

## Distinctive aspects of the ‘Pinteresque’ menace: A study of Harold Pinter’s The Dumb Waiter

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Among English-language playwrights of the twentieth century, Harold Pinter (1930-2008), had certainly attained the status of a modern classic. He had presented the characteristics of the Absurd theatre in the background of the English ethos. He has also diversely been described as an existentialist and abstruse playwright, a member of the “angry young men” or the “kitchen sink school” of British dramatists. The inherent drawbacks and tension in today’s social life gets reflected in his plays like *The Birthday Party*, *The Room*, *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Caretaker*, *Mountain Language* and so on. The unique dramatic style and innovative techniques adopted by the writer had given a new direction to the present-day drama. His plays take one directly into the divisive areas of modern life wherein the individuals are mere puppets forced to obey the dictates of such persons and institutions which have no regard for the aspirations and goodness of modern man.

The term ‘Pinteresque’ has become an eponymous adjective to describe the writing style characteristic of the works of Harold Pinter. The plays of Pinter mark a complete break from the practice of the dramatists of the traditional school. In respect of plot, characterization, dialogue or themes, Pinter was a great innovator in the field of modern dramatic literature. Mystery and ambiguity with regard to the story-line, inadequate and unreliable information about the characters, the absence of a well-defined theme and the scarcity of immense stage settings and directions, a mixing up of both comical and menacing elements in the dramatic plot and the preponderance of colloquial and highly realistic dialogue replete with repetitions, pauses and silences are some of the ‘Pinteresque’ features that render an exceptionally unique value to the plays of Harold Pinter. The element of mystery which raises so many questions that is difficult to be answered is one of the most obvious features of any play by Pinter.

The world overwhelmed by menace, turmoil of violence and isolation, as well as a state of hopelessness which envelope the modern man is the primary concern of the Theatre of the Absurd of which Franz Kafka’s literary trend anticipated its core elements and Harold Pinter identified as a true spokesman. The dilemma faced by the individual in the twentieth century gets a true dramatic presentation in the plays of Harold Pinter. The playwright takes us directly into the haplessness and anxiety felt by the individual in the modern society which is dominated by despotic groups and crime syndicates. The essence of the European Absurd theatre finds a new dimension in the plays of Pinter. “Among the younger generation of

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playwrights who followed in the footsteps of the pioneers of the Theatre of the absurd, Harold Pinter, twenty-four years younger than Beckett, has achieved the status of a major force in the contemporary theatre” (Esslin, *Theatre*234).

Pinter’s works are engrossed with mystery, ambiguity and the feelings of disintegration, vagueness and domination. An atmosphere of menace and terror characterize the overall mood of these works. The mainspring of menace in Pinter is the outside forces, which are latent and hence invisible. The characters in the dramas of Pinter are often subjected to perverse treatment of torture, torment, imprisonment, and dehumanization. His insistent theme of torture is in fact traceable to Kafka’s themes of castigation and execution. The characters who fail to find comfort either in the physical surroundings or in an understanding relationship with others are finally driven into a state of complete disintegration of self-image.

Harold Pinter’s work has been regarded as a great achievement due to his distinctive dramatic style, and his careful attention to dramatize the human predicament in his plays. The plots in Pinter’s dramas do not follow a straight line and emphasis is put on dialogue rather than action. In fact, the action is not progressive; instead, it seems repetitive and circular. The plays keep going on with the characters’ diverse moments of victory, disillusionment, fear and fulfilment. His obsession with ambiguity and the deliberate dodging to provide every detail in his work reminds us of the writings of Franz Kafka whose influence upon his drama has been acknowledged by Pinter himself. Martin Esslin attributes Kafka’s impact on Pinter especially in their engagement in the question of existence. He says, “Pinter, who acknowledges the influence of Kafka and Beckett, is, like these two writers, preoccupied with man at the limits of his being”(*Theatre*261).

Pinter was raised in an extremely traumatic atmosphere of the conflicts of the Second World War and being a Jew, was forced to change places so as to survive. Condemned as a Jew and being taken for a communist, his association with aggression did not come to a stop after the war. He had a first-hand experience of menace as a result of their arduous and unsettled life. The works, according to Raymond Armstrong, reflect a “reciprocal atmosphere of nightmarish uncertainty” (38).

If the plays of Pinter, especially *The Homecoming*, *Family Voices* and *Moonlight* directly depict the conflicts and pressures within a family or the presence of a father figure, the plays like *The Birthday Party* and *One for the Road* depict the overpowering influence of a patriarchal figure upon the protagonists’ life indirectly.

The motherly figures like Meg in Pinter’s *The Birthday Party* or Flora in his *A Slight Ache* bear close similarities among themselves as they remain usually threatening on the part of the protagonists when they fail to understand their needs and provide them help. The concept of the paradigm of the couple figures, for instance the presence of Kafka’s executioners, Franz

and Willem in *The Trial*, as well as Pinter's couples-Goldberg and McCann in *The Birthday Party*, Ben and Gus in *The Dumb Waiter* and the two brothers, Aston and Mick in *The Caretaker* gets repeated in the plot structure of both the writers.

Menace refers to a sinister feeling as experienced by the characters when they are trounced by a feeling that endangers their identity. They get victimized by a deep-rooted terror within their minds and everything surrounding them seems to have an unspecified motive. No certainty exists in their lives, be it a mutual understanding with an omnipotent system, among individuals or within one's mind.

Harold Pinter also uses the image of a room which acts like a cell or a prison room that acts as a trap. All these locations bring in a sense of substantial menace with them. In Pinter, like Kafka, the image of the room is closely connected with the idea of menace. As Esslin comments:

Pinter's people are in a room, and they are frightened, scared. What are they scared of? Obviously, they are scared of what is outside the room. Outside the room is a world bearing upon them, which is frightening...[and] which is inexplicable and frightening, curious and alarming (*Pinter 35*).

Menace projects in *The Dumb Waiter* through "the room-door-suspense syndrome" (Esslin, *Pinter 70*). Ben and Gus, the two hired assassins occupy a basement room and they expect orders at any point of time. The room without windows carries with it a sense of terror; uncertainty pervades their state both inside and outside the room. They receive orders from their employer of a mysterious organization and merely act as per the command. The hired gunmen feel imprisoned as their living and actions are restricted within that single room. The mainspring of the menace is an ominous mechanism which is unsure in terms of its function and structure.

Pinter's work includes much ambiguity and mystery. The dramatist perceives the world as "mysterious, multi-faceted and unfathomable" (Esslin, *Pinter 52*), which constitutes his idea of the menace. *The Dumb Waiter*, a well-known Pinter play published in 1959 depicts the predicament of the two assassins, Ben and Gus, who are employed by some mysterious organization, and who know almost nothing about the nature of the organization they work for. They are completely ignorant about their work and act as mere puppets in the hands of the system; acting without questioning the rationale behind their task. There is no way of communicating with their employer unless the authority figures get in touch with the employees:

GUS. What time is he getting in touch?

*BEN reads*

What time is he getting in touch?

BEN. What's the matter with you? It could be any time.

Any time (*Pinter 116*).

The time of contact is not specified by the organization; similarly, the court officials fail to inform K. of the exact time of his first interrogation. Ambiguity creates menace in Pinter. As Esslin rightly comments:

The real menace which lies behind the struggles for expression and communication, behind the closed doors which might swing open to reveal a frightening intruder, behind the sinister gunmen and terrorists, behind the violence, the menace behind all these menacing images is the opaqueness, the uncertainty and precariousness of the human condition itself (*Pinter* 51-2).

Gus continuously questions the system and he feels frustrated quite often. He wonders who is going to be the next victim and the play ends quite unexpectedly when we see Ben getting ready to kill the next victim, who turns out to be Gus himself. The curtain falls when we find the two staring at each other. Questioning the system, their relationship, his own situation, the task itself all through the plan may not save Gus from becoming a victim of the menace. The various strategies used by the characters of Pinter prove fruitless in the end, and they all become victims of indefinite menace.

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