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HAROLD PINTER'S PROJECTION OF 'FANTASY' AND 'ILLUSION' WITH A FOCUS ON AN EXISTENTIAL CLIMAX OF CONTRASTED EXPERIENCE IN HIS DRAMATIC WORLD: AN APPRAISAL

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ABSTRACT

This research paper is out and out an exploration throwing light on the dramatic art of the absurd dramatist Harold Pinter who launches who projects fantasy and illusion with a focus on an existential climax of contrasted experience in his dramatic world. This research paper makes the point clear that the real and the illusory are never clearly stated in Pinter's plays. It alluringly projects the experience of the characters to unmark the fact that the dramatic world of Pinter's characterization is found with subjective perception of an objective reality.

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INTRODUCTION

What is generally understood is that the real and the illusory are never clearly demarcated in Pinter's plays. There are two kinds of reality in them: an objective reality which is fixed and cannot change, and a subjective reality which changes according to a person's perception of that reality. In the dramatic world of Harold Pinter, the two are blended together so that what we find is often a character's subjective perception of an objective reality. In the plays generally classified as those belonging to the Theatre of the Absurd, this demarcation between illusion and reality is almost always ignored. Even among playwrights other than the Absurdist's, we find this obsession with fantasies and illusions as in Peter Shaffer's *White Liars* and John Osborne's *Under Plain Cover*, although it is never taken to the same extreme as in Pinter. In most of Pinter's plays, except in *Betrayal* where he shows us what actually happened, it is impossible to verify whether what a character tells us is true or not. In his speech delivered at the National Student Drama Festival in Bristol in 1962, Pinter himself said thus:

"The desire for verification on the part of all of us, with regard to our own experience and the experience of others, is understandable but cannot always be satisfied ... A thing is not necessarily either true or false. A character on the stage who can present no convincing argument or information as to his past experience, his present behaviour or his aspirations, nor give a comprehensive analysis of his motives is as legitimate and as worthy of attention as one who, alarmingly, can do all these things. The more acute the experience, the less articulate its expression" (P 9).

It is difficult to state what is real and what is illusory in a play by Pinter, since there is no clearly discernible line between the two. Unlike some other dramatists of the post-war theatre, Pinter does not offer illusions as an escape from reality. For instance, in *Look Back in Anger* presents fantasies as an alternative to an otherwise unbearable existence. Alison and Jimmy Porter are unable to live together amicably in an ordinary world; yet they need each other and so they finally compromise by retreating into a fairy tale world of squirrels and bears where "everyone lives happily ever after". In his plays, illusion is a part of reality and the various strains that are to be discerned when illusion and reality merge are: memory or recollections of the past, Day-Dreams or wishful

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thinking, Fantasy or make-believe, and Hallucinations and Nightmares. In the operation of memory, the "Pleasure principle" is involved which leads to the partial and at times, even complete, distortion of reality. Memory is therefore part of illusion for no recollection is absolutely true to what actually happened in the past. In all the plays wherein the characters recollect something, we find that the recollections are often coloured by the character's own wishes as to what "should" have happened as against what really did.

Even while a character elaborates at length on what appears to be true, the audience is confused when another character comments on it or refutes it as Rose does after Mr. Kidd leaves having delivered a long nostalgic account of his sister with a flat statement: "I don't believe he had a sister, ever" (RDW 16), or when Deeley narrates how met Kate at a screening of *Odd Man Out* where she had come alone and they had been almost the only ones in the theatre; (Old Times 30) - a statement thrown out of gear when Anna narrates how one afternoon she and Kate had gone to see a matinee show of *Odd Man Out* and they had been the only audience (P 38). Whose version is true? Pinter makes no comment either way, for human memory is after all fallible as he illustrates in the short sketch *Night* where an old couple reminisce, over coffee, their first meeting and find that their accounts differ widely. He remembers escorting her home after a party and making love to her on a bridge before walking down to a rubbish dump (P 58). She remembers him as having exchanged "Vows of eternal love by some railings against which she stood facing him and they stood there looking into each other's eyes" (Landscape and Silence 60). Memories of childhood, especially happy ones, are the most common type of recollection indulged in by Pinter's characters, especially in his early plays. In *The Birthday Party*, when she is slightly high, Meg recalls the happier days of her girlhood, when she had been pampered by her family and she had a room all to herself:

"My little room was pink. I had a pink carpet and pink curtains, and I had musical boxes all over the room. And they played me to sleep And my father was a very big doctor. That's why I never had any complaints. I was cared for, and I had little sisters and brothers in other rooms, all different colours" (T.B.P. 60).

But how far her memories are based on reality and how far they are coloured by wish-fulfillment dreams are open to doubt. Even Goldberg has happy memories of his childhood, of his mother preparing his favourite dishes and waiting for him:

"Simey!" my old mum used to shout, 'quick before it gets cold'. And there on the table what would I see? The nicest piece of gefilte fish you could wish to find on a plate" (T.B.P. 43).

But he uses almost the same words to describe how his wife used to wait for him with his favourite food all ready:

"Simey", my wife used to shout, "quick before it gets cold!". And there on the table what would I see? The nicest piece of roll mop and pickled cucumber you could wish to find on a plate" (T.B.P. 59).

So who actually waited up for him – his wife, his mother, or both of them? or was it after all, wishful thinking on his part? In *The Dumb Waiter*, Gus in the midst of their quarrel over whether "Light the gas" or "Light the kettle" is right, brings in his mother as the final authority – perhaps a remembrance of childhood disputes settled by mother. Gus asserts that "Light the gas" and put on the kettle" are correct usages because, I bet my mother used to say it" (P 48).

Recollections of childhood way not always be happy ones. Sometimes a painful experience can impinge more on human consciousness than anything else. For instance, in *The Caretaker*, Aston remembers only a traumatic experience in his youth when he had been subjected to shock-treatment when he was still a minor. Worse than the treatment itself was the sense of betrayal – "his faith in his mother was lost forever when she signed the papers authorizing the doctors to go ahead with shock treatment in spite of Aston's pleas". (The Caretaker 54). The recollection of the shock treatment seems accurate enough, but his feeling that it had been unnecessary could be a subjective perception of his illness. As in the case of Len (The Dwarfs) the treatment may have been absolutely necessary to "cure" him; in which case his mother may have had no other option than to sanction it. But since Aston views the incident from a child's point of view he associates it with the sense of betrayal he felt when he heard his mother had signed the papers. Not even the passage of years has made him change his opinion. In *Silence*, memory of the past merges with thoughts of the present, isolating each character into his or her solitary cell. The incidents narrated by one character are later collaborated by another, who refers to the same incident. But the thoughts are not spoken chronologically. For example, Ellen first refers to an incident which happened when she was a young woman, then she narrates an incident from her childhood and finally refers to an incident connected to her girlhood. Each of the three characters lives an isolated and lonely life in the present; but they seem to be living on memories of past events – events which may or may not have happened. An even more extreme case of "Living in the past" is seen in *Landscape* where Beth has isolated herself from present realities by retreating into the landscape of memory.

Is Beth's memory of the gentle, sensitive lover, a memory of a real incident or a fantasy, revealing her longing for a lover as different as possible from her real life husband Duff? It is noticed that Duff's conversation becomes more and more masculine and coarse as he reveals the brutal and uncultured side of his character whereas in contrast Beth's lover becomes even more gentle and sensitive. Her memories have a poetic sentimentality about it which gives it the appearance of a fantasy or day dream. But according to Michael Anderson, in *Landscape* we have "a glimpse of two separate consciousness through the window of language, balanced in an alternating structure of speech and silence" and the climax is "an existential climax of contrasted experience" (Anderson 105). No doubt, in Pinter's dramatic world, a prominent component of the mixture of illusion and reality are day dreams. Day dreams are dreams of wish fulfillment where the characters deliberately live in a phantasm world governed by their desires – but with an underlying awareness of the self-deception involved. They know, however much they pretend otherwise, that it is an illusion. For instance, the Girl in *A Night Out* is very much aware of her drab surroundings and the sordidness of her existence. But she pretends to be a married woman with a daughter studying in a select boarding school. Like the

fortune – teller in Peter Shaffer's *White Liars* who pretends to be aristocratic lady, the Girl pretends to be a well-educated lady belonging to a good family:

“I'm quite well educated, you know.
My father was a he was a military man.
In the army” (A.N.O. 78).

In the same play, Albert for a time pretends to be a “strong man of action” who has silenced the woman who had been plaguing him all his life – his mother. He also boasts to the Girl that he was an assistant director of films” (Slight 78).

In *Night School*, both Wally and Sally indulge in the game of make-believe. Wally, an unsuccessful forger of post-office savings books dreams of being a con-man or a gangster employed by an organization. Sally dreams of being an ultra respectable school – marm, an intellectual who knows several languages, attends musical concerts, rarely drinks, and who has no time for such frivolous activities as dancing. In reality, she is a nightclub hostess who dances and drinks with the patrons of the club, almost a semi-prostitute. Both of them thus hide their real selves behind their imaginary facades. As a result, they lose whatever chances they had of finding happiness together. In fact, as Martin Esslin says, “their real identities match each other far better than their fantasy personalities of the big gangster and the demure little school marm” (Esslin 116). Like Walter and Sally, all the three characters in *The Caretaker* indulge in day dreaming. Mick dreams the converting the house into a fabulous penthouse with “teal-blue, copper and parchment linoleum squares ... Venetian blinds on the window, Cork floor, Cork tiles in which he would live with his brother. Through his day dreams, Mick reveals the impact advertising has had on his subconscious. Since he is a dealer in building he knows about the various types of flooring and other attractive alternatives related to interior decoration. So in his fantasies, he dreams of possessing an ideal home which he pictures in his mind's eye. Aston dreams of being able to create something – of using his hands to build a shed and later on to convert the house into flats. Davies dreams of having an identity. A nameless unwanted old man, he dreams of being sought after and respected as a human being. Yet he makes no real attempt to go to Sid cup perhaps realizing, as Trussler says, that “Sid cup is a last hope only so long as it remains no more than a hope” (Trussler 83). Thus, it is seen that *A Night Out*, *The Caretaker*, *Night School* and *Landscape*, the illusions serve as an escape from the sordid and routine realities of life by offering a more exciting contrast.

Fantasy is a form of creative imaginative activity, wherein the images and thoughts of a character are directed and controlled by the whim or pleasure of the moment. Sometimes, the subconscious becomes the guiding factor and the conscious mind is submerged. In such cases, the distinction between actual incidents and dreams are lost and the dreamers may even indulge in “Living out” the imaginary incidents. Alrene Sykes comments:

“In the last decade, there has risen a sub-species of dream plays, plays about dreamers who not only dream dreams but act out, their fantasies before us, with like-minded partners” (Sykes 107).

Like Genet, Osborne and others, Pinter in *The Lover* also deals with characters who enact their fantasies within the confines of their home. Sarah and Richard imagine themselves to be

unfaithful and betraying their partners. In the afternoon, they act out various situations in which a husband/wife could betray each other. For their marriage to survive, it has become essential for them to live in a dream world where all their inhibitions are left behind and all their erotic perversions satisfied. Simon Trussler observes:

“ ... the lovers believing that variety is the spice of lust, evidently choose to act out impromptu rapes or seductions as the mood takes them during their matinee mating games, and to reserve the straighter sex for their evening performances as a married couple” (P 112).

Pinter's play *The Lover* ends on an ambiguous note with Richard introducing their fantasies into the evenings, instead of confining it to the afternoon sessions. This gives one the impression that Richard himself has lost all sense of reality. According to Martin Esslin, “*The Lover* develops the notion of the erotic wish fulfillment fantasy – which may well have been the source of Stella's confession of adultery in *The Collection and Shows* its function in a happy marriage” (P 131). One way of interpreting *The Basement* would be to consider the whole play as a fantasy visualized by Law. The play has all the qualities of a wish-fulfillment dream – the more attractive man who loses his girl to the underdog, in this case, the dreamer. It is obvious that Law envies Stott's power over women and may be on that cold wintry night, in his loneliness he thought of his old room-mate Stott. Thinking of Stott, naturally reminded him of Stott's girl-friends and so on. The play can thus be conceived of as a dream sequence, portraying a reserved man's desire for a woman – a woman who would prefer him instead of the more attractive, and wealthy Stott. Law says of Stott to Jane, “Charming man, man of great gifts” who had “connections with the French aristocracy” (P 64), and who had been brought up and educated in France. Moreover, he was very rich. Esslin points out that the play “must either be a kind of dream or day-dream and Trussler considers the play as a fantasy woven by Law. In *The Dwarfs*, one can find a psychological treatment of illusions as in this play one can see the gradual disintegration of Len's mind as represented through Len's fantasies of the dwarfs. The dwarfs are illusory creatures, scavengers by nature, seen by Len. The dwarfs have finely left him. Like Aston, he is the loser; for as Trussler says, “Len's inability to discern between fact and fantasy is “not a diminishing, but a heightening of sensibility, a hallucinating sense of the immediate” (P 103).

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