

## Politics in the Plays of Harold Pinter

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### Abstract

In many of Harold Pinter's plays, the conflict is set in motion by the arrival of a visitor at the door. Within this unexpected admission a particular power struggle emerges, and by the end of the play, someone has lost the struggle and someone has won. It would be poetic to say that this very conflict mirrors the events of the Holocaust, that in the end, with the defeat of the Nazis, someone had won. Unfortunately, there were not any winners in the Holocaust, only victims. It is the memory of these victims that motivates Pinter to write the plays that he does, plays that are, at heart, addressing the corruption of mankind.

### الملخص

السياسة في مسرحيات هارولد بنتر

في العديد من مسرحيات هارولد بنتر يبدأ الصراع بوصول زائر يقف عند الباب. مع هذا الدخول غير المتوقع لهذا الزائر يبدأ صراع القوى ، اذ مع نهاية المسرحية يخسر شخص ما هذا الصراع وينتصر به شخص اخر. سيكون من الواقع القول ان هذا الصراع يعكس احداث المحرقة وانه في النهاية ومع هزيمة النازيين انتصر شخص ما. لسوء الحظ لم يكن هناك اي منتصرين في المحرقة فقط كان هناك ضحايا. ان ذكرى هؤلاء الضحايا هو ما حفز بنتر لكتابة المسرحيات بالشكل الذي كتبها، مسرحيات تخاطب جوهرها فساد الانسان.

## Introduction

In his Nobel acceptance speech, Harold Pinter states that "I have often been asked how my plays come about. I cannot say. Nor can I ever sum up my plays, except to say that this is what happened. That is what they said. That is what they did."<sup>1</sup> Pinter's description of his writing technique suggests that the motivation for his characters and his plots comes from a deeply rooted subconscious that he cannot articulate. Critics have commented that Pinter's work often alludes to the Holocaust that occurred during the Nazi Regime of World War II. In his later political plays, Pinter is overtly commenting on the role of a dictatorship form of government. In order for Pinter to reach this openly political work, his plays have gone on a journey, a journey that Pinter himself cannot describe, but one that is preoccupied with the Holocaust.

Pinter is far from being regarded a political writer. All one has to do is read his Nobel Acceptance Speech to see that he has a strong political point of view and he is more than willing to express it whenever possible. This speech, one of the many political protests made by this playwright, focuses on the exploitation of victimized countries that are unable to fight back against the greatest power, the United States government. His speech, forty-six minutes long, opens with an address regarding his plays and discusses his particular motivation for writing several of his works. The greater part of his speech is spent addressing the United States government and its subsequent dictating measures that manipulate incompatible countries until they are entirely dominated. One may wonder why does Pinter spend his Nobel acceptance speech discussing political affairs of the countries around him? Why does he not discuss his art? Why is he so angry about the actions of the United States government and his own British government? The answer is simple: Pinter is fighting for the victim, for the minority, and for the abused.

The themes that recur in Pinter's work distinctly reflect his Jewish background. Pinter recognizes that his fascination with dominance and subservience has become a common theme in his plays. The role of the victim and the aggressor suggests that the themes in his works are associated with one particular aspect in Pinter's life, his Jewish heritage. Steven H. Gale discusses Pinter's themes, suggesting that they are all ultimately related. He refers to Bernard Dukore's analysis of Pinter's work, who describes Pinter's writing as "a picture of contemporary man beaten down by the social forces around him, based on man's failure to communicate with other men."<sup>2</sup> The idea suggested by Dukore, that Pinter's plays reflect a type of social oppression, can be traced back to Pinter's experience in his youth.

Harold Pinter was born in Hackney, a working class neighborhood in London's East End, in 1930. The rise of anti-Semitism in Europe during the 1930s had an impact on the East End of London where mostly Jewish people lived. Living in this environment affected Pinter's conception of the class system that was present in Britain, as well as educated him as to where the Jewish people fit into that system. Pinter's life, even as a young boy, was shaped by his heritage. With the outbreak of World War II, Pinter was evacuated from the city; he did not return to London until he was fourteen. He recalls:

On the day I got back to London, in 1944, I saw the first flying bomb. I was in the street and I saw it come over.... There were times when I would open our back door and find our garden in flames. Our house never burned, but we had to evacuate several times. Every time we evacuated, I took my cricket bat with me.<sup>3</sup>

Pinter's lost childhood is exemplified by his innocent desire to take his cricket bat with him each time his family was evacuated from their home. Mel Gussow's interview with Pinter, "A Conversation (Pause) with Pinter," discusses Pinter's youth. Pinter claims that he remembers very little about his childhood, "If you asked me to tell my childhood stories, I would find it almost impossible."<sup>4</sup> Pinter's lack of memory of his youth suggests that he tries to repress a past that was too hard to forget; he claims that, "I can't remember so much, but it is not actually forgotten. It exists-because it has not simply gone. I carry it with me. If you really remember everything you would blow up. You can't carry the burden."<sup>5</sup> Pinter's reflections suggest that his need to forget his childhood led him to withhold the trauma he survived, only to have it manifest itself in his plays.

In Miriam Gross's interview, "Pinter on Pinter," Pinter discusses his suspicion of political structures and governments and the way that the government manipulates people for its own gain. His political point of view comes from his strong feeling about the war. He states, "I felt very strongly about the war. And still do, if you see what I mean. After all, I wasn't a child by the time it ended; though I was when it began."<sup>6</sup> Pinter's reflections on war reveal that perhaps he has buried his childhood memories, only because they were too painful or difficult to live with. This repression is important to consider when analyzing Pinter's work, especially since he was victim to anti-Semitism. Pinter recalls, "I was evacuated-at the age of nine-and that left a deep mark on me, as I think it

did on all children who were evacuated. To be suddenly scooped out of one's home and to find oneself hundreds of miles away-as I did, in Cornwall-was very strange."<sup>7</sup> Pinter's childhood, the most formative years of a person's life, has a strong influence on his playwriting.

It was during those years that Pinter received an education that tainted the innocence of his childhood. Pinter explores his awareness of his own mortality in his plays:

When Pinter began his playwriting career in 1957, however, one idea was foremost in his mind as a major theme: fear. As a young Jew living through the early days of World War II, he had gone to bed afraid that he might be awakened in the night by a knock at the door and that he and his parents would be taken forcibly from their home by unknown assailants, a picture vividly impressed on his mind by tales of Hitler's Germany.<sup>8</sup>

With that fear continually haunting him, Pinter explores different scenarios that could take place if the authorities did arrive at the door and seize their victims, and each scenario becomes one of Pinter's published plays.

Therefore, it is important to reiterate that many of the defining qualities of Pinter's plays are a result of the world that he grew up in. In Austin E. Quigley's "The Language Problem," Quigley suggests that Pinter's experience as a minority Jewish person influenced his use of menace in his plays. Quigley states that Pinter discovered that he had to rely on a verbal defense to protect himself:

I went to a Jewish club, by an old railway arch, and there were quite a lot of people often waiting with broken milk bottles in a particular alley we used to walk through. There were two ways of getting out of it-one was a purely physical way, of course, but you couldn't do anything about the milk bottles-we didn't have any milk bottles. The best way was to talk to them.<sup>9</sup>

Pinter not only uses language as a tool for creating menace, but also as a tool for survival. Pinter's plays are influenced by events and moments from his past, whether or not they are consciously recognizable. For example, his plays are noted for their use of silence and cryptic small talk. His major plays are usually set in a single room whose occupants are threatened by forces or people whose precise intentions neither the characters nor the audience can define. Often these characters are engaged in a struggle for survival or control.

In one of Pinter's first plays, The Birthday Party, the conflict in the play begins after there is a knock at the door. Pinter stated in an interview that he was initially surprised by the insipid reaction to The Birthday Party. He thought that anyone who had lived through World War II would recognize the dreaded knock at the door. He states: "This man is hidden away in a seaside boarding house...Then two people arrive out of nowhere, and I don't consider this an unnatural happening. I don't think it is all that surrealistic and curious because surely this thing, of people arriving at the door, has been happening in Europe in the last twenty years."<sup>10</sup> This knock at the door is reminiscent of the fear and powerlessness felt by the Jewish communities in Europe during the Nazi Regime. This device becomes an important thematic element in many of Pinter's plays. Pinter subconsciously writes plays that represent the same conflict as the Holocaust, although he sets his plays in London and masks his conflict within everyday situations.

In his Nobel acceptance speech, Pinter articulates his artistic motivation for writing:

Truth in drama is forever elusive. You never quite find it but the search for it is compulsive. The search is clearly what drives the Endeavour. The search is your task. More often than not you stumble upon the truth in the dark, colliding with it or just glimpsing an image or a shape which seems to correspond to the truth, often without realizing that you have done so. But the real truth is that there never is any such thing as one truth to be found in dramatic art. There are many. These truths challenge each other, recoil from each other, reflect each other, ignore each other, tease each other, are blind to each other. Sometimes you feel you have the truth of a moment in your hand, then it slips through your fingers and is lost.<sup>11</sup>

Pinter's writing has been motivated by his need for truth, for understanding and for reasoning; living in the shadow of the Holocaust has found its way creatively and subconsciously into his work.

## **The Subconscious Characterization of the Holocaust:**

Pinter has essentially written four types of plays throughout his career and the plays selected for analysis here are also the best representative of the four categories. These aforementioned categories are as follows: the menace plays, the family plays, the couple plays, and the social plays.

Many of Pinter's earlier plays fall into the category of the menace plays. These include: The Room (1957), The Hothouse (1958/79), The Dumb waiter (1957), The caretaker (1959), The Dwarfs (1960), Monologue (1972), No Man's Land (1974) and Victoria Station (1982). These plays are best described as menace plays because they reveal a type of domination and menace that arises when characters who know each other end up in competition against each other. The conflict of these plays results in one character trying to dominate or manipulate another character. These works also make use of silence; lurking underneath the lengthy silence is the threat of violence, the anticipation of something deadly, and Pinter uses that threat effectively. The characters are content to be victims in their own situation. They do not attempt to change or fix their condition; they accept their position for what it is and continue on with their meaningless existence. The fight for power is a never-ending fight; the characters will always remain victims in this world. Many of the plays in this category have similar themes, but The Room lends itself best to this particular analysis.

The second prominent category is Pinter's family plays: A Night Out (1959), Night school (1960), Landscape (1967), Silence (1968), Family Voices (1980), A kind of Alaska (1982), One for the Road (1984), Mountain Language (1988) and The New World Order (1991). While it is arguable that some of these works exploit the same vulnerability as the menace plays, these particular plays represent families that are torn apart, manipulated and tortured, and the strength of the family is at risk. These works address different levels of loss throughout their development; for example, the early works depict families that have been separated, or are unable to connect. By the final plays, the families are being tortured and their human desire to survive often becomes more important than their own family honor. Two of Pinter's family plays are analyzed here; One for the Road and Mountain Language.

Some of Pinter's work can also be grouped into a category of the social plays: The Birthday Party (1958), Tea Party (1964), Party Time (1991), Moonlight (1993), Celebration (1999) and Remembrance of Things Past (2000). These plays are distinctly social and celebratory, usually centering around a party, but under this façade lurks the corruption of the characters. For the most part, the characters are blind to the reality of the world around them and would rather live their lives to plan their next party than to realize the corruption that exists within their own social circle. The Birthday Party is the best representation of these works. It was Pinter's first social play and he manipulated the different degrees of innocence within his characters.

The final category of Pinter's work is his couple plays. These plays are important social commentaries and they are also some of his most produced work. These works include: A Slight Ache (1958), The Collection (1961), The Lover (1962), The Homecoming (1964), The Basement (1966), Old Times (1970), Betrayal (1978), and they all culminate in Ashes to Ashes (1996). The characters that exist in these plays manipulate the ambiguity of truth. Most of the plots revolve around the fallibility of memory and the power struggle that occurs between lovers when the truth becomes ambiguous. Each character is guilty of something, and it is his/her guilt that becomes the ultimate tool for manipulation. The men's attitudes towards the women in these plays are decidedly ambivalent. In most of the plays the women become the object of desire for all of the men. More often than not, the women are coerced into playing the role of the whore for the men's sexual pleasure. Pinter's fascination with the corruption with the institution of marriage is the reason that he has written so many plays on this subject. In each play, he develops the corruption in the marriage further and questions the fidelity of the characters to the point that he finally reaches his most horrific couple play, Ashes to Ashes. This play, like the others, follows the same role-playing technique that could be considered foreplay for his characters, but the end of this foreplay leaves the audience with a sickened sense that perhaps the game has gone too far.

The Room is the first play that Pinter wrote and produced. When an actor-friend of his, Henry Woolf, asked him to write a short play for a performance at Bristol University in 1957, Pinter created The Room. John Russell Taylor notes that this is an exceptional play for an author's first piece of written work. He argues that it is not what is expected from a new playwright:

The situations involved are always very simple and basic, the language which the characters use is an almost uncannily accurate reproduction of everyday speech... And yet in these ordinary surroundings lurk mysterious terrors and uncertainties, the whole external world of everyday realities is thrown into question. Can we ever know the truth about anybody or anything? Is there any absolute truth to be known?<sup>12</sup>

Taylor's questions address the underlying theme in this play. What seems to be a harmless environment, a warm cozy room set in a boardinghouse, later becomes an interior hell. The room that Bert and Rose Hutt occupy is contrasted with the outside world which is both menacing and cold, and this contrast indicates that the room is a safe haven from the rest of the world. Yet, however safe this haven is, Rose never leaves the room. She does not venture into the hallway and is unaware of the rest of her surroundings, indicated in her lack of knowledge of the rest of the house. She spends part of the play speculating on both the outside world and also the action inside the house. Rose appears to be a doddering old woman, but she later becomes more and more preoccupied with the existence of others. How long has she been isolated and why is she fascinated with the basement? Her lack of awareness of her own environment suggests that she is a hostage in this world. Although she does not appear to be in a violent hostage-situation at the beginning of the play, by the end it is apparent that she is a victim of a frighteningly controlling man.

The violence of Bert Hudd is revealed throughout the play. The world of menace begins to emerge in a seemingly cozy environment. As these characters are trapped in this world, we see their personal relationships begin to reflect a microcosm of society. Esslin notes that Pinter's fascination with menace is a result of his past:

Yet in Pinter's plays this existential fear is never just a philosophical abstraction. It is, ultimately, based on the experience of a Jewish boy in the East End of London; of a Jew in the Europe of Hitler. In talking about his first play, The Room, Pinter himself made this point very clearly: 'This old woman is living in a room which, she is convinced, is the nest in the house, and she refuses to know anything about the basement downstairs. She says it's damp and nasty and the world outside is cold and icy, and that in her warm and comfortable room her security is complete. But, of course it isn't, an intruder comes to upset the balance of everything, in other words, points to the delusion on which she is basing her life.'<sup>13</sup>

Rose is unaware of the world around her, for example, she lives in this house, but she does not know how many floors it has, or even what the basement looks like. Her lack of interaction outside of her room, however cozy it may be, is disconcerting. This leads us to wonder if she ever does leave the room and if she does, what does she do during her minor escape?



The action of the play is set in motion by the 'visitors' that Rose greets. The arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Sands and their news that the Hudd's room is considered vacant further adds to the menace of the play. These strangers have the ability to threaten Rose's only sanctity:

**Mr. Sands:** The man in the basement said there was one, one room. Number seven he said.

Pause.

**Rose:** That's this room.<sup>14</sup>

She is menaced by these people who think that they can live in her room and discuss this with her as if she never existed. This is similar to the Nazis' invasion of Jewish homes. They took possession of what was not their own and continued forward so as to blot out the Jewish people in hopes that no one would remember them. Rose's haven is at stake and with the departure of Mr. and Mrs. Sands; she appears agitated for the first time in the play. Mr. Kidd's return shortly after this moment is met with Rose's exclamation: "Mr. Kidd! I was just going to find you. I've got to speak to you."<sup>15</sup> Yet we are aware that this statement is not true, Rose was not about to leave her cell. Mr. Kidd's return adds to the growing tension in the play when he reveals that there is someone that wants to see Rose, and her reaction suggests that her acceptance of playing the role of the hostage in this room is due to the fact that she may be hiding something. In "Harold Pinter's Theatre of Cruelty" Martin Esslin notes that "Pinter's earliest play, The Room, can thus be seen as a post-Holocaust nightmare: is Rose, whose real name seems to be Sara- the Nazis forced all Jewish women to carry the second name Sara- a Jewish woman sheltering in a marriage with non-Jew?<sup>16</sup> Esslin's observation, that Rose may be hiding something, explains why she is appreciative of the small world that she inhabits.

The power struggle that appears at the end of the play when Bert returns reveals the theme of domination. At the beginning of the play Bert does not have to say anything in order to control and manipulate Rose, yet, when he returns at the end of the play and sees Riley with Rose, he uses much more dramatic measures to obtain power:

**Bert:** I got back all right.

He takes the chair from the table and sits to the left of the Negro's chair, close to it. He regards the Negro for some moments. Then with his foot he lifts the arm chair up. The Negro falls on to the floor. He rises slowly.

**Riley:** Mr. Hudd, your wife-

**Bert:** Lice!

He strikes the Negro, knocking him down, and then kicks his head against the gas-stove several times. The Negro lays still.<sup>17</sup>

Bert violent reaction suggests that he is aware that his power, a power that he had held over Rose for sometime, has been lost and in order to regain that power, he must resort to violence. Bert reinforces his domination over both Riley and Rose, Rose loses her ability to see, and just like Riley she has become the dominated victim.

Pinter's choice to include specific stage directions regarding Riley is important to note. Riley is described as the Negro throughout the play. With this description, Pinter sets up a particular minority class struggle that reveals his attention to class politics. This is the only specific requirement of an African American person in any of Pinter's plays and this is the first play he wrote. Throughout the rest of his writing career, Pinter never returns to the image of the blind Negro. Therefore, the Negro represents more than the mysterious link regarding Rose's past. He is a symbol of the minority and the discriminated. His blindness further demotes him to the position of the victim. It is arguable that Pinter uses Riley as a means to define the Jew. Riley becomes the symbol for those that are manipulated and controlled. The Jews were not the only people discriminated against during the Holocaust; gypsies, homosexuals, as well as African Americans were also sent to death camps. Riley is not only a link to Rose's hidden past; he is also Pinter's metaphorical Jew.

Martin Esslin discusses the importance of race in The Room and suggests one possible interpretation of the text that would reflect Pinter's own awareness of his Jewishness:

It is very characteristic of Pinter that the element of race hatred (which we know, must have overshadowed his childhood in the East End of London) pervades the play without ever being directly pushed into the foreground. Mr. Kidd's strange vagueness about his own origins introduces the subject, which breaks to the surface with brutal clarity when Bert assaults the blind Negro with the exclamation 'Lice!'; here Bert's motivation must be one of racial hatred.<sup>18</sup>

Esslin suggests that Rose's identity is compromised by her racial secrets. The Negro man's arrival indicates that Rose is hiding her relationship to this man and what that particular relationship implies. He may know something about her past that she has yet to reveal to the other characters of the play. For example, he calls her Sal, a name that could be short for Sara and a representation of the Jewish woman. Therefore, she may have tried to hide her identity by changing her name to Rose and assuming Bert's identity. Esslin's argument draws

attention to Rose's eagerness to please both Bert and the landlord. Her actions are a result of knowing that she could be discovered everyday, and this reality means that she lives in a constant state of nervousness. Esslin asserts, "Consciously or subconsciously, as far as the author is concerned, this might be the source of the existential anxiety that pervades this play and so much of Pinter's other work."<sup>19</sup> Esslin's interpretation of this play suggests that Pinter's very first play is preoccupied with the conflict that is posed by race. Rose, regardless of what her secret is, lives in a constant fear of the world around her, even the world that exists just outside her door: "Rose congratulates herself on living in a warm room rather than downstairs in the dark and damp basement- in the underworld of the dead... As a Jew in the world of Auschwitz she would indeed be a fugitive from death."<sup>20</sup>

The Birthday Party, Pinter's first full length play, was written in 1957. The play depicts a struggle for power, a battle between Stanley and his aggressors, Goldberg and McCann. This type of power-game recurs in all of Pinter's plays; it is a battle that shifts between the role of the victim and the role of the aggressor. Furthermore, Pinter often sets his conflicts in ordinary domestic environments; in The Birthday Party the play takes place in the kitchen of Petey and Meg's boardinghouse. The conflict begins with the dreaded knock at the door that shatters Stanley's hiding place with Meg and petey. Pinter (as quoted in Esslin's Pinter: A Study of his Plays) notes the allusion to the Holocaust in The Birthday Party:

Again this man is hidden away in a seaside boarding house... Then two people arrive out of nowhere, and I don't consider this an unnatural happening. I don't think it is all that surrealistic and curious because surely this thing, of people arriving at the door, has been happening in Europe in the last twenty years.<sup>21</sup>

The knock at the door signifies the introduction of conflict into the play. Stanley's principal antagonist in The Birthday Party is Goldberg, who appears to be the most powerful character in the play, but his power is always in question because he relies on McCann to perform the more physical aspects of their duties for him. At the same time, Stanley is by no means an innocent victim. His attempt to bully Meg places him in the same camp as Goldberg and McCann, though only on a minor scale. This play reflects the class system and how different degrees of class are attempting to situate themselves within that system. In Michael Billington's biography of Pinter, he notes the resonance of Pinter's Jewishness in The Birthday Party. He states that The Birthday Party becomes even more political and philosophical because Goldberg and McCann

are victims as well: "They represent the West's most autocratic religion, but its two most persecuted races."<sup>22</sup> The audience becomes aware that Stanley is in trouble, yet the details of why he is in trouble are never described; this ambiguity resonates the ambiguity of the Holocaust and the similar accusations that were put upon the Jewish people.

The arrival of Goldberg and McCann parallels the arrival of the SS at a Jewish person's door, an occurrence that Billington notes "has resounded throughout Europe history in the twentieth century."<sup>23</sup> Similar to the Jewish people's acceptance of their situation, Stanley too accepts his fate and takes it in stride, having no hope for his future. Billington argues that The Birthday Party is not just about authority breaking the will of a person, but that the character of Goldberg reveals something about Pinter's attitude toward the question of Jewish identity. The Birthday Party reveals "how prevalent anti-Semitism still was in the 1950s. It demonstrates how Pinter himself instinctively resisted any form of oppression. But above all it shows how Pinter was able to divorce his private identification with Jewish suffering from his public critique of Jewish tradition."<sup>24</sup>

The Birthday Party is a political play about the need for resistance. Pinter depicts the world of menace within a setting of a birthday party for Stanley, just as the Nazis depicted the concentration camps as "Jewish vacations" to the rest of the world. Within these euphemisms, the only thing that exists is the victimization and domination of innocent people. Esslin states:

Words become weapons in the mouths of Pinter's characters. The one who gets hold of the more elaborate or more accurate expression established dominance over his partner; the victim of aggression can be swamped by language which comes too thick and fast, or is too nonsensical to be comprehended; this happens, above all, to Stanley in The Birthday Party, who is subjected to a process of brainwashing through a torrent of incomprehensible questions and assertions fired at him by the two terrorists.<sup>25</sup>

Stanley becomes an easy target for these two men; if any of the characters in the play are vaguely aware of what is going on, they do not do anything to stop it.

Perhaps they are scared and that fear drives them to turn a blind eye to what is happening. This could be considered a comment on each and every person who, for whatever reason, was unable to do anything to help his race in the face of the Nazi party.

It is foreshadowed that visitors will arrive at Meg and Petey's bed-and-breakfast. The entrance of Goldberg and McCann is anticipated throughout the text; Petey mentions that two men on the beach had inquired about their place and as Stanley is taunting Meg about the arrival of these men who are 'coming in a van with a wheelbarrow,' the knock at the door announces their arrival. Yet despite their expected entrance, Stanley does not do anything to protect himself. Austin E. Quigley's article "The Language Problem" suggests that "Stanley is confronted by two visitors, who overcome his self-confidence neither by employing silence nor by concentrating on an inefficient use of language. They verbally bludgeon him into submission and silence by the sheer number and variety of their accusations."<sup>26</sup> If Stanley has been a self-confident man prior to their arrival, he would have tried to escape. His response to Meg, "I didn't think they would come" echoes the same realization that the Jews experienced when they discovered that the stories of deportation and death camps were true. The recurring themes in The Birthday party can be compared to the Holocaust. For example, Esslin notes that "on another level The Birthday party might be seen as an image of man's fear of being driven out from his warm place of refuge on earth."<sup>27</sup> That fear characterizes the experience of Jewish people during World War II.

In The Life and Works of Harold Pinter, Michael Billington comments on the multidimensionality of Pinter's work. He suggests that while it would be simple to classify Pinter's work as being about the relationship between victims and aggressors, his themes are much more complex: "This gets us right to the heart of the matter. It is not simply a play about a pathetic victim brainwashed into social conformity. It is a play about the need to resist, with the utmost vigor, dead ideas and the inherited weight of the past."<sup>28</sup> He suggests that this multidimensionality of Pinter's characters makes them more complicated than a archetypal stereotypes:

What, however, gives The Birthday Party its political and philosophical complexity is the sense that Goldberg and McCann are themselves victims. They represent not only the West's most autocratic religion, but its two most persecuted races. As the play proceeds, the two characters gradually fall apart making the climax much more equivocal than is generally recognized. Billington's assertions draw attention to the fact that Pinter's parameters of victim and aggressor are often blurred, but nonetheless, ever present. It is

important to note that Pinter, through The Birthday Party has written a play about the power of authority to break human will. Although Stanley was warned about the impending knock at the door, he was slightly paralyzed by this and as a result, unable to defend himself. Similarly, the Jews also grew to anticipate the arrival of the Gestapo in the night and instead of fighting against it, also appeared to accept their arrival. Essentially, "The Birthday Party works as a deeply political play about the imperative need for resistance."<sup>30</sup> In one of Pinter's first plays he is commenting on the importance of fighting back against oppression and not playing the role of the victim. Pinter notes the need for resistance against those that attempt to manipulate and dominate the lives of others.

One for the Road marks the beginning of Pinter's political dramas. Up until this point, Pinter masks his themes within the domestic life of a middle or lower class London setting. By doing so, Pinter isolates the issue of discrimination to the class struggle. In his plays, the hierarchy of power is set up according to the class system. The men are most often in control and they use that control to dominate the other characters in the plays. This class struggle is not foreign to the Jewish identity, instead, it reinforces it. Pinter grew up in the East End of Hackney, the equivalent of the Jewish ghetto in London. His awareness of class implicated his Jewish identity. In the following plays, Pinter exploits the class system with the power struggles that emerge between the characters.

In One for the Road, Pinter addresses the idea that absolute power corrupts absolutely. In the opening lines of the play Nicolas states:

What do you think this is? It's my finger. And this is my little finger. This is my big finger and this is my little finger. I wave my big finger in front of your eyes. Like this. And now I do the same with my little finger. I can also use both.. at the same time. Like this. I can do absolutely anything I like. Do you think I'm mad? My mother did.<sup>31</sup>

Nicolas enjoys the fact that he can do anything that he pleases; he takes pleasure in exerting his power over others. His question regarding his madness acts as a sort of self-reflection of his own enjoyment in this masochistic behavior, yet like Pinter's other abusive characters; he too is unable to change.

This play not only marks a shift in Pinter's writing style, but also a shift in Pinter's personal agenda; "Pinter remains to his credit, a permanent public

nuisance, a questioner of accepted truths, both in life and art. In fact, the two persistently interact."<sup>32</sup> With this shift, Pinter no longer disguises his themes within his plays, but instead creates openly hostile environments as a commentary on the world around him. Pinter wrote One for the Road in 1984 after meeting two "extremely attractive and intelligent young Turkish women" at a party, who seemed casually indifferent to the use of torture in their country. According to Michael Billington, Pinter claimed that "instead of strangling them, I came back immediately, sat down and, it's true, out of rage started to write One for the Road."<sup>33</sup>

This play is one of the first political plays that Pinter has written. Martin Esslin notes that this play was "generally considered to mark a new departure in Pinter's oeuvre-an openly political play, almost a political pamphlet. And yet, these four short scenes between an interrogator and his victims are clearly a direct continuation of Pinter's preoccupation with 'man manipulating man'"<sup>34</sup>. The action of the play is set in an office that acts as a torture chamber. Nicolas, who runs the sinister state institution, has brought in a family for questioning. The husband, presumably a dissident intellectual, has been tortured and his wife has been repeatedly raped. The fate of their seven-year-old son Nicky, whom Nicolas sits on his knee, is ambiguous until the final line of the play. This play depicts torture victims and their inability to protect those that they love. Once again, Pinter's play exhibits the underlying obsession with the Holocaust, alluding to the many victims who were tortured and raped for pleasure. The family in this play has been torn apart in the same way that Jewish families were separated during the Holocaust.

Nicolas has discovered the most effective method of torture: "What about you? Do you love death? Not necessarily your own. Others. The death of others. Do you love the death of others, or at any rate, do you love the death of others as much as I do?"<sup>35</sup>. Nicolas uses Victor's fear of death and his fear of losing his family to best torture him. This is similar to the Nazi doctrine; they would rather use the threat of violence, than violence itself. The Nazis were aware that a person's imagination is a better method of torture itself, and Nicolas uses that technique effectively to abuse Victor. In fact, he manipulates Victor to the point that Victor would rather be dead:

**Nicolas:** I feel a link, you see, a bond. I share a commonwealth of interest. I am not alone. I am not alone.

Silence.

**Victor:** kill me.

**Nicolas:** What?

**Victor:** kill me.<sup>36</sup>

It is important to note that Pinter's depiction of Nicolas is ambiguous. According to Billington, Nicolas in One for the Road finds "in a political system a remedy for his own private deficiencies and believes in the idea of a just cause."<sup>37</sup> Nicolas may not enjoy his role as much as he appears to; he drinks profusely and there is also a sense of loneliness in his character who serves for the state because he has no one else; his role as a torturer consumes his life. His drinking 'one for the road' is a means to reinforce his power over Victor. Each time he drinks, he raises a toast to his successes as a captor. At the end of the play when both Nicolas and Victor share a drink, it appears as though it is a moment that might equalize the power disparity between the two men, but that is not possible. It is during this drink that Victor is told that he will be free to leave, but his wife is going to remain there longer for the men's pleasure and that his son is dead. Therefore, he is toasting his family's manipulation which further demotes him and emphasizes his powerlessness. Martin Esslin makes an important comment on the corruption of power in this play. He notes that Nicolas is not trying to obtain any information from Victor. He is, rather, enjoying his role as the interrogator:

While he is tormenting Victor with hints about the fate of his wife and son, he is not even using such threats to blackmail him into any of the meaningful objectives such secret-police interrogations might pursue in a concrete and real case. What is shown is unrelieved sadism, mental and physical torture for their own sake and finally the murder of an innocent child... He and his family are simply tortured for what they are-intellectuals, people who are suspected of not liking the great dictator.<sup>38</sup>

Pinter is fascinated by the characters that enjoy the pleasure in power, and indulge in it to the point that it corrupts them.

This play is a reflection of the experience of being unable to do anything to defend or protect oneself. This play is a comment on the methods of torture used, and also a comment on those who use such methods for enjoyment. Pinter is noting the ability of power to corrupt people. Just as Nicolas becomes corrupt by the power that he can exert over his victims, the Nazi soldiers also willingly tortured and murdered many people. Katherine Worth discusses the importance of the use of the set in Pinter's plays in her article "Pinter's Scenic Imagery." In One for the Road, the audience is confined to the office, just as the victims are. One of Pinter's themes is the contrast between the ordinary and the horrific. Worth notes that the imagery in One for the Road suggests a political message,



that if everything appears fine on the surface, all one has to do is dig deeper to discover the festering corruption. By setting the play in what would appear to be a regular office, the audience is disjoined by the menace that exists in the most familiar places. Worth states:

The shocking contrast between the ordinariness of the surfaces and the horrors beneath is Pinter's obsessive theme. He has used an utterly conventional naturalistic set for the sake of that contrast from his earliest plays to later ones like One for the Road where the bland, well furnished office of the torturer, Nicolas, is one means of bringing closer to a middle-class audience the agonies most would want to push farther away.<sup>39</sup>

The well furnished office of Nicolas in One for the Road associates the audience to the torturer and reveals that he is a person like anyone else. He is not a villain, but instead a real person; Pinter portrays that anyone can become an aggressor like Nicolas or an SS officer; all a person needs is the thrill of being in a powerful position.

One of the major themes of Pinter's work is the inevitability of death. In "The Outsider in Pinter and Havel" Susan Hollis Merritt notes that "in most of Pinter's work after The Room(1957), death is figurative. In The Hothouse (1958/70) and One for the road (1984), however, along with mental and physical rape and torture, death becomes literal; characters 'really' die. In both One for the Road and Mountain Language (1988), it may be that the characters are being tortured to death."<sup>40</sup> Pinter's plays establish the 'outsider' from the opening of the first action and this 'outsider' is more often than not, also the victim.

Pinter's treatment of Gila is an important comment on the treatment of Jewish women. Nicolas is ambivalent towards her, yet he willingly rapes her:

Your wife and I had a very nice chat but I couldn't help noticing she didn't look her best. She's probably menstruating. Women do that....tell me....truly...Are you beginning to love me? Pause. I think your wife is. Beginning. She is beginning to fall in love with me. On the brink...Of doing so. The trouble is, I have rivals. Because everyone here has fallen in love with your wife. It's her eyes have beguiled them. What's her name? Gila.... Or something?<sup>41</sup>

Is Nicolas suggesting that Gila and even Victor are suffering from Stockholm syndrome and that they have fallen in love with their captor? If so, his role as

the aggressor has reached a level where he can dictate his victims' feelings. The victims become similar to marionettes; they are manipulated for the enjoyment of their captor. This is further represented when Nicolas mentions the brothel that they have upstairs: "We have a first class brothel upstairs, on the sixth floor, chandeliers, the lot. They'll suck you in and blow you out in little bubbles. All volunteers."<sup>42</sup> His view of the expendability of human life is similar to the way that the SS soldiers exploited the free will of people; the 'first class brothel' reflects the image of the brothels that were set up at Auschwitz for the Nazis' enjoyment. Throughout the play the audience is distinctly aware of Nicolas' enjoyment in his role as a torturer, but they are also introduced to the mindless suffering of innocent people.

The last line of the play is intended to inflict similar pain in the audience that the millions of people lived with everyday during the Holocaust. Victor has been informed that he and his wife will be freed and he asks about his young son, to which Nicolas replies, "Your son? Oh don't worry about him. He was a little prick".<sup>43</sup> Nicky is the only character that says how he feels and what he thinks; he possesses a childlike innocence that allows him to express himself, whereas his parents know enough not to speak their minds. In the end, it is the child's innocence that kills him. His honesty allows Nicolas to consider him a 'little prick' and therefore, decide that he should not live. Nicolas' power to determine who should and should not live reflects the power that the Nazi's held over the people; they often killed members of one family only because they had the power to. Nicolas has discovered the ultimate means of torture and inflicting pain upon others, to kill one's offspring. Victor's son was a product of himself and his wife; he was the one thing that they had created together, and according to Nicolas 'he was a little prick.' Therefore, their offspring was not considered fit to live. Similarly, according to Pinter, Adolph Hitler wanted to end the Jewish race. In order to fulfill his orders, the Jewish babies and children had no hope for survival. He wanted to kill the future of the Jewish race in the same manner that Nicolas ends the future of both Victor and Gila.

It is fascinating that children rarely appear in Pinter's plays and when they do, they are murdered by the end. In modern drama children represent the future, the hope and possibility of opportunity, and Pinter's lack of child characters suggest a lack of hope in the future. In One for the Road Nicolas not only murders Victor and Gila's offspring, but he also ends their prospect of life. With one simple action, the SS man and Nicolas become the same person. Whether they are following the orders or perhaps even enjoying their opportunity to play god, their sins are still the same.

Pinter's Mountain Language, written in 1988, further explores the conflict between victims and their rulers. Mountain Language presents a powerful image

of the suffering imposed by authoritarian regimes. Pinter examines the threat that the powerful exert over the less powerful. This play depicts the victimization of people through the suppression of language and individuality. The domination of the victimized characters reflects the inability of some people to find their voices during the Holocaust. Carey Perloff discusses Mountain Language in his article "Harold Pinter's Mountain Language." He argues that language becomes a tool for oppression and as a result, the voice-overs are the only means of communication. In the hostile landscape of the play, communication is forbidden, and victimization occurs with the suppression of language. The 'owners of language' in this world use words to gain power over those who have threatened them with some form of dissent. The guards threaten the women who are visiting their husbands and sons and tell them that only the language of the capitol is to be spoken. The women do not know the language of the capitol and when they continue to speak their own language, they are beaten. The women are coerced into silence for fear of what the guards may do to them. When a guard informs an elderly woman that she is permitted to speak her language again, she is too traumatized to speak at all, knowing that when her words are 'granted to her,' they are useless. With that realization, the elderly woman has become a repressed victim of the guards.

Mountain Language represents the irrational domination of human will:

Now hear me. You are mountain people. You hear me? Your language is dead. It is forbidden. It is not permitted to speak your mountain language in this place. You cannot speak your language to your men. It is not permitted. Do you understand? You may not speak it. it is outlawed. You may only speak the language of the capitol. This is the only language permitted in this place. You will be badly punished if you attempt to speak your mountain language in this place. This is a military decree. It is the law. Your language is forbidden. It is dead. No one is allowed to speak your language. Your language no longer exists? any questions?<sup>44</sup>

The guards' monologue is similar to the 'Fuehrer Principle' that everybody must abide by the Fuehrer. This passage reflects the goals of the Nazi party and their determination to destroy the Jewish people and their own defining 'language'. Both the guards in Mountain Language and the Nazis use the same means to control and dominate their victims; they gain power through the means of menace. Perloff suggests that this play is quite accessible: "What strikes me is not its specificity but its aching universality. Pinter seems to have exposed the question to himself: at times of extreme terror, what matters most? What allows an individual to go on? How do we endure?"<sup>45</sup>

The treatment of the women is similar to the treatment of Jewish women during the Holocaust. The young woman is physically assaulted by the Sergeant and this domination implies her inferiority in comparison to the guards. The guards' treatment of the old woman and her son is similar to the actions of the SS guards of World War II. According to Michael Billington, Mountain Language is a powerful play because it is an extension of the world that we inhabit:

The hooded man in the third scene reminds us that the Security Forces in Northern Ireland used just such practices. Pinter is not offering us the consolation that we are witnessing something hopelessly alien and remote. He is saying it could happen here; maybe some of it even does. But even more importantly he implies that we cannot shove the moral responsibilities for such actions on to others. The terror is within us, not without.<sup>46</sup>

Billington notes that the play can be considered a commentary on the use of domination throughout history. For Pinter, his awareness of this type of subversion occurred when he was a young boy growing up in an anti-Semitic environment. There are many moments in this play that are reminiscent of the Holocaust. For example, in the opening of the play it is revealed that the dogs have more power than the women:

**Young Woman:** We were here at nine o'clock this morning. It's now five o'clock. We have been standing here for eight hours. In the snow. Your men let Dobermann Pinschers frighten us. One bit this woman's hand.

**Officer:** What was the name of this dog?<sup>47</sup>

In this dialogue it first becomes apparent that the women have no control over the situation and that they must abide by the officers in order to see their husbands. It is also apparent that the dogs have been granted names whereas the women and the prisoners are nameless. Names equal identity, therefore, the dogs are granted an identity while the women are not. When the young woman is asked her name she responds "My name is Sara Johnson. I have come to see my husband. It is my right. Where is he?"<sup>48</sup>. Pinter's naming the young woman 'Sara' reinforces the influence of the Holocaust on this play. 'Sara' represents all of the Jewish women who were required to change their middle name to 'Sara' as a means of identification for the Gestapo.

When the women are united with their husbands in the visitors' room, they have to find another way to communicate. When the woman tries to tell the prisoner that she had brought bread, she is reprimanded:

**Elderly Woman:** I have bread-

The guard jabs her with a stick.

**Guard:** Forbidden. Language forbidden.

She looks at him. He jabs her.

It's forbidden. (To prisoner) Tell her to speak the language of the capitol.

**Prisoner:** She can't speak it.<sup>49</sup>

The elderly woman is also expected to conform to the expectations of the capitol. In "Pinter in Rehearsal" Carey Perloff makes an important observation: "Communication is forbidden. Language has become the tool of the oppressor, whose torrent of words infects the atmosphere. The only true connection comes through silence."<sup>50</sup> Perloff's statement is represented in the voiceovers of the play; these voiceovers are the only way that the characters can communicate with each other; they are never granted a chance to say goodbye. Much the same, the Jewish people were also never given a chance to say goodbye to their families; they were methodically separated on the train platform and did not realize that they might never see their families again.

Pinter's subconscious obsession with the Holocaust comes to a climax with Ashes to Ashes written in 1996. In his Nobel acceptance speech Pinter describes his relationship with this play:

Ashes to Ashes, on the other hand, seems to me to be taking place under water. A drowning woman, her hand reaching up through the waves, dropping down out of sight, reaching for others, but finding nobody there, either above or under the water, finding only shadows, reflections, floating; the woman a lost figure in a drowning landscape, a woman unable to escape the doom that seemed to belong only to others.<sup>51</sup>

This play depicts the Holocaust and the role of the torturer and the victim. Rebecca, in conversation with Devlin, describes what seems to have been sexual intimidation or torture at the hands of someone in the same mould as Nicolas in One for the Road. Gradually Devlin assumes the identity of this torturer, and the nature of the sexual intimidation is called into question in a way that is reminiscent of a similar trick played by Pinter on his audience in The Lover.

This time, however, the play concludes with a recollection from Rebecca that evokes images of the concentration camps of Nazi Germany.

Rebecca is haunted by the memories of her past; these memories come and go, similar to the condition of a trauma-victim. Rebecca's reminiscences spring up in the midst of everyday conversation, and as Devlin forces her to remember what happened in her past, he takes on the role of a Nazi torturer in her memory. Through Rebecca's mind, we are taken on the journey of the memories that haunt her from the war.

The title, Ashes to Ashes, is not explained until near the end of the play when Rebecca begins to sing a song that begins, "ashes to ashes, dust to dust." This passage is a Biblical allusion: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." This passage is from Genesis 3:19 and suggests that we come from dust and in our death, we return to dust. It is not a mistake that this passage is often quoted during funeral services, nor it is a mistake that Pinter places this passage in a Holocaust play that reminds us that millions of people were not only murdered and cremated by the Nazis, but they were also denied a decent burial.

Throughout the play, a series of images haunt Rebecca. She recalls the torture and rape in a camp, referring to her torturer and rapist as her 'lover' who was also tour guide in a camp: "Well, they were making things-just like any other factory. But it wasn't the usual kind of factory"<sup>52</sup>. This passage alludes to the death camps that the people were transported to throughout Europe. It is also important to remember that Auschwitz had been referred to as a 'factory of death'. Rebecca's memories of this camp are all depictions of life for prisoners at Auschwitz:

**Rebecca:** The only thing was- the place was so damp. It was exceedingly damp.

**Devlin:** And they weren't dressed for the weather?

**Rebecca:** No.

Pause.

**Devlin:** I thought you said he worked for a travel agency?

**Rebecca:** And there was one other thing. I wanted to go to the bathroom. But I simply couldn't find it. I looked everywhere. I'm sure they had one. But I never found where it was.<sup>53</sup>

The images that appear in this play are images of the death camps of the Holocaust, memories that haunt Rebecca, and no doubt, Pinter as well.

Rebecca's description of her 'lover' alludes to the nature of Adolph Hitler: "Because he ran a really tight ship, he said. They had total faith in him. They

respected his...purity, his...conviction. They would follow him over a cliff and into the sea, if he asked them, he said. And sing in a chorus, as long as he lead them".<sup>54</sup> Rebecca is flooded by a montage of images from her past. They include her 'lover' tearing babies from the arms of screaming mothers on the platform; people carrying their only possessions and then being forced by 'guides' to walk out into water with their belongings floating in the water as they drowned; an old man and little boy walking down the street carrying their possessions and holding hands; and her baby being snatched away from her after the guards discovered it. Throughout these painful recollections Devlin plays the role of the torturer and also assumes the role of her 'lover', the man who had similarly tortured her during the war. He begins to manipulate Rebecca's mind and at one point, he tells Rebecca that she has no authority to be discussing such an atrocity. Rebecca responds: "I have no such authority. Nothing has ever happened to me. Nothing has ever happened to any of my friends. I have never suffered. Nor have my friends."<sup>55</sup> Rebecca's subservience to Devlin reinforces her lack of power and control and suggests that she will always play the role of the victim.

The culmination of these images and Devlin's capitalization on Rebecca's vulnerability recreates the horror and the fear of the Holocaust. As the play progresses, the reality of the images begins to materialize and it becomes clear that Devlin is assuming the role of the Nazi while making Rebecca re-experience the Holocaust. Martin Esslin points out:

If *Ashes to Ashes* were to depict a sado-masochistic ritual, the fact that the course of the man's questioning elicits from the woman a series of vivid images of mass cruelty reminiscent of the holocaust-mass slave labor in the German armaments industry in World War II reveals that at the heart of this play is Pinter's message that the Holocaust cannot be forgotten.<sup>56</sup>

Michael Billington notes that *Ashes to Ashes* is reminiscent of Pinter's previous plays; the relationship between the interrogator and the victim is similar to the character interaction in *One for the Road*. The cruelty is similar to *Mountain Language*. This play "gets under one's skin precisely because it is not dealing with some alien or distant world: it acknowledges the potential for oppression and resistance that lies within all of us"<sup>57</sup>. After thirty years of exploring the role of menace and domination in his plays, Pinter embraces the Holocaust and writes a play that is a conscious commentary on the horrors that happened to the Jewish people. The play ends with Rebecca's denial that she even had a child, but her denial is followed by an echo, an echo that is either

reinforcing her victimization, or is questioning her honesty. She attempts to accept her actions and in the end, she realizes that the only way that she can continue living her life in the reality of what she has done, is to deny it. The final scene of the play, the scene where Rebecca recounts the story of her lost child depicts the same sequence of events as occurred to Bessie K., a woman who lost her child during the Holocaust:

I had a baby boy... They took us to the buses, they brought us to a big airfield. And nearby were the trains, the cattle trains. And... I look back: I think for a while I was in a daze; I didn't know what was happening actually. I saw they [were] taking away the men separate, the children separate, and the women separate. So I had the baby, and I took the coat what I had, the bundle, and I wrapped [it] around the baby and I put it on my left side, because I saw the Germans were saying left or right, and I went through with the baby. But the baby was short of breath, started to choke, and it started to cry, so the German called me back, he said in German "What do you have there?" Now: I didn't know what to do, because everything was so fast and everything happened so suddenly. I wasn't prepared for it... And he stretched out his arms I should hand him over the bundle; and I hand him over the bundle. And this is the last time I had the bundle.... I was dead. I died, and I didn't want to hear nothing, and I didn't want to talk about it, and I didn't want to admit to myself that this happened to me.<sup>58</sup>

This story has a similar rhetorical rhythm as Rebecca's confession, it has the same thematic element, it has the same characters, and most importantly, it has the same ending:

And when [the doctor] saw me there [Stufhof concentration camp] she was so happy to see me, and right away she says 'what happened, where's the baby, what happened to the baby?' And right there I said 'What baby?' I said to the doctor 'What baby?' I didn't have a baby. I don't

Just like Bessie K., Rebecca refuses to admit that she had a child and that she lost that child. The most notable aspect of Bessie K.'s story is that such events nearly happen word for word to Rebecca in Ashes to Ashes. Whether or not Pinter is aware of this particular story, perhaps there were hundreds of similar



stories that were told after the Holocaust, Pinter is addressing a universal denial in this play. Rebecca states: " I don't know of any baby. I don't know of any baby"<sup>60</sup>. When we heard Bessie K.'s story we realize that this did not happen to a fictional character, but to a Holocaust survivor; it is then that Rebecca's story reveals what it meant to be a Jewish mother in Nazi-occupied Europe.

Pinter's fascination with the victim and the torturer, with the presence of menace in a seemingly safe haven, and the manipulation of human destiny can all be attributed to his own awareness of his Jewish identity. In an interview regarding his play Ashes to Ashes at the university of Barcelona in 1996, Pinter discusses his inability to ever let go of his Jewish angst:

From my point of view the woman is simply haunted by the world she's been born into, by all the atrocities that have happened. In fact they seem to have become part of her own experience, although in my view she hasn't actually experienced them herself. That's the whole point of the play. I myself have been haunted by these images for many years, and I'm sure I'm not alone in that...<sup>61</sup>

Pinter's observation that he himself has been haunted by the images of the Holocaust for many years suggests that not only has he been haunted, but so have the characters in his plays.

## Conclusion

Pinter's work is invariably shaped by living in the shadow of the Holocaust. Martin Esslin claims that:

A preoccupation with cruelty in all its varieties and possible manifestation, physical as well as verbal, with the recurring figures of terrorist and executioners pervades Pinter's oeuvre and constitutes one of the main thematic strands of its total texture-indeed, it might be argued that it stands at its very center. In this Pinter is a true representation of his century, the century of the Holocaust, genocide, the unclear bomb.<sup>62</sup>

From The Birthday Party to his final 'Holocaust play' Ashes to Ashes, Pinter explores his subconscious fascination with what happened to his Jewish people during World War II. Pinter's work is a direct reflection of a century that saw the rise and fall of Adolph Hitler, and also the century that redefined the meaning of fear; Pinter's plays act as therapy to explore the role of the aggressor and victim and their eternal dance in the Holocaust.

Pinter's journey is fascinating. When he began to write, he was suppressing his political point of view and his agenda was hidden within the themes of his plays. His political journey is one of growth. In the 1950s and 60s, he was never viewed as a political playwright and was excluded from the *Angry Young Men* British movement. As his work progresses, he becomes more outspoken and forceful than any members of that movement. Pinter stands alone in the canon of drama. He has been described as a public and political nuisance. He has always been politically aware; the development of his work reveals that he has been saying the same thing all along, that there is a corrupt force in society, a sickness that leads men to enjoy torturing others.

From his first play, The Room, to Ashes to Ashes, a timeframe that spans forty-two years, Pinter has been addressing the power struggle that occurs between people. This struggle for domination, even in the most domestic settings, reflects the world that we live in. In his article, "The Evil that Men Do" Michael Billington draws attention to the progress of Pinter's plays: "What is fascinating is that many people see a dichotomy in Pinter's own career between the mysterious early plays and the jaded certainties of the later political plays. But recent revivals of The Birthday Party and The Hothouse have shown that Pinter was always exercised by political oppression."<sup>63</sup> In one particular production of Mountain Language it was Pinter's idea to pair it with The Birthday Party, and Carey Perloff notes the resonance of this dual production: "It became immediately clear that, for all their surface differences, both pieces wrestled with a concern that has been paramount in Pinter's work from the

beginning: the struggle of the individuals to survive the depredation and aggressions of society"<sup>64</sup>. Pinter's desire to depict such struggles can be traced to the strongest influence in his past, his own Jewish struggle to overcome dominance and subservience.

Pinter is now, more than ever, motivated to speak against oppression. Within these seemingly 'fictional plays', Pinter is exploring the exploitation of real people and the loss of real lives. This representation of culture memory becomes a political message, especially when paired with the subsequent abuse of human life that has continued to occur since the Holocaust, and as Pinter points out in his Nobel acceptance speech, has no immediate conclusion. Pinter has shown no conclusion to his political rants. In the past ten years, he has grown more distant with the theatre. He seems to have lost confidence in the theatre to voice his anger. Instead, he now uses public arena to display his social protest.

It is noted in the introduction that Pinter uses his Nobel acceptance speech to voice his discontent with the United States Government. He gave a speech at a "No War on Iraq" Liaison meeting in Parliament in 2002. In this speech Pinter is terse and direct in his analysis of both George Bush and Tony Blair. He is notably angry that nothing in this world changes, that there are still victims, but now those who are corrupting their position in power are our own country leaders. He states:

Bush has said: "We will not allow the worlds worst weapons to remain in the hands of the worlds worst leaders." Quite right. Look in the mirror chum. That's you. The US is at this moment developing advanced systems of "weapons of mass destruction" and is prepared to use them where it sees fit. It has walked away from international agreements on biological and chemical weapons, refusing to allow any inspection of its own factories. It is holding hundreds of Afghans prisoners in Guantanamo Bay, allowing them no legal redress, although they are charged with nothing, holding them captive virtually forever. It is insisting on immunity from the international criminal court, a stance which beggars belief but which is now supported by Great Britain. The hypocrisy is breathtaking. Tony Blair's contemptible subservience to this criminal American regime demeans and dishonors this country.<sup>65</sup>

In regards to Ashes to Ashes, one of his most-overt Holocaust plays, he states: "The word democracy begins to stink. So in Ashes to Ashes, I'm not simply talking about the Nazis; I'm talking about us, and our conception of the past and our history and what it does to us in the present"<sup>66</sup> For Pinter, his 'past' and his

'history' motivates him to take a stand in the political ring. He refuses to be censored. He is going to address the corruption of the present.

Pinter's plays draw attention to the roles that are played in the struggle for domination. There are those who are in power and have a deep sense of satisfaction from that role. There are those who play the role of the victim, powerless and weak. Pinter is sympathetic to none of these characters. Instead, he is mirroring what he saw happen in the past, what he sees happening around him now, and what he fears will continue to happen in the future.

By no means does Pinter's work attempt to graphically depict the events of the Holocaust, nor does it challenge other Jewish voices for attention. If anything, Pinter's plays have been considered 'domestic dramas' about lower or middle class families and relationships, instead of being examined for the lurid motivations that drive each of his characters into conflict. Pinter camouflages the overt within the comfortable, only to later make it poignant when the power struggle comes to a horrid climax. His message is subtle, if it can happen within a comfortable and seemingly safe and domestic environment, it can and it does happen in the real world.

Pinter's plays not only reveal his feelings of his Jewish heritage, but also provide us with a repertoire of plays that explore the struggle to be heard and the struggle to make a difference. Pinter may have masked the power struggle in domestic setting in his earlier plays, but in his more recent work he has reached a level of shouting that cannot be ignored. And as the 2005 Nobel Prize winner, he has not been ignored; if anything, the impact of his plays and his political message is finally being addressed.

## Notes

1- Harold Pinter, "Nobel Speech: Art, Truth and Politics." Speech, Nobel Prize, 2006, 1 March 2007

- <[http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2005/pinter-lecture.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2005/pinter-lecture.html)>, p.2  
/literature/laureates/2005/Pinter-lecture.html .p.2
- 2- Steven H. Gale, Butter's Going Up: A Critical Analysis of Harold Pinter's Work (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1977), p.17.
  - 3- Martin Esslin, "Harold Pinter's Theatre of Cruelty," Pinter at Sixty, ed. Katherine H. Burkman and John L. Kundert-Gibbs (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p.12.
  - 4- Mel Gussow, "A Conversation (pause) with Harold Pinter," Critical Essays on Harold Pinter, ed. Steven H. Gale (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1990), p.29.
  - 5- Ibid., p. 29.
  - 6- Miriam Gross, "Pinter on Pinter", Critical Essays on Harold Pinter, ed. Steven H. Gale (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1990), p.39.
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