p. 29),

for to Jerry's query

Is it? What has?

(p. 30),

she responds that

It's all all over.
(She drinks)

(p. 30).

This would seem to be indicated as the ending in this backward spiralling structure, but this would be all too simple. Pinter has to give more substance to the convolutions of this world of smooth social in= tercourse in which the dark undercurrents are so de= structive and corrosive. The second scene is there= fore a coda to the first one in which the hurt is immeasurably extended and the banal turned into a bleakly vicious vision which constituted if not a judgment at least a searingly bright light on a world gone irretrievably awry.

Scene 2. Jerry's house. Study. 1977. Spring.

Robert and Jerry face each other in the aftermath of Emma's revelation. Jerry is ill at ease, while Robert is contemptuously in control of the situation. Jerry's stumbling agony:

The fact is I can't understand ... why she thought it necessary ... after all these years ... to tell you ... so suddenly ... last night (p. 37)

is greatly compounded when Robert mockingly tells him:

> No, she didn't. She didn't tell me about you and her last night. She told me about you and her four years ago
>
> (p. 37)

Robert is honestly astonished when Jerry expresses disbelief. The fact that Jerry was a participant in a game in which he had a handicap unknown to Robert seems shocking. Jerry is not quite as sophisticated as Robert:

> But we've seen each other ... a great deal ... over the last four years. We've had lunch
>
> (p. 39).

Robert provides the clincher, however, when he quiet= ly reminds Jerry:

> Never played squash, though
>
> (p. 39).

Jerry's questioning assertion that "I was your best friend" (p. 39) draws from Robert the bland rejoinder, "Well, yes, sure" (p. 39), which is a striking clue to the complexities of the game. To Robert, much would be tolerable because of this friendship with Jerry. He observes strict hierarchies of rules, delimiting certain areas. Emma would not be allowed at a squash game (cf. Scene 4) but once Jerry really

is seen to be intruding on a certain domain cherished by Robert, the ultimate male accolade of friendship, a squash game, is quietly withdrawn. The same situation appears as a parallel in the relationship between Emma and Casey and Robert's awareness of it.[1)]

Jerry, who holds much more tenaciously still to certain conventional attitudes, is shocked by what he regards as Robert's dishonourable conduct in not telling him that he knew all along:

> Jerry : Then why didn't you tell me?
> Robert : Tell you what?
> Jerry : That you knew. You bastard.
> Robert : Oh, don't call me a bastard, Jerry
> (pp. 40-41).

Robert's dispassionate call to Jerry to observe the rules of the game lends a curiously distasteful interpretation to his gratuitous use of violence towards Emma:

> It's true I've hit Emma once or twice. But that wasn't to defend a principle ... I just felt like giving her a good bashing. The old itch ... you understand
> (p. 41).

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1. Robert : I bumped into old Casey the other day. I believe he's having an affair with my wife. We haven't played squash for years, Casey and me. We used to have a damn good game
(p. 43).

Robert's scrupulous and dispassionate observance of the socially accepted formulae (in contrast to Jerry's more passionate and sentimental responses) would seem to engender this cold violence[1] and is in a sense an ironic comment on the style of the comedy of manners in which this play has been so successfully cast.

Robert compounds Jerry's agony by indulging in an activity that is all too common in contemporary co= medy - the solicitous attention to the minutiae of seduction and infidelity:

> I hope she looked after you all right (p. 43),

but he turns the screw a little by observing that Jerry only lived with her "in the afternoons" (p. 42).

Once having disposed of the betrayed ruins of marriage and friendship, the two turn to an even deeper level of deception and betrayal - the mutual betrayal of ideals once cherished: they talk about Casey, discovered by Jerry and published by Robert:

> Robert : Yes, his art does seem to be falling away, doesn't it?
> Jerry : Still sells.
> Robert : Oh, sells very well. Sells very well indeed. Very good for us. For you and me (p. 44).

---

1. Cf. Wycherley's *The Country Wife*, in which old Pinchwife indulges in physically hurting his young wife for real or imagined slights.

Robert regretfully tells a story of Casey outselling Barbara Spring, while he happens "to think that Barbara Spring ... is good, don't you?" (p. 44). He puts the stamp on their corruption by repeating:

> Still, we both do very well out of Casey, don't we?
> (p. 45).

Jerry makes an abortive attempt to return to innocence when he talks of reading Yeats, for that merely makes him recall another event:

> You read Yeats on Torcello once
> (p. 45),

which, unfortunately, was the time of Emma's undisclosed revelation to Robert of the affair. The conversation peters out in a melancholy atmosphere.

Scene 3. Flat. 1975. Winter.

This scene represents the actual moment of breakup of the affair. In a forlorn way, Emma and Jerry discuss the burnt-out affair in physical circumstances as bleak as their emotional states:

> Emma : I don't quite know what we're doing, any more, that's all.
> . . . . . .
> Jerry : It's pretty cold now.
> Emma : We were going to get another electric

fire.

. . . . . .

Jerry : Not much point in getting it if we're never here

(pp. 49-50).

They seem to be hovering on the edge of a quarrel when they recall the happy bustle and rush of the early days of the affair:

Emma : You see, in the past ... we were inventive, we were determined, it was ... it seemed impossible to meet ... impossible ... and yet we did ...

(p. 52).

A touch of acrimony creeps in:

Jerry : Nights have always been out of the question and you know it. I have a family.

Emma : I have a family too.

Jerry : I know that perfectly well. I might remind you that your husband is my oldest friend

(p. 52).[1)]

---

1. This attitude also ties in with Jerry's quick proviso to Emma ("It's not a home"), for he tries to keep his actions rigidly compartmentalized (and, paradoxically, sentimentally intact) in order to render them more morally palatable even while he is deluding himself.

Jerry uses his friendship with Robert to establish some kind of integrity - as he needs Robert's ignorance of his affair to sustain the integrity of the friendship at least. In its way this is made to appear as ludicrous and reprehensible as Robert's callous manipulation of the pieces of the puzzle (known to him and unknown to Jerry) for his own enjoyment.

Emma deliberately derogates the present situation by calling the sadly empty flat ridiculous and a haven in the past only for the physical expression of the adulterous affair, to which Jerry makes a pained objection:

> No, for loving
>
> (p. 55).

Jerry sadly acknowledges the ambivalence of their situation, as well as the desolate awareness of the inevitability of a breakdown when he observes that

> I don't think we don't love each other
>
> (p. 55),

an observation that seems effectively to wrap up the affair by its recognition of the limits and seeing it in perspective.

They sadly quibble about disposing of the physical effects, the "contents" of the flat, and even here

varying recollections of the past can surface painfully:

> Jerry : Wasn't the bed here?
> Emma : What?
> Jerry : Wasn't it?
> Emma : We bought the bed. We bought everything. We bought the bed together (p. 56).[1]

They decide on the disposal of everything and Emma starts to leave, but there is a further painful hiatus when she is unable to get the key from the ring, a physical reminder of the bonds she used to have with Jerry:

> (Takes out the keyring, tries to take key from ring.)
> Oh Christ.
> (Struggles to take key from ring. Throws him the ring.)
> You take it off.
> (He catches it, looks at her.)

---

1. Pinter cleverly uses their forgetfulness of detail as a dramatic device to underline the fact that an affair is really superimposed on the mundane everyday reality and that its existence is precariously maintained. Jerry very accurately sums up this awareness when he observes that:

> You have a home. I have a home. With curtains, etc. And children. Two children in two homes. *There are no children here*, so it's not the same kind of home (p. 54, my italics).

This fact is a crucially important one, underlining the essential sterility of such a relationship, in spite of its fulfilment of certain needs in the participants.

> Can you just do it please? I'm pick=
> ing up Charlotte from school. I'm
> taking her shopping.
> (He takes key off.)
> Do you realize this is an afternoon?
> It's the Gallery's afternoon off.
> That's why I'm here ... Can I have
> my keyring?

In this exchange Emma deliberately commits two de= structive actions. She mentions Charlotte as part of a pre-planned activity for a Thursday afternoon, their usual meeting time, thus allowing her everyday life to become an obtrusive reality, and she taunts him with the knowledge that she has an afternoon off that she is not sharing with him. She leaves after briskly telling him that

> I think we've made absolutely the
> right decision
> (p. 58),

leaving him standing bemusedly. Emma comes across in this scene as the more decisive of the two, in contrast to Jerry's melancholy dithering, but she is also the more callous in her decisiveness - she con= sistently comes over less sympathetically than Jerry.

Scene 4. Robert and Emma's house. Living room. 1974. Autumn.

In terms of strict chronology this scene immediately succeeds the one in Venice where Robert finds out about the affair, a fact which would explain the undercurrents that can be felt in the course of the scene as well as the way in which Emma disintegrates under the strain at the end of the scene, regaining some of the sympathy she lost in the previous scene through her seemingly callous dismissal of Jerry.

Jerry and Robert are having a drink, waiting for Emma to join them after putting her baby Ned to bed. The scene abounds in ambiguities, for Robert seems to find double meanings in everything he says and to be finding some obscure enjoyment in needling him:

> Jerry : How is your sleep these days?
> Robert : What?
> Jerry : Do you still have bad nights? With Ned, I mean?
> Robert : Oh, I see. Well, no. No, it's get=ting better. But you know what they say?
>
> (p. 62).

They enter into a carping and utterly gratuitous argument about boy and girl babies, and the degree of anxiety each is bound to feel about leaving the womb. Robert becomes overtly aggressive, leaving Jerry totally bewildered and on edge:

Robert : I was asking you a question.
Jerry : What was it?
Robert : Why do you assert that boy babies find leaving the womb more of a problem than girl babies?
Jerry : Have I made such an assertion?
Robert : You went on to make a further asser= tion, to the effect that boy babies are more anxious about facing the world than girl babies.
Jerry : Do you yourself believe that to be the case?
Robert : I do, yes.
(Pause.)
Jerry : Why do you think it is?
Robert : I have no answer.
(Pause.)
Jerry : Do you think it might have something to do with the difference between the sexes?
(Pause.)
Robert : Good God, you're right. That must be it
(pp. 64-65).

Emma's entrance neutralizes the tense and yet inane scene for a moment, only to have it explode again when they start discussing the honesty and/or dis= honesty of Casey's latest novel, and Robert contemp= tuously deals with Emma's ideas:

> Once when we were all having dinner, I remember, you, me, Emma and Judith, where was it, Emma gave a dissertation over the pudding about dishonesty in Casey with reference to his last novel. *Drying Out*. Judith had to leave unfortunately in the middle of it for her night shift at the hospital
> (p. 67).

Having disposed of Emma, he turns to Jerry, asking about playing squash. Jerry temporizes, and Robert admits to playing with Casey:

> He's a brutally honest squash player. No, really, we haven't played for years. We must play
>
> (p. 68).

The "hindsight" that the audience has after the previous scenes has a great deal of dramatically ironic effect. Robert now obviously has the whip hand over both, Jerry's sense of guilt making him quiescent and Emma's knowledge that Robert might confront Jerry about the affair making her intrude rashly:

> Why can't I watch and then take you both to lunch?
>
> (p. 69).

This invites Robert's tirade involving the issue of friendship between men:

> Well, to be brutally honest, we wouldn't actually want a woman around, would we Jerry? I mean a game of squash isn't simply a game of squash, it's rather more than that. You see, first there's the game. And then there's the shower. And then there's the pint. And then there's lunch. After all, you've been at it. You've had your battle. What you want is your pint and your lunch. You really don't want a woman buying you lunch. You don't actually want a woman within a mile of the place, any of the places, really. You don't want her in the

> squash court, you don't want her in the shower, or the pub, or the restau= rant. You see, at lunch you want to talk about squash, or cricket, or books, or even women, with your friend, and be able to warm to your theme without fear of improper interruption. That's what it's all about
> (pp. 69-60).

Jerry tries to evade the issue, aware of the decep= tion and the meaning that it has in the context of friendship:[1)]

> I haven't played squash for years
> (p. 70).

He gets out of the game by mentioning his trip to New York, which is news to Emma and which enrages her.

When Jerry leaves, Robert and Emma face each other in an atmosphere of abounding ambiguity and of brittle tension.

---

1. When Robert finds out about the affair, he lashes out at Emma:

> I've always liked Jerry. To be honest, I've al= ways liked him rather more than I've liked you. Maybe I should have had an affair with him my= self
> (p. 87),

acknowledging his bitterness, which from now on he will allow to erupt in his refined torture of Emma and Jerry.

(Robert returns. He kisses her. She responds. She breaks away, puts her head on his shoulder, cries quietly. He holds her.)

Emma seems to be accepting Robert's punishment with a certain submissiveness, and to accede implicitly to the rules of the tormenting game Robert has inflicted on all of them through his hurt.

Scene 5. Hotel room. Venice. 1973. Summer.

This scene is a pivotal one, as the erosion really sets in in the course of Emma's revelation to Robert of her affair with Jerry.

They talk idly of plans ("We're going to Torcello tomorrow, aren't we?") until Robert starts his campaign by needling Emma about the book she is reading on Jerry's recommendation:

> Jerry thinks it's good too. You should have lunch with us one day and chat about it
>
> (p. 77).[1)]

---

1. Once again the "hindsight" of the audience, regarding the matter of female intrusion on male preserves such as lunch together is a powerfully ironic dramatic device, adding to the atmosphere of ambiguity and deception.

Emma is evasive:

> Is that really necessary?
> (Pause.)
> It's not as good as all that
> (p. 77),

but Robert moves into the attack obliquely:[1)]

> Robert : Oh, not much more to say on that subject, really, is there?
> Emma : What do you consider the subject to be?
> Robert : Betrayal
> (p. 78).

From here, with minutely registered meticulousness, he talks of seeing the letter intended for her at American Express. He asks solicitously:

> I suppose you popped in when you were out shopping yesterday evening?
> (p. 79),

and expresses the first intimation of hurt when he says:

> That's what stopped me taking it, by the way, and bringing it to you, the thought that I could very easily be a total stranger
> (p. 80).

---

1. They are discussing the theme of Casey's book, recommended by Jerry, and to Robert's mind very apposite to the situation.

Robert proceeds to demolish Emma out of the enormity of his sense of betrayal and his awareness of hurt.

> Robert : How many times have we been to Tor= cello? Twice. I remember how you loved it, the first time I took you there. You fell in love with it. ... About six months after we were married. ... I wonder if you'll like it as much tomorrow.
> (Pause.)
> What do you think of Jerry as a letter writer?
> (She laughs shortly.)
> You're trembling. Are you cold?
> (p. 82).

Robert goes on pitilessly to recall his student days and his friendship with Jerry, driving home, with cold efficiency, the enormity of the betrayal:

> Robert : He wasn't best man at our wedding, was he?
> Emma : You know he was.
> Robert : Oh yes. Well, that's probably when I introduced him to you
> (p. 83).

Following this, Robert cuts to the bone in the in= quiry about the mechanics of the affair:

> Robert : Where does it ... take place? Must be a bit awkward. I mean we've got two kids, he's got two kids, not to mention a wife ...
> (p. 85).

Even Robert is stunned and the whole scene plunges abruptly into greater darkness when he finds out that the affair has been going on for five years:

> Robert : *Five years?*
> (Pause.)
> Ned is two years old.
> (Pause.)
> Did you hear what I said?
> Emma : Yes. He's your son. Jerry was in America. For two months
> (p. 86).

Robert's boundless hurt manifests itself in a reflec= tion on friendship:

> I've always liked Jerry (cf. p. 445, footnote),

and in a vicious thrust at Emma:

> Tell me, are you looking forward to our trip to Torcello?
> (p. 87).

As was the case with the structure at the beginning of the play (Scene 2 being a comment, a supportive action, for Scene 1), the following two scenes will have the same function with regard to Scene 5, in= corporating the beginning of the corrosive game played with Jerry as the "innocent" butt in the centre.

Scene 6. Flat. 1973. Summer.

This scene is the representation of the first seriously flawed contact between Jerry and Emma, the first encounter during which she has to contend with the burden of Robert's knowledge and the double duplicity that she has to maintain now, in a sense cuckolding the cuckolder.

They talk about the trip Emma has just had to Venice, and the dangerous tightrope that Emma has to walk from now on shows with painful clarity in every suc= cessive conversational topic:

> Jerry : Did you go to Torcello?
> Emma : No.
> Jerry : Why not?
> Emma : Oh, I don't know. The speedboats were on strike or something (pp. 92-93).[1)]

---

1. In the very next scene, Jerry and Robert talk:

> Robert : Incredible day. I got up very early and - whoomp - right across the lagoon - to Torcello. Not a soul stirring.
> Jerry : What's the "whoomp"?
> Robert : Speedboat (p. 112).

This might contain a hint of a shared duplicity pointed out by some reviewers (a duplicity seemingly strengthened in the very last/first scene (p. 138)), suggesting that the whole elaborate and convoluted pattern of betrayal might be an ultra-sophisticated social game. In their implied shared complicity and in the subtlety and sophis= tication of the game one might find a powerful hint that the game is part of an elaborate stratagem to *simulate* a meaningful existence.

The talk turns casually to the letters:

> Jerry : I got your letter.
> Emma : Good.
> Jerry : Get mine?
> Emma : Of course. Miss me?
>
> (pp. 93-94).

Her elaborately casual manner and smooth evasion con= ceal the awareness of her duplicity - and there is an odd nuance in Jerry's response, which also consti= tutes an awareness of dangerous ground and a tactical retreat:

> Jerry : Yes, actually I haven't been well.
> Emma : What?
> Jerry : Oh nothing. A bug
>
> (p. 94).

Jerry then disconcerts her by curtly dropping the subject and referring to the lunch he is going to have with Robert. He cannot understand Emma's vehement tone of inquiry, for he cannot know at this stage that what has been going on for years[1)] is badly out of tune now:

> Emma : What is the subject or point of your lunch?
> Jerry : No subject or point. We've just been doing it for years. His turn, fol= lowed by my turn
>
> (p. 95).

---

1. The friendship of years now seems to Emma to be an in= tolerable burden in the knowledge of Robert's awareness of the affair. Her inability to share this with Jerry adds to the sense of desolation which haunts the play.

The rot has set in irrevocably, and even their casual gossip is strained. Emma's deliberate attempt to create a sense of intimacy is evaded by Jerry's non-committal response:

> Emma : Do you still like it? Our *home*?
> Jerry : It's marvellous not to have a tele= phone.
> Emma : And marvellous to have me?
> Jerry : You're all right
> (p. 98).

Jerry's approbation of one detail (the lack of the telephone) introduces a chill into the air which is not dispelled by Emma's next action:

> Emma : I bought something in Venice - for the *house*.
> (She opens the parcel, takes out a tablecloth.)

The incipient sense of doubt and crisis is strengthened when Jerry relates a scare he had while she was away about a letter he had left in the pocket of a jacket. He follows this with a story of an incident some months before when his wife nearly tumbled to the truth of the affair involuntarily:

> Something else happened a few months ago - I didn't tell you. We had a drink one evening. Well, we had our drink, and I got home about eight, walked in the door, Judith said, hello, you're a bit late. Sorry, I said, I was having a drink with Spinks. Spinks? she said, how odd, he's just phoned, five minutes ago,

> wanted to speak to you, didn't mention he'd just seen you. You know old Spinks, I said, not exactly forthcom= ing, is he? He'd probably remembered something he'd meant to say but hadn't. I'll ring him later. I went up to see the kids and then we all had dinner (p. 100).

He seems unable now, in the recollection of his fear of detection, to stem the flood of painful reminis= cence, and in a moment of castigation he describes in vivid detail the event about which so much uncertain= ty is seen to exist:

> Listen. Do you remember, when was it, a few years ago, we were all in your kitchen, must have been Christmas or something, do you remember, all the kids were running about and suddenly I picked Charlotte up and lifted her high up, high up, and then down and up. Do you remember how she laughed? (p. 100).

He seems sunk in reverie, continuing the story obli= vious of Emma's interruption:

> She was so light. And there was your husband and my wife and all the kids, all standing and laughing in your kit= chen. I can't get rid of it (p. 101).

His acute awareness of the enormity of the betrayal is anaesthetized momentarily by Emma's reminder:

> It was your kitchen, actually (p. 101),

and for the moment his guilt seems to be sublimated and exorcised by physical contact:

> Emma : Why shouldn't you throw her up?
> (She caresses him. They embrace.)
> (p. 101).

Scene 7. Restaurant. 1973. Summer.

In many senses this scene parallels Scene 2, in which Robert explicitly confronts Jerry with his knowledge of the affair. This scene, however, is a complement to the preceding one in that Jerry is once more the gull. Robert plays a refinedly vicious baiting game from his advantageous position: he knows and Jerry doesn't know that he knows.

Robert and Jerry exchange some pleasantries, but Robert moves on to the attack almost immediately:

> Robert : Ready for some squash?
> Jerry : When I've got rid of the bug, yes.
> Robert : I thought you had got rid of it.
> . . . . . .
> We really must play. We haven't played for years.
> . . . . . .
> Jerry : Bit violent, squash
> (p. 107).[1)]

1. From his long association with Robert, Jerry would be intimately aware of Robert's ritualistic view of a squash game, and his evasiveness is a clear admission of guilt to Robert, who exploits Jerry's unhappy predicament with sadistic relish.

After ordering their lunch, they fall into a slightly carping conversation involving the Italian waiter and his son. Robert's argumentative stance is a clear indication of his poorly concealed aggression, and violence seems to lurk just under the surface - a violence sensed by the puzzled Jerry and carefully avoided.

Robert's account of the visit to Torcello discomfits Jerry, especially when Robert explicitly states his enjoyment of a solitary visit:

> I was alone for hours, as a matter of fact, on the island. Highpoint, actually, of the whole trip.
> . . . . . .
> I sat on the grass and read Yeats.
> . . . . . .
> They went well together
> (p. 113).

In direct contrast with his own refined taste, Robert then seems to imply, "Emma read that novel of that *chum* of yours", and "she seemed to be madly in love with it", all of which is an elaborate if implicit insult, as Robert earlier declined to publish the novel in question. Robert goes on to denigrate his job and those associated with it, and he attacks Jerry again:

> You know what you and Emma have in common? You love literature. I mean you love modern prose literature, I mean you love the new novel by the new Casey or Spinks. It gives you

both a thrill

(p. 116).

Jerry can only contend that Robert must be drunk to be so vehement, and Robert violently rounds on him:

> Robert : Really? You mean you don't think it gives Emma a thrill?
> Jerry : How do I know? She's your wife. (Pause.)
> Robert : Yes. Yes. You're quite right. I shouldn't have to consult you. I shouldn't have to consult anyone (p. 116).[1]

With this magnificent broadside, Robert seems to have vented his spleen. He comes back to an even keel, and for the moment it would seem as if the friendship is going to weather the storm, bridge the yawning abyss that has suddenly opened up and which would seem to be part and parcel of the life of modern man:

> It's just that I can't bear being back in London. I was happy, such a rare thing, not in Venice. I don't mean that, I mean on Torcello, when I walked about Torcello in the early morning, alone, I was happy, I wanted to stay there forever (p. 117).[2]

---

1. Cf. Deeley in *Old Times*, when he warns Anna about Kate being his wife after all.

2. At this point, Robert is strongly reminiscent of Gray's Simon Hench, who also wishes to withdraw from all abrasive human contact. It is also important to note that Torcello has come to represent to Robert some sort of ideal without blemish.

Scene 8. Flat. 1971. Summer.

Towards the end of the play the scenes become consist= ently shorter. The effect of this is that the pace seems to accelerate as the tension mounts. The move= ments towards the core, to the moment when everything began, picks up momentum - only to founder as one arrives at the core to find not meaning or signifi= cance but another possible level of duplicity.

The encounter between Jerry and Emma initially has a sense of freshness, of sincerity and even of innocent pleasure about it. Jerry freely indulges in senti= mentality:

> Jerry : I sat down for a bit, under a tree. It was very quiet. I just looked at the Serpentine.
> (Pause.)
> Emma : And then?
> Jerry : Then I got a taxi to Wessex Grove. Number 31. And I climbed the steps and opened the front door and then climbed the stairs and opened this door and found you in a new apron cooking a stew
>
> (pp. 122-123).

Into this atmosphere of intimacy Emma drops a meta= phorical bomb:

> I ran into Judith yesterday. Did she tell you?
>
> (p. 123).

> What the hell was she doing at Fortnum and Mason's?
>
> (p. 124).

The atmosphere is completely destroyed when Emma insistently asks Jerry whether Judith knows or suspects anything, and he dismisses her with:

> She's too busy. At the hospital. And then the kids. She doesn't go in for ... speculation
>
> (p. 126),

but even he is victim to doubts and fears, which he irritably voices:

> Another doctor. He takes her for drinks. It's ... irritating ... I don't know exactly what's going on
>
> (p. 127).

Jerry's predicament is, to say the least of it, ludicrous:

> Emma : Have you ever been unfaithful?
> Jerry : To whom?
> Emma : To me, of course.
> Jerry : No.
> (Pause.)
> Jerry : Have you ... to me?
> Emma : No.
> (Pause.)
> If she was, what would you do?
> Jerry : She isn't. She's busy. She's got lots to do. She's a very good doctor. She likes her life. She loves the kids.
> Emma : Oh.
> Jerry : She loves me.

. . . . . .
All that means something.
. . . . . .
But I adore you
(p. 129).

Into Jerry's confused state of mind, his agonized attempt to keep everything (his cosy home life, his adorable mistress) locked in separate compartments,[1] Emma drops the next bombshell, one which should be particularly destructive of Jerry's delicate sensi=bilities:

Emma : I'm pregnant. It was when you were in America.
(Pause.)
It wasn't anyone else. It was my hus=band.
Jerry : Yes. Yes, of course.
(Pause.)
I'm very happy for you
(p. 130).

The conventional words spoken by Jerry are grossly inadequate to the situation, and they mark the extent of the suffering he goes through after Emma's an=nouncement.

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1. Jerry's "philandering" would, in psychological terms, mark him as insecure and immature, and would militate against his achieving the insight and maturity expected of the traditional comic hero. His over-accepting attitude of suffering would be in keeping with the con=temporary comic vision, however.

It is highly significant that even at this early stage Jerry has to contend with the pain and suffering of betrayal, with the constant and corrosive awareness of Robert's physical possession of Emma, and of his own betrayal of a wife who loves him. The bleakness, the melancholy of this vision is indeed a powerful comment on the world they inhabit.

Scene 9. Robert and Emma's house. Bedroom.
1968. Winter.

The action has now spiralled all the way inwards to the core, to the genesis of the betrayal. And here, at the very core, there are disturbing suggestions which undermine the idea of any idealism at all.

Jerry sits alone in the darkened room. Emma comes into the room to comb her hair, and is surprised by Jerry:

> I've been waiting for you.
> . . . . . .
> I knew you'd come
>
> (p. 133).

He brushes aside Emma's feeble attempts at evasion ("Arent's you enjoying the party?") by passionately declaring:

> You're beautiful.
> Listen. I've been watching all night.
> I must tell you, I want to tell you,
> I have to tell you -
> (p. 134).

In the face of Emma's further feeble protests, Jerry launches into an impassioned declaration very reminiscent (and with the same disturbing implications) of the last part of *Old Times:*

> I should have had you, in your white, before the wedding. I should have blackened you, in your white wedding dress, blackened you in your bridal dress, before ushering you into your wedding as your best man
> (p. 135).

Emma is unable to stem this importunate flood:

> Emma : My husband's best man.
> Your best friend's best man.
> Jerry : No. Your best man
> (p. 135).

Jerry becomes wildly extravagent in his wooing:

> Look at the way you're looking at me. I can't wait for you, I'm bowled over, I'm totally knocked out, you dazzle me, you jewel, my jewel, I can't ever sleep again, no, listen, it's the truth, I won't walk, I'll be a cripple, I'll descend, I'll diminish, into total paralysis, my life is in your hands, that's what you're banishing me to, a state of catatonia, do you know the state of catatonia? do

> you? do you? the state of ... where the reigning prince is the prince of emptiness, the prince of absence, the prince of desolation. I love you (p. 136),

but his use of certain key words is highly signifi= cant within the context of the wider vision of the playwright. The references to *a state of catato= nia*, to the *reigning prince ... of emptiness*, the *prince of desolation*, of *absence* are very provocative. For one thing, at the very end of this play, which is in reality a beginning, the character thus perceptive= ly describes his own condition as catatonic, and so links himself imaginatively with all the contemporary comic heroes. More significantly, in the suggestive structural pattern of this play, the playwright sug= gests that Emma might be an antidote to this sterile awareness, but this is patently nonsensical, unbear= ably ironic, in fact, in view of what has been unfolding all through, for Emma leaves a wake of destruction and betrayal and not of renewal. Pinter has thus suc= ceeded, through the highly ingenious use of structure, to suggest the inhibitory and compromising influence of the past on the present, in which context a future seems to be ruled out. This play could thus be seen in one sense as a culminating statement of a develop= ment that has been going on for two decades in Pinter's dramatic work.

Pinter is unflinching and uncompromising in his final statement too: in the vision of the limitless poten= tial for betrayal and duplicity he portrays Robert as breaking in on a potentially compromising situation

in which Jerry offers a drunken accolade to Emma. Robert coldly accepts the compliment:

> Robert : Quite right.
> (Jerry moves to Robert and takes hold of his elbow.)
> Jerry : I speak as your oldest friend. Your best man.
> Robert : You are, actually.
> (He clasps Jerry's shoulder, briefly, turns, leaves the room.
> Emma moves towards the door.
> Jerry grasps her arm.
> She stops still.
> They stand still, looking at each other
> [p. 138].)

Robert seems to be inviting duplicity by leaving them pointedly alone in what must have seemed to him a suspicious situation. The affair is effectively launched in this very last scene of the play.

Throughout the play, Jerry has been imbued with a kind of innocence and lostness - yet right at the end, in the familiar and upsetting dislocating action, Pinter undercuts that view so that all our cosy as= sumptions are shattered and one is left again out on the proverbial limb, a situation which has become very familiar in contemporary comedy. The sugges= tion at the end of possible collusion between Robert and Jerry, however implicit, in the matter of the affair, gives strength to the melancholy awareness that betrayal is an all-pervasive reality in this world. Were one to accept the idea of shared

complicity, too, then one would be forced to see the entire episode as an expression of a super-sophisti= cated game, a game which is in part an elaborate stratagem to simulate a meaningful existence.

CHAPTER 5

"So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?" - It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life - Wittgenstein: *Philoso= phical Investigations*

5 MENACE TO MANNERS

In the following recapitulation of the salient points of Pinter's comic vision, the stress will be on the line of development to be observed in the course of the twenty years during which these representative eight plays were written. The line of development to be studied in particular involves the gradual movement from the comedies of menace to a more clearly stylized form of comedy of manners, with an accompanying greater stress on the inhibitory and compromising effect of the past on the present, with consequent implications for the future.

It will emerge that Pinter's pre-occupations remain essentially the same, but that there is a very real change in style evidenced by the choice of more socially affluent characters who are more sophisticated, articulate - but no less lost in an environment essentially hostile to them and their ideals. Accompanying these concerns there is the growing and more explicit awareness of a pattern of need: a need to be fulfilled through interrelational "contracts", and a need ironically betrayed throughout, most particularly in *Betrayal*.

In *The Birthday Party* the tag of comedy of menace is particularly apt. In a world peopled by pathetically inadequate characters two menacing figures intrude. They are not properly identified, a fact which strengthens the impression of threat and menace. In this world fraught with tension, relationships are constantly manoeuvred and dissolved and seem to be woefully inadequate to the situation which seems to get out of hand frequently. Under these circumstances the playwright portrays the characters as constantly attempting, with an ambiguous measure of success, to adapt to the social situation. Stanley emerges as a victim of a faceless and nameless force, and forces the spectator into an uneasy awareness of kinship with him, sharing his obscure sense of guilt and anxiety. His limitations and imperfections are mercilessly revealed so that he stands battered into submission, in the characteristic stance of catatonic over-acceptance at the end of the play.

Throughout the play one is made aware of the uneasy fact that the truth, especially as revealed in recollection, is contingent and relative. This adds to the theme of the past haunting the present.

To add to the atmosphere of menace in this play there is the ever-present threat of violence and aggression erupting. Violence seems to lurk just under the surface and when it erupts there is often a farcical situation tinged unmistakably with anxiety and hysteria. In the comedies of menace this is an important

point, for gradually, as the surroundings and characters assume greater sophistication, the overt use of violence disappears to be replaced by more subtle but no less destructive devices (cf. *Old Times* and *Betrayal*).

The farcical element in these early plays often centres on games (like Blind Man's Buff in *The Birthday Party*) as a paradigm for action in the world these characters inhabit. The game seems to assume greater reality as it progresses. Later the overt games will be replaced by more implicit but no less significant games with strict rules requiring meticulous observance (as in *No Man's Land* and *Betrayal*, foreshadowed by the game in *The Lover*).[1)]

Language is used throughout as a major dramatic device. It is used as a device to reveal character, to negotiate relationships, to mask and to reveal menace, and as a powerful device to generate humour. Pinter's remarkable ear for nuances in language has been commented on extensively. What is remarkable is that in these early plays he captures the vapid speech of his "human derelicts" to perfection, modulating his language to an ever greater pitch of sophistication in his graduation to higher social classes and greater articulateness.

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1. This game element has been significantly present ever since the bears and squirrels game was used as a paradigm for existence in Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*.

The Birthday Party thus involves a little man striv= ing valiantly to cope with an incomprehensibly menac= ing world and failing to do so because of inherent human weaknesses and imperfections. He is shown to be deserving of compassion, facing the prospect of destruction with a bleak and forlorn, incomprehending, over-accepting attitude. The play is both funny and frightening, seeming to be a mirror of man and socie= ty at a certain level, inviting compassion and fellow-feeling. The menace and the violence, though unde= fined, are overtly present. In later plays this menace and violence will be more closely integrated in character and social environment, more firmly con= tained in the constricting bonds of the social struc= ture, but be no less real and destructive. As the incidence of physical violence diminishes, also, ver= bal destructiveness increases in direct proportion.

The Caretaker still belongs to a large extent to the group of plays described as the comedies of menace, but there is a very real development in the sense that the indefinable sense of menace has been replac= ed by a real psychological need expressed in terms of heartrending anxiety about stable relationships. There is thus the insistence here on the development of the pattern of need which is an essential if iron= ic concomitant to the development of Pinter's comic vision.

In this play, as in *The Birthday Party*, there is an agonized quest for identity in a world that seems hostile and indifferent. The characters respond in different fashion but equally funnily and pathetically to the demands of this environment: Davies through his excessive and hilarious xenophobia and patently ridiculous evasions of reality and Aston through his obsessive tinkering which seems to him to be the only way of coming to grips with an incomprehensible world of technological and mechanical facelessness.

All the characters strive desperately if unsuccessfully to impose some measure of order on their surroundings (effectively suggested in theatrical terms in the squalor of their surroundings which remains impervious to their efforts to impose any sort of order on it). In these efforts to impose order and coherence the farcical intrudes strongly, to the accompaniment once more of physical violence and savagery. The violence once more lurks just under the surface to erupt shockingly in action carefully orchestrated to balance the farcical and appalling aspects of the situation. The violence is often evoked in the form of games. The game involving Davies' bag holds explicit overtones of violence and savagery averted only through Aston's interference. Similarly the vicious game that Mick plays with the vacuum cleaner is merely a paradigm for the savagery built into the situation.

Underlying the violence there is once more the pathe=tic need for assertion of the self, a need which will ironically be denied at the end in the inevitable pattern of rejection and disintegration. At one level Aston's madness is also a powerfully suggestive device (common in contemporary comedy) to cope with the incomprehensible aspects of contemporary reality - to retreat into the shadow world of mental imbalance constitutes one response to the challenge of living.

In this play then there is a real development in the closer and more explicit portrayal of the menacing quality of life as a need, an awareness of some defi=ciency in interpersonal relationships. The charac=ters are still human derelicts (which does not, how=ever, imply that one cannot readily identify with them in their aspirations and dreams and defeats), caught in a hostile environment and being seemingly inarticulate, but their attitude and stance at the end of the play are not materially different from those of the heroes of the later more sophisticated plays.

The Collection and *The Lover*, although relatively short plays, are important in the development of Pin=ter's comic vision because they show an advance in the choice of more affluent and more articulate cha=racters, thus a more sophisticated brand of dramatic language and also an overt shift to more explicitly sexual relationships - all of which will be seen to be features of the later plays, being a concomitant

to the shift from menace to manners.

In *The Collection* specifically there is an exploration of the theme of the ambiguity of sexual roles as well as the concern for friendship, an issue which accompanies the theme of the quest for identity throughout, up to *Betrayal*.

The menace is more consciously suppressed in both these plays, surfacing only briefly and then as an integral part of the games played in the social context. The violence is still more explicit in *The Collection*, and in this play there is also a strong utilization of the devices of menace. *The Lover* is a clearer instance of the primacy of the game element - in fact, it might be said that the meticulously worked-out game in this play is a logical development from the improvised games of *The Collection*. Together with the more detailed game and the more meticulous observance of rules in *The Lover*, there is a lower incidence of pure violence, the violence and aggression seemingly sublimated in the intricate rules of the game. Part of the games played in both plays is still an obsession (particularly in *The Collection*) with the verification of truth in recollection, and thus the influence of the past on the present, with the implication that this influence is an inhibitory and compromising one.

A strong similarity to Coward has been noted by some critics, notably Hirst (1979) in a trend to link Pinter, persuasively, to my mind, to the manners tradition of English drama. What is particularly noticeable is the fact that the link with Coward is found in Coward's work of the thirties, his obsession with decadence and despair hidden under a suavely sophisticated social veneer. It would seem that under a twentieth-century version of Restoration innuendo lurks the quality of despair typical of the sixties and the seventies as expressed in the works of contemporary comic dramatists.

It is feasible to regard the consciously elegant language and the meticulously structured social games as efforts to structure reality, to create a sense of fixedness in the midst of a nauseatingly unstable world of flux. Certainly these two plays move away from the world of undefined menace to a world in which the menace is firmly, recognizably rooted in man and the social environment. Man, always in a situation of need, needs desperately to be able to fasten on to something which despite all his manoeuvrings and machinations constantly seems to evade him.

The Homecoming, as indicated before, occupies a position of some ambivalence, being situated at the far end of the comic spectrum, even within the limits of the contemporary vision of comedy. In a certain sense it can be regarded as a black parody of the conventional vision of comedy - a judgment based on

the total lack of redemption and reconciliation found at the end of the play. Even though the lack of redemption is a fixed characteristic of contempo= rary comedy, leading to the characteristically over-accepting attitude, the tone of *The Homecoming* is too explicit, too unironic, to permit any other interpre= tation. It might be suggested that the characters in the play are not evil but desperate, but even this fails in the absence of any moral structure (however contingent or relative) whatsoever. In this respect one is again powerfully reminded that Harold Hobson found a "moral vacuum" in the play which upsets the final balance.

The play represents a curious development. On the one hand there is a markedly strong development in the direction of the manners style in the more so= phisticated and intricate evolution of games and the careful observance of the rules of these games. On the other hand there is an appallingly vicious brand of violence, not only physical but verbal as well. The parallel development of violence and manners seems to occasion a curious quality of stasis, which is perhaps responsible for the abrupt plunge the play takes into unrelieved darkness. The obtrusive violence seems to underscore the utter lack of love and caring, making a vicious mockery of the needs revealed at various stages and in varying intensity, and this perhaps accounts for the fact that the audience is hard put to it to respond in any way compassionately.

So, whereas the characters are revealed in their stark, imperfect reality, seemingly pitiful and forlorn, one cannot really feel compassion. Therefore their quest for identity and their pursuit of various dreams, while in keeping with the pre-occupations of comedy, acquire an air or ludicrousness untempered by compassion.

There are various aspects of this play which tie it into the mainstream of development pointed out here. The theme of the relativity of truth as presented through recollection of the past, and the way in which the past inhibits present action, is prevalent, as is the exploration of relationships (sexual relationships as well as parental and filial ones) as part of the process of coming to terms with oneself, others and the environment.

Were one to assess the contribution of this play to the developmental pattern of Pinter's comic vision, it would seem that the increased and more sophisticated stress on the aspects of game and linguistic manipulation would place it in the manners tradition, whereas the overt violence and aggression which at times seem to annihilate the civilized overtones and invade the social enclosure, militate against any simplicity of interpretation. It is important to note that in the next play, *Old Times*, violence has been subdued almost entirely, has been sublimated into a particularly vicious and destructive form of talk - more articulate, more refined, more allusive,

but no less corrosive in its final effect.

Old Times, according to Hirst (1979), is the most sustained example of mannered comedy up to that point, and shows a number of important developments. There is a much stronger awareness of the inhibitory nature of the past with the concomitant themes of the contingent and relative nature of the truth as revealed in recollection. It has been suggested that the title supplies the only viable time-scheme for the play, and this would be true and have applicability within the wider scope of contemporary comedy as much as it is true of this play. The conflicting nature of recollections of the past by various characters would seem to account for the treacherous surface that the characters have to traverse. It is notable that humour seems to be the only means by which survival can be negotiated in this treacherously slippery environment. This would also lead to the games played in this play. More elaborate, more superficially entertaining and fundamentally destructive, more elegant because of the greater measure of linguistic dexterity and adeptness, these games constitute an ever more important part of the action in direct proportion to the elimination of overt violence. The themes explored are those of sexual conquest (including an exploration of ambivalent sexual relationships, as the suggested one between Kate and Anna) and of friendship, and in the working out of these themes overt violence disappears (apart from one incident involving Kate and Deeley at the end)

but the naked aggression underlying the action ex=
presses itself in equally wounding and destructive
verbal onslaughts.

The play has a curiously static quality, but under
the dreamlike surface lurk all the demons plaguing
twentieth-century man in the shape of a defective
awareness of identity, of anxiety, of unfulfilled
dreams, of hopelessness, of a crying need unlikely
in the present scheme of things to be fulfilled in
any meaningful way. The glaring light turned on
the characters, suspended motionlessly if ludicrous=
ly in their apathetic misery, highlights the stance
of man in the seventies as poignantly as it is given
voice by Jerry in the last scene of *Betrayal*.

No Man's Land contains in a highly individualized
and imaginative fashion the exploration of the themes
of the quest for identity, the awareness of need, the
matter of friendship and the nature of time (together
with the effect of the past, in varied recollected
form, on the present). There is also a stronger and
more insistent awareness of a nostalgia for a settled
past here.

The sense of dislocation is particularly strong in
this play. The no-man's land occupied by the cha=
racters in the play, the trembling balance between
the two fixed poles with neither being attainable is
in reality a paradigm for the situation of most con=
temporary heroes.

The characters are more typical too of the mannered style of comedy, as is the world in which these characters move. Hirst is affluent, sophisticated - but incongruously incoherent and ill-at-ease at times. This is ironically counterbalanced by Spooner, who although dressed as a vagrant uses the style and manner of a polished man of the world, adding immeasurably to the effect of dislocation which Pinter utilizes in his attempt to create a true image of the unease facing man in the present-day world.

This play contains the most elegant use of language and also the most marked allusive structure. The characters are highly articulate, the verbal stratagems constituting the strongest elements of the games that are still insistently played. The intricacies of the game should be carefully noted, for there are inversions (as for example through the contrasts engendered in Spooner's speech and dress) which add to the ironic quality of the play. There is the added purely Restoration touch of the scheming servants (Foster and Briggs) from whom some semblance of overt violence and aggression springs.

The characters, in the course of painful recollections about themselves, move in a world devoid of meaning and hope, playing intricate games to exorcise the meaninglessness, and using language as a stratagem to cover their nakedness - only to succeed, ironically, in uncovering their nakedness and to stand defenceless in the face of a threat which cannot be

comprehended, evaded or surmounted. It is important to note that one of the implications of the movement towards manners is that overt violence and aggression are gradually contained more and more effectively within a fixed social framework constituted of careful manoeuvring and games, but that the menace is no less real and terrifying for being known, still inculcating in the ludicrously stripped characters the dread and anxiety indissolubly linked to men devoid of hope and so impervious to redemption and reconciliation.

This can be seen most strongly and most particularly in the latest play, which is to a large extent a culmination of a development. *Betrayal* is cast perfectly in the mould of the comedy of manners, with the menace seemingly totally submerged - to emerge more subtly but no less terrifyingly from the social environment and from the games played with such meticulous observance of the rules. The pattern of need is particularly strongly evident here, with the almost unbearably ironic concomitant of betrayal at every level and in every nuance.

The compromising nature of the past in its inhibitory effect on the present is explored in particularly imaginative fashion through the dramatic structure. The very sophisticated texture of the play, covering as it does the painful uncertainties, anxieties and fears of the polished and articulate characters, adds to the impact of the play when seen within the context

of the contemporary comic world. The play is very much an imaginative twentieth-century recasting of a Restoration play with the profoundly significant difference that the quality of redemption is totally missing, leaving the characters to face the world with an over-accepting attitude that hints forlornly at a fortitude born of hopelessness and lostness.

Thus, in Pinter's comedy, there is still the insist= ence on the social interrelationships that have al= ways been a staple of comedy. The ludicrous appears in the inability or unwillingness of characters to adapt fully or to integrate themselves fully into the social context. The ludicrous also consists in their woefully inadequate attempts to realize their most cherished dreams, a shortcoming that may be tied most meaningfully to the vision of a disintegrating world as a backdrop to their efforts.

The ironic principle, the awareness of an underlying incongruity or disparateness, is still an integral principle in this drama. There is, however, a grea= ter degree of disparateness to be perceived in the world and this would seem to preclude redemption and reconciliation, leading inevitably to a bleak, iro= nic, wry, forlorn awareness of the exigencies of reality.

Apart from its visceral impact, Pinter's work, espe= cially in the later plays, has a great deal of in= tellectual appeal, through his sophisticated manipu=

lation of language.

Increasingly, too, the elegance and sophistication of his language and his characters have led to the development of a more mannered style of comedy very much in line with a main trend, indeed *the* main trend in the tradition of English drama in the course of the past three centuries.

True to the spirit of comedy there is in all these plays an awareness of imperfection and limitation, with the important added consideration that this awareness has become increasingly corrosive and forlorn, inculcating the over-accepting attitude as the only possible mode of response. Comedy is thus truly the only means of coping with the despair of contemporary man - the farcical translates effectively an impression of the fractured existence of man into dramatic form. The only response is a metaphorical rude gesture and a laugh of sardonic derision - to hide a pathetic and sad awareness of inefectuality in a world from which the gods have departed.

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7 SUMMARY

COMEDY IN THE SEVENTIES: A STUDY OF CERTAIN PLAYS BY HAROLD PINTER

Harold Pinter emerges from a survey of critical responses to his work as being at once the most praised and the most reviled of contemporary British playwrights. The present study is an attempt to shed some light on some of the problems confronting the reader of his works through approaching his plays as exemplars of the contemporary comic vision.

Chapter 1 contains a survey of criticism on Pinter. Criticism of his work has to some extent crystallized into certain trends or "schools". What emerges from a survey of twenty years' intensive critical activity is the fact that critical response to his work is as ambiguous and unsettled as ever. This is part of the motivation for the present study.

In dealing with criticism of his work, then, the fol= lowing broad categories may be isolated.

Positive judgment has almost consistently centred on his undeniably effective manipulation of language. He is generally conceded to be a master craftsman of dramatic language with an acutely attuned ear for the

nuances of speech.

Strong negative criticism has centred on his being wilfully and arbitrarily obscure. This characteris= tic can also be interpreted as ambiguity or complexi= ty. A number of critics have sought to deal with the bafflingly ambiguous nature of the plays by re= sorting to myth and ritual as aids to understanding. There has also been some concern with the significance of Pinter's Jewish descent.

Far from regarding Pinter as esoteric and complex, some critics have maintained that his work is purely realistic, even naturalistic. This realism, however, is of a particular type which induces a sense of dislo= cation in the audience, and which has also induced a number of critics to regard Pinter as an exponent of the Absurd school.

A certain sense of reservation has been noted regard= ing the lack of moral vision in his work (particularly as regards *The Homecoming*).

A promising area of critical concern has been the concern with Pinter's comic vision. It was illus= trated that while many critics have indicated areas of comic appeal in his work, no single and exhaustive study of Pinter's comic vision has yet been under= taken. The aims formulated at the end of this chap= ter then are:

The formulation of a contemporary theory of comedy, inductively developed; and the application of this definition to

(a) Pinter's six full-length plays; and
(b) the two short television plays (*The Collection* and *The Lover*).

Chapter 2 deals with the justification for dealing seriously with generic distinctions. It is suggested that the playwright reveals his vision of life and the world most clearly in imbuing it with a sense of either tragedy or comedy. The study of genre is thus an important aid, a *way into the play*.

In spite of newer terms being invented, it is decided to adhere to the term *comedy*, without resorting to any qualifying adjectives.

Comedy is to be regarded as a mirror of the times, thus a new definition is needed for each new age: the *permanent ways* of comedy remain, while the *variable superstructure* is adapted to the changing needs of the times.

Chapter 3 contains a detailed examination and evaluation of comic theory. The difficulties facing the theorist of comedy are analysed and the field of investigation narrowed down to *comic drama*.

Some attention is paid to the fact that laughter theory and comic theory have tended to be confused. Laughter theory (as it incorporates views on catharsis also) is carefully evaluated and the "invasion" of laughter theory into comic theory disposed of with the perspective that laughter could be regarded as an *inessential adjunct* of comedy. Catharsis is accorded a carefully limited validity.

Comedy is discussed under various headings. In the critical consideration of comic theory a certain progression can be observed: the discussion starts with a consideration of comedy and society (as this aspect of comedy is generally considered to be the most inviolate of the *permanent ways* of comedy) and progresses ultimately to a consideration of comedy and cosmic homelessness; comedy and the despair of contemporary man (this aspect being the most recent addition to the *variable superstructure*). In between, other aspects are considered and evaluated, such as incongruity, intellectual concerns and objectivity, the aspects of criticism or reduction, satire, compassion, limitation and imperfection, insight and maturity as well as acceptance, myth, redemption and the metaphysics of comedy.

A brief discussion of the relationships of comedy follows: farce is now generally regarded as a device of comedy rather than as a mode in itself, and tragedy is seen to have been temporarily eclipsed in a world devoid of faith in a metaphysical entity.

Following on this survey, a tentative *notion* of comedy could be formulated to act as a guideline in dealing with the works of a number of contemporary authors. These authors are Tom Stoppard, Joe Orton, Simon Gray, Peter Nichols and Trevor Griffiths.

A discussion of representative works by these playwrights yields the impression that while many of the permanent ways of comedy have remained (such as its social character, its vision of the disparateness of the world, its insistence on game and play, on the primacy of language, the importance of compassion, revelation, awareness of limitation, there has been an important movement in the direction of a totally bleak and non-redemptive characteristic in this drama. The typical comic hero in the contemporary situation is more isolated and at the end of the play is frozen in a characteristically catatonic stance.

The themes that emerge most persuasively are those of the contingent nature of truth and the paralysing influence of the past on the present.

The inhibitory effect of the past on the present has had a profound influence on the time-context of comedy, for the time-scheme has now persuasively become past-present instead of the traditional one of present-future. As a concomitant of this change there has been a movement towards a lack of hope and redemption in the place of the traditional hopeful pattern symbolized by the redemptive ending.

In the framework of contemporary literature one could then assert that the comic vision has become a means of coping with despair, of asserting man's residual dignity in the face of blankly hostile and often incomprehensible assaults on his sensibility. The black jokes and the savage humour often serve as a weapon against the invasions of emptiness, the awareness of cosmic homelessness, so that contemporary comedy has become a means of coping with the "whole experience", the flux and evanescence constituting modern life.

It is thus feasible to suggest that much of what has been called Theatre of the Absurd could equally well come under the umbrella of the contemporary vision of comedy.

This definition of comedy is developed for the purpose of finding a *way into* the plays of Harold Pinter.

In the course of a study of Pinter's comic vision it emerges that there is a clear developmental pattern. From the earliest *comedies of menace* his work has changed very markedly into *comedies of manners*, so that the latest play, *Betrayal*, is a pure example of the manners tradition in English drama.

The Birthday Party is a comedy of menace: in a world peopled by pathetically inadequate characters two menacing figures intrude. The characters in the

play constantly try (if pathetically and ineffectually) to adapt to the social situation. Stanley emerges as a victim of a faceless and nameless force, and forces the spectator into an uneasy awareness of kinship with him, sharing his obscure sense of guilt and anxiety. His limitations and imperfections are mercilessly revealed so that he stands, ultimately, battered into submission, in the characteristic stance of catatonic over-acceptance. The play is both funny and frightening, the violence obtrusive.

The Caretaker can still be regarded as a comedy of menace, but there is a real development in the sense that an awareness of mutual need has come into play. The play also hinges, as does the previous one, on an agonized quest for identity in a world that seems hostile and indifferent. The characters are shown up most revealingly in their efforts to come to grips adequately with an incomprehensible world of technological and mechanical facelessness. This striving is often accompanied by eruptions of violence, and farcical action has come, in this play, to be a paradigm for action in the pathetic need for assertion of the self. The quality of menace in this play has come to centre in a need for more fulfilling personal relationships. The characters in the play are still human derelicts, caught in a seemingly hostile environment and seemingly inarticulate, but their attitude and stance at the end of the play are not materially different from those of the heroes of the later, more sophisticated plays.

The Collection and *The Lover*, although relatively short plays, are important in the development of Pinter's comic vision because they involve more affluent and sophisticated characters, more elegant dramatic language and an overt shift to more explicitly sexual relationships - all of which constitute features of the later plays, being a concomitant of the shift from menace to manners.

From this point onwards (and, incidentally, from this point onwards a strong similarity between Pinter and Coward has been noted), it becomes feasible to regard the consciously elegant language and the meticulously structured social games as efforts to structure reality, to create a sense of fixedness in a world in which there is a nauseating awareness of flux.

The Homecoming, existing as it does to some extent in a moral vacuum, occupies a position of ambivalence - at the far end of the comic spectrum. The characters in the play might, charitably, be regarded as desperate more than evil, but even so the lack of a moral structure upsets the final balance.

The play is, on the one hand, a strong development in the direction of the comedy of manners. On the other hand, there is an appallingly vicious incidence of violence. The parallel development of violence and manners seems to occasion a curious quality of stasis, which is perhaps responsible for the abrupt

plunge the play takes into unrelieved darkness. The obtrusive violence underscores the lack of love and caring, vividly highlighting the lack of redemption so painfully apparent in contemporary drama.

In *Old Times*, regarded by some as the most sustained example of mannered comedy so far, there is a much stronger awareness of the inhibitory nature of the past, with the concomitant themes of the contingent and relative nature of the truth as revealed in re= collection. The title of the play strikingly reveals the only valid time-scheme of contemporary comedy, for whereas the traditional time-scheme has been *present-future*, it has become oppressively clear that the time-scheme of contemporary comedy can be no other than *past-present*, with the present heavily compromised by the detritus of the past.

In this play recollection is the central action, and the conflicting nature of recollections of the past by various characters would seem to account for the treacherous surface that the characters have to tra= verse. It is notable that humour seems to be the only means by which survival can be negotiated in this dangerously slippery environment. The games played in deadly earnest by the characters are more elaborate, more superficially entertaining, more fundamentally destructive, more elegant because of the greater measure of linguistic dexterity and adeptness. The games constitute an ever more impor= tant part of the action in direct proportion to the

elimination of overt violence. Under the curiously static quality of the play lurk the familiar demons plaguing twentieth-century man in the shape of a defective awareness of identity, of anxiety, of unfulfilled dreams, of hopelessness, of a crying need, unlikely in the present scheme of things to be fulfilled in any meaningful way.

No Man's Land contains in a highly individualized and imaginative fashion the exploration of the themes of the quest for identity, the awareness of need, the matter of friendship and the nature of time (together with the effect of the past, in varied recollected form, on the present). There is also a stronger and more insistent awareness of a nostalgia for a settled past.

The character types are more typical of the more mannered style of comedy, as is the world in which the characters move. This play also contains a very marked allusive structure - the elegant language constitutes a sophisticated verbal game which once again becomes a paradigm for existence. It is important that one of the implications of the move towards *manners* is that overt violence and aggression (so prevalent in the *comedies of menace*) are gradually contained more and more effectively within a fixed social framework constituted of careful manoeuvring and games. The menace, however, is no less terrifying for being known, still inculcating in the ludicrously stripped characters the dread and anxiety

indissolubly linked to men devoid of hope and so impervious to redemption and reconciliation.

This is most noticeable in *Betrayal*, Pinter's most recent play. This play is cast totally in the *manners* mould, with the menace seemingly completely submerged - to emerge more subtly but no less terrifying from the social environment and from the games played with such meticulous observance of the rules. The pattern of need is most conspicuous in this play, with the almost unbearably ironic concomitant of betrayal at every level and in every nuance. The compromising nature of the past with its inhibitory effect on the present is explored in particularly imaginative fashion through the dramatic structure. The sophisticated texture of the play, covering as it does the painful uncertainties, anxieties and fears of the polished and articulate characters, adds to the impact of the play. The play is very much an imaginative twentieth-century recasting of a Restoration play with the profoundly significant difference that the quality of redemption has disappeared, leaving the characters to face the world with an over-accepting attitude that hints forlornly at a fortitude born of hopelessness and lostness.

This study has thus resolved itself in a threefold manner. What has been achieved is

(a) a contemporary definition of comedy, tailored to the needs of contemporary (British) comedy;

(b) an interpretation of Harold Pinters' major plays through an analysis of his comic vision; and

(c) the establishment of a developmental pattern, from menace to manners, in the plays of Harold Pinter.