PUNCH AND PINTER

PRE-LITERARY TECHNIQUES IN THE PLAYS OF HAROLD PINTER

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By

ALVIN WASSERMAN, B.A.

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AUTHOR: Alvin Wasserman, B.A. (Sir George Williams University)

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS:

This thesis examines the plays of Harold Pinter through his use of basic pre-literary theatrical techniques. The techniques are specifically outlined in terms of such pre-literary theatricals as Punch and Judy puppet shows and vaudeville variety acts. The thesis contends that Harold Pinter's drama is directly based on standard theatrical elements, and can be understood more precisely according to them than in accordance with literary modes or terms such as allegory, imagery, metaphor or symbolism.

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CHAPTER I

Contemporary playwrights are continually experimenting in an attempt to expand the scope and broaden the perspectives of theatre. Philosophies and social theories of increasing complexity have been incorporated into a variety of new formats which often change the construction and conventions of the stage as well as alter the intentions of the presentations. However, along with the expanding abstraction in the new plays, a return to the basic theatricality inherent in pre-literary drama is evident among the ones which are most successful.

The elusive nature of pre-literary dramatic forms makes them particularly difficult to cite with a great degree of exactitude. One must do without the certainty assured when dealing with the standard published material of specific authors. The pre-literary dramatic forms which are utilized in this examination of Harold Pinter's theatre are primarily the Punch and Judy puppet shows and the variety acts that constitute vaudeville theatricals. Although theories on the origin of Punch differ, the prevailing opinion traces the character to "Silvio Fiorillo's introduction of

Pulcinella in the impromptu comedies of Naples." [1] There is no agreement as to the date when Punch made his first appearance in England. Reports of the initial presentations of the Punch character are as diverse as the rumoured content of these puppet plays. When puppeteers began to stage Punch shows there were at least as many different stories being dramatized as there were performances. McPharlin's history of Punch includes a listing of some of the many themes the Punch stage adapted from the popular drama of the day.[2] It is generally agreed that a change occurred in the type of material which the Punch shows usually employed. However, the date on which this shift took place is impossible to ascertain. McPharlin estimates it happened about 1828[3] though others contend it was significantly later. The large selection of popular adaptations of which the Punch shows were composed became for an expanding number of Punch practitioners variations on one standard scenario. Nearly all the commentators on the history of the show concur on this point.

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[1] Cruikshank, Punch and Judy, p.13.
Fraser, Punch and Judy, p.6.

[2] McPharlin, The Puppet Theatre in America, A History, pp. 34-35.

[3] McPharlin, p.120.

This standard version which is related to a myriad of others was transcribed by George Cruikshank who sought out the foremost Punch puppeteer in London in the late eighteen hundreds. Similar versions are cited in D. H. Myers' book, The Last Days of Mr. Punch as well as in both McPharlin's and Fraser's books. The basic plot begins with Punch enjoying a riotous time either by drinking to excess or having an affair with a mistress. Mrs. Punch, later known as Judy, enters the stage and after a brief period of harmony, comes to blows with him. The reason for the conflict is often Judy's discovery of Punch's mistress. In many variations she is angry because Punch who has been holding their baby, tires of its crying, and throws it off the stage. Whatever the reason, a fight ensues and Judy is killed. Punch must then commit a succession of murders in order to conceal his crime and remain free. The participants in these conflicts vary but the violin-playing neighbour Sacramouch seems to be a regular as is the hangman, Jack Ketch, who is tricked into hanging himself at the end of the play. Punch's final opponent was usually the devil whom he would beat and send off the stage running, red tail stuck between his legs to signify Punch's complete victory.

It is only marginally easier to trace the origins and identify the main conventions of the vaudeville stage productions. The influence of the British music or variety halls is one area where

all the commentators on the entertainments agree. Many English performers made the transition to the higher paying vaudeville circuits in America, and some, like Chaplin,[4] went right into the early motion picture industry. The British music halls and the vaudeville stages shared a parent with the Punch and Judy shows. The Italian commedia dell'arte tradition behind the character of Punch was also the background from which the harlequinade entertainers, popular in England in and before the eighteen hundreds was derived.[5]

> Other elements of the harlequinade merged into the tradition of the English music hall and American vaudeville, with its cross-talk comedians, tap dancers, and comic songs.[6]

The various manifestations of pre-literary theatre all drew on common techniques and shared ancestors to a great degree. Performers would exchange techniques at the festivals that attracted people in England and the continent. The later American

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[4]Cheshire, Music Hall in Britain, p. 56.

[5]Cruikshank, p. 16.

[6]Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, p. 239.

vaudeville was in fact a gathering of performers who represented a wide spectrum of pre-literary stage repertoire. It is difficult to make distinctions between the material in the several types of productions which have derived from the pre-literary tradition. Punch and Judy was performed by Eleanor Ransom on the vaudeville stage,[7] English music hall comedians played vaudeville, and burlesque theatres took material from variety hall performances and adapted it to their particular stylistic preferences. The boundaries, if there were any, were flexible to the point of being undefinable.

Inside the vaudeville circuits competition and outright stealing of material was so wide-spread that routines were often copyrighted in a futile effort to safeguard acts from imitation. This practice was not effective as there was no real way to monitor the many acts on the stages across the country. Some performers prided themselves on their ability to steal and integrate ideas from other acts so well that the matter of originality in their cases was unsolvable. As a result of this many of the vaudeville stage performances which would otherwise have no way of being retained were recorded in copyright offices

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[7]Gilbert, Vaudeville, Its Life and Times, p. 314.

throughout the United States. The current upsurge of interest in vaudeville, marked by the large number of books and articles published about it since the mid sixties, have drawn extensively on these files as well as on the memoirs of the few vaudevillians who wrote down their impressions of the era. It is generally assumed that vaudeville in America started around the late eighteen hundreds and lasted until the outbreak of the Second World War. It was about this time when the most respected vaudeville house, The Palace in New York, stopped its regular weekly presentation of vaudeville billings and turned largely towards the screening of motion pictures.

In examining any of the pre-literary entertainments their common heritage is most visible in their mutual employment of basic stage elements. These devices, or elements, were used extensively on the vaudeville and Punch stages. They represent the central ways in which theatrical effects were produced. What follows is a list of these techniques and a brief account of how each functioned.

> The cart of Thespis, The Miracle Plays, the Treteau de Tabarin, The Hotel de Rambouiller . . . Punch and Judy, the Italian puppet-shows, all of them had one thing in common: they provide

the opportunity of make-believe . . . [8]

All of these early pre-literary entertainments devised ways of leaving things to the audience. They created illusions rather than depicted realities. This first principle implies the ability to generate excitement and a sense of wonder. This is a main contributor to the theatrical strength of any performance; it is what brings audiences to the theatre regardless of the number of times they have previously seen the performance.

A second technique, or theatrical element common to the pre-literary spectacle is the basic simplicity which the shows personify, "with the minimum of effort they achieve the maximum of effect." [9] This was due in part to making a virtue out of necessity as the early showman had to limit his props in order to maintain mobility. In theatres, including vaudeville houses, budgets were devoted to building maintenance and salaries rather than to elaborate collections of stage materials. The acts were expected to bring with them all they required with the exception

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[8]Baring, Punch and Judy and Other Essays, pp. 17-18.

[9]Baring, p. 18.

of a piano or a set of drums. The players were limited to variations on a few standard situations which could be made to correspond to the small selection of backdrops available. Despite this restriction two people on a stage could go to Africa or explore a classroom by simply putting on an appropriate hat, or expression. Their fears moved the audiences and their miscues evoked laughter because the simplicity of the method made the scenes easily accessible to the audience. While maintaining this simplicity they were able to cut across a wide range of areas without ever leaving the stability of a few stock situations.

A theme which was used in pre-literary dramas so frequently that it can well be regarded as one of the basic principles is the use of ordinary domestic scenarios as backdrops for cruelty and violence. The folk tales that early Punch shows depicted, [10] as well as the version of the play often cited as the standard scenario, are domestic cruelty dramas of this sort. Though homespun situations are not in themselves interesting, and violence in isolation is seldom entertaining, the result of a careful mixing of the two invariably produces comedy or in some combinations, compelling drama. Household personalities and situations, besides

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[10] McPharlin, The Puppet Theatre, p. 35.

being easy to stage, are readily recognizable by onlookers. As a result of related experiences the audience immediately forms expectations about the possible developments in the domestic scenarios. These expectations become the target for the performers who invent complications and twists of circumstances which result in outcomes entirely different from the ones the audience would logically expect. It is because the domestic scene is so familiar to the spectators that the variations of unexpected conflict and violence can be so directly effective. The actors sustained an impact similar to performing in the homes of the people watching by bringing the home situations to the stage.

A basic way in which the domestic situations were rendered into comedy or drama was through the fourth theatrical technique in this discussion, "reversal". As soon as the audience was given an opportunity to perceive a configuration of dramatic circumstances, the arrangement would be completely reversed. Doors and chairs disappeared, characters would suddenly forget all they had said, short people became tall, fathers became mothers - - any change would do as long as it was sufficiently unexpected. Characters as well as dramatic settings could alter entirely in a few well-concealed seconds and then be thrust upon the unsuspecting onlookers. The changes caught the audiences by surprise and could be used to generate

sympathy for one character or laughter at another. Just as the sudden discovery of the identity of a character by his birthmark or pendant was a standard Aristotelian dramatic element, reversals of every feasible sort were a mainstay in pre-literary theatricals.

Much of the comedy in these entertainments worked in relation to a sympathy or pathos the efforts a comic figure evoked. The part of the Harlequin was "to forget his errands, to stumble over queens, and to run his head over [sic] every post that comes his way".[11] Barretti, a commentator on the early character of Punch notes that at first the puppet was a "weak fellow, who is always thrashed by the other actors and always boasts of victory after they have gone."[12] This combination of blundering and helplessness was cultivated by vaudevillian and music hall comedians who perfected the method of mixing pathos with humour. Sight routines were devised which functioned on this the fifth theatrical principle in this listing. The result was the production of various portraits of comic anguish. The hapless clown or tramp became

[11] Cruikshank, p. 15.

[12] Cruikshank, p. 57.

synonymous with the name vaudeville. Characters were made victims of fate, of others, and often of their own inadequacies in well-known routines which combined compelling drama with riotous humour.

The sight routines based on the conflicts which comic figures executed in vaudeville as well as in Punch shows, involved, in a great number of cases, rivalry for possession. The principle behind this aspect of the theatricals, the sixth, is the same one which operates in the child's game of musical chairs. The action springs from the fact that there are more people who wish to be seated than there are seats available to them. Characters fight to remain on stage in puppet shows, and to remain in the spotlight on vaudeville stages. While the positions of winner and loser are being determined on stage the audience gets entangled in speculation, and tends to identify with the contestants. An involved conflict, skillfully executed, can force the audience into doubts, suspicions, anxieties, and anticipation, yet can operate with the simple principle of having one place with two people wanting to fill it.

Though conflicts of this genre were often physical, they were not so exclusively. The confrontations extended into gesture and language. Contests were won by the character who could yell

louder, speak softer, or coin the most unusual word or phrase. This seventh principle involves the use of words to denote power or authority and was utilized in an endless string of stage situations. Since words were used to set up confrontation their adaptations to indications of victory or defeat enhanced the physical routines without unduly lengthening them.

Words were used to contrast with physical violence as well as to represent it. Juxtaposition, the eighth principle in this discussion, was used to create perplexing combinations of words, actions, and other words. The difference between what was said on stage and what was done, or what a character meant to say and what was said, if large enough, could immediately result in the generation of laughter. What was important in the vaudeville acts which operated on this principle was the great degree of separation between two activities or subjects, as well as the inexplicable reason for the unique stage combinations. A vaudeville comic, John Carl, built his act primarily around this principle. His show was based ostensibly on banjo playing, but . . .

> . . . After a few bars of banjo music he would stop suddenly and recite of all things, passages from Shakespeare. Then he would go into a song, cease again, and deliver more Shakespeare. He never explained this juxtaposition but veterans say his recitals were excellent. 13

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[13]Gilbert, Vaudeville, p. 42.

As this principle depends on reacting against audience expectation it is similar to the reversal technique. However, the juxtaposition did not have to involve exchanges or substitutions and could be done verbally by even one character alone on a stage.

The ninth theatrical element is the employment of word plays which revolve around standard situations. The Punch shows' simple domestic setting, for example, would be the scene for puns and constant manipulations of word meanings during performances. The fascination certain words could inspire would merit the cessation of the action on the stage. This was often exploited by asides to the audience by one puppet while the others passively waited for the action to resume. The vaudeville 'afterpieces' also operated on this principle.

> Necessarily simple, the afterpieces were fashioned about stock situations . . . they provided excellent illustration of the ridiculous plays upon words and phrases and the extraction of comedy from absurd misconstructions. 14

Through language fragmentation ordinary situations became storehouses for comic lines. The situations were rendered linguistically humorous and then the language used would be turned against itself in parody or farce. The meaning of the words focussed on the

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[14]Gilbert, p. 47.

situations would initially follow logical patterns and then this logic would be perverted through puns or repetition. The final direction of the words would only be related to the situation in the most tenuous of ways. The logic it followed would become funny due to the blundering, unfathomable nature of its many twists and turns.

The tenth pre-literary element is one which directly employs all of the nine previously listed. The technique may be termed "compression", as it involves extreme precision and economy applied to every facet of individual performances in order to give an overall symmetry of form to each one. This compression is a process of continual refinement of material used in conjunction with the nine techniques outlined. It attempts to mold the material into a cohesive theatrical structure which conceals all of the elements which operate behind it.

Briefly, the theatrical principals which compose the ten listed are the following: (1) Deliberate omission generating the opportunity for the audience to make-believe. (2) Basic simplicity of performance. (3) The use of domestic scenarios as backdrops for cruelty and violence. (4) Reversals. (5) The combination of pathos and comedy in the person of a hapless victim.

(6) Conflict or rivalry for privileged positions. (7) The substitution of words for weapons and marks of victory or defeat. (8) Juxtaposition of words with actions or with other words. (9) Word plays constructed in relation to standard situations in order to distort the situation as well as the logic behind the words. (10)Compression of all aspects of the performance into an overall symmetrical structure. These ten theatrical techniques provide an operational basis which can be used to refer to pre-literary theatricals. Though only a few versions of Punch plays and a limited number of vaudeville routines are available in their entirety, the basic principles of these entertainments can be extracted and used in comparison with other forms of theatre. These techniques were not in themselves pre-literary drama, but selectively performed and molded by skilled performers they became the foundation of innumerable individual productions and theatricals.

CHAPTER II

In discussing contemporary playwrights grouped under the "Theatre of the Absurd" heading it is necessary to briefly review the origin of the term. Martin Esslin coined the title to describe a group of writers which included Beckett, Ionesco, Genet and Pinter. The word "absurd" was to be taken in the sense of Sartre's "nausea" as interpreted by Albert Camus in The Myth of Sisyphus. It describes the aftermath of the realization of the "primitive hostility", the emptiness which man must face when the illusionary meanings which had cloaked these realities fall aside.

> This malaise, in front of man's own inhumanity, this incalculable let down, when faced with the image of what we are, the "nausea" as a contemporary writer calls it, also is absurd. 15

The "absurd" world view is one in which there are no certainties. No systems, no God, no patterns are seen to necessarily exist. Man's actions cannot be justified by exterior purposes or ultimates, their meanings, if they're to have any, must come from within them. The activities are not explainable and conclusions are groundless according to this scheme. The plays of the absurdists focus on what remains after the exterior rational structures which gave purpose were removed -- motion without cause or direction, ritual without substance, statement without meaning.

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[15]Camus, Le Mythe de Sisyphus, p. 29.

The "absurd" philosophy, or lack of it, has been mistaken for a blanket nihilistic condemnation of man's situation. According to this perception the humour generated in the plays of the absurdists is incongruous with their underlying pessimism. This criticism is mistaken. Though the dramas imply that "the future is as hopeless as the past and present . . . despair is as absurd as hope."[16]

The playwrights termed "absurdist" differ from one another and deny any concrete relationships to a single body of ideas, yet there are strong similarities in the plays of each. They rejected the complacent employment of "realistic" stage conventions such as the open fourth wall and the miniature drawing rooms, complete with their false doors and mock decor. Accepting the conventions would imply accepting the rationale and system inherent in the practise of working with them. Instead the playwrights examined each prop in isolation, looking for an intrinsic value and ignoring its previous relation to other objects usually placed with it on the stage. They wrote for a stage which was "both instrument and metaphor."[17] Movement and language scripted for the stage was similarly refined and the result was the arrival at a simplicity which had previously been the strength of preliterary theatricals.

> . . . the tradition of fools and clowns of the Medieval and Elizabethan stage was revived by the absurdists. For their ability to imbue their exaggerated (sometimes vulgar) gestures with significance and stretch the language to its absurd extreme, fools and clowns used to represent highly philosophic points of view . . . Thus the

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[16]Daniel, "Ionesco and the Ritual of Nihilism," Drama Survey, I, No. 1, (May 1961), 38.

[17]Robertson, "A theatre for the Absurd", Drama Survey, II, No. 1, 31.

> theatre of the absurd is not altogether a novel experiment. It had had its roots in the earlier dramatic movements . . . [its] distinctive speciality is exploitation of the oft-used but undervalued techniques of earlier dramas.[18]

The return of the absurdist playwright to the staple elements of pre-literary drama is often stated but has not as yet been fully elaborated. Ionesco has written that his turning toward the theatre was inspired by his childhood excitement at witnessing a Punch and Judy play.[19] This motivation is clear to critics examining his theatre. Daniel comments that in his plays . . .

> The emphasis is on the external rather than internal action and like puppet shows, the plays are blatantly theatrical.[20]

However as to just what constitutes "blantant theatricality" the critics are not very clear. Genet's use of illusion and dream realities have been roughly paralleled to the techniques of mime and the trickery of carnival and circus performers.[21] In addition Beckett's fondness for vaudeville tramp figures evident in Endgame and Waiting for Godot, has often been focused on in approximately the same general ways. As yet the commentaries have not adequately explained the specific pre-literary elements which the "Absurd" playwrights have utilized.

In his book, Theatre of the Absurd, Esslin devotes a full chapter to the general pre-literary influences which can be found in absurdist drama. In an article discussing Harold Pinter in particular Esslin was

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[18]Singh, Absurd Drama, p. 18.

[19]Ionesco, Notes and Counter Notes, p. 20.

[20]Daniel, p. 54.

[21]Singh, p. 17.

more explicit about the pre-literary influences related to absurdist theatre.

> The starting point of his theatre is a return to the really basic elements of drama, the suspense created by the elementary ingredients of pure, pre-literary theatre: a stage, two people, a door; a poetic image of an undefined fear and expectation.[22]

The setting for Pinter's drama is exactly that of the simplistic situations of the Punch or vaudeville stage. Pinter when interviewed about his plays has said:

> Two people in a room -- I am dealing a great deal of the time with this image of two people in a room. The curtain goes up on the stage, and I see it as a very potent question: What is going to happen to these two people in a room? Is someone going to open the door and come in?[23]

The situation is simple enough but the tendency in criticism noting the pre-literary parallel has been to identify it and then proceed to ignore its particulars and implications. Taylor, for instance, writes that ...

> Pinter's plays work quite as much on what they do not say as on what they do. In this sense they are not primarily literary theatre at all.[24]

It is unfortunate that neither Taylor, nor any of the others who have made the connection identify the non-literary components in any

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[22]Esslin, "Pinter and the Absurd", Twentieth Century, CLXIX, (Feb. 1961), 178.

[23]Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, p. 206

[24]Taylor, Harold Pinter, p. 25.

thorough manner. Each critic explores a particular implication or tendency in a few of Pinter's plays ignoring elements which do not fit into their schemes. The result is an enormous amount of interpretations with no allowance for conciliation or consolidation between any of the points of view. What has marked most of the work on Pinter to date is the contention that one main idea of system of belief runs through most of the plays. This missing ideological link or "Puzzle" as many commentators have termed it is explained by William Baker and Ely Tabachnich in terms of Pinter's Jewish background and the feelings of threat to Jewish identity.[25] Ronald Hayman speaks of the experience of the hunt, and the feelings of aggression when explaining the main theme of Pinter's work.[26] Others have pointed to classical mythology,[27] existentialism, or socialism as the key to understanding the matter which is behind the words in Pinter's plays.

The critics return to analogy though Pinter has denied affiliation to any firm ideological belief. The major shortcoming of this kind of approach is that there can be no cumulative body of criticism on Pinter if the plays are looked upon as puzzles waiting for the identification of a missing link. Inaccurate guesses do not make informative

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[25]William Baker, Stephen Ely Tabachnich, Harold Pinter, pp. 8-10.

[26]Ronald Hayman, Harold Pinter, pp. 91-92.

[27]Katherine Burkman, The Dramatic World of Harold Pinter: Its basis in Ritual.

reading. Another main fault of this critical approach is its failure to integrate Pinter's comedy. Many of the studies ignore it, some under-emphasize it, but the majority of the commentators recognize it, applaud it, and promptly forget it. Ideological systems seldom can assimilate humour or theatricaly without undercutting themselves.

Martin Esslin, the most respected Pinter critic,notes the comedy and pre-literary elements in Pinter yet proceeds to interpret the plays without significant reference to this dimension.[28] This dimension is central because it allows for other interpretations of the plays while it operates within each one of them.

What is important is the fact that the pre-literary elements which the critics cite with general terms such as "blatant theatricality", and "poetic image of undefined fear" are not in themselves general at all. All pre-literary theatricals operated on basic, visible, explainable principles, ten of which are reviewed in the first section of this paper. This thesis contends that Harold Pinter's drama is directly based on these central theatrical elements, or techniques, and can be understood more precisely according to them than in accordance with literary modes or terms such as allegory, imagery, metaphor or symbolism. This is not to maintain that Pinter's drama does not involve use of literary stylistic

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[28]Martin Esslin, The Peopled Wound, The World of Harold Pinter.

devices, or imply ideologies of various sorts, but rather to emphasize that they are secondary to the non-literary techniques and can largely be explained in terms of them.

The utilization of each of the ten principles in a wide range of Pinter's work will be discussed in the course of comparisons between pre-literary scenarios and specific scenes in Pinter's plays.

CHAPTER III

Harold Pinter writes for the stage. His theatre represents a return to the source of drama, a creation of space where illusion in the form of suspicion, doubt and comedy is immediately accessible to the audience. His utilization of the first of the pre-literary elements outlined in the introduction, deliberate omission, creates an open-ended quality which attracts the large number of interpretations offered to explain each play.

What is left unsaid, unexplained, and silent in the plays, is what is determined primarily by the particular experience of the audience. The dumb waiter in the play of the same name, as well the matchseller in A Slight Ache are but two examples of the illusions which can be created by Pinter's deliberate omission of factual details and background. The abundant opportunities for make-believe are reflected in the frequent speculation as to the organization served by the matchseller or dumb waiter. Just a few of those suggested by commentators include the Communist Party, the crime syndicate and the Irish Republican Army. The effect of this invitation directed at the audience is an excitement or sense of wonder as different interpretations are offered and then rejected. The plays suggest philosophies and ideologies but the

references are made purposely fleeting and evasive. This unwillingness to adhere to definite subject matter or position, opting instead for suggestiveness and illusion, aims at satisfying the objectives of the omissions in pre-literary theatre. It renders the plays non-specific and provides the opportunity for the audience to make-believe. "Pinter has few equals among dramatists in this subtle almost imperceptible direction of his audience." [29]

That Pinter has been successful in creating drama which functions on the premises of this creation of possibilities and illusion is born out by the relation Pinter's plays have to other artistic forms which are not primarily concerned with concrete realities and specific subject matter. The dance critic for the New York Times wrote of The Homecoming : "The play resembles a ballet in its dramatic ambiguity. In its unwillingness to specify, its concern to move, rather than to preach.... In ballet it is acceptable that there be no hard line between illusion and reality. Indeed it is acceptable that nothing has to mean anything -- which is a far cry from something meaning nothing". [30] Another comparison of Pinter's drama to other art forms was made by J. R. Brown. "In one way this drama is like the first movement of Sibelius' Second Symphony: the

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[29]Taylor, Harold Pinter, p. 26.

[30]Barnes, "The Homecoming and Blow Up: Strange Ballets, "New York Times, 12 Feb. 1967, D20.

'subject' is introduced fragmentarily and not stated fully until the conclusion. But we must add that the early intimations are not distinguished as 'subject'. The audience is perplexed and its attention drawn away to momentary interests that seem more compelling so that when the 'statement' comes it carries more assurance by the recognition it brings of the play's entire form".[31] Pinter's plays, when regarded in this manner, rather than according to individual avenues of interpretations, enable one to appreciate the plays for themselves and not as vehicles for ideological or allegorical messages. As long as the open-ended nature of the plays is recognized then any number of speculations can be associated with them without ever having the effect of pigeon-holing the 'meaning' and limiting the scope of the plays.

Ruth's speech in Act II of The Homecoming, in which she describes the movement of her leg and her underwear is a perfect case in point. It has been quoted to explain the philosophical principals behind the actions of the family in the play; the sexual nature of Ruth which excludes any philosophical understanding, as well as to demonstrate that each of the characters do not "really" communicate with each other at all.

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[31] Brown, "Mr. Pinter's Shakespeare" The Critical Quarterly, V(1963), 253.

The speech is constructed of short phrases, fragments of thoughts and questions, all framed in a choppy rhythm. The line "perhaps you misinterpret"[32] is particularly appropriate as the speech is intended to suggest and not confirm any of the possible interpretations suggested by it. The contradictory conclusions drawn from the speech do not matter and in no way do any one of them dictate what has happened up to that point in the play or what will happen after it. There is an openness to the speech which cannot be explained away. A dramatic ambiguity parallel to ballet which Clive Barns, the dance critic, noted. By omitting the statements which would have lent certainty to one interpretation or another, Pinter has left room for many interpretations, all of them valid.

The fact that the plays are complete despite the openness of situation and deliberate withdrawal of material can be seen to be a result of their basic simplicity. A stage, two characters, and a door. The essentials of Harold Pinter's drama are all the elements that were vital in the Punch and Judy shows. The greater portion of Harold Pinter's dialogue is spoken by two characters to each other; when there is a third or more as in The Collection they are manipulated so as not to interfere with the confrontation. In this early drama, Bill, the husband who is trying to find out if his wife has

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[32]Pinter, Homecoming, p.53.

had sexual relations with James, goes back and forth between the two households to ask his questions. Never in the play do all the characters involved gather together to talk things out at one time. The elusive nature of Pinter's verbal confrontations necessitates two characters facing each other with no one there to augment, support, or contradict the information that each one offers. They are alone in their struggles even when living in a large household with people continually about as in The Homecoming. In this play the exits and silences of characters are meticulously arranged so as to maintain the one to one conflict from scene to scene while the characters take turns as participants. This is also the case in Punch plays, limited by the fact that the puppeteer has only his two hands with which to work the puppets. The personnel changes in the encounters on the Punch stage usually involve the shifting of puppets on the puppeteer's left hand. The right normally is reserved for Punch himself. The puppeteer's technique, the second of those previously listed, basic simplicity, dictated the action which took place on the little stage. Punch would meet his oppents one after the other and the story line would follow that pattern, building up as the rivals got increasingly interesting. The Homecoming is but one of many Pinter plays that works largely on this sequential pattern. "Pinter tells us that he wants to write plays which tell a story, chronicle a series of happenings, without the artificial because and therefores

of drama, but simply in the basic childhood terms of 'and then . . and then .. and then.'" [33] This simplicity emphasizes the activities on the stage and the ideas which are projected from them rather than the narrative which often is repetitive and secondary.

The simplicity of the confrontation commands attention and because of the possibility that a character may be ousted by another at any time, interest is held almost regardless of the words which the characters throw at each other. Attention is grabbed by a motion and held there by the succession of one motion only to another. The scenes don't follow each other in a predictable fashion in both Punch and Pinter shows; they take over from each other almost violently. Pinter maintains simplicity throughout his plays as the technique serves to intensify the relationships between the stage characters. Trite conversations or ordinary daily activities become engrossing because they are presented without any elaboration or complex accompaniment. In this way, one standard situational setting can be utilized repeatedly in different plays and produce an assortment of effects.

The standard situational backdrop which Pinter has chosen to work with in the majority of his plays is one of the domestic variety. As was

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[33] Taylor, Pinter, p. 5.

mentioned in the first chapter, the domestic scenario when produced in conjunction with violence can be regarded as the third of the frequently employed pre-literary techniques. One of the main themes in early Punch shows was folk tales. These were often domestic scenarios whose main element was cruelty.[34] The Room, The Collection, The Lover, A Slight Ache, The Caretaker, A Night Out, The Homecoming, Old Times, No Man's Land, among other Pinter plays are based on the technique of using domestic scenarios as a backdrop for cruelty. A common label for Pinter's early plays, before The Homecoming, was "Theatre of Cruelty". This critical approach grew outdated as Pinter continued to write plays which defied categorization of this kind. Pinter's later plays, Landscape, Silence and Old Times, for example, did not seem to emphasize violence any longer. The stabbing of the blind Negro in The Room, Pinter's first play, was reduced in his next, The Dumb Waiter to the expectation and preparation for violence, and continually refined in later plays to various degrees of conceptual violence.

A clearer understanding of Pinter's use of cruelty in the domestic setting can be obtained by referring to the way this technique was presented in the pre-literary Punch puppet shows. Ionesco's

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[34]McPharlin, The Puppet Theatre in America, A History, pp.35, 44.

description of his play, The Picture as a 'guignolade', a Punch and Judy play, lists several of the implications of the activities of the puppet characters. "In fact" Ionesco writes "this Punch and Judy play must be acted by circus clowns in the most childish, exaggerated, idiotic manner possible . . .The reversals of situation must happen brusquely, violently, crudely, without preparation . . ."[35] Ionesco singles out reversals of situation as a main characteristic of the Punch plays. These were often reversals of character's identity and they were the active force which enabled the domestic settings to combine with acts of cruelty in order to create the effects of comedy or near tragedy. Which of the emotions the reversals evoked were determined by the amount of sympathy a character managed to instill in the audience before he lost his position or took over a position from another character. To demonstrate this technique, the basic outline of an early Punch play, found in a childrens' book, Pug's Visit to Mr. Punch, published by William Charles in Philadelphia, 1821, will be summarized. Pinter's use of the same technique will be demonstrated by a comparison of one of his plays to the Punch story.

In this early version of the puppet play Punch sends his dog,

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[35]Esslin, The Theatre of The Absurd, p.125.

Towser to invite Pug, a monkey, to "have supper and crack a good bottle or two". Punch's wife prepares a jolly spread and after the repast she has to put Pug to bed. "While Mr. and Mrs. Punch are asleep Pug dresses himself in Punch's clothes. Mrs. Punch is so charmed with him in them that she runs away with him, leaving Punch still asleep. When he wakes to find himself alone, he rushes off to Pug's house and finds his wife dancing a minuet with the monkey."[36] Pug's trip to Punch's house, his reversal of identity and Punch's subsequent trip back to Pug's house constitute the action in this story. There is also a conflict for the companionship of Mrs. Punch (not yet called Judy in the early versions of the play); either she sleeps with Punch or goes dancing with Pug, she is the only woman available in the story. The triangle love situation, and the reversals in affection and identity which it sets up are the areas in which the violence functions in this story.

The same issues are used by Pinter in an almost identical manner in the radio play, later adapted to the stage, entitled The Basement. The two males are Stott and Law, the woman whom they both want is Jane. Stott comes to Law's room concealing Jane outside. Once in, he waits for the right moment to introduce her. They all

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[36]McPharlin, p. 120.

decide to live together, because the visitors are looking for a place to stay. Jane shows affection for Law, their host, and there is a conflict over her between the men which underlies their relationship to each other. The three play games with violent undertones in a party atmosphere, smashing glass bottles against each other. The last scene find Stott alone in the room when the visitors arrive. It is Law, he is wearing the raincoat Stott wore when he first arrived, Jane is outside as she was in the first scene, hiding. The dialogue is exactly the same as in the opening scene, the only difference being that Law has reversed roles completely with Stott who is now the host who invites the visitor in.[37] The triangle configuration, the shift in the woman's affections, and the reversal of the rivals' roles are all present in the Pinter script.

Another play in which Pinter uses the combination of domestic scenario and cruelty activated by reversals in roles is The Dumb Waiter, another of his early works. The Dumb Waiter is not on the surface a domestic play. The pair are not related and they do not live in the flat together. However, a look at some of the concerns of Gus throughout the play gives one quite a different impression. Near the beginning of the play Gus speaks:

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[37]Pinter, Tea Party and Other Plays, p. 78.

> He's laid on some very nice crockery this time, I'll say that. It's sort of striped. There's a white stripe. (Ben reads) . . . . It's very nice. I'll say that. (Ben turns the page) You know, sort of round the cup. Round the rim. All the rest of its black, except for right in the middle, where the cup goes, where it's white. (Ben reads) Then the plates are the same you see. Only they've got a black stripe-- the plates-- right across the middle. Yes, I'm quite taken with the crockery. 38

A short while later Gus comments on the malfunctioning lavatory, the room's lack of a window, how nice the crockery is despite the general inadequacy of the place, the bed on which he couldn't sleep, his desire for another blanket and his horror at the thought that the sheets in the room might not have been fresh. These are just a few of the household concerns he expresses. While the play isn't set in a permanent home of any kind, Gus, the character who asks questions and is concerned with himself in a conscious way constantly expresses his desire for a controlled, orderly environment. He wants the rooms in which he stays to serve as a home. He is worried about who cleans up the mess after they have murdered their assigned victim. He asks who tidies up the places although he never returns to them. He is the wife of the pair; the fact that his domestic tendencies are misplaced is borne out by the ending in which it looks as though he is about to be punished for them.

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[38]Pinter, The Dumb Waiter, pp. 36, 37.

The reversal in roles in this play bears resemblance to the one which occurs at the end of the version of the Punch play which most critics take as the standard one.[39] Jack Ketch is to hang Punch for the murder of his wife and their baby. Punch tricks Jack into a demonstration of how one should put on the noose. Punch takes advantage of the situation and hangs Jack in a dramatic reversal of the roles of victor and victim. Pinter's reversals in The Dumb Waiter while not quite as overt, are quite similar. In the play the two hoodlums, Ben and Gus, are waiting for orders to tell them who their next victim will be. The first reversal comes when the dumb waiter in the room suddenly becomes active and sends down demands for exotic foods of increasing complexity. From would-be killers the pair become servitors subject to the impossible demands of the machine. They cannot even make tea, as ordered, for the gas runs on a meter and they have no money. The final reversal comes in the last scene of the play in which Gus stumbles into the room after going to the toilet. He is stripped of his coat and his gun and is visibly shaken. When Ben's gun is pointed at him Gus is revealed as the intended victim of their murder assignment.

The final effect of this play is not one which emphasizes the

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[39]See Page 3, Chapter I for further explanation.

violent aspect, therefore, to consider it under the "Theatre of Cruelty" grouping is to ignore many of the plays' components. When the parallel to the pre-literary theatricals' use of domesticity, violence and reversals (the third principal) are referred to, more of the actual content of the play can be explained. As in Ionesco's description of The Picture the characters in The Dumb Waiter are larger than life. They have been seriously concerned with absurdities such as the proper flushing of the toilet, the identification of 'common' phrases, and newspaper stories of child violence. They related to each other in what the audience perceives as comic, cross-talk comedian style terms; the implied violence behind their mission and the sudden turn toward menace at the end of the play functions only in terms of the contrast to what has gone before. The openness of what the following event, the 'and next' of the play would be, given a resolution of Ben's confrontation with Gus, is what makes for the strong curtain. The cruelty is important in the play, but is clearly not primary.

The domestic scenario carries with it audience expectations and definition of both the behaviour of people, and the limitations implied in their roles. The effectiveness of the actions in the plays of this domestic type is derived from the shift in roles and audience expectations, not the incorporation of violence. Briefly, two other plays which utilize the domestic situation in this way should be

mentioned to demonstrate the frequency of Pinter's employment of this technique. In A Slight Ache the middle-class couple, Flora and Edward, are confronted with a silent, mysterious matchseller. The subtle violence in their relationship to him culminates in the reversal of Edward's role with the matchseller's. Edward takes the matchtray at the play's end as Flora embraces the former matchseller with passionate interest. The Homecoming ends with the wife, Ruth staying to live in the household of her husband's family in the capacity of both whore and mother while her husband, Teddy, leaves unemotionally to return to their family in America without his wife.

Though reversals are used by Pinter as the primary activity which renders subtle violence or cruelty interesting in relation to domestic scenarios, this device can be used in other contexts as well. Reversals, the fourth of the pre-literary techniques in the discussion, was also used to produce shifts in dialogue and action. In the puppet shows, this change can be seen through the reported actions of the character of Punch. At one point in the puppet play, Punch interrupts his dance with Judy by striking a sudden blow to her face without apparent motivation. Another instance of behaviour reversal is his cuddling of their baby just prior to his throwing it off the stage.[40]

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[40]Myers, The Last Days of Mr. Punch, p.34.

The effect comes in these cases from the speed of the shift in affections as well as the large degree of difference between the two activities. The audience, not being prepared for any change is held by the force created by the sudden transition. Pinter uses changes of this sort frequently. In The Birthday Party, the blindman's-buff scene works in this manner. There has been a sense of threat throughout the play but it has clustered about the personages of McCann and Goldberg, the two intruders who seem to take an unsettling interest in the affairs of the boarder, Stanley. The game starts and both Meg, the lady of the house, and McCann have uneventful turns at being 'it'. Stanley is next. "Stanley rises. He begins to move towards Meg . . . He reaches her and stops. His hands move toward her and they reach her throat. He begins to strangle her." [41] The transition from game to struggle is instant, and on the visual level, like Punch's action. Another reversal is the fact that Stanley chooses Meg, not his tormentors, to vent his frustration on. In the play, Meg has been a mother/whore figure for Stanley. The transition, therefore, is also from affection to violence, although the timing is more intricate than the corresponding shifts in the Punch play. The reversal technique, when used by Pinter in this manner, plays upon the audience's ideas of social norms. The unexpected occurences which

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[41] Pinter, The Birthday Party, pp.63, 64.

punctuate the drama force continual alertness as to the events which are happening on the stage and the many directions which, regardless of social norms, may result.

Pinter's material seems at times to border on the melodramatic. Lovers' quarrels, household traumas and garden-party frustrations abound. It is at these times when his comedy, used in relief in the way farce was on the Victorian stage, intensifies the drama, lifting it to a position safely removed from sentimentality. "Everything is funny; the greatest earnestness is funny; even tragedy is funny." 42 Here Pinter classifies tragedy as potentially funny but when confronted with the news that audiences were laughing throughout a production of The Caretaker, he was irritated. From the London Sunday Times August 14, 1960 a comment of his reproduced by Esslin: "As far as I'm concerned The Caretaker is funny up to a point. Beyond that point it ceases to be funny, and it was because of that point that I wrote it." [43] The seeming contradiction between the two statements can be resolved by noting that Pinter's comedy works only in relation to a kind of tragedy. The two are inextricably connected. The point where the play ceases to be funny comes not once, but again and again, rotating with the play's dramatic moments. The comic

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[42] Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, pp. 211-212.

[43] Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, p. 212.

dialogue timed in what appears to be random alternations with the other 'developments' on the stage often consists of only a few ordinary lines. As a result of their unexpected placement they soon become familiar to those watching, and funny to them because of their unusual positioning apart from their content. The almost tragic moments are not just diversionary, though they do serve that function; they are credible because of the comedy which has preceded them. The dramatic tension is often created by the pathetic actions of an ineffectual character whose efforts, while pitiful, are nevertheless funny. It is this mixture of comedy and pathos which comprises the fifth pre-literary technique mentioned in the outline.

Pinter is not alone among contemporary playwrights in his use of the combination in one scene of both tragedy and humour. Samuel Beckett's tragic comedies employ the technique in ways similar to those of the vaudeville theatricals. One does not need Pinter's confessed admiration of Beckett's early novels to spot the antecedents of Pinter's comic sensibility. Pinter's unpublished play The Hothouse contains some rather direct borrowings from Beckett's Murphy. There is, in both authors' works, a mental hospital whose administrators are at the extreme ends of the sanity scale. The names of the personnel in Pinter's play are typical one-syllable vaudeville act monikers: Root, Lush, Beck, Budd, Tuck, Dodd, Tibb and Lobb. The names of some of the people in the M.M.M. hospital in Murphy were Bom, Bim and Uncle Bum, as well as Tim

and Tom, the orderlies. The most frequent overflow of the vaudeville act into modern literature was the tramp. The character of Murphy is but one of Beckett's many tramp figures. This type of character, depicted in assorted philosophical stages by Beckett, is used by Pinter most visibly in the person of Davies in The Caretaker. A close look at Davies will serve to highlight the use and effects of the fifth technique, the mixing of comedy and pathos.

An overview of his action in the play is reminiscent of the Chaplin street routine. Charlie tries to cross a street and at every step inadvertently causes calamities and accidents of all sorts. Chaplin, miraculously unaware of it all continues doggedly to cross with an inexplicable devotion to the task. Davies leaves the cluttered household in the same devastated state. He has played one brother off against the other to a point where neither could possibly support him. They do not wish to be reminded of the weaknesses they have unintentionally exposed to Davies so there is no possibility of his remaining in the household. Yet the curtain closes with a long speech comprised of his pleading to remain. The sentiment he embodies at the end of the play is not tragedy in a Shakespearian sense but rather comic anguish in the vaudevillian manner. This comic anguish, the end result of the mixing of comedy and pathos, through the actions of a troubled character can be analysed in terms of its pre-literary background. In the British Music Hall, a source of American vaudeville and

silent film humour, a comedian called Little Tich performed a classic tramp act. In one routine, he would dance and throw away his stick, and drop his hat.

> The band stops; while Tich tries to move towards recovering his hat but he hesitates and turns to the direction of his stick, and then changes his mind again, and so on, until he is demented with worry. However, the band creeps in sotto voce and this seems to encourage him to pick up his stick firmly. But, as he stoops to pick up his hat, the toe of his long boot pushes the hat ahead, sometimes it goes just out of reach, sometimes it positively jumps like a frog.[44]

The act's use of the hat and shoe is interesting as the absurdist group of playwrights seem to have picked up these particular trappings of the comic routine and transformed them into recurring motifs in their dramas. The theme most frequently associated with the props when used in routines of the comic anguish variety was that of indecision and inadequacy. Tich's act featured this kind of a dilemma. The audience sympathized with his indecision while maintaining a comfortable distance from it due to its obvious insignificance. The face of Tich, full of worry, concern and anxiety was a vivid visual portrayal of comic anguish resulting from the mixture of humour and ineptitude, which the fifth technique called for. Beckett's employment of the technique portrays the two tramps in Waiting for Godot, Didi and Gogo, in much the same way. The two anxiously speculate on the

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[44]Cheshire, Music Hall in Britain, p. 73.

mutability of a pair of shoes from day to day. With Lucky and Pozzo, they engage in a protracted exchange of hat routine with a disturbing persistence. While much has been written about the possibility of shoes and hats as denotations of social role or class, the main point in the use of these props is to contrast the reality, the tangible qualities of the items,with the abstract mental constructs the characters feel they must deal with in order to use them. Rather than shoes, the characters must attempt to put on theories of matter, or of motion. Inability to act, to make a firm decision in favour of one alternative comes as a result of the irrational, imponderable nature of the world as viewed by the characters on the stage. This doubt extends even to their perception of their own identities.

One identity is as irrelevant and unconformable as another, one hat as appropriate or misplaced as another. In Pinter's Caretaker, the hat exchange from Godot is echoed in the bag - passing sequence in the second act. The routine incorporates a conflict for possession and power on one level and for conformation of identity and social position on the other. The desperation evident in Davies' grabbing of the bag heightens with his realization that it was bought by Aston, second hand, and is not really his at all. This in addition to the possibility that his story is largely a fabrication and he may have never had a bag, combine to present the tramp in an image of formlessness. He is unable to decide on even the approximate nature of his

identity. In accepting the clothes from the bag, he accepts one identity, yet after putting on the red gentleman's smoking jacket[45] over his patched baggy pants he tries on the dingy work overall that Aston gave him,accepting another.[46] Davies, on the stage in multi-layered ill-fitting clothing marking an equally ill-perceived self conception, is a carefully crafted theatrical portrait of comic anguish.

Behind the comic picture of Davies is an unnerving sense of the misplaced, undefined state of being that the tramp is trapped in. It is not moralistic comedy like that found in the folk story of the Emperor in his invisible suit of clothes because Davies is more real, more human than the Emperor could ever be. It is the balance between human fallibility and comic flexibility which denotes the successful application of the tragicomic technique to a particular character's plight. A few quotations from The Caretaker will demonstrate how the shoe props are integrated with the tramp's feelings of inadequacy to support both comedy and pathos.

Davies.. I thought there must be someone living there.

Aston.. Family of Indians live there.

Davies.. Blacks?

Aston.. I don't see much of them.

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[45]Pinter, The Caretaker, p. 42.

[46]Pinter, The Caretaker, p. 43.

Davies. Blacks, eh? You've got some knick-knacks here alright, I'll say that. I don't like a bare room. I'll tell you what, mate, you haven't got a spare pair of shoes?

Aston. Shoes?

Davies. Them bastards at the monastery let me down again.

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Aston. (emerging from under the bed with shoes) Pair of brown.

Davies. He's gone now. Went. He's the one put me on to this monastery. Just the other side of Luton . He'd heard they'd give away shoes.

Aston. You've got to have a good pair of shoes.

Davies. Shoes? It's life and death to me. I had to go all the way to Luton in these.

Aston. What happened when you got there, then?

Pause.

Davies. I used to know a boot maker in Acton. He was a good mate to me.

Pause.

Pause. You know what that bastard monk said to me? How many more Blacks you got around here then? [48]

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[48]Pinter, The Caretaker, pp. 13-15.

In this scene the tramp's attitude toward the shoes and his relation of some of his past, reveal a pitiful weakness in him. The tramp's loneliness and crafty equation of shoes with friendship underlie the comic haphazardness of his speech. The technique of mixing the pitiful with the comic to produce a portrait of comic anguish is carefully executed in these lines. Davies' quest for the 'right' pair of shoes substitutes for his quest for identity, or more correctly his avoidance of the search. His obsession with the shoes reflects his desire to belong to a community as well as his frustration, and fear of rejection from such collectives. His insecurities, sparked by racial groups, in fact organizations of any sort, are marked by his reluctance to speak in a straight-forward manner about the Indians, or what happened at the monastery. He doesn't belong to any family or group, but what is more threatening to him is the fact that he cannot ever belong to some of the most conspicuous and, he feels, powerful communities. He senses that these groups are in control of the situations which surround him. The comic effect is derived from the alternation of the brown and black complexions of the Indians and Negroes respectively with the black of the shoes and the image of the monks. Later in the play Davies rejects a pair of black shoes because only brown laces can be found to put on them. After much jabbering in the scene in which he tells the story of monks, Davies finally tries on the shoes.

Davies.. Not a bad pair of shoes. (He trudges around the room). They're strong all right. Yes, not a bad shape of shoe. This leather's hardy, en't?

Very hardy. Some bloke tried
to flog me some suede the other
day. I wouldn't wear them.
Can't beat leather, for wear.
Suede goes off, it creases, it
stains for life in five minutes.
You can't beat leather. Yes.
Good shoe this.

Aston.. Good.

(Davies waggles his feet)

Davies.. Don't fit though.[49]

Davies last assertion functions as a punch line would in a stage routine. The build-up is controlled by the elaborate description of how long leather will last, and its strength and desirability over suede. The two flat affirmations signified by the word 'yes' alone in a sentence, one at each end of the speech, gives it a generalized affirmative thrust. The complimentary adverbs and adjectives carry along with them a build-up of expectation which comes crashing down with the last simple, negative statement. The shoes don't fit so all the virtues they have do not really mean anything to Davies. On reflection, the most sorrowful aspect of Davies' comic anguish is its inability to resolve itself. Davies wants another pair of shoes exactly as much as he does not want

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[49] Pinter, The Caretaker, p. 15.

to go to Sidcup to 'get his papers'. He is like Little Tich, incapable of acting, torn between picking up his hat or his cane.

The mixture of comedy and pathos and the comic anguish it imbues in a character is not restricted in Pinter's plays to the tramp figure. The same feelings of inadequacy and inability to act purposefully which marked the tramp tragicomic figures are found throughout Pinter's plays in many varieties of 'victim' characters. Like the tramp figures these other characters feel they are the victims of conspiracies, the hostility of the environment, bullies, bad luck and the like. In the case of Davies, it is almost all of these forces which prohibit his obtaining a pair of shoes. In actuality, the failure is entirely his own responsibility.. An example of a Pinter character, in no way a tramp figure, regarding himself as a victim of fate or the deliberate manipulation of those stronger than him in the same way is that of Stanley in The Birthday Party.

In vaudeville each act had the conviction that it was the best of its kind anywhere, and if it wasn't successful it was because luck wasn't with them or that the powers that controlled the bookings had it in for them.[50] This is exactly the sentiment Stanley, the ex-concert pianist expresses to himself in the first act of that play.

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[50] Spitzer, The Palace, p. 76.

> I had a unique touch. Absolutely unique. They came up to me. They came up to me and said they were grateful. Champagne we had that night, the lot. (Pause.)...Yes. Lower Edmonton. Then after that you know what they did? They carved me up. Carved me up. It was all arranged, it was all worked out. My next concert. Somewhere else it was. In winter. I went down there to play. Then when I got there, the hall was closed, the place was shuttered up, not even a caretaker. They'd locked it up. (takes off his glasses and wipes them on his pyjama jacket). A fast one. They pulled a fast one. I'd like to know who was responsible for that. (bitterly) Alright Jack, I can take a tip...any day of the week. (He replaces his glasses and then looks at Meg).51

Stanley in this speech gives up responsibility for his failure in show business, yet throughout the play it is evident he feels guilty about something. His repetition of "I can take a tip" only serves to prove that he couldn't and still can't. The few lines Stanley utters contain two standard Pinter images which when they appear in any of his plays accompany violent confrontation and identify the victim. The first is his mention of winter. The second is his failing sight.

Examining the character of victim in Pinter's plays, and its accompanying images necessarily includes facets of the sixth pre-literary techniques, rivalry for position and power. The hostility of the environment, often severity of weather conditions, and the inability

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[51] Pinter, The Birthday Party, pp. 22, 23.

to see properly, when mentioned in a Pinter play, are projections of the confrontation of a victor and a victim. In A Slight Ache although it is the summer solstice, Edward, the husband who in the play gets replaced by the matchseller, says the weather is treacherous.[52] He talks of a summer storm the week before in which the matchseller stayed out, seemingly quite comfortably.[53] Flora, noting the date recalls the Christmas frost and the floods in the area.[54] Edward in his final speech of the play in which he breaks down, recalls the height of his power which came in winter. At that time he was strong, and could wear polo shorts in the cold; to him the summer is a hostile environment which brings weakness and failure as he can't stand up to the seasons' change. In the play The Room, Rose's inability to cope with the winter weather forces her to stay huddled up indoors, fearful of strangers. The weather is just as dangerous for her as it is for Edward in A Slight Ache. She remarks to her husband that, "It's very cold out, I can tell you. It's murder."[55] Bert, her husband displays his victory in the same way that the matchseller proved his over Edward by standing up to the summer storm. Bert is able to go outside and drive his van over the ice, and then reutrn safely. The weakness of Rose in The Room, Edward in A Slight Ache, as well as Stanley in The Birthday Party is also associated with some degree of blindness in

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[52]Pinter, A Slight Ache, p. 10.

[53]Pinter, A Slight Ache, p. 21.

[54]Pinter, A Slight Ache, p. 30.

[55]Pinter, The Room, p. 7.

each of the characters. In Stanley's speech quoted previously, the stage directions have him taking off his glasses at the precise moment that he reveals his vulnerability to Meg, who doesn't respond. Stanley looks across at her and says, "You're just an old piece of rock cake, aren't you?"[56] In the party which results in Stanley's loss of will, his glasses get broken and one of the intruders, McCann, gives them back in the final act, shattered. Stanley dumbly takes them before he is led away, defeated, to the van outside. In The Room, the blind Negro intruder, who claims some connection to Rose, (a father figure is implied), passes on his blindness to Rose in the final scene at the moment when Bert hits him. The weakness with which Rose is struck is foreshadowed by her previous avoidance of light. She tells Bert to stay in as it will soon get dark then immediately says; "It gets dark now."[57] When Mr. and Mrs. Sands come to look at the apartment thinking it unoccupied they comment on the lack of light in the apartment for it seems just like the night outside.[58] Mr. Sands' later denial of his wife's observation of a star outside indicates that he too avoids light. This weakness in him suggests that he may be a future victim of a forced blindness.

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[56]Pinter, The Birthday Party, p.23.

[57]Pinter, The Room, p.19.

[58]Pinter, The Room, p. 19.

The use of impaired sight to identify victims is often extended to darkness of any sort. In the second act of The Caretaker Davies walks into the room and finds the light switch doesn't work. He takes out matches from his pocket but drops them. Mick is hiding in the room and he cruelly kicks around the box, taunting the hapless tramp. This act, like Stanley's removal of his glasses, foreshadows eventual defeat.[59] The package of matches shoved through the bottom of the door by an unknown force in The Dumb Waiter serves to illustrate how small the world of the hired killers really is, and how little they are in control of it. They are both victims. The use of light to denote victim and victors is more subtle in the later plays like The Homecoming where the mere act of having one's cigarette lighted functions almost as a scoreboard, marking who is in command at any given moment. The references to weak sight have been quoted by Catherine Berkeman in her attempt to link some of Pinter's plays to ancient fertility rites.[60] It is sufficient to note that blindness, as well as hostile environment function in Pinter's plays as denotations of the positions of victor and victim. To view the plays in terms of a chain of metaphors or as protracted allegories is tantamount to misunderstanding them entirely. Pinter's stage characterizations are purposely limited in order to create deep conflicts between characters which are easily accessible to the audience's understanding.

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[59]Pinter, The Caretaker, p.44.

60Berkeman, Dramatic World of Harold Pinter.

To invoke an additional system of characterizations, such as that inherent in the mythological interpretation is to unnecessarily clutter the clear-cut rivalries.

There are only so many roles and an abundance of characters available to fill them. In Old Times there are two positions delineated, one for a passive, easily compliant, submissive person, and the other for a strong commanding role which must have the passive partner in order to validate itself. The two places are well defined, however, there are three people in the play competing for them. In vaudeville the rival acts were involved in a similar competition for roles. Usually there were two suitors interested in one girl. A standard act would have the two men meeting each other and at first they would take each other to be the father of the girl and so get along exceedingly well. When it became known that they were each after the same girl they would quarrel. They finally resolved their differences, to the amazement of the audience, by both agreeing to relinquish their claims to the woman. In Pinter's plays the rivals are often after a place to live, as well as the possession of another person. The main difference between the use of the rivalry technique in both scenarios is that in Pinter's no one can give up the conflict and settle with his rival. Often the dialogue of an opponent during the skirmish is very funny. Pinter has said that more often than not the speech "only seems to be

funny -- the man in question is actually fighting a battle for his life."[61] It is a showdown; at the end of such plays as The Room, A Slight Ache, The Dumb Waiter, The Collection, A Night Out, The Birthday Party, The Caretaker, and The Homecoming, there are clear victors in the conflicts. In the later experimental memory-type plays such as Silence, Landscape, and Monologue, there are only the losers and their fragmentary memories of the clashes left. No victors. The more recent major works, Old Times and No Man's Land combine the uncertainties of the memory plays with the presence of very real on-stage character conflicts. In Old Times the three people, Anna, Deely, and Kate take turns in the active and passive roles, get lost between each other's creations of memories past and present and in the end, have all lost, in some way to each other at some point in their confrontation. The audience gets a sense of definite change in the characters' positions but unlike the straightforward reversal shown in an early play like The Basement, the matter of what changes have taken place is left undefined. The roles, definite and closed at the start of the play become more generalized and completely open by the play's end.

The contention that these exchanges between Pinter's characters are strictly struggles for the limited space available on the stage,

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[61] Pinter, "The Art of the Theatre III," The Paris Revue, X No. 39, (1966), 34.

or for the position in the spotlight has been suggested by Ronald Bryden in his discussion of The Birthday Party. He likened the play to an exercise in theatrical discipline, an impromptu in which additional characters arrive on the stage. This is done, he writes

> to alter the grouping in the most obvious way: They [the characters] must take the stage from the actor dominating it, drive him off or be driven off themselves. What they actually say scarcely matters... the only reasons for their answers are the questions, and that the first person to fall silent in this game, is the loser. He who stops talking must surrender domination of the stage, avert himself, give up the space for whose mastery the players manoeuvre. Whatever the surface dialogue, the situation is battle; domineer or be dominated, act or be acted off [sic]. The Pinter world is a stage with nothing in the wings.62

The battle, besides being one for physical space, as Bryden notes, is a fight to secure mental space as well. It is not the room that is in question so much as who the people in it will be. How will each character define himself, through what words or actions? How will he convince the others while assuring himself of the validity of his assumed role? Nothing is verifiable on the stage, no one will steadfastly support another character's story on stage for fear it might undermine his own position. The parallel to puppet theatre's use of the rivalry technique is evident as the conflict on both stages is for

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62 Bryden, "Three Men in a Room", New Statesman, LXXII No. 1737 (1964), 1004.

the leadership position. Each scene calls for one dominant character to take control at a time, battling for the position, if necessary. The actions involved in the struggle for possession of the oral as well as physical space are much the same in both theatres, as is the employment of the limited space and rivalry conflict technique. The way in which the violence is enacted by the characters on both pre-literary stages and in the plays of Pinter also have much in common. The seventh of the pre-literary techniques reviewed in the introductory chapter, the substitution of words for weapons and marks of victory and defeat is the primary method utilized in staging conflicts or rivalries for position and power.

Contrary to Mr. Bryden's contention words do matter. They are the clubs and sticks of Pinter's troupe who attack each other with them as well as hide behind the shadows, (pauses) they cast. The silence is not the cause of the character's defeat as Brydon states, but rather the aftermath of it. It signifies a swallowing up of the confrontation momentarily. "The pause is a pause because of what has just happened in the minds of the characters. They spring out of the text. They are not formal conventions but part of the body of action."[63] The silence, then is actually a character in the plays, one who continually upstages the others when the dialogue has reached a point of imbalance or has

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[63]Gussow, "A Conversation", NYTM, p. 132.

climaxed. "And the silence . . . . means that something has happened to create the impossibility of anyone speaking for a certain amount of time -- until they can recover from whatever happened before the silence."[64] The confrontation of words is just as brutal, perhaps even more so, than the fights which take place on the physical level between the characters on a puppet stage or the rival acts in a vaudeville theatre. Pinter's later plays get increasingly violent, characters cut deeper and deeper into each other when the sharp objects present in nearly each play (scissors, knives, bottles, broken glasses) get passed from hand to hand, threaten, but are never used.

Whoever holds the power is the one who dictates what reality will be on any one of the stages mentioned in this discussion. The object is to get the other characters to confirm what is said by any means available. From the transcript of a Punch play the following dialogue demonstrates the power of the confirmed word:

Servant:	Get away, I say wid that nasty bell.
Punch:	What bell?
Servant:	That bell.
Punch:	That's a good one. Do you call this a bell? It is an organ.

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[64]Gussow, "A Conversation", NYTM, p.132.

Servant: I say it is a bell, a nasty bell.

Punch: I say it is an organ (striking him with it) what do you say it is now?

Servant: An organ, Mr. Punch.

Punch: An organ? I say it is a fiddle. Can't you see? (offers to strike him again).

Servant: It is a fiddle. [65]

Punch gets away with what he likes because he is the one in command. In The Caretaker, Mick, the younger more violent brother, pushes the tramp, Davies, about at will. In one encounter Davies was so rattled he pulled out an old knife and threatened Mick. Just how much Mick maintains the dominant position is easily ascertained by the dialogue.

Mick: Well, I can see before, when you took out that knife, that you would not let anyone mess you about.

Davies: No one messes me about, man.

Mick: I mean, you've been in the services, haven't you?

Davies: The what?

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[65] Frazer, Punch and Judy, pp. 41-42.

Mick: You've been in the services. You can tell by your stance.

Davies: Oh . . . yes. Spent half my life there, man. Overseas. . . like . . . serving. . I was.

Mick: In the colonies, weren't you?

Davies: I was over there. I was one of the first over there.[66]

Mick's power to assert his version of reality is here extended to even the past of Davies. As an aside, it is interesting to speculate which half of Davies' life could have been spent in the services. Since the tramp's identity is split into two names, Davies and Jenkins, one can associate either one of the identities with the services. One then may discount it as a real possibility because of the probable fictional basis of the name in the first place. Davies or Jenkins might have served, then again the tramp could be either one, or neither of the two. It is Mick who at several times in the play puts pressure on Davies to confirm his real identity, though each time doubt remains. Another of Mick's enforcements of his will on Davies comes just earlier in the play.

Mick: No, he doesn't like work, that's his trouble.

Davies: Is that a fact?

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[66]Pinter, Caretaker, pp. 50-51.

Mick: It's a terrible thing to have to say about your own brother.

Davies: Ay.

Mick: He's just shy of it. Very shy of it.

Davies: I know that sort.

Mick: You know the type?

Davies: I've met them.

Mick: I mean, I want to get him going in the world.

Davies: Stands to reason, man.

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Mick: But he won't buckle down to the job.

Davies: He don't like work.

Mick: Sounds like it to me.

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Mick: What would your advice be?

Davies: Well. . . he's a funny bloke, your brother.

Mick: What?

Davies: I was saying, he's. . . he's a bit of a funny bloke, your brother.

Mick stares at him.

Mick: Funny? Why?

Davies: Well . . . he's funny . . .

Mick: What's funny about him?

Pause.

Davies: Not liking work.

Mick: What's funny about that?

Davies: Nothing.

Pause.

Mick: I don't call it funny.

Davies: Nor me.[67]

The turnabout by Davies is done almost with a slow motion effect. The audience sees and hears it coming while it is being done. From Davies' flat statement about Aston's being a funny bloke to his later qualifications and stammering, Davies' backup is put in perfect relief. He retreats to the position he thought Mick implied by re-stating that Aston doesn't like work,but when pressured he denies even this. The piece ends in a complete turnabout to the position dictated by Mick. There is great irony in the fact that Davies, the tramp, speaks condescendingly about someone who does not like to work. The dialogue can be regarded as a comic set piece,but the confrontation behind it is as menacing as Punch's threat to hit the servant. This connection of language to violent power is very explicit in Pinter's The Dumb Waiter. There is a tension behind the choice of expression which Gus should use when he and Ben wish to boil water for tea.

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[67]Pinter, The Caretaker, pp. 49-50.

Ben: Go and light it.

Gus: Light what?

Ben: The kettle.

Gus: You mean the gas.

Ben: Who does?

Gus: You do.

. . .

Ben: (his eyes narrowing) What do you mean, I mean the gas?

Gus: Well, that's what you mean, the gas.

Ben: (powerfully) If I say go and light the kettle I mean go and light the kettle.

Gus: How can you light the kettle?

Ben: It's a figure of speech! Light the kettle. It's a figure of speech![68]

This dialogue ends with the two staring at each other breathing heavily. Later when Ben inadvertently slips and says (wearily) "Put on the bloody kettle, for Christ's sake"[69] the stage directions have him suddenly stop, half turn and stare at Gus. Ben has shown weakness and lost the duel to Gus. This suggests that despite the final scene in

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[68]Pinter, The Dumb Waiter, p. 47

[69]Pinter, The Dumb Waiter, p.49

which Gus is stripped, Ben also has his weaknesses which can be exploited. He may not be able to eliminate Gus or he may be the next victim. While the violence is written into the stage direction in The Dumb Waiter the later Homecoming and Old Times incorporate it in a much more subtle manner. In The Homecoming the will of Lenny, a brother of Teddy still living in their father's house clashes with the will of Ruth, Teddy's wife. The weapons, as is standard in Pinter, are words on the oral level and an ordinary domestic act on the visual level. In this case it is the activity of drinking from a glass. Lenny offers Ruth a drink, then admits there is no liquor in the house. He offers her water and she takes a sip while he takes control of the conversation by questioning her about her marriage. He then feels in command enough to ask her for her hand to hold, supporting his claim to it by a story demonstrating his sexual prowess with a woman.[70] It is his uncontested statement which renders the story true. Ruth asks at one point: "How did you know she was diseased?" and Lenny replies bluntly: "How did I know? pause. I decided she was."[71] Lenny sustains his dominance until he reveals his father's weakness, an obsession with order and clarity.[72] His desire to move a glass ashtray

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[70]Pinter, The Homecoming, pp. 28-31.

[71]Pinter, The Homecoming, p. 31.

[72]Pinter, The Homecoming, p. 33.

reveals to Ruth that he shares his father's vulnerability. Ruth then hits another sensitive area by calling him Leonard, the name his mother used and she presses the assault with a final tease . . . "If you take the glass . . . . I'll take you".[73] The end of the conflict comes with Ruth's victory as she takes the glass of water and drains it in one swallow. She exits up the stairs with Lenny yelling after her in frustration wanting to know "What was that supposed to be? Some kind of proposal?"[74] Ruth's victory was just as total as any of Punch's purely physical triumphs could be yet both the weapons used and the indicators of the victory in the Pinter scene are merely words.

The dialogue remains calm, and full of niceties but it is accompanied by an almost brutal assault. This kind of juxtaposition, the eighth of the pre-literary techniques listed, constituted the dynamics of the famous vaudeville comedy act of Mr. Duffy and Mr. Sweeny.

> After entering, Mr. Sweeny would begin a pointless story. Mr. Duffy dozed. Waking suddenly, Mr. Duffy, noting that Mr. Sweeny was still talking, would casually slap him on the face and then apologize profusely. So would Mr. Sweeny bow until no one could tell who was apologizing to whom or for what. When the bowing and handshaking subsided, Mr. Sweeny would say 'Pardon me once more', and cuff

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[73]Pinter, The Homecoming, p. 34.

[74]Pinter, The Homecoming, p.35.

> Mr. Duffy on the jaw. After more apologies, bows, and appeasements, they took seats beside each other; whereupon Mr. Duffy would then seek to seat himself in a chair which was not there. Then Mr. Sweeny would help Mr. Duffy to a seat, make him comfortable, and nonchalantly kick him in the face 75

The air of social decorum and politeness masking an underlying violence in this routine is a magnification of the two forces which were present in the Ruth/Lenny escapade. The violence is heightened by its juxtaposition to the air of composure and civility which accompanies it, making it hard to understand and humorous at the same time. If the people can keep their composure, they can communicate; the audience clings in vain to the belief that communication can bring conciliation. This is not so, more often it implies further confrontation.

Communication is conflict on Pinter's stage. The characters may penetrate each other's defenses but, as is inevitable in some of the prolonged contests they often overextend themselves and reveal weaknesses which they wish to conceal. Tension arises because of the discrepancy between what the character has meant by his words and the things which are actually revealed. The silent matchseller in A Slight Ache is used as a mirror for the thoughts of both Flora and Edward. In

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[75]Gilbert, Vaudeville, p. 259.

Flora's speech she tells him of the time when, still a girl, she was brutally raped.[76] That her condemnation of the act turned to indifference is demonstrated by her refusal in later years to seek revenge on the poacher who raped her. She associates the matchseller with the poacher and instead of finding him repugnant as she first did, soon sees him as solid, and desirable. Her revelation of the rape becomes a plea for a similar sexual act when she asks the vendor: "Have you ever...stopped a woman?" and offers to give him a "lovely lathery bath".[77] Edward then comes in and in asking the matchseller to tell him about his childhood ends up confessing his life's story. From perceiving the matchseller's silence as crying in sympathy for him Edward proceeds to break down at the end of his revelation and accuse the seller of laughing at him. What began as nostalgic boasting for Edward ends up as a confessional. His original intention of using the speech as a forum for displaying his strength intensifies his final defeat.

Aston's closing speech in Act II in The Caretaker also displays the juxtaposition of a character's purpose in speaking to what, when

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[76]Pinter, Ache, p. 31.

[77]Pinter, Ache, p. 32.

said, stands completely apart from the original conception. In confirming his ability to go out of the room to the feeble Davies, Aston talks about a café he used to frequent. This leads to the recollections of the hallucinations which at one time would come over him. By the end of the speech he has revealed to Davies that he was forced to undergo electric treatments in a mental hospital. Through the rest of the play Aston is unable to communicate sincerely with Davies because of this disclosure. Davies complains to Mick about Aston's discontinuation of conversation, hoping to gain some sympathy. The results of Aston's self-revelation is his inability to deal with the fact that Davies has heard him talk about his hospital experience although his intentions in beginning the speech were to raise himself in the eyes of the tramp.

What was important in the vaudeville acts which operated on these principles was the large degree of separation between the two activities or subjects, as well as the inexplicable reason for the unique combinations. Pinter's use of juxtaposition is tied to the covering or uncovering of weaknesses in characters, but the way this is made operative is through the variation of the content to what the speaking character and the audience expects from what has already taken place. This unmasking of vulnerability is self-willed and is unlike the previously discussed inadequacies which are revealed in the verbal confrontations and the tragicomic actions of the characters on the stage.

As was previously noted, Pinter's plays tend to use a few standard situations repeatedly. The domestic backdrop is the one used most frequently, although other stock situations such as the garden and office based ones are utilized in some of his plays. Much of the comedy in Pinter's plays depends on phrases and common linguistic terms associated with these stock situations in order to produce humorous perversions and manipulations of the language. If Pinter's comedy is not produced faithfully, unifying much of the material in each production, failure may result. Since a large proportion of it revolves around word plays based on standard situations, the ninth of the pre-literary techniques listed in the first chapter, a comparison between the comic dialogues of scenes in both vaudeville and Pinter serves to explain the dynamics of the comic technique. The vaudeville afterpiece, performed at the end of the night's fare, is representative of the way pre-literary theatrical comedies employed situational word play based on the linguistic misconstruction technique. A piece called "The Three-O-Clock Train" transcribed by Gilbert in his book on vaudeville [78] will be used in a comparison with a

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[78]Gilbert, American Vaudeville, It's Life and Times, p. 42.

few specific scenes representative of Pinter's comedy.

The sketch featured a delapidated set which appeared in dim, sinisterly suggestive light.

Straight Man: If I didn't have this hang out here I don't know what I'd do. I get the place rent free because the landlord thinks it's haunted. (inevitable knock) Come in.

Comic: What time does the three o'clock train go out?

Straight Man: The three o'clock train? Why, it goes out exactly sixty minutes past two o'clock.

Comic: That's funny. The man at the station told me it went out exactly sixty minutes before four o'clock.

Straight Man: Well you won't miss your train, anyway.

Comic: No, well I'm much obliged. (exits)

Straight Man: Curious sort of chap. (picks up banjo, Comic re-enters).

Comic: Excuse me, which is the other side of the street?

Straight Man: Why, the other side of the street is just across the way.

Comic: That's funny. I asked a fellow across the street and he just said it was over here.

Straight Man: Well you can't depend on everything you hear.

...

Comic: (seating himself and scanning the wretched room) Nice place you have here. Nice comfortable place.

Straight Man: Yes, I get the place for a very reasonable rent. Know why I get it so cheaply?

Comic: You don't pay the rent.

Straight Man: No. No. It's because the place is haunted. (comic looks round uneasily)

Comic: When do the, that is, when, er, when are they, these or...?

Straight Man: Oh, they're liable to come in any time.

Comic: (shuddering) Right in here?

Straight Man: Oh, yes, right in here. They just waft in and waft right out again.

Comic: Why, they waft, do they? (looks round uneasily)

Straight Man: What's the matter?

Comic: I thought something was wafting.[79]

The straight man offers to sing the comic a lively song to cheer him up and comes up with a morbid death march. The piece ends with the straight man calmly exiting while the comic is chased off the stage by a ghost. Strikingly, like many of Pinter's early scenarios the piece is apparently about one thing (in this case the three o'clock train) but essentially concerned with another, the possession of the rent-free room. Compare the comments on the room that Davies the tramp makes in The Caretaker when he first looks around Aston's place.

Davies: (looks about) This is your room?

... You got a good bit of stuff here.

Aston: Yes.

Davies: Must be worth a few bob this...put it all together.[80]

The rooms represent security to both Davies and the comic. Davies' fear of the blacks is strangely like the comic's fear of the ghosts. The ending of the train sketch is the eviction of the intruder, the comic, by the ghost the straight man talks about. Similarly, The Caretaker ends with the ejection of Davies as a result of the

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[79]Gilbert, American Vaudeville, pp. 47-48.

[80]Pinter, The Caretaker, p. 11.

manipulations of Aston's violent brother, Mick. These parallels are not surprising for in both the vaudeville sketch and Pinter's early drama, word play is used against a background of a basic stock situation: a room, a door, a character and the inevitable knock or invitation in these cases.

A closer look at the comic dialogue in Pinter's work, separated from the complications that are inherent in the drama, can be obtained by viewing some of his Revue sketches. These comic interplays were written for short variety type performances, and have been adapted at various times to the stage, radio, and animation. These pieces include; Trouble in the Works, The Black and White, The Request Stop, Last to Go, and Applicant. In order to highlight some of the basic construction of Pinter's humour this essay will quote some of the Last to Go routine in order to expand the comparison based on the comic technique used in vaudeville's 'Three-O-clock-Train.'

Man: You was a bit busier earlier.

Barman: Ah.

Man: Round about ten.

Barman: Ten was it?

Man: About then.

Pause

I passed by here around then.

Barman: Oh yes?

Man: I noticed you were doing a bit of trade.

Pause.

Barman: Yes, trade was very brisk about then.

Man: Yes, I noticed.

Pause.

I sold my last one about then. Yes, About nine forty-five.

Barman: Sold your last then, did you?

Man: Yes, my last 'Evening News' it was. Went about twenty to ten.

Pause.

Barman: 'Evening News' was it?

Man: Yes.

Pause.

Sometimes it's the 'Star' is the last to go.

Barman: Ah.

Man: Or the...whatsisname.

Barman: 'Standard.'

Man: Yes.

Pause.

All I had left was the 'Evening News'.

Pause.

Barman: Then that went, did it?

Man: Yes.

Pause.

Like a shot.

Pause.

Barman: You didn't have any left, eh?

Man: No, not after I sold that one.

Pause.

Barman: It was after that you must have come by here, then was it?

Man: Yes, I came by here after that, see, after I packed up.

Barman: You didn't stop here though, did you?

Man: When?

Barman: I mean, you didn't stop here and have a cup of tea, did you?

Man: What about ten?

Barman: Yes.

Man: No, I went up to Victoria.

Pause.

Barman: Yes, trade was very brisk here about ten.[81]

The circles of thought which lead nowhere are evident in both the 'Train' routine and in Pinter's. The vaudeville sketch uses them in rapid succession; first the variations on three o'clock, then the other side of the street paradox followed by the no-rent-is-cheap-rent lines. In Pinter the circles of thought are much fewer but they are spread out in short question and answer lines that accumulate additional information and shift the emphasis away from their original meaning. In this sketch the shift is a move away from the basic fact that the barman was busy about ten o'clock. While the audience is held by the pauses, the return to this fact comes unexpectedly, closing the circle of logic around them. The vaudeville routine deals with each comic 'bit' one at a time and never mixes material, a method successfully used by Pinter. In both sketches there is fixation on the subject of time. In 'Train', three o'clock and in Last to Go ten o'clock is the hour around which the sketch is based. There are as many variations on these times as can fit smoothly in the characters' dialogue. Again, the vaudeville routine's invocation of both sides of the hour is done in one concentrated treatment, while Pinter's variations on the hour appear at carefully

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[81]Pinter, A Slight Ache and Other Plays, pp. 129-131.

timed intervals. In both routines, words or phrases are fixed on and repeated by the characters. This either because they are fascinated with the sound of them as in the 'Train' sketch or because they have nothing else to say except to mindlessly repeat the phrases as is the case in Last to Go. The comic's repetition of the verb 'waft' in describing the action of the ghost is the result of an enchantment with that word. Pinter's characters continually exhibit similar attraction to words in all his plays. In Last to Go, as soon as one character offers an expression it becomes a recurrent theme from that point on in the conversation. The word 'succulent' holds Meg's attention in The Birthday Party in a similar way, partly because she does not fully understand it and also that she perceives in it a sexual connotation.[82] Words which are toyed with in this way in The Dumb Waiter include 'deficient ballcock' and 'spread'. They are used by the inquisitive Gus when describing first the toilet and later the messy murder of a woman. In Old Times Deely stops the dialogue a number of times to comment or puzzle over the appropriateness or attractiveness of a particular word or phrase. Among his favourites were 'lest'[83] and 'gaze',[84] words which he says are not heard very

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[82]Pinter, The Birthday Party, p. 17.

[83]Pinter, Old Times, p. 19.

[84]Pinter, Old Times, p. 26.

often. He also tends to repeat ones he likes, 'float'[85] and 'ripple'[86]. The words are singled out for their sound, or their 'intellectual' aptness which the characters feel can elevate them in the eyes of others. Sometimes, as in Last to Go the words are dwelt upon merely because they are there, hanging in the air and can be used to keep the conversation alive.

Whenever passages are used which normally have import of some kind in a context other than that of the theatre, for instance in the technical or philosophical realm, the phrases are visibly drained of their exterior meaning. This is a major difference between the plays of Samuel Beckett and those of Harold Pinter. Beckett will let a philosophic statement stand, or fall as the case may be on the stage. Pinter continually undercuts such statements for comic effect. In The Homecoming a philosophic argument is presented by Lenny in order to question and test his brother Teddy who has a Doctorate in Philosophy. Lenny asks his brother if it is possible to reverence anything in the universe. After receiving a 'no comment' he proceeds to say:

> Lenny: But you're a philosopher. Come on, be frank. What do you make of all this business of being and non-being?

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[85] Pinter, Old Times, p. 24.

[86] Pinter, Old Times, p. 37

Teddy: What do you make of it?

Lenny: Well, for instance, take a table. Philosophically speaking. What is it?

Teddy: A table.

Lenny: Ah. You mean it's nothing else but a table. Well, some people would envy your certainty, wouldn't they Joey? For instance, I've got a couple of friends of mine, we often sit around the Ritz Bar having a few liqueuers, and they're always saying things like that, you know, things like: Take a table, take it. Alright, I say, take it, take a table but once you've taken it, what are you going to do with it? Once you've got hold of it, where are you going to take it?

Max: You'd probably sell it.

Lenny: You wouldn't get much for it.

Joey: Chop it up for firewood.[87]

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[87]Pinter, The Homecoming, p. 53

The meaning of the argument is steadily siphoned off as the dialogue progresses. First it is the idea of the table that is central to the discussion, then it is an actual table, and then it is the table in the pub. The emphasis on the verb 'take' and its repetition shift attention to the activities which can surround the table. At this point the argument becomes a subjective exercise for the characters, each taking the opportunity to apply their priorities to the disposal of the table. What stands out from all this is, naturally enough, not the philosophy, but rather the humour of this particular exercise in futility. Ruth enters the discussion and brings it around to a demonstration of her particular forte, injecting the question with sexual innuendos by drawing attention to her leg, and underwear.

The humour which is a result of this undercutting of technical jargon can be conveniently viewed in some of Mick's monologues in The Caretaker. In Act II he threatens to eject Davies from the house and calls him by an assortment of derogatory names. Then in one of the reversals in dialogue previously discussed in this paper he offers to sell Davies the place.

> On the other hand, if you prefer to approach it in the long-term way I know an insurance firm in West Ham'll be pleased to handle the deal for you. No strings attached, open and above board, untarnished record; twenty per-cent interest, fifty percent deposit; down payments, back payments, family allowances,

> bonus schemes, remission of term for good behaviour, six months lease, yearly examination of the relevant archives, tea laid on, disposal of shares, benefit extension; compensation on cessation, comprehensive indemnity against Riot, Civil Commotion, Labour Disturbances, Storm, Tempest, Thunderbolt, Larceny or Cattle all subject to a daily check and double check. Of course we need a signed declaration from your personal medical attendant as assurance thay you possess the requisite fitness to carry the can, won't we? Who do you bank with?88

This speech, packed with real estate broker jargon is funny just because of who it is delivered to, the hapless tramp. Apart from this imbalance the technical words get piled on each other so rapidly that their meaning completely collapses. With the additions of contradictions such as the lease to a place that is sold outright, and the multiplication of exotic disasters and technical language of all sorts, the piece takes on a logic which is guided solely by Mick, the speaker. Last to Go is funny because the logic is shared by the two characters while the audience is excluded from an understanding of it. Mick's speech is humorous as the audience is more aware of the faulty logic than is the terrified tramp. The last line of the speech serves admirably as a punch line and is punctuated in the play by Aston's return to the flat and the arrival of an uneasy silence. The progression in the monologue constitutes a deliberate build-up from common street language to technical terminology. There is an over

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88 Pinter, The Caretaker, p.36.

usage of this language causing it to break down into a wild parody of itself. This is followed by a pointed return to street expressions ("carry the can") and then by an unexpected question which goes back to the business terms and completely eliminates the possibility of a reply on any level. The speech's circle of dialogue is as compressed as those in the train sketch, although they include the added elaboration that subject matter brings.

Pinter's comedy is necessarily more complicated as it is integrated with dramatic tensions and must operate on many levels at once. The pre-literary situational word play technique is clearly evident behind the comic aspect of the dialogue. The ways in which this basic comedy is made to integrate with the subtleties inherent in drama are examined in the course of Chapter IV.

CHAPTER IV

Both the pre-literary stage productions and Harold Pinter's plays are primarily concerned with the general shape or structure of each performance. The purpose of the tenth theatrical technique included in this discussion, compression, is to guide all aspects of stage devices and material. The result must be scenes completely empty of excess language or gesture.

The motivations, or concerns behind the acts or plays are always secondary to the final form which occupies the stage. A story about Kazana, an Egyptian snake charmer playing vaudeville demonstrates the dynamics behind the process of preparing for a performance. Kazana "was booked to play the Tivoli theatre in Toledo. When one of her snakes died of extreme cold, she placed the basket with the three snakes that were still alive next to a radiator, They smothered due to extreme heat. Kazana kept the engagement, however, doing a Hula dance."[89] The acts were flexible until they were performed and proven successful. Pinter has stated that the best sort of collaborative working relationship behind a production is one in which "facts are lost, collided with, fumbled, found again."[90]

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[89]Di Meglio, Vaudeville, p. 30.

[90]Pinter, "Speech," Theatre Quarterly, p. 3.

The assumption in both kinds of productions is that everything is flexible when worked with in preparation for an audience.

Once the variety acts were proven though, they were never changed, only compressed and refined to reach a state where each rendition differed from the last in almost imperceptible ways. Sight gags or comic deliveries required exact timing which had to be duplicated every time the act was performed with a control that was not visible to the audience. Vaudeville patrons "were not attracted by curiosity. Audiences came to see acts they knew. Audiences tolerated no deviations. The famous team of Smith and Dale, for example, worked for well over a half century but always did their "Dr. Knorkheit" sketch."[91] The intricate repetition of the acts, familiar to both performer and onlooker made the best of the routines become ritualized.

Pinter's plays, notably the early ones, but generally true in all of them, are variations on a few themes centered about one situation. Two people, a door and an intruder in a play like The Room becomes two people and an expectation of another in The Dumb Waiter; and in The Birthday Party two intruders looking for a concealed third person. The plots, if they can be called such, act as explorations of variations on the people in a room situation. The plays through repetition of a few themes around the situation can also be considered rituals.

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[91]Di Meglio, Vaudville, p. 78.

> Seen from the wings by a detached observer, the performance itself must have seemed rigidly mechanical for, as with role players in most highly developed rituals, the vaudeville performers were intent upon the technique and regarded themselves in their minutes before the curtain, as skilled craftsmen. Those phenomena upon the stage which acquired symbolic meaning in the imagination of the audience were, as viewed from the wings, the products of a repetitive process based upon rather crude and stereotyped notions of human behavior.[92]

This description of the vaudeville act serves equally as a description of a performance of one of Pinter's plays. The competition for space and power, the fragility of identity, the attraction to and repulsion from maternal and sexual personalities are themes which recur in Pinter's plays. Besides the continual use of these themes, repetition of the enclosed people in a room situation as has been previously noted, is common to many of Pinter's plays. These themes and situations while not exactly crude in themselves are often purposely made to appear so through the characterizations contained in the plays. The parallel between Pinter's and vaudeville's ritualized performances can be extended to include the skill in acting required in both plays. As Pinter's stage actions are often confined to the verbal level, conflict, must be suggested and reflected in subtle mannerisms and movements. The sense that there is always something about to happen on a Pinter stage is important because actual physical events are used sparingly throughout the plays, and are

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[92]Mr. Lean, American Vaudeville as Ritual, p. 91.

effective only when surrounded by prolonged anxiety and anticipation.

The action, when it arrives, is composed of single strokes, meant to strike quickly and then to echo on into the performance. Similar to actions in ritual the singular acts of import are carefully prepared for and when completed made to integrate with the remainder of the ceremony rather than vanish completely. The breaking of the Buddha in The Caretaker, the sudden collapse of Sam in The Homecoming, the mysterious unexpected initial movement of the dumbwaiter in the play of that name are but three instances of this variety of sudden one-stroke action designed to suggest rather than introduce further actions in the plays.

The actors must be aware of the many minor manipulations the plays call for in order to invest each of the sudden actions with multiple meanings and to keep them present in the minds of the audience after they have taken place. Minor gestures such as the opening of lights, the exchange of carefully timed glances, the lighting of cigars, in The Homecoming must be made to carry all manner of inferences. A character's mood, his insecurities and strengths and even his position in the household can all be conveyed by the appropriate gesture. Pinter is acutely aware of the demands his plays make on actors. When praising one particular actor in a production he noted the following:

> Each night [he] would do something with his cigar, pass it from this hand to that and put it down at precisely the same word and in the same way. His head would remain down and then he would look up. There was a kind of precision there that impressed me.[93]

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[93]Pinter, "In an Empty Bandstand," The Listener, VI, (1969), 630.

The timing he calls for is exact, its purpose is to compress both meanings and suggestions into gestures at particular points in the plays. The handling of a cigar can be the equivalent to an anxious silence between two people. It has the capability to serve both as a visual marker and as aural punctuation for the development on the stage. When properly adhered to this technique of compression, demanding a high degree of precision and economic gesture within the plays, gives each an individual symmetrical structure.

Each play is unique despite the similarities in situation, patterns of actions, and theme. Pinter's characters do not display a wide variety of personalities either. They can almost be completely accounted for in short outline of general personalities and tendencies. The pair of cross-talk comedian roughians can be seen in The Birthday Party as McCann and Goldberg; in The Dumb Waiter as Gus and Ben and in No Man's Land as the "working class aggressor menials, Foster and Briggs."[94] The victim who is a fading professional explains the basic character of Stanley the ex-concert pianist in The Birthday Party, the out of touch intellectuals Edward and Teddy in A Slight Ache and The Homecoming respectively, as well as Deely the ex-almost everything in Old Times. The elderly "public school literate;"[95] Spooner and Hirst in No Man's Land are characters of the same ilk. The other notable category of Pinter's male personalities is that of the seedy adolescent. This type

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[94]Elson, "Harold Pinter's Mud-patch," The Listener, XCIV, No. 2404 (May, 1975), p. 585.

[95]Elson, The Listener, p. 585.

is usually associated with brutality, aggression, and a clandestine street gang sexuality. Characters that fit this description include Mick in The Caretaker, Lenny in The Homecoming, Bill in The Collection, and Willy in The Tea Party. Each of them push, boss, or sneak their way into more desirable positions in their environments by ousting rivals in as direct and unprincipled manners as they are capable of conceiving.

Pinter's cast of women is even more restricted. Every woman of importance in his plays is defined either by her maternal or her sexual aspects. Often these aspects combine in characters rendering them, for the purposes of the plays, both mothers and whores. This combination of maternal and sexual is evident in the characters of Ruth and the departed Jessie in The Homecoming; Meg in The Birthday Party, Stella in The Collection, Jane in The Basement, and Sally in Night School, all are women who are depicted in the plays primarily through either sexual or maternal characteristics. The split between these two aspects is the subject of The Lover, a play in which the woman, Sarah, functions as a whore for her husband in the afternoons, and as a doting maternal type wife for him in the evenings. The degree of maternal or sexual qualities in each woman varies. Meg is almost completely maternal, her sexuality is limited to infrequent fantasy. The other extremity is demonstrated by the predominatly sexual Ruth in The Homecoming.

The strength in these women is often in their apparent weakness. Their passivity attracts the more dominant characters whose sense of identity grows dependent on the women's agreement to play the subservient role for them. Ruth wins all of her confrontations by playing possum in this

manner as does Kate in Old Times, a play centered on the need for one character to fabricate passivity in order to give another an assumed sense of definition by domination.

The limited types of characterizations along with the repeated use of situation and theme render Pinter's plays as carefully structured as the ritualized vaudeville act. The New York Times review of Pinter's 'new' play No Man's Land, criticized Pinter for using the enclosed room, conflict for position situation in yet another production. This return to the same fundamental situation and theme is reminiscent of the Punch shows' basic repitition of action and plot. Though Pinter's plays invite make-believe and symbolic interpretation,they operate, like Punch or variety shows, on hard and fast techniques and principles which cannot be ignored. If the plays were altered to fit any one interpretation more readily, if undue emphasis was placed on the possible directions of a suggestive line rather than the line itself, the play would lose its carefully structured shape.

> From the point of view of actual practical working on my plays, I don't think that they bear a great amount of shifting and changing and different interpretations. This simply won't work. I think what has to be done is just to play the damn lines and stop. start, move and do it all very clearly and economically.[96]

Pinter's plays more than those of any of his contemporaries must be regarded in the same manner as pre-literary theatricals. His theatre

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[96]Pinter, "Harold Pinter Talks to M. Dean", The Listener, LXXXIVI No. 2084, (1969), p. 312.

should not be seen in terms of any cumulative progression or investigation of ever increasing areas or themes. Rather his plays function as exploration and refinement of one basic situation. In the place of gathering material laterally in a broad generalized shape Pinter has chosen to utilize basic pre-literary theatrical techniques in a compressed inward focus which excludes additional information in an attempt to distill the primary elements of being from the trappings of a single situation.

This narrow focus results in a clarification of the components involved in a restricted situation to an extent which few other playwrights have been able to achieve on the stage. Pinter's approach to this distillation of being from situation radically differs from those taken by other modern playwrights. The primarily verbal, psychological dramas of Arthur Miller or Edward Albee, for example, while expanding the scope of dialogue by contrasting inner and outer realities, also tend to overly complicate the confrontations they depict. The battles rage on, words beget words, and the plays often slow down almost to the point of stopping. The psychological implications become well defined and diverse but it is often at the expense of movement and interest. The plays can be dependent on an audience's patience, or the ability of a few well defined characters to carry the play through long scenes of verbal confrontations.

Pinter, while incorporating the psychological dimension, cuts through the excess of language so often associated with it. The pre-literary techniques he employs puncture the confrontations, and re-

lieve the pressure and the monotony of the verbal conflicts. New perspectives are brought to old problems by reversing or altering expected occurrences in the plays. The techniques renew the dramatic action, and the final effect of the plays is heightened as a result of the comedy and unexpected action which they generate.

Though Samuel Beckett's plays also delineate restricted situations while keeping dialogue refined and concise, there are notable differences between his plays and those of Pinter. Beckett's plays are inextricably tied to philosophy. Contained in his plays are parodies of naive realism, existentialism, as well as attacks on the laws of Newtonian physics. The plays are often compelling because of the concepts and ideas in action behind the characters. In exploring the negativity and exhaustion inherent in an entropedic worldview Beckett has given a finality to his plays (notably Endgame and Waiting for Godot) which tends to cut off, rather than promote further dramatic exploration. Although the intensity of Beckett's finality has influenced almost all dramatists after him, the fact remains that he has written himself into a corner. The logical extension of the premises he posits is the principle of non-extension or that of extinction.

Pinter, while not nearly as influential, has prolonged an intensified focus on restricted situations without arriving at the limiting finality of Beckett's plays. Beckett's drama winds down to inevitable conclusions; while Pinter's, through the open-ended quality that the pre-literary aspects of his plays encourage, defy specific confirmations and invite multiple speculation.

Although the possibilities of open-ended characterizations and situations have been explored by other modern dramatists, notably Luigi Pirandello, Pinter has refined the practice immeasurably. In a play like Pirandello's It is So (If you Say So), there are two or three conflicting ways of identifying the one character in question, the mysterious mother. Even though any one will do, the roles are clearly defined. The plot is constructed in order to support the possibility of multiple roles and is very crudely contrived to eliminate concrete ways of confirming or denying any one identity. The reported burning of a building which contained the woman's identification papers is one such ploy in It is So.

Pinter has escaped the problem of contrivance by simply omitting all the naturalistic conventions which are used as outlets for confirmation and information of material presented onstage. While the plays do not take place in the mist-filled outlands that are suggested by some of Genet's or Beckett's plays, the enclosed rooms of Pinter efficiently exclude explanation and documentation. More prevalent in the rooms are stacks of old newspapers piled high in leaning bundles as in The Caretaker, or scattered news clippings as in The Homecoming. Somewhere in the papers reality and truth may exist, but then again they may not.

Pinter has also eliminated the verbosity of Pirandello's plays, many of which, like It is So (If You Say So), were adapted from short stories he had written. In Pinter's plays the openness of identity is not restricted to one or two players at a time, nor are

any of the characters able to act together in order to seek out definition. Their roles are all flexible to a degree, and all subject to the unexpected contortions which arise from the use of the pre-literary devices. Though Pirandello is definitely a forerunner in the use of the undefined, the contrivance behind his manipulations, and his prose-like style tend to lessen the dramatic effectiveness of his plays. They depend too exclusively on the novelty of the inexplicable and, as with all novelties, the effects wear away with time. Due to the extensions and expansions that other playwrights have introduced to the manipulations of Pirandello his plays now seem to be antiquated.

Pinter's material is not wholly original. His open characterizations can be viewed as extensions of Pirandello's work, and his refinement of situation as modifications of Beckett's. What, then, is responsible for his critical success, and what inadequacies are contained within his drama? The answer to these queries is directly related to the areas dealt with in this paper. Pinter considers himself a craftsman and the techniques he uses are listed and demonstrated in the third chapter of this thesis. They reveal that Pinter's plays are constructed with the painstaking attention to detail that marked the best of the vaudeville acts. His plays create excitement, produce memorable comedy, and invite the audience to participate in subtle, yet exciting ways. The pre-literary techniques he employs are chosen to balance the exploration of the elements behind restricted situation with comedy, unexpected movement, and direction of the audience's attention.

Through the use of these techniques Pinter is able to incorporate speculation and parody of many disciplines into a directed examination of the complexities of the (domestic) situation.

Pinter's crude themes such as conflict for possession; maternal/sexual aggression and role confusion, fascinate because, like the well crafted vaudeville act, they acquire a compelling ritualistic dimension. The main difference between the notions of human behavior and morality behind the themes used in vaudeville and those found in Pinter's plays is that there is something sinistrally amoral and anarchistic lurking behind Pinter's lines. While the patterns of behavior that were accepted and employed in vaudeville acts dated, so did the effectiveness of much of the material. Pinter's chaotic thematic suggestiveness combines with his continual movement toward the illumination of the components of the restricted situation and gathers momentum from play to play. The drawbacks in this cumulative probing of the elements behind situation are disturbing. The plays tend to be serials, each one follows the last subtracting yet another variable or constant from the on-going situation. This results in the plays appealing more to those familiar with the Pinter canon than to the majority of others. If Pinter's restriction of situation eventually results in a restriction in the variety of the audience he attracts then he, like Beckett, will write himself into an inescapable corner. Another shortcoming associated with Pinter's approach is the possibility that the perplexing amoral or anarchistic themes continually present in his plays will lead both critics and

audiences into psychological speculations which will focus on Pinter rather than his plays. When this variety of criticism becomes prevalent it brings with it a corresponding loss of interest in the plays themselves, and marks the beginning of the decline of the playwright.

Mr. Pinter has avoided this limiting categorization to date largely because the focus of his plays gets increasingly sharper, incorporating psychological, philosophical, and sociological variables to the delight of the initiated. His stage at the same time gives out crashes and puzzles which turn the heads of new onlookers, the same crashes and puzzles which turned the heads of onlookers toward the stages of Mr. Punch.

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