

Harold Pinter

(1930-2008)

Harold Pinter was born in 1930 in Hackney, London, the son of a Jewish family. In 1949 he trained as an actor, and he was also fined for being a conscientious objector.

From 1951 to 1965 Pinter worked as an actor and wrote important plays such as *The Room*, *The Dumbwaiter*, *The Birthday Party*, *A Slight Ache*, *A Night Out*, *The Caretaker*, *The Homecoming* and short plays like *Request Stop* and *Applicant*. He got married in 1956.

In 1962 he wrote the screenplays for *The Caretaker* and *The Servant* (this last one adapted from Robin Maugham's novel).

In 1969 he authored the screenplay of *The Go-Between*, adapted from L.P. Hartley's novel, and in 1974 he wrote *No Man's Land*.

In 1978 *Betrayal* appeared on stage, and *Pinter's Poems and Prose: 1949-1977* was published.

In 1981 Pinter wrote the film script of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

After the overthrow of Chile's President Allende in 1973, Pinter became an active human rights campaigner, a member of Amnesty International and an anti-war campaigner.

He wrote *One for the Road* in 1984, *Mountain Language* in 1988 and *Party Time* in 1991, plays showing his social concern.

In 2005 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, and in 2008 he died from cancer.

Atmosphere

Pinter's plays may be defined as 'comedies of menace', since the atmosphere is dense with **horror**, **fear**, **anxiety** and **suspense**. These feelings do not arise from the use of supernatural characters or situations, but rather from daily routine. Daily life seems to hide a dark side which is perceived by his weaker characters. They are, however, unable to explain their uneasiness and dismay verbally, hence there is a peculiar tension due to their long silences or ambiguous speeches.

Claustrophobia

A room in which the characters are shut is the central image in many plays by Pinter. Inside this room the characters are gradually oppressed by a sense of impending danger which comes from the outside. It may radically change their personality and relationships by bringing to life hidden tensions, drives and secrets. The space inside thus becomes narrower and narrower, violence breaks out in the climax when the outside intrudes and prevails over routine. The precarious, warm corner where one takes shelter and feels safe is broken forever.

Strategies on stage

Pinter's plays pivot around struggles for power whose reasons are often not solved, whose outcomes are ambiguous, and the audience can rarely understand the reasons why a character prevails or is defeated. Though what is extremely clear in these plays is the variety of behavioural strategies adopted by the contenders, who can be divided into two categories: the masters and the victims.

In order to keep their position, the former:

- have to be strong enough to influence the latter;
- keep control over all the room and their personal belongings;
- anticipate the latter's movements;
- suppress the enemy verbally or physically;
- cannot show any fears or weaknesses.

These are all typical strategies of a hunter.

The victims usually adopt the opposite techniques of submission, basically trying to avoid capitulation by means of:

- silence;
- surprising reactions;
- indifference;
- lies;
- counterattacks.

Pinteresque

The adjective coined to refer to the peculiarity of Pinter's language. His characters are actually unable to listen and often misunderstand other people; they talk across each other because they 'evade' communication, rather than making efforts at it. What makes his plays **absurdist**, therefore, is this lack – or denial – of communication. His characters fill the void of their miserable life with ambiguous silences: it is the **unsaid** which is more important than words, it is the many pauses scattered in his plays which arouse expectations and fear, comic pauses and misunderstandings. They become ritual repetitions and slowly build up a threatening atmosphere, a sense of deep uneasiness.

The words used in his plays are ordinary, common, core English words, often used in a way similar to Beckett's, as the characters follow a circular pattern in their speeches.

Main works

The Room (1957)

A play already containing all the features of his drama: an oppressing setting, a progressive sense of fear suggesting one's helplessness in daily life.

The Birthday Party (1958)

The protagonist is threatened by two strangers who seem to be sent by a mysterious organisation. The ambiguity of the play is left unresolved at the end.

A Slight Ache (1958)

A one-act radio play set in a middle-class milieu. The couple at the centre of the play is slowly disintegrated by the relentless invasion of an old match-seller.

The Dumb Waiter (1959)

A sense of oppression and isolation from the world surrounds the two protagonists, who are shut in a basement and communicate with a master outside via the dumb waiter.

The Caretaker (1960)

Two brothers and a tramp living in a shabby loft spend their time organising their future life and doing nothing of what is said. Alliances are made and broken in a triangular game.

Betrayal (1978)

A play about memory involving a married couple and the husband's friend. It starts from the end and does not solve the ambiguities of the love triangle dealt with: who betrayed whom?