A Study of Menace, Pause and Silence in Harold Pinter’s Early Plays

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30 credits thesis
Autumn term 2012
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Introduction

Harold Pinter (1930–2008) is one of the few dramatists who has changed the common expectations and conventions of the theatre with his distinctive style of writing. His work has been the subject of academic studies for decades. The particular characteristics of Pinter’s theatre such as the presentation of a menacing atmosphere, idiosyncratic and meticulous use of language, and frequent use of silences and pauses in his plays has distinguished him from the other playwrights. Pinter is considered as one of the most outstanding post-war playwrights of his time in England for his influence on theatre and introducing a new language to the theatre: the language of menace and silence. Menace and intrusion are undoubtedly the repeated themes in Pinter’s early plays written between the 1950’s and 1960’s. He creates a violent world where the characters are in a constant struggle to subjugate and victimize each other by dominant use of language and deceitful behavior. Menace and violence are implicitly presented in Pinter’s theatre and the actions and motivations of the mysterious characters that are alienated from each other are never clearly resolved. According to Ronald Hayman, “Pinter’s multi-leveled theatricality thwarts a simple allegorical reading.” (Pinter and Twentieth-century drama, 76) Pinter’s plays can be studied in different levels. The complexity of his plays has subjected them to different kinds of interpretations. To describe Pinter’s work briefly, perhaps it is best to quote Katherine H. Burkman:

“The drama of Harold Pinter evolves in an atmosphere of mystery while the surfaces of life are realistically detailed, the patterns below the surface are as obscure as the motives of the characters, the pause as prominent and suggestive as the dialogue” (25).

The theme of menace, the complexity and obscurity of the characters, the unconventional language use and the competitive struggle that takes place in the plays are the features of Pinter plays that require more detailed analysis. One of the main
objectives of this essay is to analyze the structure of menace and its constituents as a recurring theme in Pinter’s early play. Perhaps the violent post-war atmosphere that Pinter experienced in England in his early youth was one of the major historical and social influences on Pinter’s early work and the reason for his emphasis on the theme of menace as a recurring theme. Pinter later became an active pacifist and devoted the later years of his life to criticizing England and United States’ policies regarding the invasion of other countries. Regarding the theme of violence, in an interview with Lawrence M. Bensky, Pinter Points out:

“Everyone encounters violence in some way or other. It so happens I did encounter it in quite an extreme form after the war, in the East End, when the Fascists were coming back to life in England […] there were quite a lot of people often waiting with broken milk bottles in a particular alley we used to walk through. There where one or 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, you know, sort of “Are you all right?” “Yes, I’m all right.” “Well that’s all right then, isn’t it?” And all the time keep walking toward the lights of the main road.” (29)

Pinter’s remark about the extremely violent experiences of his time is widely reflected in his early work. Even the ways Pinter’s characters use in order to avoid victimization and to get out of the way of harm are similar to what he mentions in his interview; the use of words. The theme of violence and menace is a historical and a universal issue that is still ongoing in our world and is a significant theme worthy of exploring in Pinter’s theatre.

Furthermore, it is noticeable to point out the spatial image of the settings in Pinter’s theatre such as a room, a basement or a boarding house that have as much significance as the ways the characters communicate. Pinter takes advantage of theatre as a medium to portray menace in an interpersonal relationship between the characters on stage. The characters in the early pays are portrayed in confined spaces as their personal
territory, struggling for survival and dominance. Some critics have associated Pinter’s work with symbolism, existential philosophy or the theatre of the absurd. However, Pinter has denied any association with mainstream literary movements or symbolic or philosophical implications in his plays. In description of his work he explains:

“What happens in my plays could happen anywhere, at any time, in any place, although the events may seem unfamiliar at first glance. If you press me for a definition, I’d say what goes on in my plays is realistic, but what I’m doing is not realism” (Writing for Myself, 9).

The inexplicable events, the unresolved mysteries and the ambiguities in most of Pinter’s plays and the unfamiliar language in the dialogues indicate the absence of realism in his theatre. Peter Hall, the stage director well known for having directed many of Pinter plays, rejects such view points of the critics like Martin Esslin’s that consider Pinter as part of theatre of the absurd. Hall argues that there is a distinction between Pinter’s work and the writers of the absurd:

“In his early years, Pinter was often categorized as part of the theatre of the absurd. Nothing could be more misleading. The absurdists (and Ionesco remains their leading exponent) sought to illuminate by incongruous juxtapositions or improbable shocks – which were usually justified by a grain of truth. But Pinter in comparison has always been truth itself. Underneath his confrontations, hidden in the enigmas of the back-stories of his plays, there is always a perfectly credible and recognizable pattern of human behavior” (161).

Hall argues, the human behavior in Pinter’s theatre “may be disguised (it usually is), but beneath all the ambiguities is something utterly coherent and lifelike. Yet it is never obvious.” (161) The particular characteristics of Pinter’s theatre such as the theme of violence, the competitive interpersonal relationships, the implied unwillingness in communication between the characters and the distinctive use of silences and pauses, distinguish his work from the writers of the absurd. Pinter makes particular use of
“Silences” and “Pauses” as theatrical techniques that present a non-verbal way of communication in his plays. The frequent use of these particular techniques in Pinter’s dialogue has urged some critics to coin new expressions such as “Pinteresque” or “Pinter Pause” in the vocabulary of drama to specify Pinter’s technique. One of the important objectives in this essay is to point out the fundamental significance and function of the “Silences” and “Pauses” in Pinter’s work and point out their distinction. I will discuss how the silences and pauses function in Pinter’s theatre as a non-verbal way of communication by creating fragments in the dialogue.

The plays which will be analyzed in this essay are: *The Room*, *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Birthday Party* and *The Caretaker*. My objective in this essay is to explore the context of these plays with regards to the theme of menace. In the first chapter, I mainly aim to explore the menacing context of these plays regarding the structure of menace and the ways it takes place in each play separately. This analysis will be presented in relation to the spatial territory in which the characters are confined. My aim is also to describe why menace is presented in a theatrical sense. I have chosen to quote some significant passages of each play in each section to illustrate my purposes in the first chapter. The aim of the second chapter is to define the character types involved in the presentation of menace, “The Intruders” and “The Victims”, and to analyze the strategies their use in encounters with each other. After describing the character types I will explore in detail how “The Intruders” use linguistic strategies to confuse and subdue their victims and finally victimize them and how “The Victims” use strategies to cope with menace in order to survive. There are some passages quoted from the plays to facilitate the purpose of the second chapter. The objective in the third chapter is to define “Silences” and “Pauses” as theatrical techniques used in form of non-verbal communication between the characters. I will discuss, based on Peter Hall’s definition, how these techniques are significant in understanding a Pinter play for the readers and the actors who perform them on stage, and will further explore the function of “Silences” and “Pauses” and their distinction in the context of the plays in question in this essay.
Chapter 1

The Structure and Setting of Menace on Stage

The theme of Harold Pinter’s early plays are the mysterious and unknown forces from the outside world that intrude on the privacy of the characters, threaten their sense of security and harm them verbally, mentally or even physically. As John Russell Brown points out, “Pinter’s most obvious devices for invoking the right attention for his plays are menace and muddle, particularly in his earliest plays” (126). Menace is one of the main features of Pinter’s early dramatic work and he takes advantage of theatre as the medium for representation of menace on stage. One of the common features of his early plays is the importance of setting. The characters are usually portrayed in confined interior spaces, e.g. a room, a basement or a remote boarding house. They feel safe from the dangers of the world outside by isolating themselves in their limited living space. As Victor L. Cahn describes, they “take refuge in a room, a construction of familiar walls and furniture about which they know as much as they can know about anything and in which they feel as safe as they do anywhere” (2). These characters are very possessive and protective of the territory they live in and tend to be defensive in reaction to any intrusion. They keep themselves preoccupied by the banal daily routine activities and avoid any connection with the world outside in order to maintain their feeling of safety and security. One of the characteristics of menace is the fact that its nature remains obscure and mysterious. Katherine H. Burkman argues, “If the mysterious emerges and takes over in Pinter's drama, it is never completely explained. The nameless terror, which threatens the Pinter hero, is not fully identified, the mystery never resolved” (27). This fact is noticeable in almost all the plays in question in this chapter, including The Room, The Dumb Waiter and The Birthday Party.

Pinter presents a theatrical expression of menace. His use of the theatre as a medium for representation of menace is the best possible choice to portray the territorial nature of menace. Like Samuel Beckett, one of the writers Pinter has always admired as
an influence, he is very much concerned with the visual image of the characters and the setting of the plays on stage. The critic, Martin S. Regal suggests that, “[Pinter’s] plays often have their genesis in a visual image. He is impressed by the way his characters stand, sit or move, long before he makes them speak…” (2). By creating a rather realistic setting in his plays, Pinter delicately implies to the audience the possibility of the occurrence of menace in the real world to create and awareness without making any statements or suggesting any direct manifests like the contemporaries of his time. In Pinter’s theatre, the stage is a limited space that portrays the image of characters confined to their small living spaces and isolated by an entrance. Only the intruders come in and exit through the door and there is no escape for the ones subjected to the menace. The characters are either forced to stay in a place to execute a task, e.g. the basement in *The Dumb Waiter*, or forced to hide from their pasts and the mysterious agents of menace, e.g. Stanley hiding in the boarding house in *The Birthday Party* or they live in constant fear of an unknown presence, hiding in a place, e.g. Rose in *The Room*. In some cases the characters struggle to get into a place and take possession of it, e.g. Davies in *The Caretaker*. In the majority of the early works, the intrusion is portrayed as the central action in the play and as a result of the intrusion of the agents of menace from the outside the menaced characters are trapped in a predicament with no escape from it. The confinement of the characters to their limited surroundings makes their escape impossible and the small interior setting of the plays visually amplifies the atmosphere of menace on stage. Usually a door is knocked, a stranger comes in and menace is gradually built up during the play. The menaced characters in the plays are either subjected to psychological violence and dispossessed of their living territory, or, in some cases are subjected to physical violence. Disregarding the different forms of menace and their settings in Pinter’s early plays, e.g. a room, a basement, a boarding house, the common fact about all the plays remains unchanged: the visual image of a character entrapped on stage with no escape from the inevitable damage. This chapter will discuss how this image is repeated in each play in different forms and how menace takes form on stage and threatens the characters’ existence. Pinter’s four early plays are analyzed in this chapter, including *The Room* (1957), *The Birthday Party* (1957), *The Dumbwaiter* (1957) and *The Caretaker* (1958). In this chapter these plays will be separately analyzed with regards to the
structure of menace and the way in which the spatial image of menace is presented on stage. A summary of each play is given to facilitate the understanding of the play.

1.1. The Room (1957)

*The Room* represents the main characteristics of Pinter’s early work. The play is about a middle-aged woman, Rose Hudd, living in a room of a rented house with her husband Bert, a reserved lorry driver. When her husband leaves to work, a young couple show up at her room and claim they are looking for the landlord to rent Rose’s room. Later her eccentric landlord, Mr. Kidd, informs Rose there is a man in the basement that wants to meet her. The inevitable encounter with the stranger, a blind Negro, leads to Rose’s blindness. The play starts with the scene where Bert is sitting at the breakfast table with a magazine propped up in front of him, completely unresponsive to his wife. The beginning of the play emphasizes on a visual and sensual aspects of the scene: a small room with some basic furniture around it and the safe and warm image of it for Rose. She comments about the cold weather outside, the warmth inside the room and expresses her fear of the basement:

ROSE. It’s very cold out, I can tell you. It’s murder.

[…]

Still, the room keeps warm. It’s better than the basement, anyway.

I don’t know how they live down there. It’s asking for trouble (87).

Her recurrent references to the basement depict her extreme worries, which indicates the presence of a potential menace in the basement. On the other hand, Rose keeps trying to communicate with her reserved husband to get some reassurance about her sense of security inside the room but Bert remains totally silent, indifferent and unresponsive. He just sits at the breakfast table, reads his magazine and leaves for work after eating. The form of interaction between the middle-aged couple is a sign of evasion in communication between the characters. A sudden knock on the door marks the first suspense in the play; Mr. Kidd, the landlord steps inside the room. The exchange between Rose and the landlord is a trivial conversation about the weather, the unknown number of
the rooms in the building and Mr. Kidd’s self-contradictory accounts about himself. He has peculiar characteristics: He avoids answering Rose’s questions either because he cannot hear well or he simply doesn’t want to. He clearly refuses to tell Rose how many floors exist in the building and his recollections of the past about his family background are all vague. His mode of expression reinforces his unreliability:

MR. KIDD. I think my mum was a Jewess. Yes, I wouldn’t be surprised to learn that she was a Jewess (93).

The encounter with the unreliable Mr. Kidd creates a sense of mystery and suspense in the play. Shortly after the landlord leaves the room Bert also leaves for work. Rose is now alone and her sense of insecurity increases when she suddenly finds two people at her door, a young couple who introduce themselves as Mr. and Mrs. Sands. They are apparently looking for the landlord to rent a room. This couple’s remarks about their intentions are also deceptive and misleading. They play about the name of the landlord and try to alarm Rose about the world outside. The couple’s presence gradually scares Rose. She is worried about her husband who is driving in the dark, icy roads and the Sands deliberately try to make her feel more anxious by telling her how risky it is to drive in the icy roads during the night. Rose is worried to lose possession of her room since learning the young couple is looking for the landlord to rent a room. The fear of dispossession, horror and insecurity increases in Rose when the Sands tell her they have heard a man’s voice in the basement telling them the room number seven in the house is vacant for rent, which happens to be the same room that Rose lives in. The confirmation of the ominous presence of an unknown stranger in the basement is a foreshadowing of a potential menace that adds to the atmosphere of suspense and mystery. The couple leaves Rose to find the landlord while she insists the room is already occupied. Consequently Mr. Kidd who knows Rose is alone shows up in her room again. After ignoring all the questions asked by Rose he tells her there is a man in the basement that wants to meet her. The man has been waiting there for some days for Mr. Hudd to leave so that he could meet Rose alone. She refuses to meet the man since she doesn’t know him and she is alone, scared and insecure in her husband’s absence. However, she is eventually forced to face the man in the basement. Mr. Kidd leaves and a Blind Negro named Riley enters the
room. At this point of the play the most significant intrusion takes place. Rose, filled with fear of dispossessment of the room reluctantly receives the stranger and aggressively responds to him:

RILEY. This is a large room.

ROSE. Never mind about the room. What do you know about this room? You know nothing about it. And you won’t be staying in it long either. My luck. I get these creeps come in, smelling up my room. What do you want? (107).

The blind Negro has a message for Rose. He calls her Sal, which adds up to the confusion in the play and tells her that her father wants her to come home. After he frequently asks Rose to come home:

“She touches his eyes, the back of his head and his temples with her hands, Enter Bert. He stops at the door, then goes to the window and draws the curtains. It is dark. He comes to the centre of the room and regards the woman” (109).

Meanwhile, Bert comes home and starts talking for the first time during the play. He describes how he drove his van in the icy road and made it back home alright. The climax and the closure of the play is shocking and surprising. Bert notices the presence of the Blind Negro and before he utters any words Bert suddenly knocks him down, kicks his head against the gas-stove several times until he lies motionless on the floor. Rose stands and clutches her eyes and we find out that she has lost her ability to see. The drastic and violent closure of the play leaves the audiences to deal with an unsolved mystery and many unanswered questions. It is never known who Riley was, what was his relation with Rose, why he called her Sal, why Burt struck him brutally and inexplicably and finally why Rose lost her vision.
**Conclusion**

In *The Room*, menace is presented in the form of characters acting as the agents of menace and Rose’s struggle, as the menaced character trying to protect her territory and survival. In this play four characters contribute to the presentation of menace: Mr. Kidd, Mr. and Mrs. Sands and The Blind Negro. They successfully collaborate in a way to victimize Rose. The setting of the play is a room, a confined territory that Rose tries to protect in order to maintain her safety. She refuses to leave the room where she feels protected from the cold, darkness and the unknown presences in the building, but her safety is not guaranteed inside the room and she is inevitably forced to encounter the intruders that violate her privacy. The image of the room as a limited space vividly visualizes the occurrence of menace. The room becomes an inescapable area when the intruders enter and entrap the victim. This image amplifies the atmosphere of menace on stage. After Rose is entrapped in the room, she is forced to face her inevitable destiny disregarding her efforts to survive. She is struck blind after meeting the Blind Negro, who apparently knows her from the past and asks her to come home, with no possibility to escape. Even though Bert attacks the blind Negro, he fails to prevent the destined damage to Rose and she loses her eyesight.
1.2. The Dumb Waiter (1957)

The title of the play indicates the significance and function of the dumb waiter as the main device and a medium in the presentation of menace. A dumbwaiter is “a small elevator used for conveying food and dishes from one story of a building to another” (Merriam-Webster.com). In this play, the dumb waiter is the medium with which the source of menace communicates with the agents of menace in the basement by sending them orders. In The Dumb Waiter the setting is a basement room, a confined space where two hired killers, Gus and Ben, are awaiting to receive orders to do a job. They are assigned to kill a victim who is about to arrive in the basement but they are not yet informed or briefed about the victim. Both men are sitting on their beds in the basement, waiting for instructions. Ben has a magazine in front of him and every once in a while reads out random pieces of news for Gus. However, the apparently random pieces of news have a significant theme; they are about people getting killed by accident. They foreshadow the invisible menace that gradually builds up throughout the play. On the other hand Gus keeps questioning Ben about the job by expressing his concerns but he is repeatedly ignored. By reading out the news, Ben tries to intimidate his partner and gradually increase the sense of uncertainty and insecurity in him during the play. Ben is more reserved and seems more confident and experienced in his profession in contrast to Gus. Whenever questioned by Gus, he evades answering either by changing the subject, being silent or criticizing Gus for being inquisitive. This form of communication shows the precarious relationship between the partners and the atmosphere of menace that is progressively built up during the play. The tension between the characters increases in a discussion about a football match that Ben doesn’t recall and an argument over the usage of the expression “light the kettle” or “put on the kettle” which turns into physical violence:

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

**GUS.** What does the gas-?

**BEN** (grabbing him with two hands by the throat, at arms length). THE KETTLE, YOU FOOL!
Gus takes the hands from his throat (126).

Ben proves to be dominant by imposing his opinions to Gus, giving him orders and repeatedly ignoring his questions and criticizing him. On the other hand, Ben himself is not certain about the authority he works for. His frustration in response to Gus’ questions indicates his uncertainties. As the play makes progress, the precarious situation and the sense of hostility between the men in increased. When Ben is criticized about reading the paper, he harshly responds with another threat: “You’ll get a swipe around your ear hole if you don’t watch your step” (130). Eventually both men feel the sudden appearance of menace concretely:

“There is a loud clatter and racket in the bulge of wall between the beds, of something descending. They grab their revolvers, jump up and face the wall. […] (Gus) lifts the panel. Disclosed is a serving-hatch, a ‘dumb waiter’” (131).

The sudden arrival of the dumb waiter, as the element of menace, replaces the physical violence between Gus and Ben. They both get startled by the presence of the dumb waiter and aim their revolvers at it. The dumb waiter carries a food order written on a piece of paper. The men decide responding to the orders by sending all the food they have in their possession but the food orders keep coming in more exotic forms. The men notice a speaking tube is located next to the dumb waiter for communicating with the source above. They realize the unknown voice above is not satisfied with what they have sent: “the Eccles cake was stale, the chocolate was melted, and the milk was sour” (140). Subsequently, the voice orders tea and Ben sends Gus to go to the kitchen to make some but the gas in the basement does not work. Gus becomes frustrated and he starts questioning the authority that is sending orders. Ben, who apparently has been already briefed about their job, finally informs Gus about the details of their job: as soon as the victim arrives and knocks, Gus has to open the door while hiding behind it and Ben has to shoot the victim (142). Even the instructions don't stop Gus from questioning Ben about the authority that sends the orders:

**GUS** (thickly). Who is it upstairs?

**BEN** (nervously). What’s one thing to do with another?
**GUS.** Who is it, though?

**BEN.** What’s on thing to do with another?

[...]

**GUS** (feverishly). I told you before who owned this place, didn’t I? I told you.

*Ben hits him viciously on the shoulder* (147).

As the relationship between the men becomes more precarious and violent, the dumb waiter sends another food order and triggers Gus’ reaction:

WE’VE GOT NOTHING LEFT! NOTHING! DO YOU UNDERSTAND? (146).

Gus’ disobedience increases the tension; Ben slaps him across his chest and warns him to stop. Unlike Gus, Ben doesn’t question anything and abides by the orders sent from above like a conformist. Gus, tired of the situation leaves the room for the last time to get a glass of water and in his absence Ben receives instructions through the speaking tube. He is informed that: “The victim has arrived and will be coming straight away. The normal method to be employed” (148).

In the final scene, after receiving the instructions Ben takes out his revolver, goes to the door and aims his gun. The door opens and Gus stumbles in without his revolver and jacket while staring at Ben in silence. (149) At the end of the play we realize that Gus is the victim who has to be killed. The dumb waiter as the unknown authority from above turns the killers against each other and orders one to kill the other.

**Conclusion**

In *The Dumb Waiter* the source of menace is not presented in form of a character entering the room to perpetrate the menace but instead is rooted in an unknown and unseen location, sending orders through a dumb waiter to the agents of menace. Like Pinter’s other plays, the lack of trust between the characters and a precarious relationship, which turns into a disaster, is emphasized. This precariousness is portrayed by
indetermination of Gus about the job and Ben’s violent responses. The exotic food orders sent through the dumb waiter make the killers desperate to comply with them anymore and the desperation leads to the disintegration of their relationship. Gus disobeys the authority and becomes the target of menace. As Christopher Innes describes, “The Dumb Waiter shows that the menacers themselves are not immune from the system they serve. One of the pair of thugs turns out to be the victim they have been hired to murder” (286). The Dumb Waiter is about the matter of complying with the authority. The unknown authority turns the agents of menace against each other and eventually the one who questions the authority has to be eliminated and victimized. Regarding the setting of the play, a basement room is portrayed as a confined space on stage where the characters are forced to remain in to receive orders and accomplish the job. Like The Room, there is no escape from menace; the characters have no opportunity to escape the basement until the task is completed, someone is victimized and the job is accomplished.
1.3. The Birthday Party (1957)

The Birthday Party is the story of a man who lives in a boarding house in a seaside town and two strangers who come from an unknown organization to interrogate him and take him away on his birthday. The title of the play indicates the occasion in which Stanley is interrogated, humiliated and his ominous fate takes place on his unwanted birthday party. A possible interpretation of the title’s significance could be Martin Esslin’s view, “the Birthday Party might also be seen as an image, a metaphor for the process of growing up, of expulsion from the warm, cozy world of childhood.” (84) He supports this idea by pointing out Stanley’s reluctance to leaving his warm shelter because he is afraid of the outside world. (84-85) The play takes place in two days and in three acts. Stanley Webber is an indolent and unenthusiastic man spoiled and pampered by his halfwit landlord, Meg, in the boarding house. Apparently he had been a piano player in the past. In the first act Meg informs him two men are interested in staying at their boarding house for a while and the news alarms Stanley. He reacts by claiming that he is planning to leave the boarding house soon since he has been offered a job. (16) Stanley’s reaction to the arriving unknown visitors indicates his fear of the unknown. Possibly he has taken refuge in the boarding house to have a quiet life and to hide from an unpleasant past. The ominous news alarms Stanley and threatens his safety. The atmosphere of mystery is built up when Stanley predicts the menace that is bound to happen:

STANLEY. (advancing) They’re coming today. They’re coming in a van.

[...]

STANLEY. They’ve got a wheelbarrow in that van. [...] A big wheelbarrow. And when the van stops they wheel it out, and they wheel it up the garden path, and then they knock at the front door.

[...]

STANLEY. They’re looking for someone. A certain person (18).
The strangers, Goldberg and McCann arrive shortly after this conversation and their arrival happens to coincide with Stanley’s birthday, even though he denies his birthday himself. Goldberg is Jewish and McCann is an Irish man. As Esslin points out, they are reminiscent of the two characters, Gus and Ben, in The Dumb Waiter but with a more complex character. (76) Like Gus in The Dumb Waiter, McCann is nervous about the “job” they are going to do and the experienced, confident and dominant Goldberg tries to reassure him and calm him down. In the second act, Stanley is faced with McCann. Realizing the mysterious visitors will probably do him some harm, he tries to convince McCann that he is not the man they are looking for, but he fails to do so. (36) Stanley is totally entrapped when Goldberg enters the room and joins McCann. The central action of the play takes place when the intruders violently interrogate and humiliate Stanley at the table. He is accused of random crimes:

MCCANN. Why did you leave the organization?

GOLDBERG. What would you old mum say, Webber?

MCCANN. Why did you betray us? (42).

[...]

GOLDBERG. [...] We’re right and you’re wrong, Webber, all along the line.

MCCANN. All along the line! (45).

It is never known which organization did Stanley belong in the past or what is the nature of his relation to the intruders. During the interrogation Stanley punches Goldberg in the stomach in resistance and McCann lifts a chair to strike him. The predicament is interrupted by Meg’s entrance to the room and the menacing atmosphere subsides. By the swift changing of the awkward situation, Goldberg proposes that they celebrate Stanley’s birthday. In fact the suggestion is a part of the intruders’ plan. At the birthday the guests decide to play the blind man’s buff game. When its Stanley’s turn to be blindfolded during the game, McCann deliberately breaks his glasses and by placing a toy drum in his way makes him stumble on the ground. The violent atmosphere is amplified further when the blindfolded and confused Stanley reaches Meg and tries to choke her but Goldberg
and McCann stop him. Meanwhile the lights suddenly go off and the party turns into a disaster:

*Silence. Grunts from MCCANN and GOLDBERG on their knees. Suddenly there is a sharp, sustained rat-a-tat with a stick on the side of the drum from the back of the room, Silence. Whimpers from LULU* (58).

The second act ends by Stanley’s mental breakdown at his birthday party. He is described giggling frantically while Goldberg and McCann approach him. The third act happens the day after the birthday. In the third act, the day after the birthday party, it turns out that Stanley had a nervous breakdown and is not able to speak anymore. He comes out of his room, guided by with McCann, cleanly shaved and dressed in a dark well-cut suit with his broken glasses in hand (75). After the interrogation he is not able to talk anymore:

**GOLDBERG.** […] What’s your opinion of such a prospect? Eh, Stanley?

**STANLEY** concentrates, his mouth opens, he attempts to speak, fails and emits sounds from his throat.

**STANLEY.** Uh-gug… uhgug… eeehhh-gag… (On the breath.) Caahh… caahh… (78).

Goldberg and McCann address Stanley in a rhythmic and comic dialogue and inform him that from now on they will take care of him. They intend to take Stanley away with them and Petey, the only character that sympathizes with Stanley, tries to stop them but fails since he is not strong enough. Eventually they take Stanley away with their car.

**Conclusion**

In *The Birthday Party*, Goldberg and McCann act as the agents of menace. Unlike *The Dumb Waiter*, the agents of menace are visibly portrayed in form of characters. The complexity and mysterious nature of the characters and the plot leaves the play open to
many different interpretations. Critics such as Martin Esslin even consider Goldberg and McCann as projection of Stanley’s own thoughts and fears. (87) Esslin suggests most of the questions Stanley is asked during the interrogation scene are the projection of his own fears and guilt feelings externalized in shape of the intruders who want to take him away from his safe place: ‘You verminate the sheet of your birth’, ‘you contaminate womankind’, ‘what makes you think you exist? You’re dead. […] You can’t live, you can’t think, you can’t love’ (87). The critic, John Russell Taylor also poses the same question in his review of *The Birthday Party*: “Are they [Goldberg and McCann] in fact beings from another world, […] or perhaps largely figments of Stanley’s overheated imagination?” (11). Regarding these comments, which seem plausible, Stanley fails to survive the projection of his own fear and guilt feelings and consequently gives up and breaks down. On the other hand, Pinter, as a refusal to provide explanatory notes for the production of *The Birthday Party*, comments: “everything to do with the play is in the play… Meaning begins in the words, in the action, continues in your head and ends nowhere… Meaning which is resolved, parcelled, labeled and ready for export is dead.’ (qtd. in *Modern British Drama 1890-1990*. 283) Pinter’s comment applies to most of his plays, specifically *The Birthday Party*, regarding the interpretation of their meaning. A possible way to inspect the element of menace in *The Birthday Party* is to consider Taylor’s comment on Pinter’s style of writing: “Precise explanations and credentials would be destructive of Pinter’s whole dramatic purpose” (11). *The Birthday Party’s* analysis, which is open to various interpretations, cannot be simplified. In fact it is impossible to deny the fact that Goldberg and McCann are characters that appear in the play with actions, motives and their complexities. They come to the boarding house, cross-examine Stanley, physically and mentally torture him and eventually take him with them. Stanley, as the menaced character, senses the fear of being deprived of his safe place by the intruders and desperately tries to resist them but fails. The brutal interrogation and the catastrophic incidents at his unwanted birthday party, lead to his mental and physical break down and the intruders deprive him of his quiet life and take him away. The setting of the play, the boarding house, amplifies the setting of menace as a place where Stanley becomes entrapped and fails to escape the predicament. *The Birthday Party’s* conclusion depicts Stanley as a different man after being subjected to
interrogation. He becomes a conformist who has completely surrendered and does not show any signs of disobedience of the authorities anymore.

1.4. The Caretaker (1960)

_The Caretaker_ is about a young man, Aston, who finds an old tramp in a brawl in a café. The old man, Davies, has lost his job after an argument with his employer and is left with no place to go. Out of sympathy, Aston invites him to stay at his place for a while and later offers him to work there as a caretaker. The place is a room in a house located in West London. Davies claims he only needs to stay for a while until the weather breaks and he will be able to go to Sidcup. He has to get a hold of his references over there to be able to find a job. Aston’s brother, Mick, who apparently owns the place, is a businessman with a playful and complex character. His first encounter with Davies marks the first sign of menace in the play. When Mick finds Davies in the room, he violently grabs his arm and forces him down on the ground to find out who he is and later he treats him politely. Mick’s illusive and changing attitude towards Davies is a strategy to find out about his motivations about staying in the room. Later in the second act, Aston offers Davies to work as a caretaker in the room for a while and Davies hesitates to accept the offer by claiming that he needs his references to be able to be employed. During the whole play, Mick’s shifting attitude toward Davies continues to the point of physical violence. There is a scene where Davies enters the room and tries to turn the lights on but the switch doesn't work. A box that he is holding falls on the floor and someone kicks it and Davies reacts nervously:

**DAVIES.** I got a knife here. I’m ready. Come on then, who are you?

_He moves, stumbles, falls and cries out._

_Silence._

_A faint whimper from DAVIES. He gets up._

All right!

_He stands. Heavy breathing._
Suddenly the Electrolux starts to hum, a figure moves with it, guiding it. The nozzle moves along the floor after Davies, who skips, dives way from it and falls, breathlessly.

Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah! Get away-y-y-y-y! (43).

After the strange incident, which is reminiscent of humiliation of Stanley in The Birthday Party, the lights come on and it turns out that it was Mick who had deliberately turned the lights off to scare Davies. To justify this act, he pretends that he was doing some cleaning and he had to use the plug to turn on the vacuum cleaner. He informs Davies that he is a tradesman in charge of the place and his brother Aston is supposed to take care of the place for him. Mick pretends he needs Davies’ experience and advice to help his shy brother have a more sociable and active life. In fact he tries tricks Davies by giving him credit to figure out his real motivations. Davies, who feels more confident after Mick’s compliments and finds out that he runs the place, tries to criticize Aston to discredit him:

DAVIES. Well... he’s a funny bloke, your brother.

[...]

MICK. What’s funny about him?

Pause.

DAVIES. Not liking work.

MICK. What’s funny about that?

DAVIES. Nothing.

Pause.

MICK. I don’t call it funny.

DAVIES. Nor me.

MICK. You don’t want to start getting hypercritical (48).

Even though Mick reacts negatively to Davies’ response, he offers him the caretaking job at the place with the condition that he goes to Sidcup to get hold of his references to be able to get the job and he accepts the deal. This turns out to be a plan to get rid of Davies. During the whole play, the brothers interact with Davies in each other’s absence. At the end of the second act Aston tells Davies that he has experienced an
electric shock treatment in a hospital in the past because he had hallucinations and used to talk too much. (53) Aston’s revelation of his electric shock treatment and abnormality places him in an unreliable position in the play like Mick and Davies. His story about his treatment is a strategy to create the illusion of superiority and competency in Davies to make him reveal his real intentions to Mick. The plan works, and Davies feeling superior, decides to exploit Aston’s trust. In order to secure his position as the caretaker and discredit Aston, he starts criticizing him to take sides with Mick. Mick pretends to be affirmative and sympathetic in response to Aston to encourage him in revealing his real intentions. In the third act Aston offers a pair of shoes he has found for Davies, which is an implication that it is about time for Davies to leave but he tries to procrastinate his leaving again:

**DAVIES.** I’d have to get down to Sidcup before I could get hold of them. That's where they are, see. Trouble is, getting there. That's my problem. The weather's dead against it.

_Aston quietly exits, unnoticed._

Don't know as these shoes’ll be much good. It's a hard road (63).

It turns out that his story about going to Sidcup has been a strategy to procrastinate his stay. According to Christopher Innes, “His declared intention of going is contradicted by the (justified) fear that if he leaves the room there will be no chance of getting back in” (288). Davies knows if he leaves he won’t be welcome by the brothers anymore, so he accepts the shoes but still tries to buy time. Eventually the relationship between the men is completely ruined during an argument between the men. Aston wakes Davies during the night because he has been making noises in his sleep. He reacts aggressively by threatening Aston with a knife and telling him that he deserved the electric shock treatment because he is out of his mind. Aston asks him to leave. (64-66) Consequently the untactful Davies turns to Mick to gain his support by trying to convince him to get rid of Aston. Mick tricks Davies by pretending that he expected to hire him as an interior decorator to furnish the place and not a caretaker. Davies pretends there has been a misunderstanding and blames it on Aston by calling him “nutty”. Mick gets angry,
accuses Davies of lying and making trouble. (71-72) Mick leaves without responding to Davies’ last words and before going out exchanges a meaningful smile with his brother Aston at the door. (73) In the final scene Davies, having failed to achieve his plans and being rejected by the brothers is forced to leave the shelter he was offered.

**Conclusion**

In *The Caretaker*, comparing to Pinter’s earlier plays, the approach to menace is different. This play is considered a new phase in Pinter’s dramaturgy, mainly focusing on interpersonal relationships between people. Menace is presented embedded and internalized within the characters. The characters’ relationship with each other is precarious and complex and each one of them strives for his ambitions. Burkman point out that, “In some respects, the three characters in *The Caretaker* are all dispossessed, all in search of their identity papers in a materialistic world that each seeks to shape to his dreams and in which each feels lost” (86). Mick’s dream is to decorate and run the place as a successful businessman someday, Aston’s dream after being subjected to electric shock treatment is to build a shed in the garden and to have peace of mind in his own room and Davies’ ultimate plan is to take over the possession of the room he is invited into to secure his position as a caretaker. He tries exploiting Aston’s compassion by turning his brother Mick against him but he pushes his luck too far. The demanding, fussy Davies fails to achieve this goal because he is not as tactful as the brothers. He discredits himself by his failure and eventually is expelled from the room. In *The Caretaker*, Pinter is mainly concerned with presenting a precarious human condition that is gradually exacerbated to the point of verbal and physical violence and the subsequent deprivation of Davies as the main character. The room, as the setting of the play, visualizes a desired space in which the three characters compete for. After the arrival of Davies, the room becomes the ground that the brothers try to protect from the tramp after tactfully getting him into revealing his scheme. *The Caretaker* is the story of competition for survival and possession. The three characters are confined to a room, as the visual space portrayed on stage, where they discretely try to take control. The potential menace that might threaten Mick and Aston, the owners of the room, would be Davies if he
succeeded in turning the brothers against each other. On the other hand, the potential menace for Davies would be failing to achieve his plan and getting expelled from the room. Davies realizes that he should play his game well enough to secure his position in the room but the brothers’ plan outdoes his scheme. Mick and Aston succeed to make him expose himself and subsequently they get rid of Davies by expelling him from the room.
Chapter 2

Typology of Characters and their Linguistic Strategies

A feasible approach to the analysis of Pinter’s theatre is the study of characters and their possible motivations in each play. Pinter’s plays call for a detailed exploration of the characters and their motivations due to their complexity, obscurity and illusiveness. Pinter’s comment about his multiplex characters implies to the reader, the urge for exploring them:

“A character on the stage who can present no convincing argument or information as to his past experiences, his present behavior 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” (qtd. in About Pinter: The Playwright and the Work, Mark Batty, 25).

The aim of this chapter is a detailed analysis of the structure of four plays, regarding the character types and the possible motivations they try to achieve by use of linguistic strategies. This chapter’s objective is to classify the characters into two groups as the main contributors to the presentation of menace and describe the strategies they utilize to achieve their goals. The characters in question will be categorized as “The Intruders” and “The Victims”. “The Intruders” are defined as the characters involved in the perpetration of menace and the victimization of the others and “The Victims” are the characters affected by the perpetration of menace and victimized. These characters follow their motivations with evasiveness and deception either in order to dominate the others or to protect themselves from harm. The plays in question in this chapter are The Room, The Dumb Waiter, The Birthday Party and The Caretaker.
2.1. Intruders and Victims

Pinter’s characters are usually alienated from each other by confining themselves to their small living spaces. Pinter describes that he deals with these characters “at the extreme edge of their living, where they are pretty much alone” (Knowels, *Understanding Harold Pinter*, 8). All these characters come from unknown backgrounds. They do not reveal much information about them or if they do, it is in order to confuse each other rather than making themselves understood. They usually use language in an ambiguous and deceptive way for different purposes. Some use language in order to achieve dominance over the others and, some in order to protect themselves from harm. In general, these characters could be divided into two categories in Pinter’s early plays: “The Intruders” and “The Victims”.

“The Intruders” are the unknown and obtrusive characters that come from the outside world, confront the victims and jeopardize their existence and sense of safety and security. They act as the agents of menace and their main strategy is either to achieve verbal or physical dominance over the victims to dispossess them of their personal territory, their rooms, or to subject them to physical or mental violence by threatening their lives. Pinter explains these characters as “inexpressive, giving little away, unreliable, elusive, evasive, obstructive, and unwilling” (*The Peopled Wound*, 44). These complex characters use certain linguistic strategies in order to achieve their goals. Some notable examples of the intruders are Mr. Kidd, Mr. and Mrs. Sands and Riley in *The Room*, Goldberg and McCann in *The Birthday Party*, the unseen voice sending the orders in *The Dumb Waiter* and Davies in *The Caretaker*.

In contrast, the victims are the characters affected by menace and victimized by the intruders. They function as the target of menace and are terrorized by the intruders. A common characteristic of the victims is the constant fear of the unknown. They take refuge in their small world, their rooms, and isolate themselves from the outside world to feel protected. According to L. Cahn, they “live in perpetual suspicion, regarding both familiar figures and strangers with trepidation” (2). L. Cahn describes these characters as “protective of what they see as their own, objects and territory over which they can assert sovereignty”. He suggests they are “always nervous that whatever few rights and
possessions they claim may be snatched away, leaving then even more alienated” (2). In each play, the insecure victims are inevitably forced to face the unknown intruding forces that invade their privacy and endanger their safety. “The Victims” past are never known and, as Mark Batty argues, it is never clear “why those pasts should invade and infect the [characters] present” (24). The closure of each play results in the victimization of a character by the agents of menace but the motivation of the intrusion and the reasons for the strange events mainly remains obscure. The common subject, in the conclusion of all the plays in question, is the failure of the victims in prevention of the psychological and physical damage forced upon them, and their failure to defy the intruding forces in order to protect themselves. Some notable examples are Rose’s blindness after the failure in prevention of the encounter with the blind Negro in The Room, Stanley’s mental breakdown and loss of his speaking ability after being subjected to the brutal interrogation by Goldberg and McCann in The Birthday Party or, Gus, in The Dumb Waiter, who is primarily supposed to act as one of the agents of menace but becomes the victim after questioning the authority. And finally, Davies in The Caretaker, who tries to take over the possession of the room by turning the brothers against each other, fails in achieving his plan and he is eventually forced to leave the room he was offered to stay.

2.2 Intruders and The Development of Menace

The aim in this section is to discuss the different linguistic strategies the intruders use to perpetrate menace, in order to achieve verbal domination over the victims or to harm them mentally or physically and finally victimize them. The excerpts given in this chapter include the plays: The Room, The Dumb Waiter, The Birthday Party and The Caretaker respectively.
A. Struggle for Dominance

One of the main events occurring in Pinter’s plays is the struggle for dominance between the characters. These characters constantly try to outdo each other with use of different strategies. In an interview with Lawrence Bensky, when asked about the violence in his plays, Pinter responds:

“The world is a pretty violent place [...] so any violence in the plays comes out quite naturally. It seems to me an essential and inevitable factor… The violence is really only an expression of the question of dominance and subservience, which is possibly a repeated theme in my plays […] A threat is constantly there: it’s got to do with this question of being in the uppermost position, or attempting to be” (29).

The struggle for dominance in Pinter’s plays is mainly a verbal competition. As I described the occurrence of menace in the earlier chapters, the act of intrusion is followed by the appearance of the agents of menace. They mainly try gaining a verbally dominant position by the fluent use of language to confuse and subdue the victim. In some cases they try allying with the other forces or characters in order to claim territory or gain dominance. John Russell Taylor’s description of the use of verbal domination supports this view further:

“[Pinter] has observed, as no one else has, the constant tugs-of-war in normal speech, [...] between the inquisitive inquirer who wants to find out as much as he can while giving nothing away and the wary victim of his interrogation who cannot or will not bring the conversation to an end but is determined to show himself as little as possible in what he says” (24).

One of the common characteristics of the intruders is their inquisitive nature. They inquire information from the victims and meanwhile refuse to give any information about themselves in order to secure their own position as the dominant rival and to subdue the victim. An example of verbal dominance between the previously discussed plays is
Goldberg’s pretentious, genteel, patronizing and dominant attitude towards McCann and the others in *The Birthday Party*, which portrays him as the superior figure in the play. He treats McCann like his inferior employee, boasts about his greatness to everyone and gives orders to McCann and Stanley. His fluent use of language, high self-esteem and verbal superiority in the encounter with Stanley, the victim, is completed with McCann’s physical brutality. At the interrogation scene, Goldberg and McCann force Stanley to sit at the table and bombard him with questions and random accusations without giving him the chance to respond and consequently the process leads to Stanley’s mental breakdown:

**MCCANN.** Why did you leave the organization?

**GOLDBERG.** What would your old mum say, Webber?

**MCCANN.** Why did you betray us?

**GOLDBERG.** You hurt me, Webber. You’re playing a dirty game.

**MCCANN.** That’s a Black and Tan fact. […] (42).

The violent interrogation and humiliation of Stanley leaves him speechless and defenseless to the point that he completely surrenders when the intruders take him away. In *The Room*, Mr. and Mrs. Sands who arrive at Rose’s place, use language in a similar way to confuse and frighten her. They constantly contribute to each other’s statements in turns to baffle her:

**ROSE.** What’s it like out?

**MR SANDS.** No darker than in.

**MRS SANDS.** He’s right there.

**MR SANDS.** It’s darker in than out, for my money.

**MRS SANDS.** There’s not much light in this place, is there, Mrs Hudd? Do you know, this is the first bit of light we’ve seen since we came in?

**MR SANDS.** The first crack (97).
Mr. Kidd, the landlord, questions Rose to find out when her husband would leave home (Plays 1: 90), meanwhile he refuses to respond to her questions about the number of the floors (Plays 1: 92) and finally, when Rose refuses to meet the blind Negro, Mr. Kidd verbally intimidates her in order to force her agree to see the man:

MR KIDD. I know what he’ll do. I know what he’ll do. If you don’t see him now, there’ll be nothing else for it, he’ll come up on his own bat, when your husband’s here, that’s what he’ll do (105).

In The Caretaker when Mick finds Davies in his room, physically intimidates him and tries to confuse him by telling him random anecdotes about his own uncle’s brother or other people who reminds him of Davies. (30) He tricks Davies by altering his attitude towards him constantly by alternatively treating him nicely and violently:

MICK. You sleep here last night?

DAVIES. Yes

MICK. I’m awfully glad. It’s awfully nice to meet you… (28).

And later on Mick changes his attitude toward Davies:

MICK. You’re stinking the place out. You’re an old robber, there’s no getting away from it. You’re an old skate. You don't belong to a nice place like this. […] I can run you to the police station in five minutes, have you in for trespassing, […] (33-34).

During the second act, Mick mischievously tries to frighten Davies by turning the lights off before his arrival and physically intimidating him. Afterwards he convinces Davies that he was trying to clean the place and to run the vacuum cleaner he had to turn the lights off. Then he treats Davies in a friendly manner and offers him a sandwich (42-45). One of the other strategies that Mick takes advantage of is the use of jargon to puzzle Davies and prove his own superiority. He offers renting the place to Davies by use of jargon and posing his conditions:
**MICK.** You got no business wandering abut in an unfurnished flat. I could charge seven quid a week for this if I wanted to […] Say the word and I’ll have my solicitors draft you a contract. […] No strings attached, open and above board, un tarnished record; twenty percent interest, fifty percent deposit; down payments, back payments, family allowances, bonus schemes, remission of term for good behaviour, six months lease… (33-34).

Mick tries to subdue Davies in his long speech filled up with use of technical financial expressions. Mick’s verbal dominance and cunning behavior and Aston’s revelation of his electric shock treatment convinces Davies that he is in a superior position and more competent than Aston. Hence the untactful Davies, who wants to take over the room and claim territory, decides to ally with Mick by attempting to turn him against Aston but he fails and the brothers turn against him. In the end Davies is victimized by the brothers’ plan and he is forced to leave. Another example of dominance is *The Dumb Waiter.* Like Goldberg in *The Birthday Party,* Ben is the dominant hit man who treats his partner aggressively. He gives Gus orders, criticizes him for being inquisitive about the job and intimidates him physically and verbally:

**GUS.** […] (*Rising, looking down at BEN). How many times have you read that paper?

**BEN** slams the paper down and rises.

**BEN** (angrily). What do you mean?

**GUS.** I was just wondering how many times you’d –

**BEN.** What are you doing, criticizing me?

**GUS.** No, I was just –

**BEN.** You’ll get a swipe round your earhole if you don’t watch your step (130).

Later on, when Ben realizes the authority above the basement is sending orders through the dumb waiter, he decides to conform to the orders and ally with the authority in order to get rid of the victim. While Gus questions the authority and disobeys the
orders, a message is sent through the dumb waiter that introduces Gus as the victim and instructs Ben about the procedure. Ben follows the orders and decides to kill Gus when he arrives the room.

**B. Self Contradiction**

The intruders in Pinter’s drama generally tend to be puzzling, illusive and evasive in their interaction. What they express about themselves or their intentions does not necessarily stand for what they present but often their expression of the self is self-contradictory and is a way to put them in a superior position compared to the victims. They use language in a way to mislead their rivals. Ronald Hayman supports this idea by stating:

“Pinter’s characters are vague and uncommunicative, but it does not always seem that ignorance is their reason for withholding information. They tend to be less benevolent more competitive, aggressive, perverse. They are liable to provide misleading information for the sake of causing confusion and anxiety, disturbing the audience at the same time as they disturb each other’ (126). He explains, “It is taken for granted that the characters are unreliable witnesses, even of their own behavior. They are forgetful or dishonest about the past, vague or secretive about their intentions, ignorant or biased about their motivations. Their behavior is liable to be inconsistent both with their explanations of it and in itself (Ibid. 126).

In *The Room* there are four intruders in order of appearance in the play: Mr. Kidd, Mr. and Mrs. Sands and The Blind Negro. They all contribute to the victimization of Rose together. Mr. Kidd, the landlord, is a partially deaf old man with an unreliable memory. His contradictory accounts about himself, his family history and even the number floors in his house are as confusing and puzzling to Rose and the audience. Mr. and Mrs. Sands, the young couple that show up at Rose’s door in search of Mr. Kidd to rent a room, try to confuse and frighten Rose. When they find out she is concerned about her husband who is outside, driving on the road during the night, they try to frighten her:
**MR SANDS** *(guffawing).* Well, he’s taking a big chance tonight then.

**ROSE.** What?

**MR SANDS.** No – I mean, it’d be a bit dodgy driving tonight (98).

When Rose asks them how long they have been inside the building they don’t have a clear answer either:

**MR SANDS.** About half an hour.

**MRS SANDS.** Longer than that, much longer.

**MRS SANDS.** About thirty-five minutes (98).

They also mention a man they spoke to in the basement without actually having seen him. They claim they have been told there is a room number seven vacant in the house, which happens to be the same room Rose lives in. When Rose asks for the descriptions of the man in the basement, the Sands ignore her question and suddenly leave to find the landlord. Another example of self-contradiction is Davies in *The Caretaker.* After he is allowed to stay in Aston’s room for a while, he makes noises in his sleep and when Aston asks him if he had been dreaming, he denies it in a heated discussion and blames the noises on the neighbors. (21) He also refuses to talk about his origins when questioned by Aston:

**ASTON.** Where were you born?

**DAVIES.** I was… uh… oh, it’s a bit hard, like, to set your mind back… see what I mean… going back… a good way… lose a bit of track, like… you know… (23).

Aston refuses to reveal information about himself because it would put him in an insecure position. The intruders in Pinter’s plays generally mystify the others by self-contradictory statements, concealing any information about them or by giving false information to the others in order to perpetrate menace, achieve their plans and victimize the others.
2.3. Victims and The Struggle for Survival

In Pinter’s theatre the victims are mainly faced with the inevitable menace when the act of intrusion occurs and the menacing forces victimize them. In this section I will discuss the defensive strategies that the victims use in order to cope with menace and the agents of menace and in order to survive. In the plays in question in this essay the victims make self contradictory or false statements about themselves and try to resist the intruding forces as an attempt for survival. These strategies will be discussed in detail in this chapter.

Self Contradiction and Resistance

The main characteristics of the victims regarding protecting themselves in the encounter with menace are self-contradiction, making false statements about themselves and their pasts and resisting the intruders with an aggressive manner. Like the intruders, victims try to give as little information as possible about themselves when questioned. They are reluctant to communicate with the strangers that violate their privacy and jeopardize their safety. Even if they reveal any information to intruders, either it is in form of contradictory statements or false narratives for misleading the intruders and evading the danger that jeopardizes them. Pinter explains:

“My characters tell me so much and no more, with reference to their experience, their aspirations, their motives, their history. Between my lack of biographical data about them and the ambiguity of what they say lies a territory which is not only worthy of exploration but which it is compulsory to explore” (Writing for theatre, 12).

Pinter’s comment draws attention to the necessity of exploring the possible motivations of these characters. As he comments, the characters he creates have an obscure past, which is difficult to verify. Regarding Burkman’s analogy which I quoted earlier, comparing Pinter’s dramatic world to a battleground where everyone struggles for dominance, it is very likely that the victims in these plays lie about their pasts or manipulate it in order to mislead the intruding forces and get away from danger and its destructive consequences. For instance, in the Birthday Party, Stanley initially admits to
McCann that it is his birthday (32) and afterwards he denies it (35). He is jobless while he is staying at the boardinghouse but in order to save his life, he claims that soon he has to leave the boarding house for some business when he encounters Goldberg and McCann. (34) When Stanley fails to convince McCann that he is a businessman and he will leave the place he tries to avoid the intruders by pretending to be the manager of the boarding house in order get rid of them:

**STANLEY** (*moving downstage*). I’m afraid there’s been a mistake. We’re booked out. You room is taken. Mrs. Boles forgot to tell you. You’ll have to find somewhere else (38).

He asks the intruders to leave but he fails to get rid of them and consequently they force him to sit down at the table and brutally interrogate him and subject him to violence. Stanley’s final resort to resist the intruders at the interrogation scene is either giving irrelevant answers to the questions or posing a question in response (41-43).

In *The Room*, when Rose is forced to meet the blind Negro, she reluctantly accepts to meet him and treats him in a verbally abusive way and denies any connection with the man. However, it doesn't save her from the danger that is awaiting her:

**RILEY.** This is a nice room.

**ROSE.** Never mind about the room. What do you know about this room? You know nothing about it. And you won’t be trying in it long either. My luck. I get these creeps come in, smelling up my room. What do you want?

**RILEY.** I want to see you.

**ROSE.** [...] You’re a blind man. An old, poor blind man. [...] They say I know you. That’s an insult, for a start. Because I can tell you, I wouldn't know you to spit on, not from a mile off (107).
In the play, *The Dumb Waiter*, Gus questions the system he works for but in contrast, Ben follows all the orders that are sent through the dumb waiter without any doubts but Gus repeatedly questions Gus and the nature of their job and the authority, which sends them the orders from an unknown place. Since Gus resists obeying the system he works for, he becomes victim of menace and the unknown authority orders Ben to kills Gus.

**Conclusion**

By the presentation of the atmosphere of menace, the battle for dominance and territory and a competitive relationship between the characters that results in subjugation and victimization, Pinter’s theatre basically creates awareness about what happens in the world. This awareness is implied without making any statements or delivering any messages, but it is presented in a rather implicit and subtle form. A room, as the setting of Pinter’s plays represents a microcosm of the world and the mysterious characters living in constant fear of the unknown and evading communication, represent human beings. By the presentation of the interpersonal relationship in form of “The Intruders” and “The Victims”, and the use of linguistic strategies by the characters for achieving domination and survival, Pinter offers a new function of the language in theatre. In Pinter’s plays, the language becomes as a tool in control of the characters as well as a medium for communication. They use language to communicate, to subdue each other and to survive in the competitive world they live in.
Chapter 3

Silence, Pause and Their Function in the Context of Menace

Pinter is well known for the use of “Pauses” and “Silences” as unique theatrical devices that emphasize the particular ways in which his characters communicate or avoid communicating with each other. I find it important to explore the meaning of the pauses and the silences in Pinter’s theatre in order to point out their distinction compared to the work of the writers such as Samuel Beckett who have influenced Pinter’s work. Exploring these theatrical techniques helps the reader and the audience to have a better understanding of the nature of Pinter’s plays, specifically regarding the non-verbal communication between the characters. My aim in this chapter is to define the function and significance of the pauses and silences with regards to the plays discussed earlier.

3.1. Definition and Function of ‘Silence’ and ‘Pause’

Some critics have misinterpreted the use of pauses and silences in Pinter’s work as a sign of failure of communication. Pinter opposes this opinion by pointing out the fact that:

“We communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is a continual evasion, desperate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves. Communication is too alarming. […] To disclose to others the poverty within us is too fearsome a possibility.” (Writing for Theatre, 13)

Pinter’s comment indicates the characters are unwilling to communicate verbally because they want to prevent vulnerability, but this does not mean that they can’t communicate at all. The unwillingness in communication is either the sign of a precarious relationship between the characters or, the sign of fear of the others. They constantly suffer the fear of revealing their emotions and feelings to the other people from the world outside. In Pinter’s theatre disclosing any information or sincere emotions results in an emotional insecurity. Therefore, the words frequently give place to the silences and the
pauses as a substitute for communication and the characters’ non-verbal choice becomes a tacit way of communication between each other. For a better understanding of a Pinter play it is necessary to value the importance of the non-verbal communication (the ‘Pauses’ and ‘Silences’) as much as the verbal communication (the words) between the characters. To explore the meaning, the function and the importance of “Silence” and “Pause” in Pinter’s plays it is worthy of attention to quote Peter Hall, the stage director well known for having directed many of Pinter’s plays. He defines pause and silence and their usage as follows:

“There are three very different kinds of pauses in Pinter: Three Dots is a sign of a pressure point, a search for a word, a momentary incoherence. A Pause is a longer interruption to the action, where the lack of speech becomes a form of speech itself. The Pause is a threat, a moment of non-verbal tension. A Silence – the third category – is longer still. It is an extreme crisis point. Often the character emerges from the Silence with his attitude completely changed” (The Cambridge Companion, 163).

According to Hall, “these three signs in the text all indicate moments of turbulence and crisis. [...] By their use, the unsaid becomes sometimes more terrifying and more eloquent than the said” (Ibid, 163). In Pinter’s drama there are frequent instances of the use pauses and silences that show the uneasy moments where the characters hesitate to speak or cannot speak articulately or momentarily stop speaking. The pauses and silences create a dramatic suspense. The characters refrain expressing their true feelings and weaknesses by use of continual crosstalk that is filled with pauses and silences in order to cover those feelings. As Pinter points out: “One way of looking at speech is to say that it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness.” (Writing for Theatre, 13) One of the examples of the usage of ‘Pause’ as a way to create suspense is in The Room. Rose tries to communicate with her husband, Bert, but she is absolutely ignored and her speech turns into a long monologue with pauses:

ROSE. She rises, goes to the window, and looks out.
It’s quiet. Be coming on for dark. There’s no one about.

*She stands, looking.*

Wait a minutes.

*Pause.*

I wonder who that is.

*Pause.*

No. I thought I saw someone.

*Pause.*

No (88).

The pauses used in this example echo a feeling of suspense in the play. Each pause draws the audiences’ attention to what has been said before and after it. On the other hand, Bert’s silence in response contributes to this feeling of suspense and indicates the non-communication in a dull relationship. As Burkman points out, “Pinter pause […] heightens the effect of non-communication” (5). Another example of pause is the banal conversation between Meg and Petey at the breakfast table in *The Birthday Party*, while Petey is reading the newspaper:

**MEG.** Will you tell me when you come to something good?

**PETEY.** Yes.

*Pause.*

**MEG.** Have you been working hard this morning?

**PETEY.** No. Just stacked a few of the old chairs. Cleaned up a bit.

**MEG.** Is it nice out?

**PETEY.** Very nice.

*Pause.*

**MEG.** Is Stanley up yet? (4).

Meg’s frequent trivial questions indicate the nature of their relationship, which is similar to Rose and Mr. Hudd’s. She merely asks questions about such trivial subjects to create a conversation regardless of what answer she will be given. Therefore, every pause marks a change in the direction of her questions and the subject. The pauses also indicate
Petey’s unwillingness to engage in a conversation. He tries to respond with the shortest possible answers to avoid conversing with Meg. Regarding the banality of conversation in Pinter’s work, Burkman argues:

“The repetitions and lack of logic of ordinary conversation … are carefully woven into the texture of Pinter’s dramatic world and give it its distinctive combination of the banal and the strange.” (5)

This combination of banality and strangeness is visible in many of Pinter’s plays such as *The Room, The Homecoming, The Birthday Party* and *A Slight Ache*.

In some cases the pause is used to show the verbal tension in the play. For example in *The Caretaker*, Davies makes noises in his sleep and Aston wakes him up and tells him that he was jabbering. There is an argument between them:

**DAVIES.** I don't jabber, man. Nobody ever told me that before.

_Pause._
What would I be jabbering about?

**ASTON.** I don’t know.

**DAVIES.** I mean, where’s the sense in it?

_Pause._
Nobody ever told me that before.

_Pause._
You got hold of the wrong bloke, mate (21).

In the uneasy moment in the above example, the pauses emphasize the tension between Aston and Davies. Davies definitely knows that he has been making noises but he denies it, he even blames it on the neighbors. In the above example, each pause echoes the words that Davies articulates and shows the verbal tension between the two characters.

Regarding the function of silence based on Hall’s definition, “the extreme crisis point”, it is notable to mention the climatic and violent ending of *The Room* where Bert arrives and strikes the blind Negro:
BERT. Lice!

He strikes the NEGRO, knocking him down, then kicks his head against the gas-stove several times. The NEGRO lies still. BERT walks away.

Silence.

ROSE stands clutching her eyes.

ROSE. Can't see. I can’t see. I can’t see.

Blackout

Curtain (110).

The use of silence indicates the extreme crisis point at this climax of the play. Another example is the interrogation scene in *The Birthday Party* where Goldberg and McCann surround Stanley after interrogating him:

GOLDBERG. You’re dead. You can’t live, you can’t think, … You’re nothing but an odour!

Silence. The stand over him. He is crouched in the chair. He looks up slowly and kicks GOLDBERG in the stomach. GOLDBERG falls. STANLEY stands. MCCANN seizes a chair and lifts it above his head. STANLEY seizes a chair and covers his head with it. MCCANN and STANLEY circle (46).

As Hall describes, “Often the character emerges from the Silence with his attitude completely changed.” (*A Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*, 163) That is what happens in the example given above or in the final scene of *The Dumb Waiter* where Gus is going to be victimized by Ben:

GUS stumbles in.

He is stripped of his jacket, waistcoat, tie, holster and revolver.

[...]

A long silence.

They stare at each other.

Curtain (149).
In *The Caretaker*, the violent encounter between Mick and Davies concludes the first act of the play with silence. (27) Before the ending of the third act in *The Caretaker* there is a significant moment of silence between Aston and Mick, the brothers, that is a very important example of non-verbal communication. That is when the brothers actually decide to get rid of Davies who has been staying in their room, but this decision is subtlety implied in a non-verbal gesture of silence where the brothers signal each other that it is time to get rid of the tramp:

*A door bangs.*

*Silence. They do not move.*

ASTON comes in. *He closes the door, moves into the room and faces MICK. They look at each other. Both are smiling faintly.*

MICK (*beginning to speak to ASTON*). Look...uh...

*He stops, goes to the door and exits...* (72,73)

After this silence is exchange between the brothers, Aston realizes that it is time to imply to Davies that it is time for him to leave. The play concludes with a long silence where Aston is facing the window with his back turned to Davies, and ignoring his implorations. (76)

**Conclusion**

At the end of this chapter, it is important to point out the distinction between Pinter’s style of writing and the writer he was influenced by, Samuel Beckett. There is a difference between the significance and function of the silence and pauses in Pinter’s drama and Beckett’s. According to Hall “Certainly Beckett is the first dramatist to use silence as a written form of communication” (163). In Beckett’s theatre, the characters fail to communicate with each other to the point that their failure is has a comic effect on
the audience. Beckett makes use of repetition, non-sequiturs, silences and pauses in his dialogue to show the failure in communication between the characters. Basically all these techniques, specifically pauses and silences emphasize the non-communication. In contrast, in Pinter’s theatre the pauses and silences are used as a form of non-verbal communication. The characters in Pinter’s plays communicate with each other successfully with the use of words and in the absence of words where they decide not to reveal their feelings or any information and the silence and pause appear in dialogue.
Chapter 4

Conclusion

Harold Pinter has taken advantage of the theatre as a medium to portray characters that are alienated from each other and the outside world. He has used the theme of menace as a theatrical statement to illustrate a predicament in which the characters are bemused. These characters, “The Intruders” and “The Victims”, use language as a weapon to cope with each other in an inevitable encounter. The intruders use language in a deceiving way to dominate and subdue the others and the victims use language as a defensive shield to protect themselves from the threat jeopardizing their existence. Pinter offers a microcosmic image of the world by choosing the room as the setting of his plays. The characters are presented in confined spaces that they consider their personal territory and their safety depends on it. The act of intrusion marks the central action of all the plays where the intruders encounter the victims in their confined spaces and try to victimize them. The intrusion is as inevitable as the psychological or physical violence that affects the victims at the end.

The social and historical influences that intrigued Pinter during the post-war era have resulted in a unique theatre that offers an unconventional insight to the language. The lack of any physical description, the uncertain background of the characters, their unknown motivations and their lack of identity, present a poignant and dark post-war world that is worthy of exploration.

Pinter introduces a different way of communication in theatre by use of theatrical techniques such as “Pauses” and “Silences” in writing dialogue. I believe he takes advantage of these theatrical techniques to portray a world in which the people are afraid to communicate with each other due to lack of mutual trust and confidence in each other. In Pinter’s competitive and violent theatre any communication will inevitably result being exposed to a mental and emotional security and the use of “Pauses” and “Silences” indicates the conscious choice of the characters in refusal of communication. Some critics
misinterpret the use of silences and pauses in Pinter’s plays as failure in communication and associate Pinter with the writers of the theatre of the absurd. But it is important to make a distinction between Pinter’s theatre and the writers he has been wrongly associated with. Samuel Beckett is considered as one of the playwrights, mainly associated with the theatre of the absurd, that Pinter has acknowledged as an influence and has praised as “the best prose writer living”. Even though there are traces of Beckett’s influence in Pinter’s writing, regarding the use of pauses and silences, there are fundamental differences between the two regarding their perspective about communication. Playwrights such as Beckett indicate that language is an insufficient medium as a way of communication. Beckett’s dialogue is fragmented with pauses and silences to indicate the non-communication between the characters. These fragments create a sense of absurdity in dialogue or sometimes are followed by non sequitur by one of the characters, which create an absurd or comic effect on the audience. In contrast, Pinter’s theatre is not about the lack of communication but about the fear of communication between the characters. In a Pinter play, the characters can communicate with each other through language and through silences as verbal and non-verbal ways of communication. The silences and pauses become significant by creating suspense and theatrical effect between dialogues and become a non-verbal form of communication. By offering a menacing atmosphere in his early plays, Pinter portrays a terrifying world where the characters are likely to avoid communication to maintain their safety and the violence is followed by silence. As Pinter states, “Communication is too alarming. To enter into someone else’s life is too frightening, to disclose to others the poverty within us is too fearsome a possibility.” (*Peopled Wound*, 47)
Acknowledgment

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Francoise Monnoyer Broitman, whose great encouragement, advice and support enabled me to accomplish this dissertation.

I would also like to thank my friend Erin Mohajerin for her great help and finally my deepest gratitude goes to my family, my mother and my father, for their love and great help. Accomplishing this dissertation would not have been possible without their support.
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