An Analysis of Dominance and Subservience as Technique and Theme in the Plays of Harold Pinter

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AN ANALYSIS OF DOMINANCE AND SUBSERVIENCE AS TECHNIQUE AND THEME IN THE PLAYS OF HAROLD PINTER

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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PREFACE

The main purpose of this dissertation is to analyze the operation and development of dominance and subservience as a technique and a theme in the plays of Harold Pinter. Since dominance and subservience, as a main concern, is bound up with other important techniques and themes, such as mystery, sight and blindness, friendship and love, time, space and identity, these other concerns are also discussed.

The first chapter describes the general characteristics and the operation of all of Pinter's major themes and techniques, while the second chapter continues and extends the discussion more concretely by examining the operation of dominance and subservience, as well as Pinter's other concerns, as they appear in their most radical form, in The Dumb Waiter. Understanding dominance and subservience in its simplest and most explicit form through a close reading of this early play not only facilitates the analysis of it in other works where it operates in more complex and subtle ways, but also leads to an appreciation of all of Pinter's important themes and techniques.

The third chapter then continues the discussion by examining The Birthday Party and The Room, while the remaining chapters are devoted to a chronologically arranged analysis of Pinter's other plays through Landscape, Silence, and Night.
While most other analyses of Pinter's work concentrate either on the language or on the room-tomb-womb motif, no other study offers any detailed examination of the dominant-subservient relations between characters. Nor does any study make use of Pinter's own insights into the use of dominance and subservience in his plays. When asked about violence in his work he replied:

Violence is only an expression of dominance and subservience which is possibly a repeated theme in my plays.¹

Not only violence but also much other behavior of the characters in Pinter's plays is an expression of the struggle to gain dominance or to resist subservience.

Two studies deal superficially with the subject of dominance and subservience in Pinter's early work. Ruby Cohn² classifies Pinter's characters as villains and victims; and some of the characteristics she mentions of these two types are in some ways roughly equivalent to the characteristics of the dominant and subservient characters in Pinter's early works. What Miss Cohn fails to appreciate, however, is that in the later works, and even to some extent in the early works, the characters do not exhibit clear-cut differences in the sense that the "villains" are drawn to evoke only negative responses while the "victims" only sympathetic responses. Pinter's characters are neither quite so simply nor so didactically drawn, but are in fact much more complex.


Bernard Dukore offers a very similar analysis where he identifies a questioner who is roughly equivalent with Miss Cohn's victim. Questioning is, however, only one of many qualities frequently associated with the subservient character in Pinter's works.

No other discussions of Pinter's works touch even this closely to the subject of dominance and subservience in Pinter's plays. Moreover, no one has sought to integrate this one aspect of the character's relations with each other into the larger scope of Pinter's other main concerns; nor has anyone sought to integrate Pinter's own excellent insights into his work with an analysis of the plays themselves.

Since some of the best insights into Pinter's work are made by Pinter himself (something generally unappreciated since few critics are aware of the many articulate and incisive statements Pinter has made about his work in his various interviews and essays), this work relies heavily on Pinter's own commentary drawn from the sources in the select bibliography at the end, which lists his essays and interviews as well as important secondary sources which have been useful for this study.

I am deeply grateful to the members of my committee, to Professor Stanley Clayes for his many generous hours spent offering me numerous invaluable suggestions and insights, to Professor Paul Hummert for proposing the bibliography without which this work could not have been written, and to Professor Thomas Gorman for his encouraging attitude toward original criticism. And to Jimmy for putting up with me.

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I am also indebted to the many kindnesses of Sister Rita of Loyola's library, to the invaluable clipping service of the librarians at the New York Public Library of the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, and to the librarians at the University of Chicago and Northwestern University. I am especially grateful to my family and to my friends Pat Cohan and Sylvia Bellipanni who share my interest in Pinter's work.
CHAPTER 1

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF MAJOR TECHNIQUES
AND THEMES IN HAROLD PINTER'S WORK

Fundamental in the relationships between characters in almost all the works of Harold Pinter is the recurrent assertion of dominance over subservience. As a technique the struggle for the position of dominance creates much of the dramatic tension—who will gain dominance, Goldberg or Stanley (The Birthday Party)? As a theme it portrays an attitude that a man apparently better preserves his identity (derived primarily from his relative position with his fellows) if, like Goldberg, he is able to achieve dominance, or if, like McCann, he is willing to consent to subservience. If, on the other hand, like Stanley, he is both unable to achieve dominance and unwilling to be subservient, he may be forced into a subservience that entails the loss of some or most of his former self. This description of what apparently happens in The Birthday Party and elsewhere differs, however, from the deeper reality which is that neither the dominant nor the subservient character has much on which to base an identity when it solely or even primarily grows out of a dominant-subservient relationship.

As both technique and theme dominance and subservience is explicitly expressed in all of Pinter's early works, sometimes more subtly later on, then abruptly almost vanishes in Landscape and Silence, to return again
more noticeably in Night. Throughout his work, however, dominance and subservience are intimately bound up with other important techniques and themes such as mystery, sight and blindness, friendship and love, time, space, as well as with Pinter's portrayal of identity. Understanding the operation and development of dominance and subservience will thus lead to an understanding of Pinter's other important techniques and themes as well.

As a technique in Pinter's work the expression of dominance and subservience creates the dramatic tension which results when one character attempts to gain or to maintain a position of dominance over another. Dominance is generally like power in Pinter's work; it is either achieved when one character gets another to do what he wants him to do, or, when a character simply undermines the other's position. Pinter's insights into an early work illustrate an explicit use of the technique that combines both means of achieving dominance:

I wrote a short story a long time ago called, "The Examination," and my ideas of violence carried on from there. That short story dealt very explicitly with two people in one room having a battle of an unspecified nature, in which the question was one of who was dominant at what point and how they were going to be dominant and what tools they would use to achieve dominance and how they would try to undermine the other person's position. A threat is constantly there: it's got to do with the question of being in the uppermost position, or attempting to be.  

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The various tools characters use to achieve dominance include the apparently innocuous but common method of winning an argument, as in The Dumb Waiter when Ben attempts to get Gus to agree with him that the correct expression is "light the kettle," not "light the gas." Later, however, when Ben's position of dominance becomes uncertain he grabs hold of Gus's throat. In this and similar instances, in order to maintain dominance, a character whose position is threatened often employs such seemingly perverse and extreme methods as the threatened destruction of the other character, which is what occurs at the end of The Dumb Waiter when Ben, who may presumably have orders to shoot, holds a gun on Gus. Violence, both verbal and physical, is consistently portrayed in Pinter's work as an extreme attempt to maintain a position of dominance that is being frustrated or threatened. Pinter himself says:

Violence is really only an expression of the question of dominance and subservience, which is possibly a repeated theme in my plays.  

It is indeed a repeated theme in his work; violence occurs in The Birthday Party when Stanley, who is the dominant member of the household, kicks Goldberg who threatens to usurp his position. It occurs in The

1 Harold Pinter, The Caretaker and The Dumb Waiter (New York: Grove Press, 1965), pp. 97-99, 112; this and all subsequent references to Pinter's plays are to the American editions and the page references to this work in the future will occur in the text.

2 Pinter, Paris Review interview, p. 362.

3 Harold Pinter, The Birthday Party (New York: Grove Press, 1968), p. 52; all subsequent references to this work will be to this edition and will appear in the text.
Dumb Waiter when Ben strikes Gus because he asked questions which Ben could not answer and which therefore threaten to destroy Ben's position of authority (p. 118). Violence occurs in The Homecoming when Max, titular head of the household, strikes Joey who implies that Max made a fool of himself in his error about Ruth.¹ And elsewhere in Pinter's work violence erupts for very similar reasons; it might be noted here, however, that Pinter does not apply the term "violence" to verbal and physical means used to maintain dominance:

I wouldn't call this violence so much as a battle for position, it's a common everyday thing.²

More disturbing than the seeming violence are the motives or apparent lack of motives which impel a character to seek a position of dominance and to devote all of his energy to the ensuing battle. The motives are real enough if we view the struggle for dominance as a technique where the battle is a game that requires little more motivation to play than the desire to win, in this case, the dominant position. When, on the thematic level the position of dominance becomes, or almost becomes, synonymous with one's identity it is also clear enough why a character should seek a position of dominance if failing to do so would result in a loss of identity. As soon as we examine the nature of the position of dominance, however, we realize how frail a thing it is to serve as

¹Harold Pinter, The Homecoming (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 42; all subsequent references to this work will be to this edition and will appear in the text.

²Pinter, Paris Review interview, p. 363.
one's identity, or even upon which to base it. When Goldberg remarks "Well I've got a position, I won't deny it," and McCann echoes "You certainly have," (p. 29), we are at once struck by the hollowness of the remarks and by the actual worthlessness of the position, because, in part, the precise nature of the position is kept a mystery. While only in *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter* do characters so explicitly equate identity with a position, this equation is implied wholly or in party by almost all of Pinter's characters who struggle for dominance.

When the equation of identity and dominance is not explicit, only implied, intrinsic motivation for a character's actions may appear to be lacking. When added to this subtlety Pinter introduces an element of mystery to the outside motivation--Has someone sent Goldberg and McCann? If so, who? More important, why? Has Ben been ordered to shoot or is he acting on his own impulses? In either case why?--the extrinsic motivation, too, seems obscure or even lacking. Such subtleties and mystery, however, function to emphasize the absurdity of equating not just dominance with identity but identity with a position that has no ultimate worth. By keeping the nature of the battle in "The Examination" "unspecific," Pinter throws into relief the battle itself, and in turn the ultimate worthlessness of the position each character is seeking.

Still, if we understand the struggle as a technique and theme, motivation does not seem lacking--a character struggles to win the position of dominance to preserve his identity. What is lacking is any real identity, for an identity based on or equated with a position of dominance is at best relative to the subservient character. Agusta
Walker in "Messages from Pinter," assigns the lack of real identity as the cause for the struggle between characters:

The inadequacy of the inner being, the lack of self assurance, the corroding fear that a real identity does not quite exist behind the front, makes these people grasp at each other for straws.

Not only is the inner being inadequate, but also, when examined, the outward reasons for a character's actions are at best slender and at worst, possibly nonexistent. What is also often lacking then is any extrinsic motivation even in the Pinter hierarchy where almost everyone is dominated by someone or something—even Goldberg by his organization and, admittedly, by society. Not only is any immediate extrinsic motivation ambiguous or mysterious or missing (Who, if anyone, sends Goldberg?) but also mysterious or missing is any ultimate extrinsic motivation for Goldberg's behavior (If we assume some organization behind his actions, what actuates the organization?). Yet Goldberg's behavior and Stanley's reaction to it can only be taken seriously or be seen as disturbing by an audience to whom role or position is taken seriously as the equivalent of who one is. And even the least comprehending member of the audience is left with the uneasy suspicion that what happens to Stanley happens for no good reason at all.

The portrayal of identity and truth as relative permeates all of Pinter's work through his use of other techniques and themes which also

create richer, and more complex characters and dramatic action than an analysis confined to dominance and subservience, or any other single aspect of his work, reveals. Too close an analysis of any single aspect of Pinter's work which ignores the others, the whole, and makes no attempt at synthesis will probably end in the kind of easy symbolic interpretation of his work that Pinter cautions against as "a pretty efficient smoke screen, on the part of the critics or the audience, against recognition, against active and willing participation." While Pinter is not saying that we cannot look for consistencies in his work (recall his consistent portrayal of violence) he is cautioning against generalizations that mistake the part for the whole. In his most often quoted comment about his work Pinter himself offers a generalization about the relativity of truth as it is portrayed in his work:

We don't carry labels on our chests, and even though they are continually fixed to us by others, they convince nobody. The desire for verification on the part of all of us, with regard to our own experience and the experience of others, is understandable but cannot always be satisfied. I suggest there can be no hard distinction between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false. A character on stage who can

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1Harold Pinter, "Writing for the Theatre," Evergreen Review, VIII (August-September, 1964), 80.
present no convincing argument or information as to his past experience, his present behavior or his aspirations, nor give a comprehensive analysis of his motives is as legitimate, as worthy of attention as one who, alarmingly, can do all these things. The more acute the experience the less articulate its expression.

The device most frequently used to convey the uncertainty resulting from the relative truth of experience is mystery. As a technique, mystery creates or enhances suspense through either temporary or total withholding of information. Only after The Dumb Waiter is well underway do we learn that Gus and Ben are hired gunmen (information temporarily withheld), but we never learn by whom or for what reasons they were hired.

Technically, mystery is sometimes further heightened by nonrealistic devices, by the unexpected appearance of a dumb waiter or by the strange presence of a matchseller at the back gate. Effectively, the devices operate generally on the edges of reality, not beyond it. Unlike Eugene O'Neill's unrealistic theatrical devices such as masks in The Great God Brown (Who in real life could don a mask to trick his wife into believing he is someone else?), Pinter's nonrealistic devices, such as Richard's pretending to be Sarah's lover Max (The Lover), are within the realm of

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1 Ibid., p. 80.

2 For further discussion see Charles Marowitz, "Interism is Maximum Tension through Minimum Information," New York Times Magazine (October 1, 1967), p. 36.
possibility (It is possible for a husband and wife to agree to such pre-
tense).

Thematically, mystery conveys an attitude that there is much in the
world Pinter portrays that cannot be known, such as ultimate or absolute
reasons for things happening, as already noted of The Birthday Party.
Mystery functions thematically not only to point up the futility of
seeking answers to questions that cannot be answered, but also to point
up the absurdity of acting on reasons that may not exist. What happens
to Stanley or to Disson in Tea Party, may happen not only for no good
reason, but also perhaps for no ultimate reason at all.

Consciously or unconsciously Pinter creates the world of the con-
temporary scientist who less often speaks of cause and effect than of
a high correlation between two separate events. According to Pinter,
y any statement he makes about his work, or by extension, the characters
make about their experience, is limited:

So, I'm speaking with some reluctance, knowing that there
are at least twenty-four possible aspects of any single
statement, depending on where you're standing at the time
or on what the weather's like. A categorical statement,
I find, will never stay where it is and be finite. It
will immediately be subject to modification by the other
twenty-three possibilities of it. ¹

In contrast to the world Pinter creates for them, his characters
generally still operate on the belief in a cause for an effect. Even

¹ Pinter, Evergreen Review, p. 80.
though the cause for an action is unknown (Who in The Dumb Waifer sends the matches under the door? And more important, why?) does not necessarily mean that there is no cause; there may be several, as Gus and Ben note. But though a single and correct cause can never be determined with certainty, the characters settle on one that appears to them most probable and allow it to function in their lives as if it were known, absolute fact. Pinter, through such elaborately comic scenes as the one where Gus and Ben discuss the cause for the appearance of the matches, or later, the appearance of the dumb waiter, is poking fun at those who find more comfort in settling on a cause, any cause, than in admitting it may be unknown. The belief in cause and effect relations to which most of Pinter's characters subscribe is consistent with a belief in an ordered universe where who one is can be known by knowing or discovering one's place in the world and adhering to it.

Since, however, in the world Pinter portrays there is no Prime Mover, any hierarchy is artificial, man made. While Ben may be taking orders from some organization, what cause or causes can be assigned to account for the existence of the organization or its actions? The absence of any First Cause would seem to call for a new, different, or at least a more flexible way of reacting to the events, sometimes strange and unusual, that occur in the plays; yet the characters generally continue to approach new problems with familiar, worn out, stock responses. Edward in A Slight Ache seems to believe that he can understand and solve the problem of the matchseller's presence by chatting with the fellow—Flora seems to know better. But how can Pinter's characters
be expected to fathom, even to recognize, the mystery around them when most of them are so myopic that they rarely conceive of themselves or others as existing beyond the walls that contain them? Yet the mystery on the thematic level that portrays an uneasy and sometimes frightening view of the world is apparent to the audience with their larger vision and frequently to one central character in each work who sees things about his world and the reality of it that the other characters do not.

Most of Pinter's characters, however, are completely blind to the essential absurdity of the struggle in which they are engaged. As a technique and theme, sight and blindness is perhaps another aspect of dominance and subservience because they are characteristic, respectively, of the subservient and dominant characters.

As a technique, sight and blindness is characterized by how much or how little a character sees; as a theme, by the insights a character has or fails to have about the world around him. In The Dumb Waiter, Gus sees many things Ben never notices until Gus points them out; Gus notices the envelope under the door, the number of burners on the stove and even the speaking tube on the wall. His observations about the stove lead him to the subsequent insight that he and Ben are not in the kitchen of a restaurant. This insight then enables him to see the threat in the absurdity of their situation in a way that Ben is blind and unable or unwilling to see it. What the subservient character sees about reality is, however, rarely fortuitous for him, for it is the dominant character, with his illusions about the world, who seeks
to impose his reality upon him and is frequently successful in doing so.

Occasionally blindness operates as the optical loss of vision; Rose in *The Room*, Disson in *Tea Party*, Edward in *A Slight Ache*, and Stanley in *The Birthday Party*, all become blind in the end. Ironically, it is frequently the character who sees the most and has the best insights who in the end becomes physically blind.

Like sight and blindness, friendship and love are intimately bound up with dominance and subservience; what appears to be friendship or love is generally characterized by a failure to make any commitment or to achieve any lasting bond; it is commonly associated with close relationships; and the failure is often primarily due to the problems which grow out of one character's attempts to gain or to maintain dominance over the other. Implicit in the earlier discussion of dominance and subservience is the idea that in Pinter's work there can be no friendship or love in a traditional or Aristotelian sense of a relationship between equals either in beauty, strength or wisdom. Pinter's characters are either dominant or subservient to one another, rarely, if ever, equals.

Driven more by desires to assert dominance than by the selfless desires needed for friendship or love, Pinter's characters generally lack even such selfish desires as a need to be loved, or a desire for companionship that might promote a lasting, or even close relationship. Only in relationships such as Goldberg and McCann's, where the subservient
character agrees to submit to the dominance of the other can the relationship continue to exist.

As a technique, friendship or love between characters (frequently the vehicle for all else as a central concern of a work) produces the tension between the faint hope that relationships will succeed and the knowledge that they cannot. Thematically, Pinter's portrayal of love and friendship simply leaves us with a question: is it possible for man, a social being who derives knowledge of who he is from his relations with others, to succeed in establishing relationships that are not in the end mutually destructive? Generally the answer would seem to be No, if man behaves as Pinter's characters and if he is motivated by the same impulses. Gus and Ben in The Dumb Waiter, Harry and Bill in The Collection, Diana and Disson in Tea Party, Davis and Aston, and later Mick and Davis in The Caretaker, Sarah and Richard (Max) in The Lover, are all instances of relationships, like most in Pinter's work, which are marked for failure because of the struggle for dominance.

Pinter's characters, of course, like any artistic creation, are abstractions from and not representative of the whole of life; yet through his dramatizations of the relations between characters Pinter seems to lay bare an aspect of our contemporary life that is so convincingly familiar as to seem true and momentarily representative of the whole.

If it is a frail or a false identity that Pinter's characters gain from their relations with one another, time and space provide even fewer clues to the question of who one is. Space and time, elusive and distorting qualities in Pinter's work, function as an aspect of the mystery
by posing questions never satisfied with answers. Rarely, as in The Collection, is it possible to discover the truth of a past event because the shape of it shifts with each retelling or remembering of it. Pinter is quite firm in his views on the subject:

Apart from any other considerations, we are faced with the immediate difficulty, if not the impossibility, of verifying the past. I don't mean merely years ago, but yesterday morning. What took place, what was the nature of what took place, what happened? If one can speak of the difficulty of knowing what in fact took place yesterday, one can I think treat the present in the same way. What's happening now? We won't know until tomorrow or in six months' time, and we won't know then, we'll have forgotten, or our imagination will have attributed quite false characteristics to today.  

As a technique, things that exist in space or occur in time, such as objects in a room, or events in the past, sometimes occupy characters almost as much as their interactions with others. Gus, at length describes the objects around him; Rose and Mr. Kidd in The Room discuss a chair that might be hers or his; Teddy, in The Homecoming, is pleased to report that his room is still there. Such preoccupations are not idle stage business but one way characters reveal themselves to the audience, and, if a character is particularly observant or insightful, his observations may reveal something to him as well. Gus, observing the objects around him

1Ibid., p. 81.
as if they provided an affirmation of his own existence, gains the disquieting insight that his situation is changing for the worse. Rose, through her observations about the chair, is coming to the uneasy realization that nothing may be as it seems, and worse, there may be no way to affirm anything by observation. Teddy, on the other hand, who seems particularly lacking in insight, can be pleased by what he discovers about his room because it allows him to believe that things are still as they were before. Ironically, things become as they were for Teddy when he formerly lived at home--at the end he is once again, as before, on his own.

The preoccupation with the past is so important in Landscape and Silence that it operates to the exclusion of almost any dramatic interaction between characters. Beth and Ellen both recall themselves as young women by recalling former lovers; both women assert that they are not really old, or different. Yet in these works the preoccupation with the past seems to be more than a quest for, or the assertion of identity since this concern seems almost the whole of these characters as they present themselves to us.

The character's recollections of themselves and others in the past is a study of growing old that serves as a reminder of mortality. These are characters who have drifted alone through life that will soon leave them; and though their separateness is without the dramatic tension that

1 Harold Pinter, Landscape and Silence (New York: Grove Press, 1970), pp. 15 and 36; subsequent references will be to this edition and will appear in the text.
comes from interaction, these characters, through their monologue dramatizations of old age and aloneness and loss fascinatingly rivet the audience to the stage.

In Night Pinter once again combines recollection of past events with some interaction between characters with their different remembrances of a shared experience. But again, as in The Collection, there is no way to verify the truth of the past through memory. Pinter concludes his discussion of time and truth by saying:

A moment is sucked away and distorted, often even at the time of its birth. We will all interpret a common experience quite differently, though we prefer to subscribe to the view that there's shared common ground. I think there's shared common ground all right, but that it's more like quicksand. Because "reality" is quite a strong firm word we tend to think, or to hope, that the state to which it refers is equally firm, settled and unequivocal. It doesn't seem to be, and in my opinion, it's no worse or better for that. ¹

With this very general, and somewhat simplified understanding of the major techniques and themes in Pinter's plays it is now possible to proceed to The Dumb Waiter, an excellent starting point for an analysis of the operation and development of dominance and subservience.

¹Pinter, Evergreen Review, p. 81.
CHAPTER 2

THE DUMB WAITER: THE SIMPLEST EXPRESSION OF DOMINANCE AND SUBSERVIENCE

In a room two men, who we later learn are hired gunmen, await orders. Instead of the expected orders, an envelope containing matches appears under their doors; a brief discussion, than a slight argument follows--Ben strikes Gus. Later a dumb waiter appears containing orders, but food orders which the men nevertheless attempt, but are unable, to fill. Several times the dumb waiter ascends empty, until the men finally send up what food they have. A voice at the other end of the dumb waiter rejects the food--several times Ben strikes Gus. Finally, Gus steps out of the room while Ben apparently receives both the information that the victim is about to appear, and the awaited order that they are to proceed as usual (presumably as they had just rehearsed the scene). When Ben calls Gus to join him, Gus, stripped of waistcoat and gun, appears as Ben levels his gun at him--one of the hired killers now seems to be the intended victim. Why?

The final threat of violence is consistent with the earlier violence; each time Ben feels his position threatened he strikes his subordinate Gus. When asked about terror and the threat of violence, Pinter himself replied that the best clue to understanding the apparently mysterious
nature of the violence is to understand its link with the nature of the dominant-subservient relationship between characters such as Ben and Gus:

I think what you're talking about began in *The Dumb Waiter*, which from my point of view is a relatively simple piece of work. The violence is really only an expression of the question of dominance and subservience, which is possibly a repeated theme in my plays.

Following Pinter's own lead in an analysis of all his work reveals that *The Dumb Waiter* is an excellent starting point not only for a discussion of dominance and subservience, but mystery as well; this play (though not the first of his works to contain the twin themes and techniques) presents the most radical portrayal of the twin operation of mystery, dominance and subservience used to create ambiguity. In the end when Ben levels his gun at Gus it is never certain whether he is acting on orders or on his own as a result of the deterioration of the dominant-subservient relation between him and Gus. Moreover *The Dumb Waiter* offers a paradigmatic portrayal of mystery and violence in Pinter's work. Much that at first appears mysterious, such as the immediate cause for violence (Ben's striking Gus) can be traced to the dominant-subservient relationship between characters.

Examining important similarities and differences between characters such as Ben and Gus reveals how violence is a natural product of a

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dominant-subservient relationship in Pinter's work. First, both the
dominant and the subservient characters are, by definition, symbiotically
dependent upon each other; this mutual dependence provides a precarious
basis for a relationship that can continue to thrive only so long as the
dominant character (Ben) can maintain his position unquestioned and un-
threatened by outside forces or by the subservient character (Gus), that
is, only so long as the subservient character remains in his place. Since,
however, mysterious outside forces are seldom absent from Pinter's work,
and since few of his characters are willing (or able) to be wholly sub-
servient, changes which are bound to occur are almost all inimical to
preserving the relationship. Second, both characters are generally
willing to fight to defend their values and fundamental beliefs; while
this may seem a trivial observation it is worth noting that Pinter's
characters frequently respond with the almost reflexive action of trained
athletes whenever their beliefs or values are challenged. What makes
for sport is that the values of the dominant and subservient character
are different from one another in ways which also produce much of the
play's tension. Ben believes in the authority and order of the organiza-
tion while Gus questions it.

Other important differences between the two characters' different
values are reflected in their different strengths and weaknesses. The
dominant character (Ben) is generally equipped at the outset with his
position of dominance (senior partner) which he proceeds to defend as
if it were a goal. He has, however, several handicaps. His dominance
rarely, if ever, proceeds from superior strength, intelligence or virtue, but more commonly instead, from a desire to maintain the position for its own sake; and as pointed out in the previous chapter (pp. 5-6), a character frequently equates preserving a position or role with preserving his identity.

Since, then, defense of position is roughly a self-defense it is no wonder that the dominant character will use whatever means he can to defend his position; he frequently begins by noting the superiority of his position; failing here, he may then resort to verbal argument and abuse, and finally to violence or threats of violence, which proceed in direct proportion to his feeling thwarted or threatened in maintaining his position. Whenever Ben strikes Gus, Ben feels threatened in maintaining his position.

The dominant character generally suffers under another handicap—he is essentially blind to what his opponent (Gus) is better able to see; and being less observant he is also less insightful about the events of the reality around him than is his counterpart. From their different observations and interpretations of reality proceed the different values and world views of the two characters. While the dominant character perceives and wishes to continue to perceive an ordered universe where his position is stable, secure and without mystery, the subservient character perceives the actual disorder and mystery in the world that is portrayed around him—such perceptions lead him to question the most fundamental values of the dominant character and subsequently the ultimate validity of the dominant
character's maintaining a position which is artificial, relative only to those he dominates.

Were the subservient character without his weaknesses he might easily attain his opponent's position; the opposite, however, generally holds, due to yet other differences between dominant and subservient character. Where the dominant character generally gives orders and attempts to have an answer for everything, the subservient character takes orders and frequently asks questions. Where the dominant character must, in order to retain his position, act self-confident, assured and in control of himself (else how can he have control over others?) the subservient character may at times show weakness. So long as the subservient character's display of weakness, or lack of self-assurance is mild (e.g., Goldberg's subordinate McCann in The Birthday Party), the balance in the relationship is not destroyed. If, however, the dominant character strikes out too hard at him in his attempts to maintain dominance, he may destroy the subservient character (e.g., Stanley) and hence destroy the relationship as well. Moreover, with no one clearly in sight to dominate, the dominate character (e.g., Ben if he chooses to shoot) also destroys his own position which is dependent upon being in a superior position to someone he can dominate.

For further discussion of the subservient character as questioner see Bernard Dukore, "The Theatre of Harold Pinter," The Drama Review, VI (1962), 50, where Dukore identifies and equates the questioner with what is here termed the subservient character. His equation, as this discussion indicates, identifies only a few of the many characteristics of the subservient character.
Despite the numerous differences listed so far it is now nevertheless possible to assert that there is no simple distinction between the dominant and subservient characters to justify labeling them, for example,  

villain and victim—terms which are in most senses misnomers since it follows from the final conclusion of the preceding argument that both characters in the end stand to lose much, Ben his position, Gus his life.

While the point that there is no simple distinction between the dominant and subservient character will be more fully appreciated later in this discussion, it can be noted here that the dominant character is also not wholly unsympathetic, else we would have melodrama rather than Pinter's much richer creations. In The Dumb Waiter, for example, while Ben consistently strives to maintain dominance over Gus, there are those long moments when both struggle against the forces represented by the dumb waiter, and thus when both characters receive almost equal attention and sympathy from the audience. But once again it is also a mistake not to notice the many obvious and subtle differences between the two characters and instead to view such different characters

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1 For further discussion of Pinter's characters classified as victims and villains see Ruby Cohn, "The World of Harold Pinter," The Drama Review, VI (1962), 61-63, where she notes as characteristic of the villain that his dialogue is more cliche ridden and his values "those which have traditionally structured our morality," but which here create "immoral agents that destroy the individual" (p. 55). Somewhat valid for the early plays, her argument needs qualification; the so-called villains blindly pay only lip service to traditional values, but in fact do not practice them; recall Goldberg who professes the gentleman's code of conduct toward women, though, as Lulu reveals later, he acts quite the opposite.
as Ben and Gus as virtually one and the same person struggling against mysterious outside forces. ¹

Some of the more subtle differences between the two characters are that the subservient character's weaknesses are frequently subjected to criticism which he must passively receive from the dominant character, such as Ben, who must never be subjected to criticism and cannot tolerate it if the relationship is to continue; nor can the dominant character even display sympathy for the weaknesses of the subservient character, for to do so would be too like admitting weakness in himself. Moreover, in order to maintain his position the dominant character frequently goes a step further and attempts to eradicate weakness in the character who displays it; Ben strikes Gus when he asks questions which express doubts and fears concerning the order of the organization. But like other means associated with the behavior of maintaining dominance, the move may be self-defeating, for what destroys weakness often destroys the subservient character as well, and in turn the relationship; Ben may kill Gus and thus end the partnership.

This summary analysis of dominant and subservient behavior enables us to see that the violence that occurs in Pinter's work generally proceeds from the dominant character's attempt to maintain dominance both over his opponent's often increasing resistance, as well as in the face

of threatening outside forces. A closer analysis of The Dumb Waiter will more clearly illustrate Pinter's mastery of the twin techniques and themes of dominance and subservience and mystery used to create a carefully controlled ambiguity.

As the curtain rises on Ben and Gus whose positions even in the opening mime are clearly delineated, Ben is in the superior position on the bed, while Gus is in the lower position on the floor; Ben immediately evinces disapproval of Gus's actions as "he glares after him," when Gus exists for the first time (p. 85). When Gus pulls the toilet lever off stage, nothing happens although the toilet flushes from time to time on its own; similarly perhaps the two men fail to control the play's central mechanical device, the dumb waiter.

Meanwhile, on stage Ben orders Gus to prepare tea, and though Ben hardly pays any attention to Gus's activities he expects Gus's full attention whenever he reads aloud newspaper accounts about killing or death.

Perhaps the first hint of Gus's rebellion against the authority represented by Ben occurs when Gus questions one of Ben's newspaper accounts as "difficult to believe" (p. 86). Ben's response, "It's down here in black and white," reveals his automatic belief in authority that prepares for his later unquestioning response to the authority represented by the dumb waiter.

Ben's newspaper reading is not simply a realistic touch but is also an important device for at least two other reasons. First, Ben is attracted to the human interest trivia about killing and death, which it
might be expected he would somehow relate to his own work and life, but instead does not; death has no immediacy for Ben—he lives as if he will never die. And he sees no connection between his work as a hired killer and these accounts of death which seem, however, to be more interesting to him than his actual job which is merely routine. Moreover, these newspaper accounts about death that help Ben kill time reveal also that Ben has no sympathy with the weaknesses which produce a victim; he says of the old man who gets himself into a position to be run over, "It's enough to make you want to puke" (p. 86). Second, while Ben seems content with the vicarious enjoyment of reading and seems happy enough to view things second hand, Gus prefers a "bit of a view" of the world, a window in the room in order to see things for himself.

It is Gus, however, who initiates most of the play's action and is central in the sense that he does most of the moving about, gains most of the audience attention and sympathy. Gus listens to Ben, responds politely to his reading aloud, but is really preoccupied with a question: "I want to ask you something" (p. 86) he states in accord with his subordinate position. There is no question of Ben's dominance or of Gus's acceptance of it when, instead of answering Gus, Ben demands tea and then interrogates Gus about his activities in the kitchen:

**BEN.** What are you doing out there?

**GUS.** Well, I was just--

**BEN.** What about tea?

**GUS.** I'm just going to make it.

**BEN.** Well, go on, make it.

**GUS.** Yes, I will (p. 86).
Gus returns to take up the central action by elaborately describing the crockery while Ben asks why he is interested in it (p. 87). Note that in contrast to Dukore's assertion about the 'questioner' character (Gus), Ben asks nearly as many questions as Gus does; but unlike Gus's questions which proceed from a genuine concern about the world around him, Ben's proceed as a check to be sure that the world is as he perceives it—ordered. Moreover, a threat or reprimand is frequently couched in Ben's questions which Gus in the beginning either accepts or ignores. When, for example, Gus now answers that he is interested in the plates because he has biscuits he plans to eat, Ben is irritated (he orders Gus to hurry and eat them, then adds, 'Time's getting on') (p. 87), because Gus has something he does not which suggests a dangerous imbalance in the relationship. This exchange parallels the later scene Ben makes over Gus's bringing only one Eccles cake, and only enough crisps for himself.

Gus repeats, "Oh I wanted to ask you something," but states instead, "I hope it won't be a long job" (p. 87), revealing both that they are there to do a job and that there are aspects of the job that are mysterious to Gus but which at the same time Ben ignores.

Before Gus can ask his question Ben interrupts with another newspaper account, this one of an eight year old girl who killed a cat while "her brother, aged eleven, viewed the incident from the toolshed" (p. 88). In reply, Gus, who has less respect for the printed word than does Ben, suggests that the brother probably killed the cat. Agreeing quite spontaneously Ben flares up at what appears to be foul play (ironic anger, considering his own activities):
I think you're right.

Pause.

Slamming down the paper.

What about that, eh? A kid of eleven killing a cat and blaming it on his little sister of eight! That's enough--

He breaks off in disgust and seizes the paper (p. 88).

This is the only time in the play that Ben so openly agrees with one of Gus's suggestions which contradicts Ben's own view of the world, specifically, his previously stated faith in the authority of the printed word. Since, however, there is no outside threat, this light comic scene quite deftly shows Ben relaxed and without reason to be on guard.

Gus next inquires, "What time is he getting in touch?" (p. 88). Each additional piece of information (here that they are awaiting orders) is accompanied by additional mystery. The unknown "he" adds to the mysterious nature of the job as does Ben's hedging in response to Gus's nervousness which, as a sign of weakness, Ben cannot tolerate; "What's the matter with you? It could be anytime," Ben snaps (p. 88).

The slight tension eases when Gus asks, "Have you noticed the time it takes the tank to fill?" (p. 89). Ben, who seems to have an answer for everything replies, "It's got a deficient ballcock, that's all" (p. 89).

Again Gus's attention shifts, first to a newspaper picture of cricket players that catches his eye, then again as he freely associates to the absence of a window, "I'd like to have a bit of a view. It whiles away the time" (p. 90). Ben seizes upon Gus's last statement to accuse Gus of having no interests, and to boast of his own:
I've got my woodwork. I've got my model boats. Have you ever seen me idle? I'm never idle. I know how to occupy my time, to its best advantage. Then when a call comes, I'm ready (p. 90).

That Ben's interests are, in fact, time killers like the newspaper reading that provide him with little creative satisfaction is underscored in Gus's response, "Don't you ever get a bit fed up? (p. 90). To the audience, however, there must be something more than vaguely familiar in Ben's values such as good manners, busyness and freedom from idleness, which are also clearly the values professed by almost all of Pinter's characters who strive for dominance.

Again mystery accompanies new information as Gus observes that this place is "worse than the last one" (p. 91), a hint that they may be slipping in rank within the organization. Ben's dismissal of the remark, "When are you going to stop jabbering?" really fails to dismiss the inferences of Gus's observation (p. 91).

Again it is Gus who shifts the discussion to ask, this time, why Ben stopped in the middle of the road that morning when he apparently thought that Gus was asleep. Ben's ambiguous answer ("We were too early" p. 93) enhances the suspense as the first in a series of ambiguities leading to the final ones: did Ben receive outside orders? did he know in advance what the orders were? The two questions suggest four possibilities, none of which can be entirely dismissed. If Ben received outside orders to kill Gus and if he knew them in advance he may have hesitated (stopped in the middle of the road) before deciding to fulfill
them. He may not, however, have known the orders in advance; he may have heard them for the first time when they came via the dumb waiter. He may never have had any outside orders (since we never actually hear the voice that sends them) and he may be acting on his own.

Gus's actions emphasize the ambiguity of Ben's response when, as Ben picks up the paper to avoid further discussion, Gus appropriately rises to ask if they didn't shove off immediately after getting orders to leave immediately (p. 92). Although Ben resorts to his position of authority, "Who took the call, me or you?" Gus not so easily satisfied as earlier persists, "Too early for what?" (p. 92).

Soon, however, Gus again shifts the subject with the question "What town are we in? I've forgotten" (p. 93). When he learns that they are in Birmingham his response underscores both the uselessness of certain kinds of factual information to dispel mystery and also the narrowness of their world: "He looks with interest about the room," then adds, "That's in the midlands. The second biggest city in Great Britain. I'd never have guessed" (p. 93). His response, like a child's repetition of a geography lesson, also provides light comic touches that make the mounting tension more bearable.

The tension builds as several arguments grow out of a discussion about football. When Gus suggests that they take advantage of their situation and take in a game, Ben says that they can't--the Villa are playing away. More crucial, however, is Ben's own admission that things are changing for the worse: "Anyway there's no time. We've got to get straight back" (p. 93). When Gus objects that they used
to take off a weekend in the past, Ben counters with "Things have tightened up, mate. They've tightened up" (p. 93), which again implies that Ben knows something that Gus does not.

Although the tension eases for a moment when Gus chuckles to himself as he recalls a former Villa match, the tension quickly resumes when Ben denies that he saw the match, while Gus insists Ben was there. Moreover, Ben scores the point in the argument about the place, outcome and plays of the match (which he denies he saw!); Ben terminates one round with "Get out of it" and bullies his way to end another with "Don't make me laugh, will you?" (p. 94).

Gus, however, does not seem to mind losing the arguments and once again shifts the subject with a question, "When's he going to get in touch?" (p. 94). This time, before Ben can respond, Gus's mind wanders back again to the thought of seeing a match: "Here, what about coming to see the game tomorrow?" (p. 94). But Ben's reminder that there is no game throws into relief the lack of escape from the tediousness of their work.

Pinter's timing in the next scene is perfect as he utilizes the stock response of both the characters and the audience who expect the arrival of the awaited orders; Gus discovers an envelope under the door, maintains the suspense a moment longer by puzzling over it, then contrary to expectation finds, instead of orders, twelve matches. The mysterious appearance of the matches is an important device which precedes and prepares for the even more mysterious appearance of the dumb waiter; both
the characters and the audience participate equally in being baffled by
the appearance of the matches. Unlike the characters, however, the
audience may be less willing to accept Ben and Gus's explanation for
the appearance of the matches and their attempt to dismiss the subject.
Thus the tension for the audience increases as the characters attempt
to dispel the mystery by trying to provide some reasonable answer for
the matches. Ben, as expected, quickly assumes command:

BEN. Well, go on.

GUS. Go on where?

BEN. Open the door and see if you can catch anyone outside.

GUS. Who, me?

BEN. Go on! (p. 96).

Ben's insistence, and Gus's reluctance indicate that neither wishes
to venture beyond the room where outside the strange and the unfamiliar
are associated with danger or the threat of it. Gus follows orders, but
before he exists, withdraws a revolver that offers the audience the
first clue about the nature of the job the men are there to perform.
When he returns reporting that he saw no one, he attempts to minimize
the mystery of the event by suggesting that the matches will be use-
ful, a suggestion Ben quickly adopts as if it were his own, in a volley
where the characters virtually exchange roles:

GUS. Well, they'll come in handy.

BEN. Yes.

GUS. Won't they?

BEN. Yes, you're always running out, aren't you?
GUS. All the time.

BEN. Well, they'll come in handy then.

GUS. Yes.

BEN. Won't they (p. 97).

Note that Gus initiates a way of viewing the situation which they both adopt; the exchange then pivots with Ben's slight accusation that it is actually Gus who needs the matches, then turns completely with Ben's presenting Gus's very remarks as if they were his own. This is the last time, however, that the roles are so easily interchangeable, for in the next instant, perhaps realizing that the remarks were not his own and that the strangeness of the situation has not been dispelled, Ben now bullies Gus by questioning the assertion that the matches will be useful; first Ben demands "Why?" then, when Gus answers "Because I haven't got any," Ben mildly accuses Gus: "Yes you're always cadging matches." Finally Ben patronizingly cautions, "Well, don't lose them." But when Gus probes his ear with a match, Ben slaps his hand as if to gain final authority; he orders "Don't waste them! Go on, go light it" (p. 97).

The next exchange, an argument over phrasing and usage, is even more serious because for the second time Gus is not so easily coerced into accepting Ben's point of view as he was earlier. Interestingly, it is Gus who first uses the phrase "light the kettle" which he later maintains is incorrect for "light the gas" (p. 97). Meanwhile Ben, as in the immediately preceding scene adopts Gus's phrase "light the kettle," then defends it in deadly earnest as the correct expression;
first Ben says, "It's common knowledge," then, attempting to sound more authoritative, says, "Light the kettle! It's common usage!"—the exclamation marks, used sparingly in Pinter's work clearly indicate Ben's excitement and agitation (p. 97). Momentarily, being right becomes equally important to both Ben and Gus:

GUS. I think you've got it wrong.

BEN. (Menacing). What do you mean?

GUS. They say put on the kettle.

BEN. (Taut). Who says?

They stare at each other, breathing hard (p. 97).

Gus loses this round when he answers that his mother says it, to which Ben counters and scores with "When did you last see your mother?" (p. 98), a typical master stroke of forcefully delivered illogic, a nonsequitur, that is frequently used by one of Pinter's characters to gain the advantage over another. Underscoring the illogic Ben says, "Gus, I'm not trying to be unreasonable," then quickly resorts to reminding Gus of his own superior position, "Who's the senior partner here, me or you?" and finally adds one more bit of illogic to clinch the round: "I'm only looking after your interests" (p. 98).

When, in the next moment, Gus is unwilling to let the matter drop or to openly accept Ben's position, the argument resumes in even more deadly earnest, made bearable by the comic inanity of the remarks:

BEN (Veheemntly). Nobody says light the gas! What does the gas light?

GUS. What does the gas--?
BEN (Grabbing him with two hands by the throat, at arm's length).

THE KETTLE, YOU FOOL!

Gus takes the hands from his throat.

GUS. All right, all right (p. 98).

Despite Ben's vehement defense of "light the kettle" he lapses in his next command, though Gus diplomatically chooses to ignore the lapse:

BEN (Wearily). Put on the bloody kettle, for Christ's sake.

Ben goes to his bed, but realising what he has said, stops, half turns. They look at each other. Gus slowly exists left. Ben slams his paper down on the bed and sits on it head in hands (p. 99).


A brief amnesty follows during which Gus changes the subject with "... I wonder who it'll be tonight," a remark which is emphasized by the silence which follows it (p. 99). Ben vents his anger first at another aspect of Gus's behavior, "What are you sitting on my bed for?" then at what is really bothering him:


Gus hesitantly persists, "I thought perhaps--I mean--have you got any idea who it's going to be? (p. 101).
Gus then exists, but while he is out of the room Ben's removing his gun to check for ammunition enhances the tension and gives the audience another clue about the nature of the job they are there to do. Further, Ben's maneuver may foreshadow the final scene where Ben also withdraws his gun while Gus is out of the room.

When Gus reappears the audience learns that the men are waiting for Wilson, presumably their immediate superior; note, however, that supplying the name "Wilson" for the earlier mentioned "he" does not clear up any more of the mystery than knowing that they are in Birmingham does. With the mention of Wilson, Ben again withdraws his gun to polish it, an action which momentarily defers the threat by calming him with an activity that is directed at the specific goal of getting ready.

Gus's reaction to the mention of Wilson is, however, markedly different; he confesses a weakness such as Ben would never confess having; Gus says, "I find him hard to talk to, Wilson. Do you know that, Ben?" (p. 101). Ben's impatient and unsympathetic reply, "Scrub round it, will you?" indicates that he is not only unable or unwilling to sympathize with weakness, but also that he will not tolerate what might be construed as criticism of the organization, that is, of one of its superiors. Gus's confession may also be interpreted as an admission that he does not fit the organization which Ben seems to fit into quite well. And when Gus next remarks that Ben must have read the newspaper many times, Ben's sharp reply, "What are you doing,
criticising me?" (p. 102) reveals even more clearly the connection in Ben's mind between Gus's confession and criticism of the organization.

Although there are no women in the play, Gus next presents an attitude toward women of mingled fear and superiority which Pinter is later to develop in such characters as Lenny (The Homecoming) and Aston (The Caretaker). If Gus is inferior to Ben, certainly women, who are inferior to men, are inferior to Gus: "They don't hold together like men, women" (p. 103), Gus describes how they die. Then recalling what a mess the last one made Gus wonders who cleans up afterward. Ben's condescending reply reveals again Ben's own faith in the order of the organization where there is no need to question anything:

BEN (Pityingly). You mutt. Do you think we're the only branch of this organization? Have a bit of common. They got departments for everything.

GUS. What, cleaners and all? (p. 103).

Gus's next bit of wondering about the girl is interrupted by a loud clatter and the appearance of the dumb waiter to which the men respond by withdrawing their guns. Gus discovers the order for steaks, sago pudding and tea, the latter of which makes it seem half possible for them to fill the order since Gus has been busy preparing tea. But while the men puzzle over the order the dumb waiter ascends empty as Gus impulsively shouts up, "Give us a chance" (p. 104) indicating his almost automatic willingness to follow orders. That Ben is in complete accord about following the orders is revealed in the next instant when
Gus questions his own response, then questions the order as well. And
when Gus finds the situation "a bit funny" Ben promptly counters with,
"No. It's not funny. It probably used to be a cafe here, that's all.
Upstairs. These places change hands very quickly" (p. 104). Ben tries
to find an explanation while Gus asks the crucial question:

WELL WHO'S GOT IT NOW? (p. 104)

It may belong to the organization, it may not. Ben hedges, "Well that
all depends--" (p. 104). Thus Pinter has nicely prepared for the be-
inning of the different responses of the two men who continue in their
divergent directions to the end of the play.

What follows from this point is now fairly easy to understand. Both
the characters and the audience are at first perplexed by this new dis-
covery, the dumb waiter, as they earlier were by the matches. And Ben,
who is not only used to giving orders to the person below him, but also
used to taking them from his superior, responds to this new request for
food as he would to any other order from above. His response is not
surprising since the entire play up to this point has been a preparation
for fulfilling orders. But as the demands from the dumb waiter become
increasingly difficult to meet (though they were always impossible) Ben
becomes more aggressive in asserting his dominance over Gus; twice he
hits Gus when Gus questions Ben's commands as well as the orders sent
from above. Meanwhile, Ben, who desires to see things as he is ac-
customed to seeing them, acts rigidly and inflexibly as always and as
if such responses would keep the situation from changing for the worse.

What choices do these men have? It is not clear since mystery is
wedded to any possible alternative. To ask why, for example, the men
do not simply go upstairs to see who is sending the orders might be like asking why Gregor in Kafka's *Metamorphosis* did not consult a doctor when he began to change. It is part of the nonrealistic technique that leads you to believe two men can be intimidated by messages sent in a dumb waiter, or that a man can change into a bug. To the end of the play certain mysteries, such as who is sending the orders, or more crucially, whether Ben actually receives orders to kill Gus, remain unsolved. Yet it is more than a desire to solve the mystery that holds audience attention; it is the relationship between Ben and Gus which also involves the audience to the extent that their following orders even seems reasonable--after all, if the dumb waiter is not being operated by the organization, Ben and Gus do not wish to attract unnecessary attention to their unlawful activities. On the other hand, if it is, the orders may be a test which Gus and Ben do not wish to fail.

Both men are thus understandably afraid of the dumb waiter; Ben will not even look up into it, and when Gus does, Ben "flings him away in alarm," after Gus cautiously looks up following the arrival of new orders for soup, liver and onions and a tart. When Ben resolves, "We'd better send something up" the stage directions, "They are both relieved at the decision," indicate that neither Ben nor Gus knows for sure who is sending the orders. But in the next moment, when the dumb waiter ascends before the men can act, Gus momentarily forgets Ben's caution; "Wait a minute," he calls while Ben again warns against shouting up; but since the threat seems to be alleviated by the decision to act, Ben's admonition to Gus is proportionately mild (p. 105).
When next, in an attempt to fill the order, Gus empties the contents of a bag he brought, Ben becomes angry because there is only one Eccles cake, then becomes even angrier when he discovers only enough crisps for Gus—that there are none for Ben again suggests an imbalance in the relationship and explains why Ben strikes Gus on the shoulder saying, "You're playing a dirty game my lad!" (p. 106).

Meanwhile the men fail to get the food onto the dumb waiter before it again ascends empty; but this time Ben almost involuntarily shouts, "Wait a minute," before he realizes he has lost control and thus turns on Gus with, "It's all your stupid fault, playing about." (p. 106). Ben tries to recover his calm by taking out his gun and playing with it in preparation for the assignment, while Gus, adding to the tension, observes "that the stove has only three burners—You couldn't cook much," implying that they may not be in the basement of a restaurant (p. 105). Ben, however, "irritably" counters with 'That's why the service is slow" (p. 105). Again, Gus, not entirely satisfied with Ben's answer, pursues the point: "Yes, but what happens when we're not here?" (p. 107).

When the dumb waiter next appears with orders for several Greek dishes Ben and Gus resolve to send up the fare they have which Gus amusingly embellishes by noting the brand names as he calls up the hatch:

Three McVitie and Price! One Lyons Red Label! One Smith's Crisps! One Eccles cake! One fruit and nut!

(p. 108).
Ben, in perfect accord, even joins in adding the label Gus forgot: "Cadbury's" he tells Gus who calls it up the hatch. Ben and Gus seem momentarily satisfied with their action, though Ben mildly rebukes Gus again for shouting up the hatch; but because the threat again seems off, Ben merely says "it isn't done," then adds, "Well, that should be all right, anyway for the time being" (p. 108).

Things are not all right for long; although Ben seems satisfied as he and Gus put on waistcoat, holster, gun and jacket, Gus wonders if what is happening to them may be a test: "We're reliable, aren't we?" (p. 109). Before Ben can reply the box descends with an order for Chinese food as well as with the tea they earlier sent up. The situation once again seems to be reversing for the worse and Ben is admirably willing to admit defeat by sending up a note with the truth. Gus, however, discovers a speaking tube which Ben orders him to use to make the confession. But when Gus impulsively blurts out "The larder's bare," Ben who is alarmed seizes the speaking tube and "with great deference" delivers his message that reveals all the respect he has for the unknown superior:

Good evening. I'm sorry to--bother you, but we just thought we'd better let you know that we haven't got anything left. We sent up all we had (p. 111).

Ben's honest admission of the truth is met, however, with complaints; "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," Ben replies after he listens to the tube then reports to Gus that the cake was stale, the chocolate melted and the milk sour (p. 112). Yet in the next instant Ben is elated over one thing that seems again to confirm his position:
You know what he said? Light the kettle! Not put on the kettle! Not light the gas! But light the kettle! (p. 112).

Gus, too, immediately adopts that as authoritative and says "Now can we light the kettle?" (p. 112). He exists and returns with information more crucial than one of phraseology--"there is no gas" he reports to Ben who again becomes despondent: "Now what do we do?" he asks "clapping hand to head" (p. 112). Gus, who responds sympathetically to Ben's despair, delivers a lengthy tirade against whoever is upstairs; he conjectures that whoever he is he probably has lots of food and no longer considers their needs. Then, observing that Ben appears unwell, Gus concludes, "I feel like an Alka-Seltzer myself" (p. 114). But Ben, instead of being cheered by Gus's conjecture and sympathy, pulls himself out of his despondency by "wearily" suggesting that they rehearse their plans: "Let me give you your instruction," Ben begins what sounds like a responsive reading.

Gus breaks in at the end with the observation that Ben "missed something out"--the part where Gus withdraws his revolver. Note, too, that there is also no explicit instruction to pull the trigger.

Gus exists and returns wondering again about the matches: "Why did he send us matches if he knew there is no gas? (p. 117). Ben now "nervously" responds, "What's one thing to do with another?" (p. 117). The connection is obvious and Gus persists until Ben, who is unwilling to admit that the situation is not under control, "hits him viciously on the shoulder" (p. 118).
When the dumb waiter arrives with more orders Gus follows his impulse and shouts in frustration:

WE'VE GOT NOTHING LEFT! NOTHING! DO YOU UNDERSTAND? (p. 118).

Again Ben flings Gus away and "slaps him hard, back-handed across the chest," while the box ascends ominously empty. The attempt to ignore it only heightens the tension which continues to mount despite Ben's affected calm before the final action; Ben, returning to a familiar activity, picks up the newspaper which is now devoid of all meaning:

Ben throws the paper down.

BEN. Kaw!

He picks up the paper and looks at it.

Listen to this!

Pause.

What about that, eh?

Pause.

Kaw!

Pause.

Have you ever heard such a thing? (p. 119).

Gus "dully" joins in, "Go on," then steps out of the room (p. 119).

Alone now, Ben hears the whistle, puts the speaking tube to his ear, listens, then says:

Understood. Repeat. He has arrived and will be coming in straight away. The normal method to be employed.

Understood.
To ear. He listens. To mouth.

Sure we're ready (p. 120).

Ben's "we're ready" would seem to indicate that both Ben and Gus are going to do the job together as they had just rehearsed it. And even when Ben calls for Gus there is nothing to indicate otherwise until the final moment when Gus enters "stripped of his jacket, waistcoat, tie, holster and revolver," and Ben levels his gun at him. The two men merely stare at each other without surprise or recognition until the curtain falls.

It comes as no surprise, however, that it is Gus and not Ben who is on the receiving end of the gun. Although the ultimate reasons for the final action are ambiguous and an unsolved mystery, the more immediate reasons for the final action and the end of the relationship are carefully prepared for--Gus, who no longer seems to subscribe to the order and authority of Ben and the organization, and Ben, who still would like to, cannot continue in their relationship. And though mystery weighs heavily at the end (Who sends the final orders, and, since the audience never hears them, what are they? How does Gus come to be stripped of his things?) the greater emphasis seems to be on the relationship between Ben and Gus. Arnold P. Hinchliffe also concludes:

The play is about the difference between Ben (the dumb waiter) and Gus (who by his questioning is rebelling). Whereas Ben accepts orders and is an almost perfect cog in a larger machine, Gus is becoming an individual and must be eliminated.¹

¹Hinchliffe, p. 67.
Although Hinchliffe is one of the few critics who seem to appreciate the differences between Ben and Gus he does seem to go beyond the text with so positive an identification of Ben as dumb waiter (Ben does, after all, confess that they cannot fill the order), or of Gus as rebel (even near the end Gus willingly accepts the authority of the dumb waiter on the "light the kettle" issue). Hinchliffe is certainly correct in pointing out that the play's focus is on the men's relationship, which is, however, more interestingly complex than his analysis suggests.

The Dumb Waiter may be a simple play but it contains a highly interesting complexity both in the intricate and honest portrayal of the dominant-subservient relation between Ben and Gus, and also in the carefully constructed ambiguity resulting from the interplay of mystery, with dominance and subservience.

Did Ben receive orders to kill Gus or is he acting freely on a decision he alone made? If he is receiving orders is he responsible for his action? If not, who is? The effectively abrupt ending seems to focus on these questions and to dramatize the precariousness of the dominant-subservient relationship.
CHAPTER III

THE BIRTHDAY PARTY AND THE ROOM: EARLY, MORE COMPLEX

EXPRESSION OF DOMINANCE AND SUBSERVIENCE

Written in the same year (1957) though prior to The Dumb Waiter, The Birthday Party is more complex as the greater number of characters results in fuller treatment of the techniques and themes of sight and blindness, friendship and love, time, space and identity. The interplay of mystery with dominance and subservience operates to create an ambiguity quite similar in both plays, while, in contrast, in Pinter's first play, The Room, also written in 1957, mystery alone provides the central ambiguity.

It is never finally resolved whether what happens to Stanley results from a premeditated plot, or from certain choices he makes in his relations with Goldberg and McCann; both possibilities are developed simultaneously, and both remain open. While most of the critical attention, focused on the mystery in The Birthday Party, tends to promote the view that Stanley, somewhat like Joseph K. of Franz Kafka's The Trial, is an unwitting, even passive victim of a mysterious organization which Goldberg and McCann, like the Inspectors, represent, Pinter implies otherwise; when asked who Goldberg and McCann work for he replied:

I would say they worked for a large organization with an office completely above board.¹

At the outset of The Trial the inspectors immediately enter with such overwhelming force that it seems almost preposterous to ask why K. obeys their summons when by not doing so he might have escaped his end. Though his innocence seems fairly certain, the inspectors come for the purpose of getting K. On the other hand, it is never absolutely certain that Goldberg and McCann have come to execute a premeditated plot against Stanley, although the suspicion that they have is raised at once by the sinister sound of their vaguely stock theatrical underworld language that Stanley overhears:

McCANN. Is this it?
GOLDBERG. This is it.
McCANN: Are you sure?
GOLDBERG. Sure I'm sure. (p. 27).

But although Goldberg also mentions a "job" they are to perform (pp. 28-29), a "mission," (p. 30), and an "assignment" for which he selected McCann as his partner (p. 29), he also implies that they may have come for a holiday:

What's the matter with you? I bring you down to the seaside. Take a holiday. Do yourself a favor. Learn to relax. (p. 27).

And nowhere except in the opening scene do the two men mention any of their actions as part of a job; even in the final scene when McCann talks of taking Stanley away he says, "Let's get the thing done and go" (p. 76), not "Let's get the job done." Moreover, Goldberg and
McCann, unlike Kafka's Inspectors, do not openly initiate the conflict with Stanley who himself seems to provoke them by his overly defensive and unsuccessful attempts to get rid of McCann (pp. 37-42), then Goldberg (pp. 43-45). Even Goldberg's suggestion to give Stanley a party seems genuinely spontaneous, not premeditated or sinister.

MEG. It's his birthday.

GOLDBERG. His birthday?

MEG. Yes. Today. But I'm not going to tell him until tonight.

GOLDBERG. Doesn't he know it's his birthday?

MEG. He hasn't mentioned it.

GOLDBERG (thoughtfully). Ah! Tell me. Are you going to have a party?

MEG. A Party?

GOLDBERG. Weren't you going to have one?

MEG (her eyes wide). No.

GOLDBERG. Well, of course, you must have one. (He stands.)

We'll have a party, eh? What do you say? (p. 32).

Why, then, does Stanley act alarmed when he first hears that the men are coming? And why does he try so hard to get rid of them? While the explanation generally offered is that Stanley is hiding out hoping to avoid the consequences of some guilty deed which he suspects Goldberg and McCann are on to, other different reasons can also account for Stanley's alarm.

Even before Goldberg and McCann arrive Stanley's position is so centrally like an only child's in the household that any addition is
bound to be a change for the worse for him. He has almost all of Meg's attention, even to the exclusion of Petey, and he is taken seriously here as he would not be elsewhere--here he is someone, elsewhere nobody. And when he threatens to "go down to one of those smart hotels on the front," (p. 15) it is already quite clear that Stanley is going nowhere, for to leave might be to lose whatever identity he has that comes from the recognition of others. He would like to keep things as they are, even in his moments of despair (He groans and lies across the table, p. 23) than risk losing what little he has.

Goldberg and McCann do in fact usurp Stanley's position; they make a major decision, like the one to have a party, to which Stanley does not even have a veto. He does not leave, however, because his inertia is so firmly established even before the men arrive that when given the choice of going out or staying, he will choose to stay; earlier he refused to go out with Meg (p. 19), and then, though he momentarily proposed to go out with Lulu, decided, "there's nowhere to go," and stayed (p. 26). When McCann, on the other hand, practically threatens Stanley not to go out (in opposition to another of Stanley's momentary proposals to leave) McCann does not force him to stay, but Stanley again chooses to stay as he backs off from the door:

STANLEY walks around the table towards the door.

McCANN meets him.

STANLEY. Excuse me.

McCANN. Where are you going?
STANLEY. I want to go out.

McCANN. Why don't you stay here?

STANLEY moves away, to the right of the table (p. 39).

A far more fatal choice is Stanley's choice to sit, though he first refused Goldberg's demanding invitation to do so (He strolls casually to the chair at the table. They watch him. He stops whistling. Silence. He sits. p. 47). The refusal to sit in both The Birthday Party and The Room is a refusal to be subservient; even before Stanley enters, McCann similarly refuses to sit until he is sure Goldberg will (p. 27). As if he were asserting his independence, Mr. Sands in The Room refuses his wife's suggestion to sit; but when he momentarily lapses into a sitting position which his wife notices, he denies that he was sitting at all, "Don't be silly, I perched" (p. 106). Stanley is thus not alone in attempting to assert his independence by refusing to sit on command; but when he finally does sit, his caution, "You'd better watch out" (p. 47) sounds impotent.

Stanley's failure to gain complete dominance over Meg, who generally has the last word in an argument, or over Lulu whose critical motherliness ("You could do with a shave, do you know that?" p. 25), like Meg's more coy motherliness ("You deserve the strap" p. 19), prepares for Stanley's attempt but failure to gain dominance over Goldberg and McCann in the inquisition scene. In each instance that he is teased or feels threatened Stanley responds with a counterattack rather than ignore Meg, Lulu, Goldberg or McCann. But the contest, not merely one of wits,
is a more basic conflict of values reflected in the view each character has of his world.

In contrast to the other characters who seem fairly pleased with what they see, Stanley sees that the house is "filthy," and that Meg is a "bad wife," and poor housekeeper. "The milk's off" (p. 15), Stanley says refusing the cornflakes Petey thought were "very nice" (p. 11). Meg fails to attend to Petey's tea in the first act (p. 16), and has nothing for his breakfast in the last (p. 70); after Stanley tells her the house is filthy she dusts the table while he is still at breakfast (p. 18). But it is Stanley's view of the house and people that is the one conveyed to the audience and intended by Pinter who said in a discussion of the genesis of *The Room* and *The Birthday Party*:

*The Birthday Party* had also been in my mind for a long time. It was sparked off from a very distant situation in digs when I was on tour. In fact, the other day a friend of mine gave me a letter I wrote to him in nineteen-fifty-something, Christ knows when it was. This is what it says: "I have filthy insane digs, a great bulging scrag of a woman with breasts rolling at her belly, an obscene household, cats, dogs, filth, tea strainers, mess, oh bullocks, talk, chat, rubbish shit scratch dung poison, infantility, deficient order in the upper fretwork, fucking roll on."

Now the thing about this is that was *The Birthday Party*--I was in those digs, and this woman was Meg in the play,
and there was a fellow staying there in Eastbourne, on the
cost. The whole thing remained with me and three years
later I wrote the play. ¹

Stanley's superior view of almost everything else also lends support to
his suspicions about Goldberg and McCann that are implied when he talks
to McCann:

STANLEY. Listen. You knew what I was talking about before,
didn't you?

McCANN. I don't know what you're at at all.

STANLEY. It's a mistake! Do you understand? (p. 42).

Stanley tells Goldberg that he sees what the others do not;

But I have a responsibility towards the people in this house.
They've been down here too long. They've lost their sense of
smell. I haven't. And nobody's going to take advantage of
them while I'm here (p. 45).

Stanley's concern is really for himself. But he is unable to verify with
certainty any past connection with these men when he asks McCann if they
have met before, whether McCann knows "Maidenhead," (where Stanley claims
he lived,) or "Fuller's Tea Shop," "Boots Library," or "High Street,"
all of which McCann denies knowing (p. 39). Then, simultaneously attempt-
ing to affirm and deny any past connection, Stanley mentions Basingstoke:

(hissing). I've explained to you, damn you, that all those
years I lived in Basingstoke I never stepped out the door (p. 42).

¹Pinter, Paris Review interview, p. 352.
It is not McCann (whom Stanley asked) but Goldberg who mentioned Basingstoke when he first entered chatting about his childhood spent with Uncle Barney (p. 27). And later Goldberg recounts to Lulu his time spent at home, his jaunts to Fullers for tea, and Boots for a library book (p. 50). Stanley, however, fails to hear this last bit of circumstantial evidence, and the past connection is left ambiguously open.

While Meg, Petey and Lulu remain blind to the threatening undercurrents of Goldberg and McCann's actions, Stanley's suspicion about them gains its best support from the vicious cruelty directed at him. They quickly turn to advantage Stanley's inability to see without his glasses when Goldberg orders McCann to take them in the inquisition scene (p. 49). And McCann's taking Stanley's glasses and breaking them during the blindman's buff game (p. 63) is clearly the cruellest act portrayed in the play. Moreover, when McCann breaks Stanley's glasses he metaphorically breaks the part of Stanley's former self consisting of a world view that opposes the way Goldberg and McCann see things; "We're right and you're wrong, Webber, all along the way," they tell him (p. 51).

Later, McCann's description of Stanley's activities upstairs, "He tried to fit the eyeholes into his eyes" (p. 74), underscores how impossible it is for Stanley to return to his former view of anything including himself; he seems suspended in a limbo between the impossibility of either returning to his former self or becoming like Goldberg and McCann. In the end, Goldberg and McCann almost seem to recognize that by reducing Stanley to a shell of a man they have gained little:
GOLDBERG. It goes without saying. Between you and me, Stan, it's about time you had a new pair of glasses.

McCANN. You can't see straight.

GOLDBERG. It's true. You've been cockeyed for years.

McCANN. Now you're even more cockeyed (p. 82).

But Stanley is not passively robbed of his sight; he relinquishes it as he relinquishes whatever inner-directed identity he may have had.

And Bernard Dukore's view that The Birthday Party is about the artist represented by Stanley, who is pitted against the conforming forces of society represented by Goldberg and McCann "who mold him into the collective pattern," requires some qualification.

Whatever portions of Stanley's character may be informed by Pinter's own experience, Pinter became the artist Stanley did not. Moreover, the conflict in the play is not simply between Stanley, in whatever sense he can be regarded as an artist, and the conforming forces of society, but also within Stanley himself. But Stanley's blind spot is that he sees no conflict between an inner- and an outer-directed identity that comes from the approval of others; and given the others in Stanley's environment, seeking an outer-directed identity, as Stanley increasingly does, is inimical to preserving whatever inner-directed identity he may have.

Although Stanley may wish to think of himself as an artist, a pianist (an identity gained from the outer-directed association with a role), Stanley shows less interest in his playing the piano (or an identity gained from the inner-directed satisfaction of performing,

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1 Dukore, p. 52.
expressing or creating something), than does Meg—a point semihumorously made when she gives him a toy drum "because you don't have a piano" (p. 36).

In contrast with Stanley's lack of inner-directed identity are Pinter's own views of himself as an artist with a firm sense of inner direction:

When I was a failure I wasn't a failure to me. When I'm a success, I'm not a success to me.\(^1\)

On the other hand, what Stanley increasingly seeks is the kind of outer-or reflected identity Len describes in Pinter's The Dwarfs:

You are the sum of so many reflections. How many reflections? Whose reflection? Is that what you consist of?\(^2\)

Stanley seeks approval from everyone though he admires none of the people around him. He openly encourages Meg's flirtatiousness, and though she soon becomes obnoxious, he continues to try to win her admiration with his concert tour story that begins with:

Tell me, Mrs. Boles, when you address yourself to me, do you ever ask yourself who exactly you are talking to? Eh?

(p. 21).

Although Stanley deflects Lulu's criticism of his unwashed appearance


while she is with him, he immediately washes his face when she leaves (p. 26). Stanley is even anxious that McCann should think well of him when, implying his innocence for a past deed, he says:

To look at me I bet you wouldn't think I'd led such a quiet life (p. 40).

And Stanley's engaging in the inquisition as he does seems another attempt to prove himself, not in his own eyes but in the eyes of his inquisitors.

During the inquisition scene, however, not only is Stanley asserting his identity by trying to outsmart the questioners, but so are Goldberg and McCann busy attempting to preserve their own questionable identities. Goldberg's identity, for example, an entirely outer one gained from his position, is subtly presented as not much less precarious than Stanley's. The understanding Pinter has of Goldberg's plight seems to result from his somewhat sympathetic attitude toward all of his characters; "Even a bastard like Goldberg in The Birthday Party, I care for," he once said in an interview. And while Goldberg and McCann attempt to affirm each other's importance there is a sadly hollow ring to what they are saying:

GOLDBERG. Well, I've got a position, I won't deny it.
McCANN. You certainly have.
GOLDBERG. I would never deny I had a position.
McCANN. And what a position!
GOLDBERG. It's a thing I would not deny (p. 29).

\[1\text{Pinter, Paris Review interview, p. 361.}\]
At one point Goldberg is almost on the verge of realizing that he sacrificed his individuality in playing by the rules, and unlike Stanley, sitting where he was told to sit:

What do you think, I'm a self-made man? No! I sat where I was told to sit. I kept my eye on the ball. School? Don't talk to me about school. Top in all subjects. And for why? (p. 77).

Unfortunately Goldberg cannot answer his own question:

Follow my mental? Learn by heart. Never write a thing down. And don't go too near the water. And you'll find that what I say is true.

Because I believe that the world . . . (Vacant.). . . .

Because I believe that the world . . . (Desperate.). . . .

BECAUSE I BELIEVE THAT THE WORLD . . . (Lost.). . . . (p. 78).

Goldberg, however, avoids the recognition that his position is intrinsically worthless and he is no more than a pawn in the larger scheme of things. He carries on as always according to the rules for behavior that make him oppose Stanley who, because he does not want to play by the same rules, infuriates Goldberg as might a son who chose to live by values opposite those necessary to maintain a position his father slaved a lifetime away to attain. But the viciousness with which Goldberg and McCann oppose Stanley may occur for yet another reason than this or than as part of a premeditated plot against Stanley.

Once one of Pinter's characters is motivated in a certain direction, he will almost always continue myopically in that same direction
through a kind of inertia of motion that Pinter once observed of his own behavior; Pinter recalls how, after beginning a brawl with a man who claimed Hitler did not kill enough Jews, Pinter lost sight of the original cause for the fight and continued the fight blindly for its own sake:

"You're talking a load of rubbish," I said.

"I suppose you're a filthy Yid yourself," he said.

"Say that again," I said and he did.

I hit him and there was this frozen thing there, then a slice of blood came down his cheek. He hit me, then I laid into him forgetting who he was and what the whole thing was about entirely.

Goldberg, too, begins the fight, the inquisition, for personal reasons; "If you want to know the truth, Webber, you're beginning to get on my breasts" (p. 46). But the questions quickly go from the personal to the impersonal; "why do you treat the young lady like a leper?" (p. 47), then later, "What about the Albigensian heresy? Who watered the wicket at Melbourne? What about the blessed Oliver Plunkett?" (p. 51). The inquisition scene seems to be impelled now by a momentum of its own. And when Stanley loses ground he responds as Ben or any of Pinter's other characters do when they feel cornered; he strikes out, here at Goldberg who is prevented from striking back by Meg's entrance. But the fight

\[1\] Pugh, p. 8.
is not yet over and it quickly resumes at the party as McCann finally gets back at Stanley by again taking his glasses, and this time, breaking them. Is McCann's action the culmination of a plan made in advance of his arrival? Is it the final in a series of actions perhaps provoked by Stanley himself? The ambiguity that is kept alive through the end suggests that the answer is not in an either/or choice, but possibly in some complex combination of both possibilities.

In any case, Pinter raises the possibility of personal choice and responsibility but keeps them carefully wrapped in the uncertainty of mystery. Could Stanley have acted differently to have avoided this end? If Goldberg and McCann are, perhaps, like Ben, simply obeying orders, are they responsible for their action? While the choices made in the moves of the dominant-subservient relationships dramatize both the destructive results of gaining dominance for its own sake as well as the fruitless results of maintaining an identity based solely on outward position, the uncertainty of mystery dramatizes a fear reaction that may appear to be paranoid, but may actually have a rational or intuitively sound foundation. The ambiguity dramatizes the twin dilemma of not knowing what to fear and then not knowing how to act when so much seems fearful, and most choices wrong.

Rose's choices in *The Room* are even more limited than Stanley's—whether or not she chooses to see the stranger she loses. Although she first refuses to see Riley, she seems forced to give in when Mr. Kidd threatens that he may come up when Bert is home—a threat which is all
the more foreboding because Mr. Kidd, at the stranger's insistence, has avoided even mentioning the subject in Bert's presence. Rose's reasons for fearing Riley, like Stanley's for fearing Goldberg and McCann may have a simple explanation--she may fear Bert's jealousy; but there may be more mysterious reasons for her fear--she may have known Riley in the past, which is clearly implied in Riley's request that she come home. But the nature of the past connection between Rose and Riley, like the one between Stanley and the guests, if it exists, can only be guessed.

Although Rose seems more vaguely suspicious of everything than does Stanley whose suspicions are fairly well focused on the two men, Rose's alarm, like Stanley's, begins even before her guest arrives. The out-of-doors, the weather seem threatening to Rose who implies that she would rather remain within; "It's very cold out, I can tell you. It's murder" (p. 91). Rose also fears losing the room, even before the Sandses threaten to take it when they tell her it is going to become vacant (information probably given by Riley); quite early Rose says, "If they ever ask you Bert, I'm quite happy where I am" (p. 93). Her room is better than the basement about which she seems more than idly curious or mildly suspicious:

Those walls would have finished you off. I don't know who lives down there now. Whoever it is, they're taking a big chance (p. 103).

Moreover she seems to be prompting Mr. Kidd to tell her whether there is anyone actually down there when she says, "Must get a bit damp
downstairs" (p. 98). And with suppressed agitation she finally asks Mr. Sands, "I was just wondering whether anyone was living down there now" (p. 106).

Rose's fear of losing the room connects with her suspicion that there is a stranger in the basement when Rose, talking at nightmarish cross purposes with Mr. Kidd, tries to find out what the Sandses meant in saying her room is becoming vacant, while Mr. Kidd anxiously inquires whether or not she'll see Riley:

ROSE (rising). Mr. Kidd! I was just going to find you.

I've got to speak to you.

MR. KIDD. Look here, Mrs. Budd, I've got to speak to you.

I came up specially.

ROSE. There were two people in here just now. They said this room was going vacant. What were they talking about?

MR. KIDD. As soon as I heard the van go I got ready to come and see you. I'm knocked out (p. 109).

Rose, like Stanley, sees what the others do not; and her worst fears seem in the end to be confirmed; she may lose her room and Riley may have indirectly brought her harm. But nothing Rose is able to discover verifies with certainty any of her suspicions. Her own actions, however, ambiguously imply some past connection with Riley. When he tells her his name she responds, "That's not your name" (p. 112). But though she first acts as if Riley's presence and request were a horrible mistake, when
nothing he says or does seems finally sinister, she seems to respond more warmly toward him in spite of herself. Although Rose apparently feared losing the room or even going out of it, when Riley asks her to come home she finally seems to acknowledge that the room is really a trap:

The day's a hump. I never go anywhere (p. 116).

And when she puts her hands on Riley's face and neck she seems to be exploring the possibility of escape.

But when Burt returns and finds Rose's hands on Riley, Bert squelches any possibility for Rose's escape when he beats Riley. Though Esslin insists, "here Bert's motivation must be one of racial hatred; after all, he has not even taken the trouble to find out why the Negro is in the room," it would seem that Bert's finding Rose with her hands on Riley might imply that his outburst of violence is motivated by jealousy. The delay in Bert's reaction, however, also suggests something else may be motivating him toward violence—a clue to which may be in the image Pinter says sparked his writing the play; he claims he once met two people in a room, one feeding the other and that the image of that encounter supplied the original idea for the play. The motivation for violence in The Room, more obliquely than in The Birthday Party and The Dumb Waiter, may stem from an attempt to retain dominance or control over another.

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1 Esslin, p. 65.

Pinter's image and the play both contain relationships of dominance. In the original image the dominance seems to be one-sided, whereas in the play it first appears mutual; although Rose seems to depend upon Bert for her livelihood, he seems dependent upon her since she spends nearly all of her time feeding, clothing and caring for Bert and in turn seems to derive a sense of worth from it:

This is a good room. You've got a chance in a place like this. I look after you, don't I, Bert? Like when they offered us the basement here I said no straight off. I knew that'd be no good. The ceiling right on top of you. No, you've got a window here, you can move yourself, you can come home at night, if you have to go out, you can do your job, you can come home, you're all right. And I'm here.

You stand a chance (p. 95).

Is she trying to convince Bert that he is lucky to have her, to be where they are, or is she trying to convince herself? The relationship between the two seems subtly off-balance; she does all the talking, is ten years older than Bert, and while he likes weak tea, prefers hers strong, mildly suggesting that though he may appear to be the more independent of the two, Rose is really the stronger. The imbalance may appear, however, only in retrospect, for until Bert goes out, Rose seems happy enough to remain behind the protective walls of the room rather than venture out; and three times she reminds Bert she will have cocoa ready for him when he returns.
Instead of finding Rose alone making cocoa, Bert returns to find her standing in the middle of the room with her hands on Riley, and reacts as he does when a car is in his way; "I bumped him. I got my road. I had all my way" (p. 116). Bert's reaction may at first seem little motivated by jealousy since he shows less affection for Rose than for his van which he describes in clearly sexual terms:

There was no mixing. Not with her. She was good. She went with me. She don't mix it with me. I use my hand. Like that. I get hold of her. I go where I go. She took me there. She brought me back (p. 119).

While Esslin insists that Burt has abandoned Rose, rather than the reverse ("Bert's account of his trip in his van clearly shows that his sexual energy is no longer focused on Rose; the van has ousted her from his affection."\(^1\)) there was never any evidence that any of Bert's sexual energy was ever focused on Rose; and in the absence of Bert's affection, and of Bert himself, Rose seems to have responded to the proffered affection of Riley. Moreover, Bert seems to understand that in contrast to Rose, his van is faithful to him. And though he never accuses Rose who never attempts to explain Riley's presence, Bert also may realize that Rose may no longer be dependent upon him though he has nothing but his van if she leaves him. He still is dependent upon her for his care and even for a sense of importance--she praises his bravery in going out, and his skill in driving (p. 98). But Bert, on

\(^1\)Esslin, p. 66.
the other hand, can perhaps be replaced by a blind Negro whom Bert obviously considers his inferior; "Lice," he calls out as he strikes him (p. 116). Bert may also suspect a past connection between Rose and Riley who seems about to make a confession ("Mr. Hudd, your wife--,") p. 116) when he is silenced by Bert who kicks him. Although both Martin Esslin and Ruby Cohn view Bert as triumphant, Bert, like Goldberg and McCann, has forcefully gained dominance that wins him little. But the real emphasis in this play is less on any dominant-subservient relationships than on the dramatization of fear in its half seen, half mysterious forms.

More enigmatic than Bert's violent reaction is, at the very end, Rose's blindness which places the final focus on the play's mystery. Her blindness which seems to link her to the blind Riley, comes at the very moment that severs any further connection as well as, perhaps, any further possibility for escape. Although the cause for Rose's blindness may be no less mysterious than Stanley's, his seems easier to understand because it occurs more gradually while hers happens so abruptly it seems wholly mysterious.

Without any connection to anything else that happens, Rose's sudden blindness at the end makes her final plight seem unavoidable. Unlike

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1 Though Bert shares an intimacy with his van that he does not (from anything we see) share with Rose, it is difficult to feel as Esslin describes it, that Bert's feelings about his van are a triumph over Rose: "The journey into the winter night becomes an act of intercourse with its own triumphant orgasm" (p. 66). Ruby Cohn seems closer to the text in her description of Bert and Rose as typical victim and villain: "Of the rival claimants for Rose, Riley and Bert, the latter bludgeons his way to triumph" (p. 56).
Stanley who may have had some choices in his dealings with others that might have kept him from destruction, Rose seems to have none; had she not allowed Riley entrance he might, as Mr. Kidd suggests, have entered when Bert was home and the outcome might have been no different. Hinchliffe, who maintains that "the play is not, finally, successful," seems nevertheless right in adding:

The play remains, however, a good piece of theater. The final explosion occurs so rapidly and so unexpectedly that the audience is left stunned, which is not a bad conclusion to a play.¹

For a first play that was written in only three or four days The Room is certainly fine theater. It contains an honest portrayal of the characters' fears coupled with light comic touches associated with Pinter's best dialogues. Moreover, Pinter's imaginative use of perfectly timed unexpected occurrences make even this first work (though not one of Pinter's best) better than much other contemporary drama.

The Birthday Party, as a first full-length drama, is a really remarkable work that was written when Pinter was still only twenty-eight. Even in this work which comes closer to melodrama than any of his later more mature pieces, Pinter has complete mastery over his craft and already begins to show signs of the kind of complexity in dominant-subservient relationships he later developed and explored more deeply.

¹Hinchliffe, p. 47.
Even here he handles with surety the dramatization of the ambiguous appearance of what can ultimately be construed as good and evil; Goldberg, perhaps more than any of Pinter's other characters appears to be evil, yet Pinter is careful to show that he may only be a pitiful victim of himself, a man who feels cheated because he overconformed to the lessons he believes society taught him.

Perhaps the best praise for these two works, and praise which is generally applicable to any of Pinter's work, is that his characters seem to live and are not mere contrivances of a master puppeteer. Moreover, Pinter himself seems cognizant of his talent along these lines, for in a description of the characters in The Birthday Party, a discarded play, Pinter seems to hit on one reason his characters in these two plays seem alive:

It was heavily satirical, and it was quite useless. I never began to like any of the characters, they really didn't live at all. So I discarded the play at once. The characters were so purely cardboard. I was intentionally--for the only time, I think--trying to make a point, an explicit point, that these were nasty people and I disapproved of them. And therefore they didn't begin to live. Whereas in other plays of mine every single character, even a bastard like Goldberg in The Birthday Party, I care for.  

1Pinter, Paris Review interview, p. 361.
Perhaps it is Pinter's ability to "care for" all of his characters that also keeps his work out of the realm of the purely didactic, as The Nouthouse presumably was. Yet Pinter does write drama with a tension between characters some of whom you care for more (Stanley, Rose) than others (Goldberg, McCann, Bert). And the complexity in these works makes them worth repeated viewing and reading.
CHAPTER 4

THE EARLY REVUE SKETCHES: BRIEFEST EXPRESSION OF DOMINANCE AND SUBSERVIENCE

Written for presentation in 1959, in the wake of The Birthday Party's bad reviews, the early revue sketches display in miniature some of Pinter's concerns already observed in the full-length works. When asked how he first got started writing revue sketches Pinter replied:

Well, I was asked. Disley Jones, of the Lyric, Hammersmith, had worked with me before on The Birthday Party, and when he became involved with planning a new revue for the theatre he asked me if I would care to contribute. I'd never done anything like that before, but I thought about it, and then wrote The Black and White, which along with The Last to Go, is my favourite among my sketches.¹

These sketches, as Pinter insists, are primarily about people, the way they talk to one another, what they say, imply, or fail to say:

I regard myself very much as an amateur revue-writer, a dramatist some of whose work just happens to fit into the framework of a revue. As far as I am concerned there is no real difference

between my sketches and my plays. In both I am interested primarily in people; I want to present living people to the audience, worthy of their interest basically because they are, because they exist, not because of any moral the author may draw from them.1

While Pinter's sketches may not differ essentially from his longer works, as in any very short work his sketch characters are drawn more as familiar types than as individuals, and his overriding concerns, dominance and subservience, mystery, sight and blindness, friendship and love, time, space and identity, are here often reduced to a mere suggestion or even absent altogether. Some of his concerns, such as the assertion of dominance, which may appear mild or nonexistent in the text, may, however, be much emphasized in actual production; in the Pinter People television production of Trouble in the Works, where Pinter took the part of Fibbs and seemed to do most of the directing, Fibbs, initially an overpoweringly dominant employer loses stature to Wills, the meek employee who gradually gains dominance as he informs Fibbs that the other employees are dissatisfied with the company's products and hate to make them. Wills states with growing confidence, "Well, I hate to say it, but they've gone vicious about the high speed taper shank spiral flute reamers."2

1Ibid., p. 9.

2Harold Pinter, A Night Out, Night School, Revue Sketches (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 92; subsequent references to these works will be to this edition and will appear in the text.
Interestingly, the Fibbs and Wills' exchange of dominant role, only mildly suggested in the text, is greatly emphasized in the Pinter People cartoon production, where Fibbs, originally drawn to many times the size of Wills, at the end appears a much shrunken figure collapsed behind his desk, before which looms the now much inflated figure of Wills who finally informs Fibbs that what the men want to make is "Love," ("Brandy balls" in the text, p. 93).

Pinter's other main concerns seem fairly absent in Trouble in the Works, which seems much more a vehicle for presenting the machine tool names that also happen to carry sexual connotations; Pinter describes the experience out of which the sketch grew:

So, I did do one day's work in an office once. Half a day. Job with machine part tools. In fact, Trouble in the Works came right out of that half day's work which made the work in the office well worth while. I had to copy down all the names of these machine part tools, extraordinary, half dog points, hemispherical rod ends and all that lot.¹

The Black and White, also sparked by actual experience, is a study in communication, or the lack of it, that only incidentally deals with dominance and subservience in the relation between the two tramp women:

Actually, I had had the two old tramp-women in the all-night cafe in my mind for years, ever since I used to live in the

¹From a tape of Pinter People.
East End and spend quite a lot of time wandering round the deserted town at night waiting for the all-night busses back home. In those days you find these curious night-wanderers who don't seem to be going anywhere or doing anything, though obviously they must have some interest in the future, even if it only keeps them going from moment to moment--till the next bus goes by, or the last paper is sold. They seem to be extraordinarily solitary, unable to communicate with each other or anyone else, and often not even wanting to.

In The Black and White dominance and subservience, which creates the mild tension in the sketch, is reduced to a few scattered lines uttered by the Second Woman who asserts her dominance as she simultaneously voices her fear of strangers to the subservient First Woman who responds defensively:

FIRST: The two-nine-four, that takes me all the way to Fleet Street.

SECOND: So does the two-nine-one. [Pause.] I see you talking to two strangers as I come in. You want to stop talking to strangers, old piece of boot like you, you mind who you talk to.

FIRST. I wasn't talking to strangers. (p. 95)

The Second Woman again mildly asserts dominance while this time implying perhaps a vague fear of the police:

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1"Mr. Harold Pinter . . .", p. 9.
SECOND: They took me away in the wagon once.

FIRST: They didn't keep you though.

SECOND: They didn't keep me, but that was only because they took a fancy to me. They took a fancy to me when they got me in the wagon.

FIRST: Do you think they'd take a fancy to me?

SECOND: I wouldn't back on it (p. 96).

Although the Second Woman is the more dominant, the actual antagonism between the two women is slight and without menace. And when the First Woman admits that many of Pinter's subservient characters do, "I wouldn't mind staying," she is reminded by the Second, "They won't let you" (p. 97). There is no argument--no point in arguing; the two women end in simply going their separate ways as the First observes:

It don't look like an all-night bus in the daylight, do it? (p. 97).

Her remark is both funny and sad.

Request Stop is also funny and sad by turns much as Pinter intended:

I want as far as possible to leave comment to the audience; let them decide whether the characters and situations are funny or sad. Take the woman in Request Stop. We've all met them, the people who talk to themselves in crowds, enlarging upon a slight or imagined grievance, making fragmentary attempts to communicate and slipping back into muttered protest. Is the reaction of other people to them, as they edge uneasily away, funny
or tragic? Obviously it can be both, but I think my job as dramatist is simply to present the situation shaped in dramatic terms, and let the audience decide for themselves.\(^1\)

In the Woman's familiar sounding harangue against the Small Man, Pinter dramatizes the uncomfortably comic qualities of someone attempting to assert dominance:

I beg your pardon, what did you say?

\(/{\text{Pause,}}{\text{}/}\)

All I asked was if I could get a bus from here to Shepherds Bush.

\(/{\text{Pause,}}{\text{}/}\)

Nobody asked you to start making insinuations (p. 97).

The Woman's attack quickly becomes menacing:

I've got better things to do, my lad, I can assure you. I'm not going to stand here and be insulted on a public highway.

Anyone can tell you're a foreigner. I was born just around the corner. (p. 98).

But her menace is quickly deflated when the woman she appeals to as a witness moves off without a word after a taxi. The entire crowd's refusal to respond to the woman turns the situation that might otherwise be amusingly menacing into one that becomes quietly pathetic. But though the sketch might have legitimately ended when the whole group runs off after a passing bus and leaves the Woman alone, Pinter continues it for one more line that rescues the growing pathos with a final odd, but comic twist that throws a mystery back over all the Woman's previous behavior; as another

\(^1\)Ibid.
man walks up to the bus stop, the woman, speaking "shyly, hesitantly, and with a smile," asks this time if she can get a bus not to Shepherds Bush, but to Marble Arch (p. 99). Could a woman "born just around the corner," not know a neighborhood bus route to Marble Arch? Does she stand at the bus stop all day in wait of passers by? With really remarkable economy Pinter manages to evoke all the changing responses and with a swift final stroke concludes by ambiguously implying several imaginative possibilities for the woman's behavior—all in well under four minutes!

The other of Pinter's favorites, Last to Go, presents two more familiar types whose attempts to communicate fail:

The whole point of The Last One to Go, /sic/ as far as it has a point, in the obvious sense is that the newspaperman and the stall-keeper talk to each other but they never communicate at all, a situation which is both funny and tragic, like any misunderstanding.¹

Unlike Request Stop, Last to Go, evokes the double response without any of the menace generated by the woman's outburst. The mood here is quiet as the men simply exchange information about nothing that seems very important, but what is in fact essential to each in his work—the kind of shop talk about jobs that occupy most of these man's lives; the barman recalls his busy spell, the man his last newspaper sold:

BARMAN: Yes, trade was very brisk here about ten.

MAN: Yes, I noticed.

Pause.

¹Ibid.
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.

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 (p. 100).

When the talk shifts to George, it hardly matters that each of the men has a different "George . . . whatsisname" in mind; they both seem to agree "he must have left the area" (p. 102).

The Applicant, turning again to the portrayal of one person's dominance over another, is the last of Pinter's early revue sketches that was published together with the others. Dealing with the familiar interview situation, and pushing it to some imaginative extremes, The Applicant, a combined study in the horrors of an inquisition and physical torment, is the most didactic of Pinter's sketches. It portrays the evils of dominance gained by a person representing some large organization which Lamb would like to join.

1Esslin discusses Pinter's other unpublished sketches, That's All, That's Your Trouble, Interview, Dialogue for Three, pp. 197-198.
The "essence of efficiency," Miss Piffs, who comes to interview the unfortunate Lamb, is, according to Martin Esslin, a direct descendant of Miss Cutts, the interviewer from Pinter's unpublished and admittedly didactic play *The Hothouse*. Even without the stage direction that Lamb is "striding nervously about," and without the name Lamb, Lamb is set up from his first line as the victim; when he answers Miss Piffs' "Ah, good morning," with "Oh, good morning, miss," he has already said too much and said it badly without matching Miss Piffs' forcefulness. A simple "good morning" might have been the first line of a character headed in a different direction.

Not only does this sketch contain the most obvious portrayal of the dominant-subservient relationship, but it also contains the most blatant of all sexual attacks by one of Pinter's women characters. One of the few questions Miss Piffs permits Lamb to answer, "Are you Virgo Intacta?" is immediately followed by the more direct, "Do women frighten you?" as she pushes the button for the second jolt of electricity that propels Lamb onto the floor. Moreover, in the *Pinter People* production, the cartoon character of Miss Piffs drifts to a horizontal and superior position above the prostrate Lamb.

*Special Offer*, the only other published early revue sketch and available only in Hinchliffe's *Harold Pinter*, is less a sketch than an extended joke that falls flat at the end. The main portion of the sketch is, however, a fair example of one form of Pinter's humor, where he takes a stock

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situation, here women for sale, and reverses it with appropriate changes so that it comes out comic. The men for sale are offered to a BBC secretary who describes how she was approached by an old crone:

It's an international congress, she said, got up for the entertainment and relief of lady members of the civil service. You can hear some of the boys we've got speak through a microphone, especially for your pleasure, singing little folk tunes we're sure you've never heard before. Tea is on the house and every day we have the very best pastries. For the cabaret at teatime the boys do a rare dance imported all the way from Buenos Aires, dressed in nothing but a pair of cricket pads. Every single one of them is tried and tested, very best quality, and at very reasonable rates. ¹

The virtual monologue continues with the terms and money back guarantee deal; and what is also humorous is the secretary's serious response to the old woman:

That's very kind of you, I said, but as a matter of fact I've just been on leave, I start work tomorrow and am perfectly refreshed. ²

The sketch which would have been more effective had it simply ended here, loses its impact when the secretary asks, after a pause, "Do you think

¹Hinchliffe, pp. 73-74.
²Ibid., p. 74.
it's a joke . . . or serious?" which is "kin to the more effective unspoken query raised at the end of many of Pinter's works.

Humorous, sad, realistically drawn studies of ordinary people in familiar conversation, the early revue sketches sometimes contain the concerns present in Pinter's full-length works. Among his major concerns, the assertion of dominance appears most prevalently in the sketches, and is occasionally combined with a twist of mystery added at the end. On the whole, however, the sketches with their sharp focus on the characters are more a brilliant little study of familiar chatter used to dramatize people whose talk fails to communicate.
CHAPTER 5

A SLIGHT ACHE: DOMINANCE AND SUBSERVIENCE EXPRESSED
IN THE COMPLEX EXCHANGE OF ROLES

First broadcast on radio during the same year (1959) the revue sketches were first presented, A Slight Ache contains a freshly imaginative, dense handling of all the themes and techniques already observed in Harold Pinter's previous plays. No longer are there easy distinctions between the dominant and subservient character (see Chapter 2, p. 21); instead, as dramatized in the several exchanges of roles, the characters may be interchangeable. Moreover, the dominant and subservient characters are both treated more sympathetically than in previous plays. Edward, originally dominant over the apparently subservient Flora, reveals a weakness (blindness, that begins as a slight ache in his eye) formerly associated only with the subservient character, while Flora, who gains dominance in the end, as does Ruth in The Homecoming, is the first of Pinter's characters to finally achieve dominance who is also portrayed as a sympathetic rather than villainous character.

Mystery, in the form of the Matchseller, and Edward's and Flora's different attitudes to him, is also more imaginatively handled here than in earlier plays; in the original radio version, since the Matchseller
has no lines, his very existence is questionable as is his potential menace which might only exist in the eye of the observer; Edward who sees the Matchseller as threatening is in fact destroyed when he invites him into his home, while Flora who views him as harmless seems to gather strength from his presence. Who is blind? Are you right if you think you are?

Time, space and identity are also more elusive and slippery qualities here than in any of Pinter's previous work. In the beginning Flora announces, "It's the height of summer," (p. 11) while at the end she tells the Matchseller (who Edward thinks has grown younger) "Summer is coming" (p. 40). Space and the objects that occupy it are moveable; the breakfast furniture simply disappears in order to focus the action on the scullery. Finally, the protean quality of identity is dramatized not only in Edward and Flora's exchange of dominant roles, but also in Flora's exchange of Edward for the Matchseller she calls Barnabas.

Edward, a strange and interesting combination of dominance and subservience, first appears dominant over Flora as he orders her about during the wasp killing; "Cover the pot," he commands (p. 11) before he resolves, "Well, let's kill it for goodness' sake" (p. 12). But his blindness or slight ache in his eye seems an appropriate ill for one who like Stanley, and perhaps Rose, Disson in Tea Party, and Gloucester in Lear, is blind to himself. While Edward is busy writing about time and space, the Belgian Congo and other far off places that absorb his interest, he has no knowledge of the passing seasons, of the plants growing in his garden, and, by extension, of himself. "You know perfectly well what grows in your garden," Flora tells Edward who proudly admits, "Quite the contrary. It is clear that I don't" (p. 10).
Not only is Edward partially blind, but also like other of Pinter's characters who become subservient in the end, Edward fears the out-of-doors; "It's very treacherous weather you know" (p. 10) he tells Flora who, by contrast, seems to glory in its being "the longest day of the year," "the height of summer" (p. 10), and herself seems in full bloom while Edward soon appears to wither.

Edward's dominance and attempts to maintain it are on the other hand much like Goldberg's--related to an identity based on position, for Edward a social position with which he attempts to impress the impassive Matchseller as is illustrated when he offers him a drink:


There are vague indications, however, that Edward, perhaps like Disson in Tea Party, may have acquired (not been born into) his social position, and also married above his station. Though Edward tries to impress the Matchseller with the large variety of chairs he has (p. 23), he reveals that the house furniture was all purchased at the same sale (p. 27); after advancing this information, Edward ambiguously suggests to him "You too, perhaps, you too" (p. 27). And though Edward displays a fleeting sympathy for the Matchseller when he tells him that he too was once struggling in commerce (p. 24), Edward, again like Goldberg, is more interested
in asserting dominance over the matchseller by making him sit; unlike Goldberg, however, Edward experiences no victory, only relief when he finally manages to force the Matchseller backward until he stumbles into a chair:

Aaah! you're sat. At last. What a relief. (p. 27)

Moreover, though Edward admits he is no squire ("I entertain the villagers annually, as a matter of fact. I'm not the squire but they look up to me with some regard" (p. 22) he also obliquely hints that Flora may be the former squire's daughter Fanny, "a flower" (Flora), who like Flora had a fine figure and "flaming red hair" (p. 23).

More central to Edward's identity than his position is his masculinity—what it means to be a man. In former times (hinted at in the village setting that until recently boasted of a squire), a man could prove himself in battle. But though Edward claims he formerly struggled "against all kinds of usurpers" (p. 35), his battles now are absurdly reduced to combat with a wasp, which he kills in a cowardly fashion, and a verbal combat with a matchseller whose silence, like the silence of the crowd against the Woman in Request Stop, makes Edward's assertion of dominance appear ludicrous and pathetic in the way the Woman's tirade was both funny and sad. As Agusta Walker asserts, the Matchseller may possess the manhood Edward lacks:

What makes a man? It is the struggle for life or at least
a struggle for something, and this wretched old fellow has had it.

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1 Agusta Walker, p. 8.
Even Edward admires the Matchseller's stoic endurance during the summer storm reminiscent of Lear on the heath:

There was a storm last week. A summer storm. He stood without moving, while it ranged about him (p. 21).

For Pinter too (expressed in his praise of Anew McMaster's interpretation of Lear) the heath scene embodies, in wonderful combination, the heroic, the tragic (dread) that is transfigured by gaity:

He understood and expressed totally the final tender clarity which is under the storm, the blindness, the anguish. For me his acting at these times embodied the idea of Yeats' line: "They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay, Gaity transfiguring all that dread."¹

Whether or not the Matchseller ever experiences that "final tender clarity," is only hinted at since he succeeds where Edward fails, and since he directly confronts the elements (and perhaps by extension, himself) in ways Edward clearly does not when Edward battles the wasp and attempts to confront the Matchseller. In the first battle, Edward vacillates between ordering Flora to do the actual killing and hoping that by doing nothing the problem will solve itself; first Edward orders Flora, "Put it in the sink and drown it;" then he hopes, "It's stuck. It'll drown where it is, in the marmalade," and again, "Bring it out on the spoon and squash it on the plate," (p. 13) he orders Flora who twice

¹Harold Pinter, Mac (Emanuel Wax for Pendragon Press, 1968), p. 15.
refuses, "It'll fly out and bite me" (p. 12); "It'll fly away. It'll bite" (p. 13).

When Edward finally resolves to kill the wasp himself, the method he uses, in contrast to the one's he suggested Flora use, involves no risk to himself—he pours the hot water down the spoon hole and claims he is "blinding him" (p. 14); Edward is clearly relieved by his action which seems a victory that also momentarily transfers his own blindness, or slight ache, to the wasp.

Edward's similar attempts to transfer, by projection, his blindness to the Matchseller are, however, unsuccessful, which indicates that the real problem of blindness is with Edward not his seeming opponent; Edward first wonders if the Matchseller has a glass eye (p. 25), then says of him to Flora (as Goldberg accuses Stanley):

He can't see straight (p. 29).

But in spite of all efforts to project his blindness onto the Matchseller the problem sticks to Edward who finally confesses that he looked at the Matchseller from all angles and with all kinds of glasses, as well as "bare eyed," (p. 37), but despite all efforts "to get to the bottom of it" (p. 19), he is still left with the unanswered question that is his last gasped utterance:

Who are you? (p. 39).

The question might just as easily have been, "Who am I?" which is precisely the question Edward staunchly avoids. Though he has some
momentary sympathy for the Matchseller (which it might be supposed could lead to some subsequent understanding of himself) when Flora asks how he is getting on with him ("He's a little . . . reticent. Somewhat withdrawn. It's understandable. I should be the same, perhaps, in his place" p. 28), Edward quickly eradicates this sympathy by asserting and defending until the end:

Though, of course, I could not possibly find myself in his place (p. 28).

The irony, that Edward is precisely in the Matchseller's place in the end, emphasizes the extent to which Edward is blind to himself.

Edward's view of the wasp and Matchseller, contrasted with Flora's seems to further emphasize Edward's inability to see himself and others. Where Edward views the wasp as "vicious" (p. 13), and seems unduly fearful, Flora is only prudently afraid that the cornered wasp will bite; where Edward projects onto the Matchseller his own failing sexuality when he refers to him as a bullock (pp. 19, 26), with a "great bullockfat of jelly" (p. 29), and conveys negative connotations of "bullock" as castrated bull or steer, Flora, who also mistakes the Matchseller for a "bullock let loose" (p. 17), and sees him "not at all like jelly" (p. 32), attaches to the Matchseller the more positive connotations of a young bull. In some senses then, the Matchseller is as Martin Esslin maintains:

The silent character acts as a catalyst for the projection of the others' deepest feelings. Edward in projecting his
thoughts is confronted with his inner emptiness and disintegrates while Flora projects her still vital sexuality and changes partners.¹

But Edward, alarmed with the Matchseller Flora finds harmless, avoids the confrontation with himself that both Esslin and Katherine Burkman² maintain Edward achieves; Edward, much like Goldberg (see Chapter 3, pp. 55-56) verges on, but finally and desperately avoids any recognition when he says:

You're shaking with grief. For me. I can't believe it.

For my plight (p. 37).

But instead of actually confronting the nature of his own "plight," Edward, like Goldberg, retreats into the refuge of again asserting dominance over another; "Come, come stop it. Be a man," Edward orders the Matchseller (p. 38). But it is clearly Edward who is having difficulty being a man. Then again, like Goldberg, Edward asserts that he is in superior health, with "excellent eyesight" (p. 38), while he blames something "in the airs," in the "change of air, the currents obtaining" between him and his object that prevents him from clearly seeing the Matchseller. Edward seems to fall from the exhaustion of his misguided attack on the Matchseller which should have been directed on himself.


²"Indeed, the play moves toward Edward's recognition of his identity with the Matchseller who has come to replace him," Katherine Burkman, "Harold Pinter's A Slight Ache as Ritual," Modern Drama, IX (1968), 329.
But Flora who then entices the Matchseller out ("I want to show you
my garden, your garden. You must see my japonica, my convolvulus . . .
my honeysuckle, my clematis" p. 39) before she exchanges Edward for
the Matchseller, is not unsympathetic in her dominance, her command of
the situation, as were Goldberg, Bert, or Ben before her. Nor is she
merely "solicitous" as Ruby Cohn maintains. Instead, she is more genuinely
attuned to Edward's plight and willing to help him than any of Pinter's
previous characters ever were toward another's problem.

From the first, though Edward obstinately refuses to admit his fear
of the Matchseller ("Of course he's harmless. How could he be other than
harmless? p. 16) Flora understands that he is intimidated by the presence
of the Matchseller at the back gate when Edward says:

For two months he's been standing on that spot, do you realize
that? Two months. I haven't been able to step outside the
back gate" (p. 15).

More important, Flora responds sympathetically by offering him more
realistic alternatives to his problem than any of Pinter's previous
characters have had. Several times she responds to Edward's request to
bring the Matchseller in by suggesting instead to "call the police" (pp. 19,
20) to have him removed. And even after she brings the Matchseller into
the house she prudently cautions, "Edward, are you sure it's wise to bother
about all this?" (p. 21). But again Edward refuses to listen to her advice

1 Ruby Cohn, p. 327.
as he obstinately insists on confronting him. Even after Edward sees him (after which he momentarily seeks refuge outside) Flora is still willing to show the Matchseller out:

Is this necessary? I could show him out now. It wouldn't matter (p. 28).

Only after Edward still refuses to take her advice, still maintains he is not afraid ("Me frightened of him?" p. 29), and finally deprecates her ("No you're a woman. You know nothing" p. 29), does Flora begin to change and decide like Edward to "get to the bottom of it" (p. 30).

Edward up to this point has rejected not only all of Flora's advice, but in his talk with the Matchseller he indicated his rejection of Flora as well, of her sexuality when he tells the Matchseller "You're no more repulsive than Fanny, the squire's daughter" (p. 27) whom he had earlier described in exactly the same terms he had described Flora when he told the Matchseller "Get a good woman to stick by you" (p. 24). Moreover, Flora seems to have been that good woman even up until the time when she tells Edward "You should trust your wife more" (p. 30). But after his steady rejection, Flora seems ready to test the Matchseller to see if he might not be a suitable substitute for Edward. As Ruby Cohn points out, Barnabas in Biblical terms means "son of consolation;" and like Kafka's Barnabas, the only villager admitted to the Castle, this Barnabas "replaces the master of the house and becomes the consolation of its mistress."

1 Ruby Cohn, p. 372.
The Matchseller seems to have more in common with Flora than does Edward; according to Katherine Burkman the day of St. Barnabas, June 11, in the old style calendar, was the day of the summer solstice, "while Barnaby-bright is the name for the shortest night of the year." ¹

Flora may, as Miss Burkman also suggests, represent "the fertility goddess," in "a mockery of the fertility ritual," while Edward represents "the dying winter season and Edwardian England." ² Miss Burkman may be correct in asserting that A Slight Ache is a parody of ritual drama but she fails to indicate the nature of the parody. It may be possible to suggest that the parody, though in some sense a mockery, is at base tragic; spring will return each year to the earth, but once gone from your own life, is gone forever. Both Edward's fall and Flora's attempt to re-capture the lost love of her youth and perhaps youth itself through the decrepit Matchseller both may dramatize such a point.

What brings about Edward's fall? Is it simply time for him to die? Has he brought it on himself by attempting to ask too many of the wrong kinds of questions which Gus, Stanley, Rose, and later Len (The Dwarfs), Aston (The Caretaker), and Disson (Tea Party) also ask but cannot answer? Hinchliffe thinks so, and feels that in asking questions Edward is a typical Pinter character doomed to fail. ³ Esslin, too, feels that all the elements in the play are stock Pinter situations, the intruder from the

¹ Katherine Burkman, p. 333.
² Ibid., p. 336.
³ Hinchliffe, pp. 68-70.
outside and the antagonism between two in a close relationship; moreover, the play's chief virtue, according to Esslin, is Pinter's demonstration that he has transcended the vernacular in the characters' speech. ¹

What all these critics ignore is the real, though subtle, difference between this play and Pinter's previous work; they also overlook the ambiguity that operates to the end. Edward has more choices open to him than any previous Pinter character as well as most other subsequent ones. Yet it is still possible that had he acted otherwise, on Flora's advice, the outcome would have been no different, especially if what happens to Edward is simply an unmasking of already existing qualities. And all the possibilities that might account for Edward's fall are left ambiguously open as mystery is again wedded to dominance and subservience through the final moments when Flora hands Edward the matchbox and walks off with Barnabas.

Is Flora better off in the end? Is the ending hopeful, an affirmation? Even Flora's position, though in some senses apparently better, is not clearly so. Both a negative and positive response to her final action seem simultaneously and ambiguously implied.

A Slight Ache is, to my mind, the best of Pinter's short works. As a dense handling of old themes and techniques presented in a much more complex way, the play seems to represent a clear and important jump in Pinter's development as a playwright.

¹Esslin, The Peopled Wound, p. 91.
CHAPTER 6

A NIGHT OUT: THE MOST REALISTIC EXPRESSION
OF DOMINANCE AND SUBSERVIENCE

A Night Out, written and produced for radio then television in 1960, two years after Pinter's revue sketches and A Slight Ache, is the only of his plays where mystery is wholly absent, and where dominance and subservience is reduced to some basic battles—a son's desperate attempts to gain dominance over his overly possessive mother, and his similar attempts with Gidney, a superior in his department at work.

The radio version, which left open the question of Albert's innocence or possible lechery with the office girl, may have been more successful by allowing at least some mystery the television version removes in the direction about Ryan: "It must be quite clear from the expression it was his hand which strayed" (p. 27). Without mystery, however, those who achieve dominance (the mother, Gidney, and in a sense Ryan), like those who do not (the girl, and except for a brief period with the girl, Albert), are less awesome than simply pitiful since their

1 As Hinchliffe notes: "There is no mystery in the play; the dreams of both the tart and Albert we know to be only dreams, the photograph is identified by the inscription on the back, and even the person who interfered with Eileen is identified in the directions for the television production," p. 78.
actions are understandably motivated by feelings of inadequacy and of being trapped in the narrow limits of their worlds.

The play opens with Albert and his mother desperately avoiding communication by means of what Pinter terms "continual evasion":

We have heard many times that tired, grimy phrase: Failure of communication" ... and this phrase has been fixed to my work quite consistently. I believe the contrary. I think that we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is a continual evasion, desperate rear guard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves.\(^1\)

Although Albert is obviously preparing to go out (he is combing his hair, brushing his shoes) the mother avoids acknowledging his leaving and in her way communicates her desire to keep him home by treating him like a boy--she mocks his grooming then assigns him the chore of replacing a light bulb:

MOTHER: Cleaning your shoes? I'll have to put the flag out, won't I? What are you looking for?

ALBERT: My tie. The striped one, the blue one.

MOTHER: The bulb's gone in Grandma's room (p. 8).

Not until several pages later does the mother, with "shocked surprise," discover, "You're going out?" (p. 5). Her attempts to make Albert stay are also aimed at making him feel guiltily responsible for

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\(^1\)Pinter, Evergreen Review, p. 82.
her and for his own actions. She would rather he put the bulb in Grandma's room (though Grandma has been dead ten years, though he is freshly dressed and the bulbs are in the blackened dirty basement), than release him. She, like Ryan, is at an age to retire--she from the motherhood of having a young boy, and he from the firm--but both manage to extend their influence beyond their time by devious means involving a kind of destructive sexuality. "Are you leading a clean life?" the mother asks her grown son a question reminiscent of Miss Piffs' question to Lamb in The Applicant (see Chapter 4, p. 76); "You're not messing about with girls?" (p. 7) the mother asks a question Flora, for example, would never ask (see Flora's comment to the old Matchseller, "Does it ever occur to you sex is a very vital experience to other people?" A Slight Ache, p. 32). Apparently, however, for Albert, too, sex is to be shunned; "Don't be ridiculous," he says to his mother then adds, "I don't know any girls" (p. 7), which in several senses is true.

In the second scene, waiting for Albert to join them to go to the party, Seeley and Kedge discuss the office team's Saturday game where Albert's poor playing resulted in the team's defeat. Although in former Pinter plays such details might only be hinted at, they are all present here as reproduction of realistic-sounding dialogue; but the details make it unmistakably clear that Gidney, a man of superior rank at the office and also something of the team's coach, is out to get Albert. Seeley, who is Albert's only real friend (and also the only example of such a selfless friend in all of Pinter's plays) attempted to shield
Albert from defeat at the game, as he later attempts to defend Albert against Gidney's unjust attack against him at the party; Seeley says to Kedge:

I said to Gidney myself, I said, look, why don't you go left back, Gidney? He said no, I'm too valuable at center (p. 10).

Gidney, who put Albert in the left back position, may have been just as responsible for Albert's poor performance in a position not normally his, as Albert was himself. The scene between Seeley and Kedge, then, builds up a kind of tension by making it clear that Albert is treading on thin ice that seems doomed to break with Albert's first slip.

The third scene reveals Albert still home trying to get away from his mother who insists he brush his clothes, have a handkerchief in his breast pocket, and straighten his tie before she will pronounce him a "gentleman," and allow him to leave; her hanging onto his tie reveals her obvious sexual attachment to him while her insistence that he look like a "gentleman" shows that she, like Gidney and later the girl, are all attached to narrowly middle-class values where they each seek to imitate how they believe the "respectable" (p. 39), "gentleman" (p. 13), and "lady" (p. 30) with "breeding" (pp. 30, 39), dress and behave.

The fourth scene returns to Kedge who tries unsuccessfully to engage Seeley in a discussion of Albert's shortcomings, especially his touchiness whenever his mother is mentioned. When Albert finally appears, saying he does not want to go to the party, what coaxing does not accomplish Kedge's
taunt does: "You frightened Gidney'll be after you, then, because of the game?" (p. 15). The three men head off for the party while the scene shifts back to the mother who is alone playing patience beside a clock.

The second act opens at the party in honor of Ryan whose presence is hardly felt; while in contrast, Gidney's dominance in the department is quickly established as King, now the senior member of the department, carries on about the merits of bicycling to work only to be challenged by Gidney, who drives to work and says of cycling, "Not so good in the rain" (p. 18). Gidney's dominance in the scene is clear when in the next instant King moves into adopting Gidney's attitude:

I drive too, of course, but I often think seriously of taking up cycling again. I often think very seriously about it you know (p. 19).

Having failed to impress Gidney and the girls with his views on the subject of cycling, or with the fact that he, too, owns a car, King later approaches the youngest members of the department, the clerks Horne and Barrow, and makes them an empty offer that is obviously only intended to impress them with the fact that he owns a boat:

You interested in sailing, by any chance? You're quite welcome to come down to my boat at Poole, any weekend--do a bit of sailing along the coast (p. 23).

Shortly afterward, Gidney puts Joyce, one of the secretaries, up to embarrassing Albert by asking him to dance; but also Gidney's showing off to Joyce as he does may reveal that Gidney is little better off than Albert:
Anyway, I'm thinking of moving on. You stay too long in a place you go daft. After all, with my qualifications I could go any where (p. 22).

Albert asks the obvious question here, "Then why don't you?" when Gidney repeats his boast to him adding that he could also be a "professional cricketer" (p. 22), but adds "I don't want to" (p. 22).

Perhaps Gidney has more possibilities open to him than Albert, but not many more. He like the others, save Seeley, are revealed as petty and mean, but for perhaps understandable reasons that make them also seem rather pathetic while Albert seems an even more pathetic scapegoat for their own inadequacies.

Ryan's touching Eileen and allowing the blame to fall on Albert who may consequently lose his job, seems only a last ditch effort of a company man to make his slight presence felt once more before he retires.

Gidney, who under the guise of gallantry tries to engage Albert in a battle over the "lady's" honor, may have nice shoes (pp. 19-20), a car, and a line with which to impress the secretaries in the office, but the fact that he even tries to impress them may also indicate that he can do little better than Albert. And unable to goad Albert with the subjects of the girl's honor, and his poor playing in Saturday's game, Gidney finally calls Albert (who strikes him) a "mother's boy" (p. 30). The audience sympathy is with Albert who is being obviously bullied; but Gidney does not seem altogether wrong in his accusation though his undue anger may possibly be brought on by his own insecurity on the subject.
Moreover, his vehemence is so strong that he may actually use whatever power he has to have Albert dismissed (p. 30).

The next scene opens with Albert's return to his mother who accuses him of "mucking about with the girls" (p. 31) as she carries on an almost exhausting tirade against what she imagines to be Albert's unclean life, as well as his obviously unkempt appearance, until Albert finally "lunges to the table, picks up the clock and violently raises it above his head," after which follows "a stifled scream from the mother" (p. 33). The probability here, as with Stanley after his apparent act of violence against Lulu, is that Albert may have killed her.

The third act opens with Albert being picked up by a girl who, like Lulu, turns out to have many of the same qualities of the mother, or of Meg before her. When Albert coughs violently the girl says, "Oh, please don't do that! Use your handkerchief!" (p. 8); but when she herself "belches" (p. 39), she excuses it as a hiccup resulting from not eating (p. 39). She may be starving; and her plight seems just as pitiful as all the others in Albert's life. Also like the others who assert dominance, she attempts to impress Albert with her notions of "breeding," but then wonders that "solicitor's wives go out and pick up men when their husbands are out on business!" (p. 39), and is "fascinated" with the question "How far do men's girlfriends go? I've often wondered" (p. 39). But she herself lacks the wherewithall to conclude the deal; "Yes, I suppose we might as well..." she says several times without finishing (pp. 39, 39).
Albert, however, seems too preoccupied with his own recent problems even to follow her suggestion—perhaps both of them would rather not be called upon to perform. He instead responds to a combination of free associations (with the clock on the girl's mantel that reminds him of the clock with which he struck his mother) and of the girl's act (her continued nagging, "Mind your ash! Don't spill it all over the floor! I have to keep this carpet immaculate;" her command, "Sit down, sit down. Don't stand about like that" p. 41; and finally her cutting remark "There's something childish about your face, almost retarded" p. 42), that all provoke Albert to "hand screw his cigarette out" before he ''lets it fall on the carpet" (p. 42). Her outrage at this then provokes Albert into finally releasing the flood of his pent up frustration; "Just because you're a woman you think you can get away with it" (p. 42). This initial outburst triggers more free associations to all the other injustices he recently suffered beginning and ending with his mother's: "It's the same business about the light in Grandma's room;" then a reference to the secretary he supposedly touched, "You haven't got any breeding. She hadn't either" (p. 43); followed by a recollection of Gidney's last insult, "I've got as many qualifications as the next man;" before finally returning to the subject of his mother, "I finished her" (p. 43), though he finally admits, "I loved her" (p. 44).

After Albert then reveals the sham about the photograph—that it is of the girl herself, not her daughter as she claims—the worst ignominy he makes the girl suffer is to force her to put his shoes on him.
The momentary dominance he gains with the girl is lost almost as soon as Albert returns home to find his mother alive, but only hurt because her son raised his hand against her. Albert seems to have lost his battle to escape on his night out though Esslin maintains another possibility is open:

And when he returns home from his wild night out, the mother is still there and not even the extreme acts of violence to which he resorted has been able to free him. Or has it?

That is the question with which we are left.¹

As the play ends with the mother telling Albert what a good boy he is while she strokes his hand, Albert seems finally defeated and in her power. But like all the others who assert dominance over Albert, the mother is no more than a sadly pathetic, lonely old woman living in a world narrowly centered about Albert.

The clarity that the play gains from the absence of mystery seems to add little; and Albert, so heavily burdened with the guilt his mother may have forced upon him, fairly attracts bullies, who like most bullies, are revealed at close range to be rather pathetic. Moreover, the rich possibilities that can account for character motivation in plays containing mystery are lost here where characters act from accurately, almost simplistically familiar and predictable motives that reflect their individual inadequacies.

¹Esslin, The Peopled Wound, p. 94.
Despite the play's many naturalistic qualities, it nevertheless remains a Pinter drama, though not typical, nor perhaps one of his best; and as Hinchliffe¹ and Esslin² note, the play enjoyed enormous success as a television play when it first appeared. Certainly the comic qualities of the dialogue rescue the dramatization of dominance from pathos. There is still that basic complexity in all the characters that prevents any from being purely evil—we can understand why they each act as they do. That Pinter never again returned to such wholly realistic writing may, however, possibly indicate his own dissatisfaction with this work.

¹Hinchliffe notes that A Night Out played to a record television audience of between fifteen and eighteen million, p. 75.

²Esslin, The Peopled Wound, p. 91.
CHAPTER 7

THE CARETAKER: DOMINANCE AND SUBSERVIENCE EQUATED

No other play by Harold Pinter evoked such a wide variety of opposing critical interpretation as The Caretaker; the play fairly means something different to each critic, perhaps to each viewer. For Ruby Cohn, who still tries to fit this work into her system of victims and villains, the two brothers, representing the System villainously victimize the old tramp Davies:

Instead of allowing an old man to die beaten, the System insists on tantalizing him with faint hope, thereby immeasurably increasing his final desperate anguish.¹

Responding directly to this statement, Arnold Hinchliffe maintains, "This seems to be willful and perverse as an interpretation;"² he then adds, "Cosmic implications are out of place in The Caretaker," and concludes, "Pinter's tramps do not discuss cosmic matters."³ Martin Esslin, on the other hand does draw cosmic significance from the play's realism:

Here, as in the experience of a spectator confronted with a slice of real life which he is made to see in blinding

¹Ruby Cohn, p. 67.
²Hinchliffe, p. 103.
³Ibid., p. 105.
clarity, the real old man, the real ordinary apple, become archetypes of cosmic significance, and illuminated areas of knowledge and experience that had up to that moment remained dark and void of significance. 1

The diversity of interpretation indicated in this brief sampling is nicely balanced by Pinter’s own quite consistent views about the cosmic or symbolic significance in the play as well as his similar views about the audience reaction to the three characters. Pinter cautions generally against symbolic interpretation of The Caretaker:

I’ve gotten a number of letters I’ve had to respect about the symbols in this bloody play, but I feel very strongly about the particular, not about symbolism. People watching plays tend to make characters into symbols and put them up on the shelf like fossils. It’s a damnd sight easier to deal with them that way. 2

Pinter consistently insists that the play is about very specific people, and that the emphasis is not on anything the characters might stand for, but on their relations with each other:

I have never been conscious of allegorical significance in my plays, either while or after writing. I have never intended any specific religious reference or been conscious

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of using anything else. "Mankind caught between the Old
Testament God and the New Testament God," makes no sense
whatever to me in relation to The Caretaker.

Even more diverse than the critical reaction to the play as a whole
is the critical reaction to the characters who have each been termed sym-
pathetic or menacing by one or another critic. The almost Chekhovian
shifting of characters in different scenes accounts for shifting audience
response; as Hinchliffe notes:

As the unreality and unworthiness of Davies appear,
the characters of the two brothers are also brought out,
and our sympathies are constantly shifting.

But Hinchliffe also finds these shifting sympathies both the play's virtue
and its vice:

The shifting sympathies of the audience are at once the
virtue and vice of the play: the virtue because they
mirror the complexity of life; the vice, because they
lead back to subjective taste.

Hinchliffe apparently intends the term "subjective" to carry nega-
tive connotations; whereas Pinter (Chapter IV, p. 72, where he says the

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2Hinchliffe, p. 96.
3Ibid., p. 104.
Woman in *Request Stop* can be viewed as both funny and sad) frequently precisely intends a certain subjectivity of response. That is not to say that his plays can mean anything at all, or that his characters are not drawn to evoke certain very specific responses (funny and sad are quite specific); but the real problem here again seems to be with an either/or kind of interpretation, that is, with the feeling that it is necessary to choose between two opposing characters in a relationship to decide that one character is sympathetic or not, and then to conclude that the other must, therefore, be the opposite. Pinter himself never intended so simple a response here; and he clearly finds no difficulty in admitting that our sympathies can be, for example, with both Aston and Davies at the end:

Aston isn't crazy. It's difficult for him but he makes an attempt to be friendly and it just doesn't work. When he turns his back at the end you know he'll never try again.

The tramp in turn, is too suspicious, too selfish to respond. When he finally realizes it's his only chance to escape loneliness, it's too late. You sympathize with both. 1

Pinter's own experience may account for his really fine sympathetic and complex portrayal of the relationship between the tramp and the two

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1 Frances Herridge, "Across the Aisle; Pinter Talks about The Care-taker," New York Post (October 26, 1961), p. 27.
brothers. Pinter, who was briefly a caretaker, and like Davies once went under another name, David Baron, seems to appreciate both Aston's attempts to help as well as the tramp's aversion to work and his problems with his identity. When asked if anything in The Caretaker had been drawn from actual experience, Pinter replied:

I'd met quite a few tramps--you know, just in the normal course of events, and I think there was one particular one... I didn't know him very well, he did most of the talking when I saw him. I bumped into him a few times, and about a year or so afterward he sparked this thing off.  

Pinter's original intention was to have one of the characters die by violence at the hands of the other at the end:

At the end of The Caretaker, there are two people alone in a room, and one of them must go in such a way as to produce a sense of complete separation and finality. I thought originally that the play must end with the violent death of one at the hands of the other. But then I realized, when I got to the point, that the characters as they had grown could never act in this way.  

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1 An early profile on Pinter describes his caretaker experience in 1958: "Pinter by now married and with a child on the way, was living at that time in near-destination as the caretaker of a Notting Hill basement," "Profile: Playwright on his Own Success," The Observer (September 15, 1963), p. 13.

2 A birth announcement for Pinter's son gives Pinter's name only as David Baron in The Stage (February 3, 1958), p. 8.

3 Pinter, Paris Review interview, p. 353.

More specifically Pinter thought it might be the tramp who dies, but he recognized that his writing had developed beyond the point of his earlier theatrics; and he again insists that the play is about the human situation involved in the relationship between the two specific men:

The original idea was to end the play with the violent death of the tramp. It suddenly struck me that it was not necessary. And I think that in this play I have developed, that I have no need to use cabaret turns and blackouts and screams in the dark to the extent that I enjoyed using them before. I feel that I can deal, without resorting to that kind of thing, with a human situation. I do see this play as merely a particular human situation, concerning three particular people, and not incidentally, symbols. ¹

Written and produced in 1960, the same year A Night Out was first presented, Harold Pinter's second full-length play, The Caretaker contains the most subtle portrayal of all his main concerns presented in his plays to that date. Aston, who invites Davies into his room, is almost forced out before he finally withdraws his offer of a room and a job as caretaker, a job which Mick also offers and withdraws from Davies. But here

¹From an interview with Kenneth Tynan, quoted in Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 212.
for the first time in Pinter's work the final dominance gained by the
two brothers is portrayed as little different from the final subservience
of the tramp; both dominance and subservience are here forms of failure.

In the constantly shifting relationship between the three men, Aston
first appears to be dominant over Davies who, though at first humbly
subservient and grateful, soon becomes diffident and almost gains dom-
inance over Aston by virtually taking over his room as he makes it un-
comfortable for Aston to remain home. But realizing, perhaps, that he
is being moved out, that he and the tramp cannot get along, and that
the room is his, Aston regains his room and dominance as he turns his
back on Davies. And Aston's dominance represents his failure to make
human contact with the tramp. Mick, on the other hand, is an erratic
mixture of dominance and subservience; he is at first wholly dominant
over Davies as he terrorizes him until he screams when he uses a strong-
arm hold on Davies that serves as Mick's introduction (p. 28). After
frightening Davies for a second time, with a vacuum cleaner (p. 45),
Mick offers a kind of friendship as he offers Davies a sandwich (p. 47);
then he actually humbles himself before Davies when he asks him his
advice:

Uuh . . . listen . . . can I ask your advice. I mean,
you're a man of the world. Can I ask your advice about
something? (p. 48).

But Mick's rejection of Davies at the end, like Aston's, is a show of
dominance that reflects his inner failings to make human contact as well
as his outer, more superficial failing to realize his dreams of redecorating.
Mystery, formerly important in creating ambiguity, is here reduced to the mystery about what Mick actually does (though when asked Pinter replied, "All I know is that whatever he did, he had his own van."\(^1\)) and to the mysterious sound that terrorizes Davies, but turns out to be a vacuum cleaner. The most important aspect of mystery, however, is the mysterious nature of identity.

The identity of each of the characters is illusive and uncertain. Davies confesses to Aston that Bernard Jenkins is an assumed name, but it is the name which he then tells Mick is his, meanwhile he is anxious to get to Sidcup to get papers, because he says, "They prove who I am!" (p. 19). The name shifts, however, are only symptomatic of deeper identity problems reflecting the illusion and pretense Davies must keep up to avoid realizing that he is a tramp who does perhaps stink (p. 70). Aston has similar illusions about himself in his belief that he once had something he now has lost. He believes he once had extremely clear sight and an ability to talk to other people easily; he says, "I used to get the feeling I could see things . . . very clearly," but adds, " . . . this clear sight . . . it was . . . but maybe I was wrong" (p. 55). It is thus not certain that Aston's sight was formerly different or better than it is now. He may be ironically wrong about his loquaciousness too, because he hardly seems at a loss for words when he wishes to speak. But like Davies who would like to blame his inability to do anything on everyone else's failure to provide him with a pair of shoes, Aston blames most of his inability to accomplish anything on the asylum doctors who he believes robbed him of his faculties.

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\(^1\) Hewes, p. 97.
Mick's illusions are the most grandiose. He wants to turn the small dwelling into a "penthouse" even a "palace" (p. 60); and he, too, is quick to misplace the blame for failure onto Davies whom he dismisses because he is not an interior decorator, when it is clear that Mick requires more than a decorator to realize his dreams--his own plans, after all, are concretely clear enough:

I'd have teal-blue, copper and parchment linoleum squares. I'd have those colours re-echoed in the walls. I'd off-set the kitchen units with charcoal-grey worktops. Plenty of room for cupboards for the crockery. We'd have a small wall cupboard, a large wall cupboard, a corner wall-cupboard, a corner wall cupboard with revolving shelves. You wouldn't be short of cupboards. You could put the dining-room across the landing, see? Yes. Venetian blinds on the window, cork floor, cork tiles. You could have an off-white pile linen rug, a table in ... in afromosia teak veneer, sideboard with matt black drawers, curved chairs with cushioned seats, armchairs in oatmeal tweed, beech frame settee with a woven sea-grass seat, white topped heat-resistant coffee table, white title surround (p. 60).

Mick goes on with an equally detailed description of the bedroom.

As the play opens, Mick appears briefly as a mysterious intruder in Aston's room and slips out unnoticed as Davies and Aston enter. The relationship between these two thrives best in the beginning, so
long as Davies responds gratefully to Aston's Semaritan kindness:

If you hadn't come out and stopped that Scotch git,
I'd be inside the hospital now. I'd have cracked
my head on that pavement if he'd landed (p. 10).

Later Davies even adds:

Anyway, I'm obliged to you letting me have a bit
of a rest, like . . . for a few minutes (pp. 10-11).

Ut if soon becomes quite clear that Davies who is diffident and
proud will not long be able to accept the friendship and the room
with such a grateful subservience, even if Aston's dominance is full
of humility and good intentions. Soon, Davies no longer offers
praise and thanks but only insults for Aston's efforts because Davies'
image of himself and sense of worth come, in part, from feeling superior
to "them Blacks," "Greeks," and "Poles" (p. 8)—a feeling which Davies
later turns against Aston. But his taunts only destroy the relation-
ship and Davies' chance of remaining in the room:

You think you're better than me you got another think
coming. I know enough. They had you inside one of
those places before, they can have you inside again!
All they have to do is get the word (p. 67).

As Esslin notes, this pride results in Davies' downfall:

Weak and best by terrible feelings of inferiority, he simply
cannot resist the temptation to take advantage of Aston's
confession; confronted with a man who has been to a mental
hospital, who admits his inadequacy, Davies is unable to
react with sympathy, with gratitude for the maimed man's kindness, his offer of friendship. He must enjoy the thrill of treating his benefactor with the superiority of the sane over the lunatic. Transferred to the lower levels of contemporary society, this is the hubris of Greek tragedy which becomes the cause of Davies' downfall.¹

Davies finally boasts, "I never been inside a nuthouse!" (p. 67).

Even before his taunts, Davies increasingly rejects Aston's favors in ways that also destroy his chances of staying. Aston, who claims he hardly speaks to anyone, and who spends most of his time collecting and repairing junk, proffers a sort of friendship to Davies whom he then tries to set in working order. He offers him a cigarette to help him "loosen up," (p. 8), a bed and a room so he can get himself "fixed up" (p. 16), money (p. 19), shoes so he can get to Sidcup (p. 15), clothes (p. 38), and more shoes (p. 64). But Davies increasingly rejects each of these. He does not smoke cigarettes, but accepts the tobacco for his pipe which he never lights (pp. 8, 12). He finds the bed draughty from the first and remains pretty inflexible on that point; "It isn't me has to change, it's that window" (p. 53), he says and even goes so far as to ask Aston for his bed (p. 76). He forgets almost at once about the money and asks for more the first morning (p. 26). He rejects the first pair of shoes out of hand without trying them on; and

¹Esslin, The Peopled Wound, p. 100.
though he later accepts the red velvet smoking jacket out of the bundle of clothing Aston buys for him, he refuses the shirt because, as he says, "I need a kind of shirt with stripes, a good solid shirt with stripes going down" (p. 41).

Davies unleashes a long series of complaints to Mick against Aston just before Aston arrives with a second pair of shoes. First Davies complains that he is very sensitive about being ignored by Aston; but there seems some justification and insight in Davies' last line which refers to Aston's madhouse confession:

Couple of week ago . . . he sat there, he give me a long chat . . . about a couple of week ago. A long chat he give me. Since then he ain't hardly said a word. He went on talking there . . . I don't know what he was . . . he wasn't looking at me, he wasn't talking to me, he don't care about me. He was talking to himself! (p. 59).

Next Davies accuses Aston to Mick, "He's got no feelings!" (p. 62); but his accusation might just as accurately apply to himself. Finally Davies blames Aston for his failure; "I got to sort myself out," he says as he blames his lethargy on Aston who wakes him in the night because he claims his jabbering in his sleep wakes him; "But when I wake up in the morning I ain't got no energy. And on top of that I ain't got no clock" (p. 63).

Aston's arriving with the shoes after all this tends to offset Davies' criticism, especially since Davies then complains that the shoes have no laces; and even when Aston gives him some, he compains
that he can't wear black shoes with brown laces (p. 65). Davies does begrudgingly accept Aston's last favor, and too late even realizes his mistake in being ungrateful; in his last plaintive efforts to remain at Aston's, Davies says:

I'll tell you what though . . . them shoes . . . them shoes you give me . . . they're working out all right . . . they're all right. Maybe I could . . . get . . . down . . . (p. 78).

But Davies was never quite willing to put up with the draft from the window and in his earlier awkward attempt to sympathetically understand Aston's reason for keeping the window open at night, he blunders onto the painful subject of the madhouse as he suggests they switch beds:

I'll be out of the draught see, I mean you don't mind a bit of wind, you need a bit of air. I understand that, you being in that place that time, with all them doctors and all they done, closed up, I know the places, too hot, you see they're always too hot, I had a peep in one once, nearly suffocated me, so I reckon they'd be the best way out of it, we swap beds . . . (p. 76).

Aston simply says, "I like sleeping in this bed" (p. 76), as he turns his back on the old man.

Aston offered shelter and a kind of friendship to the old man who rejected both by being petty and mean. It is, however, a mistake to view Aston as a thoroughly selfless man without a fault, or, as Ray Orley does, to find Aston's goodness menacing because it is so extraordinary:
Aston is so good, so patient, that it is menacing because it is unfamiliar.\footnote{Ray Orley, "Pinter and Menace," \textit{Drama Critique}, II (Fall 1968), 138.}

Aston is really not without fault; he too lacks a certain sensitivity and the ending reflects not only the tramps's failure but also Aston's as well.

Aston's offers are always on his own terms, which might not be unreasonable, perhaps, to someone else, but are too much for Davies, who even before he is offered the bed says he is "very sensitive" to draughts (p. 11). Moreover Aston does not offer him the room on equal terms--there is never any discussion about the window which Aston allows Davies to close only once very briefly during a rain. The room is simply Aston's, and Davies as a guest must comply with Aston's rules.

Aston has other shortcomings which are also reflected not only in the end when he turns his back on Davies, but also earlier when he withdraws from him, as Davies describes it to Mick, after the madhouse confession. Aston's several confessions to Davies may reveal more about Aston than Aston can comfortably live with. First, Aston confesses that he was once approached by a woman who said, "How would you like me to have a look at your body?" (p. 24). And Davies, not understanding Aston's discomfort in being the target of the woman's advances, takes Aston's confession to be a boast which he feels challenged to top; "They've said the same thing to me" (p. 25).
But when Aston tells Davies his madhouse story, his withdrawal from Davies afterward may indicate that both Aston and Davies were uncomfortably embarrassed by the confession; although, had Davies responded differently to the story he may have been able to stay. Incidentally, too, Pinter warns against believing everything Aston says; he also describes the purpose of the scene as non-didactic:

Well, I had a purpose in the sense that Aston suddenly opened his mouth. My purpose was to let him go on talking until he was finished and then . . . bring down the curtain. I had no ax to grind there. And the one thing that people have missed is that it isn't necessary to conclude that everything Aston says about his experiences in the mental hospital is true.¹

As Pinter also describes the characters, Aston wants something more of Davies than Davies can give him:

They've much in common with all of us. It's almost impossible for one person to enter into another's life, don't you agree. When someone tries to share his experiences or disasters with us we listen to them, but always with detachment. And he wants so much more than that.²

Aston receives no sympathetic understanding from Davies, only taunts. Davies' distrustfulness, even his selfishness, which enabled him to

¹Pinter, Paris Review interview, p. 362.

²Herridge, p. 27.
survive on the outside make him unfit company on the inside. But Aston too lacks deep sympathetic understanding of the tramp's weaknesses. And he withdraws at the end when the old man needs him most. When Aston returns for the last time and finds his Buddha smashed and the tramp still there, Aston and Mick exchange a glance and fleeting smile (Aston has no way of knowing that Mick, not Davies, smashed the Buddha); but even Aston's tie with his own brother is brief, though each defended the other from the insults of the tramp. Aston turns away and Mick quickly leaves him alone with the old man. Aston who was formerly attached to the clay figure and attempted an attachment with a man, now, like Joey the Mechanical Boy, retreats to his corner to repair a broken electrical plug. But the old man required more than mechanical repairs in his need to be out of the draught, or not to be treated as subservient. And when Aston turns his back on Davies it is in many ways as much his failure as the tramp's that he failed to make human contact.

Mick's failure is similar to his brother's and occurs for some similar reasons. With his erratic and arbitrary behavior, alternating between fits of violence and proffered friendship toward Davies, and aloofness from his own brother, Mick relates to the old man only as he imagines him—as an uncle, a confessor, an advisor, an interior decorator. When Mick, like Aston, confesses his deepest feelings to the tramp, he too may feel embarrassed, as Aston does; and he would rather blame the old man than himself for his own inability to realize his deepest wishes. In a growing fit of anger Mick finally turns on
Davies and says:

You're the only man I've told, about my dreams, about my deepest wishes, you're the only one, and I told you because I understood you're a first class professional interior and exterior decorator (p. 72).

Mick's inability to see and accept Davies as he is reflects his inability to see himself and his dreams for what they are; he may be more successful in a worldly way than his brother; he does after all own his own van and probably the deed to the house. But it is interesting that even this last point is less clear in the final version of the play than in the earlier one where not only Mick but Aston too mentions Mick's ownership; Aston's madhouse confession originally concluded as follows where the underlined portions, describing Mick's ownership of the house, are now omitted from the present version of the text:

The think is I should have been dead. I should have died. And then anyway, after a time, I got a bit better, and I started to do things with my hands, and then about two years ago I came here, because my brother had got this house and so I decided to have a go at decorating it, so I came into this room, and I started to collect wood, for my shed, and all these bits and pieces that I thought might come in handy for the flat, or around the house, sometime. I feel better now. I don't talk to anyone ... like that. I've often
thought of going back and trying to find out who did that to me. But I want to do something first. I want to build that shed out in the garden.¹

By introducing some doubt about Mick's ownership of the house even his worldly success is in doubt; and his dreams for the house are not only slick paper reflections of commercial advertising, as Marjorie Thompson points out,² but may be to no purpose if the house is not his. In his rage against Davies because he is not a decorator Mick smashes the Buddha, one of his brother's most cherished possessions and his one attempt to decorate the room. Mick's apparent violence in his rejection of Davies at that moment makes him a man less to be feared than pitied.

In its dramatized complexity The Caretaker ranks with The Homecoming and A Slight Ache as one of Pinter's best works. The complex handling of dominance and subservience which are here equated represents a significant clinamen in Pinter's work where here the blame for the failure seems distributed equally. The three characters, on a treadmill of action that ends as it began, each represents a kind of personal failure. Mick will not, at the rate he is going, ever realize his dreams of redecorating the house; Davies can no longer remain in the house; and Aston may never get his toolshed built. More important, each has failed to make human contact.

¹Hinchliffe uses the original version (New York, 1961), p. 34, as his text. After "I don't talk to people now" the present text reads "I steer clear of places like that cafe" (p. 57)—where he found Davies.

²Marjorie Thompson, "The Impage of Youth in Contemporary Drama," Modern Drama, VII (1964), 348.
CHAPTER 8

NIGHT SCHOOL: DOMINANCE EQUATED WITH LOSS

Night School, originally written for a 1960 radio, then television presentation, was withheld from publication by Harold Pinter until 1967 when it finally appeared in revised form. Pinter felt that he was obviously repeating himself in this play which he also thought was the worst thing he had written:

Later I realised that in one short television play of mine there were characteristics that implied I was slipping into a formula. It so happened this was the worst thing I've written. The words and ideas had become automatic, redundant. That was the red light for me and I don't feel I shall fall into that pit again.¹

Even the dialogue, which could formerly carry a play such as A Night Out, here reaches a new low; the funny lines are often not funny:

Walter, don't shout at your aunt, she's deaf (p. 57).

The line, a throw away, seems pointless as do some of his puns, which, as Hinchliffe also notes, are otherwise weak:²

SOLTO: I killed a man with my own hands, a six foot ten Lascar from Madagascar.

¹"Harold Pinter Replies," p. 7.
²Hinchliffe, pp. 110-111.
ANNIE: From Madagascar?
SOLTO: Sure. A Lascar.
MILLY: Alaska?
SOLTO: Madagascar (p. 65).

Some of Pinter's sexual puns seem too obvious:

ANNIE: I bet you never had a tart in prison, Wally.
WALTER: No, I couldn't lay my hands on one (p. 64).

The play, not generally well received, has several other difficulties which Hinchliffe points out:

Its failure stems from the fact that no author can put old wine into new bottles; it re-exploits too heavily old themes—conflict for possession of a room (which stands for peace and security for both Wally and Sally) and lying. 1

The play exists in several forms; and Hinchliffe's analysis is based only on a copy of the earlier television script sent to him by Pinter prior to revision and publication. While the revisions do not entirely clear up Hinchliffe's objections, they do, like the revisions for The Caretaker, increase mystery in the play, and here strengthen Wally's character and hence make the play slightly more interesting. In the revised version it is neither absolutely clear what the room stands for, nor certain when someone is lying or telling the truth.

Pinter's main concerns in Night School are with mystery (in the form of the illusive identities of each of the main characters) and

1 Ibid., p. 113.
with dominance and subservience (primarily, it seems at first, with everyone's dominance over Wally).

In the original version, and in the most obvious interpretation of the revised, Wally Street, a petty forger, after serving a short prison sentence, returns home to his aunts who have let his room to Sally who claims she is a school teacher. Wally's attempts to regain his room are ironically successful. By showing Sally's picture to Solto, who then probably wins her away from Wally, Wally regains his room but loses Sally, who he may or may not realise is probably more valuable than his now empty room.

In the revised version it is less clear that Wally is attracted to Sally and less likely that Sally would ever had returned any of Wally's affection; perhaps all Wally could really hope to win is his room. It is also possible, in the revised version, that Wally's regaining his room may not result from his accidental and thus unfortunate loss of Sally, but instead from his carefully calculated removal of her by means of his private plot which involved Solto's taking her away.

Pinter's revisions, in the form of several deft omissions, increase mystery in the play and strengthen Wally's character so that he is not merely a more comic version of the unfortunate Albert (A Night Out) who is precisely what he appears to be with no choices except those which lead to failure. The original television version actually shows Wally up in Sally's room finding both post office books (he has just returned from prison for forging such books) and also a photograph of Sally working as a night-club hostess. In its published version (and
probably the earlier radio version as well) Wally's actual findings in Sally's room are mysteriously reduced to "the sound of a large envelope tearing" and Wally's gasped response, perhaps of recognition, "Gaw . . . huhhh," (p. 63). Wally's former, and perhaps future identity as a petty forger is firmly established; whereas the revised version allows the possibility that Wally may be the more romantic gunman he describes himself to Sally.

After Wally orders Sally to model for him the original version also includes a kiss between the two that the final version omits. By removing the kiss Pinter removes any conclusive evidence of a mutual affection between Sally and Wally and hence makes both of their attitudes toward one another more mysterious. Sally may or may not care for Wally, may or may not hope he is the romantic gunman he poses as, and finally may or may not be disappointed to learn from Solto that Wally is only a petty forger. Wally may or may not really care for Sally; he may care only for himself and his room which he desires to regain.

Mystery runs high in this play, but it is used primarily as a technique to increase the suspense, and only in a minor way as a theme to suggest both that one person may have several different opposing roles and that is is impossible to determine which role is the "real" one. More important here, the confusion of role and identity does not seem questioned as it is in The Birthday Party for example, where Goldberg's role (his position) is dramatized as only faintly a part of his identity as a human being. Night School seems to deal with the more shallow and perhaps less interesting question of multiple roles in individual lives.
Solto may be rich or poor; to his tax collector and to Wally who wants to borrow money in order to "go straight" Solto represents himself as poor. To Sally, whom Solto invites to go away for a weekend, he represents himself as the wealthy owner of a private beach and a little hut which he says is neither little nor a hut (pp. 83-84). In his relations with Sally, Solto seems akin to other of Pinter's older men, Goldberg and even Ryan (A Night Out) who seem to get their way with young women where younger men, Wally, Stanley and Albert fail.

Sally may be a school teacher, as she tells the aunts, or a night-club hostess— the only role in which she is actually shown; she may even be both. When she leaves in the end it may be because she is embarrassed that Wally has learned her true, or other identity as night-club hostess, or because she no longer cares for Wally now that Solto told her Wally is only a petty forger, or also because she has decided to take up Solto's offer to go away for a weekend.

Wally may be the petty forger he appears to be and tells Solto he is (p. 68); or he may be, as he tells Sally, a gunman, an armed robber (pp. 73-75). Wally's identity (his role) however, seems less ambiguous, less open to multiple interpretation than do Sally's and Solto's. Perhaps most of the evidence seems stacked against interpreting Wally as anything more than an unfortunate, unsuccessful petty forger and bungler.

The dominant-subservient relations between Wally and all the other characters further portrays Wally as a comic, but unfortunate failure.

In his relations with his aunts, with Sally and with Solto, Wally appears
to be in the subservient position. The aunts have moved him out of his room by letting it; and Milly has little respect for Wally's abilities as a criminal; she objects to his activities not because they are wrong but because Wally is not successful at them:

Listen, I've told you before, if you're not clever in that way you should try something else, you should open up a little business—you could get the capital from Solto, he'll lend you some money. I mean, every time you put a foot outside the door they pick you up, they put you inside. What's the use? (p. 56).

Sally not only has no difficulty keeping Wally's room so long as she wants it, but also has the upper hand in the relation with Wally in other ways. She seems almost to frighten Wally by her presence; when they meet for the first time on the stairway she has command of herself and the situation while Wally almost stammers backward away from her:

SALLY: Mr. Street?
WALTER: Yes.
SALLY: I'm so pleased to meet you. I've heard so much about you.
WALTER: Oh yes.

Pause.

I . . . er . . .
SALLY: Your aunts are charming people.
WALTER: Mmmmm.

Pause.

SALLY: Are you glad to be back?

WALTER: I've left something in my room. I've got to get it (p. 61). Wally later brings a bottle up to Sally more because he needs courage than because he wishes to apologize for his behavior as he says, or even because he actually wants to test whether or not she is the school teacher she claims she is. After he builds up his courage to speak to her he begins to order her to model for him. But ironically, for the first time in Pinter's work, a character gains dominance, not by resisting, but by obeying the commands of another; as Wally orders Sally to sit (an old familiar order in Pinter's work) to stand, to cross and uncross her legs, Sally obeys, but in doing so makes Wally who is giving the orders appear foolish. Sally thus seems here a forerunner of other of Pinter's strong silent, enigmatic women such as Stella (The Collection), Ruth (Homecoming), Wendy (Tea Party), and Jane (The Basement), who quietly and without difficulty gain dominance over those who wish to dominate them.

Solto has no difficulty maintaining dominance over Wally whose request for a loan he quickly dismisses. Moreover, Solto claims that he is a better forger than Wally though he himself is no forger at all (p. 6), and he advises Wally to leave forging.

What happens in the end appears to be quite simple. Wally has gained his room back and lost the girl who leaves behind a photograph of herself as a teacher—a gesture which is both intended to answer
Wally's question by letting him know she was aware of his inquiry about her and also intended to indicate her rejection of him.

Because, however, there are no final directions to indicate Wally's reaction to Sally's sudden departure, it seems impossible to determine with certainty that he is maddened by the loss, that he may not, in fact, be simply happy to have his room back. What he says can be interpreted either way. When Milly says "It looks as though she's goine for good," Wally merely says "Yes," then after a pause adds, "That's what it looks like" (p. 88).

Although no other critic has suggested that Wally's dead pan reaction might indicate that he actually tried to get rid of Sally by the devious route of Solto (he knew Solto would invite Sally away, that he would probably succeed, and that Wally would then get his room back) Wally's final reaction, or non-reaction, seems to open up this possible interpretation and hence make Wally appear a more interesting character, not a victim of chance. In either case, whether or not Wally regains his room by accident or by design he seems to be portrayed as someone who in gaining what he says he wants (the room) loses something more valuable (the girl).

Night School may not be among Pinter's better works (it may or may not be the very worst thing he ever wrote), but his revisions show how he is able to strengthen a much weaker play by the use of mystery that redeems the dominant-subservient relationships from being too clearly simple.
CHAPTER 9

THE DWARFS: DOMINANCE AS BETRAYAL

The 1963 stage version of The Dwarfs derives from a 1960 radio version of an even earlier, 1953-1957, unpublished novel by Harold Pinter. Among Pinter's critics only Martin Esslin seems to have seen the novel and in The Peopled Wound mentions a few differences between the novel and the play which omits much biographical material about the characters and also omits the character Virginia, apparently the girlfriend at one time or another of each of the other characters, Len, Mark and Pete.

The central character in the play, Len, allows us access to his mind and hallucinations in a way no other Pinter character can or does. The most sensitive of the three characters, Len, seems to have a heightened sense of empirical reality which transforms into a heightened imaginary life inhabited by dwarfs whom Len temporarily joins:

I've not been able to pay a subscription but they've consented to take me into their gang, on a short term basis.

I won't stay long (p. 94).

But like a very small child, or an artist without an art, Len lacks the ability to abstract, to organize, or to gain distance on

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1Hinchliffe, p. 79; Esslin gives the dates for the writing of the novel as "about 1950-1956," The Peopled Wound, p. 120.
the empirical data that bombards his senses; as Pete tells him, he also lacks the ability to discriminate between the real and the imaginary:

The apprehension of experience must obviously be dependent upon discrimination if it's to be considered valuable. That's what you lack. You've got no idea how to preserve a distance between what you smell and what you think about. You haven't got the faculty for making simple distinctions between one thing and another. Every time you walk out of this door you go straight over a cliff. What you've got to do is nourish the power of assessment. How can you hope to assess and verify anything if you walk about with your nose stuck between your feet all day? (p. 3).

Perhaps, however, Len's inability to discriminate can be regarded as a virtue; according to Len himself, Pete and Mark are hardly superior for their powers of assessment which, he feels, are easily reduced to a pigeonholing mentality; "You've got me pinned to the wall before I can open my mouth" (p. 99) echoes Prufrock's feeling about his acquaintances.

The difficulty of understanding Len is reflected in the opposing critical response to him which is rivaled in Pinter's work only by the opposing critical response to the characters in The Caretaker. Ruby Cohn implies that Len is a Christ-like martyr:

Pete and Mark leave Len in the hospital with a kidney infection which suggests he had good reasons for his
obsessive fear of the hole in his side which suggests martyrdom.

But Len's references to the hole in his side are not obsessive—he only mentions the matter twice, the first time to deny it; "They make no hole in my side" (p. 89). The hole-in-the-side references, according to Hinchliffe, "does not make Len a Christ figure." Moreover, Pinter denies that he intended Len to be a Christ figure:

The possible reference to Christ in the "They make a hole in my side" quotation from The Dwarfs never occurred to me. I certainly didn't intend it. 3

But Pinter qualifies this remark:

However, I would like to remind you on this question, that I live in the world like everyone else and am part of history like everyone else. 4

More important is the issue of Len's illness which Hinchliffe regards as the kidney infection Pete mentions; but Hinchliffe also adds:

It depends whether Pete is being evasive when he says Len is in the hospital for "kidney" trouble or simply stating a fact. 5

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1 Ruby Cohn, "Latter Day Pinter," Drama Survey, III (1963), 368.
2 Hinchliffe, pp. 78-79.
3 Hewes, p. 97.
4 Hewes, p. 97.
5 Hinchliffe, p. 85.
Esslin, however, does not even allow the possibility that Len is in the hospital for anything except a mental illness for which, he feels, Len is "cured" as Aston is "cured":

From these hallucinations it is quite clear that Len, like Aston in The Caretaker, is undergoing a crisis, a mental breakdown. He has been leading an irregular and eccentric life for some time. ¹

But to compare Len with Aston also seems a mistake because we know nothing of Aston before he enters the asylum, and we see Len go briefly after he returns from the hospital, there is too little on which to base any comparison. Recall too Pinter's remark, "Aston is not crazy" (Chapter 7, p. 92). Moreover, how can we judge the validity of Len's final observations? As Hinchliffe points out:

The clean, bare world seems to be redeemed by a flower, but we have no reason to suppose that the flower is any more real or less real than the previous garbage. ²

Esslin nevertheless sees no ambiguity in the end:

The play ends with Len's sense of loss after emerging from his mental illness: the dwarfs have left. He is alone in a prosaic, antiseptic, ordered world and regrets the glorious warmth of chaos. ³

¹Esslin, The Peopled Wound, p. 121.
²Hinchliffe, p. 82.
Commenting on the final lines of the play Esslin concludes:

It is the isolation of the young man emerging from the wild whirlpool of steaming adolescence into the bare, ordered world of respectability.¹

The difficulties in the play seem to center on three questions that cannot be answered. Is Len mad or sane but with a heightened and perhaps superior awareness? Does Len change? If so, is the change for better (a world with a flower), for worse (a bare and sterile world), or without value (both worlds are imaginary anyway)? There are, of course, other difficulties that result from the incomplete translation of the private world in the novel to the similar world of the play, and Pinter knows that much that is missing is not communicated in the play:

From my point of view, the general delirium and states of mind and reactions and relationships in the play—although terribly sparse—are clear to me. I know all the things that aren't said, and the way the characters actually look at each other, and what they mean by looking at each other.²

Pinter also realizes that the play as a play is not very successful:

It does seem very confusing and obviously it can't be successful. But it was good for me to do.³

¹Ibid.
²Pinter, Paris Review interview, p. 357.
³Ibid.
The play does more successfully communicate and dramatize central issues which are not the difficult unanswered questions just mentioned, but the illusive quality of identity, and as Pinter notes:

The play is about betrayal and distrust. 1

More specifically the play is about the three characters' betrayal of each other which then results in the isolation of each, the breakdown of their friendship which is, at the outset, quite close. In the end, however, the ties between the characters are severed with the same kind of finality as they are at the end of The Caretaker. Betrayal in the play seems to translate into a form of dominance.

Because of their inherent limitations Mark then Pete each attempt to betray the other; Mark and Pete, who both lack Len's perception of reality each vie for Len's friendship apart from the other. First Pete, then Mark attempt to play Len off against the other. Pete says to Len:

You knock around with Mark too much. He can't do you any good. I know how to handle him (p. 93).

Then, almost in echo of Pete's comment, Mark says to Len:

You spend too much time with Pete (p. 95).

He adds:

Give it a rest. He doesn't do you any good. I'm the only one who knows how to get on with him. I can handle him (p. 95).

Len too, who may realize that his relationship with Mark and Pete is

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1 Pinter, Paris Review interview, p. 357.
over in the end, deliberately or innocently betrays Pete to Mark when he tells him that Pete, whom Mark idolized, thinks him a fool.

John McLaughlin summarizes other of the characters' limitations:
Len, the imaginative activist, hallucinates openly; he perceives himself as beleaguered by dwarfs. Mark the esthete, has his illusory world, too, erected largely on the putative admiration of Pete. When Len tells Mark that Pete thinks him a fool, that world is shattered.

Pete, less self-deceiving, is yet somewhat so, a parasitic intellectual-of-sorts, Pete feeds on Mark's dependence. Mark senses this when he says to Pete,

"You know what you are? You're an infection." ¹

The characters' individual limitations, their distrust of one another, and their illusions about themselves seem to result, in part, from the illusory quality of reality as it is presented in the play. In addition to dominance and subservience portrayed as betrayal and distrust (Mark's and Pete's individual attempts to gain dominance over Len; Mark's subservient admiration of Pete) Pinter's other more important concern is with the illusiveness of identity.

Len is the main spokesman for the view that reality is illusive; and his preoccupation with the subject superficially indicates a natural desire for verification, though on a deeper level it signifies first an

avoidance, then perhaps a recognition of his own mortality which he first refuses to admit. By attributing mutability to everything outside himself Len seems to believe that he can perceive himself as a fixed center:

Things do change. But I'm the same (p. 86).

Len's comment is like Goldberg's similar assertion that he never changed, never lost a tooth (The Birthday Party, p. 77).

Next Len's recognition of things outside himself impels him toward a recognition of himself (his physical being); he examines the otherness of things outside himself:

There is my table. That is a table. There is my chair. There is my table. That is a bowl of fruit. There is my chair. There are my curtains. There is no wind. It is past night and before morning. This is my room. This is a room. There is the wallpaper, on the walls. There are six walls. Eight walls. An octagon. This room is an octagon (p. 88).

Len also seems here the budding poet playing with words and trying to discover their relation to reality. His attention next moves, by association, from things outside himself to something attached to him (his shoes) and finally to himself (his feet):

These are my shoes, on my feet (p. 88).

Len's focus becomes more interior as he enters his own mind in a kind of "I'm me" self-recognition; but he still sees empirical reality in a flux (in a kind of hallucinatory movement of a Van Gogh painting, or description of an LSD experience) which comes to a dead halt, and still sees himself as fixed:
This is a journey and an ambush. This is the centre of the cold, a halt to the journey and no ambush. This is the deep grass I keep to. This is the thicket in the centre of the night and the morning. There is my hundred watt bulb like a dagger. This room moves. This room is moving. It has moved. It has reached . . . a dead halt. This is my fixture. There is no web. All's clear, and abundant. Perhaps a morning will arrive. If a morning arrives, it will not destroy my fixture, nor my luxury. If it is dark in the night or light, nothing obtrudes. I have my compartment. I am wedged. Here is my arrangement, and my kingdom. There are no voices. They make no hole in my side (pp. 88-89).

Not only things, but also other people compose Len's external reality and may change while he remains fixed; "Of course he may have changed" (p. 86), Len says of Mark and implies he himself has not. The dwarfs in some ways seem to be an interior analogue of other people, perhaps, more specifically of Pete and Mark; when Pete and Mark leave Len says "They've gone on a picnic" (p. 98). Only later is it clear that Len is referring to the dwarfs who have gone on a picnic; but the momentary confusion between Pete and Mark and the dwarfs is enough to establish a connection between them.

Len's physical illness may lead him to recognize that he too is mortal, for when Mark returns Len finally admits that he too may change;
but with the recognition comes his simultaneous realization that his relationship with Mark and Pete is over:

Both of you bastards, you've made a hole in my side, I can't plug it! [Pause.] I've lost a kingdom (p. 99).

After Mark departs Len momentarily perceives or imagines Mark alone in his own home living his life vicariously, standing apart from himself, as it were, and watching himself just as Len is watching him:

Mark sits by the fireside. Crosses his legs. His fingers wear a ring. The finger poised. Mark regards his finger. He regards his legs. He regards the fireside. Outside the door is the black blossom. He combs his hair with an ebony comb, he sits, he lies, he lowers his eyelashes, raises them, sees no change in the posture of the room, lights a cigarette, watches his hand clasp the lighter, watches the flame, sees his mouth go forward, sees the consumption, is satisfied. Pleased, sees the smoke in the lamp, pleased with the lamp and the smoke and his bulk, pleased with his legs and his ring and his body, in the lamp. Sees himself speaking, the words arranged on his lips, sees himself with pleasure (p. 102).

This quality of living one's life vicariously, so explicitly stated in Len's description of Mark, the most shallow of the three characters, seems also implied in many of Pinter's other characters, Goldberg, Edward (A Slight Ache) and Disson (Tea Party). These observations
of oneself and others still, however, leave unanswered the question of identity.

All of Len's careful observations about himself and others lead him to conclude that it is after all impossible to know who you are and that all reality is illusive; his statements echo Pinter's own, "A moment is sucked away and distorted, often even at the time of its birth" (see Chapter 1, page 16). Len defines the problem of verification and identity as he dismisses the possibility that identity is equivalent to role, "what you are," or to what you or others imagine or recall you are:

The point is, who are you? Not why or how, not even what. I can see what, perhaps, clearly enough. But who are you? It's no use saying you know who you are just because you tell me you can fit your particular key into a particular slot, which will only receive your particular key because that's not foolproof and certainly not conclusive. Just because you're inclined to make these statements of faith has nothing to do with me. It's not my business. Occasionally I believe I perceive a little of what you are but that's pure accident on both our parts, the perceived and the perceiver. It's nothing like accident, it's deliberate, it's joint pretence. We depend on these accidents, on these contrived accidents, to continue. It's not important then that it's conspiracy or hallucination. What you are, or appear to be to me, or appear to be to you, changes so
quickly, so horrifyingly, I certainly can't keep up with it and I'm damn sure you can't either. But who you are I can't even begin to recognize, and sometimes I recognize it so wholly, so forcibly, I can't look, and how can I be certain of what I see? You have no number. Where am I to look, where am I to look, what is there to locate, so as to have some surety, to have some rest from this whole bloody racket? You're the sum of so many reflections. How many reflections? Whose reflections? Is that what you consist of? What scum does the tide leave? What happens to the scum? When does it happen? I've seen what happens. But I can't speak when I see it. I can only point a finger. I can't even do that. The scum is broken and sucked back. I don't see where it goes. I don't see when, what do I see, what have I seen? What have I seen, the scum or the essence? (pp. 104-105).

Perhaps now all of the apparent varying interpretations and difficulties in the play (knowing whether Len is mad or sane, whether he changes or not) can be simply interpreted as a dramatization of the complex and illusive qualities of reality Len discusses here at the end of the play. However much The Dwarfs succeeds or fails as theatre, Len's explicit commentary at the end makes the work valuable in understanding Pinter's concern with verification of identity and reality elsewhere in his work.

As the work of a young man (as a novel) later translated by the more mature artist (as a play), The Dwarfs reflects both earlier (the
quest for the essence of identity and reality) and later concerns (dominance and subservience in seminal form). *The Dwarfs* unquestionably requires an effort on the part of reader and audience that other of Pinter's works do not; but for anyone seriously interested in Pinter's work the effort pays off by allowing us to appreciate yet another and in some ways quite different dimension of Pinter's talent—the work is simultaneously more explicit and more imaginatively illusive than any of Pinter's other works.
CHAPTER 10

THE COLLECTION AND THE LOVER: DOMINANCE

GAINED BY DELIVERATE PRETENSE

Like The Dwarfs, both The Collection, first broadcast on television in 1961, and The Lover, first broadcast on radio in 1963 (frequently staged as a double-bill), explore problems of attempting to verify the illusive qualities of identity. But unlike The Dwarfs, these two plays both involve deliberate pretense which intensifies the problems of verification. Stella claims she slept with Bill, claims she did not, then refuses to say more; Sarah and Richard, husband and wife, pretend to be lovers—Sarah plays Delores and Mary to Richard's Max and the park-keeper.

After The Dwarfs Pinter seems to leave off dealing with identity as essence and as in Night School returns to dramatizing identity as role. The essence may be nonsense, nonexistent anyway, or as Len argues, indistinguishable from the scum; so, Pinter's portrayal of identity as role here represents a development rather than a regression to the merely superficial (recall Pinter's pains to dramatize Goldberg's role or position as only superficially part of his identity). John Russell Taylor notes the shift in the portrayal of identity from The Dwarfs (where Len dismisses the notion that identity is equivalent to "reflection") to The Lover (where identity is largely illusion and reflection):
Any menace to the status quo comes from within; if the arrangement looks like breaking down, it is only because the desire to have things clear and unequivocal is part of human nature and almost impossible to vanquish. However, Richard and Sarah appreciate the necessity of vanquishing it, the impossibility indeed of living together on any other terms except the acceptance of an infinitude of reflections in lieu of the unknowable, perhaps nonexistent essence.¹

In both The Collection and The Lover characters employ deliberate pretense and role-shifting in order to gain an advantage, or dominance, over another. Even before The Collection begins Stella may have fabricated her story (that she slept with Bill) in order to increase her hold on her husband James; Agusta Walker observes that between Stella and James "desire has cooled off to the well-known point where the wife feels she must stir her husband to jealousy."² Like Stella, the other characters who deliberately shift role-identity in order to gain an advantage are motivated to gain dominance by feelings of inadequacy or insecurity.

James seeks Bill out at first because he is hurt by his wife's confession of infidelity; his erratic behavior, and finally his statement to Bill indicate as much:

² Agusta Walker, p. 7.
When you treat my wife like a whore, then I think I'm entitled to know what you've got to say about it (p. 54). Moreover, a desire for revenge underlies James' aggressive actions against Bill; first James sets Bill up by complimenting him ("You're a wag, aren't you," p. 56; "I'll bet you're a wow at parties" p. 57) so that Bill opens up, becomes warmer ("Oh, thanks very much" p. 56; "Well, it's nice of you to say so, but I wouldn't say I was all that much of a wow" p. 57); then James startles Bill so that he falls backward on to the floor; finally James threatens, "Tell me the truth from there" (p. 58).

Maneuvered into this humiliating position it is now Bill who seeks revenge; although up to this point he maintained he did not sleep with Stella, he now corrects James when he says he knew Bill was sitting on the bed beside his wife when he telephoned her in Leeds; Bill replies:

Not sitting. Lying (p. 59).

Harry, meanwhile, whose jealousy is now aroused by James describes James in grotesque terms when he reports that someone (James) stopped by yesterday and Bill asks what he looked like:

Oh . . . lemon hair, nigger brown teeth, wooden leg, bottlegreen eyes and a toupee. Know him? (p. 62).

When Bill says that the church bells must be getting to Harry, Harry quits joking and finally admits:

They haven't helped, but the fact of the matter is, old chap, that I don't like strangers coming into my house without an invitation (p. 63).
Returning briefly to Stella, James wishes her to believe that he is not at all hurt by her alleged infidelity; instead he coolly thanks her for giving him the opportunity to meet Bill with whom he claims he had dinner (a lie):

No, really, I think I should thank you, rather than anything else. After two years of marriage it looks as though, by accident, you've opened up a whole new world for me (p. 67).

In the next two scenes the couples virtually exchange partners; but in both scenes the objects which carry sexual connotations (the white kitten in the first, the cheese knife in the second) are used to convey the failure of any exchange. Harry goes over to see Stella and strokes the white kitten in her lap:

Oh, what a beautiful kitten, what a really beautiful kitten.

Kitty, kitty, kitty, what do you call her, come here, kitty kitty (p. 72).

Pinter, who once directed the play and Michael Hordon as Harry, directed these lines to convey a meaning opposite to the most obvious one (that Harry actually likes the kitten); as Pinter pointed out the lines read quite differently:

Michael, you see, it's not your taste at all. The whole thing's horrid.

Harry prefers men.

Meanwhile, in the scene immediately following, Bill offers James a cheese knife that James is reluctant to touch or to hold:
Try it. Hold the blade. It won't cut you. Not if you handle it properly. Not if you grasp it firmly up to the hilt (p. 73).

When Bill challenges him ("What are you frightened of?" p. 73), James freely associates once again to his wife's supposed infidelity:

I'm not frightened. I was just thinking of the thunder last week, when you and my wife were in Leeds (p. 73).

James finally challenges Bill to a mock duel and taking both the available cheese knives throws one at Bill and cuts him; James' violent response is, however, a reaction to Bill's provoking observation that he may have enjoyed Stella in a way James never did:

Every woman is bound to have an outburst of . . . wild sensuality at one time or another. That's the way I look at it, anyway. It's part of their nature. Even though it may be the kind of sensuality of which you yourself have never been the fortunate recipient (p. 74).

If Stella's intention is to stir her husband's jealousy in order to regain his attention, her plan initially fails because James becomes (or thinks he becomes) attracted to Bill; but as Agusta Walker points out, James' attraction to Bill results from his own insecurity and his belief that Bill is the wealthy owner of the home and collection of vases:

He thinks, in other words, that the handsome fellow is not only masculine but also rich and elegant--those qualities so coveted by the insecure--and so he ingratiates himself
into a liaison whereby he can partake of all the high life, looking up to the other with admiration but harboring a poisonous envy. The real issue between them is their comparative strength. The husband is anxious about his own lack of prowess, not his wife's infidelity, and in the end when he half playfully threatens his rival with a knife, he proves to his mixed disappointment, that this man too is a weakling.  

Bill, because of his own insecurity, allows, even encourages James' attraction to him; Agusta Walker sums up the nature of the mutual attraction between Bill and James:

The key scene is one in which the two young men are drinking together, being very refined, and they regard themselves in a mirror, preening with self-congratulation. The mirror is their reassurance that they exist, since theirs is wholly a surface life, and the urgent need that they have in common is to attract, for this is the only affirmation they have of their worth. Their greatest triumph, as always with those who suffer from fear of inadequacy, is to attract someone away from someone else and all their contrivings are for that goal. It has nothing to do with affection, since each is wholly self-preoccupied.  

1 Agusta Walker, p. 6.
2 Ibid., p. 7.
James manages to stir Harry's jealousy which is aroused less by any love for Bill than a combined desire to continue to possess him and a fear of losing him; when Harry attempts to humiliate Bill before James, Harry's bitter jealousy, his fears about himself, are all apparent:

Bill's a slum boy, you see, he's got a slum sense of humor. That's why I never take him along with me to parties. Because he's got a slum mind. I have nothing against slum minds per se, you understand, nothing at all. There's a certain kind of slum mind which is perfectly all right in a slum, but when this kind of slum mind gets out of the slum it sometimes persists, you see, it rots everything. That's what Bill is. There's something faintly putrid about him, don't you find? (p. 78).

For James the sudden realization that Harry, not Bill, is the owner of the house and collection, and that Bill may be a "slum boy" is enough to ruin the budding relationship between him and Bill; when James abruptly leaves it is fairly clear that he will not return again.

Finally rejoining his wife, James returns to his initial desire to verify whether or not Stella slept with Bill; Stella seems to gain dominance over James, without, however, regaining any of his affection as she leaves his questions unanswered:

You just sat there and talked about what you would do, if you went to your room. That's what you did.

Pause.
Didn't you?

Pause.

That's the truth . . . isn't it? (pp. 79-80).

In The Lover, too, the characters deliberately shift roles to gain dominance. Esslin remarks that the deliberate pretense is an attempt to reconcile animal lust with the cold respectability of marriage, while Hinchliffe sees the pretense as a means of escaping the boredom of familiarity. Both conclusions seem valid; but what is particularly interesting is to see how Sarah and Richard play the game of continually shifting pretense. Richard generally dominates the relationship by initiating most of the change; but he wants Sarah to be a strong partner, not merely servile or subservient. Richard leads Sarah like a dancer who insists she change the step as soon as the old one becomes pat; and Sarah's ability to follow his lead, to be all women to him, rarely falters. In the end she even surpasses Richard's ability to lead as she takes over when Richard does not seem to know what he wants.

Richard initiates the game in the play's opening line, "Is your lover coming today?" (p. 5), and continues it when he returns from work and inquiries whether he has come (p. 7). But Richard seems to find the subject in and of itself less spicy than necessary to hold his


2 Hinchliffe, p. 123.
interest; and so, on the offensive, he introduces an apparently new attitude toward his wife's supposed infidelity:

Does it ever occur to you that while you're spending the afternoon being unfaithful to me I'm sitting at a desk going through balance sheets and graphs? (p. 9).

Sarah, not at all on the defensive, replies that she occasionally thinks of him, and when Richard then asks whether she thought of him this afternoon, Sarah assumes the offensive role by saying the picture "wasn't a terribly convincing one;" when Richard asks why not, she replies:

Because I knew you weren't there. I knew you were with your mistress (p. 11).

It is apparently Sarah's turn to introduce into the game a new element, the mistress who Richard then claims is not a mistress but a whore (p. 11).

Richard insists, however, that his whore lacks the grace, elegance and wit of his wife; but she does "engender lust with all its cunning" (p. 13). When Sarah inquires about dignity, he replies, "The dignity is in my marriage" (p. 11); and when she naturally inquires why he even looked elsewhere, he responds, "You did" (p. 14).

Talk about the lovers provides most of the subject matter for Sarah and Richard's evening and bedtime conversation which, incidentally, is not accompanied by any display of affection. The bedroom scene ends with Sarah's getting Richard's assurance that he is not jealous, then her adding: "Good, because I think things are beautifully balanced"
Balance, however, is not what Richard prefers; and his several next attempts to upend the balance are fairly well met by Sarah's following his lead.

The next afternoon when John, the milkman, comes and tries to press Sarah into buying some cream, she coldly refuses. The brief scene is apparently included both so that the cast list contains two men's names thus postponing the fact that Richard is Sarah's lover which comes as a surprise, and also reveals how Sarah behaves with an actual potential lover—the proverbial milkman—she wants no part of him.

As soon as the milkman leaves, Richard appears as Max, and together he and Sarah play on a bongo in what either may be intended to symbolize actual love making, or may reveal literally that their lover relationship is as devoid of actual love making as is their marriage relationship we just observed in the bedroom.

The actions after the bongo scene suggest after-play (the cigarette scene) and then again foreplay of lovemaking; Max pursues Sarah who now shyly withdraws, "I'm waiting for my husband!" (p. 21). Following Sarah's lead now, Max switches into the role of the kindly park-keeper come to rescue her from the clutches of Max. Then, to keep things moving, Sarah drops her shyness and turns aggressive as "her fingers trace his thigh," and he "lifts them off" (p. 22). This time he is the shy one, "Look now, I'm sorry, I'm married" (p. 22); she becomes even more aggressive until Max again switches roles by calling her Dolores, at which time she again becomes reticent, "Trapped! I'm a married woman. You can't treat me like this" (p. 23). Again Max calls
a switch as he calls her Mary at which time, not sensually as in the earlier bongo scene, "she grits her teeth," in response to Max's advances as he draws her being a table out of the audience sight.

Perhaps having exhausted his routine of possible combinations, Max now tells Sarah that he is going to end their affair because his wife would object if she knew; he says, however, he would first like to see Sarah's husband because he is a man; "You're just a bloody woman" (p. 27), he complains then finally adds, "You're too bony" (p. 28). Perhaps like James, Richard thinks he might prefer a man to a woman, or would like some combination of both:

You know what I like. I like enormous women. Like bullocks with udders. Vast great uddered bullocks (p. 28).

But Sarah is unable, or unwilling, to attempt this new role.

Richard as Richard returns home in the evening; when Sarah says she has no dinner ready he complains that she is "falling down" in her "wifely duties," which is consistent with her "debauchery" (pp. 32-33). He then forbids her to entertain her lover as he assumes a combined business and paternal tone toward Sarah who falters in her first attempt to redeem herself when she tells him she does after all have dinner ready, "Boeuf bourgignon" (p. 38); Richard responds angrily with a whispered, "adultrress" (p. 36). He becomes more and more aggressive when he finds the bongo drums. But Sarah cunningly checks him as she turns on him with one last surprise:

Do you think he's the only one who comes! (p. 37).

She claims there are others who come for tea and to whom she offers strawberries and cream (the milkman?). Richard follows her lead and
together they begin slipping into their afternoon roles as Sarah asks:

Would you like me to change my clothes? I'll change for you, darling. Shall I? (p. 40).

By occasionally initiating change in order to preserve the relationship, Sarah can at other times accept a subservient role (comply with Richard's desires) without losing dignity. Richard's emphasis on the word "change" in the end seems to indicate that so long as he and Sarah continue to change, to keep up their illusions, the attraction between them will continue to thrive:

Yes.

Pause.
Change.

Pause.
Change.

Pause.
Change your clothes.

Pause.

You lovely whore (p. 40).

The Collection and The Lover both seem light frothy delightful pieces of theater which continue to explore Pinter's concern with dominance and subservience. If the exploration of dominance gained by deliberate pretense of role-shifting seems to take place only on the surface of things Pinter nevertheless seems to explore that surface very thoroughly.
CHAPTER 11

THE HOMECOMING: DOMINANCE USED TO GAIN FREEDOM

After a five-year absence from writing for the stage Pinter returned to the theater in 1965 with *The Homecoming*, a play full of so much apparently unexpected behavior that it continues to baffle critics. Ruth, perhaps the most misunderstood of all of Pinter's characters, is most often received as an unsympathetic, shocking, licentious woman, even a nymphomaniac; it seems universally agreed that in the end she becomes a prostitute. Even Pinter's best critics do not question this last point, while those, such as Ray Orley, who view Ruth as a somewhat sympathetic character, still describe her behavior with unfavorable connotations:

Her primitive nature is doubtless better attuned to Max and sons' jungle than to the probably rather sterile life at the University in America with the empty Teddy.\(^1\)

In sharp contrast to his critics is Pinter whose comments on the subject are generally ignored and who sees Ruth as sympathetic:

In *The Homecoming*, the woman is not a nymphomaniac, as some critics claimed. In fact she's not very sexy. She's

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1 Hinchliffe, p. 150; Esslin, *The Peopled Wound*, p. 159.

2 Orley, p. 148.
in a kind of despair which gives her a kind of freedom.

Certain facts, like marriage and the family, for this woman, have clearly ceased to have meaning. Elsewhere Pinter points out that Ruth does not become a prostitute in the end:

She does not become a harlot. At the end of the play she's in possession of a certain kind of freedom. She can do what she wants, and it is not at all certain she will go off to Greek Street. But even if she did, she would not 2 be a harlot in her own mind.

Actually Ruth's plans at the end are deliberately evasive so that it is wholly uncertain that she will agree to the family's proposition to set her up; when Lenny asks if she wishes to "shake on it" now or later, she avoids making a commitment:

Oh, we'll leave it till later (p. 79).

And not without reason Max (who in the opening discussion of horses says he could "smell" which filly was a "stayer") at the end suspects Ruth will not carry out the family's intentions for her:

Listen, I've got a funny idea she'll do the dirty on us, you want to bet? She'll make use of us, I can tell you!

I can smell it. You want to bet? (p. 81).

1Kathleen Tynan, "In Search of Harold Pinter; Part Two. We're Pretty Tight as a Family. Nobody Just Rings at the Door and Comes in," Evening Standard (April 26, 1968), p. 8.

2Hewes, p. 58.
Certainly Ruth's later behavior supports Max's suspicions—she uses them all as all of her desires (for water, food, and tentatively a large flat) are granted. More important, as Pinter pointed out, Ruth in the end gains freedom, and is thus the first of Pinter's characters to gain dominance in the end who also gains something positive and is finally in a better position than at the beginning.

There are several other problems in the play, other differences between what critics find confusing and Pinter's intentions. Critics are often baffled about the motivation behind one or another character's actions. What motivates Max to his outbursts of violence? Why does Sam make a sudden confession then faint in the end? Why does Ruth behave as she does? And why does Teddy passively look on as his wife rolls on the floor with his brother?

Max's behavior seems the easiest to understand; the opening scene purposely reveals Max as an aging patriarch who resents being pushed out of power by his sons and brother, and resents even more being relegated to a mother substitute role; "Go and find yourself a mother," he tells Joey who asks Max (who does the cooking) for dinner (p. 16). Max's threat of violence in the first scene is impotent and born of frustration; when Lenny disparages Max's cooking, Max makes an empty threat at him with his cane,¹ as Lenny mockingly cries in

¹The extension of oneself, such as the cane here, and other fairly obvious phallic symbols in Pinter's work (here, the cigars all the men smoke at the beginning of the second act, and elsewhere, Ben's polishing his gun to calm himself when the demands from upstairs seem overwhelming (The Dumb Waiter); Tony's smoking before the fireplace with Susan as Barrett is beginning to gain power (The Servant); Disson's making a large
imitation of a little boy: "Oh, Daddy, you're not going to use your stick on me, are you?" (p. 11).

Max's behavior in front of Teddy and Ruth at the end of the first act is not so difficult to understand either. Shortly after Max makes it perfectly clear that he does not like to be regarded as the mother-cook in the house, Teddy waltzes down the stairs, and after a six-year absence stammers (which itself invites attack) "Hello . . . Dad . . . We overslept," then asks, "What's for breakfast?" (p. 40). The surprise of his son's unexpected visit, the presence of a strange woman, and Teddy's taking Max's service so clearly for granted, all arouse Max's anger which Max then aims at Teddy through his insults against Ruth:

I've never had a whore under this roof before. Ever since your mother died.

Max's tirade gathers such momentum that he does not seem to hear Teddy's protest, "She's my wife" (p. 42). Although Max is temporarily silenced by Joey's reminder, "You're an old man" (p. 42), this reminder of Max's flaging power only further incenses him.

Having made a fool of himself with his words in the presence of the family, Max tries to redeem himself as a man with a show of pencil-shaped wooden object in his workshop shortly after he first begins to realise the attraction between his wife and her brother (Tea Party); Law and Stott's fight with broken milk bottles when neither is succeeding with Jane (The Basement), generally appear only when a male character is becoming unsure of his power or sexual prowess.
strength as he discharges the remainder of his anger against the unsuspecting Joey (whom he hits in the stomach knocking the wind out of his boxer son), and then against Sam (who, coming to help Max as he staggers under the effort of striking Joey, receives a blow on the head from Max). With Max's anger now spent, he is able to welcome his daughter-in-law and son. "You a mother?" he asks Ruth, then inquires, "How many you got?" (p. 43). He now seems as if he feels prepared to "cuddle" with Teddy, and he does.

In the end, Max recognizes that he is aging, but he is still unwilling to give up in the race to win Ruth's favor:

I'm too old, I suppose. She thinks I'm an old man.

Pause.

I'm not such an old man (p. 81).

Sam's confession and fainting at the end are related to his inferior position in the house; as Max's unmarried brother with no sons under his control, Sam has always had to seek his identity outside of the house; his is clearly a role-oriented identity: "I'm the best chauffeur in the firm," he tells Lenny who responds with mock praise whose mockery is lost on Sam, "I'll bet the other drivers tend to get jealous of you, don't they, uncle?" (p. 13). Sam also likes to think of himself as a gentleman of the old school; he offers courtly praise of Max's dead wife Jessie (p. 16), and attempts to defend Ruth with the impotent reminder that Ruth is married to Teddy; "She's his lawful wife," he says when the rest of the family are making plans to keep her
on (p. 69). Sam even suffers Max's crudest insults against him ("You'd bend over for half a dollar on Blackfriars Bridge," p. 48) because Sam can simply view himself as above such remarks.

Sam is unable, however, to tolerate insults against his driving ability (from which he derives most of his identity) especially when he is unfavorably compared to Max whom he loathed. When Max taunts him ("You know who could drive? MacGregor! MacGregor was a driver!" p. 48) this seems to be the final insult; but like many of Pinter's characters whose reactions are delayed, Sam leaves immediately and waits until later to disclose the secret he has harbored for years, but which he now supposes will cut Max to the quick. He announces just before fainting:

Mac had Jessie in the back of my cab as I drove along (p. 78).

Perhaps because so much happens all at once, some critics occasionally wonder why Sam died, or why Max did. When asked to account for this interpretation of the last scene, Paul Rogers who played Max in the original Broadway production explained in Pinter's presence:

There's an appalling fact about Pinter. You may not allow a single word he writes to pass unnoticed. There's no moment when you can have a little quiet doze-off or go searching after complications that are irrelevant. When the uncle collapses after telling his dirty little secret it is his cowardly way of retreating from the situation. And if
you listen you will hear us say he's not dead. As for Max, the stage directions only say that he falls to his knees sobbing and crawls to the side of Ruth's chair. ¹

Pinter added in comment:

He doesn't die. Actually, he's in fine form. ²

Ruth's attempts to gain dominance over the family originate from the same defensive reaction that impels many of Pinter's other characters to seek dominance. While her actions may not seem noble, given this family and this particular situation with which she is faced her actions cannot be condemned either. Given her husband who cares little for her, who seems as incapable of realizing the problems in the marriage as he seems incapable of change, Ruth's behavior is at least partially justified. Pinter himself remarked that Ruth's decision to stay is the best choice she has:

If this had been a happy marriage it wouldn't have happened. But she didn't want to go back to America with her husband, so what the hell's she going to do? ³

The very first scene between Ruth and Teddy clearly reveals Teddy as self-centered, unfeeling and unresponsive to Ruth. Out of touch with his wife Teddy makes no attempt even to listen to what she says; although she announces at the outset "I'm tired" (p. 21), only a moment later when

¹ Hewes, p. 58.
² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
he returns from the inspection of the bedroom Teddy inquires, "Tired?" (p. 21). Perhaps in response to Teddy's nervousness Ruth gradually grows more wakeful for this time she answers, "Just a little" (p. 21). Soon after, Teddy again asks, "Are you tired?" and he apparently does not even hear her answer, "No," for in the same breath he says in a paternal tone:

Go to bed. I'll show you to your room. You . . .
need some rest, you know (p. 22).

Teddy is not only out of touch with his wife, as indicated in his erratic and self-contradictory behavior towards her, but he also appears to be out of touch with himself, his own needs, wants and desires. First he says he wants to go for a walk (p. 22), then, without acknowledging that he changed his mind, when Ruth says she would like to go out for a breath of air, he acts alarmed ("At this time of night? But we've . . . only just got here. We've got to go to bed" p. 23); then flatly contradicts his former statement about wanting to go out:

The last thing I want is a breath of air (p. 24).

Although he promises "I'll wait up for you," then, "I'm not going to bed without you," when Ruth leaves, he forgets his promise, does not wait up, and goes up to bed without her.

One of the most crushing objections against viewing Ruth as sympathetic stems from her attitude toward her children; even if her reasons for leaving Teddy are understandable, how can she leave her children? First, it seems necessary to point out that Ruth does not
run out on her children at the first opportunity; in fact, almost as soon as she and Teddy arrive she voices a desire to return because as she says, "I think . . . the children . . . might be missing us" (p. 22). Her tentatively put statement is met here only by Teddy's derision; "Don't be silly," he says without hesitation (p. 22). Yet, as another example of his inconsistent behavior, when Max asks him the very next day whether the children are missing their mother, Teddy replies, "Of course they are" (p. 51) -- then he never mentions the matter again. For Ruth to return to her children in a foreign country, America, it seems necessary in this context for her to return with Teddy -- if she wants the children she must also take Teddy.

Ruth's relationship with her husband may not be enough to condone her behavior; but it seems equally a mistake to attempt to explain her behavior with Lenny and Joey solely as part of her licentious nature as possibly evidenced in her remark that before her marriage she was a "model for the body" (p. 57). Esslin, for example, seizes upon her remark, assumes she was formerly a "nude photographic model" which he then says "is a widely known euphemism for a prostitute."¹ He allows his own imagination to carry him even further beyond the text when he next mentions the house where Ruth says she "changed" her clothes (p. 57):

The country house she so lovingly recalls as the scene of her nude posing by the lake, where drinks and cold buffet

¹Esslin, The Peopled Wound, p. 159.
where served, sounds more like the scene for orgies than a place for photography. ¹

The text neither suggests that Ruth's modeling was done in the nude nor that she was formerly a prostitute. Apparently, however, she was more attractive before she had her children (p. 57), and she feels it necessary to remind people that she was once attractive at all. Recall that when she first mentioned that she was a model, Lenny asked for "hats?" (p. 57). More fruitful than speculating about her former life to account for her present behavior, is to examine what happens in the play itself in order to understand it. As Pinter points out, Ruth's relationship not only with her husband but also with the family accounts for her action:

She's misinterpreted deliberately and used by this family.

But eventually she comes back at them with a whip: She says "If you want to play this game I can play it as well as you."²

A perfectly good example of what Pinter is talking about here, occurs in Ruth's first encounter with the family, when she first meets Lenny. Lenny introduces himself, but whenever Ruth tells him she is Teddy's wife (pp. 28, 29), he fails to acknowledge her remarks and apparently, like his older brother, hears only what he wants to hear; he nevertheless immediately tries to impress her, and perhaps

¹Ibid.

²Hewes, p. 58.
unconsciously compete with Teddy, by adopting philosophical jargon (which he did not use earlier with his father) in his talk about his clock which may have waked him:

So . . . all things being equal . . . this question of me saying it was the clock that woke me up, well, that could easily prove something of a false hypothesis (p. 29).

Suddenly making an erratic move toward Ruth, Lenny asks, "Do you mind if I hold your hand?" (p. 30). When Ruth asks why, his telling her two stories about women he physically harmed seems intended simultaneously to frighten and to impress upon her that if she gets out of line she may receive similar treatment. Lenny says of the first woman who he claims made advances toward him:

So I just gave her another belt in the nose and a couple of turns of the boot and sort of left it at that (p. 31).

When Lenny then acknowledges Ruth as Teddy's wife ("You and my brother are newly weds, are you?" p. 31), he praises, of all things, Teddy's sensitivity; he says he wishes he were more like Teddy in this respect, but adds that he gets "desensitized" whenever people make unreasonable demands on him—he offers as an example an account of the woman who asked him to move a heavy mangle from her front to back room and to whom he gave "a short-arm jab to the belly" (p. 33).

Beneath what Lenny actually says he conveys to Ruth a desire that she should view him as strong and fearsome. But he sends out mixed signals about his own feelings for her; he seems at once attracted to and even afraid of her. When he finally attempts to gain dominance,
Ruth proves herself a good match for him as he asks for a glass of water she gave her earlier:

RUTH. I haven't quite finished.

LENNY. You've consumed quite enough, in my opinion.

RUTH. No, I haven't.

LENNY. Quite sufficient, in my opinion.

RUTH. Not in mine Leonard (p. 33).

She is really too swift for him as she stays deftly ahead; though he earlier asked to hold her hand (an aggressive move intended perhaps to frighten her) she countermoves with a more oblique pass that makes him shy away in confusion. She seems to understand that one of the best ways to ward off a potential attack is to assume a parallel and even more aggressive position than your attacker:

LENNY. I'll take it then.

RUTH. If you take the glass . . . I'll take you.

Pause.

LENNY. How about me taking the glass without you taking me?

RUTH. Why don't I just take you?

Pause.

LENNY. You're joking (p. 34).

As Lenny gradually continues to back down, Ruth increases the tension by continuing to make suggestions until she finally calls Lenny's bluff:

RUTH. Have a sip, go on. Have a sip from my glass.

He is still.
Sit on my lap. Take a long cool sip.

She pats her lap. Pause.

She stands, moves to him with the glass.

Put your head back and open your mouth.

LENNY. Take that glass away from me.

RUTH. Lie on the floor. Go on. I'll pour it down your throat.

LENNY. What are you doing, making some kind of proposal? (p. 34).

Perhaps the best justification for Ruth's decision to stay with the family comes in the end from her husband's response both to her and to the family. Why does Teddy look passively on as Ruth rolls on the floor with Joey? Pinter answers the question as he again explains his attitude to Ruth:

Look! What would happen if he interfered. He would have had a messy fight on his hands, wouldn't he? And this particular man would avoid that. As for rolling on the couch, there are thousands of women in this very country who at this very moment are rolling off couches with their brothers, or cousins, or their next-door neighbors. The most respectable women do this. It's a splendid activity. It's a little curious, certainly, when your husband is looking on, but it doesn't mean you're a harlot.¹

Teddy's response to Ruth is obviously lacking a very important human quality, feeling or emotion. Teddy, like several of Pinter's other

¹Ibid., pp. 57-58.
characters, Disson (Tea Party) and Edward (A Slight Ache), exhibit in common a belief that the mind is superior to feeling, and that the rational egoist (one whose acts are wholly reasonable, not colored by emotion), is the most superior kind of person, and what one should aspire to be. Michael Craig, who played Teddy on Broadway, understands Teddy's shortcomings well:

Teddy is probably the most violent of them all, but his violence is controlled. They play this awful game with him to try and make him break, and he turns it around. She shoots it right at his father. He says, "I'll call your bluff. If you want a woman in the house, here she is if she wants to stay." He's an awful man, Teddy. He's rationalized his aggressions, but underneath he's Eichmann.

It is perhaps going too far to call Teddy an Eichmann, but there are clear indications that Teddy has not only "rationalized his aggressions" but feels that he is superior for having eliminated emotion from his response to his family (both his families). The best evidence comes from what Teddy himself says; shortly after Max praises Ruth as a woman of feeling (p. 60), Teddy attempts to persuade the family that he is superior to them because of his ability to "see" things objectively, to operate "on things not in things," to be uninvolved and to act without feeling (a scholarly attitude perhaps, though hardly superior, that carries over to his relations with people). Though Teddy says he can "see"

\[1\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 57.}\]
things better than the rest of them, all evidence points to the contrary; Teddy simply uses his role (as professor of philosophy) the same way Goldberg uses his position—as if his role made him superior. And discussing his critical works, Teddy tries to impress the family as he snobbishly flaunts what he believes is his superiority:

You wouldn't understand my works. You wouldn't have the faintest idea of what they were about. You wouldn't appreciate the points of reference. You're way behind. All of you. There's no point in my sending you my works. You'd be lost. It's nothing to do with the question of intelligence. It's a way of being able to look at the world. It's a question of how far you can operate on things and not in things. I mean it's a question of your capacity to ally the two, to relate the two, to balance the two. To see, to be able to see! I'm the one who can see. That's why I can write my critical works. Might do you good... have a look at them... see how certain people can view... things... how certain people can maintain... intellectual equilibrium. Intellectual equilibrium. You're just objects. You just... move about. I can observe it. I can see what you do. It's the same as I do. But you're lost in it. You won't get me being... I won't be lost in it (p. 62).
One key to the fallacy in what Teddy says occurs when he maintains that his sight is superior because he objectively sees how things actually are---quite the opposite of what Pinter himself consistently maintains about the nature of our reality. Interestingly too, Teddy is the only one in the play with glasses; and his physical weakness seems an apt metaphor for his emotional blindness which he communicates when he terms all the people "objects."

Teddy seems to view his wife as just another object whom he can trade or barter if he chooses and if she can be persuaded to consent. His most telling actions that reveal his lack of feeling toward Ruth come in the last scene when his only objection against having Ruth remain behind is that it will not benefit the family, "She'll get old . . . very quickly" (p. 75); more important, it is Teddy who actually encourages her to stay behind as he is the one to communicate the family's proposal to her:

Ruth . . . the family have invited you to stay, for a little while longer. As a . . . kind of guest. If you like the idea I don't mind. We can manage very easily at home . . . until you come back (p. 74).

Although it seems to have escaped notice, The Homecoming, like The Birthday Party, The Caretaker, and Pinter's best sketches appears to have a private level of meaning and seems to be informed

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1 For discussions of the personal experiences which informed these works see Chapter 3, pp. 50, 61; Chapter 4, p. 70; Chapter 14, p. 193.
by personal experience, several clues of which exist in the names of the
two dead characters who also figure in the play, Mac and Jessie. Help-
ful here is some important background information on the subject. Recall
that Pinter chose David for his stage name and that it was under this
name he worked for Anew McMaster, Mac (who headed a Shakespearean
repertoire company and who was the subject of Pinter's tribute Mac).
Mac's death two years before Pinter wrote The Homecoming profoundly
affected Pinter; in his tribute to him he portrays Mac as a surrogate
father in his life. While The Homecoming may appear perhaps to be an
absurdest inversion of the Biblical Story of Ruth, important clues
to Pinter's private attitude to both Ruth and Jessie may be contained
in the closing verse of the Biblical account which concludes with a

1 "Two People in a Room," p. 36.

2 The Biblical Ruth, a virtuous woman, is praised for choosing to
stay with her husband's family after her husband's death. In an
agricultural and patrilineal society her help "amid alien corn" in the
fields kept the family (especially Naomi the mother-in-law) alive.
And when Ruth remarries it is to her husband's kinsman who marries
her only after he "taketh knowledge of her." Pinter's Ruth is fairly
married to a dead man and like the Biblical Ruth, chooses to stay with
her husband's family and may even contribute to their support. More-
over, she like the Biblical Ruth may come to know her husband's kinsmen,
especially Joey the boxer son as the Biblical Ruth knew Boaz (whose
name means strength or fleetness). While Pinter's Ruth is not the
epitome of the virtuous woman, it has already been shown that her
behavior is not entirely blameworthy. She does seem simply to hold
her own in this alien world of men who test her in ways not wholly
different from the way Boaz tests the Biblical Ruth.
Given the impact of Mac's life and death on Pinter, he could not have chosen lightly the name Mac for a dead character in his play; nor is it likely that choosing the name Jessie was unconscious accident for Pinter, a poet like the Biblical David for whom he named himself. In the play, something of the raucous spirit of the living Mac seems to inform the descriptions of Mac in the play; moreover, given Sam's confession, it is entirely possible that Mac was the father of at least one of Jessie's sons (a possibility casually reinforced by Max's references to his "three bastard sons" p. 47).

Perhaps at present all that can be said about the connections between the characters in Pinter's life, and his fictional characters as well as the name he took for himself, is that in an oblique or poetic way Pinter, on a private level, suggests admiration for and kinship with Mac (Anew McMaster): by connecting Jesse (the Biblical ancestor of David) with Jessie (The Homecoming ancestor of the three sons) David, as a reference to himself, is linked with The Homecoming sons who are in turn linked with Mac (both the living and fictional character): thus Pinter links himself to Mac the man he admired. The references, however, conscious or unconscious may be important in understanding Pinter's attitude to the play's Mac, the only character Max consistently praises; the closing lines of Mac summarize nicely Pinter's admiration for the living man:

He was a realist. But he possessed a true liberality of spirit. He was humble. He was a devout anti-puritan.
He was a very great pisstaker. He was a great actor and we who worked with him were the luckiest people in the world and loved him.

"Liberality of spirit" is interestingly mentioned in the play by Lenny who says the family looks to Teddy for this virtue, which it seems obvious none of the characters in the play possesses:

And so when you at length return to us, we do expect a bit of grace, a bit of je ne sais quoi, a bit of generosity of mind, a bit of liberality of spirit, to reassure us. We do that. But do we get it? Have we got it? Is that what you've given us? (p. 65).

Teddy's "Yes," after he has just deliberately eaten Lenny's cheese roll, an admittedly mean-spirited act, clearly exemplifies Teddy's lack of liberality.

Pinter's explicit comments on the public interpretation of The Homecoming, as well as the clues he seems to offer concerning the play's private meaning, seem to provide the best basis for an understanding and appreciation of the work. Attempts to look for and separate "the good guys" from "the bad guys" seem as out of place here as they are generally in Pinter's work; as Pinter finally points out, the family is "not evil," but only "slightly desperate," a point which seems obvious enough, but should be recalled in any discussion of the play's characters:

There's no question that the family does behave very calculatedly and pretty horribly to each other and to the returning son. But

\[1^{\text{Mac}}, \text{p. 19.}\]
they do it out of the texture of their lives and for other reasons which are not evil but slightly desperate.¹

In its intricately complex treatment of dominance and subservience in this family's relationship, The Homecoming is one of Pinter's best plays. Here he clearly transcends his former work which depended so much on mystery to gain the ambiguity that contributed so much to the play's complexity. As in The Caretaker this play seems somehow true in the examination of these characters' lives. As in A Slight Ache, The Homecoming contains some imaginative turns which push everyday reality to the very limits of our experience. Here the use of dominance to gain freedom makes The Homecoming unique among Pinter's plays.

¹Newes, p. 58.
CHAPTER 12

TEA PARTY AND THE BASEMENT: THE ILLUSIVE QUALITIES OF DOMINANCE

_Tea Party_ (1965) and _The Basement_ (1967), both originally produced on television, and frequently staged as a double-bill, both begin with a dominant character who undergoes a complete reversal and in the end entirely loses dominance. _Tea Party_ studies the disintegration of Disson's dominance based on recently acquired wealth and his position as the head of a large sanitary company (the largest bidet manufacturer in England!), while _The Basement_ develops Stott's natural dominance over Law which near the end dissipates as Stott, becoming less sure of himself, loses Jane and finally assumes Law's position while Law rises to his.

_Tea Party_, the richer of the two plays, returns once again to all of Pinter's former concerns; Disson's growing blindness parallels his loss of dominance, and both blindness and dominance are connected with mystery—it is never wholly certain whether Disson's eye trouble is real or imagined, or whether what he "sees" and suspects about the relation between his wife and her brother is true or false. Moreover, Disson's blindness is related to his identity problems—his inner self as an emotional being conflicts with his outer or social self. Disson, like Teddy and Edward before him, attempts to deny his feelings and
approach problems with a prescriptive rationality that makes him emotionally blind or empty. He attempts to deny his feelings for Wendy, but as he does so his eyesight begins to fail him; even his lovemaking with his wife is coldly rational, without feeling.

The precarious nature of Disson's dominance is apparent at once in the interview with Wendy whose reserve contrasts with Disson's slight lack of it, as does her complete confidence set off his slight stammer: "We manufacture sanitary ware ... but I suppose you know that?" (p. 43); "Well, do you think you'd be interested in ... in this area of work?" (p. 44); "Well now, this ... post is, in fact, that of my personal assistant" (p. 44). Wendy, on the other hand, only stammers understandably when answering questions about her previous employer (who never stopped touching her). Moreover Disson's overpraising her shows a lack of reserve; "I would say you possessed an active and inquiring intelligence" he tells her although she indicates no such qualities.

The wedding reception raises one of the play's central ambiguities, the relation between Diana and Willy which may, as Disson later suspects, be incestuous, or may be quite innocent. Diana kisses her brother twice before she finally kisses Disson, only in response to Disson's having offered Willy a position. Willy's praise for his sister is couched in suggestively sensuous terms; he praises her swimming, "the grace of her crawl," her piano playing, "the delicacy of her touch," and her "long fingers moving in exquisite motion on the keys;" and he ends in calling her "the flower, the blossom, and the bloom" (p. 48). After a few vague
words about Disson in Disley's absence, Willy's speech in honor of the groom heaps more praise on Diana "who in all probability has the beating of her husband in the 200 meters breast stroke" (p. 49). As Esslin perhaps rightly suggests of the speech, "This starts Disson's feelings of embarrassment and inferiority towards his new wife's family."¹ At least the audience is made aware of Disson's feelings.

Disson, whose natural reaction to Willy's speech might be the expression of his feelings that Willy's speech did not present him in the best light, apparently masks his feelings and responds, "Marvelous," though the speech was not at all (p. 49). Moreover Disson invites trouble as he invites Willy into the firm as "second in command," at a point that shows Disson's growing lack of prudence for a man in his position. Willy's gracious and dignified acceptance of Disson's offer reveals that Willy is clearly in command of himself and is a man who though placed in a subordinate position is not at all subservient. Disson's last line in the scene is ironic foreshadow for the rest of the play which proceeds downhill for him; "This is the happiest day of my life" (p. 50).

The passionless bedroom scene, which follows the reception scene, reveals Disson's insecurity and self-centeredness. When he asks Diana "Have you ever been happier? With any other man?" he seems less interested in her happiness than in his score with her as a lover. Her very stark responses ("Yes," "Yes," "Never," "Yes," ) indicate that the answers Disson is looking for cannot best be given in words—if he does

not know he should not ask. Yet where an emotional response should answer his question and would be appropriate coming from him, Disson pursues a rational course the morning later when he asks why Diana did not marry Jerry and she replies "Because he was weak" (p. 51). Then Disson, as if assuring himself that he fits her ideal, responds, "I'm not weak" (p. 51).

The first bedroom scene contrasts markedly with the second and both contrast with the scenes between Disson and Wendy who seems to arouse him more than his wife does. In the second bedroom scene, one year later, Diana complains "You seem a little subdued . . . lately," indicating that Disson is no longer able or willing to meet Diana's desires which still seem active.

Disson's business and home life continue to erode as his actions and words become more contradictory. Just as Disson stammered slightly in his interview with Wendy, in his briefing to Willy he now contradicts himself. First Disson notes that their two offices are "completely cut off from the rest of the staff," adding "Equally, I didn't like fraternization between the two offices" (p. 52). But Disson then concludes by saying "Interdependence is the key word, it's your job to understand me, mine to understand you" (through closed doors?) (p. 53). In view of Disson's closed door isolation policy Willy's suggestion that Diana should be his secretary "to be closer to you" is ironic.

When Disson says "I don't like indulgence. I don't like self-doubt. I don't like fuzziness. I like clarity. Clear intention. Precise
execution" and then asks, "Black or white?" (refering to the tea) he underscores his own attitude which, like Edward's and Teddy's, opposes Pinter's own, that reality is infirm. Disson, however, attempts to fix reality in a senseless adherence to arbitrary rules he creates.

Although Disson is only gazing out of the window when Willy buzzes for him, Wendy announces "Mr. Disson does not want to be disturbed until 3:30;" Disson's inflexibility to his own rules at the office is then mirrored in his growing rigidity to his family. As he shut off others from himself at work he now feels cut off from his family at home when he returns to Diana and the boys; he looks from one to the other as if they are in league with each other, though Diana was only attempting to get on with the boys.1

Although Esslin suggests that Disson's blindness may be vaguely Oedipal, ("Is it Disson's punishment for having aspired to the bed of the chaste, modonna-like Diana?"2) Disson's eye trouble, which begins immediately after he openly begins to notice, then later touch, Wendy, seems more concretely related to the growing disparity between Disson's

1When Diana tells the boys that they mean a great deal to Disson, John wonders what "a great deal means," while Tom wonders what "mean means." Several years prior to writing Tea Party Pinter was asked by Andrew Sarris the meaning of The Homecoming, and Pinter replied, "I'd understand questions about meaning if I knew what the word 'meaning' meant," (Village Voice (April 20, 1967), p. 25). Sarris who found Pinter's remark flippant was later incensed to hear it come out of the little boy in Tea Party (Village Voice (December 19, 1968), p. 53). Pinter's remark does, however, seem apt for those who would inquire into meaning in his work or any in literature.

feelings, his rational attitude, and his actions toward Wendy which are all in conflict. His attitude toward touching his secretary is that it is forbidden, the stuff of cheap fiction which he himself is above:

One would have thought this . . . tampering . . . this interfering . . . with secretaries was something, of the past, a myth, in fact something that only took place in paperback books. Tch. Tch. (p. 45).

But Disson's inviting Wendy to sit on the leather on his desk because, as he says, "It will be softer . . . for you," brings Wendy into his own touching range (p. 56).

Disson's actual eye trouble begins that evening when he sees two ping-pong balls; Willy apparently only delivered one. Disson's double vision might equally represent his suspicion that Willy is double dealing (with Diana) or might represent Disson's own suppressed double dealing with his secretary and his wife. Hinchliffe suggests another possibility:

Class warfare, success, relationships that collapse, all center on a hero who tries to conceal them in more trivial failures--an inability to play ping-pong or do woodwork.

But eventually his suspicions, jealousy, and the recognition or fear of inadequacy reduce him to the condition forced on Edward in A Slight Ache. ¹

Although Disley, Disson's eye doctor, pronounces Disson's sight as perfect, Disson in the next scene has great difficulty tying his necktie,

¹Esslin, The Peopled Wound, p. 171.
an action typical in Pinter for depicting sexual inadequacy (see Albert in A Night Out).

One wholly realistic solution which Diana offers to solve Disson's problem, Disson rejects out of hand; when he complains about Diana's working because he sees less of her than he would otherwise, she suggests, "Would you prefer me to be your secretary?" But Disson responds, "No, no, of course not. That wouldn't work at all" (p. 62). For Disson who had previously kept business and pleasure neatly separate from each other, the two are now inextricably, and for him confusingly, bound together. The borders between brother-sister, husband-wife, employee (secretary)-boss, and lover, are no longer absolutely clear to Disson who once demanded clarity. When Willy counters Disson's complaint, "But we all meet at lunchtime. We meet in the evening" (p. 62) Willy reveals that he is with Diana more than Disson is since he and Diana are together both during and after work.

With the pattern established the rest of the play repeats more intensely what is already set in motion. Wendy at times now openly invites Disson's attention ("I've put on my new dress" p. 63), and the more he notices her the more difficulty he has seeing. After one scene which opens with Disson sitting in Wendy's chair, Disson goes home and nearly cuts off his son's finger while woodworking. In another, Disson, who requests that Wendy bind his eyes with her scarf, uses the blindfold as an excuse to touch Wendy; becoming ostrich-like, Disson acts as if his body is out of sight if his eyes are buried in darkness.
Disson's and Wendy's lively "ball game" which is played with Disson's table lighter, contrasts with the second "subdued" bedroom scene where there is no longer any talk of love. When the blindfolded Disson next touches Wendy she openly accuses him, "You're playing one of your games, Mr. Disson. You're being naughty again" (p. 72). Disson's blindness may be real enough (however psychosomatic in origin), but he certainly takes advantage of his blindfolded state.

During his next trip to Disley's, Disson finally cries out, "Help me," but Disley, who earlier said, "I only deal with eyes, old chap. Why do you come to me? Why don't you go to someone else?" now ignores Disson's plea. "Who made the speech?" Disley changes the subject and Disson, rather than admit his weakness, says, "I don't want you to think I'm not a happy man. I am" (p. 73).

Disson, however, reveals even greater feelings of inadequacy as the disparity between Diana's former life at Sunderly and Disson's poorer background are contrasted in the discussion about Sunderly, and later emphasized by the visit from Disson's poor parents. This time when Diana asks him "come to bed," no bedroom scene follows; Disson refuses, "You can say that in front of him?" Disson asks referring to Willy who is now apparently ever present. And this time when Disson asks for assurances of Diana's love she avoids mentioning "love" as she states, in the past tense, the reasons she married him:

I found you admirable for your clarity of mind, your surety of purpose, your will, the strength your achievements had given you-- (p. 75).
Willy interjects to draw Disson aside for what appears is going to be a little talk about Disson's drinking. But Disson wards off possible attack by offering Willy a partnership. Again, Disson's actions are out of accord with what he certainly must feel about Willy.

The final scene, the most intriguing of all, depicts Disson blindfolded at his own request. While half of the scene portrays his point of view as what he imagines or intuits is happening, the other half presents a presumably objective view which conveys none of the sinister implications of Disson's view. Unfortunately, although the double point of view is successfully communicated in a television or film version, the double view is blurred in a stage performance where the ambiguity is less pronounced or even lost altogether. In the television version where Disson "sees" or imagines his guests in conspiratory postures at the tea party, with Willy caressing his wife and secretary in turn, the objective viewpoint reveals only the most ordinary activities that might occur at any respectable tea party.

When in the end Diana says to the fallen Disson, "It's me. It's me, darling," then after a pause adds, "It's your wife," Diana's plea may be the legitimate cry of a loving wife and all of Disson's suspicions may be imaginary projections of his own feelings which he denied in himself but attributed to Willy and Diana. Hinchliffe summarizes the ambiguity nicely:

The symbolic objects--water closets, bidets, ping-pong ball, and mirror--are aligned with shots of a fetishistic nature.
(leather, black chiffon, high heels) and incorporated in scenes like the football game with the table lighter (which at one point lay at Wendy's feet like an apple!) or a game of chess in order to give the play a brilliant but evasive patina, suggesting that we cannot be entirely sure that the whole thing is not completely the delusion of Disson's guilty, secret, true self. 

What did Disson's dominance consist in? How did he lose it? Certainly neither Willy nor Diana can be accused of actively usurping Disson's place, yet in the class difference that exists between them from the outset, Willy and Diana have command of themselves and others that Disson lacks. Once again Pinter portrays through ambiguity the impossibility of knowing whether dominance is lost through outside or internal forces, or even whether such forces are real or imagined.

The Basement also dramatizes the more illusory qualities of dominance. Although most critics seem to view the play as a fight between Law and Stott for possession of the room and the girl, there is hardly any real struggle. Stott simply takes over the room from the unprotesting Law who actually seems happy enough to have company, even if the company, an old friend and his girl, take over his bed. But as Stott changes the room, by removing Law's watercolors and then imprinting his own image on the decorating he also changes Law who gradually develops Stott's tastes, including his liking for Jane, as well as some of Stott's strength.

^Hinchliffe, p. 145.
Except at the very end there is no real struggle for Jane either who simply gravitates to Law for companionship during the day and to Stott for lovemaking at night; after the second love scene, however, Jane smiles at Law (p. 99). But when Jane makes overt advances toward Law he spurns her revealing how apt is his name for one who inflexibly adheres to rules; when she asks how he can resist her, he cries, "We can be seen! Damn you" (p. 100).

Stott's underlying jealousy of Law may be implied when he attempts to deprecate Law in front of Jane. "Your style was deceptive," he says to Law who agrees, "It still is;" but Stott turns on him, "Not any longer" (p. 102)—though in view of the ending Law seems to be right. When Stott also refuses to run the race with Law he similarly seems to be trying to make Law look foolish before Jane (p. 103). Stott's attempts to make Law appear foolish in Jane's eyes have, however, the opposite effect.

Jane gradually cools in her affection for Stott as evidenced in one scene when she pulls away from his kiss, and in another immediately following when she pulls away from his touch (pp. 104–105). Jane then pleads with Law, "Why don't you tell him to go?" and she adds, insinuating perhaps that she knew Law even before she knew Stott, "Then we could be happy again, like we used to be" (p. 105).

Law still resists her as he betrays her confidence to Stott; "She has no loyalty" he complains, then speaks of her as if he found her repulsive: "She's a savage. A viper. She sullies this room. She dirties this room. All this beautiful Scandinavian furniture. She dirties it.
She sullies the room" (p. 106). Someone must leave, because according to Law's ideas of rules, "The Council would object," and "so would the Church" (p. 104). Law's attitude toward Jane might seem to indicate that in this relationship he prefers Stott. Yet in the very next scene when Stott momentarily appears to be breathing his last, Law and Jane suddenly seem to be getting on mysteriously well as they are described "snuffing each other like animals" (p. 107). Law seems finally to have developed an animal liking for Jane, but when Stott unexpectedly recovers two battles ensue, presumably for the girl and the room. Stott takes a few shots at Law with some marbles and lands one on Law's forehead; the final battle with the broken milk bottles ends when the bottles smash together hailing the last scene, a repetition of the first--except that Law and Stott have exchanged positions. The reversal is complete as indicated in forms of address; where in the opening scene Stott's dominance is evident when he addresses Law by his first name, Tim, while Law addresses him as Stott (p. 92), in the end the positions are reversed as Stott welcomes Law as Law who refers to Stott as Charles (the first time his first name is given) (p. 112).

For the first time in Pinter's work the character who is expelled from the room, Law, is not the subservient loser but is somehow dominant. The cyclical structure of the play suggests that the exchange of roles will occur again, and perhaps again, which implies an easy interchangeability of dominant and subservient character. How or why Stott loses dominance and Law gains it is, however, even more mysterious than the reasons Disson loses dominance in Tea Party. When Law owned the room,
he did not really possess it since it was so easily taken over by Stott and the girl, who for wholly mysterious reasons is gradually attracted to Law (because he resists her?); so long as Law resists Jane he remains subservient, but when he gives in to his animal desires he becomes suddenly assertive and although he apparently loses the room he wins the girl, only to return to the room to repeat the ritual once more.

These two plays present an interesting contrast to one another in that they reflect the illusory and precarious nature of dominance at different times in life. Disson who is at an age to reap the benefits of a long worked for position discovers what money and a position do not purchase—peace, security and love. His apparent dominance is revealed as a front for deep-seated inadequacies and self-deception. The precise cause of his downfall, however, is as illusive as is the cause for the role-exchange between Law and Stott. Jane seems to function only as an object in the triangle, yet her choice of man seems to determine who will be dominant. Pinter here combines mystery successfully with dominance and subservience to dramatize again that one's position is a complex combination of choice and accident.
CHAPTER 13

LANDSCAPE, SILENCE AND NIGHT: THE MOST SUBTLE EXPRESSION OF DOMINANCE AND SUBSERVIENCE

Few books today, are forgivable. Black on canvas, silence on screen, an empty white sheet of paper, are perhaps feasible.¹

Landscape (1968), Silence (1969), and Night (1969), all in obvious senses "silence on stage," are not only "forgivable," "feasible" but meaningful expressions of our times dramatizing also some of the universal subjects of all literature, the passage of time on youth and age, love, life and death. Only in the most subtle senses do these three plays present Pinter's previous concern with dominance and subservience; more obviously they portray Pinter's concern with time, space and the mystery of identity.

In Landscape Beth and Duff are engulfed by silence; they do not "appear to hear" each other's voices, Duff's patter about trivia in the present, a few recollections of the past, and Beth's internal monologue solely about the past. Their relationship, their identities as husband and wife seem contained only in their separate illusions which are never communicated to one another.

The subjects of their separate monologues converge at times, most noticeably at the end when Beth and Duff describe sexual encounters. But even in their separate recollections of an intimate experience there is no communion; where Duff recalls "banging the gong," saying "I would have had you in front of the dog like a man," then plans, "You'll plead with me like a woman" (p. 29), Beth recalls a time on the beach when "He lay above me" (p. 29), and she ends with "Oh my true love I said" (p. 30). In neither case is the love experience clearly fulfilled; Duff switches from the conditional past to the future tense, suggesting what he only wishes would or will happen, while Beth recalls a youthful memory that seems detached from the living woman of the present.

In the fragmenting and telescoping of time the identities of the characters in all the plays is mysterious; is Beth really different from the young girl which she recalls as herself? She knows she will be different in the future:

Of course when I'm older I won't be the same as I am,
I won't be what I am, my skirts, my long legs, I'll be older, I won't be the same (p. 24).

Nor is it clear that her man, as she refers to him, is Duff—he may be her former employer Sykes, gone, presumably dead. Pinter, in a letter to the director of a German production, maintains that the man in Beth's memory is Duff, infused with recollections of Sykes whom Duff jealously detests:
... the man on the beach is Duff. I think there are elements of Mr. Sykes in her memory of this Duff, which she might be attributing to Duff, but the man remains Duff. I think that Duff detests and is jealous of Mr. Sykes, although I do not believe that Mr. Sykes and Beth were ever lovers. I formed these conclusions after I had written the plays; the same letter also refers to Silence and after learning about them through rehearsals.

Elsewhere in the play the two monologues contrapuntally echo one another as Beth speaks of stopping off at a hotel for a drink (p. 15), while immediately following Duff describes stopping off at a pub for a pint (p. 15). A dog wanders in and out of both their narratives. But even in these tenuous connections, Pinter seems to be dramatizing the separateness of these two people who have presumably lived together for so many years but whose lives no longer touch. Duff's explicit statement about what really matters only further emphasizes their separateness:

That's what matters, anyway. We're together. That's what matters (p. 24).

In what sense are Beth and Duff together? Although the landscapes of each of their narratives take us beyond the walls that are traditionally associated with Pinter's room settings, Beth and Duff seem more obviously walled into the isolation of their separate recollections of similar or shared experience. They exist together in silence.

1The entire portion of the letter plus Esslin's interpolation as they are presented in The Peopled Wound, p. 187, are given here.
Dominance and subservience can have little role without the interaction of characters. It is, however, very subtly apparent in Duff's relation to Sykes as his employer, in his relation to Beth, and in Beth's relation to the man of her memory. Duff, who first speaks quite respectfully of Sykes ("That's where we're lucky, in my opinion. To live in Mr. Sykes' house in peace, no-one to bother us" p. 17), later reveals his hostility toward the man ("Mind you, he was a gloomy bugger. I was never sorry for him at any time, for his lonely life" p. 20), and finally expresses his relief that Sykes is now gone:

At least now . . . at least now, I can walk down to the pub in peace and up to the pond in peace, with no-one to nag the shit out of me (p. 24).

Duff apparently resented his subservient position in the household, but was able to retain some of his dignity outside of the house when he spoke with authority to the boys at the pub:

This fellow knew bugger all about beer. He didn't know I'd been trained as a cellerman. That's why I could speak with authority. (p. 25).

In his relationship with Beth, Duff is gentle at times, as when he speaks of her among the flowers (p. 16), or when he describes his confession of infidelity to her (p. 19); but though he describes his desire to take Beth in commanding raucous terms, he seems oddly unsure of his ability to have her "like a man," as he describes how he "would" have liked to behave with her and have her respond to him; sadly, he does not seem to have "what matters" to him.
Beth's relation to her man is a quaintly passive one played to a gentle courtly but sensuous lover who spends a lot of time himself passively asleep on the beach. The man as she describes him seems so different from the Duff we see that it is easy to suppose Beth is speaking not of her husband but of a lover, perhaps Sykes. But whether or not the man who occupies her thoughts is really Duff or Sykes or someone else hardly matters since, as Pinter says, "I think there are elements of Mr. Sykes in her memory of this Duff;" this Duff (of her dreams) is not the real, living here-and-now Duff anyway. It is not even necessary to suppose, as Esslin does, that Beth no longer actually speaks to Duff; the dramatic device of the internal monologue simply allows Pinter to dramatize what is occasionally common to any conversation—one person's being on his own track and shut off from the other; here it also dramatizes that what is most important to each of these characters is not each other, not even themselves as they presently exist, but what each conceives himself to be, generally in the past.

Beth may not have been unfaithful to Duff, as he confesses he was to her, yet her ongoing infidelity with her imaginary man of her youth is a far more significant part of her life than Duff's real infidelity is to him. In a sense then, these characters out of touch with each other are beyond dominance and subservience.

Silence pushes the boundaries of silence even further by means of a wholly non-realistic setting where three lives touch only briefly, generally to underscore parting, and where time is a moveable function of the minds of Ellen, Rumsey and Bates who willfully go forward or
back in time to dramatize the failure in their relationships. Even more than in Landscape, where death is obliquely hinted at in the allusion to Sykes, and where silence dramatizes a dead relationship between two living people, the silence of Silence seems a reminder of mortality as Esslin suggests when he draws a parallel to Beckett's Play:

Even more than Landscape, Silence recalls Beckett's Play where the device of repeated fragments of speech running down is used to suggest the way the last moments of awareness of a dying person might remain suspended in a limbo forever, echoing on and on through eternity, while gradually losing their intensity but unable ever to fade away completely. Are the cross-cut thoughts and memories in Silence also the dying thoughts of the three characters engulfed in total silence, the silence of death? ¹

The characters in Silence, like almost all of Pinter's characters, act unselfconsciously, generally unaware of death or even of the failure in their relationships. But the failure is apparent even as Rumsey overinsists that he is content to be alone:

I've lost nothing.

Pleasant alone and watch the folding light. My animals are quiet. My heart never bangs. I read in the evenings. There is no-one to tell me what is expected or not expected of me. There is nothing required of me (p. 35).

Being alive requires something; only the heart of the dead "never bangs." Rumsey seems only half alive, and his condition seems to have grown out of a choice, when he spurns Ellen. When she approaches him he says, "Find a young man":

ELLEN. There aren't any.
RUMSEY. Don't be stupid.
ELLEN. I don't like them.
RUMSEY. You're stupid.
ELLEN. I hate them.

Pause.
RUMSEY. Find one.

Silence. (pp. 44-45)

Rumsey possibly quit before he was fired, for when he earlier asks Ellen to cook for him she responds coyly, "Next time I come. I will" (p. 41); next time may be never since the last time, as Rumsey reminds her, "You were a little girl" (p. 41). Even the suggestions of lovemaking between Ellen and Rumsey, though joyful, seem to occur between disembodied, ethereal beings who do not touch:

ELLEN. When I run . . . when I run . . . when I run . . .
over the grass . . . Rumsey. She floats . . . under me.
Floating . . . under me (p. 40).

Ellen, as an old woman, also says she is content to be alone, "I like to get back to my room" (p. 36); and though she is described in the cast list as a "girl in her twenties," she clearly moves forward in time into her old age where she says:
BATES. Do you want to go anywhere else?

ELLEN. Yes.

BATES. Where?

ELLEN. I don't know.

Pause.

BATES. Do you want me to buy you a drink?

ELLEN. No.

Pause.

BATES. Come for a walk.

ELLEN. No.

Pause.

BATES. All right. I'll take you on a bus to the town.

I know a place. My cousin runs it.

ELLEN. No.

Silence. (pp. 38-39)

The silence ends their brief encounter; but to Bates as an old man, whatever wounds he suffered in youth left no marks—his fondest recollections are of his walks in the country with a little girl (Ellen?).

Dominance in this play occurs so subtly it seems almost absent; it occurs primarily at junctures to underscore the failures in the relationships; where Rumsey spurns Ellen (p. 45); where Ellen spurns Bates (p. 39); and when Bates impotently cries out at his noisy young neighbors (p. 35) and perhaps is reminded of his own spent youth.

Night, written when Pinter was thirty-nine and his wife forty, portrays a couple in their forties who recall their first meeting; and
although their recollections of the shared experience differ ("Ah, yes, I remember it well"), the Man and Woman, rather than struggle for dominance as is usual in Pinter's work when a central dispute occurs, argue briefly then momentarily acquiesce, and finally agree to their disagreement!

At first the Man and Woman are at odds about their separate recollections:

WOMAN. We walked down a road into a field, through some railings. We walked to a corner of the field and then we stood by the railings.

MAN. No. It was on the bridge that we stopped.

Pause.

WOMAN. That was someone else.

MAN. Rubbish.

WOMAN. That was another girl.

MAN. It was years ago. You've forgotten.

Pause.

I remember the light on the water (p. 56).

Momentarily they reach accord when they dispassionately rehearse perhaps the most essential part of their first meeting, the first time they made love:

MAN. And then we left the bridge and we walked down the cowpath and we came to a rubbish dump.

WOMAN. And you had me and you told me you had fallen in love with me, and you said you would take care of me always,
and you told me my voice and my eyes, my thighs, my
breasts, were incomparable, and that you would adore
me always.

MAN. Yes I did.

WOMAN. And you adore me always.

MAN. Yes I do (pp. 60-61).

The dialogue seems to progress beyond the present as it ends with
the Man and Woman agreeing to disagree about past details, but to agree
about present feelings (but for each other?):

WOMAN. And then we had children and we sat and talked and you
remembered women on bridges and towpaths and rubbish dumps.

MAN. And you remembered your bottom against railings and men
holding your hands and men looking into your eyes.

WOMAN. And talking to me softly.

MAN. And your soft voice. Talking to them softly at night.

WOMAN. And they said I will adore you always.

MAN. Saying I will adore you always (p. 61).

Love, common to all three plays, is portrayed as failing to connect
the lives of characters whose separateness is emphasized by their past
attempts to love. Even those who apparently loved and marry (Beth and
Duff, the Man and Woman) are no closer than those who seem to have lost
their chance to love (Ellen, Rumsey and Bates). Landscape, Silence and
Night, all autumn plays, primarily portray characters' past youth and
middle age who have somehow lost the hopeful love of springtime and youth
which is nevertheless suggested in each of the works, in the lush rain
wet landscapes of Duff's narrative, in Rumsey's and Bates' talk of the
little girl and the birds, and in the dialogue of youthful passion in
Night.

In view of Pinter's previous concern with dominance and subservience,
the noticeable near absence of that concern in these recent plays poses
an interesting question. Is the absence of the struggle for dominance
simply an outgrowth of the technique (since the characters do not touch,
do not communicate directly they cannot struggle for dominance) or is
the absence of the struggle more deeply thematic (the absence of the
struggle to gain dominance reflects an absence of a quality essential
to being alive, to life itself perhaps)?

The thematic implications of dominant-subservient relations in
Pinter's previous work are generally that the struggle for dominance
grows out of feelings of inadequacy and results generally in destruc-
tion rather than growth or creation in human relationships. Conversely,
it might then be supposed, the absence of the struggle for dominance
would be a good thing. Yet in these recent plays the absence of the
struggle for dominance seems hardly a positive quality in these char-
acters lives. Without the struggle and without the correlative desire
to attain an artificial or arbitrary position or role these characters
actually seem only half alive, isolated into a death in life state of
existence.
It is not at all certain, however, that Pinter intended such thematic implications in Landscape, Silence and Night (after all, understanding such implications seems to presuppose an intimate knowledge of Pinter's previous work). Still, such implications cannot be dismissed. These characters who act generally as if they are complete within themselves seem to dramatize the opposite problem Goldberg has with his identity; while these characters seem content with their almost wholly inner-directed identities (as opposed to the kind of wholly outer-directed identity of a Goldberg) they are hardly superior for such an identity. Some balance between the two would seem best.

Implicit, then perhaps, in Pinter's dramatization of such wholly inner-directed identity is a recognition that the healthy man as he exists in society is necessarily some combination of an inner-and outer-directed identity. Thus, Pinter's concern, or seeming lack of concern with dominant-subservient relations in Landscape, Silence and Night may represent yet another plunge into his exploration and dramatization of civilized Western man as he is, and, perhaps by implication, ought to be, if he could.
CHAPTER 14

SOME CONCLUSIONS

When Harold Pinter was asked to submit a piece for a Beckett Festschrift he presented the following excerpt from a letter to a friend written in 1954:

The farther he goes the more good it does me. I don't want philosophies, tracts, dogmas, creeds, way outs, truths, answers, nothing from the bargain basement. He is the most courageous, remorseless writer going and the more he grinds my nose in the shit the more I am grateful to him. He's not fucking me about, he's not leading me up any garden, he's not slipping me any wink, he's not flogging me a remedy or a path or a revelation or a basinful of breadcrumbs, he's not selling me anything I don't want to buy, he doesn't give a bollock whether I buy or not, he hasn't got his hand over his heart. Well, I'll buy his goods, hook, line and sinker, because he leaves no stone unturned and no maggot lonely. He brings forth a body of beauty. His work is beautiful. ¹

Pinter then added in conclusion:

I can't, now, use any 'words' about his work at all, except to say that he seems to me far and away the finest writer writing.1

What Pinter says of Beckett here and elsewhere to call him "the finest prose writer living,"2 seems to me to be true of Pinter himself.

Perhaps a single work by a few contemporary playwrights stands out above any single work of Pinter's. Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf may be better theater in the sense of its theater wit; but Albee's work seems temporal; Pinter's, more timeless in the use of language and idiom alone. Beckett's Waiting for Godot may be more profound, whatever that may mean, than anything Pinter ever wrote. And without Beckett's novels and Kafka's there possibly would have been no Pinter the playwright.

This study, however, is a study of the whole of Pinter's published playwriting to date. And the whole of his work seems to me better than anything else we've got now in the theater. Harold Hobson was the first major critic to recognize Pinter's genius; shortly after The Birthday Party folded after its first brief London run Harold Hobson wrote:

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1 Pinter, "Beckett," p. 86.

Now I am well aware that Mr. Pinter's play received extremely bad notices last Tuesday morning. At the moment I write these lines it is uncertain even whether the play will still be on the bill by the time they appear, though it is probable it will soon be seen elsewhere. Deliberately I am willing to risk whatever reputation I have as a judge of plays by saying that "The Birthday Party" is not a Fourth, not even a Second, but a First; and that Mr. Pinter, on the evidence of this work possesses the most original disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London.  

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Hobson went on to point out that Osborne and Beckett both got poor notices and he added:

But that has not prevented those two very different writers, Mr. Beckett and Mr. Osborne from being regarded throughout the world as the most important dramatists who now use the English tongue. The early Shaw got bad notices: Ibsen got scandalously bad notices. Mr. Pinter is not merely in good company, he is in the very best.  

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John Russell Taylor too was also an early critic who, in writing about contemporary British dramatists concluded of Pinter that "in the long run he is likely to turn out the greatest of them all":


2Ibid.
At this stage all questions of realism or fantasy, naturalism or artifice become irrelevant, and indeed completely meaningless: whatever we think of his plays, whether we accept or reject them, they are monumentally and inescapably there, the artifact triumphantly separated from the artist, self-contained and self-supporting. Because he has achieved this, and he alone among British dramatists of our day, the conclusion seems inescapable that even if others may be more likeable, more approachable, more sympathetic to one's own personal tastes and convictions, in the long run he is likely to turn out the greatest of them all.  

Arnold P. Hinchliffe, with slightly more reserve, adds similar praise as he also comments on both Pinter's temporal and universal appeal:

Certainly of all contemporary British dramatists only Pinter manages to be topical, local and universal—to combine the European Absurd with native wit to create a record of common inevitability.  

More recently Martin Esslin in his conclusion to The Peopled Wound left no aspect of Pinter's work unpraised:

In a wave of young playwrights which is richer in talent than any generation of British dramatists since the

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1 Taylor, p. 315.

2 Hinchliffe, p. 165.
Restoration, Harold Pinter clearly stands in the front rank, as a craftsman, a master of dialogue, a technician of suspense, laughter, surprise and emotion, and as an artist, a true poet of the stage, who has created his own personal world in his own personal idiom, wholly consistent, wholly individual, an expression of his own anguish, peopled from his wound, which yet, as great poetry always does, re-echoes in the depths of the minds of a multitude of individuals and is therefore capable of giving voice to unspoken fears, sufferings, and yearnings shared by all mankind.

The praise from Pinter's best critics is overwhelming. This study is an attempt to understand and appreciate only one small corner of Pinter's drama. It is not concerned primarily with an aesthetic theory so much as the social, psychological, ethical and basically human truths in Pinter's work. While his plays are not in any negative sense didactic, they are certainly so in the highest sense—in the world view they present.

Tolstoy once said that to know one woman well is better than to know five-hundred (presumably superficially). There is a sense in which this is true of the works of a great literary artist. To know Shakespeare well is to understand man as a wise man does and to know much about literature and other art. To travel through Pinter's works is to travel widely, yet Pinter does not take you on quite the same journey;

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there are few allusions to classical or Biblical mythology (though he has his Diana, Ruth and Barnabas, perhaps others). What is more important in Pinter is the commonly expressed recognition on the part of audience and critic that his people seem real, their dialogue true to the ear and their actions uncomfortably familiar, though often pushed to extremes few of us have actually experienced.

The worldview Pinter delivers springs from the very roots of Western civilization's values; his expression of dominance and subservience is a dramatization of man in a society whose values are based not on individual worth so much as on one's relative position to one's fellow. And the notion of nobility equated primarily with position, role or rank seems long dying but not dead. Still, critics of a more prescriptive school are quick to complain that Pinter's vision lacks nobility (nobility he shows is hollow).

If art springs from life as an expression of life then what Pinter seems to be dramatizing is man who if he strives for dominance over his fellow and seeks his identity solely from that dominance, he is sure to destroy the possibility of fruitful relations and ultimately himself. But any good literature is not merely an expression of life, it returns to life to influence those who participate in and enjoy it.

Is man primarily as Pinter portrays him? Can man change? If so, can he avoid self-destruction? Pinter offers no answers in his work. Yet he seems to point to you, your inner self rather than merely to the institutions that past man and present create. Even if there are answers
they are not simple, and there are no easy affirmations. Pinter's own view is not that of an ameliorist:

I don't have any expectation of the world growing better or anything. The world remains as it is.\(^1\)

Perhaps the implication is that it will not, according to Pinter, grow worse.

In contrast to the predominant notions of our youth-obsessed culture and contrary to Pinter's recent characters who seem to be running down as life goes on, are Pinter's views of himself, his own life:

I feel better year after year, progressively. I'm enjoying my life more as it goes on.\(^2\)

As Pinter also once said of a discussion about whether or not man will improve, "Who the Hell cares anyway?:"

Well it's going to end anyway ... a million year's time or something ... all blow up ... get too near the sun.

I don't think people bear that in mind quite enough.\(^3\)

Obviously Pinter's work is more, much more than this discussion of dominance and subservience reflects. And like any critical work it can no more approach, reproduce, analyze then synthesize the experience of a work of art any more than can a work of art, such as a love poem, reproduce the experience of life, lovemaking. Pinter's work is full

\(^1\) Pinter, _Pinter People_ tape.

\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Ibid.
of much good fun and laughter that this study hardly mentions except what is reflected in actual quotations from his work. His plays seem to reflect the best of the comic as well as the serious qualities of contemporary life and art. The language is far more beautiful, more lyrical even in its naked simplicity than this examination even suggests.

Despite material success and international fame, Pinter's own attitude toward the quality of his work remains charmingly modest:

I'm a very good example of a writer who can write, but I'm not as good as all that. I'm just a writer; and I think that I've been overblown tremendously because there's a dearth of really fine writing, and people tend to make too much of a meal. All you can do is try to write as well as you can.

Elsewhere he has said:

Each play, was for me, "a different kind of failure."

And that fact, I suppose, sent me on to write the next one.

Perhaps finally relevant to questions about Pinter's future reputation as a dramatist is the question "Is the theater dead?" When asked if he thought it was finished, Pinter responded:

It is not finished while I am alive.

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1 Pinter, Paris Review Interview, p. 366.
2 Pinter, "Writing for the Theater," p. 82.
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APPROVAL SHEET

The dissertation submitted by Penelope Ann Prentice has been read and approved by members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Jan. 10, 1972
Date

Signature of Advisor