DIALOGICAL INTERPLAY AND THE DRAMA OF HAROLD PINTER

DIALOGICAL INTERPLAY AND THE DRAMA OF HAROLD PINTER

By

JONATHAN STUART BOULTER, B.A.(Hons)

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Arts

McMaster University

August, 1992

MASTER OF ARTS (1992)
(English)

McMASTER UNIVERSITY
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: Dialogical Interplay and the Drama of Harold Pinter

AUTHOR: Jonathan Stuart Boulter, Honours B.A. (McMaster University)

SUPERVISOR: Dr. Anthony Brennan

NUMBER OF PAGES: vii, 112

ABSTRACT

The thesis is an effort to understand the way in which three of Pinter's early plays, The Birthday Party, A Slight Ache, and Tea Party are structured to work precise effects upon audiences. The underlying premise of this work is that Pinter compels his audience to assume an active role in the unfolding drama by manipulating the distance between audience and play. The activity of the audience can be understood to comprise two components. When confronted by the myriad questions posed by the Pinter play the audience begins to pose its own questions and to attempt to fix its own totalizing structures upon the play. I call this primary position of the audience its posture of hermeneutical inquiry. The second phase of the audience's participation in the play begins as the spectator notices that his or her own interpretive process is exactly analogous to that of the major characters in the drama. Any firm distinction in the ontological status of spectator and character is blurred. I have termed this blur "dialogical interplay": Pinter manipulates his audience to direct questions not only at the play, but to pose questions within the play itself.

What is crucial to note, however, is that in all cases of the plays under scrutiny here, the character who shares the posture of the spectator (and in this sense "becomes" the spectator) is destroyed, either physically or mentally. Thus the experience of the Pinter play is one which invariably involves the audience's sense of its own violation. Ultimately, I contend that the audience's proximity to the dramatic proceedings is encouraged because of

Pinter's overriding sense of contempt for his audience, yet it is precisely the audience's sense of imminent danger that can account in part for the hold Pinter's plays have had over the decades.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Anthony Brennan for his sound advice and indefatigable patience.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

I am concerned in the present analysis with the relationship between the Pinter play and its audience. Though perhaps unfashionable in these days of the demise of the author, my notion of the audience's experience of the Pinter play involves the idea that the play is intentionally designed to work a precise effect upon the audience. This naturally assumes the existence of a thinking, perhaps even scheming, dramatist who calculates the effects of all events within his plays. My experience in closely examining the fabric of Pinter's plays is thus one which has involved the discovery of deliberate structures which serve to involve the audience in the proceedings in any number of ways. My notion of audience "involvement" is linked to the idea that throughout the early plays of his career Pinter attempted - with varying degrees of success - to manipulate the distance between the audience and the play. I shall contend that the success of the three plays under scrutiny here, The Birthday Party, A Slight Ache, and Tea Party, is fully dependant upon the audience being placed variously in positions of close proximity and distance from the dramatic proceedings. Pinter attempts to close the gap between audience and play firstly by encouraging the viewer to assume an active hermeneutical posture. Secondly, Pinter narrows the distance by encouraging "empathy" in the audience, to employ a term used but not fully explored by Daphna Ben Chaim

in her Distance in the Theatre. I shall contend, to simplify here for a moment, that the audience's objective stance vis-à-vis the drama gives way to a istinct subjective identification with certain characters as the play proceeds. Pinter will, however, at various points force the audience into a position of greater distance from the play; at these times of greater objectivity the audience finds itself able, indeed compelled, to question its own hermeneutical process. What I think is crucial to notice about this distanced position is that even here the audience is still active - there is no rest for the Pinter audience. It is precisely with the exploration of the means and methods used by Pinter to engage the audience in an active role - whether interpretive or participatory - that this analysis is ultimately concerned.

Before outlining basic concepts which will be used throughout this analysis, it might be well to acknowledge briefly Pinter's own attitude towards his audience. The following is excerpted from an interview with Mel Gussow in Critical Essays on Harold Pinter:

> Naturally I am very happy when the plays actually do communicate, when the audience enjoys them or finds them recognizable. It is naturally gratifying. But if they don't, they simply don't. And it's not my business to try to encourage them...I have very mixed feelings about audiences. I love some of them. Unfortunately, I did develop as an actor a hostility towards audiences. I think I've sustained it. It may sound childish, but I tend to regard the audience as my enemies. In other words, they're guilty until they're proven innocent. What is required is simply an act of concentration and they so rarely seem disposed to give it. Half the time I wonder what the hell, why do they bother to go to the theater, I'm not at all convinced that the main bulk of a given audience is really interested in the theater. But when I'm in the audience I have great sympathy

> with the audience for having to submit to the terrible things on stage. Sometimes I feel dreadfully with them in our mutual suffering. (31)

I have excerpted Pinter's words at length for I do think they ultimately cast some light on the experience of watching his plays. Two important concepts are sounded here. Firstly, Pinter raises the issue of recognizability. A vital aspect of this analysis lies precisely in this idea of recognition, or what I will generally call familiarity. A Pinter play can be understood at one level as a network of interwoven clichés: Stanley, the ostracised/outcast "artist", Goldberg and McCann, the gangster "heavies", Edward, the pretentious "scholar" collapsed by his own weakness, Flora, the neglected amorous housewife, Wendy, the oversexed secretary, Disson, a further type of Edward, the underconfident overacheiver. As types, the characters in the play are eminently recognizable and thus familiar. As will be explored in more detail in the chapters to follow, it is precisely this recognizability that constitutes the audience's first step into the play, for with this apprehension of the familiar comes a greater increase in proximity - an idea which is a significant element in the ensuing analysis.

The second statement I consider of great importance is Pinter's conception of the audience as enemy. Part of the experience of these plays involves the assault on the audience's sensibilities and expectations. Although in his statement Pinter sees the audience as enemy because it cannot seem to sustain any lasting concentration, I think his idea has some deeper

ramifications. Part of my understanding of Pinter's project lies in the idea that his concern is to remove the audience from its traditional role of passive observer; this radical shift in audience role (anticipated in different ways by Brecht and Artaud) thus constitutes a major aspect of the assault on the audience. As this idea is of overarching significance to this study, it is necessary here to outline the process of audience involvement/participation in some detail.

I will posit as being a priori understood that there exists between the spectator and spectacle some distance. One might borrow from Edward Bullough's essay "'Psychical Distance'" and regard the space from a psychological point of view, or one might simply choose to envision the space as physical. In any case, it has been a general tenet in dramatic criticism that the idea of distance is of crucial importance, and may in fact be what constitutes our seeing the spectacle as spectacle (art). The removal of distance, as Ben Chaim notes in her discussion of Grotowski, in part results in the removal of the "art" aspect of drama (50): the drama simply becomes something resembling ritual. It does seem, moreover, that a crucial component of modern drama involves the continual manipulation of this distance between audience and play, as Ben Chaim suggests:

> The dramatist today chooses a theatrical style, and therefore a general distance norm, for his or her play, just as he or she chooses characters and situations. Moreover, not only have the fixed canons of genre fallen in the theatre, so have the fixed canons of style: distance is manipulated from one moment to the next in the play, inducing empathy and then objectivity and

> then again empathy. The plays of Harold Pinter or Edward Bond defy description in traditional genre or style terms; they might be understood, I believe, in terms of style shifts at the service of the manipulation of distance. (79)

Ben Chaim's remarks apply directly to Pinter's dramatic strategies in the three plays under scrutiny here. Her understanding of the fundamental dialectical process of response (objectivity/empathy) is sound and will be of great use throughout this analysis.

The Birthday Party compels the audience into a process of continual vacillation. We are led in the first Act to experience the play as an almost perfect example of naturalistic drama. The conversations, the dynamics of the relationships, the mise-en-scene, all contribute to a sense of naturalism, and may stand as examples of what leads Beckerman in his "The Artifice of 'Reality' in Chekhov and Pinter" to see a Chekhovian inheritance in Pinter's drama. The first act, in Pinter's own terms, might be labelled eminently "recognizable". Part of the purpose of this study is to understand what happens to the audience as it begins to experience the second and third Acts of The Birthday Party. From the first to the second and third Acts we have, to use Ben Chaim's term, a "style shift"; where the first Act was seen as largely naturalistic, the second and third Acts begin to be seen as increasingly absurd. We must, of course, ask ourselves the following question: is this style shift at the service of the manipulation of distance, or the cause of a distance fatal to the success of the play?

My contention in chapter one is that The Birthday Party is a flawed play. This idea arises in no small measure from what I discover as the fatal distancing of the audience which results from this mixing of the two genres (naturalism/absurd). My argument must, however, be prefaced here with the suggestion that a clash between naturalism and the absurd does not inevitably repel the audience. There are many instances in modern drama, often indeed in Pinter, where a successful synthesis of the two genres occur. In the truly successful Pinter play where the absurd and naturalistic exist, there is a neat interweaving of the two genres. Mick's outflowing of words on decorating in The Caretaker, Lenny's stories of abusing women in The Homecoming, or Briggs' story of the one-way system at Bolsover Street in No Man's Land, are all absurd and slightly surreal moments which may seem at odds with the general naturalistic tenor of the plays. However, all these absurd moments are woven into the naturalistic context in such a manner as not to act to repel the audience. By the time, for instance, that we arrive at the Bolsover St. routine in No Man's Land (Act II), we have been prepared for it by a series of incremental steps: its placing thus becomes the capstone of an entire process of the victimization of Spooner. Mick's absurd speech on decorating in The Caretaker (Act III) - "You could have an off-white pile linen rug, a table in...in afromosia teak veneer, sideboard with malt black drawers, curved chairs with cushioned seats, armchairs in oatmeal tweed...(58) - is a deliberate act of bamboozling; we have been amply prepared for it by Mick's unnerving appearance/

disappearance routine in Act I, and by his darkly comical Electrolux "torture" sequence in Act II which precedes his decoration speech. Lenny's stories in The Homecoming can be easily understood as his best form of defense against Ruth, a figure he perceives to be a threat to him. Moreover, we begin to see his speeches as perhaps being fantasies precisely because Ruth herself sees Lenny's strutting machismo as a disguise of his fears of impotence and as evidence of his misogyny. In all three cases of The Caretaker, No Man's Land, and The Homecoming, the abuse and seeming absurdity is presented within a context that allows the audience to accept these surreal elements as credible outflowings of pent-up anger, frustration, and fear. We may not have information about "backgrounds", but in the case of, for example, Foster and Briggs in No Man's Land, we can spin credible origins and onstage contexts from the stuff of their potent fantasies.

It is precisely a lack of context which destroys our acceptance of Goldberg and McCann, and even Stanley in The Birthday Party. My point here is that the audience of The Birthday Party can never be fully involved in the dramatic proceedings because the material is in itself exclusive. There is here an unsuccessful blending of an element of style which becomes obtrusive enough to draw the audience's attention to it. It is at this moment of heightened awareness of the drama as drama that the audience's acceptance of the material wanes. Resistance arises in an audience at the point where an overextension of distance occurs. In Pinter this zone of acceptance is flexible,

for he constantly shifts us between naturalism and the absurd; an audience's acceptance of such a movement into absurdism is only granted, however, if the shift is accomplished carefully. In The Birthday Party, as I will note, the movement is altogether too abrupt. At this moment the audience perhaps feels betrayed, for we are forcefully reminded how easily we have been manipulated into accepting the fiction as real.

My understanding of the successful Pinter play involves the notion that the audience must be involved continuously in the process of the manipulation of the distance that naturally exists between itself and the drama. The audience experiences a continual vacillation: we are drawn into the play at times, only to be forced out at others. It is precisely with this dialectical process that this study will be concerned. If it is accepted that a distance between audience and play exists as the curtain rises, how does Pinter work towards a diminishing of this distance? As I see it, there are two phases in this process. Firstly, Pinter deliberately structures his text to encourage an active hermeneutical inquiry in the audience. Pinter encourages, perhaps even compels, this posture by presenting to the audience a series of gaps or absences; by this I mean that those elements we perhaps expect to find in traditional drama - exposition, explanation, "meaning" - are conspicuously absent. This is as true for the unsuccessful play as for the successful one. We cannot know the origins of Stanley any more than we can know the origins of the matchseller in A Slight Ache; we cannot know the reason(s) for Edward's blindness in A Slight Ache

just as we cannot know with any certainty the final physical/mental condition of Disson at the close of Tea Party. However, it is precisely this paucity of information that motivates our participation in, response to, and creation of possible scenarios.

I should here modify this idea of the paucity of information in the Pinter text. It is indeed true that Pinter is oftentimes niggardly with "hard" information about origins, motivations, or meaning. This paucity is offset, however, by the archetypal structures to be found in almost all of his plays. It is not coincidental that between all three plays under scrutiny here there exists distinct similarities in structure and theme. Clearly, the structural movement of each play is similar: a man in ostensibly safe surroundings is gradually confronted by a force which works either to expel him from his environment (The Birthday Party), or to reduce his mental and physical well-being inside the safe place (A Slight Ache, Tea Party). We might, therefore, regard each character as a pharmakos - a scapegoat figure undergoing a process of almost ritual castration and expulsion. It is by no mere chance that Stanley, Edward, and Disson all experience "blindness" in either physical or psychological senses: one might, if one were so inclined, even view each play as an ironic send-up of the Oedipus myth. I see Katherine Burkman's work in The Dramatic World of Harold Pinter, or Lucinda Gabbard's The Dream Structure of Pinter's Plays as being the proper place for such analysis, however.

Nevertheless, one should not underestimate the significance of the archetypal element of Pinter's drama. Because he so deliberately uses such familiar material in his plays, Pinter can, with a great deal of self-assurance, expect his audience to respond immediately to these elements, and to the play in toto. It is this degree of archetypal recognizability in the plays (which moves beyond the mere clichés I outlined above) that facilitates and encourages the audience to identify, perhaps even identify with, such figures as Stanley, Edward, and Disson. I might here, simply to support this notion, briefly regard part of the allusive structure of A Slight Ache. Pinter here deliberately chooses symbols which will call up a whole gamut of dramatic and literary associations. The blindness of Edward immediately recalls any number of classical figures - Tiresias, Phineus, Oedipus, perhaps even Polyphemus. Perhaps the most apparent and ultimately ironic allusion present in A Slight Ache is to King Lear. As Pinter's play proceeds, and the audience begins to perceive Edward's none too understated fear of becoming (becoming again?) a beggar like the matchseller, we begin to see a hideously ironic allusive link between Edward and Lear, both of whom "fall" from their respective positions of power - positions, indeed, of more show than substance - to become as "poor naked wretches" on the heath. When Pinter mingles such charged themes as blindness and potency, as he will in all three plays here, he essentially calls up in the audience's mind a whole history of scripts. Our entire dramatic education seems always to shimmer beneath the surface of the Pinter play.

There is, of course, something darkly ironic in Pinter's manipulation of our desire to read his plays allusively. Despite the fact that some critics and students of his plays latch onto these allusions as if they were "keys" to unlock the mysteries of the drama, the honest critic - one willing to accept the play's resistance to closure - will eventually realize that these allusions simply cannot fill the gulf of absences in the play. One might in fact envision each allusion as a kind of mise en abime - a link in a chain that simply and inevitably leads to yet another link ad infinitum. Because Pinter uses such a vast amount of accumulated cultural and literary baggage in his plays, one can never hope to pin down the final allusion, the final key. It is precisely these constant shimmerings of familiar material, however, which keeps the audience hoping for that final solution.

We might borrow from Catherine Belsey's Critical Practice and view the Pinter text in her terms as "interrogative". Belsey works from Benveniste's notion of the three types of discourse - the declarative, imperative, interrogative - and presents a taxonomy of the text. The declarative text is that which is defined as "classic realistic", a text, which presents a "privileged discourse" (91); the presentation of an ideological position in the classic realist text is clear and, most importantly, stable. There is very little room in the declarative text for contradiction, slipperiness, or aporia. The imperative text, by way of contrast to the declarative text, is defined by Belsey as "propaganda" (91): the sermon, political broadcast, agitprop drama. Belsey quotes Steve

Neale, who writes that the imperative text places the reader "as in identification with one set of discourses and practices and as in opposition to others...maintaining that identification and opposition...not resolving it but rather holding it as the position of closure" (91). What is clear in Belsey's outline is that in both cases of the declarative and imperative text, the reader's (or audience's) position is stable. In both cases he is placed outside the text; he simply apprehends the declarative text, and is preached at by the imperative.

The interrogative text, as Belsey notes, compels the audience into a dynamic position. This text "literally invites[s] the reader to produce answers to the questions it implicitly or explicitly raises" (91). Belsey contends that this questioning process arises precisely because the reader cannot locate any hierarchy of discourse, no "authorial" position, within the text. I have modified this notion into the idea that in Pinter authorial position is waived in favour of gaps and absences. Interestingly enough, Belsey too raises the idea of the "distance" between reader and text:

> The interrogative text invites an answer or answers to the questions it poses. Further, if the interrogative text is illusionistic it also tends to employ devices to undermine the illusion, to draw attention to its own textuality. The reader is distanced, at least from time to time, rather than wholly interpolated into a fictional world. (92)

Although my notion of how Pinter will distance an audience (as in Tea Party) does not to any large extent involve the notion of metatheatre, I would suggest that it is precisely the interrogative mode of the Pinter text that facilitates the first step into what I will thoughout this analysis term "dialogical

interplay". This notion, as mentioned above, involves two steps - the first being the apprehension of the interrogative mode of the text. Consequently, I imagine the audience engaged in a kind of dialogue with the Pinter play - a dialogue that arises precisely because of the abundances of absences in the text. It is precisely the silence of the Pinter play which compels our hermeneutical inquiry, for the answer to most questions posed by the audience are not overtly profferred by the play. The posing of questions constitutes the first step of this hermeneutical inquiry. As we begin to realise that the play remains, like the matchseller, mute, we begin - perhaps even unconsciously at first - to construct possible scenarios to fill in the blanks, as it were. In his essay "The Dumb Waiter: Pinter's Play with the Audience" Thomas van Laan describes the process as follows:

> Pinter seems far more interested in examining the processes by which meaningful events are made...By prompting us simultaneously to make guesses about what is happening in the play and to question ourselves self-consciously for doing so, Pinter asks us to focus not only on the play but also on ourselves, and to perceive ourselves not as passive attenders to a meaningful event shaped for us by another, but as uneasy collaborators with the dramatist, striving against difficulties and probably in vain to complete something that cannot fully exist without our participation. (499)

I agree with Van Laan that it is precisely the passivity of the audience that Pinter is working against. To be passive is to maintain a position of relative safety, and we know - from the quotation with which I began this introduction - that Pinter regards the audience with some hostility: "I tend to regard the audience as my enemies." Over the course of the play, thus, we come to

assume the position of uneasy "collaborator", a notion that goes far in explaining Pinter's own statement: "...when I'm in the audience I have great sympathy with the audience for having to submit to the terrible things on stage". Pinter's choice of words is telling: we "submit" to the dramatic proceedings as if, to advance a perhaps strange notion, we were the characters themselves. This notion brings me to the second phase of dialogical interplay.

The second phase of dialogical interplay involves the radical closing of the distance between audience and play. The early Pinter play is usually structured like a puzzle or a riddle: the characters within the play are confronted with a situation which is initially baffling and requires some degree of interpretation. The Birthday Party, A Slight Ache, and The Room, all share this structure. Rose in The Room, for instance, must attempt to make sense of the "intruder" Riley, a character analogous to Goldberg and McCann in The Birthday Party, and the matchseller in A Slight Ache. What becomes increasingly noticeable to the audience is that our experience of the total play The Room is precisely analogous to Rose's experience of Riley. As Riley appears on stage Rose is thrown into a sublimely baffled state; yet, of course, there are vague and tantalizing hints that some real relation exists between the two characters, but, true to the form of early Pinter, the play is structured to defy a totalizing rational explanation, both for Rose and the audience. Thus Rose's final position in the play is precisely ours. Her "Can't see. I can't see. I can't see" (110) is an expression of blindness shared by the audience. We too

cannot see clearly, we cannot ever hope to understand fully the "meaning" of Riley or the play as a whole. This posture is one which the audience of early Pinter repeatedly assumes. Stanley's bafflement in The Birthday Party is ours, equally as Edward's final words to the matchseller in A Slight Ache - "Who are you?" - are ours. In this shared posture, therefore, there is a dizzying blur in any firm distinction between spectator and character. It is in this blur that Pinter manages most successfully to bring the audience into the action, to diminish as much as possible the distance which lies between audience and play.

My outline of the two phases of dialogical interplay is perhaps slightly misleading. I do not wish to suggest that the experience of a Pinter play is simply one of a steady elimination of the distance of objective evaluation towards a subjective identification. The process and experience of the play is, of course, more complex than this. As the play proceeds the audience is involved in a continual process of involvement and distance: it is a process that occurs at every stage of the drama, rather than one that is worked towards as the play proceeds. In the third chapter of this study, therefore, I shall attempt a microscopic analysis of one scene of Tea Party to demonstrate on a particular rather than general level this dialectical process of involvement and distance.

I should perhaps add here a note to forestall an objection to my notion of dialogical interplay and the closing of distance. The objection should be raised that I have spent a great deal of time in my discussion of these plays regarding the position of the male characters. I have observed that the

audience naturally assumes a role analogous to that of Edward in A Slight Ache, and of Disson in Tea Party. The question might well be asked: what about the women? It could be suggested that as Edward's aridity becomes more and more pronounced, the women in the audience might well be drawn towards Flora and further away from Edward; in fact, it might be noted that Edward's final "who are you?" might be a question passed over by a great deal of the audience. I cannot deny a certain subjective bias towards the hermeneutical process of Edward. I cannot deny, however, that it is not merely the gender of Edward that compels my attention. I do think that in the early plays especially the very structure of the works compels a certain identification with the male characters. These early plays are generally all concerned with the lives of male characters (The Room, Pinter's first work, is an exception to this rule). In her book Pinter's Female Portraits, Elizabeth Sakelladirou borrows from Shulamith Firestone and chooses to place the early works of Pinter in the "new virility school" (15) - writing, that is, from a "totally masculine standpoint" (11).

I agree to a certain extent with Sakellaridou. Pinter's early works do tend towards a male oriented vision of things; the plays' concerns stem from fear of impotency, usurpation at the hands of other males, and male sexual fantasy. I would, however, amend this criticism slightly with regards to A Slight Ache and Tea Party. Granted, Flora does seem stereotypical to a degree, but as a female creation, what an improvement she is over Meg or Lulu in The Birthday Party! And certainly we cannot dismiss the fact that her process of

interpretation of the matchseller is as valid as the process of Edward. We do, consequently, as we watch the unfolding of the drama, identify with Flora: we may, in fact, regard her bold appropriation of the matchseller as an admirable step towards empowerment. Flora is thus at least as compelling a character as Edward - perhaps even more so. I will not, therefore, deny that an audience might vacillate in their identification between Edward and Flora. In fact, I think this is precisely what Pinter intends. We are presented in A Slight Ache with two people confronting an enigmatic scenario. The play thus presents these two hermeneuts' "solution" to the problem; Flora accepts the matchseller and asserts power over him by naming him - a posture not unlike a great number of critics of the play itself! Edward assumes a position, again perhaps like a great deal of the audience, of radical uncertainty. He can never know who or what this sphinx is. To return to my initial disclaimer, however, if I have spent perhaps more space and time outlining Edward's final posture, it is precisely because the play's structure demands it. He is given more time in his interviews with the matchseller, the denouement is primarily concerned with his fate; the play, in the most reductive sense, seems to be about Edward.

My analysis of Tea Party is perhaps a little easier to defend. I have spent most of the analysis regarding Disson's "visions". The question that I think might legitimately be raised again is: what about the women? Is Wendy really a siren? Might not women in the audience feel that they are being offerred a typical male fantasy through the illusory visions of Disson? Might this

fantasy not alienate the women because, in classic fashion, it sees women only as sex objects? I am thinking here of that stage direction which describes Disson's vision of Wendy: "Suddenly Wendy's body appears in enormous close-up. Her buttocks fill the screen" (121). There are indeed moments such as this which will inevitably alienate female viewers - Pinter's plays are full of them. In the context of Tea Party, however, it seems to me too abrupt simply to dismiss Disson. The question I raised above - is Wendy really a siren? - is one which is part of the philosophical heart of the drama. Tea Party asks its audience, an audience composed both of males and females, to pose these questions: is what Disson sees "real"? What is the true vision of things? Disson's vision might seem at times to be typical male fantasy, but is this precisely what he sees? As I argue, it is these questions that should keep an audience firmly in its seat, precisely because we cannot know with any certainty what the answers are.

The process of "identification" should thus be acknowledged as a complex one. Daphna Ben Chaim describes the process of the diminishing of distance as taking the form, in at least some cases, of "empathy". The word, as I suggested above, is an apt one; the Oxford English Dictionary defines empathy as "the power of projecting one's personality into (and so fully comprehending) the object of comprehension". This is precisely what I mean when I describe the process of dialogical interplay. Here is the vertiginous blur which I sense occuring during the experience of A Slight Ache and Tea Party.

Ben Chaim, however, employs the word in a sense which I would not wish to be used in the description of the experience of the Pinter play. In her final chapter of Distance in the Theatre Ben Chaim describes the feeling of the audience of Brecht's Mother Courage. Brecht's use of epic theatre conventions have, as Ben Chaim maintains, succeeded in distancing the audience throughout the play. (Brecht's desire to "alienate" (distance) the audience so as to facilitate an objective and critical view of the dramatic proceedings is well known). However, at the crucial close of the play, Brecht radically alters the audience's posture: as Katrin sounds her drum, the audience, again acccording to Ben Chaim, feels an empathetic tug:

> What is important, however, is that [the] play can only be effective if the general level of distance that is established is reversed at a climactic point: in Mother Courage, distance is significantly reduced with the strong exploitation of empathy for Katrin when she has climbed on the wagon to beat a drum to warn the town (though she knows that she will be shot for doing it). (79-80)

What should be noticed here about Ben Chaim's use of the word "empathy", in contradistinction to its effect in what I have termed "dialogical interplay", is that there is no sense that the audience feels itself become Katrin as she pounds her drum. Ben Chaim could quite as easily have used the notion of "sympathy" to describe this closing of distance. I simply make this distinction not to dispute the theorizing of Ben Chaim, but to define the concept more clearly. I would, however, be interested to know which characters in early Pinter Ben Chaim would have us empathize with (in her sense of the word)!

This is perhaps the space to offer some speculation as to why Pinter would wish to diminish this distance, to involve the audience. Although it is quite impossible to read the intentions of the author, I would suggest that Pinter's hostility towards his audience may have something to do with his desire to press the audience's face into the proceedings. My experience of the Pinter play has always involved a rather apparent sense of violation. (This sense of violation may have a great deal to do with the many negative responses to Pinter's plays over his career). If the play is well constructed, as are A Slight Ache and Tea Party, the audience cannot, if indeed it is at all attentive, escape a close interaction with the proceedings. In the early plays (The Room, The Dumb Waiter, The Birthday Party, A Slight Ache, Tea Party) it has always struck me that there is at least one character who seems to be a "stand in" for the audience; this player is usually characterised, like the audience of the play itself, by his or her bafflement or blindness to the happenings on stage: Rose in The Room, Gus in The Dumb Waiter, Stanley in The Birthday Party, Edward in A Slight Ache and Disson in Tea Party. The questions these characters pose are precisely the questions we pose, their experience of puzzlement is as equally ours, and thus our objectivity becomes empathy, to return to Ben Chaim's speculations. What is crucial to note, moreover, is the fact that with the possible exception of Gus in The Dumb Waiter, these characters are all in some manner maimed or destroyed: with their destruction must come an

audience's feeling of its own violation, for we have in a very real sense "become" these characters as the plays have unfolded.

This sense of violation is, of course, common to the experience of a great deal of modern drama. With absurdists especially there is usually a tendency to identify the baffled, stupified character as a mere projection of the audience. Ionesco's Berenger is a prime example of the "stunned" character who embodies a stance not unlike the audience's. Alternately, The Bald Soprano may be seen as an extended insult to the bourgeois, theatre-going public. There is thus an overriding sense of unease in the audience of the modern play, for it knows that at any moment it may become the brunt of insults (Ionesco), or of a more subtle psychological violation (Pinter). The audience of the Pinter play goes along with the proceedings very nervously, for at any moment Pinter can spring any number of traps on us. We are encouraged to undertake elaborate speculation in a Pinter play, but Pinter will often make us feel the fool for doing so when he reveals that the fabric of the play is too threadbare to hang together - such is the experience of The Birthday Party. Perhaps the most difficult question to answer with regards to The Birthday Party is whether Pinter deliberately fashions the play to irritate us, or whether his inexperience as a playwright lead to this inept dramatic structure. The question is, of course, impossible to answer, but I do believe Pinter's contempt for his audience may have a great deal to do with what I have termed the audience's "betrayal" in The Birthday Party.

By way of conclusion, we should perhaps note here a distinction between Pinter's drama and that of Beckett, whom Pinter acknowledges to have been a major influence. In Beckett's dramatic universe "absence" plays as important a role as that of the major characters: often we cannot know precisely the "origins" of many of his characters, just as we cannot understand completely the precise nature of the mise-en-scene. (Where, for instance, are we in Quad, or Not I?). In Beckett, as distinct from Pinter, however, we do not need to know the answers to these basic questions; often, indeed, these questions are never even raised, for with Beckett, the contract between audience and playwright is one which involves the tacit understanding that we have moved into a universe in which certain norms of naturalism simply do not apply. Beckett is, for instance, a master of revealing the insubstantiality of his characters. He often has his characters deliberately reveal their metatheatricality, but this somehow does not overdistance the audience. By contrast, we shall see in chapter one of this analysis how when the audience becomes aware that Goldberg and McCann are too insubstantial to support our "suspension of disbelief" the audience begins to withdraw from the play. Beckett rarely pretends to "flesh" out a character, but as I have mentioned this does not serve to alienate the audience; rather it includes the audience in a world in which the real and theatre coexist, may in fact be one and the same. His Waiting for Godot is the masterpiece of manipulation and succeeds in incorporating the audience because Beckett does not hesitate to acknowledge

that his characters, his audience, and himself are all in the same position - we all, as moderns, are baffled by the lack of context, explanation, meaning. We all wait for a Godot who cannot come.

Pinter's position is more arrogant and results primarily, I would suggest, from his characteristically modern insecurities. Although, as I will discuss, the audience of the play will move into identification with characters, there is always a sense that the boundary between audience and play has been manipulated precisely for the violation of the audience. There is rarely the sense of an existential bond - a commonality of experience - between audience and play (or Pinter); rather, one gets the sense that Pinter's own insecurities, be they the fear of impotence or lack of power, have been foisted onto the audience, as if Pinter, somewhat like a petulant child, has to give out suffering to deal with his own. Pinter, it seems, rarely relaxes fully enough to trust an audience and the tension we feel is a result in part of that mistrust.

I have chosen to analyse some of Pinter's work precisely because of this dangerous relationship between audience and play. There may well be a sense of uncomfortable violation while viewing or reading a Pinter play, but the experience is itself endlessly fascinating precisely because Pinter has available so many methods to ensnare his audience. He can be willfully and irritatingly baffling, as we shall see in The Birthday Party. He can present us, as he will do in A Slight Ache, with a puzzle which has as many solutions as we care to imagine. He can, as he will do in Tea Party, force his audience to question

even its own rational thought processes. In all cases, however, Pinter manages to remove us from a posture of safety and complacency - a posture assumed perhaps after years of casual theatre, film, or television viewing - and charges the normally dead space between ourselves and the drama with questions and a thrilling sense of danger.

CHAPTER ONE: THE BIRTHDAY PARTY

In an essay in the recently published Around the Absurd, Benedict Nightingale had this to say about Pinter's early full length play, The Birthday Party:

> Though it is by no means his best play, there is about it that sense of mystery that, surely, goes far toward explaining the hold Harold Pinter has long maintained over our imaginations; that feeling that people aren't quite saying what they mean, or meaning what they say; that peculiar combination of intensity of emotion and social obfuscation, animal instinct, and inscrutability of motive. To define most of the dramatist's work closely is to limit it. (144)

I call attention to Nightingale's notions for two reasons; firstly, because the purpose of the present chapter is to develop from the idea that The Birthday Party is flawed. Secondly, I will argue that it is precisely the play's lack of perspicuity which contributes to its ultimate failure. If, as I maintain, the success of the early Pinter play lies precisely in the degree of audience "involvement", how or where is the audience "placed" in The Birthday Party?

The Birthday Party is a play which has continually baffled audiences and critics. It is instructive to observe the theoretical contortions the critic must undergo in efforts to elucidate what seems to be the deliberate obscurity of the play. It is an all too infrequent occurrence in Pinter criticism for the critic to

embrace fundamental and essential mysteries, and as a consequence, the history of Pinter criticism is the history of the imposition of willfully reductive hermeneutical structures upon the plays. Thus Martin Esslin, in an effort to make sense of the proceedings of The Birthday Party, must make appeal to those shibboleths in Pinter criticism, allegory and psychology. In The Peopled Wound: The Work of Harold Pinter, Esslin writes:

> On one level it is fairly clear - particularly from the final image of Stanley in the uniform of respectable, bourgeois gentility - that Stanley is the artist whom society claims back from a comfortable, bohemian, "opt-out" existence...On another level The Birthday Party might be seen as an image of man's fear of being driven out from his warm place of refuge on earth. The play would then, like Beckett's Endgame, emerge as a morality about the processes of death itself, a kind of modern Everyman. (82)

After imposing these structures upon the play Esslin can breathe more easily. The essential mysteries of the play - who is Stanley? who are Goldberg and McCann? who is Monty? - are taken out of their dramatic contexts and placed, and thus defined, on allegorical/symbolic levels: Stanley is bohemian Everyman, Goldberg and McCann Death/Society.

While registering tolerantly Esslin's attempt to fix The Birthday Party as a modern Everyman, Elin Diamond has a more ingenious "solution" to the problems created by the play's obscurity. Although Diamond is a more sophisticated critic than Esslin, the notion of the play's unfathomable obscurity is seemingly too uncomfortable for her to accept, and thus she makes appeal to yet another allegorical structure; in Pinter's Comic Play Diamond writes:

> Symbolism, however, does not explain the special blend of comedy and malevolence with which Goldberg and McCann manipulate others and entertain us. Death in Everyman merely arrives, but Goldberg and McCann work; they come to Meg's boardinghouse with a "job" to do. How they do their job, not why, is Pinter's dramatic concern, for as usual he is niggardly with information that might be molded into motives. To justify the pair's scheming, their clowning, their destructiveness, and their power, we have to look at another figure in the morality play tradition, not in Everyman, but so popular and influential that Shakespeare and his contemporaries knew and used him: the trickster, tempter, and malicious humorist - the Vice. (45)

It is fascinating to observe the desperation in Diamond's hermeneutical posture. She feels compelled to "justify" the actions of Goldberg and McCann in the overall structure of the play. In so doing, moreover, she, like most critics, must take the farthest step away from the play to comprehend the occurrences within the play. Once she has imposed a structure onto Goldberg the entirety of the play suddenly makes sense: Goldberg is a Vice figure, analogically related to Iago or Diccon in Mr S's Gammer Gurton's Needle. (It is, of course, interesting to note that it is with Goldberg that Diamond is primarily concerned; characters such as Lulu or Meg or Petey are not scrutinized.) The Birthday Party thus can be understood finally under the rubric of the morality play. Diamond may question the rigour of Esslin's interpretation, but her fundamental position is remarkably similar.

In her Strategems to Uncover Nakedness, Lois G. Gordon reads The Birthday Party with that most tenacious structure, the Oedipal conflict, in mind.

With this framework Gordon can make the enormous claim of comprehending Stanley's origins and past actions:

> Specific definition of Stanley's sin and crime is the subject of the play, but it can be stated briefly: In an effort to deny an amourous relationship with his mother whereupon he usurped his father's place in the household, Stanley has moved to a new land and become the hopeful son of his present family. In doing this, however, Stanley has similarly and unknowingly displaced the present father to establish a lover-son relationship with his wife. Not until his confrontation with Goldberg and McCann does Stanley admit his sin and suffer a kind of internal purgation.
> (21)

As Goldberg and McCann come to be seen as "projections of Stanley's guilt, driving and uncompromising internal furies" (27), the play assumes an infallible clarity. In her interpretation, however, Gordon raises procrustean scholarship to new levels. In an analysis of Stanley's first "interrogation" at the hands of Goldberg and McCann, Gordon carefully censors those elements of the dialogue which do not fit her Oedipal schema. In her excerpt (below), Gordon removes all obscurities, and all non sequiturs. She excludes the removal of Stanley's glasses (odd, because this "blinding" would seem to harmonize perfectly with the Oedipal myth), the mention of the cup washing (43), and all geographical references. Thus Gordon:

> Goldberg. Don't lie.
> McCann. You betrayed the organization.
> .....
> Goldberg. Where was your wife?
> .....
> What have you done with your wife?
> McCann. He's killed his wife.
> .....

> Goldberg. Where's your old mum?
> Stanley. In the sanitorium.
> (26)

It is only by means of an extreme act of redaction that Gordon can comfortably proceed.

The preceding critical responses to The Birthday Party stand as evidence of the results of necessary ambiguity in the play. The Birthday Party differs somewhat from other early plays of "intrusion" (The Room, A Slight Ache) in one very crucial manner. In both The Room and A Slight Ache, the audience is either offered or is able to construct very definable social and personal contexts (and histories to support these contexts) for the major characters. We are able, for instance, to extrapolate easily from the physical and verbal evidence on stage that Rose and Bert Hudd represent a certain known factor: they are a married couple whose relationship has a dynamic familiar to all - the reticent husband, the garrulous wife. As clichés, perhaps, they are eminently and convincingly familiar. Likewise in A Slight Ache; Edward and Flora are representatives of a known class of the privileged. Their relationship is finely delineated as Pinter provides all the information the audience needs to comprehend their social and personal circumstances. In other words, Rose and Bert, Flora and Edward are amply contextualized. If we do not have empirical knowledge of their origin, we feel able and comfortable enough to construct one. Of course, ample contextualization in Pinter is not a necessary guarantee of clarity; often, indeed, the audience is provided with an

abundance of contextualizing information which functions to lull the audience into a vague sense of familiarity. One thinks of Voice I in Family Voices, who provides the listener with a great deal of information as to his present circumstances. While this information cannot be accepted at face value as "truth", it does have a very pronounced effect upon the audience: the superabundance of information (real or imagined) about his context, like the superabundance of information about the matchseller (real or imagined), feeds the audience to a degree that it feels that it might have enough information to construct a story/history of the character to accompany the plot.

In The Birthday Party, the audience's natural desire for knowledge of origin is present, though fulfillment of the desire is not and never will be forthcoming. The denial of knowledge is a contributive factor, in my estimation, to the overall failure of the play. I shall here explore a number of aspects in the structure of the play; I shall consider the precise posture(s) of the audience as it experiences the unfolding of the drama. What effect does the intrusion of the "absurd" into what is at times a perfect naturalistic play have upon the audience? What effect does the absence of a "centre" (central character) have upon the audience? Can any form of dialogical interplay occur between audience and play if that play consistently denies empathetic identification with and any form of even provisional knowlege of the major characters?

An effective Pinter play, indeed any successful play, will immediately bring the audience into the action. Usually the Pinter play succeeds in this by

compelling the audience to assume a posture of uncertainty and thus of active hermeneutical inquiry. The opening of The Birthday Party is a humourous example of a scene which, by its ambiguity, compels the audience to puzzlement:

> (Petey enters from the door on the left with a paper and sits at the table. He begins to read. Meg's voice comes through the kitchen hatch.)
>
> Meg. Is that you, Petey?
> Pause
> Petey, is that you?
> Pause
> Petey?
> Petey. What?
> Meg. Is that you?
> Petey. Yes, it's me.
> Meg. What?...Are you back?
> Petey. Yes.
>
> (3)

We should acknowledge immediately the importance of the syntactical arrangement of this early scene (a scene, in its grammatical construction, strikingly similar to the opening gambit of A Slight Ache). The interrogative mode of this opening harmonizes nicely with the overarching interrogative mode of the entire play; Pinter sounds early the theme of questioning, and demonstrates in a subtle manner that obscurity and "blindness" is a central feature of the lives of the characters within the play: "What? Is that you? Yes it's me. What?" Indeed, the three times repeated "Is that you?" might well stand as the central theme of the play.

The opening minutes of the play, while sounding major themes, serve also to establish an entirely "naturalistic" tone. The gentle verbal scuffles between Stanley and Meg, the preparation of food, the dusting, all establish a precise and familiar context. At this point, and until Meg mentions the two gentlemen (13), the audience is able to accept the proceedings without any hermeneutical discomfort - we are not compelled to question Stanley's origins because they are not yet at issue. His context here is Meg's boardinghouse - he has no other ties to the world.

This comfort - both of the audience and Stanley - collapses as Meg mentions the imminent arrival of the two gentlemen, for it is at this point in the play that Stanley's context is widened and obscured. He now either has ties to the outside world, or, indeed, what amounts to the same thing, he <u>fears</u> the intrusion of the outside world. In any case the audience now is compelled to question the origins of Stanley; Pinter anticipates this and ironically has Stanley ask the questions:

> Stanley. Who do you think you're talking to?
> Meg. (uncertainly) What?
> Stanley. Come here.
> Meg. What do you mean?
> Stanley. Come over here.
> Meg. No.
> Stanley. I wanted to ask you something...Come on...all right. I can ask it from here just as well. Tell me, Mrs Boles, when you address yourself to me do you ever ask yourself who exactly you are talking to? Eh?
>
> (15)

Stanley's questions work well to reduce Meg to uncertainty. They are at once an effort to assert power over Meg and an important thematic indicator. As often happens in Pinter, when intrusion becomes threatening, an assertion of power by the threatened party occurs. We have seen previously how Stanley, as one who understands the effectiveness of threats, wields a certain power over Meg: when Meg earlier refuses to give Stanley "something cooked" (9) for breakfast, Stanley threatens to go elsewhere for his meal. As is expected, Meg quickly responds to this by fetching his food post haste. Stanley's reactive defense mechanism to the imminent arrival of Goldberg and McCann, however, is empty. It is an impotent demonstration of the need to maim in the face of being maimed. Moreover, the questions may in fact not merely be an assertion of power as a rhetorical defensive mechanism, but indeed may, from Stanley's standpoint, require an answer. Meg, as well as the audience, is at last led to question just who it is we <u>are</u> talking to. Who is this Stanley?

Certainly Stanley's story of his concert at Lower Edmonton and the subsequent failure "somewhere else" (17) does nothing to satisfy our curiosity regarding his origins. Why should we accept the "fact" that Stanley is a pianist? To do so would be as foolish as accepting that Stanley is, as he suggests, considering a "job" (16). Pinter has effectively reduced the audience to a state of utter uncertainty regarding whom we are led to accept as the major players in this drama. In the first Act, thus, Pinter has offered and quickly removed and <u>firm</u> centre to the play. Context has given way to contexts, or, more precisely,

pretexts for contexts.It is precisely this multiplication of contexts here that constitutes a crucial first step in the betrayal of the audience in The Birthday Party. A more mature playwright would understand that there is a tacit bond between dramatist and spectator - a bond that has as a crucial component the feeding of the audience. An audience of a play, especially a "modern" play, requires the playwright to supply it with enough substance (information, articulated backgrounds) to sustain its attention, be it an active interpretive inquiry or simply one of passive acceptance of the proceedings. An audience, to continue the metaphor, may even be satisfied with substance which has only the appearance of "reality". Often in Pinter the "food" the audience receives is akin to plastic fruit - it appears initially to be capable of satisfying our needs, but often proves indigestible. By removing the constituent aspect of the bond here in the early stage of the play, however, Pinter begins the process of audience alienation.

Thus, as Stanley's mystery is placed before us, Pinter brings in those walking ciphers, Goldberg and McCann. In the first Act of the play the essential mystery of these two works well to enthrall an already puzzled audience. Pinter tantalizes the audience with what seem like firm indications as to their origins and relationship with Stanley, and thus Goldberg and McCann are typologically related to Riley in The Room and the matchseller in A Slight Ache. As with the matchseller and Riley we have a multiplicity of possible origins for Goldberg and McCann, none of which are firm enough to end our curiosity. The two seem to

be members of an arcane organization and their language would indicate some sort of terrorism:

> McCann. Hey Nat, just one thing...
> Goldberg. What now?
> McCann. This job - no, listen - this job, is it going to be like anything we've ever done before?
> Goldberg. Tch, tch, tch.
>
> (23)

Their precise relationship to Stanley is, of course, left vague and undefined; all we know for certain is that Goldberg and McCann are looking for Stanley, but with what end we are unable to perceive.

Whether Stanley knows the two gentlemen is also left vague. On hearing Meg reveal Goldberg's name, Stanley remains mute (29), and, of course, his silence speaks equivocal volumes. We cannot know if he is part of Goldberg's organization, but we can surmise, judging from the closing image of the Act of Stanley "savage and possessed" (30) beating on the drum, that he fears or is in some fundamental manner disturbed by the presence of the two. And here the opposition between audience and character begins to be shaken; we share Stanley's bafflement, if not his rage, and thus his "Who are they?" (14) is as equally ours.

If the first Act of The Birthday Party presents the increase of uncertainty in a naturalistic setting, the second Act presents uncertainty in a context, which being absurd, places what I might term the "natural uncertainty" of the first Act at a far remove from the audience. If the theatrical experience is dialectical (attraction/repulsion), the uncertainty of the first Act is insidiously

attractive, while increasingly in the second and third Acts, the uncertainty serves to distance, in the sense that, as I would argue, the audience is no longer willing (able?) to honour the bond between itself and the dramatist. As it now begins to harbour serious reservations as to the plausibility of what it is witnessing (a posture not assumed in Act 1), the audience, very simply, is no longer able to maintain its suspension of disbelief. This repulsion is, I suggest, partially the result of the clash between naturalism and the absurd.

The absurd enters almost immediately as Act 2 opens. The whistling exchange between McCann and Stanley sets the tone for the barrage of bizarre exchanges that will occur in the second and third Acts, the most important being the two "interrogations". Contradictions occur and pile upon contradiction, often within a few lines of each other: "McCann: I don't think we've met. Stanley: No we haven't" (31); "Stanley: I've got a feeling we've met before. McCann: No we haven't" (33). We are soon to discover that Goldberg's identity - if, indeed, identity is at least provisionally fixed by a name - is unclear:

> Goldberg. "Simey!" my old mum used to shout...
> McCann. I thought your name was Nat.
> Goldberg. She called me "Simey".
> (37)

It does seem that for Pinter the obscurity of Goldberg's identity is an important aspect of the play; Pinter later repeats verbatim the above exchange, with Lulu as the interlocutor (53). We soon discover in Act 3 that Goldberg might in fact possess yet another proper name (Benny). (McCann himself seems to have two names: he is both Seamus and Dermot). Goldberg's protean identity keeps the

audience, as well as characters within the play - characters even, whom we would expect to know Goldberg (McCann) - in a constant state of uncertainty. (A similar strategy is employed by Pinter in The Caretaker where the caretaker might be "Mac Davies" or "Bernard Jenkins", or, we are free to suppose, a host of other names.

The precise effect of the cumulation of uncertain facts and unarticulated backgrounds is that everything is rendered suspicious - both that which is to come and that which has come before. Even the language of the characters in the second Act is increasingly looked upon as being unstable. In my estimation, the first interrogation of Stanley is a perfect example of the manner in which language in Pinter, as Quigley rightly perceives in The Pinter Problem, undergoes the process of being bled of all referential or semantic content and used simply as a tool (52). I take two examples from the transcript of the interrogation:

> Goldberg. What have you done with your wife?
> McCann. He's killed his wife.
> Goldberg. Why did you kill your wife?
> Stanley. What wife?
> McCann. How did you kill her?
> Goldberg. How did you kill her?
> McCann. You throttled her.
> Goldberg. With arsenic.
> McCann. There's your man!
> Goldberg. Where's your old mum?
> Stanley. In the santorium.
> McCann. Yes!
> Goldberg. Why did you never get married?
> (43)

We have here an instance in which a "fact" is presented in a question ("What have you done with your wife?"); the question presupposes the existence of the wife, yet a subsequent question denies this supposition ("Why did you never get married?") McCann and Goldberg, moreover, do not wait for Stanley to offer information but, precisely because they are writing the "script" as it were, offer the answers they need: "McCann: How did you kill her?...You throttled her!"

Where the above excerpted portion may be seen as carrying possible traces of semantic content, at the climax of the interrogation, referentiality has given way completely to semantic obscurity; the language thus becomes completely "pragmatic" and is used to reduce Stanley to speechlessness:

> Goldberg. Why did the chicken cross the road?
> Stanley. He wanted to - he wanted to...
> Goldberg. Why did the chicken cross the road?
> .....
> Goldberg. Which came first?
> McCann. Chicken? Egg? Which came first?
> Goldberg and McCann. Which came first? Which came first? Which came first?
> (Stanley screams)
>
> (45-46)

In fact, following this linguistic bludgeoning, Stanley speaks only one line for the remainder of the play, a line which, however, harmonizes nicely with the play's concern with clear sight and vision, or, more precisely, with the themes of identity and origin. Stanley's final line is "Could I have my glasses?" (47), and can, I suggest, be read as a plea for physical as well as metaphysical clarity.

I excerpt these two exchanges simply to demonstrate the overall texture of the first interrogation. We have thus a process, a vacillation if you will, between the possibility of "meaning" and the absurd. In fact, the first interrogation is emblematical of the entire structure of the play, if one is permitted to equate naturalism with "meaning". As the interrogation begins, after the farcical process of seating (a demonstration of the jostling for power), the audience does, I suggest, accept the proceedings for what they appear to be: up until this point in the play we have been given vague though tantalizing hints that Stanley might well be connected to these two seeming thugs and so as the trial begins we accept the at times random (absurd) questioning as part of an effective interrogation technique. Goldberg opens with a barrage of questions specially designed to remove any firm psychological grounds from Stanley. He moves from specific temporal questions - "what were you doing yesterday?" (41) - to simple abuse - "You're a washout" (41) - to questions in rapid succession dealing with Stanley's relationship with Petey and Lulu respectively: "Why do you force that old man to play chess?" (41), "Why do you treat that young lady like a leper?" (41). This opening gambit is effective; Stanley, it seems, is thrown completely off guard. The only way he can respond and keep face is to answer the questions with more questions: "Yesterday?" "What do you mean?" "Me?"

Goldberg then asks a seemingly absurd question: "Where do you keep your suits?" (42), which is followed, in good interrogation style, with the

question we would like to believe would fix Stanley unequivocally to these men. McCann asks: "Why did you leave the organization?" (42). Goldberg and McCann follow this question with four more in rapid succession before allowing Stanley to respond. Stanley then offers the only response that may be taken as a denial (however weak) of the charges: "You're on the wrong horse" (42). The response is important for it is the only instance in either interrogation in which Stanley offers some statement denying the accusations presented to him. It is, unfortunately, also a contextually ambiguous declaration, because we cannot know unequivocally to which accusation the response is directed.

It is also crucial to note that neither Goldberg nor McCann respond directly to the denial - Goldberg in fact merely follows with another question, "When did you come to this place?" (42). I think that it is precisely following Stanley's "denial" that the audience begins to shuffle its collective feet: we have until this point held out the hope that some firm link between Stanley and the two "gentlemen" would appear. After this point in the interrogation, however, Goldberg and McCann shift the ground yet again and begin the further descent into absurdity - the hope for connection is denied.

An audience begins to tire of this interrogation as it begins to sense Pinter's refusal to establish even the slightest link between the two parties. Because Stanley never truly rejects nor accepts the accusations, we are placed in an equivocal position that ultimately reduces any fascination with the proceedings. Moreover, it is as the interrogation proceeds and any link between

Stanley and the "organization" is blurred that Goldberg and McCann begin to be seen no longer simply as human agents, but rather as some larger "symbolic" force, perhaps as Avenging Existential Angels: they begin to be read as something more than what the dramatic context seems at other times to allow. (We begin to perhaps sympathize with Esslin or Diamond!) Pinter thus forces the audience into a position of continual vacillation: Goldberg and McCann are at once hugely symbolic and insufficiently human. I wonder if this is perhaps asking too much of an audience that is here beginning to demand a rational exlanation for the proceedings - or at least an explanation (if not wholly "rational") that could be understood under the rubric of plausibility.

It is precisely an absence of an adequate grounding in the natural which makes the flights into the absurd in the second and third Acts problematic. We can accept certain movements into fantasy and absurdity, but only if they can be related to an unfolding subtext that has some psychological basis or is grounded in the established character relations. In other words, the movement into the absurd can only be accepted if it can be fitted into an overall frame that is naturalist. Goldberg and McCann undertake an inquisition that spirals into the absurd, and we cannot relate it to Stanley's past or present, or to their past or present, or, indeed, to any sense of frustration or fantasy. Without such associations which would allow us to translate the experience, we are stuck with the fact that the interrogation is absurd, unmotivated, and superfluous to any purpose of the play we have been able to guess at.

There is a similar problem in the dramatic articulation of Stanley. In her article "Game Playing in Three by Pinter", Burghardt has this to say regarding the interrogation and the subsequent game:

> In a sense, it is a variation of the ability to "see" as in to know. This game is a regression; Stanley is the object and he stands before us seen and casually defined. The questions create confusion because they are absurd, pointless, seemingly unrelated, and frequently unanswerable. So the effect is the un-defining of Stanley; now neither he nor the audience is quite sure who or what or why he is. Stanley, reduced to a state of metaphysical uncertainty, is then thrust into a second game where his metamorphoses complete.
>
> (384)

I do think that Burghardt's notion of the "un-defining" of Stanley represents a kind of wishful thinking. If Stanley were stripped of definition or identity during the interrogation, this would, I think, represent an effective dramatic structuring of the play. We would thus have a movement from definition - this is Stanley - to "metaphysical uncertainty" - who is Stanley? However, as I have endeavoured to demonstrate, the audience is never convinced of any firm "ontology" of Stanley. He is, we may variously choose to believe, "boarder", "pianist", "husband", "betrayer". If, as Burghardt suggests, Stanley is "casually defined" prior to the interrogation, this casual definition is consistently suspect as it disallows any firm understanding of him. The interrogation, thus, seen structurally, has no real function beyond the enforcement of power over Stanley.

Part of the real confusion about Stanley is a result of the basic contradiction of the way Stanley's character seems to develop and the background to which Goldberg and McCann attempt to attach him. In many details of his development, especially in his giggling, the party, the toy drum, and his relations with Meg, Stanley seems a soft, spoiled child. Goldberg and McCann seem to be trying to fix Stanley to a thuggish organization to which a person of Stanley's ilk would be completely foreign. We simply recoil in disbelief at the thought of Stanley as a hardened criminal. The only possible explanation for Goldberg and McCann's actions would be if Stanley were the victim of mistaken identity; indeed, if the play gave a mere shred of evidence to support this idea, a great deal of the action would be easily comprehended. The notion that people become ensnared in stories that are not their own, or have a past they are desperate to bury, is a central feature of a number of Pinter's plays; The Room, The Caretaker, Old Times, No Man's Land, The Collection, and The Homecoming all explore these themes. If in The Birthday Party, there was a case of mistaken identity being played out, we suspect Stanley would protest more strenously than he does. He does not do so, however, and we are left with the alternate hypothesis that he really is part of a criminal organization - an idea which all of his observable behaviour and childish character seems to rule out. The ontology of Stanley, therefore, remains as mysterious as ever.

Ultimately, my contention is that The Birthday Party is a play which is unable to accomodate convincingly both its naturalism and its absurdism. A

naturalistic play always, I suggest, holds the possibility of explanation and of semantic referentiality. An absurdist play is a priori understood to consistently deny the audience the possibility of rational explanation or "meaning" - no sane critic will lament the fact that one cannot know precisely who Vladimir and Estragon are, or why Winnie is buried in the earth in Happy Days. By ineptly mixing the two genres in The Birthday Party, Pinter betrays the audience with false hope. We, as critics themselves inevitably do, therefore feel justified in asking those questions which a naturalistic play encourages but which here cannot be answered: who are Stanley, Goldberg and McCann? Why are they pursuing him? Why do they participate in the party? Those questions which have no place in pure absurd drama arise with disturbing regularity when the critic and audience face this play. Pinter, perhaps anticipating such criticism, argues that to understand "past experiences" or present circumstances is fundamentally a vain hope; the following passage from Pinter's speech at the National Student Drama Festival (printed in Plays: One) is often quoted by critics eager to defend Pinter's obscurity:

> A character on stage who can present no convincing
>
> argument or information as to his past experiences, his present behaviour or his aspirations, nor give a comprehensive analysis of his motives is as legitimate and as worthy of attention as one who, alarmingly, can do all these things. (ix)

This statement is a perfect defense of a play such as Waiting for Godot; The Birthday Party, however, is neither a sophisticated example of the absurd, nor a

sophisticated example of naturalism, and herein lies the fundamental structural flaw in the play.

In "The World of Harold Pinter", Ruby Cohn calls Act 3 of The Birthday Party "a virtual post-mortem" (88), and indeed, this phrase accurately describes the tone of the final Act. But if a post-mortem is primarily concerned with the body of the deceased, this term cannot be applied to Act 3, for the focus here shifts more than slightly from Stanley onto Goldberg and McCann (Stanley remains offstage for more than half of this Act). In her Harold Pinter, Alrene Sykes writes that "The third act is largely concerned with the effect of his [Stanley's] fate on other people - one reason why The Birthday Party is a more complex and wider-reaching play than its predecessors" (22). The play may indeed be more "complex" and "wider-reaching" (whatever that means) than The Room, but, the question naturally arises, is it more effective? Act 3 of The Birthday Party is concerned more with Goldberg and McCann than with Stanley; Sykes seems to be of the opinion that this shift in focus is part of the necessary analysis of the effect of Stanley's fate on others. However, by shifting the audience's eye from Stanley, Pinter again displaces the audience. We must look at the end of Act 3 before tracing the structure of events to see if, in fact, what occurs in this Act is crucial to any fundamental advancement of either plot or theme.

The outcome of the play is simple. Stanley is taken away from the boardinghouse to meet, we assume, the enigmatic Monty. The question that

arises in the astute audience's mind is why this final outcome could not have occurred at the end of Act 2 - the concomitant notion being the perhaps churlish idea that The Birthday Party is simply too long. For surely Stanley, if he is indeed the major concern of the play, is not radically altered in Act 3 (beyond mere cosmetics) from his state at the end of Act 2.

The major alteration in character over the course of the third Act is, rather, found in Goldberg and McCann. Where in Act 1 and 2 Goldberg exhibited a bluff confidence and power, in Act 3 he inexplicably falls victim to strange angst. When Petey inquires as to Stanley's health, Goldberg, for the first time in the play is hesitant: "Goldberg:(a little uncertainly). Oh...a little better, I think, a little better. Of course, I'm not really qualified to say, Mr Boles. I mean, I haven't got the...qualifications" (65). Moreover, he complains to McCann of fatigue (70), and snaps, as the stage directions read, "murderously" (70) at McCann who has made the grave error of calling him "Simey". Goldberg,it seems, has experienced some imbalance, as if a centre had been removed from his world (could he be feeling guilt?); indeed, after delivering a series of absurd platitudes to McCann he says:

> And you'll find - that what I say is true.
> Because I believe that the world...(Vacant.)...
> Because I believe that the world...(Desperate.)...
> BECAUSE I BELIEVE THAT THE WORLD...(Lost.)...
> (72)

Following this desperate crescendo, he requests, again inexplicably at the naturalistic level, that McCann blow into his mouth: "All the same, give me a blow...Blow in my mouth" (73).

Why is it important for Pinter to present this side of Goldberg to the audience? Is it, as some critics maintain, because Pinter wishes to frighten an already frightened audience by showing that even the agents of the inexplicable are subject to moments of desperation? Perhaps; but this argument loses some of its impact when we realize that Pinter is not willing to show any final change in Goldberg, any final result of his moment of pain. For indeed, after receiving his life-restoring blow in the mouth, Goldberg is able to engage in the second linguistic bludgeoning of Stanley.

Likewise the previously withdrawn and brooding McCann is placed before us in the third Act in a process of development. In what does seem like a too abrupt volte face, McCann begins to demonstrate a kind of weakening that is manifest in a fear of Stanley, or a fear of what Stanley has been doing in the room upstairs: "He's quiet now. He stopped all that...talking a while ago" (67). McCann has also returned Stanley's glasses in an act of what seems like kindness. The audience here perhaps suspects that McCann, like Goldberg, might be feeling the pangs of remorse.

As often happens with characters in Pinter who initiate violence upon others, the brutalizers here in The Birthday Party seem to have been weakened by the ordeal. Having essentially destroyed their victim, the victimizers

consequently begin to turn the violent inwards upon themselves and then, most importantly, outward upon each other. Goldberg at one point objects to McCann's tearing of the newspaper, and the exchange which follows is telling:

> Goldberg. Stop doing that!
> McCann. What?
> Goldberg. Why do you do that all the time? It's childish, it's pointless. It's without a solitary point.
> McCann. What's the matter with you today?
> Goldberg. Questions, questions. Stop asking me so many questions. What do you think I am?
>
> (69)

It is, of course, ironic that Goldberg here objects to having been asked "so many questions". He begins to object to precisely the treatment he himself inflicted upon Stanley.

With the second interrogation of Stanley, of course, comes a rapid cessation of this in-fighting. This interrogation allows Goldberg and McCann once again to assume fully the roles they briefly lost at the beginning of the third Act. And thus there is a sense of circularity about the development of these two characters which is somewhat unsatisfactory. There is no fundamental change in Goldberg and McCann - perhaps it is difficult to change that which is never fully articulated. The static nature of their characters contributes in no small measure to the redundancy of the second interrogation.

The second linguistic ordeal is a perfect structural echo of the first. As in the first encounter, Stanley's role in the ordeal is one of complete passivity; here he simply sits as the strange promises of Goldberg and McCann are made:

Goldberg: We'll watch over you.
McCann. Advise you.
.....
McCann. We'll provide the skipping rope.
Goldberg. The vests and pants.
.....
Goldberg. We'll make a man of you.
McCann. And a woman.
(78-79)

Stanley's response to this is simply to burble incomprehensibly. Like the animal he is at the end of Act 2, and the savage child at the close of Act 1, Stanley here possesses no mind: he is now a tabula rasa upon which the mysterious Monty can inscribe a new man.

Despite some significant differences between the two interrogations - here in the second, for instance, no questions are asked, nor does Stanley respond at all -the ultimate effect is the same. Stanley's "self" (what little of it we see) is effaced. There has been no change in Stanley in the interim, and so the question can be asked: why the need for the second ordeal? In considering this question I am reminded of Eco's thoughts on bad taste. In "The Structure of Bad Taste" he writes: "At times we recognize bad taste instinctively, in the irritation we feel when confronted by an obvious lack of proportion" (180). I think this remark might well go far in defining precisely what The Birthday Party lacks. It is, I think, a due sense of structural proportion. The second ordeal, the verbal excesses of both interrogations, and, on a larger scale, the structural disharmony produced by the clumsy mixing of the absurd and elements of naturalism, all demonstrate a singular lack of awareness of the very real needs

of the audience. Thus, though I would not hold with the idea that the play should be dismissed out of hand, I would suggest that the play, precisely because it is flawed, is a hermeneutical trap; those critics who do not have the courage to hold the play in critical suspicion (and their name is legion) will inevitably become ensnared.

In the wider context of Pinter's oeuvre, however, I do think that The Birthday Party is important. Even in this very early work, Pinter has generated a precise relationship with his audience that will, I am willing to wager, continue throughout the remainder of his theatrical career. I have by necessity touched only briefly in the above analysis on the dialogical interplay between audience and spectacle - on that peculiar occurrence in Pinter when the audience, by posing questions, begins to experience the unfolding of the drama in precisely the same manner in which characters within the drama experience the same events. I say "by necessity" because a play has to seduce its audience before it can encourage any form of dialogue. As I have with some labour attempted to demonstrate, this play, rather than seducing the audience, alienates it. Dialogue, consequently can never hope to follow and thus sympathetic identification evaporates. When the characters who share our experience of events become estranged or, in Stanley's case, obscured, we fail to be brought into the action. The correct regulation of the dialogical relationship is crucial to the success of the early Pinter play as it is precisely here in the asking of questions that the audience is focussed and involved. It is crucial to note that

as Stanley's strangeness becomes more and more apparent, he begins to lose the ability to pose questions; Goldberg and McCann effectively remove Stanley's ability to function on any interpretive level. It is perhaps then not coincidental that as the "centre" of the play is effectively silenced, our interest in the play wanes. Pinter makes a fundamental structural error when he removes Stanley from the play, for in a very real sense, by doing so, he removes the audience as well.

CHAPTER TWO: A SLIGHT ACHE

Given the amount of critical response to A Slight Ache it is apparent that the play is generally perceived as being important in the Pinter corpus, though some, like John Russell Brown, who in "Mr Pinter's Shakepeare" calls it "the simplest of [Pinter's] plays" (251) and suggests that it is all "Exposition" (251), perhaps do not see it as having the dramatic weight of The Homecoming or The Caretaker. This being said, however, I would posit that the play is perhaps one of the most important of Pinter's early works as it is here that Pinter combines themes explored in earlier works - intrusion, power, identity - with a mature and effective dramatic structure. Indeed, as I have suggested, in Pinter an effective dramatic structure is crucial as it facilitates the audience's first step into dialogical engagement.

It is precisely with the role of the audience and, indeed, what amounts to the same thing, the role of hermeneutics in A Slight Ache that this particular chapter is concerned. On a very basic level, the play is concerned with the process of interpretation, an exploration of the overwhelming question, one which Edward himself poses: "Who are you?" (183). This question represents Edward's desire for certain knowledge of the mysterious matchseller, yet the same question has a curiously self-reflexive quality, and, of course, the notion of the specularity of the play will prove important. There is a sense in which the

question becomes one which Edward must ask himself. And, indeed, if, as I maintain, the audience and Edward share a relationship of close identification, the question must also be addressed by the audience to itself: Who am I? What is my role in this unfolding drama? In "Tearing of Souls", Albert Wertheim accurately posits that "the heart of the drama is not what happens on stage but what happens in the imaginations and souls of his listeners or theatre audience" (67).

This analysis of A Slight Ache is predicated upon the initial notion that the most important aspect of the drama lies in its immediate effect upon the audience. The audience of this play experiences a dialectical shifting between the familiar and the unfamiliar. We encounter the absolutely uncertain in the face of a dramatic context which lulls us into engagement by virtue of its very recognizability. I imagine, in attempting to understand how A Slight Ache works, that the play has a kind of two-tiered structure. On the upper level we have the framing device of the familiar mise-en-scene - the presentation of the elegant, eminently civilized leisured class. Moreover, the dynamic of the opening scene has a familiarity born of its very theatricality; on hearing the banalities exchanged by Flora and Edward, we naturally think of Coward (the play at times seems to be an ironic re-working of Coward's Private Lives), or perhaps even of the bruising satires of Wilde. Beneath this familiarity, however, runs the current of all the unknowns in the play - the questions of sight and blindness, of the "meaning" of specific occurrences, and of course the primary manifestation

of the unheimlich, the matchseller. In A Slight Ache Pinter succeeds effectively in sustaining his audience; where in The Birthday Party, the audience was starved of contextualizing "substance" and force-fed a surfeit of mystery, here in A Slight Ache Pinter, through a delicate structuring of the play, is able to present the audience a precise balance of oftentimes ambiguous substance and enthralling mystery.

It is by now a critical commonplace that, as a result of the opacity of the ostensible proceedings of the works, Pinter's plays vigorously resist fixed and specific interpretations. This as true for A Slight Ache as it is for The Birthday Party. Thus most critics of the play seem to labour under the notion that the "meaning" of A Slight Ache is not harboured within the ostensible dialogue or dramatic proceedings but is, rather, discovered within the so-called "subtext" of the play, that most labyrinthine and ultimately vaporous of regions. In Harold Pinter: The Poetics of Silence James R. Hollis advises the critic to "look behind [Pinter's] language to discover what is really being said" (127). Pinter himself seems generally to foster and support this notion and, though Pinter can be as willfully baffling as his plays, I again excerpt from his 1962 speech at the National Student Drama Festival:

> Language, under these conditions, is a highly ambiguous business. So often, below the word spoken, is the thing known and unspoken...You and I, the characters which grow on a page, most of the time we're inexpressive, giving little away, unreliable, elusive, obstructive, unwilling. But it's out of these attributes that a language arises. A language, I repeat, where under what is said, another thing is being said. (xii)

This notion of the subtext as the true text, with the concomitant admission that something seemingly is being said (and, perhaps, meant) in the subtext, places the critic and audience of a Pinter play in the delicate and sometimes uncomfortable position of attempting to establish a firm meaning within the play. Indeed, this constant search for meaning is the bane of the Pinter audience's existence.

My metaphor of the two-tiered structure of the play may seem to suggest that I encourage "subtextual" readings of Pinter's plays. I cannot disagree strongly enough with this reading of my metaphor. I maintain that the success of the play requires an almost simultaneous perception of both levels by the audience. This necessitates, of course, an immediate response to the stream of mysteries that run with the current of the familiar. A subtextual reading presupposes a leisured analysis of the play and gives rise to what Simon Trussler, in his The Plays of Harold Pinter: An Assessment, calls the "symbol hunt" (61) response, and which may, in fact, be what leads him to regard the play as "all symbol and no substance" (64). As the dramatic experience is temporally limited, we must, rather, respond to both levels at once. This might force an obscure perception of those elements in the play which seem portentous, but this is, I think, one of the postures the play compels us to assume.

Thus, in the present analysis of A Slight Ache I am concerned with the manner and means by which Pinter compels the audience to adopt and adapt

certain postures regarding the play. In this case the primary posture forced upon the audience is one of the balanced dialectic between absolute uncertainty and familiarity. In achieving this balance Pinter compels the audience ultimately into dialogical engagement with the spectacle: it is the centrality of the "question" -both within the play, and within the mind of the audience - which initially facilitates this relationship. Who, for instance, is this matchseller? Why does he not speak? Why has he been standing outside for so long? Why are Edward and Flora so fascinated by him? The Pinter play is a sphinx - a riddle posed of perhaps insidious intent. This analysis will firstly explore some aspects of the structure of A Slight Ache in an effort to demonstrate the manner in which the play's formal and thematic arrangement gives rise to the audience's posture of uncertainty. Secondly, I will briefly explore this so-called "dialogical interplay" in an effort to illustrate the exact nature of the audience's posture of doubt.

A Slight Ache is an exceptionally well wrought play. Despite its sometimes impenetrable dialogue, Pinter's penchant for the non sequitur, and its baffling central mystery, all of which lend the play its seemingly amorphous quality, the structure of the play is, upon analysis, revealed to be carefully organized to impart this balance between doubt and familiarity. John Fuegi's comment in his "The Uncertainty Principle and Pinter's Modern Drama" that "With Beckett and with Pinter we enter a world where the principle of uncertainty is maintained in the form, structure, and language of the aesthetic

construct itself" (207) thus seems apt. For the purposes of the present analysis, I have divided A Slight Ache into twenty sections and three panels (A 1-6, B 7-12, C 13-20). This division is not arbitrary, but is rather, suggested by the text itself. In each of these sections there is a central question, conflict, or puzzle which, when taken together, culminate in the central mystery/puzzle of the matchseller.

A

1. "Have you noticed the honeysuckle this morning"..."Pass the teapot please" (153-54).
2. "I don't see why I should be expected to distinguish between these plants" ..."It's the height of summer today" (154-55).
3. "Cover the marmalade"..."On the contrary" (155-56).
4. "Have you got something in your eyes?"..."I really don't know" (156).
5. "Oh goodness!"..."Dead. What a monster" (156-58).
6. "What an awful experience"..."Clematis. What a wonderful..." (158).

In the first section of the play a question is raised regarding the flowers in the garden. Given the importance of the opening of the play I shall return to consider at some length the syntactical arrangement of this opening section. In section two there is a puzzling exchange between Edward and Flora regarding Edward's ignorance of the garden. A question is, I think, deliberately evoked in the audience's mind here regarding the potential symbolic significance of Edward's ignorance of both the garden and the weather: "The canopy?...What for?...Is there a breeze?" (154). Pinter places within this exchange the subtlest of indications that Edward is somehow "blind" to the phenomenal world. There

are moments in A Slight Ache such as this whose significance is only fully brought out at a later point. There is thus a neat organization of the play even at this minute textual level, for the audience will recall these early moments when more obvious moments of "blindness" occur. In the third section of the play the wasp incident is featured; again, I shall return to consider this episode at length. In section four the question/puzzle of Edward's visual impairment is touched upon briefly, only to be quickly forgotten as the wasp again threatens the peace (section five). In section six of my schema there is present a tacit interpretive conflict between Flora and Edward. After Edward destroys the wasp, Flora states: "What an awful experience" (158); Edward immediately responds: "What a beautiful day it is. Beautiful" (158). This discrepancy in vision prepares the audience nicely for the discrepancies in their respective interpretations of the matchseller.

B

7. "What? Edward, what is it?..."Of course he's harmless. How could he be other than harmless?" (158-60).
8. "Edward, where are you? Edward? Where are you, Edward?" ... "You'd be surprised. You'd be highly surprised" (160-61).
9. "Good Lord, what's that? Is that a bullock let loose?"..."You don't intend to stay in the scullery all day do you?" (161-62).
10. "Get out. Leave me alone"..."Christ blast it!" (162).
11. "You're frightened of him"..."Keep away" (162).
12. "I want to speak to that man"..."Go and get him" (162-64).

In section seven of A Slight Ache, Edward and Flora notice the ominous presence of the matchseller and thus the central mystery is broached. The

sections which precede the appearance of the matchseller can be understood, if I might employ a musical metaphor, as a kind of prelude to the major theme. In each of these sections (1-6) Edward and Flora's experience of these questions and puzzles prepare the audience for their similar experience of the central mystery of the matchseller - there is, I would suggest, a careful typological orchestration of events and questions in the play. Following the excitement caused by the appearance of the matchseller, we are presented with a puzzling moment as Edward disappears: why, the audience surely asks, is Edward hiding? Why, if one accepts his explanation that he was "digging out some notes" (161), does he choose to do so at this specific moment? At section nine the matchseller again is noticed. The audience perceives a certain rhythm in Pinter's presentation of the matchseller which is analogous to his presentation of the wasp incident. Both wasp and matchseller appear, causing a flurry of excitement; then both wasp (158) and matchseller (160-61) are forgotten briefly as other conflicts arise. Again we sense that Pinter has carefully organized this one act play to create a certain organic coherence, if only at this structural level. At sections ten and eleven, the theme of Edward's visual impairment is again sounded:

> Flora. Your eyes are bloodshot.
> Edward. Damn it.
> Flora. It's too dark in here to peer.
> Edward. Damn.
> Flora. It's too bright outside.
> (162)

In section twelve the central question of the matchseller's identity is raised: the question is perhaps the most central in the play, for it surely haunts Edward throughout.

C

13. "Good morning...we haven't met"..."And do you see that plant by the conservatory? That's japonica" (164-65).
14. "He's here"..."The door at the...the door...the door at the top. I'll join you later (165-66).
15. "Here I am. Where are you?"..."I must get some air. I must get a breath of air" (166-71).
16. "Flora!"..."A woman...a woman will often succeed, you know, where a man must invariably fail" (171-74).
17. "Do you mind if I come in?"..."Why shouldn't you die happy?" (174-77).
18. "Well?...Well?"..."To your trough!" (177).
19. "Good evening to you"..."Who are you? Barnabas? (177-83).
20. "Ah, Barnabas. Everything is ready"..."Edward. Here is your tray" (183-84)

In section thirteen the matchseller makes his first physical appearance on the stage. The question is immediately evoked: why is he mute? Again the spectre of this question will haunt the play in toto. In section fourteen we are puzzled by Edward's insistence on discovering the meaning of the matchseller:

> Flora. Edward...are you sure it's wise to bother about this ?
> Edward. Tell him to come in.
> Flora. I...
> Edward. Now.
>
> (165-166)

Sections fifteen, seventeen, and nineteen are three analogically linked episodes. All take the form of the "interview". In sections fifteen and nineteen Edward attempts to discover the identity of the matchseller, as does Flora in

section seventeen. This procession of interviews, which essentially constitutes the final movement of the play (166-84), is in itself a carefully orchestrated balance of tensions and relaxation. Pinter plays upon the audience's feelings of suspense by placing between each "interview" an interlude (sections sixteen and eighteen) which effectively breaks the tension of the interview. Again, all scenes in this rhythmic juxtaposition of tension and release are marked by questions. The interviews, of course, sound the major question of the play: "Who is this matchseller?" But even in the interludes questions arise. In the second interlude (eighteen) for example, the question of the matchseller's physical condition is raised:

> Flora. Don't come in.
> Edward. Well?
> Flora. He's dying.
> Edward. Dying? He's not dying.
> Flora. I tell you, he's very ill.
> Edward. He's not dying. Nowhere near.
> (177)

The final section of the play is one to which I shall return to consider at length, for it too raises some crucial and, ultimately, unanswerable questions.

As we come to recognize the centrality of the "question" in each of the twenty sections of the play, it might be relevant to mention that there are in fact two-hundred and fifty two questions posed by Edward and Flora over the course of A Slight Ache. This fact is in itself remarkable, but it does, however, demonstrate at least at this textual/syntactical level, that the "question" plays not a slight role in the formation of the verbal structure of the play.

I will, of course, return to consider at length the matchseller, but for the moment it would, I think, be illuminating to explore some of the more crucial questions present in those sections of the play which precede his appearance. As with any Pinter play the opening lines of A Slight Ache are vital. Here the impression of familiarity is immediate: we have that almost archetypal image of the husband and wife at the breakfast table, with the husband reading the paper. (We recall Bert with his magazine in the opening of The Room, and Petey with his newspaper at the first scene of The Birthday Party). The paper here seems to act as a kind of barrier between the two and may be the first "sign" that the relationship is tense. Certainly the conversation is banal enough:

> Flora. Have you noticed the honeysuckle this morning?
> Edward. The what ?
> Flora. The honeysuckle.
> Edward. Honeysuckle? Where?
> Flora. By the back gate, Edward.
> Edward. Is that honeysuckle? I thought it was...convolvulus, or something.
> Flora. But you know it's honeysuckle.
> Edward. I tell you I thought it was convolvulus.
>
> [Pause.] (153)

This exchange might at first glance appear to be simply a classic "Pinteresque" exchange - a puzzling dialogue of dubious effect and importance. However, we can see its importance to the play as a whole as we consider the syntactical arrangement of the exchange and its relation to the heart of the play's central conflict. In these eight opening lines there are posed five questions; granted, the debate in these lines is centered around a rather pointless conflict, but

these questions set the tone for the remainder of the play. The opening lines of any piece of literature are of the utmost importance, but because of the immediate aural impact of spoken drama, the opening lines of a theatrical production must needs take on an almost overwhelming significance. By commencing a play with a question ("Have you noticed the honeysuckle this morning?") and rapidly following it up with four more questions in these first twenty seconds of the play, Pinter effectively imparts to the audience the major theme of questioning. (One is, incidentally, reminded of the opening of Hamlet - of how subtly but effectively Bernardo's "Who's there?" (li1) sets out the theme of the questioning of identity which runs throughout the play).

Because of the relative shortness of A Slight Ache, the audience perhaps expects that every incident which occurs during the play must necessarily be of significance to the play as a whole. Thus, when confronted with the wasp episode (sections three and five of my schema) which effectively opens the play, we are invited to read the incident in the light of the entire play. Though we sense the incident to be important, we are initially baffled by the amount of time Pinter devotes to the despatching of a pesky insect. Here we have, I believe, a perfect example of the manner in which the play's two-tiered structure works. On the surface we have the famliar bickering of the husband and wife, the arguing whether a wasp bites or stings: "Flora: But wasps do bite. Edward: They don't bite. They sting. It's snakes...that bite" (157). There is, incidentally, a similar incident in Coward's Private Lives where the two lovers

Elyot and Amanda argue over snakes: "Amanda: Adders don't snap, they sting. Elyot: Nonsense, they have a little bag of venom behind their fangs and they snap. Amanda: They sting. Elyot: They snap" (524). Pinter's exchange might well be an act of homage to Coward, but there is, of course, a crucial difference between the two discussions. In Coward, the scene is simply one of many in which Elyot and Amanda each attempt to gain a kind of superiority over the other. In Pinter's exchange the scene serves as a kind of prelude to menace: the wasp represents that slight irritant in the lives of the complacent middle class which will, of course, come to be embodied in the more disturbing matchseller. It is important, however, to read the wasp here initially as a wasp (a notion perhaps alien to the hardened Pinter critic!). Despite the significance we may later attach to it, the wasp here allows Edward to display his rather dubious power, and shows us a hint of that insecurity which, we will later discover, courses wildly under his surface.

But beneath these banalities we sense the current of the portentous. The wasp killing scene begins to be seen as vital, for it is a singularly charged moment in the play. In fact, Edward's revelation of his "slight ache" (156) is situated in the middle of this conflict and thus, even in this structural sense the incident gains a sense of the momentous. But what does the scene immediately signify to the audience? Death? Blindness? Whose death? Whose blindness? One suspects, of course, that Pinter initially invites the audience to think of the wasp and Edward analogically, as does Vicky Ooi in her "Edward Agonistes or

Anagonistes?"; she sees the wasp's death as a "rehearsal" (137) of Edward's downfall. Ooi's reading is, I believe, only partially correct, for it insists on a strict linking between the wasp and Edward. The wasp's role is more complex than this. As we come, for instance, to see similarities between the wasp and the matchseller, Pinter compels us to question our initial assumptions. Indeed, to acknowledge similarities between the wasp and Edward and the wasp and the matchseller lends a certain force to the idea that Edward and the matchseller are closely linked - an idea which will prove vital.

The audience's posture of inquiry continues into each of the sections of the play. Of course, some sections are more central to the themes in A Slight Ache than others:

> Flora. Have you got something in your eyes?
> Edward. No. Why do you ask?
> Flora. You keep clenching them, blinking them.
> Edward. I have a slight ache in them.
> Flora. Oh, dear.
> Edward. Yes, a slight ache. As if I hadn't slept.
> Flora. Did you sleep, Edward?
> Edward. Of course. I slept uninterrupted. As always.
> Flora. And yet you feel tired.
> Edward. I didn't say I felt tired. I merely said I had a slight ache in my eyes.
> Flora. Why is that, then?
> Edward. I really don't know.
>
> (156)

And, indeed, neither does the audience. In fact, this "slight ache" is never fully explicated despite the fact that we sense his blindness must have an enormous significance. Pinter has chosen well his central metaphor. Blindness in world literature and drama (from Tiresias to Phineus to Oedipus to Gloucester) is a

potently charged metaphor. In the cases of Sophocles and Shakespeare, however, the causes and meanings of the blindness, be they physical, or tropological, are clear. And figures such as Tiresias and Phineus, despite their physical handicaps are, of course, seers. (Even Gloucester is granted "clear sight" after his blinding.)

There is, therefore, a nice allusive irony present in Edward's impairment: despite the fact that the weight of literary tradition lies behind Edward's blindness, he is not permitted, or, perhaps more accurately, he does not permit himself a totally clear vision (he cannot "identify" the matchseller), neither in the form of an epiphany, as with Oedipus and Gloucester, nor as prophecy, as with Tiresias and Phineus. Allusive ironies aside for a moment, in A Slight Ache we cannot, because not permitted, even arrive at a definitive explanation for Edward's blindness. The explanation could be as banal as a virus or as complicating as symbolic impotence. As the play unfolds and the "importance" of Edward's visual impairment becomes more apparent, the audience becomes almost desperate to comprehend Edward's predicament - and, indeed, Pinter's "symbolism"! As Edward and Flora's cottage life becomes invaded by the matchseller we hear:

> Flora. You're frightened of him.
> Edward. I'm not!
> Flora. You're frightened of a poor old man. Why?
> Edward. I am not!
> Flora. He's a poor, harmless old man.
> Edward. Aaah my eyes.
> Flora. Let me bathe them.
> Edward. Keep away. (162)

Why, we ask, does the fear of an old man seem to affect adversely Edward's vision? Why, more importantly, is sight and blindness a central current in the play? We remember Edward's desire to blind the wasp: "Ah, yes. Tilt the pot. Tilt. Aah...down here...right down...blinding him...that's it (158). We wonder at the possible significance of the matchseller's glass eye: "Do forgive me peering, but is that a glass eye you're wearing?" (169). We wonder at Flora's mention of the matchseller's eyes: "Your eyes, your eyes, your great big eyes" (176). We are, as these numerous examples will attest, presented with a metaphor which would seem to gain a sense of the momentous but we are, finally, not granted a wholly satisfactory explanation of its significance. These references to vision, rather than providing clues to an overarching meaning of the play, are abysms, moments in the text which actively resist firm interpretation. In this resistance, however, the audience finds itself enmeshed in the force of the hermeneutic endeavour. A Slight Ache differs from The Birthday Party in that these allusions to sight and blindness (mysteries analogous to the mystery of Goldberg and McCann's relationship to Stanley) always seem on the verge of being explained. It is as if the next scene in the play - the scene always deferred in A Slight Ache - will make all things clear. Pinter employs a kind of dramatic "slow-burn" effect in A Slight Ache by means of which images, symbols, and analogues gain an incremental "significance" as the play unfolds. The wasp begins to be seen retrospectively as a "type" of the matchseller, Edward's vision problem prefigures and doubles with that of the matchseller, the matchseller,

who as we shall see embodies the highest degree of mystery, offers himself to be read, in an ironic sense as a Tiresias, a sphinx or a sphinx's riddle, perhaps as the wounded man the Good Samaritan tended to, or even perhaps as the apostle Barnabas. These mysteries all offer the audience part of what may be a total answer to the mystery of A Slight Ache. Where The Birthday Party fails to sustain the audience's questions (we know too early in the play that any firm contextualizing knowledge is absent), A Slight Ache captivates and enthralls with a ceaseless procession of tantalizing hints.

This preoccupation with sight and blindness is, of course, concomitant to the central intrigue of the matchseller. The matchseller is a singularly baffling presence, whose mystery is only heightened by his silence. The matchseller is, in fact, the only character in Pinter's corpus who remains completely silent during the course of a play. In the world of Pinter's non sequiturs and subtext, one might expect a silent character to be paradoxically simple to understand. The matchseller's silence and, therefore, meaning, is not clear to the audience, however, precisely because, like a resistant text, he provokes words and questions in Edward and Flora. The matchseller's first appearance causes a flurry of questions:

> Edward. He's back again.
> Flora. But he's always there.
> Edward. Why? What is he doing there?
> Flora. But he's never disturbed you, has he? The man's been standing there for weeks. You've never mentioned it.
> Edward. What is he doing there?
> Flora. He's selling matches, of course.
> Edward. It's ridiculous. What's the time?

> Flora. Half past nine.
> Edward. What in God's name is he doing with a tray full of matches at half past nine in the morning?
> (159)

As with the meaning of Edward's blindness, a fixed and definite meaning of the matchseller - qua matchseller, and in relation to the two speaking characters -is necessarily ambiguous. Critics answer Pinter's riddle with seemingly boundless energy. Thus Augusta Walker in "Messages from Pinter" writes: "He [the matchseller] is at the bottom of the human scale. He is that part of the race that has been squeezed dry to produce these glittering aristocrats, his superiors, and he has taken his post at their gate as if he were a spectre of his class, their discarded refuse, come to haunt them" (7). In Pinter's Female Portraits Elizabeth Sakellaridou reads the matchseller "either as a fantasy or Edward's alter ego" (82). Walker's notion, while perhaps somewhat fanciful, at least has the virtue of acknowledging the phenomenal presence of the matchseller on stage. In reading the matchseller as a "fantasy", Sakellaridou manages to evade this thorny issue. What is clear from the various responses the matchseller has elicited is that the matchseller has a decidedly protean nature: he becomes whatever or whomever the critic desires him to become. There is, of course, a dramatic problem inherent in this deciphering. By creating a "meaning" for the matchseller, the critic in a sense breaks her end of the bargain between dramatist and spectator. Part of the project of this play is to keep the audience in a continual state of inquiry. By breaking the riddle of the matchseller the critic too easily and quickly disengages with the proceedings -

she achieves that distance absolutely antithetical to the success of the play. The matchseller, to employ a base metaphor, is the carrot dangling in front of the nose of the donkey; by removing the carrot, all impetus for forward movement is gone. It is precisely the mystery of the matchseller which keeps a willing audience involved in the continual unfolding of the drama.

The process of interpretation carried out by the critics is, interestingly, exactly analagous to the processes of interpretation of Edward and Flora. There are two processes of signification within the play - that of Edward, who engages in a process of continual shifting, a position of uncertainty and doubt, and that of Flora, who essentially imposes a "structure" (meaning) upon the matchseller, thus initiating the closure of play. Flora is able, through her will to power over the situation ("I shall get to the truth of it" (174)), to attach a signified to the signifier.

At the outset, Edward decides the matchseller is, in fact, <u>not</u> what he ostensibly appears to be: "I've hit, in fact, upon the truth. He's not a matchseller at all. The bastard isn't a matchseller at all. Curious I never realized that before. He's an imposter" (163). It is perhaps most clear during the two "interviews" that Edward's position in his society is one that is fundamentally insecure, and thus the accusation that the matchseller is an "imposter", like a great deal of what Edward says, is self-reflexive. Edward's growing sense of insecurity is one that arises with the breach instigated by the ominous presence of the

matchseller. The matchseller seems to draw out the confession that Edward too led as squalid an existence in a period prior to his becoming a man of leisure:

> Yes, I...I was in much the same position myself then as you are now, you understand. Struggling to make my way in the world. I was in commerce too...Oh, yes, I know what it's like - the weather, the rain, beaten from pillar to post...up till all hours working at your thesis...Let me advise you. Get a good woman to stick by you. Never mind what the world says.
> (168)

That Edward now has a veneer - it can only be a veneer - of comfort and confidence is due, it seems, not so much to his diligence in matters of "commerce" but, as the text seems to indicate, because he had the good sense to marry into money - the position of the parvenu being one, perhaps, of radical insecurity.

It is the void presented by the matchseller and Edward's recognition of something of himself in that void that leads to his ludicrously pompous displays of knowledge and status: "I write theological and philosophical essays" (167), "Well now, before the good lady sounds the gong for petit dejeuner will you join me in an aperitif?" (169), "...what do you say to a straightforward Piesporter Goldtropfschen Feine Auslese (Reichsgraf von Kesselstaff)?" (169). It is the increased hysterical tone in these fatuous displays that betokens a kind of subterranean fear in Edward - it is, of course, the fear and shock of recognition: "Chair comfortable? I bought it in a sale. I bought all the furniture in this house in a sale. The same sale. When I was a young man. You too, perhaps. You too, perhaps. [Pause]. At the same time, perhaps" (171). It is significant that

immediately following this realization Edward removes himself from the matchseller's presence.

Edward's display of wines and property can be seen as a kind of blueprint of his insecurities. He must, it seems, repeatedly emphasize his accomplishments precisely because he was not born into this class and, consequently, he cannot take his position for granted. Pinter's emphasis on Edward's insecurities is crucial as it facilitates the audience's first important step into proximity to Edward - the more insistant Edward becomes, the more the audience becomes aware that he fears the loss of his position. Edward's destruction results primarily because he knows he is an imposter and he allows the matchseller - who is simply the question mark in every parvenu's mind - to burrow under his skin. Pinter's choice to make Edward a wine-bore, moreover, seems perfectly conceived to disturb those members of the audience, perhaps themselves wine-bores, leading as complacent a lifestyle as Edward. Pinter's power, as I shall further explore below, lies precisely in his ability to have his plays act as mirrors for the audience: the audience's recognition of itself thus constituting a crucial aspect of what I have termed dialogical interplay.

The first interview thus constitutes a growing awareness of a crucial linking between Edward and the matchseller (and indeed, between Edward and the audience). It is a process made all the more telling by the fact that throughout the scene the matchseller says not a word. The matchseller becomes in a very real sense a blank page into which Edward is compelled to

inscribe meaning - a meaning, ironically, which is simply the inscription/description of himself.

Over the course of the second interview, the matchseller is concretized and rapidly de-concretized into significance by the increasingly desperate Edward. The entire interview might be termed a "half-dialogue". Edward supplies both the questions and the "answers": "Well then, tell me about your boyhood. Mmnn? [Pause.] What did you do with it? Run? Swim? Kick the ball? You kicked the ball?" (178). In the absence of speech by the matchseller Edward must create a history to account for his presence. The matchseller is thus first labelled a cricketer: "Man called - Cavendish, I think had something of your style" (178), then not a cricketer: "Perhaps you never met Cavendish and never played cricket. You look less and less like a cricketer the more I see of you" (178); the matchseller then is read as an acquaintance (180), then as a relative: "My nearest and dearest. My kith and kin" (180). Edward does in fact recognize the matchseller's protean nature: "In fact every time I have seen you you have looked quite different to the time before" (180).

What is vital to Edward's process of interpretation is the manner in which the matchseller is alternately identified as being closely related to Edward, and placed at a far distance from him. Thus he is at once "kith and kin" and a man called "Cavendish". The matchseller is, judging from Edward's final words, ultimately an enigma: "Who are you?" (183). There is a sense, however, as we see the matchseller take the place of Edward, who has as he

says "long struggl[ed] against all kinds of usurpers" (179), that the matchseller is, at least from Edward's point of view, another "Edward". Thus, though I would disagree with Katherine Burkman's overall "ritual" reading of A Slight Ache in The Dramatic World of Harold Pinter: Its Basis in Ritual, I would agree with her that "In A Slight Ache, victim and victor are no longer victim - they are, in a sense, one and the same" (49). Perhaps then, Edward's final "Who are you?" is not simply a plea for clarity but a desperate and deliberate act of self-mystification - if he can obscure the "meaning" of the matchseller and the commensurate self-identification, perhaps he can stave off the final replacement.

Flora's interpretive process is less convoluted though perhaps not less self-mystifying than that of her husband. Flora does not hesitate to link the matchseller to herself and to her past. It should come as no surprise to the audience of the play, aware as it is that Flora and Edward share a marriage of brittle sterility, that Flora would immediately fix a sexual signification to the matchseller - interpretation here has the force, perhaps like all hermeneutics, of the erotic:

> Do you know, I've a feeling I've seen you before, somewhere. Long before the flood. You were much younger. Yes, I'm really sure of it. Between ourselves, were you ever a poacher? I had an encounter with a poacher once. It was a ghastly rape, the brute. High up on a hillside cattle track. Early spring. I was out riding my pony. And there on the verge a man lay - ostensibly injured, lying on his front, I remember, possibly the victim of a murderous assault, how was I to know? I dismounted, I went to him, he rose, I fell, my pony

> took off, down to the valley. I saw the sky through the trees, blue. Up to my ears in mud. It was a desperate battle. (175)

Flora then performs the ultimate, and here ironic, act of signification by naming the matchseller: "I'm going to keep you, you dreadful chap, and call you Barnabas" (176). I use the word "ironic" with purpose, for Flora's act of naming is, ultimately, an arbitrary act. The name itself is not important - it could as easily have been any name. Flora is no more certain as to the matchseller's identity than Edward and, indeed, the audience, but she is willing, perhaps the word should be "able", to fix the matchseller into a workable identity: she fills a void in her life (Edward) by creating that which will replace it.

A Slight Ache would seem to end in medias res - a fact which gives rise to the audience's final moment of doubt and uncertainty. This feeling results primarily because a number of crucial questions which arise in these final moments are, like the central question of the matchseller's identity, left unanswered. What is Edward's physical and mental condition at the end of the play? We know he has fallen onto the floor, but is he alive? Why has Flora chosen to replace Edward with the matchseller? Is it only a sexual matter? As A Slight Ache concludes, the audience realizes that these fundamental questions have not been answered in the play. We still do not know why the matchseller chooses to harrass Flora and Edward; we still do not know why the matchseller does not speak; we still, finally, do not know why Edward's sight is adversely affected by the silent menace of the matchseller. We can indeed

speculate, but this is, finally, all we can do. This should not be seen as a lamentable position, however. A Slight Ache presents an event which, unlike the events in The Birthday Party, does not leave the audience dissatisfied with the lack of explanation precisely because the situation itself is self-contained. Where Stanley's precise relationship to Goldberg and McCann is left vague, Flora and Edward's relationship to each other and (to an extent) to their "intruder" is very clear; we might not be capable of understanding "who" the matchseller is, or "what" his origins are, but we can, as we cannot do in The Birthday Party, understand the immediate relationships and consequences of the interaction between the major players.

But, of course, these niggling ontological questions do remain. And it is precisely these unanswered questions which initiate what I have termed the "dialogical interplay" between the Pinter text and audience. This dialogical interplay - as it directly applies to A Slight Ache - is of a double nature. Initially it arises simply because the audience has more questions to ask than answers to give as the play unfolds. The audience's experience of A Slight Ache is initially, therefore, an active dialectical experience. A question is posed: ("Who are you?"); the play itself, however, remains mute, and thus the audience is compelled to attempt a response. (Hence the plethora of critical "interpretations"). However, no firm truths are established: it is as impossible to identify the matchseller as it is to accept Flora's naming of him. All truths in Pinter are arbitrary and, therefore, provisional. This initial dialogue gives rise to

the first phase of the audience's participation in A Slight Ache. Perhaps what most precisely separates a Pinter or a Beckett from a playwright such as, for example, Osborne or Coward, is the manner in which the Pinter/Beckett audience does not passively observe and absorb the proceedings; the Pinter/Beckett audience is actively compelled to respond to the dramatic proceedings, if only initially through the posing of questions.

This dialogical interplay in A Slight Ache is, however, of a more complex nature than a simple back and forth posing of questions. Complications arise when we as audience begin to see moments or puzzles in the play which speak directly to our experience of the play qua play. We begin to interact with the play in exactly the same manner as the characters within the play interact with the central conflict of the matchseller. Thus, as Edward's visual impairment becomes more pronounced and his inability to see and comprehend clearly the meaning (identity) of the matchseller becomes obvious to the viewer, we become rather uncomfortably aware of the fact that we too are as blind as Edward, as impotent as Edward, and as helpless as Edward - his blindness is our blindness. Similarly, as we come to realize the arbitrariness of Flora's signification of the matchseller, we recognize its analogous relationship to our necessarily arbitrary interpretations of the matchseller, who stands, I would suggest, as an emblem of the text itself. As we recognize that Edward and Flora's attempts to understand the matchseller are in a sense analogically related to the audience's attempts to understand the play in toto,

we begin to see the entirety of A Slight Ache as essentially an extended meta-theatrical meditation upon the audience-play relationship (or perhaps on a larger scale, on the very problem of signification itself). Thus, we are not simple viewers of the play, but more complexly we are active participants in the play. In a very subtle and perhaps insidious manner Pinter is able to manipulate the audience to ask not only questions of or at the play, but to ask questions within the play itself. Edward's "Who are you?" is thus precisely the question the audience addresses to A Slight Ache: "What are you? What do you mean?" Pinter's "playing" with his audience has in the most profound sense rendered the audience participatory by shattering the opposition between spectator and character, audience and play. It is not the case that the audience has a mere naive sympathetic identification with Edward or Flora (such a prospect would be unthinkable); rather, the audience becomes Edward and Flora.

Perhaps the final insidious effect of the audience's participation within the play comes with the realization that despite the audience's double role (spectator and participant) which permits the audience to be simultaneously objective (audience) and subjective (participant) we still see through the glass darkly - we cannot, despite our double vision of the play, arrive at any firmer conclusions than the hapless Edward or the blindly interpreting Flora. As one begins to see the play as meta-theatre, rather than plain theatre, one realizes fully the folly of attempting to explain the blindness in the text in symbolic terms. The point I think Pinter is making in A Slight Ache is that the blindness is simply

blindness: the inability to see and comprehend clearly - the inability, finally, to understand, regardless of what it is one is trying to understand.

The audience of A Slight Ache experiences a radical assault on its expectations. The play works well initially to lull its viewer into a posture of complacent expectation and confidence. We feel perhaps that we can hold the drama at arm's length, even as the current of the unknowns in the play begin to erupt onto the surface, because this is precisely the posture an audience bred on Coward, Ibsen and Shaw is accustomed to assume. The process of this play, however, is a continual undermining of that confidence; as Edward's confidence is undermined by the silent presence of the matchseller, so too is our confidence that the play will unfold in an expected manner. Thus as the matchseller finally appears and refuses to be explained away in rational terms (for there is no "rational" explanation of him), the world, for Edward, becomes topsy-turvy - the unfamiliar which, as Edward senses, is insidiously the all too familiar, usurps the familiar. This radical re-aligning of perspectives would be enough to startle the most insensitive theatre goer out of his or her complacency, but Pinter, through his manipulation of the audience into dialogical interplay, goes one step further. A play, such as King Lear, which also examines the process of the re-alignment of perspective, while certainly powerful, essentially allows the spectator to retain his objective status; he can say: "This is Lear, these are his problems, I can safely observe from this perspective." A Slight Ache - and I am in no way suggesting that Pinter is a

Shakespeare - will not allow the audience to maintain this objectivity for long. The position of the spectator of the effective Pinter play thus is one of radical insecurity and, perhaps, of radical danger - for with the impossibility of maintaining any distance between himself and the play, the spectator is as easily violated by the proceedings as characters within the proceedings themselves.

CHAPTER THREE: TEA PARTY

I have chosen to examine Pinter's television play Tea Party (1965), for here Pinter manipulates the audience into engagement in ways similar to those in The Birthday Party and A Slight Ache. If, however, in A Slight Ache Pinter managed to encourage an active participation in the proceedings, and in this sense "control" the viewer, here in Tea Party, because he has chosen the medium of television for his presentation, Pinter is able to assert a tighter control over the audience's vision. The camera facilitates an almost tyrannical hold over the audience as it greatly reduces the scope of the audience's visual perception. Part of the project of the present chapter is to begin to understand the manner in which the audience is compelled towards sharing the (perhaps demented) vision of Disson. The camera here in Tea Party repeatedly slides from what Stephen Gale, in Butter's Going Up calls the "objective" (164) view to a "subjective" view - that is, from a view, we suppose, of what "really" is happening, to a view of, we suppose, Disson's paranoia. Notwithstanding the notion of double vision in Tea Party, the question I think the play forces us to ask is, can we decide which view is correct? Is there, in other words, a primacy of vision in Tea Party?

Most critics attempt to answer these questions in the affirmative. There seems to be an unhesitating belief that Disson slowly descends into madness and thus his vision of things is accepted as being essentially hallucinatory. In the critics' musings, consequently, there is often an explicit division made between the "real" and the "unreal" in Tea Party. In The Dream Structure of Pinter's Plays, Lucinda Gabbard notes: "The camera gives spectators pictures of actual events and then Disson's perception of these events" (173). Bernard Dukore also favours the notion that what Disson sees is ultimately untrue; in Where Laughter Stops: Pinter's Tragicomedy, Dukore comments on Disson's perception of the sexual activity at the tea party: "what he sees probably exists only in his imagination" (47). Indeed, Arnold Hinchcliffe, in his Harold Pinter goes as far as to write "we cannot be entirely sure that the whole thing is not completely the delusion of Disson's guilty, secret, true self" (145). Volker Strunk seems to me to be closer to the truth of how Tea Party operates. In Harold Pinter: Towards a Poetics of his Plays he writes: "Pinter is asking us to see the action both ways - more or less realistically because Diana and Willy do conspire against Disson; and as the nightmare of a man initially poised between inner and outer reality, whose denial of his sexual longings subsequently causes his blindness and his downfall" (150).

William Baker and Stephen Tabachnick are the only critics who seem to favour the primacy of Disson's "subjective" vision. In their reading of the play there is no dialectic between objective and subjective, between real and

unreal - all events in Tea Party simply and unproblematically occur. In their Harold Pinter, Baker and Tabachnick talk of Willy and Diana "work[ing] to undercut Disson" (49), and of their "plunging their fangs into his jugular veins" (50). Their reading of the extraordinarily problematical final movement of the play is strangely confident: "At the end of the play he [Disson] becomes totally blind as his subtle oppressors dance around him in almost ritual glee" (49). Baker and Tabachnick describe this final scene not from Disson's point of view (the notion of double perspective in the play is beyond them it seems) but as if it were truly occurring - as if Disson's parents, his children, and friends all were capable of such calumny.

Leaving aside the eccentric Baker and Tabachnick for a moment, where I think these critics, with the possible exception of Strunk, are in error is in their tendency to dismiss the entirety of Disson's vision as false - or, perhaps, as merely true for him. Pinter structures the play in such a fashion as to keep an astute audience guessing until the very end whether Disson is going mad or whether there is indeed a conspiracy afoot - a point missed entirely by Baker and Tabachnick who read the play with an almost willfull ignorance of the possibility of paranoic delusion. And a vital element of this guesswork involves what I term the dialogical involvement of the audience. Most critics seem strangely insensitive to the fact that Pinter periodically blurs any firm distinction between audience and Disson: when the television screen twice becomes black (124,129), or when Disson seemingly hallucinates two table-tennis balls (110),

we are equal partners in this "delusion". Thus, as in A Slight Ache, we must here deal with issues of proximity and distance. Why does Pinter choose to structure the play to involve and then distance the audience? What effect does the enforced vision have upon the audience?

Critics have often noticed the similarities between Disson and Edward of A Slight Ache. Indeed, the basic structure of the two plays is remarkably similar. In both cases we are presented with successful men whose outward confidence betokens a raging inner insecurity, an insecurity perhaps encouraged by each man's awareness of the distinct class divisions which exist between himself and his wife. Edward is defeated by his failure to incorporate the silent menace of the matchseller into his world: the power of the matchseller thus lies precisely in Edward's inability to resist his own insecurities, and in his inability to fulfill Flora's very real sexual and maternal needs. In many ways Disson is merely a further development of Edward. In both cases the man's downfall (literally!) is related to issues of sexuality, the process of interpretation and vision - by each man's (in)ability to see. Edward sees too late his relationship to the matchseller just as Disson is unable, it seems, to interpret properly the burgeoning relationships of Willy, Wendy, and Diana.

Moreover, one should acknowledge the various strategies Pinter employs to draw the viewer into the proceedings in both plays. I have outlined in the previous chapter the effectiveness of Pinter's use of a two-tiered structure in A Slight Ache, how the ostensible/outward level of familiarity draws the

audience in and lays the ground for the running current of questions which occupy the audience's mind. Pinter again works with this strategy in Tea Party. The early scenes of the play thread together an image of a man increasingly enmeshed in an interpersonal dynamic which, though perhaps not experienced directly by the audience in its life, carries with it enough familiar material - material, most importantly, with enough dramatic intrigue - to encourage the audience's continual attention. However, beneath this familiarity runs a very real sense of conspiracy against Disson. Disson's sense of conspiracy, shared I would suggest by the audience, is sublimated into difficulties with his vision and reaches one of many climaxes at the first table-tennis game (109-110). Essentially, the audience from this point onwards is obliged to receive two separate narratives or visions - the narrative/vision of Disson, and the narrative/vison of the remaining characters, most important among whom are Wendy, Willy, and Diana. However, the suggestions of conspiracy begin at the very outset of the play. With almost every detail in these highly compressed opening scenes, Pinter conveys to the audience Disson's sense of insecurity and, most importantly, his sense of radical alterity. It is the audience's task, consequently, to interpret all the signs and signals of the play, signs which compel us ultimately to two visions of things and to the nagging question: is there a "true" vision of things?

The opening scene of Tea Party immediately establishes Disson's character. He is a man deeply affected by the sexuality of women. Wendy's

compulsive leg-crossing seems perfectly calculated to arouse interest in Disson, as do her tales of sexual harrassment. Disson is presented humourously as one perhaps not fully in control of his own sexual curiosity:

> Wendy. He never stopped touching me, Mr Disson, that's all.
> Disson. Touching you?
> Wendy. Yes.
> Disson. Where? (Quickly). That must have been very disturbing for you.
> (97)

This opening scene serves also to sound the stream of uncertainties which will run throughout the play. In this initial interview it is the discomfort in Disson underneath his air of business-like masterful competence which alerts the audience; we begin to understand from the very outset of the play that Disson's confidence is a facade, a pretense. As we move into the second scene of the play we apprehend the workings of Disson's insecurity more fully. Disson tells Willy and Diana of Disley's illness:

> Disson. I've lost my best man.
> Diana. Oh no.
> Disson (to Willy). My oldest friend. Man called Disley. Gastric flu. Can't make it tomorrow.
> Willy. Oh dear.
> Disson. He was going to make a speech at the reception - in my honour. A superb speech. I read it. Now he can't make it.
> (99)

It it precisely the earnestness in Disson's voice that conveys his deep insecurity. There is a desperation that demonstates to Willy and Diana that his bluff and hearty confidence is a facade. In essence Disson betrays himself here, just as he betrayed himself to Wendy previously. The audience,

moreover, might begin to wonder precisely why Disson has no other friends to replace Disley. Disson protests, of course, that he does indeed have more friends, but strangely they are "not like him [Disley]...you see. I mean, he was the natural choice" (99).

The pressures of Disson's emotional anxieties are tightly compressed in the opening scenes of this play. The scenes may be very short, yet there is a density of vital information communicated to the audience. Pinter's onstage relationships thus have an almost "telepathic" hold over us. The audience's mind is accelerated through these relationships with alarming speed. A scene such as Disson's first meeting with Willy lasts no longer than seven minutes, yet we understand immediately the personal, class, and sexual dynamics at work here. Mere contact with Willy starts off faint but nagging alarm bells. On the surface in this meeting Disson is seemingly full of confidence, but his jabbering about the need for a best man betrays his insecurities to his interlocutors. Disson, moreover, appears as a man deeply threatened. On stage this is magnified as Willy is played with a languid upper class confidence with a faint patronizing air. It is quite obvious to Disson that Willy is very familiar with Diana and it may be Disson's sense of being an outsider, both in the familial and a class sense, that goads him into expressing his desire for a best man who will supply a testament to his significance and substance.

The faint sense of conspiracy here in the second scene sets the groundwork for Disson's full-blown paranoia to follow. In many ways this scene

of Disson's first meeting with Willy is crucial. Perhaps the most important aspect of the scene lies in the manner in which Diana and Willy seem allied in promoting Willy as candidate for best man. Disson reacts rather intensely against this notion - "Yes, but look...I mean, thanks very much...but the fact is...that you don't know me, do you?" (99) -and crucially the scene ends before Disson agrees to allow Willy to speak. We are shown again Disson's total lack of power, despite his blustering exterior.

The next scene of Tea Party (100-102) develops the sense of conspiracy even further. The structure of the scene presents the audience with suggestions that Willy and Diana share a relationship at once perverse and perhaps threatening to Disson. Certainly the scene is structured effectively to marginalize Disson and seems to confirm his lurking anxieties. Willy's speech on Sunderly is perfectly calculated to assert that Diana is, so to speak, a thoroughbred; raised among terraces, lawns, and Brahms, Diana is everything Disson is not and more than he could ever hope to be. Diana's father's business was the "State's" (100), not, the subtext fairly shouts, toilets! Certainly the air of an incestuous attraction hangs faintly in the air - "the delicacy of her touch...Diana's long fingers moving in exquisite motion..."(100) - , but the main effect of the speech is to place Disson on a much lower class peg than that of his wife. Willy's words on Disson are as equally stunning. He touches briefly on Disson's strong points; Disson had a "modest beginning" (100) and built his successful business "almost alone" (100; emphasis added). It is a terrifically

demeaning speech made all the more piquant by the fact that it is delivered with such smooth, aristocratic grace - it would be impossible for Disson to take offence at anything Willy says. We sense, however, as must Disson, that Willy sees Disson as the toad who kissed the princess and remained a toad.

It is not, of course, merely vague external threats which seem to be working against Disson. As with most characters in Pinter who are physically or mentally destroyed, it is the internal substance of insecurities in Disson, manifested firstly as we see in his sexual anxiety with Diana (102-104), and, equally as important, in his brazen outward confidence, which work in tandem with external threats to wreak psychical havoc. In the scene at the breakfast table it seems that Disson's anxieties have multiplied and we begin to suspect that he is starting to doubt his own strengths. His "I'm not weak...Am I?" (103) is the purest indication that his own sense of self is diminishing. Yet Disson cannot allow himself to confront his weaknesses for long, and thus not long following this scene we see Disson holding forth on the virtues of a kind of Gradgrindian utility: "I don't lay about at the periphery of matters. I go right to the centre. I believe life can be conducted efficiently. I never waste my energies in any kind of timorous expectation" (105). Certainly an audience familiar with A Slight Ache, or the topos of the braggart will begin to anticipate Disson's inexorable decline. Disson's philosophy of clarity here will be seen retrospectively in a devastatingly ironic light: "I think I should explain to you the sort of man I am. I'm a thorough man. I like things to be done and done well. I

don't like dithering. I don't like indulgence. I don't like self-doubt. I don't like fuzziness. I like clarity. Clear intention. Precise execution" (105). The scene, thus, is in many ways central to the play: everything that occurs to (in) Disson following this will reflect back upon this huge outpouring of words. The scene may indeed be seen as a kind of emblem of the entire play, for certainly its structure is telling. The confidence displayed in Disson's hugely hubristic speech is radically undercut by Willy's almost offhand remark that Diana become his (Willy's) personal secretary (106) - it is, therefore, not by chance that the sole pause in the scene immediately follows Willy's suggestion. It is, of course, also crucial that Willy reveals that Diana has spoken to him rather than to Disson about the idea of her employment. The notion of conspiracy, of events occurring beyond Disson's range of vision, is thus again delicately broached.

The first quarter of Tea Party (95-109) is a fairly conventional and straightforward presentation of an insecure man gradually confronted with an increasingly threatening situation. As Disson's anxieties increase, and they seem to do so exponentially, he begins to attempt a tighter assertion of control over his secretary. Thus, we observe Disson managing, for whatever reason, to compel Wendy onto his desk (108) - a desperate assertion of control ultimately as vacuous as Edward's pretentious display of his knowledge of wines to the matchseller. This scene (108-109) is preceded by two scenes in which Disson is shown in what seems like the early stages of paranoia; previously we have

found Disson gazing at the door of Willy's office, perhaps rapt in imagining scenes of deviance (106). Disson is presented in the scene following this (106-107) only for a few seconds but, as the stage directions indicate prior to the close of the scene, Disson seems rather suspicious on being greeted by his family: "They all smile genially at him. Disson looks quickly from one to the other" (107).

Indeed, these opening scenes are brilliantly structured to compel the audience into its by now familiar hermeneutical posture: all the hints of conspiracy and perversity must be sifted by the audience. We weigh each murmer, glance and word on scales in an effort to arrive at a surer glimpse of the "reality" of the situation. The current of questions draws the audience into the web of intrigue; the distance between audience and play is slowly being eroded, only to be utterly collapsed in the next scene.

The table-tennis game represents the first movement into what Gale labels the subjective vision. Indeed here we have the first indication that the camera is focussed from Disson's view, the first indication of his vision problem: "From Disson's point of view see two balls bounce and leap past both ears" (110). What we must acknowledge about this scene is that here Pinter manoeuvres the audience into a position of proximity to the proceedings - we are now obliged to share in Disson's "hallucination". The scene thus presents us with an important theoretical difficulty. Knowing as we do that Willy does indeed seem to be insinuating himself deeper into Disson's life, and knowing as

we do that he perhaps has designs on Disson's wife, is it so ludicrous for the audience here, if only for the briefest of moments, to suspect that Willy does indeed serve two balls in Disson's direction? Perhaps, given the twin's testimony, we cannot rationally hold this position for long, but Pinter has so delicately structured this first movement of the play as to compel the audience briefly into accepting the vision as real. This is the first moment in the play in which the audience is compelled to question, if only for a brief moment, the processes of its own thinking. Both visions cannot be real, we insist, but it seems difficult to decide between them.

Of course the next scene (110-112) is the empirical slap in the face the audience needs to disengage itself from sharing Disson's view. Disley establishes unequivocally that Disson's vision - his physical vision - is flawless: "There's nothing wrong with your eyes old boy...I'd go as far as to say your sight was perfect" (111). We are again in the position of the objective (distanced) viewer able to regard Disson with the same clinical dispassion as Disley.

It is precisely this vacillation between "objective" and "subjective" that constitutes the audience's primary posture here in Tea Party. Indeed the vacillation of the audience is the major distinguishing feature of the experience of the early Pinter play. In The Birthday Party Pinter attempts to disorientate the audience by shifting it between two generic poles, with a view perhaps of placing the audience in the position of questioning what constitutes the essence

of perception. In A Slight Ache Pinter succeeds in placing the audience in a continual vacillation between proximity and distance: the layers of familiarity undercut by the uncanny, of identification with characters and attempts to maintain a distance from them, of symbols and archetypes merging and doubling with other symbols and archetypes, all place the audience in a position of radical yet transfixing uncertainty. By placing the audience in a vacillation between identification with Disson's point of view and a radical objective view of that same vision, Pinter succeeds - and here I think lies the crux of Tea Party - in compelling the audience to pose the play's overwhelming ontological question: is there a primacy of vision here in Tea Party? (Indeed, is the audience ever fully capable of securing an unequivocal understanding of events in any of Pinter's plays?) The question here is one which we cannot yet attempt to answer; it is, however, one that we must keep in clear view as we proceed through the text.

It is not until the scene in which we encounter Disson blindfolded by Wendy's chiffon (117-120) that Pinter again confronts the audience with the question of primacy of vision and conspiracy. The scene immediately preceding this, however, continues the unfolding of Disson's vision problem. Pinter raises the tension level as Disson and his sons squabble over the making of the wooden yacht. Disson has, according to Tom and John, given an indication as to where to cut the wood; as he now seems to have changed his mind, the twins question him:

Disson. Oh give me it.
(Disson takes the saw and points to a mark on the wood.)
Now...from here.
Tom (pointing). You said from here.
Disson. No, no, from here.
John. (pointing to the other end). I could have sworn you said from there.
Pause.
Disson. Go to your room.
(117)

Disson's reaction to John's questioning is indicative of the rise in the tension he now struggles under. It seems likely that he realises his error, but will not admit this to his sons. Disson's only solution to the problem takes the form - as is true for a great number of his problems in Tea Party - of a kind of blindness: he banishes young John from his sight as he tries to assert his authority. There is, of course, an irony in the fact that blindness in Disson is increasingly countered by blindness.

I have argued that scenes in Tea Party work because they can convey information almost telepathically - Pinter does not need to spend a great deal of time in detailed exposition. Pinter's plays work because every nuance counts. Every murmur, silence, glance, and gesture immediately conveys to the audience clues towards a closer understanding of the dramatic situation. I cannot, of course, scrutinize every scene in minute detail in this or any other chapter, but I have elected here to attempt a "microscopic" analysis of one crucial scene in Tea Party (117-120) in an effort to demonstrate how Pinter works to captivate an audience, to involve them in the proceedings.

This scene is important in Tea Party because it is here for the first time Disson is presented with Wendy, Willy, and Diana together seemingly united against him. It is a moment which greatly advances his sense of paranoia. Following this scene, it is difficult for the audience to dismiss entirely our suspicions of conspiracy, but crucially, the balance of equivocality is skillfully maintained by Pinter.

I have divided the scene into seven panels (A through G). Each panel consists, in my view, of a crucial phase in the development of the scene.

A. "The curtains are drawn"..."What is the cause for delay?" (117)

It is crucial that the curtains be drawn. They stand as a visual echo of the "blindness" soon to be experienced by Disson. The office can be seen as a "safe" environment for Disson; here, with the external world blocked out, he can concentrate on asserting the power he so desperately needs. It may be true, as Disson says, that his eyes hurt, but I think that this is merely his way of communicating the anxiety he feels at his decreased power.

B. "Could I have Newcastle 77254, please"..."Mr Morton sends his apologies. The order has been dispatched" (117-118).

Disson has been blindfolded and here proceeds to manhandle Wendy. The stage directions are not absolutely clear if Wendy should be seen as reciprocating the attention; the directions read "She moves under his touch" (118). This could mean she wishes to avoid being touched, or that she she is

enjoying Disson's attention. This is yet another moment of equivocality which serves to raise questions: is Wendy part of the conspiracy? If so, is her seeming reciprocity here calculated to lull Disson into a false sense that she is on his "side"? The question is, of course, difficult to answer. What I think is crucial to note in this sequence, however, is that Pinter makes it absolutely clear that we have an objective view of things here; twice it is asserted that the camera is on Disson (118). Unlike the previous instance of blinding (the table-tennis game) Pinter is insistant on the audience remaining objective - we do not share in Disson's blinding. It is important in view of what occurs in the scene that this distance is firmly established.

C. "The intercom buzzes"..."Mr Torrance would like me to thank you for him...I heard" (118).

Two elements are important in this sequence. Firstly, Willy's use of the word "services". The audience, perhaps as well as Disson, suspects the double entendre here. We sense that something may indeed be afoot. Secondly, we perhaps suspect Willy in a lie; we do not, of course, have any empirical evidence for suspecting that Diana is not unwell, but it seems far too convenient an excuse to get Wendy into Willy's office. I think Disson may suspect this, and thus his final "I heard" (118) smacks of a kind of angry unease.

D. "Wendy goes through the inner door into Willy's office"..."Silence" (118).

It is the silence here that is most ominous. It is precisely in this silence that we step closer to Disson; we do not need to "see" from his point of view here to engage with his thought processes. In the silence we begin to construct those scenarios we suspect Disson to be constructing. The audience can fairly hear the wheels cranking in Disson's head as we imagine him imagining the scene in Willy's office. What comes in the next sequence thus is not unexpected.

E. "Disson sits still..."..."He tears the chiffon from his eyes. It hangs from his neck. He looks up" (119).

Disson here at the outset is still blindfolded and thus, given the pregnant silence of the previous scene which invites us to imagine Disson imagining, we might for a brief moment think that Disson is hallucinating the sounds issuing from Willy's office. What is crucial to note here, however, is that we have not moved into one of Disson's "subjective" moments, moments such as the table-tennis games (110,129) and that cluster of scenes which constitute the final movement of the play (132-140). We do not see from Disson's view; the camera is still "on him". Disson, of course, cannot see anything. Despite the fact that he removes his blindfold for a moment, the noises he hears remain as mysterious as ever. It is precisely the mystery that generates the nagging equivocality of the scene. If this scene <u>was</u> presented from Disson's view, we might be able to dismiss it more comfortably as paranoia. Yet Pinter toys with

his audience here. Despite the fact that our vision remains objective, we still cannot decide if, in fact, there is a scene of carnality being played out behind the door. Pinter's equivocality is pervasive - it exists both in objective and subjective "visions".

F. "Diana looks down at him. Behind her, in the other room, Wendy is sitting, taking dictation for Willy, who is standing" (119).

We have here the evidence that Willy may in fact have lied to Disson. At the very least we suspect that things in the offices have been hastily re-arranged into normalcy during the silence which ensued previously. The scene compels us to wonder how Disson will react to discovering Diana in Willy's office.

G. "What game is this?"..."I borrowed Wendy's scarf, to calm my eyes. Why are you getting so excited?" (119-120).

This final sequence is of the utmost importance. Diana immediately is on the offensive, and her questions perhaps sound a little too strident and somewhat uneasy: "What are you doing? What are you doing with that scarf? Get up from the floor. What are you doing? (119). Hers are questions a mother would address to a naughty child and her attack is effective. Disson is immediately placed on the defensive and, consequently, the questions he wants desperately to ask are forcefully deferred. Perhaps the most telling, and equivocal, moment in the sequence comes with Willy's smile: "Willy walks to the

door, smiles, closes the door" (119). This is indeed a puzzling smile. It may signify that Willy is enjoying Diana's display of power and Disson's all-too-expected weakness. It serves also to suggest that something did indeed occur behind Willy's door. What is vital about the smile is that it indicates contempt while giving away nothing else: we can only speculate as to its fullest significance. After the smile, however, Disson attempts to assert his masculine power; he addresses Diana: "Don't speak to me like that. How dare you speak to me like that? I'll knock your teeth out" (119). He then proceeds to question Diana as to the reason for her presence in the office. Her reply that she came back from home and was indeed in the office with Wendy and Willy is met with incredulity. The audience is fairly desperate for Disson to press the attack, but, perhaps not unexpectedly, he backs down:

> Disson. You mean you were in there with both of them? In there with both of them?
> Diana. Yes! So what?
> Pause.
> Disson (calmly). I was looking for my pencil, which had rolled off my desk. Here it is. I found it, just before you came in, and put it in my pocket. My eyes hurt. I borrowed Wendy's scarf, to calm my eyes. Why are you getting so excited?
> (119-120)

What happens to Disson during this pause? Why does he retreat from a position of threatening violence to a position of only slightly defensive subservience? Perhaps he wishes to cover the embarrassment of having been discovered blindfolded and eavesdropping; yet I think the rapid change to a non-confrontational stance is perfectly in keeping with Disson's character. He is

a man who seems at times to assume the posture of scapegoat and encourage his own destruction. By backing down here, Disson gives a kind of tacit approval of Diana's actions. I wonder if perhaps Pinter here is inviting the audience to regard Disson in a contemptuous light, as if to encourage that sense of distance crucial to the success of his larger programme. If there is a larger, perhaps even a philosophical exploration of the notion of "perception" in place here in Tea Party, Pinter must maintain this unrelenting distancing/identification dialectic, for to encourage the audience to identify too closely with Disson in all scenes - in our enforced vision and in real human sympathy - would, I suggest, serve to threaten our position of continual and critical equivocality.

It is critical to the success of the play that the equivocality of Disson's experience of betrayal be maintained for as long as possible; this is a structure analogous to that of the matchseller in A Slight Ache. In that play the meaning of the matchseller must needs be kept open, for he is precisely the grail Edward, Flora, and the audience pursue: if he were "solved", as I suggested, too early, the audience perhaps would feel cheated and most certainly would disengage from the proceedings. Likewise in Tea Party; if we know too early that Disson is merely hallucinating the conspiracy, or indeed, as Hinchliffe would have it, the entire play, the essential mystery/intrigue of the drama would vanish - we would be left with merely another drama of betrayal, or merely another examination of the descent into madness.

But we must return briefly to this notion of Disson as pharmakos. The issue of the scapegoat confronting external forces but also encouraging his own destruction is a central aspect of Pinter's view. Stanley is an initial version of the pharmakos; certainly he can be seen archetypically as that element of society that must be purged for the benefit of the whole. Yet Stanley also, with his stubborn silence (he never seems to deny the charges of Goldberg and McCann) tacitly approves of his treatment. Edward in A Slight Ache is a more fully detailed example of the scapegoat who wills his own destruction. The question this play in part compels us to ask is, why does Edward let the matchseller in?

A similar question could be asked with regards to Disson's actions; why does Disson let Willy into the firm with the intention of eventually making him a partner? In a scene in which Willy fairly bludgeons Disson with his superior upbringing (125-128) and Disson himself reveals to Willy and Diana the degradation of his own life ("Drinking? You call this drinking? This? I used to down eleven or nine pints a night!...Every night of the stinking week! Me and the boys...I'd break any man's hand for...for playing me false" (126)) Disson invites Willy closer into his business:

> Disson. Listen. I want you to be my partner. Hear me? I want you to share full responsibility...with me.
> Willy. Do you really?
> Disson. Certainly.
> Willy. Well, thank you very much. I don't know what to say.
> Disson. Don't say anything.
> (128)

To understand Disson's actions here we must realise that he is compelled to invite the fox Willy into his fold. On a surface level Disson wants to assert his power, to be Willy's boss and to perhaps put him in his place. This is, of course, a fatal strategy for one who is so deeply unsure of his own power. We have seen this pattern previously in A Slight Ache. Edward here invites the matchseller in so as to allow himself the opportunity to display himself. Both Edward and Disson invite the enemy into the camp in the mistaken belief that they can control them; if the enemy is under your eye, perhaps they think, you can control him. In a psychological sense, of course, both Edward and Disson reveal their deep class insecurities in this process of willfull self-destruction. Perhaps Disson has to make himself a victim. He has to offer his wife and business because he fears that he is, like Edward, a parvenu, the imposter who does not deserve his position.

It is following this moment of willed self-destruction that Disson's decline begins in earnest. At yet another table-tennis match (129) Disson's vision again fails; the screen becomes black as the audience is again compelled into sharing Disson's vision. It is precisely with a brief discussion of audience involvement and distance in the remainder of the play that I wish to end this discussion of Tea Party.

Following the second table-tennis match scene we are presented with two relatively lengthy scenes which in turn continue the exploration of Disson's background (129-130) and present neurosis (131-132). Following these

moments the length of scenes is greatly shortened as Pinter pushes us through Disson's paranoia with dizzying speed. The final movement of the play - the tea party itself - is a carefully structured balance of objective and subjective views. We are presented with views of the guests arriving, interspersed with shots of Disson's blindfolded head as he awaits the arrival of his family and friends. Threaded throughout this rapid final movement are scenes which serve to alternately advance the element of intrigue and to assure the audience that what is occuring is simply a quotidian tea-party. A two-line dialogue between Diana and Willy greatly encourages our sense of conspiracy: "Diana. Why don't you come to Spain with us? Willy. I think I will" (132), yet a scene following (134-135) presents Disson's parents interacting with their grandchildren in what can only be seen as a typically banal moment. Here the notion of conspiracy seems altogether preposterous:

> John. Cake, Granny?
> Mother. No, I've had one.
> John. Have two.
> Father. I'll have one.
> Mother. He's had one.
> Father. I'll have two.
> (135)

Following this scene the stage directions make it plain that Disson has moved into a catatonic paranoic state in which he is rapt in imagining scenes of conspiracy and degradation. What is clear from the stage directions is that the audience too must experience Disson's vision: "Disson's point of view. No dialogue is heard in all shots from Disson's point of view. Silence. Figures

mouthing silently, in conspiratorial postures, seemingly whispering together" (135). The remainder of the play places the audience in the dizzying position of being offered subjective and objective views in rapid succession: the oscillation rapidly decreases and then increases our distance from the proceedings. What is perhaps most significant about this final movement is that the audience is again placed into a position of questioning its own rational thought processes. Even though we realize that Disson cannot be seeing these scenes of perversity - he is, after all, blindfolded! - all the material that has come before, the hints of conspiracy, the giggles behind doors, the mysterious smiles, invites the audience to entertain the notion that what Disson "sees" may in fact be real in some sense. We perhaps do not believe that Willy, Diana, and Wendy are truly engaged in sex-play in full view of the children and the grandparents (137), but the possibility of them doing so earlier or later in Spain certainly seems to be within the realm of possibility.

The final effect of audience involvement in Tea Party is to place both visions of things in a state of suspended balance. Rationally we cannot fully accept Disson's subjective, paranoic vision, but rationally we cannot fully reject it. There is simply too much information given to the audience which suggests conspiracy to allow us to decide what is real and what is not. In Tea Party, Pinter has raised equivocality to new and perhaps frightening heights and thus what I have repeatedly held to be the major philosophcal issue in the play must also be placed in suspension. I have suggested that here in Tea Party the

dialectic of proximity and distance ultimately serves to raise the question of the primacy of vision, perhaps even the very notion of perception itself. What is characteristic in Pinter, as I have suggested in my introduction, is the absence of authorial position or a hierarchy of values - we cannot decide the "truth" of the proceedings because the text itself is silent. Austin Quigley might in fact be correct when he suggests that in Pinter "truth [and] reality are negotiable concepts" (30). This statement is apt in its relation to Tea Party; the audience may never decide what is "true" or "untrue" but the negotiable nature of the concepts certainly must force us to accept that what Disson sees, regardless of its "objective" truth status, is potently true for him. And if, as I have attempted to argue throughout this chapter, the audience in a sense "becomes" Disson, our final posture, though certainly equivocal, must necessarily be more than slightly disturbing.

Part of the reality of a great deal of Pinter's plays is their tendency to end in medias res; I have mentioned this previously in relation to A Slight Ache, and it is appropriate that I conclude this study with a play which seems to end altogether too soon. Tea Party concludes with Diana questioning the catatonic Disson: "Can you hear me?...Robert, can you see me?...It's me, darling...It's your wife" (140). Part of the continuing task of the audience of the play is to question the state of Disson as the play concludes: what is his mental state? Has he lost touch completely with reality? Why, most importantly, does Pinter choose to end the play precisely where he does?

At the conclusion of all the plays I have discussed here there seems to be an unscripted pause, as the endings spark a sense of void. We ask: is that all? Has the play concluded? It is with something close to despair, perhaps even anger, that the audience apprehends the "conclusion" of Pinter's plays, and it seems that again Pinter may be having a laugh at our expense. Yet these conclusions are the final "hook" into the audience; like Prufrock we are caught sprawling on the pin of the drama. We have no answers, and thus, at least from my own experience, our hermeneutic inquiry extends beyond the temporal confines of the staged event. As Stanley is taken away at the conclusion of The Birthday Party we wonder about his state, as we do for Edward in A Slight Ache. These plays in the most truculent sense resist any kind of conclusion, any kind of firm closure. It may be deemed naïve to ask questions of the play beyond its confines, but with Pinter we inevitably do. We may construct scenarios as we leave the theatre or put down the text to accomodate and perhaps supplement the painful lack of conclusion in the plays. I think part of the experience of regarding a Pinter play involves the audience's inability simply to shut off the drama as the curtain falls. The questions, the perhaps uncomfortable sense of violation, the very uncanniness of the play itself, continue to plague the audience even as the play ends.

Tea Party, like the typical successful Pinter play, works because it is so unremittingly dialectic: proximity is encouraged at one moment to be replaced by a more comforting and comfortable distance at the next. I wish to

conclude this study with some brief remarks on my notion of this dialectic and the concept of dialogical interplay.

I have throughout this analysis spoken of the "audience" as if I had sure knowledge of how a group of people respond to the drama. It can be argued that I could not possibly know how a general audience would respond, and thus, all such musings about "hermeneutical inquiry" and "dialogical interplay" is speculative at best. However strong (or weak) this line of argument is, I think my best defense is to suggest that as a human being I have at least a general understanding of how other human beings will respond at a very basic level to mysteries. My entire project is based on the assumption that human beings are naturally hermeneutic: in the face of a puzzle we tend to ask questions. If this assumption can be accepted, I believe all that follows, including my notion of dialogical interplay and audience violation, may be seen less as a radically subjective response and more as a response that speaks widely to the experience of these unsettling dramas. A justification for this appraoch is my belief that there has been altogether too much interpretation of the meaning of the plays. The Pinter industry simply does not need another interpretation of Goldberg and McCann or the matchseller. I have stated repeatedly throughout this analysis, moreover, that attaching meanings and structures to the plays is always hazardous: the plays are (thankfully) too resistant to such textual abuse. Instead of imposing structures onto the plays, I

have attempted here to tease out an understanding of the structures already to be found in the drama.

With an understanding of the structures to be found in Pinter's plays comes an impetus towards an apprehension of the manner in which these structures are designed to affect an audience. Thus I am compelled into the audience's mind and, strangely, into a position rarely assumed by most Pinter critics. It seems extraordinary to me that Pinter criticism has for the most part completely ignored that most vital component to the success of the play: the audience. Very few critics spend much time regarding the active postures the audience is forced to assume by the plays. A possible explanation for this could be that most critics tend to regard the Pinter play as a thing to be read, rather than enacted. We run into difficulties with this approach, however, because reading a play simply is antithetical to the full effect of the drama: reading a play allows too much time for leisured speculation. As I mentioned in my chapter on A Slight Ache, if one cannot view the Pinter play enacted on stage, one must at least attempt to imagine it occurring in real time, for to remove the temporal intensity of the staged event is to emasculate the play. We can begin to experience the precise moments of doubt and uncertainty, of hope for answers, of proximity and distance only if we allow the play the time scheme it would occupy on stage.

Thus, as I see it, and to which this thesis will attest, firm univocal "meaning" is not to be found inside the Pinter play, for the rapid movement of

the staged play simply does not allow enough time for the audience to pause and fully speculate: we are sped from archetype to allusion to symbol at such high speed that instead of an arrival at a firm understanding of the meaning of a particular event or character, we have a blur. If it exists at all, meaning exists in the experience of the play. Thus, to take one example, the matchseller should not simply be read as Death, the rising Underclass, or Edward's Doppelganger, but should be understood in his effect on Edward, and as I have argued, on us as well.

WORKS CITED

PRIMARY SOURCES

Pinter, Harold, The Birthday Party in Plays: One. (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1991).

_____, A Slight Ache in Plays: One. (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1991).

_____, Tea Party in Plays: Three. (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1991).

CRITICAL WORKS: BOOKS AND ARTICLES

Baker, William and Tabachnick, Stephen Ely, Harold Pinter (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1973).

Beckerman, Bernard, "The Artifice of 'Reality' in Chekhov and Pinter", Modern Drama 21 (1978), 153-161.

Belsey, Catherine, Critical Practice (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1980).

Brown, John Russel, "Mr Pinter's Shakespeare", Critical Quarterly, V, 3 (1963), 251-265.

Bullough, Edward, "'Psychical Distance'", Aesthetics: Lectures and Essays (London: Bowes & Bowes Publishers Limited, 1937).

Burghardt, Lorraine Hall, "Game Playing in Three by Pinter", Modern Drama, 17 (1967), 377-387.

Burkman, Katherine, The Dramatic World of Harold Pinter: Its Basis in Ritual (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1971).

Chaim, Daphna Ben, Distance in the Theatre: The Aesthetics of Audience Response (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984).

Cohn, Ruby, "The World of Harold Pinter" in Pinter: A Collection of Critical Essays. Ed. Arthur Ganz (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), 78-92.

Diamond, Elin, Pinter's Comic Play (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1985).

Dukore, Bernard F, Where Laughter Stops: Pinter's Tragicomedy (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1976).

Eco, Umberto, The Open Work (Massachusetts: Harvard Unversity Press, 1989).

Esslin, Martin, The Peopled Wound: The Work of Harold Pinter (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1970).

Fuegi, John, "The Uncertainty Principle and Pinter's Modern Drama" in Harold Pinter. Ed. Stephen Gale (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 1986), 202-207.

Gabbard, Lucinda Paquet, The Dream Structure of Pinter's Plays: A Psychoanalytical Approach (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickenson Press, 1976).

Gale, Stephen H, Butter's Going Up: A Critical Analysis of Harold Pinter's Work (Durham: Duke University Press, 1977).

Gordon, Lois G, Strategems to Uncover Nakedness: The Dramas of Harold Pinter (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1969).

Hinchliffe, Arnold, Harold Pinter (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1967).

Hollis, James R, Harold Pinter: The Poetics of Silence (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970).

Nightingale, Benedict, "Harold Pinter/Politics" in Around the Absurd: Essays in Modern and Postmodern Drama. Eds. Enoch Brater and Ruby Cohn (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1990), 129-154.

Ooi, Vicky Cheng Har, "Edward Agonistes or Anagonistes? Theme and Structure of A Slight Ache by Harold Pinter", Theatre Research International, 3 (1978), 133-148.

Quigley, Austin E, The Pinter Problem (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

Sakellaridou, Elizabeth, Pinter's Female Portraits: A Study of Female Characters in the Plays of Harold Pinter (New Jersey: Barnes & Noble Books, 1988).

Strunk, Volker, Harold Pinter: Towards a Poetics of His Plays (New York: Peter Lang, 1989).

Sykes, Alrene, Harold Pinter (New York: Humanities Press, 1970).

Trussler, Simon, The Plays of Harold Pinter: An Assessment (London: Victor Gollancz, 1974).

Van Laan, Thomas, "The Dumb Waiter: Pinter's Play with the Audience", Modern Drama, 24 (1981), 494-502.

Walker, Augusta, "Messages from Pinter", Modern Drama, 10 (1967), 1-10.

Wertheim, Albert, "Tearing of Souls: Harold Pinter's A Slight Ache on Radio and Stage" in Harold Pinter. Ed. Stephen Gale (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 1976), 64-71.