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## **A Study in Characterization in a Selection of Harold Pinter's Plays**

A Paper

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## **Dedication**

This paper is dedicated to my family, they generally put stock in me, move me and urge me to arrive at higher to accomplish my objectives.

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to provide light on the characterization of Harold Pinter's plays in which his drama progresses in a mysterious environment in which the surfaces of life are accurately described but the patterns that underpin them remain a mystery. Pinter's characters are frequently depicted as hostages locked in a whirl of questions and ambiguities that degrade them to a state of impotence and dehumanisation. Pinter depicts the absurdity of human existence with careful attention to detail, resulting in the false realism of his surfaces. Furthermore, their bleak present holds little hope. The aim of this study is to analyse the characterization of Jessie in *The Homecoming*, The Tramp's Friend at Sidcup and the Coloureds in *The Caretaker*, Monty in *The Birthday Party* and Jerry's wife, Judith and the couple's children in *Betrayal*. Examining the character dialogue and quotes of the selected plays, and related issues on the topic are taken from printed and online including journals, books, and magazines. Pinter's characters are shown as being trapped in an endless maze of ambiguities and unanswered questions, which leaves the reader with the impression that they are powerless and dehumanised. Their whole existence is without significance. The safe chamber does not offer any security, the events of the past were hard to pin down, and it is impossible to predict what will happen in the future. In addition, their bleak present holds little hope for the future. Because of this, their tragedy is unavoidable.

**Key words:** Pinter, characterization, Jessie, Monty, Jerry's wife, Judith and the couple's children, The Tramp's Friend at Sidcup and the Coloureds.

## **Introduction**

### **Harold Pinter's Life**

The British playwright Harold Pinter was born on England in 1930, and he died in 2008 in the city of London. He was very famous because his unique style. The Nobel Prize in Literature for 2005 is awarded to the English writer Harold Pinter. This brief justification for giving the award to Pinter that year focused on his dramatic writing and made reference to his reputation for artistic representation of everyday casual language, the threat of some hollow, ominous space that such language obscures or avoids,<sup>2</sup> his frequent use of enclosed spaces, and his foregrounding of repressive interpersonal or state behaviours (Batty,2014:8).

Pinter was known of his hostility towards politics was largely a hostility towards institutional politics and politicians because of their tendency to indulge in reductive social analysis. Politicians consequently tend to display a readiness to settle for what is currently possible rather than to register a sustained determination to deal with all the imponderables of the actual or to confront the intractability of the necessary (Ariel, 2008: 15).

The drama of Harold Pinter evolves in an atmosphere of mystery in which the surfaces of life are realistically detailed but the patterns that underlie them remain obscure. Despite the vivid naturalism of his dialogue, his characters often behave more like figures in a dream than like persons with whom one can easily identify. Pinter has on one occasion admitted that, if pressed, he would define his art as realistic but would not describe what he does as realism. Here he points to what his audience has often sensed is distinctive in his style: its mixture of the real and surreal, its exact

portrayal of life on the surface, and its powerful evocation of that life that lies beneath the surface (Burkman,1972:3).

Pinter himself is an excellent if reluctant guide to his mysterious dramatic world. He says "If you press me for a definition, I'd say that what goes on in my plays is realistic, but what I'm doing is not realism." Pinter points to what his audience has so often sensed as distinctive in his style: its mixture of the real and the surreal, its exact portrayal of life on the surface, and its powerful evocation of that life which lies beneath the surface. Pinter goes on to describe his own struggle with communication and the nature of that territory he chooses to explore. Words, he says, both please and discourage him, almost to the point of nausea. The bulk of them so often become "a stale dead terminology" that it is very easy to be overcome by paralysis (Malpas,1987:103).

The kind of theatre with which Pinter concerned is that in which two or three characters meet for the purpose of talking to themselves. This situation is seen in the plays of Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter. It is a trend in contemporary theatre, and Pinter is its English representative; and it is the trend that, it seems to, say and do in the so-called revival of the British theatre. There have been, of course, so many revivals in that perennial institution that it is difficult to believe that the theatre had time to fade and die between them. The recent important revivals can be summed up, with varying adequacy, under the three headings of "Poetic," "Angry," and "Absurd"; and all three have also been concerned with the physical aspects of the theatre-from the kind of stage to be used to such minor details as the abolition of footlights and curtains, The assimilation of "Absurd Theatre" was slow; indeed, the process is still neither final nor assured. In the early stages of this adjustment, another kind of theatre appeared that was

vociferous enough to make it appear to be the only important voice, one which has been called "Angry theatre" (Hinchliffe, 1976,8).

Harold Pinter was frequently categorised as an exponent dramatist of the Theatre of Absurd, which considered an example of the most effective, provocative, influential and poetic dramatists of his generation. His plays were distinguished from all others with their sense of ambiguity, suspense and mystification. This sprang from a gap between the surface action on one side and the hidden or underling meaning on another side for the action of characters. This creates a multiplying meaning and a hidden reality. Through the course of a 50-year career, his output spanned the stage and screen. He was known for his high-minded use of the language in a style of writing that was named after him, "Pinteresque". It suggests a cryptically mysterious style that was permeated with a hidden menace. His use of numerous clichés, colloquial language, illogical syntax and an unpolished grammar was to create dialogues that mirror everyday speech. (Abrams, 2) The tendency of Pinter to use such explicitness and exaggeration in the processes of human psychology within his plays to create a realistic view for the world deprived to believe in the meaningfulness of human existence.

This paper focuses on characterization of characterization in Pinter's plays. The focus is on the characters who do not appear on the stage, yet exert a great influence on the other characters. The plays that are selected for discussion are 1, 2 and 3. The paper is divided into an introduction, a section in which the plays are discussed, and a conclusion that sums up the findings of the study.



# Section One

## Characterization in Harold Pinter's Plays

### 1. Jessie in *The Homecoming*

Pinter's violent two-act play *The Homecoming* reveals glimpses of the inner furies raging at the core of a family of fighting men. The play is divided into two acts. "Freudian play about sons packed with hidden Oedipal urges," which exposes issues of sex and power in a realistic manner.

One of the most difficult challenges in his dramatic works is how he employed female characters in his plays. Using his Pinteresque conversations and methods, Pinter wishes to decentralize the patriarchal structure of family and society. Jessie is a mysterious figure who appears and disappears. Her absence had already left a huge gap in the family as well as the house, and her presence is literally felt in the walls of the family home. Once Teddy and Ruth arrive, he tells Ruth about his family's home:

It's a big house. I mean it's a fine room, don't you think? There was a wall, across there...with a door. We knocked it down ...years ago... to make an open living area. The structure wasn't affected, you see. My mother was dead (*Homecoming*: 21).

While Sam memories her kindly and appears to have a secret concerning her (which is disclosed at the conclusion of the play) as he mentioned her:

"Sam. Never get a bride like you had, anyway. Nothing like your bride ... going about these days. Like Jessie. I used to pull up at a stall and buy her a cup of coffee. She was a very nice companion to be with." (*Homecoming*: 16).

Max and Lenny argue over her, with Max shifting between anger and respect:

“He was very fond of your mother, Mac was. Very fond. He always had a good word for her.

Pause

Mind you, she wasn't such a bad woman. Even though it made me sick just to look at her rotten stinking face, she wasn't such a bad bitch. I gave her the best bleeding years of my life, anyway.”  
(*Homecoming*: 9).

Ruth is a mother and whore. A whore is the most passive of women, the one who can be treated as a sexual object without any consideration for her own desires or feelings. The more helpless a male, the more he will tend to dream of women as obedient slaves and prostitutes. Hence, the unapproachable mother's image must be in the sexual dreams of a child, tends to turn into the image of the whore and therefore both Ruth and Jessie are mother and whore. Because she was both 'mother' and 'sexual' in Lenny's eyes: “The night they were made in the image of those two people at it”. it helps to give an oedipal twist to his emotions toward his mother, which he believes is normal for a man of his age. (Esslin: 160).

Although, Ruth is the only female character in the play, there is an obvious parallel made between her and the dead Max's wife, Jessie. Ruth occupies Jessie's position in the family and this is obvious when Max says:

“Listen, I'll tell you something. Since poor Jessie died, eh, Sam? We haven't had a woman in the house. Not one. Inside this house. And I'll tell you why. Because their mother's image was so dear any other woman would have...tarnished it. But you...Ruth...you're not only lovely and beautiful, but you're kin. You're kith. You belong here” (*Homecoming*: 71)

Ruth and Jessie have many similarities, and this is no random occurrence; she is the reincarnation of the boys' mother. She refers to Lenny as 'Leonard,' a name only his mother has. Ruth is an example for image of Jessie in the play, has three children. It is implied that she was a prostitute prior to meeting Teddy. She claims she was 'different' when she first met Teddy, but we also know she was a nude model, which is another word for prostitute. This could explain Max's initial violent reaction to meeting her: he was confronted with an image of his deceased wife. (Quigley,1979;33).

Then he accepts her when knows she is a mother. Accordingly, he could describe his wife Jessie as 'the backbone to his family' with a 'will of iron, a heart of gold' then condemns her as a 'slut'. He was a butcher, so he is flesh trader like his son Lenny and sometimes more extreme in changing veneration and vilification of its properties. However, Ruth proves glamorousness in her sense of how physically can control and captivate:

Don't be too sure. You've forgotten something. Look at me. I move my leg. That's all it is. But I wear underwear which moves with me, it captures your attention. Perhaps you misinterpret. The action is simple. It is a leg moving. My lips move. Why don't you restrict your observations to that? Perhaps the fact that they move is more significant than the words which come through them. You must bear that possibility in mind. (*Homecoming*: 52-53)

Jessie's figure, so is that Jessie's figure confronted once more by the power of London family. However, the play suggests that the freedoms might be alternately viewed as captivities and vice versa and charges the tension with certain erotic dynamism, suggesting that the avoidance of such tensions constitutes a comparatively arid abstraction (Quigley, 1975: 225).

Both limitations and potentiality of Ruth's devastating role became most obvious compared with that of Jessie. Jessie is no more than an offstage, inarticulate figure. Her role in the play is recipient female as Max orally constructs and reconstructs her along the whore dichotomy/patriarchal mother to suit the shifting requirements of his struggle to reclaim a position of dominance within the male family arrangement. Ruth once more manages to bring the arbitrariness of genders roles encoded in language to the surface. While Max's incongruous juxtapositions reveal the constructability of the mother/slut dualism Max unequivocally says: "I've never had a whore under this roof before. Ever since your mother died", they are far from allowing Jessie to escape representation within the patriarchal order to enjoy a position outside that order. Ruth can attempt to resist that dominant order and its attempts to fix and categorize her, famously perhaps in the play decisive contract scene. (Sarbin, 35:1989).

Just like With the *Caretaker*, the character that comes home in *The Homecoming* is not Teddy it literally appears to be. It is the mother (wife), Jessie, who returns home, metaphorically reincarnated as the character of Ruth.

## **2. The Tramp's Friend at Sidcup and the Coloureds in *The Caretaker***

In *The Caretaker*, the location is a private room, and it is evident that there is at least some security only within room, and that outside, in the continuously wet weather, there is little prospect of surviving. Davies, the old tramp, is the one striving to remain inside the room, but he will be eventually pushed out to his demise. The two young guys, Aston and Mick, play the role of killers in far more subtle and complicated ways. They were the ones who evict Davies.

The characters in the play are quite secluded. They circle their own little worlds and can't establish meaningful interactions. Communication is strained or impossible; they misunderstand one another and retreat into their own worlds. They are not involved with society and find the outside world unfriendly or perplexing. As a refuge or womb, people expect to be secure here, which explains why Davies must go and finds it scary that he cannot remain. (Osborne-Bartucca, 2015)

Davies is the character that repeats his words and ideas the most. For instance, as he complains about the shoes that Aston gave him, the homeless man uses the word “foot” more times than necessary:

The only way to keep a pair of shoes on, if you haven't got no laces, is to tighten the foot, see? Walk about with a tight foot, see? Well, that's no good for the foot. Puts a bad strain on the foot.  
(*Caretaker*: 65)

In addition, Davies keeps retelling his need to go to Sidcup to fetch his papers even though he never does, a fact that makes both brothers turn against him. Aston's apparently generous act of bringing shoes constitutes an expulsion of the intruder: he wants Davies to go away and giving him shoes is an attempt to accelerate the process. Likewise, at the end of the play, Mick attacks Davies' integrity precisely because the tramp has constantly reiterated his need to go to Sidcup. (Knowles, 1988:123)

Being an observer, Pinter may have devoted his attention to individual as he raises questions about his own place in the world. In *The Caretaker*, Pinter has laid much stress on this phenomenon. He provides us with a case in which an old tramp called Davies, who wants to prove his existence as well as his identity. He is a man who wants to reserve a place in this world. Right from the first act, the readers or the audience is

confronted with the old tramp's enigmatic situation where Davies has lost not only his place in the world, but also his identity:

Davies: (with great feeling). If only the weather would break!  
Then I'd be able to get down to Sidcup!  
Aston: Sidcup?... (*Caretaker*: 19)

Having established the impossibility for Davies to journey back to Sidcup to prove his identity, Pinter has already reminded us that Davies still exists. For Davies' ignorance arose from his awareness of himself as an individual, thinking alone to play off the two brothers: Mick and Aston against each other. He thinks of himself as an existing concrete individual, set down in the world, raising the problem of identity.

Apart from the confusing reactions of the characters in the play, Pinter is exploring the human condition, the alienation of man, solitude, quest of identity and his own self. At the end of the final act, Pinter seems to emphasize Davies' silence, which may be interpreted as an evasion of the suffering and anguish that spring from his self-deception; and from facing the reality of his condition. For Davies immediately realizes that he has no right to take liberties in the brother's house, as he has no chance to stay in (Martin, 1970:72).

Despite the wealthy authenticity of his discourse, his characters continually behave more like figures in a dream than like people with whom one can easily relate. Pinter is interested in the type of theatre in which two or three characters meet for the purpose of talking to themselves. The reader is left with the feeling that Pinter's characters are helpless and dehumanised because they are shown as being imprisoned in an infinite labyrinth of ambiguity and unresolved questions. Their very existence has no bearing on anything that matters. It is impossible to know what will take

place in the future since the secure room provides no protection, the events of the past are difficult to place, and there is no way to know what will take place in the present. In addition, the gloomy nature of their current situation leaves little room for optimism for their future. Because of this, their tragedy could not have been prevented. Using his “Pinteresque” conversations and methods to describe his writing, the plays were constructed as a series of duologues. The world in which *The Caretaker* is set is one that is filled with absurdity. Life is disjointed, chaotic, bewildering, and antagonistic; there is no overarching story or purpose to it. Finding one's own significance and worth is not something a person can depend on others, society, God, or even oneself to do. The protagonists are cut off from the rest of the world, forced to fend for themselves, and hampered by circumstances beyond their control. The decisions that they make or the desires that they have seem to have no bearing whatsoever on the result. They seem to have no connection to history, either personal or communal. The most that Mick and Aston can hope for is that life will go on as it has been, and all that Davies can wish for is another little reprieve from the gnawing emptiness that characterises his existence.

### **3. Monty in *The Birthday Party***

*The Birthday Party*, written in 1957, was produced as an immediate consequence of the Bristol production of *The Room*. First presented at the Arts Theatre in Cambridge and subsequently at the Lyric in Hammersmith, it was disastrously unsuccessful. The story of Pinter's growth as a dramatist is very much the story of the education of critics and audiences about his particular style (Hinchliffe, 1976: 46).

A character who does not present in the play. Goldberg informs Petey in the third act that both he and McCann should take Stanley to visit Monty, whom he encourages Petey to assume seems to be a doctor, but this

seems improbable given that he talks about Monty in an ominous and purposely ambiguous manner. In Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, very few elements are plain or provable. In fact, the majority of what the characters proclaim as truth is eventually refuted or ignored. Life experiences, for example, were murky, as characters like as Goldberg and Stanley Webber relate contradictory versions about their own past memories. *The Birthday Party* seems to be so adaptable that even the names of the characters change from time to time. (Lannamann, 2018)

A scruffily lethargic yet fractious lodger Stanley, seemingly a failed pianist, is the only resident of Meg and Petey's seaside boarding house. Claiming it is his birthday, the fussily maternal landlady presents her lodger with a toy drum. The routine calm is disturbed by the arrival of an outlandish pair, Goldberg and McCann.

PETEY (moves to the table). I think he needs one.

GOLDBERG. I agree with you. It's all taken care of. We'll give him a bit of time to settle down, and then I'll take him to Monty.

PETEY. You're going to take him to a doctor?

GOLDBERG (staring at him). Sure. Monty. (*Birthday Party*: 34)

They appear to know of Stanley, he seems to know of them. A bizarre interrogation implies that he has fled from an organization which they represent. Fighting is interrupted by the boozy and sentimental party. During a game of blind man's bluff, the lights fail, Stanley attacks Meg and Lulu, a guest, and then has a mental breakdown. Next morning Goldberg and McCann take the smartly dressed but speechless Stanley away, and Meg and Petey return to their routine.

Goldberg asserts that Monty is the right person for Stanley, then places the bowler hat on Stanley's hair and walks more towards the door.



GOLDBERG. We're taking him to Monty.  
PETEY. He can stay here.  
GOLDBERG. Don't be silly.  
PETEY. We can look after him here.  
GOLDBERG. Why do you want to look after him?  
PETEY. He's, my guest.  
GOLDBERG. He needs special treatment.  
PETEY. We'll find someone.  
GOLDBERG. No. Monty's the best there is. Bring him, McCann.  
They help STANLEY out of the chair. They all three moves  
towards the door, left.  
PETEY. Leave him alone!  
They stop. GOLDBERG studies him.  
GOLDBERG (insidiously). Why don't you come with us, Mr  
Boles?  
MCCANN. Yes, why don't you come with us?  
GOLDBERG. Come with us to Monty. There's plenty of room in  
the car. (*Birthday Party*: 38)

Goldberg and McCann have the idea that a mystery healer known only as "Monty" may help Stanley Webber, and they wish to transport him there for treatment. Near the conclusion of the play, when they have finally succeeded in reducing him to stupidity, they drag Stanley Webber away in Goldberg's automobile to face the "Monty," a mysterious and frightening destiny. (Sobczak and Frank, 1998)

The *Caretaker* the characters fully develop Pinter's themes and tactics introduced in *The Homecoming* and refined in his subsequent works. It's a Pinteresque play, with its characters, metaphor, excellent language, and stagecraft. He changed course to avoid imitating himself. Increasingly, he "couldn't any longer stay in the room with this bunch of people who opened doors and came in and went out." he shifted his atmosphere, creating plays with middle-class characters, leaving behind the Cockney vocabulary of the earlier plays but exhibiting an ear for the follies and banalities of middle-class discourse and what was being communicated behind its affectations. (Mambrol, 2019)

#### **4. Jerry's Wife, Judith and the couple's children in *Betrayal***

*Betrayal*, inspired on Pinter's romance with BBC TV presenter Joan Bakewell when she became marriage to Television producer Michael Bakewell, is about middle-class infidelity and remorse. First performed by The National Theatre in 1978, several reviewers were unhappy that Pinter, master of terror, puzzlement, and the pregnant pause, had written such a comprehensible bourgeois cuckoldry drama. (McKay, 2016)

The drama starts with the couple's relationship in its last stages, and then it gradually moves back in time to the beginning of their time together nine years ago. This ingenious use of reverse chronology ensures that the event develops with increasing, inescapable irony, so that the climactic moment, in which Jerry proclaims his love to the stunned Emma, looks both extemporaneous and fatalistic. Jerry's confession of love to Emma has the sparse, economical speech that is typical of Pinter's work, together with a cast of characters characterised by confused feelings and motivations, as well as cunning, face-saving, and self-deception. The play focuses mostly on the shifting power dynamic in triangle relationships as well as the anguish of loss, although it is peppered with compassionate and humorous moments throughout. (McKay, 2016)

Throughout *Betrayal*, there is a logical progression such as the ripples of a body falling into a pool of water create a chain reaction of events. One lie lead to another, and so on and so forth, until a whole universe of lies has been created, each with the status of an alternate truth. (Meyrick, 2015)

Judith is a character who does not present in the play married to Jerry, he feels that she is far too busy as a doctor working at a hospital. They have two children's Sam and Sarah. According to Jerry, she is too busy to have an extramarital affair. Jerry had betrayed his closest friend

Robert by sharing a bed with Emma, who's still married to Robert; similarly, Emma, who even after everything is still has a relationship with Robert despite Jerry's affair with her. (Publishing Ed, 2020)

Other elements of the lives of these three characters are tinged by betrayal as well, most notably their relationship with the character Roger Casey, who is never seen, and Jerry's wife, Judith. The treachery committed against Judith is unmistakable, whereas the treachery committed against Casey is somewhat more covert. The events of the story are told in reverse chronological order, beginning in 1977 with the conclusion of the affair that Emma had been carrying on with Jerry for some time. The events of the play go backwards through the 1970s while the affair is taking place, and the play comes to a conclusion in 1968 on the day that Jerry first confesses his feelings for Emma, who has been married to Robert at the time. (Course Hero, 2020)

When Jerry and Emma met at their apartment, they were eating and talking about Judith, if Judith was having a knowledge of her husband's infidelity, but Jerry insists she doesn't, and he was mentioning Judith's hospital admirer upsets him. Emma asks if Jerry's been unfaithful. Jerry denies cheating, while Emma affirms her own. Jerry tells her he's thrilled she's pregnant with Robert's child. (Publishing Ed, 2020)

## Conclusion

To sum up what we have tackled in this paper, the drama of Harold Pinter develops in an environment of intrigue, where the surfaces of life are realistically portrayed, but the patterns underlying them remain elusive. Pinter's work is characterised by this tension. Despite the vivid realism of his discourse, his characters often behave more like figures in a dream than like people with whom one can readily relate. This makes it difficult for the reader to connect with the characters.

In *The Homecoming*, Jessie and Ruth are two characters engaged in a conversation and their reasons for communicating were to create an identity concerning one another. Pinter wishes to decentralize the patriarchal structure of family and society. Although Jessie has died and her absence had already left a great hole in the family as well as in the house, and her presence can be practically felt in the walls of the family home. Her absence had already created a huge gap. On other hand, there is an obvious parallel made between her and the dead Max's wife, Jessie. Ruth occupies Jessie's position in the family, and this is obvious in the details of the play.

While in *The Caretaker* the characters fully develop Pinter's themes and tactics introduced in *The Homecoming* and refined in his subsequent works. It's a Pinteresque play, with its characters, metaphor, excellent language, and stagecraft. He changed course to avoid imitating himself. Increasingly, he shifted his atmosphere, creating plays with middle-class characters, leaving behind the Cockney vocabulary of the earlier plays but exhibiting an ear for the follies and banalities of middle-class discourse and what was being communicated behind its affectations.

In *Birthday Party* Monty who does not present in the play. Goldberg informs Petey in the third act that both he and McCann should take Stanley to visit Monty, whom he encourages Petey to assume seems to be a doctor, but this seems improbable given that he talks about Monty in an ominous and purposely ambiguous manner. In Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, very few elements are plain or provable. In fact, the majority of what the characters proclaim as truth is eventually refuted or ignored. Life experiences.

The characters in *The Caretaker* are quite secluded. They circle their own little worlds and can't establish meaningful interactions. Communication is strained or impossible; they misunderstand one another and retreat into their own worlds. They are not involved with society and find the outside world unfriendly or perplexing. As a refuge or womb, people expect to be secure here, which explains why Davies must go and finds it scary that he cannot remain.

As we mention in *Betrayal* Judith, Jerry's wife, is absent from the play because he thinks she's too busy working as a doctor. Sam and Sarah are their kids. Jerry says she's too busy for affair relationship. Jerry betrayed his best friend Robert by sleeping with Emma, who is still married to Robert despite Jerry's affair with her. Judith was not knowing about her husband's infidelity, but Jerry insists was mentioning Judith's hospital admirer upsets him. The three characters are tinged by betrayal, most notably their relationship with the character Roger Casey, who is never seen, and Jerry's wife, Judith. The treachery committed against Judith, whereas the treachery committed against Casey is somewhat more covert.

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