

COMEDY IN THE SEVENTIES:
A STUDY OF CERTAIN PLAYS BY HAROLD PINTER

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CHAPTER 1

Also ... there was her report of an evening spent at a Pinter play, nearly the whole of which she had sat wondering what in God's name had happened to the prompter. "Mother. Those are pregnant. Pauses. They are not. Actors. Forgetting. Their lines" - Peter de Vries: *Forever Panting*

More rubbish has been written about Harold Pinter than all his contemporaries put together - Simon Trussler: *Harold Pinter*

1 A SURVEY OF PINTER CRITICISM

1.1 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. His work seems to have exerted an endless fascination (or revulsion) on theatre audiences, reviewers and critics. He would seem to be the most perplexing playwright of what has been termed the new renaissance in British drama. Critical material on Pinter has proliferated, and more material is constantly being published, while any sort of coherence of judgment seems to be as far away as it has ever been.

The question as to whether a further study of the Pinter oeuvre is justifiable calls for consideration in responsible fashion. What follows is a concise survey of critical judgments of Pinter in which major areas of critical concern will be *outlined*¹⁾ together with indications of profitable lines of enquiry that are still open.

1. Following the survey a statement of the intention underlying this thesis will be formulated together with an indication of the field of study within the Pinter canon.

The survey will span his career from the horrified reactions to the first London production of *The Birthday Party* in 1958 to reviews of the last play, *Betrayal*, in November 1978.

What finally emerges from the survey of twenty years' intensive critical activity is the fact that critical response to his work is as ambiguous and unsettled as ever.

1.1.1 In 1958, following the first London production of *The Birthday Party*, reviews appeared which abruptly terminated the run of the play within the first week. Schroll (1969, p. 10) quotes a number of vituperative responses to the play, such as the one by Boothroyd (writing in *Punch*) who called the play "a masterpiece of meaningless significance", and Darlington (*Daily Telegraph*) who claimed that the play was torture to sit through as it "wallows in symbols and revels in obscurity". Cecil Wilson (*Daily Mail*) intimated that Pinter wrote the play to "kill hours he spent in the dressing room as an understudy".

Balancing the determined onslaught by reviewers puzzled and irritated by the apparent obscurity of the play, Harold Hobson (*Sunday Times*, May 25, 1958) established his critical perspicacity by prophetically hailing the "absorbing theatricality" of the play

and by asserting that Pinter "possesses the most original, disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London".

1.1.2

The outspokenly ambivalent attitude revealed by reviewers since 1958 is echoed in two reviews of the latest Pinter play, *Betrayal*. The reviewer for *Time*, T.E. Kalem, calls his review *Splinteresque* in ironic imitation of terms like Pinterese, Pinterian and Pinteresque coined by critics despairing of finding a comfortable critical label for Pinter. He ends his review by voicing the reservation 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 passages, feeling vaguely shaken down" (*Time*, 27 November, 1978, p. 66).

In contrast to this, the reviewer for *Newsweek*, Jack Kroll, refers to the play as "an exquisite play, brilliantly simple in form, and courageous in its search for a poetry that turns banality into a melancholy beauty" (*Newsweek*, 27 November, 1978, p. 41).

Also writing in 1978, but still anticipating the publication of *Betrayal*, Colin Ludlow summarizes the critical dilemma by saying that "of all the dramatists to emerge in the years immediately following the success of *Look Back in Anger*, Harold Pinter is perhaps the most difficult to comprehend. His plays contain no clearly articulated meaning, they depict

events which are frequently bizarre and invariably unexplained. Yet for all their strangeness they have proved more popular and enduring than the work of any of Pinter's contemporaries ... The opacity of Pinter's work has provoked two particular forms of critical response. On the one hand, the impatient rejection of it as wilfully obscure and wholly devoid of meaning. On the other, a passionate conviction of its profundity, which, because not easily grasped, criticism must seek to explain" (Ludlow, 1978, p. 60).

1.1.3 In evaluating criticism dealing with Pinter it might be as well to establish a few preliminary points.

The critical controversy surrounding Pinter has proved to be not at all amenable to easy resolution as a number of critics have discovered. Apart from the veritable plethora of articles (both popular and academic) and reviews, a significant number of books have appeared. Of these, only the books dealing

with Pinter will be listed¹⁾ to give an idea of his popularity as an object for critical scrutiny. Apart from these books, chapters on Pinter have appeared in practically every book dealing with the new British drama. Trussler has in fact baldly stated that "more rubbish has been written about Harold Pinter than all his contemporaries put together. And this in spite of Pinter's own occasional side-swipes at his more ingenious apologists ..." (Trussler, 1973, p. 13).

Before moving on to a consideration of specific areas of critical interest, it is perhaps apposite to quote a reservation expressed by Schroll (1969) and apparently supported by Pinter himself. A careful study of the relevant literature will reveal that much of what is said about his work ultimately becomes repetitive if not actually cliché-ridden. Pinter has become the victim, to a large extent, of what Wardle, quoted in Schroll (1969), has called theatrical fashion. Wardle ascribes a threefold pattern to

1. Books on Pinter include the following:

Kerr, 1967, *Harold Pinter*; Hinchliffe, 1970, *Harold Pinter*; Esslin, 1973, *Harold Pinter* (revision of *The Peopled Wound*); Trussler, 1973, *Harold Pinter*; Taylor, 1967, *Harold Pinter* (Writers and their Work); Baker and Tabachnik, 1973, *Harold Pinter*; Gordon, 1969, *Stratagems to Uncover Nakedness*; Hayman, 1968, *Harold Pinter*; Matthews, 1966, *The Primal Curse*; Quigley, 1975, *The Pinter Problem*; Dukore, 1976, *Where Laughter Stops*; Hollis, 1970, *The Poetics of Silence*; Burkman, 1971, *The Drama of Harold Pinter: Its Basis in Ritual* and Schroll, 1969, *Pinter: A Study of His Reputation*.

this phenomenon: "A new play of unmistakable power appears on the scene; it is taken up and given a position of dignity in a movement; the movement turns into an overgrown cliché and is discarded together with the play" (Schroll, p. 6).

Although this cannot be regarded as being ultimately true of Pinter, the truth of the matter is that his critical reputation has tended to obscure his artistic achievement, impeding honest critical assessment. Inevitably critical commonplaces such as Pinterism and Pinteresque¹⁾ (violently rejected by Pinter himself as stultifying terms) have come into existence, with quite disastrous effects. These terms, originally descriptive of a certain phase and certain quality in the playwright's work, eventually become critical traps. To adhere to the mould is to stagnate, to break out is once more to confuse loyalists and denigrators alike. Schroll says that "the great acclaim for Pinter, I find, exerted subtle pressures

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1. B.O. States, commenting on non-recognition in Pinter's work (1968), contends that we "have invented special words for this activity (*Pintercourse*, *Pinterism*, *Pinterotic*, etc.) which Pinter understandably detests, but it seems we have needed them as semantic consolation for his having hidden from us the thing they refer to" (p. 477).

Kennedy (1976) ascribes a slightly different purpose to these convenient tags when he avers that "terms like *Pinterish* and *Pinteresque* have come to denote the irrationality of everyday conversation, its bad syntax, tautologies, pleonasm, repetitions, non sequiturs and self-contradictions" (p. 169).

on critics; their commentaries tended to follow common formulas, either praising indiscriminately or inevitably raising particular objections" (1969, p. 7).

Pinter himself has commented on the excess of enthusiasm by disparaging the attempts at "overblown pinning down": "I'm a very good example of a writer who can write, but I'm just a writer; and I think that I've been overblown tremendously because there is a dearth of really fine writing, and people tend to make too much of a meal" (quoted in Schroll, p. 90).

1.2 The following consideration of criticism of Pinter will only aim at isolating broad categories in Pinter criticism, and does not aim at being in any way an exhaustive discussion. Stress here will fall not so much on detailed considerations of separate plays but rather on more comprehensive judgments.

1.2.1 Positive judgments of Pinter's work have almost consistently centred on his undeniably effective manipulation of language. This interest has culminated in a number of major studies of Pinter's language, the most important of which will be briefly evaluated here. The critical output of the sixties on his theatre language was mostly contained in

articles, but in the course of the seventies these insights have been consolidated in several full-length studies. Martin Esslin to a large extent summarizes the most important statements about Pinter's dramatic language in the following observations: "Pinter uses language to disclose and disguise meaning ... Words, in Pinter's plays, become weapons of domination and subservience, silences explode, nuances of vocabulary strip human beings to the skin." Significantly, he claims that not "even his severest critics have ever cast doubt on Pinter's virtuosity in the use of language ... and rightly: few English playwrights before him have displayed so acute an observation of the mannerisms, repetitions and nonsensicalities of the vernacular as it is actually spoken". Esslin also goes on to stress the "essentially dramatic nature of his use of language" (Esslin, 1973, p. 48). (At this stage Esslin also makes an observation that is particularly valuable within the context of this study. He claims that "the precision, economy and control which Pinter exercises over the language of his dialogue firmly link him to the tradition of contemporary English high-comedy" (p. 49).)

John Russell Taylor, in a book on the theatre language of Pinter, Osborne, Arden and Wesker, explores the idea of "subtext", which has become quite a commonplace of Pinter criticism, in some detail. He points out the necessity (pp. 29-32) of good actors realising dramatically the subtextual texture of

his dramatic writing. He also extends the idea of good actors to good readers, to "imagine the subtextual reality of each character ... with fullness and accuracy" (1972, p. 33).

Taylor deals with another central pre-occupation of Pinter - the distrust of language and the way in which this distrust is given dramatic shape.¹⁾ "... Pinter has questioned, seriously and continuously, the traditional subject matter and traditional purposes of drama. His meticulous techniques of language and gesture serve a consistent and active dramatic purpose. He dispenses with verbal statement, because he distrusts it; he follows no recognized dramatic structure unless he needs to do so" (p. 95).

Taylor also voices a reservation that has been prevalent in Pinter criticism, viz. that "Harold Pinter has explored words and gestures so consciously and meticulously that he may seem more interested in theatre language than in theatre speech. He treats the money in his pocket with extraordinary care, but is never seen to purchase anything with it ... it is disconcerting to have nothing to quote in order to

1. Pinter does not himself subscribe to the currently fashionable view that language is used for purposes of "non-communication". He has been quoted as claiming that "we communicate only too well", and ascribes the following function to his dramatic speech: "One way of looking at speech is to say that it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness" (quoted in Gordon, 1969, p. 4).

illustrate an author's engagement with the world he lives in" (p. 93).¹⁾

Lois Gordon (1969) echoes the concern with words. She refers to Pinter's acknowledged "nausea with words" (Popkin, 1964, p. 578), and she posits the central premise that words are constant stratagems to cover nakedness (cf. Footnote, p. 9). She refers to a simple pattern operative in the plays. "The 'intruder's' appearance indicates the breakdown of the patterned words and games, the habitual stratagems to cover nakedness. ... At last, as the internal menace is fully projected externally, language disintegrates ..." (p. 5). She also claims that the "disintegration of normal language becomes a measure of dramatic tension" (p. 4) and claims that "it is with the fine edge of language that Pinter cuts through the verbal apparel by which man hides his naked, often vicious, reality" (p. 4).

Conversely, some significant work has been done on Pinter's use of silence as a dramatic device. John Lahr (1969) regards the "strategy for silence" in modern art as "an aesthetic attempt to revive the sense, numbed by noise and flaccid speech which glosses experience rather than confronting it" (p. 54). He links this to Pinter's practice in

1. This reservation is given impetus in the scornful description of Pinter's style by Trewin (quoted in Schroll, 1969, p. 25): "You know ... the comic macabre: suggest a lot, mean little, and leave it to your audience".

especially *Silence*. (Pinter himself has observed that "there are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is employed" [Lahr, p. 85]. In this sense language becomes a "mocking smokescreen".) Lahr claims that "Pinter's plays reduce experience to textures and tones so spare that they create a sense of their negative components. Each word spoken reveals the glacial silence beneath it" (p. 85). He finally likens the pattern of language and silence in Pinter's work to the structure of "minimal sculpture" (p. 86). He concludes that "in acknowledging silence, Pinter forces his work to eschew sentiment and confront a cold and intractable human experience" (p. 87).

Hollis (1970) claims, in support of the above, that "the effect of Pinter's language, then, is to note that the most important things are not being said, that the dove that would descend to speak the procreative word still hovers amid the precincts of silence" (p. 13). He further states that Pinter has sought, in dealing with his characters, "to manifest the exhaustion of their capacities", and is striving to do so by means of using "the normal speech of the characters to reveal the poverty, the emptiness of their lives" (p. 16). He makes the valuable observation that "Pinter begins at this point of exhaustion and in his form and fashion forges a new poetic, a poetic of silence" (p. 17).

The latter half of the seventies has seen the publication of three influential books on theatre language. The first to be discussed is Andrew Kennedy's *Six Dramatists in Search of a Language* (1976).

Kennedy quotes Pinter as having said that "I am pretty well obsessed with words when they get going" (p. 165). He concisely characterizes Pinter's language in the following terms: "In sum, Pinter's dialogue tends to 'correspond' to what we hear outside the world of the play, even though it is made to 'cohere' with the overall rhythm of the play" (p. 169). He further feels that Pinter has developed a characteristic manner of dealing with the "sense of language nausea" (p. 172) that can be regarded as a hallmark of some contemporary dramatists. Pinter succeeds in "'making something occur' out of the felt paralysis of words" (p. 172). Ultimately, after dealing in detail with the way Pinter's language (in "ritualized interplay", "highly-patterned, colloquially based verbal games", "modish language of hints and guesses", p. 178) functions in three plays, he concludes by deciding that "the urge against explicit or rhetorical language which was first expressed by the Symbolist poets ('De la musique avant toute chose')¹⁾ ... has finally found expression in a carefully limited dramatic language" (pp. 190-191).

1. "Music before and above all else."
(Verlaine, *Art Poétique*: opening words.)

The most exhaustive study so far of Pinter's dramatic language is to be found in Quigley's *The Pinter Problem*. He has made the crucial discovery that language is used in Pinter to negotiate and renegotiate relationships. (This book will be discussed in more detail in the chapter on Pinter and comedy.)

He concludes that the "linguistic battles are not the product of an arbitrary desire for dominance but crucial battles for control of the means by which personality is created in the social system to which they belong" (p. 276).

Gareth Lloyd Evans is the most recent commentator on Pinter's language. In a chapter on Pinter in *The Language of Modern Drama* (1977) he calls him "the deceptive poet" (p. 166) and further contends that the amount of close critical explication devoted to Pinter's language is reminiscent of the type and amount of attention customarily devoted to verse. In the pre-occupation of critics with Pinter's language, Evans finds distinct support for the idea that Pinter's language "shares a quality or qualities with that of poetic dramatists" (p. 167). While Pinter's language is ostensibly a faithful copy of the "real" speech of men, it is in reality "as taut as a bowstring" (p. 169) and "contains a potential that the real neither has nor intends" (p. 169).

He attributes a very precise, almost musical, structure to Pinter's language, and concludes that "Pinter is not concerned with the actualities of man in society but, taking on the traditional function of the poet, with some of the realities of what man is. He uses, as many poets have done, the sense-data of the contemporary world as a sharp salt, but it is no more" (p. 176). This view would seem to put Taylor's reservation, quoted above, into perspective (cf. p. 9).

1.2.2 A second major area of criticism, however, involves strong (negative) criticism. Many critics have accused Pinter of being wilfully and unnecessarily obscure, confusing issues arbitrarily. There are numerous critics who are resentful of the seemingly deliberate opacity and sense of mystification that Pinter creates. (There is an obverse implication to this complaint. The apparent transparency of *Betrayal* seems to have caught critics unawares, as witness the reviewer in the *Listener* of 23 November, 1978.)¹⁾

1. "*Betrayal*, the new slimline Pinter at the Lyttelton, has taken everyone by surprise by being so straightforwardly about what it seems to be about" (Elsom, 1978, p. 700).

This frustration at the apparent lack of meaning in many of the plays is linked also to the outrage of those critics who strive to find coherent patterns of symbolism in his work. Writing about early reviewers of Pinter's work, Schroll states that "all of the reviewers looked for deeper meaning in the play; they demanded that a clear-cut, coherent, symbolic statement be made in a play. The majority of the reviewers, who found no deep symbolism clearly evident, became outraged at Pinter" (1969, p. 13). A typical instance of this is the *Commonweal* review by Wilfrid Scheel, quoted by Schroll, who finds the play "devoid of deeper meanings" and who asserts that though the plays appear to be parables or allegories, in the end their symbols "don't add up" to anything (Schroll, 1969, p. 51).

Other critics have justified Pinter's use of a sometimes mystifying ambiguity by relating it ultimately to his dramatic purpose. Thus, M.C. Bradbrook (1964) speaks of "exciting but mysterious action" (p. 190) and a "sinister degree of mystification" (p. 189). In the same vein, Richard Schechner (1966) finds the mystification to serve an organic purpose. "His refusal to reveal information seems strange to us because since Ibsen we have been accustomed to knowing all, sooner or later ... Pinter intentionally disappoints this expectation and leaves his audience anxiously confused" (p. 176). He then concludes that the "essential characteristic of Pinter's work is its conceptual incompleteness" (p. 177). The

puzzle inherent in Pinter's work is, to his mind, "paradigmatically theatrical", and he feels that, if there is a "meaning in Pinter, it seems to me closely related to both Henry James and Franz Kafka. James was most interested in probing the human psyche to its depths of confusion and fragmentary bases. Kafka was always telling stories in which his heroes had no sense of what was happening to them. Combine these two, and I think you have what Pinter seeks" (p. 184).

In *Anger and After* Taylor talks of the "obsessive, dreamlike quality which forbids any questioning on the exact significance of what is happening before our eyes, but even if on reflection we begin to wonder what it all means, we soon find that Pinter has covered his tracks pretty effectively" (p. 325). One way of doing this is to cast "doubt upon everything by matching each apparently clear and unequivocal statement with an equally clear and unequivocal statement of its contrary" (p. 325). Taylor is an active apologist for this aspect of Pinter's work when he claims that "the ambiguity, then, not only creates an unnerving atmosphere of doubt and uncertainty, but also helps to generalize and universalize the fears and tensions to which Pinter's characters are subject. The more doubt there is about the exact nature of the menace ... the less chance is there of anyone in the audience feeling that anyway it could not happen to him. The kinship with Kafka is obvious" (p. 328).

Two critics seem to put this matter into perspective. Dias (1968) points out that Pinter starts his plays with a mystery and then develops them into further mysteries instead of clarifying them. He feels that in exploring the frustrations and yearnings of his characters, Pinter frequently "fumbles, makes mistakes, or plunges into obscurity. But, taken on his own intuitive terms, he can be a rewarding dramatist because of his talent for creating and sustaining suspense and an atmosphere of foreboding" (p. 124). (This view is supported by Walter Kerr [1967c] when he states that Pinter is obsessed with "defining a situation by trial and error rather than defining one by fiat, crawling over the human surface with as many tentacles as an octopus" (p. 10).)¹⁾

Finally, Simon Trussler (1973) says that "too much time has been spent on academic exegesis of Pinter *merely* because his plays are complex - as if complexity were a virtue in itself. What needs to be examined is why that complexity contributes to making *The Caretaker* a great play and *The Homecoming*,²⁾ for

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1. A later argument in the thesis is going to be that Pinter succeeds, intuitively, in gauging the temper of the times and then in portraying it in a form that may best be described as a contemporary manifestation of the comic mode.
 2. Interpretations of the "meaning" of this play have fluctuated wildly (Schroll, 1969, pp. 64-69 offers an interesting selection of [largely negative] views), culminating in the statement by Glenn Loney, writing in the *Educational Theatre Journal* that it had become "the height of fashion to bore one's friends with endless analyses of the allegorical functions of *The Homecoming*" (Schroll, 1969, p. 68).

my money, an intellectualized melodrama which is not ambiguous in any purposeful sense, just arbitrarily enigmatic" (p. 15). Pinter himself has claimed that the "more acute the experience the less articulate its expression" (quoted in Burkman, 1971, p. 6).

1.2.3 Many critics have sought to explain this bafflingly ambiguous nature of the plays by resorting to myth and ritual as aids to interpretation.

Hugh Nelson, in an article on *The Homecoming: Kith and Kin* (in Brown, 1968, p. 154) feels that, because of its being so "deeply embedded in the Christian consciousness", the myth of the prodigal son stands out as one of the "few having a fairly universal coinage" (p. 154). He elaborates on this, suggesting finally that the "real significance of the 'prodigal' theme, however, lies not in the comparison but in the contrast" (p. 155). He finds another more significant though less familiar Biblical parallel in the story of Ruth/Ruth. Nelson finds that "besides illuminating the motives which are operating behind some of the play's more difficult moments, the comparison makes clear the ambivalence of Ruth's position" (p. 156). After pointing out similarities with the story of Ulysses (via Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*), Nelson concludes by saying that Pinter "is again showing us nothing more surprising or mystifying than man's primitive nature reasserting

itself, naked and demanding, from beneath the layers of intellectual and ethical sophistication with which it has been so carefully covered" (p. 163).

Quite a number of reviewers and critics have referred in passing to the nature of the ritualistic and the mythic in Pinter's work. One full-length book has appeared on this aspect of his work and this will be discussed a little more fully in order to shed light on this aspect of Pinter criticism.¹⁾ Katherine Burkman (1971) identifies two kinds of ritual which function in closely integrated fashion in the texture of Pinter's work. "On the one hand the plays abound in those daily habitual activities which have become formalized as ritual and have tended to become empty of meaning, an automatic way of coping with life ... My contention is that beneath the daily secular rituals which Pinter weaves into the texture of his plays - 'the taking of a toast and tea' - beat the rhythms of ancient fertility rites, which form a significant counterpoint to the surface rituals of the plays and which often lend the dramas their shapes and structure" (p. 10). She argues that Pinter "is reaching back over the centuries to archaic rhythms which have always dominated drama at its best ... If

1. The suggestion is not that Pinter deliberately seeks to impose ritual patterns on his plays. Burkman feels, however, that "the ideas of Frazer, Harrison and Murray are so much a part of the modern literary consciousness that Pinter could hardly have avoided an awareness of them" (p. 16).

Pinter's drama employs ritual to approach the mysteries of life, one may well in turn approach that drama through an attempt to understand his use of that ritual" (p. 17).

1.2.4 A somewhat peripheral concern has been with the fact of Pinter's Jewish descent. Nelson ties it in with Pinter's use of the "prodigal" theme in *The Homecoming*: "Two vital facts in Pinter's biography are that his family was Jewish and that he was a Shakespearean actor. Beyond the testimony of the plays themselves, this is the only solid justification for the remarks which follow" (Brown, 1968, p. 154). The remarks alluded to then deal specifically with the correspondences between the character Ruth in the play and the Biblical Ruth.

The influence imputed to Pinter's Jewishness is dealt with somewhat more insistently in an article by Reneé Winegarten called *The Anglo-Jewish Dramatist in Search of his Soul* (1966). She makes the point that there is no "school" of Anglo-Jewish writers (p. 41), but she contends that emancipation is only a comparatively recent phenomenon, after centuries of pogrom and ghetto, and finds significance in the fact of Kafka's influence on Pinter. Thus, "it is, significantly, Kafka, the first and doubtless the greatest of modern writers of Jewish origin to find a response in the bewildered

conscience of 'alienated' man everywhere" (p. 41). She insists that if the ostensibly Jewish element is "thin sometimes to the point of invisibility, nevertheless in general pre-occupations, in what they¹⁾ say and even more in what they do not say, they are revealing the uncertainties of makeshifts both in Anglo-Jewish society and in English society as a whole" (p. 42). Pinter's evocation of a world hemmed in by threats "awakens a special response in the Jewish spectator" (p. 42). The portrayal of Goldberg in *The Birthday Party* as the evil, intruding force is ambiguous. She cannot decide whether he is satirizing a formula or whether he is in "revolt against the hidden coercion which a certain element in Anglo-Jewish society sometimes brings to bear upon its would-be refractory members" (p. 46).

Another school of thought would have it that in *The Homecoming* Pinter presumably consciously attempts to "provide significance through the suppression of any explicit references to the family's Jewishness" (Supple, quoted in Weingarten, p. 47). This idea is supported in the book on Pinter by Baker and Tabachnik (1973). They conclude the book by saying that "through his art, the Hackney Jew - like the French half-Jew, Marcel Proust - attempts to capture the moment and set it above the uncertainty that time brings" (p. 148). They place Pinter firmly

1. The article deals with both Pinter and Peter Shaffer.

within the context of Hackney, where he was born and reared, explaining that "much of Pinter's work emphasizes the fear lurking just around the corner, the sense that peace remains only an illusion vulnerable to sudden destruction ... The circumstances and environment that surrounded Pinter's early life and school days help in understanding the quality of menace underlying his work" (p. 1). They go on to discuss the composition of the population (Jewish in the main) of Hackney and to evaluate the special problems facing the inhabitants of that area in the thirties and forties. They do feel, however, that the influence of Pinter's Jewish background is largely oblique.

1.2.5 Some critics, far from attributing all sorts of esoteric interpretations to Pinter's work, claim instead that he is a purely realistic playwright. Pinter himself has averred that "if you press me for a definition, I'd say that what goes on in my plays is realistic, but what I'm doing is not realism" (quoted in Burkman, 1971, p. 3). Lois Gordon stoutly maintains that Pinter is "neither an existentialist nor an absurdist, for he never portrays the existential dilemma wherein man seeks an order in an orderless universe. Pinter is simply, if a label is necessary, a ruthless realist" (p. 10). G. Wilson Knight has even taken this a step further by identifying Pinter as part of a "Kitchen-sink" movement

(Schroll, 1969, p. 48).¹⁾ Ossia Trilling has described Pinter as a member of a new English realist movement that portrays the "refusal of the common man to be put upon by the mumbo-jumbo ... of the new society ... seeking anew to enslave his free spirit" (1966).

Taylor (1962) expands on the idea of realism when he maintains that "Pinter's work brings us up against one of the great paradoxes of the theatre - that 'realism' on the stage can be achieved only by a sacrifice of reality - in its most acute form ... instead of regarding Pinter as the purveyor of dramatic fantasy he is usually taken for, we might equally regard him as the stage's most ruthless and uncompromising naturalist" (p. 356).²⁾

Arthur Ashworth identifies Pinter with realism but then makes the transition to the Absurd, as Pinter introduces "one or more characters that he builds in non-realistic terms" into a nucleus of realistic characters in a "real life" situation (1968, p. 150). In this way a situation is then turned askew and a

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1. In a review of the film of *The Homecoming* (*The Star*, 11 November, 1975) Robert Greig, however, maintains that "it's not quite kitchen-sink: the menace is larger because less easily defined, but the characters are as real as those in any naturalistic play".
 2. Lahr (1968) also comments on the naturalistic elements in Pinter's work, establishing and elaborating on a bond between Chekhov and Pinter in the process.

nightmare created.

1.2.6 The Absurd label has been a particularly clinging one. Esslin, who created the term as a loosely descriptive umbrella for the dramatists of the present age¹⁾, has since deplored the stultification of the term into a formula. The premises upon which this term rests are those of existentialist philosophy (in the literary manifestations of this philosophy as found in the works of Sartre and Camus). Ionesco, quoted in Esslin, has defined the Absurd as "that which is devoid of purpose ... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (1968, p. 23). Esslin himself explains that "the hallmark of this attitude is its sense that the certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away, that they have been tested and found wanting, that they have been discredited and [become] ... somewhat childish illusions" (p. 23).²⁾

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1. He has since defended the use of the term by referring to it as a kind of "intellectual shorthand" to describe similarities and shared philosophical and artistic premises, whether conscious or unconscious (quoted in Hinchliffe, 1967, p. 31).
 2. This radical lack of faith in contemporary Western culture, this spiritual malaise, will be shown to have great relevance in the central thesis of this study. An attempt is to be made to suggest that the contemporary comic attitude is in fact one way of confronting this desolate and forlorn world.

Esslin goes on to evaluate Pinter's work as expressive of the tenets of the Absurd. He finds, for example, that in *The Dumb Waiter* he "brilliantly fulfills Ionesco's postulate in completely fusing tragedy with the most hilarious farce" (1961, p. 269).

Esslin finds elements in the play that are at once "utterly true, wildly comic, and terrifying in their absurdity" (p. 269).

In talking about *The Birthday Party* he maintains that "in our present-day world, everything is uncertain and relative. There is no fixed point; we are surrounded by the unknown" (p. 273).

Amend (1967) has also commented on Pinter's work along these lines. "Pinter, as a playwright of the absurd, invariably prefers the tense, symbolic manner of Samuel Beckett ... Isolated elements in his plays are intensely realistic; the combination of elements is utterly absurd" (p. 165).

R.B. Parker links the Theatre of the Absurd even more closely to French existentialist theory in an article on *The Theory and Theatre of the Absurd* (1966).

Both Camus' idea of "positive rebellion"¹⁾ and Sartre's concept of "nausea" (pp. 421-423) are discussed in an attempt to account for the spiritual and intellectual climate which has precipitated the works of Beckett, Genêt, Ionesco and Pinter. He makes the point that there are two sorts of absurdity to be distinguished in the theatre of the Absurd: "On the one hand, the absurdity of people whom Ionesco calls the 'petit bourgeoisie', who hide from the terrors of isolation and choice behind complacent routines; and, on the other hand, the *conscious* absurdity of men who have realized and accepted their inescapable autonomy. By combining the two kinds, the theatre of the Absurd produces a sort of black farce - basically depressing yet often wildly funny" (p. 424).

He goes on to talk about the applicability of these concepts to Pinter's work, referring to his satire of the sense of futility in the routines of civilized life "in the empty ceremoniousness of [his] derelicts and illiterates" (p. 424), and his ambivalent attitude towards language - the "use of clichés in order

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1. Camus' positive rebellion can be broadly defined in the following terms: "Positive rebellion, on the contrary, ... will try to reduce time to a procession of human 'presents', living always in the self-conscious moment. Deprived of a future, each act then becomes its own justification and all acts are recognized as wholly contingent" (p. 422). Camus has also maintained that a jump from logic into transcendental faiths constitutes "philosophical suicide" (p. 421), besides being a dishonest attempt at shirking the confrontation with existential "angst".

not to communicate; on the other hand, it can also be a threat, since the absurdists emphasize that the sense of one's own identity depends on relationships" (p. 426).

Walter Kerr (1967a) has been most insistent about Pinter's involvement in the school of the Absurd. He states quite baldly that "Harold Pinter seems to me the only man working in the theatre today who writes existentialist plays existentially ... He remakes the play altogether so that it will function according to existentialist principle" (p. 3). He stoutly maintains that in *The Room* "the existentialist challenge is formidable - and, within the limited confines of the piece, absolutely met" (p. 10). He further says that Pinter exploits a contemporary form of terror (p. 17), and that "anxiety rises from no single guilty act and fears no clearly spelled-out retribution" (p. 19), so that a man's "dread ... becomes his environment" (p. 19). He feels ultimately that in adopting this particular style, Pinter has begun to restore "an old and neglected urge to enter the arena naked, ... with a firm determination to move as much as a man may move against whatever can be made to yield to him" (p. 44).

1.2.7 A number of critics have voiced reservations dealing with the apparent lack of moral vision in some of the plays. Harold Hobson, ever Pinter's staunchest supporter, has professed himself puzzled on one score. In an article (called, significantly, *Pinter Minus the Moral*), he criticizes *The Homecoming*. While the play has no "aesthetic defect", it contains a "moral vacuum" (p. 39).

Other critics likewise seized upon this. C.B. Mortlock (Schroll, 1969, p. 57) speaks of "inescapable crudities", Jack Sutherland (Schroll, p. 57) has called the philosophy behind all this "worthless and phoney", and Mortlock closed his review by saying "I hope I may never see a nastier play" (Schroll, p. 57).

Nelson, in his study of *The Homecoming* (in Brown, 1968, p. 145), feels that "beneath the stated values of the play there is a total absence of values, a void which is filled by the human family's animal struggle to survive and perpetuate itself" (p. 163). Victor Amend (1967), in adding up some debits and credits for Pinter, enumerates specific deficiencies, and concludes that "these four deficiencies add up to a fifth - that of a negative approach to values ... The negative approach can be highly effective, but it begins to defeat itself after several repetitions (p. 174).

This has not been an area of major critical concern, and mostly concerns *The Homecoming*.

1.2.8 One remaining area of critical activity seems to be promising, if still relatively unmapped. Numerous critics have alluded in greater or lesser detail (though mostly just glancingly) to the comic vision revealed in Pinter's work. No single and exhaustive major study dealing with Pinter's comic vision as a central concern has been done.

In the ensuing section the references to the comic aspects of Pinter's oeuvre will be surveyed and evaluated. The survey will be done in chronological order, with the specific purpose of indicating a gradual increase in critical opinions dealing with the comic in his work. There is also a definitely discernible tendency: the description of the quality of the comic in his work has almost imperceptibly changed from *comedy of menace* to *comedy of manners*. The main intention in this study is to trace and demonstrate this aspect of Pinter's work and the preliminary survey of this aspect of his work serves a useful introductory purpose.

In 1958, in an article in *Encore*, Irving Wardle coined a phrase to describe *The Birthday Party*: he called the play a *comedy of menace*, a phrase that has since become a stock expression in dealing with Pinter's early work. Wardle further elucidated the term by saying that the *menace* stands for *destiny* and an *incurable disease*.

The tendency to regard the plays as "menacing comedies" was developed when in 1960 Alan Brien noted that *The Caretaker* has "all of Pinter's now familiar ingredients of menace, dreadful revelation, tension and grisly comedy" (quoted in Schroll, 1969, p. 20).

The "menace" tag has become a commonplace for criticism to the extent that Hirst (1979) still uses it.

In 1966 Kelly Morris dealt with *The Homecoming* by placing it within the framework of the comedy of manners. He justifies this by referring to Pinter's use of dramatic devices: "His manipulation of performance conventions suggests the 'comedy of manners' in its dependence on standard theatrical devices and tightly constructed exploitation of speech and gesture patterns, disabused of conscious causality and motivation data ... The notion of plotless comedy of manners accounts for the remarkably opaque or non-informative quality of Pinter's dialogue" (p. 185). Morris propounds the idea that there is a bizarre clash in the play of "conceptual expectations with Pinter's asocial intentions and his non-realist techniques", a clash which is sorted out by viewing his work as "an ingenious composition of constricted situational modes, i.e., a comedy of manners" (p. 186). He rounds off this idea by stating that "within the format of excessive decorum, the idiom is aggression" (p. 186). Morris concludes the essay by locating Pinter in a "special type of modern comedy of manners. No ideas but in acts: wisdom

lies in the discovery of immediate theatrical means" (p. 191). He quotes a remarkably apposite passage by William Carlos Williams to highlight the central idea:

We know nothing and can know nothing but
the dance, to dance to a measure
contrapuntally,

Satyricaly, the tragic foot
(p. 191).

Walter Kerr, in his 1967 monograph on Pinter, placed him firmly within the tradition of the Absurd Drama - in fact, Kerr claims for Pinter the prime spot as the only really Absurd dramatist. In tracing the elements of the absurd in Pinter's oeuvre he deals with comedy as an important concern. Evaluating the threat, the menace, he says that "comedy is the constant companion of the threat, and sometimes the threat itself contains an elusive comic edge" (p. 27). He maintains that the "very methods [Pinter] employs, and the shifting-sands vision of man's precarious existence which these methods record, tend naturally toward one kind of comedy" (p. 27). He acknowledges that Pinter's vision is of necessity bleaker than that of the traditional comic writer ("Existentialist uncertainty is, of course, not so blithe in tone as a mere tumbling about of twins" [p. 27]).

In the same year Victor Amend postulates the idea that "his plays are not tragedies but comedies. But a Pinter comedy is a 'comedy of menace', in many respects a modern counterpart of tragedy ..." (p. 166). However, Amend feels that "with his solid achievements in the theatre of the absurd and the comedy of menace fully acknowledged, Pinter might do well to turn to another dramatic form" (p. 167).

Schroll, in recapitulating critical reaction to the New York production of *The Homecoming* in 1967, states that "New York reviewers tended to see it as a black comedy, which to some extent countered possible moral objections" (1969, p. 64). It was in fact even viewed as an "outrageous sex farce" (p. 64).

In 1968, in an article called *Mr Pinter's Belinda*, A.P. Hinchliffe points out that "in one of the 'comedies of menace' the initial crude physical violence of *The Room* was gradually refined without in any way lessening the intensity, and with this refinement the comedy became more uncertain. Laughter at the later plays was often relief from what they were implying" (p. 173). Dealing with the later plays, he maintains baldly that "both *The Collection* and *The Lover* are comedies; and their endings are on the whole as happy as the endings of comedies usually are" (p. 176). (This statement is not qualified any further, which seems somewhat bald, but is in fact typical of most statements about Pinter and comedy.)

In 1968 Callen wrote an article in which his avowed intention was to point out that the "puzzle" in Pinter could be solved by observing the way in which his plays progress "excitingly from comedy to tragedy" (p. 299). He also affixes the *manners* label to the plays. He maintains first that "comedy is always possible when in a recognizably normal situation abnormal conduct occurs; consequently Pinter's stylized stage language, in creating this incongruity, means that his plays are generally comedies ... [his] comedy is one of manners since the plays are peopled by characters who are at once inadequate and self-important" (p. 301). Callen's reservations become apparent, however, when he deals with *The Homecoming* and finds that "the laughter has a nervous quality in it which is alien to true comedy" (p. 301). He elaborates on this idea, referring also to the fact that as the audience starts identifying with the characters (particularly in *The Caretaker*) more closely, so the transition from laughter to seriousness is so successful that the plays assume "the powerful dimensions of tragedy" (p. 302). He concludes by saying that "the audience is surprised to feel great pity for this old man who has to face once again the coldly hostile world outside ... the sense of waste is intolerably acute ... Pinter created out of the comic mode a modern tragedy" (p. 305).

In the same year, in *The Dark Comedy*, J.L. Styan claimed that "in England, Harold Pinter has been digging over the territory newly claimed by the absurdist, and offers to be the best comic talent in English since Shaw" (p. 244). He closes his consideration of Pinter's work with the valuable and provocative observation that "in the sixties the comic dramatist leaves us alone and giddy in a spinning world: it is very funny, but quite terrifying and he has proved Dr Johnson's contention that there can be no certain limit to the modes of composition open to the dramatist" (p. 250).

Lois Gordon, (1969), claims that "the comic element in Pinter predominates, as the author lampoons the banal clichéd banter revered in the word-games played in the lives of the educated and uneducated, as well as in those of the rich and poor. Pinter brings to life the everyday silliness of *Everyman* and in so doing is uncannily funny" (p. 6).

She places his comedy firmly in the social framework, finding a place for him in the company of the theatre of social protest, albeit not quite on the same plane as many other members. "Man is a rather untidy creature who must, and yet cannot, live within the ostensibly tidy company of man. Pinter's assault is leveled at the sources responsible for this terrible disparity between one's acts and impulses - civilization itself ... although Pinter mirrors what man is, he never judges his characters" (p. 8).

In the same year, in her influential study on *Currents in Contemporary Drama*, Ruby Cohn traced some comic elements in Pinter's work. "Particularly apt has been the phrase 'comedy of menace' for his work, indicating how Pinter joins the comic to the threatening. Both his comedy and his menace rely on an extraordinary ear for seizing, and gift for stylizing, contemporary London speech. By the fragmentation of his speech shall ye know a Pinter victim in his comedies of menace" (p. 15).¹⁾

This view is further expanded and amended somewhat later when she compares Pinter's works with those of the Swiss playwrights Frisch and Dürrenmatt: "Like the two Swiss plays, those of Harold Pinter begin in comedy but end in disaster. Like the comedy of Frisch and Dürrenmatt, that of Pinter is based on social reality, but, most unlike the Swiss playwrights, Pinter takes no social or moral side ... All Pinter's plays have realistic settings, and almost all of them begin in conversations of comic realism, but colloquialism, repetition, or staccato rhythm imply the menace to come" (pp. 177-178).

One of the most profound and valuable statements Cohn has made regarding the comic element in Pinter's work is the following: "In Pinter's work, there is neither dignity nor redemption ... Stanley of *The Birthday*

1. Cohn has written quite fully on the element of violence in Pinter's work, an aspect also considered in the criticism of Abirached (1967), Kerr (1967) and Baker & Tabachnik (1973).

Party ... is finally pulverized into semi-paralysis. In *The Homecoming* there is no clear line between victim and villain; ... and the savagely comic dialogue subsides into an ambiguous equilibrium¹⁾ at the end of the play" (p. 182).

In the revised edition of his enormously influential *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1968) Esslin comments obliquely on the nature of the comical and the farcical in Pinter's work. He claims that *The Dumb Waiter* "brilliantly fulfills Ionesco's postulate in completely fusing tragedy with the most hilarious farce ... the main element of comedy is provided by the brilliant small talk behind which two men hide their growing anxiety" (p. 269).

A later statement on *The Caretaker* is more oblique but nevertheless relevant: "The laughter of the audience during the long run of *The Caretaker* was by no means merely patronizing. It was also the laughter of *recognition*" (p. 281). He also deals implicitly with the comic realm when he declares that "we see Pinter's characters in the process of their essential adjustment to *the world*, at the point when they have to solve their basic problem - whether they will be able to *confront* and *come to terms* with,

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1. The reservations quoted in the earlier part of the chapter regarding the moral vacuum in the play would seem to bear on this, and would then also tie in with the concept of contemporary comedy developed in the course of the thesis.

reality at all" (p. 290).¹⁾

Hollis (1970) touches on a crucial point when he finds that "the traditional categories of 'tragedy' and 'comedy' and 'tragicomedy' are useless, for the absurdists mix them all into a witches' brew. Absurd drama may occasionally be tragic in the Aristotelian sense, but it also goes beyond tragedy and beyond even the purgative laughter of the comic ... Much of the laughter which one hears in Pinter's audiences seems a species of nervous laughter which releases tensions occasioned by characters becoming uncomfortably recognizable and situations unaccountably familiar" (p. 5).

He further contends that "the comedy is experienced so intensely that the laughter it occasions may be mistaken for anguish ... Tragedy and comedy arise out of a moral order that has been challenged in thought or act by hero or clown ... [Pinter's] point is to demonstrate that metaphysical order, and therefore its byproducts comedy and tragedy, is no longer possible" (pp. 6-7).

Hollis also uses an image of central significance when he talks of Pinter's characters being precariously suspended over the edge of an abyss.²⁾ "The

1. My italics.

2. The image of the abyss will be a central one in the development of a contemporary definition of comedy.

abyss over which they seem to teeter is surely the same abyss which Heidegger describes as 'the openness of Being'. Pinter does not dehumanize his characters as Beckett and Ionesco sometimes do; they remain 'human, all-too human'" (p. 9).

Alrene Sykes (1970) reiterates the idea of the plays being comedies of menace (p. 8) and also explores Pinter's indebtedness to Kafka in this respect (p. 8). She hesitates to call him a true absurdist, because, while his plays do "suggest that life is uncertain", they do not necessarily imply "that it is also inevitably devoid of purpose, senseless" (p. 25). The plays may be regarded as absurd, however, in the particular sense of the "juxtaposition of pathos and comedy" (p. 25). Later on she does call *The Collection* and *The Lover* "drawing-room comedies of menace" (p. 107).

Wellwarth (1970) comments on this aspect of Pinter's work tangentially by calling it "comedy of allusiveness". In an elaborately documented argument he maintains that Pinter's work is allusive of a great deal of modern and contemporary literature - for example, *The Birthday Party* reminds one particularly of Beckett as well as of Hemingway's *The Killers*. He also finds correspondences between Aston (*The Caretaker*) and Nick in Hemingway's *Big Two-Hearted River*.

Katherine Burkman's analysis of the ritual elements of the plays (1971) reflects a concern with the tragic and the comic as well, as the "rituals of daily life are seen at one and the same time as comic and ineffectual, and as tragic and pathetic" (p. 12).

This idea is developed further when she suggests that "its rhythms suggest an order beneath the surface that connects with the rhythms of ancient tragedy and comedy as well as with their ritual base" (p. 21).

She places *The Birthday Party* in the context of a statement by Pinter himself about comedy¹⁾ when she decides that "*The Birthday Party* does not, then, remain a parody of ritual alone, its comedy moves into a realm which Pinter defines as *no longer funny*. But the play's realm is not fully tragic either, and Pinter's tragicomic vision may hold a clue to a more complete understanding of the particular use of ritual in his play" (p. 36).

Henkle (1972) has suggested persuasively that Pinter's comedy approximates the cosy domestic comedy, dealing with infinite compassion with man's petty foibles, as

1. "Everything is funny: the great earnestness is funny; even tragedy is funny. And I think what I try to do in my plays is to get this recognizable reality of the absurdity of what we do and how we behave and how we speak. The point about tragedy is that it is *no longer funny*. It is funny and then it becomes no longer funny" (p. 36, Burkman, 1971).

expressed in Grossmith's *Diary of a Nobody* (published in *Punch* in the 1880's). He makes the important distinction that "the ability of such humour to put the strains of everyday life into a light perspective has, in fact, made domestic comedy the dominant popular mode for a hundred years. Contemporary writers like Harold Pinter, however, are using our commitment to such humour against us, intensifying the underlying social anxieties and shifting the balance of attitudes and perspectives that characterize light, reassuring comedy" (p. 174). This comedy then becomes "ominous" (p. 181) and closes off the "perspective on the relationship of individual concerns to the larger social context" (p. 187).

Finally he maintains that "comedy has itself become the object of exploration and assault. As Charlie Pooter¹⁾ observes at one point in his diary, plays of wit that undermine the 'simple, unsophisticated life' are 'dangerous'; sometimes they are enough to keep you awake half the night" (p. 188).

Robert Tener (1973) has referred to "uncertainty" as a dramatic formula, and contends that "for his dramatic purposes, 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,

1. The "nobody" of the Diary.

he has shown how man's language and games¹⁾ structure his reality and provide for him the necessary new myths to fracture fixed existence" (p. 178).

Simon Trussler (1973), a prolific commentator on contemporary dramatists, takes a stand on what he considers to be a "period of generic disintegration". He argues for a recognition that the "antipodean gap between farce and tragedy is created by the dramatist not the drama. For in both forms, the fates mount a concerted attack on a chosen sufferer: and it is only a difference in the playwright's point of view²⁾ - a broken pair of braces in his sights instead of a broken heart - that distinguishes the farceur's description of domesticity³⁾ from the tragedian's trail of destruction and death" (p. 29).

Baker and Tabachnik (1973) also prefer to see Pinter's vision as a mixture of the comic and tragic modes. In *The Dumb Waiter* they refer to the "anguished plea

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1. The concern with social and linguistic games is an increasingly dominant one (cf. analyses of plays in 3.8).
 2. The matter of the playwright's vision and/or point of view will be a central concern in my consideration of comedy: both as justification for dealing with generic distinctions *at all* and to support the idea that a contemporary definition has to be developed to deal with contemporary drama.
 3. This idea links up very well with the ideas expressed by Henkle, apart from the fact that Trussler prefers the term *farce* to *comedy* (he regards comedy itself as dealing with either *manners* or *humours*, p. 30).

of a man who does not know where he stands in the universe and which goes beyond the merely humorous situation Pinter constructs. His combination of tragic and comic emotion appears in the final situation:

Ben: If there's a knock on the door you don't answer it.

Gus: If there's a knock on the door I don't answer it.

Ben: But there won't be a knock on the door.

Gus: So I won't answer it (p. 33).

Austin Quigley has written a seminal work on the problem of language in Pinter's plays. His book also deals obliquely but quite thoroughly with the problem of the comic as he interprets the function of language in Pinter's work as that of "negotiating", "... dictating and reinforcing relationships" (p. 52). Seen within the social context of comedy, this is a crucially important view. He further attaches great importance to the "considerable prominence of developing relationships" and the ways in which they function "in the development of a self-concept" (p. 54). He then proposes to use the term "interrelational" to identify the function of language in Pinter's drama. He further maintains that "a great deal of the humour in the plays is based on the characters' need to confirm the status quo of their relationships by conversing after the fashion of a tennis practice ... as long as they can keep a 'conversation' going they 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" (pp. 57-58). He illustrates further by showing how, in *The Birthday Party*, "comedy is generated from the inefficient organization of potential linguistic contrasts" (p. 59).

He concludes that "the conflict that is essential to all drama is generated by the *interrelational* coercive dialogue of characters who are at crucial points of *adjustment* between themselves and the environment to which they are currently exposed" (p. 67).

Dukore (1976), a frequent commentator on Pinter, prefers to refer to his work as belonging to the tragicomic mode. He briefly defines what he regards as tragicomedy (in point of fact, the title of the book *Where Laughter Stops*, indicates the central line of his reasoning). He refers to the traditional shapes of tragedy and comedy and maintains that the "cardinal, distinguishing characteristics of modern tragicomedy revolve around a particular kind of plot progression and outcome, and the response it evokes among the audiences ... [the play] ... establishes a basic affinity to one of the two major genres, tragedy or comedy, but its development denies the exclusive characteristics of the tragic or comic genre ... if the play is primarily associated with comedy ... or if its end resembles that of comedy ['happy'], then its conclusion freezes laughter or smiles, it carries discomfort rather than comfort, it contains a sardonic or grim quality that denies

happiness, and it mocks the frequently festive culmination of comedy. Although death need not necessarily terminate such a play, the life that continues may be worse than death, which would constitute relief" (p. 4). He then applies this vision to a number of Pinter's plays.¹⁾

The most explicit consideration of Pinter's comic vision is to be found in a recent book by David Hirst (*Comedy of Manners*, 1979). He places Pinter firmly within the tradition of the comedy of manners, seeing his work as a logical extension of the works of particularly Wycherley and Coward. He maintains that "Pinter's remorseless paring down of language and economy of dramatic means give him close affinities with Coward" (p. 67). He then analyses the development in Pinter's comic vision, regarding *The Collection* as an important new development in the direction of the comedy of manners. He also points out that the development in his vision has brought about a change in both the style of language and the social class he portrays. (The book deals with all the plays up to and including *No Man's Land* [1975].)

A final statement on the comic content of *Betrayal* (1978) should serve to complete the survey. In the review of the London production (November 1978) Jack Kroll of *Newsweek* has claimed that "Pinter has never

1. Dukore's views will be rejected in the consideration of comedy in Chapter 3, as he bases his argument firmly on the *traditional* idea of comedy ('happy ending', etc.).

written anything simpler, sadder or funnier than *Betrayal* ... [he] ... finds a grim but delicate beauty and humor in such desolation" (p. 41).

1.3 It is important to note that in the foregoing survey and evaluation of references to Pinter's comic vision the quoted parts often constitute the entire statement made by the particular critic pertaining to the comic. Yet from these random and unrelated sources important pointers emerge which have served to give initial shape and direction to the present study.

A larger number of critics dealing with comedy have been quoted than have critics dealing with other aspects of Pinter's work, largely because this particular part of the survey has to serve as a launching point for the actual thesis.

Perhaps the most important single point to emerge from the survey is that no critic has so far sought to clarify his concept of comedy when dealing with contemporary drama. In fact, it has been a major stumbling block to critics that the *traditional* view of comedy stubbornly refuses to accommodate contemporary drama. This is one of the points dealt with in great detail in the ensuing chapters.

The intention in this study is thus

- 1 the development of a *descriptive, contemporary* definition of comedy, developed *inductively*; and
- 2 the application of this definition of comedy to selected plays by Harold Pinter.

1.4 The following plays will be considered:

1.4.1 The six full-length plays (*The Birthday Party*, *The Caretaker*, *The Homecoming*, *Old Times*, *No Man's Land* and *Betrayal*) which represent the full development of his comic vision will be considered in chronological order.

1.4.2 The two short plays, *The Collection* and *The Lover* will be included on the basis of their having been most consistently regarded as examples of the comedy of manners.

The choice of plays may seem arbitrary. However, some plays have to be omitted if only to guard against superficiality if the scope of the study should become too wide. The choice was thus governed by the fact that the full-length plays span his entire London career to date, and the short plays exhibit characteristics particularly relevant to the central thesis.

CHAPTER 2

Sometimes, Madame, comedies make people cry even more than dramas ... the comedies that I write. When I want to write a tragedy I make them laugh, when I write a comedy I make them cry - Ionesco:
Impromptu pour la Duchesse de Windsor

2 WHY COMEDY?

2.1 In modern critical theory there has been a strong suggestion that generic distinctions have become invalid and irrelevant. This viewpoint is often also held by dramatists themselves, who are suspicious of the rigid categories into which critics have sometimes striven to force their works. Both Pinter and Ionesco (*Notes and Counternotes*, 1962) have expressed the view that the old categories have become irrelevant.¹⁾ From the preceding chapter one might also quote the views of critics like Trussler (1973) and Dukore (1976) as well as Ruby Cohn (1969) who all argue for the acceptance of a mixed mode only to translate the spirit of the age.

However, these reservations need not deter one from using a term (*comedy*) that has been a valuable critical concept for many years. It will be suggested (2.2) that comedy reveals a particular vision of life

1. To my mind, the distrust of traditional generic distinctions has been engendered because some of these have become practically ossified. It is not possible to define a contemporary play in terms of a definition evolved to fit Shakespeare or Congreve. This is not a denial of the fact that certain universal aspects of the concept of comedy will remain in any definition, but what is needed then is a new definition, not the discarding of a useful critical concept.

held by the author. In identifying this vision accurately, the reader should achieve a greater measure of understanding and appreciation of the play. Certain modern writers of comedy would seem to share certain basic premises in viewing life and the identification of these premises within the framework of the play is sometimes a prerequisite to understanding and enjoyment.

2.2 Before going on to a consideration of the feasibility of dealing with generic distinctions, the comic in particular, a few views will be quoted to the effect that to call a work either tragic or comic is to acknowledge that the author has imbued it with a certain vision of life.

Kerr (1967c, p. 31) graphically evokes the concept of *vision* in talking about the masks of drama: "The comic mask is the tragic mask with the corners of the mouth forced upward as though by two fingers, and with the angle of vision altered".¹⁾

The philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1951) puts it concisely when he says that "through his characters and actions the comic or the tragic poet reveals his view of human life as a whole, of its greatness and

1. My italics.

Trussler (1973) vividly describes this altered vision as seeing "broken braces instead of a broken heart".

weakness, its sublimity and its absurdity" (p. 146), and he goes on to extend this idea by saying that "comic art possesses in the highest degree that faculty shared by all art, sympathetic vision" (p. 192).

McCullom (1963) also subscribes to this idea by saying that in great comedy "the product of form and attitude is a profound vision, a vision which either penetrates to a new and vivid justification of common sense and 'public policy' or affirms that consensus while intimating ways in which it may be reinterpreted and transcended" (p. 144).

Potts (1949) ascribes great importance to the idea of vision. "For the first stage in every art is perception, or vision, or imagination, and whenever we perceive or imagine we are potential artists, even if we do not go on to communicate our vision to other people in what is called creative art" (p. 10). He feels that the presence of vision implies a certain distinctiveness, and finds that "comedy is one of the few art forms that are defined by that kind of distinction" (p. 10).

Bentley (1968) implicitly acknowledges the idea of vision in comedy in dealing with the opposing visions of comedy and tragedy. "The comic poet is less apt to write out of a particular crisis than from that steady ache of misery which in human life is even more common than crisis and so a more insistent problem. When we get up tomorrow morning, we

may well be able to do without our tragic awareness for an hour or two, but we should desperately need our sense of the comic" (p. 303).

2.3 Several distinguished contemporary critics have expressed an awareness of the usefulness of generic distinction, in spite of the seeming disintegration of fixed forms. Quotation of the two most recent critics to speak out on this issue should indicate the felt necessity of such distinctions in dealing adequately and fully with literary works.

Martin Esslin (1978) maintains that "the theory of genres deals with abstract concepts of great importance and purity. Its study is essential for anyone who wants to understand drama and through it human nature itself" (p. 76).

The approach in Heilman's most recent book on comedy (*The Ways of the World: Comedy and Society*, 1978) is particularly useful. In the *Prologue* he states that "the idea of genre is a way into the play" (p. 7), and this idea seems to be a particularly felicitous one. In creating a definition of comedy, he feels that one is at least "offering a hypothesis or using a chosen perspective or a given accent or hypothesis" (p. 4).

Together with Heilman's central idea that the idea of genre is a way into a play, one should also bear in mind Hall's cautionary provision that "if sharp distinctions in genre ever existed outside critics' *schemata*, they do not in contemporary literature" (Preface, 1963).

However (and this point is expressed succinctly and clearly by Heilman), "I would like to strike a middle ground between a relentlessly logical and limiting formula for comedy, ... and a lax permissiveness which despairs of discovering a basic comic form and lets the genre become endlessly capacious, a monster of and in miscegenation, a ragbag family with only a tangle of adjectives to identify all the siblings and cousins and in-laws, offspring and foster-children, when the census-taker happens in ... adjectival incontinence commits one to surfaces rather than substance, to piling appellatives upon ossified underforms" (pp. 4-5).¹⁾

1. Heilman has created the provocative term *neopolonialism* to deal with the proliferation of terms. He is joined by J.L. Styan (1968) who has said that "it is time to call a halt to the Polonius-like mobilization of genres and sub-genres" (p. 2). Similarly, Potts (1949, p. 10) has said that there are "only two literary modes of thought: tragedy and comedy".

2.4 Neopolonialism?

Many modern critics seem to be hesitant about referring to comedy as comedy: Bentley has complained, and justly, that the traditional terms have become debased, that tragedy has come to mean anything that goes wrong, comedy anything that gets a laugh. Heilman (1978) then considers the possibility of going for an alternative, freshly minted term, but decides that the traditional terms are deeply embedded in the habits of literary talk, and so still serve the purpose adequately. To use impressive new terms "would have the double charm of novelty and forbiddingness ... but would not notably improve the critical scene" (p. 5).

Some critics have succumbed to the temptation to indulge either in a little "neopolonialism" or to create new terms. A few of these will be mentioned and briefly considered.

2.4.1 The most prevalent term to be used at present in preference to the simple *comedy* is the hybrid *tragicomedy*. It is defined and defended variously by Ionesco, Dukore, Bentley, Cohn, Trussler and others. The users of this term, however, all seem to adhere to this term because they are uneasy with what might currently be described as *comedy*: it is so disturbingly different from the comfortably

traditional view, laughter is violently truncated, the endings are totally inverted versions of the usual, the tone is disturbing, the redemptive quality has vanished. The argument is then usually that this would constitute a different genre, that this is comedy gone wrong or tragedy unconsummated. However, I would maintain that to describe the works of Pinter, Stoppard, Orton, Gray, Simpson and Nichols as tragicomic is misleading. The term has been in existence for a long time, as some Shakespearian plays have customarily been called tragi-comedies (in fact the term has Greek and Roman antecedents).¹⁾

The fact is that this term can fruitfully be used to describe a hybrid, but then should acknowledge that it stands on a middle ground between two defined modes. To describe the work of the above playwrights in these terms really amounts to a denial of the presence of either tragedy or comedy in the present age (an idea specifically rejected by both Leyburn and Kerr in works discussed later in this chapter; they claim, in fact, that comedy has absorbed, to a large extent, the traditional world of tragedy, but is still very much a distinct genre).

1. "Plautus seems to have coined the word *tragicomedy* in the Prologue to his *Amphitryon*, when the god Mercury announces high-handedly 'Faciam ut commixta sit: tragicomoedia'" (Cohn, 1969, pp. 154-155). Also, the typical series of plays in Greek drama was made up of a trilogy of tragedy rounded off by a satyr-play (or comedy).

This is not to deny the interplay so often found in generic types. "In dealing with the theory of genres we must ... never forget that in the concrete world the archetypes, the pure ideal concepts, always appear in an impure form" (Esslin, 1978, p. 76). Similarly, Suzanne Langer (1953) has maintained that "the matrix of the work is always either tragic or comic; but within its frame the two often interplay" (p. 333). The matrix of the work, the playwright's essential vision of life, moulded by the world in which he lives, is of cardinal significance in generic considerations. Thus McCollom can say that "none of these terms is as permanently meaningful as either 'tragedy' or 'comedy' because they describe hybrids or mutants sprung from relatively stable concepts" (p. 5, 1971).

2.4.2 Other new terms include such qualifying ones as "savage comedy" (White, 1978) and "dark comedy" (Styan, 1968). Both these terms are used to describe contemporary drama, and while they cannot really be regarded as within the category Heilman describes as suffering from "adjectival incontinence", the works they describe really need no further qualification within the framework of contemporary drama. White's "defining descriptions", in fact, sound very familiar to the student of contemporary drama; they articulate half-felt views: "Savage comedies are clubs to reverse the invasions of emptiness, the

queasiness of cosmic disequilibrium" (p. 10). He further firmly establishes a place for comedy, claiming in fact the most important place, by saying that "once tragedy is eclipsed, comedy remains to translate desperation" (p. 11). He also feels that "as tragic purgation fades, comedies of corrosion offer new kinds of solace: those produced by sardonic derision" (p. 12). (In embryonic form, this definition implies the concept of comedy to be developed in this thesis.)

G. Dasgupta (in White, 1978) talks about the amoral universe of savage comedy and concludes that "it seems that the correlation between the savage and comic rests on an aesthetic equation. And this equation can only be formulated by a faith, however amoral, in a universe without reprieve" - a description that would equally well suit the theatre customarily described as Absurd. In fact, it will be contended that much of what has been described as Absurd Drama will fit very comfortably indeed into a definition of comedy postulated for contemporary times. Even the term created by Michel de Ghelderode (quoted in McCollom, 1971), *farce des ténébreux*,¹⁾ could be descriptive of comedy in the modern sense. Many modern critics (again notably Ionesco) have talked about *farce* in an updated manner, a manner clearly calculated to imbue it with deeper than customary significance. It might be feasible to accept that

1. *Farce des ténébreux* may be loosely translated as *gloomy farce*.

the stronger insistence on farcical form by many modern playwrights is merely an aesthetic and formal solution to an expression of a certain vision: a vision that has its matrix in the comic mode. (The view holds that the marriage of farce and tragedy gives modern drama its distinctive shape. It may perhaps be described differently by calling it the contemporary form of comedy.)

2.4.3 One totally new term that has come into existence is *pathedy*, created by Nist (1968). Nist regards pathedy as one of the three major modes of literary art, "an organic union of tragedy and comedy" (p. 72). His view, which is determined to a large extent by Christian considerations, centres on the redemptive quality firmly inherent in the pathetic view. For man not only to endure but also to prevail, it is necessary to be pathedic. "The central theme of comedy is vanity and exposure; that of tragedy, guilt and expiation; that of pathedy, long-suffering and triumph" (p. 76).

Nist does touch upon a matter of central significance for the later arguments about comedy. He refers to William Faulkner's idea that "the chief problem of modern man is one of belief. Not so much that he believe in some specific philosophical or theological system. But that he be willing to make an act of belief in anything at all" (p. 87). It is this

idea which prompts Nist to deal harshly with Sartre and his ilk: "A curse [is] felt throughout the Existentialism of Sartre, which recoils in disgust from the animal subconscious of the sensibility into the humorless bastions of the creative intuition as protested by an atheistic spiritual preconscious ... the result is a self-indulgent pathedy that degenerates into intellectual soap-opera, without one commercial from God" (p. 87). He calls this type of literature "cry-baby". The important idea to be gleaned from this however, is that because of the lack of belief in anything, the comic in modern literature is unredemptive, and thus fundamentally different from the older vision.

2.5 Comedy as a mirror of the times

The preceding section has been an argument in preparation to the postulation of a fundamental idea: Comedy is a social form (cf. 3.5.1). It strives to reflect the age from which it springs. As an age irrevocably changes, *so will that which may properly be regarded as comedy*. Thus, a new, descriptive theory has to be developed *inductively*¹⁾ for each

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1. Potts has accurately described the task of the comic theorist. "The chief difficulty in any attempt to discover the character of comedy by *inductive* methods is the selection of specimens from which to generalize; for we cannot make the selection without first forming a notion of what comedy is to guide us in making it" (1949, p. 140). This idea has been a strong guideline in determining the methods used in the present study.

succeeding age. This idea enjoys support from quite a number of influential critics. A number of these will be briefly referred to.

Rodway maintains that it is "necessary to relate comic literature of all kinds to the life of its time" (1975, p. ix). Feibleman (1970) asserts even more persuasively that "the contemporaneity of comedy is one of its essential features ... Comedy epitomizes the height of the times, the *zeitgeist*. Hanging upon the vivid immediacy of actuality, it touches the unique particularity embodied in the passing forms of the moment" (p. 182).

Kronenberger, quoted in Felheim (1962, p. 197), asserts that "though comedy has its permanent subject-matter, and even its body of laws, it is liable, like everything else, to changes in fashion and taste, to differences of sensibility". Eric Bentley has also maintained that one theory of comedy will reflect only one tradition of comedy (1964, p. 310).¹⁾

Ellen Leyburn suggests that the modern age has seen a radical shift in the positions customarily occupied by tragedy and comedy, to the extent that "it is now the comedies of Beckett and Ionesco which show man in extremity" (in Calderwood and Toliver, 1968, p.

1. Bearing in mind this indisputable truth, the definition developed in this thesis will be directed at and be relevant to contemporary *British* drama.

178), a situation which is the reverse of the traditional situation where tragedy showed man in "boundary situations". This radically different situation obviously demands a radically different view of what constitutes comedy, as "tragedy and comedy seem to have shifted not only in perspective and substance, but also in effect" (p. 178).

Two critics will be dealt with in more detail.

Walter Kerr (1967c) has emerged as one of the most discerning commentators on comedy in the present age. He feels that "comedy has no choice but to try to make something of the situation. It cannot turn its back on the pervasive bleakness of an age; ... it must go down into the pit, clawing furiously and, with luck, entertainingly the whole way down" (p. 320). He goes even further and greatly extends the range of comedy (echoing critics like Leyburn and White) when he says that "what the present situation means for comedy is that it must assume a double burden" (p. 324). He laments the loss of tragedy (which he nevertheless acknowledges as an irrefutable fact) and sadly concludes that "comedy, as a form, was ordained to co-exist with tragedy ... now it must do all the work" (p. 325). Thus, "comedy is supplying by indirection the light against which it would cast its shadow if it could" (p. 327), and "comedy responds as best it can, straining to play jester and Jeremiah at once" (p. 328).

Obviously one needs a profoundly different definition to interpret a form that has shown such a startling evolution from the "celebration of life" it used to be. Now, instead of jeering tolerantly at ordinary little vanities and pretensions, comedy has to find a new target, and finds it, according to Kerr, in despair: "What if despair itself is the new heroic posture, the new pretense to greatness? What if there is, after all, an aspiration open to ridicule: contemporary man's aspiration to be known as the most wretched of all beings?" (p. 328).

Yet a new definition would not, could not, imply a critical *tabula rasa*; instead it would preserve the universal and adapt the particular. Heilman accordingly propounds the idea that one should look for "the durable human foundations under the variations of superstructure" (1978, p. 6). These variations of superstructure are produced by changing cultural fashions, and an addiction to change should not prompt us too readily to take them to be primary. He thus firmly counsels a conservative view. "That there are permanent ways of comedy may be an act of faith, but ... in looking at plays of widely separated ages, we find in them as many elements common to the genre as traits belonging only to the individual play in its time" (p. 7). Heilman is wary of finding too great differences in comedies of the present day, contending that human nature has basically remained the same throughout all the ages, so that the "last hundred years" could not make all that much difference. However, change has become

such an accelerating phenomenon that I would like to maintain that there has been, in fact, a radical and startling change, not so much in human nature as in the society and its beliefs, and that these have had a profound and unusually unsettling effect on man.

The contention in this thesis, then, will be that, as certain very fundamental changes in the *zeitgeist* have occurred, it is necessary to pay more than usual attention to the *variable superstructure* and determine in fact to what extent the *permanent ways* of comedy are in the process of being irrevocably eroded to reduce comedy to the plight (and pathetically heroic stance?) so vividly evoked by Kerr. It seems that nowadays, more than ever, a new definition is needed if the concept is to continue to provide a valuable "way into the play". To reiterate, the one indisputable (and undisputed) commonplace of criticism of comedy is that it is a social form, reflecting the society from which it springs; and as this society has changed so radically, so has the comedy, which now demands a new inductive and descriptive definition.

