

The Development of the Concept of 'Intrusion' in The Early Plays of Harold Pinter

Dr. Abdulhafeth Ali Khrisat Dr. Khalid Al-Udayli*

Abstract

This paper aims to emphasize Pinter's use of the concept of 'intrusion' in his early plays, *The Birthday Party*, *The Dumbwaiter*, *The Room*, *The Caretaker*, *The Collection* and *The Homecoming*. As the study shows, the room in Pinter's plays represents the microcosm; whereas the macrocosm is represented by all physical and psychological effects that come from the world outside the room. The study also focuses on Pinter's skilful use of 'intrusion' as a device that destroys as well as restores human relationships. In *The Room*, for instance, the 'intrusion' of Mr. and Mrs. Sands and the Negro is used as a destructive force that brings about an end to the relationship between Rose and her husband, Bert Hudd. But the 'intrusion' by Davies stabilizes and perhaps develops the relationship of Mick and Aston in *The Caretaker*.

*Dept. of English, Faculty of Arts, Mu'tah University.

The plays of Harold Pinter with their characteristics of menace, stripped-language and meaningful pauses have been so influential in theater all over the world. They present a set of varied themes and subject matter. But his early plays are preoccupied with the concept of “intrusion,” describing an interference in or an invasion of a physical structure and/or a human relationship. They also demonstrate both uses of the concept of ‘intrusion’ to fit the development of the themes and subject matter he has explored in *The Birthday Party*, *The Dumbwaiter*, *The Room*, *The Caretaker*, *The Collection* and *The Homecoming*.

His early plays are usually set in a single room, “a safe haven, menaced by an intrusion from the cold outside world” (Esslin 79). The occupants of the rooms are threatened by unknown outside forces. But, each play explores new characters and situations. *The Room* (1957) displays many of the elements that would characterize Pinter’s later plays- namely a room; a commonplace situation gradually turns into a menace and mystery through various forms of intrusions.

Pinter’s characters are isolated. They live in closed rooms. They keep to themselves as if they are afraid to go outside their womb-like environment, afraid to be exposed to the world outside. But none of them, it seems, is safe from intrusion: each character is more vulnerable than the other. Bernard Dukore has rightly pointed out that “Pinter paints a variety of pictures of modern man beaten down by the world around him, of man reduced and of man in the process of being reduced to cipher in the vast social structure. He shows people reduced to nonentities, and he shows people fighting in vain against being so reduced” (47).

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the aforementioned dual use of macrocosmic intrusion on the microcosmic human relationship. Pinter has craftily developed this dramatic pattern to fit the thematic shift in the plays to be examined in this analysis. In studying the thematic change of Pinter’s plays, Gale (1971) remarks that “when Pinter wrote *The Room* in 1957 he was interested in exploring the effect of fear, of physical menace, on an individual.” By the time he completed his play, the subject of his works has become a “psychological need” (188). Pinter has achieved this shift in subject matter by applying the dramatic technique of macrocosmic intrusion on the microcosmic character.

Needless to say that the technique adopted is suitable for his themes and proved to be more effective on stage than conventional dramaturgy.

The constant use of the room represents the microcosm, whereas the macrocosm is represented by all the physical and psychological effects that come from the world outside the room. The microcosmic human relationship is stable or unstable, satisfactory or unsatisfactory. A macrocosmic intrusion will either destroy or reinforce microcosmic situation: A dramatic presentation revealing the destruction of the satisfactory relationship between Rose and her husband, Bert Hudd, occurred by the intrusion of Mr. and Mrs. Sands and the Negro in *The Room*. Another intrusion made by Davies stabilizes and perhaps develops the relationship of Mick and Aston in *The Caretaker* as will be discussed later. Reinforcing, circular intrusions affect the characters in *The Collection*. *The Homecoming* demonstrates a positive intrusion by Teddy and Ruth on the other characters in the play.

In *The Birthday Party* (1958), the first of Pinter's full-length plays to be performed, two strange agents, MacCann and Goldberg intrude upon the life of Stanely who has found a refuge in a lodging house in a seaside town, owned by Meg and Petey. MacCann and Goldberg reduce Stanley to a speechless animal by their 'special treatment'. Goldberg is accurate when he says to Stanely "you're dead. You can't live, you can't think, you can't love, you're dead" (II, p.62). The play which appears to be about the typical life-style of Meg and Petey's house turns out to be about some unusual intrusion into it.

Being committed to his vision, Pinter sets the play in a living room. The action in *The Birthday Party* opens with a small talk between Meg and Petey, an old couple in their sixties:

Meg: Is that you, Petey?

Pause.

Petey, is that you?

Pause.

Petey?

Petey: Yes, it's me.

Petey: What?

Meg: Is that you?

Petey: Yes, it's me.

Meg: What? (Her face appears at the hatch.) Are you back?

Petey: Yes.

Meg: I've got your cornflakes ready. (She disappears and reappears.) Here's your cornflakes. (He rises and takes the plate from her, sits at the table, props up the paper and begins to eat. Meg enters by the kitchen door.)

Are they nice?

Petey: Very nice.

Meg: I thought they'd be nice. (She sits at the table.) You got your paper?

Petey: yes (I, 19).

This dialogue proves Pinter's concern about language as a device that conceals rather than communicates ideas. Norrick and Baker (1995) are also of the view that "Pinter is perceptive about and sympathetic to our inability to communicate genuinely, and this comes through his concern with empty dialogue – the games people play to avoid straight talk about their relationships and problems" (256).¹

Moreover, the intrusion of MacCann and Goldberg is employed as a destructive force that reduces Stanley to a cipher by the end of Act III. When Goldberg asks Stanley about his opinion of "such a prospect" (p.94), Stanley responds with nonsense and meaningless sounds that reveal his psychological condition. But Goldberg and MacCann insist on Stanley to say something while they are watching him break down: "He [Stanley] concentrates. His head lowers, his chin draws into his chest, he crouches." (p. 94). Thus Stanley vanishes from the old couple's life. The old couple, Meg and Petey are reborn.

Pinter's *The Dumbwaiter* offers the audience another example of the use of "intrusion" as a destructive force. Two hired killers, Gus and Ben, wait in a basement, to carry out the instructions to do their job. When Gus leaves to go to the lavatory for the last time, an intrusion of some sort comes from the outside. In this play, it is through a speaking tube that Ben receives an order to end Gus's life. Gus returns to find Ben's gun

pointed at him. Hall (2001) confirms that “underneath the confrontation, hidden in the enigmas of the back stories of his [Pinter’s] plays, there is always a perfectly credible and recognizable pattern of human behavior” (145). Gus and Ben are recruited to perform the act of killing. However, Gus is unhappy because he always keeps raising questions about the whole dilemma that eventually led to his silence, ‘death’; an act which reveals the ugly side of human behavior.

Pinter’s *The Room* is a play primarily concerned with Rose’s unsuccessful attempt to maintain a wanted psychological equilibrium derived from living in her room. The effect of fear on her is sustained throughout the play by a physical intrusion from the macrocosmic world by Mr. and Mrs. Sands and Riley’s psychological intrusion. The physical intrusion symbolizes a threat to her - the loss of her room, and thus, her status quo. Her tragic end is gradually developed and symbolized by the intrusion of Riley, the Negro. Pinter makes the spectators realize the significance of the room to Rose by providing a comparative description of the room and the outside world. Her room is warm, bright, comfortable and secure, whereas the world outside is cold, dark, and hostile. This kind of dramatic incongruity makes the audience realize the significance of the inherent threat from the door, the sole communicative link with macrocosm. When this preparatory step is achieved, the effect of the intrusion by Mr. and Mrs. Sands on Rose easily reveals a serious threat to her, and provides a second step of the climactic intrusion of Riley. As her husband, Bert, reenters the room, he speaks for the first time calling the Negro “Lice” and smashes his head. The play ends not only with the destruction of Riley but it also brings about an end to the relationship between Bert and Rose.

Martin Esslin (1970), accurately describing the effect of the people standing at the door, writes: “So subtly has Pinter created the atmosphere of menace that surrounds the room, of the hostility of the cold world outside it, that the mere presence of people on the landing -an ordinary enough occurrence- strikes not only Rose but the audience as well with a veritable shock: with such simple means has *coup de theatre* of great impact been produced” (59). Pinter has cleverly focused attention on the door:

... She [Rose] stands and listens, goes to the fire, bends, lights the fire and warms her hands. She stands and looks about the room. She looks at the window and listens, Goes quickly to the window, stops and straightens the curtains. She comes to the center of the room, and looks towards the door. She goes to the bed, puts on a shawl, goes to the sink, takes a bin from under the sink, goes to the door and opens it. (110-11, our emphasis)

The door plays a significant role in Rose's life. It is a safe and protective means for her from the outside dangers. Behind this door, the room and the characters inside that room are very secure: she fastens it with a pin. Before opening the door, she has to take precautions: putting on a shawl, taking a pin and getting ready for some unexpected happening, some kind of danger or mystery. When she opens the door she becomes frightened:

Rose: Oh!

Mr. And Mrs. Sands are disclosed on the landing.

Mrs. Sands: So sorry. We didn't mean to give you a fright. We've just come up the stairs.(111)

Undoubtedly, Pinter emphasizes the conflict between the character and the outside world. In *The Room*, this kind of sudden confrontation with people from the outside increases the dramatic intensity in this play. When Mrs. Sands tells Rose that "I felt a bit of damp when we were in the basement just now". She frightenedly asks "you were in the basement?" (p.115) She further reveals her fear of a menace from the basement:

Mrs. Sands: You haven't been here all that long, have you?

Rose: I was just wondering whether anyone was living down there now.

Mrs. Sands: Yes. A man.
Rose: A man!
Mrs. Sands: Yes.
Rose: One man?
Mrs. Sands: Yes, there was a bloke down there, all right. (116)

In fact, the presence of a feared man in the basement is soon confirmed by Mr. Kidd. He tells her that the unwelcomed intruder has been dwelling in the basement, a place of negative connotations associated with hostility. Kidd tells her of the intruder's insistence on seeing her in her husband's absence. When Rose realizes that she cannot avoid seeing him, she agrees to a meeting. The man, black and blind, enters and looks around the room. The spectators are now able to visually confirm his mysterious qualities.

The fact that the intruder knows her well is evidenced by his calling her "Sal", "a name which she doesn't deny but obviously doesn't like to hear" (Gale. 28). The audience can assume that the name is from her past. The intruder asks her to come with him. The dramatic effect is increased by her reply "It's late" (p.124). Why is it too late for her to "come home" with him? Does it imply that they have lived together before? Whatever the theme and the subject matter of *The Room* are whether death, uncertainty, or the difficulty of sustaining a constant stable human relationship, the concept of "intrusion" in the play serves to end the play tragically.

The difference between *The Room* and *The Caretaker* is marked by the fact that the characters of *The Room* prove to be powerless in their attempts to defy macrocosmic intrusion which finally destroys their relationship, whereas the microcosmic characters in *The Caretaker* prove to be powerful in stabilizing and developing their human relationship.

In *The Caretaker*, the thematic shift is obviously marked. Pinter himself has said about the play that "it was about love...when I equated love with 'need' a certain pattern fell into place".(Gale. 89). Whereas the macrocosmic intrusion on the characters of *The Room* produces a

psychological menace, its effect in *The Caretaker* gives more impact due to the playwright's new dramatic pattern.

Most critics maintain that Davies' intrusion produces a menace to the current stable relationship between Aston and Mick until they finally succeed in dismissing him from the room to enable them to reunite. A psychological approach to the play reveals that their relationship has not yet been completely stabilized when the intrusion occurs. When he brings Davies home, Aston asks him to live in his room, and offers him the job of a caretaker, dissatisfaction in terms of his relationship with his brother is indicated. Esslin states, "it is clear that Aston is happy to have someone to look after" (p.98).

Moreover, Aston's feeling of insecurity and social isolation resulting from his being rejected by most people, including his own mother, may account for his sympathy with Davies, but still indicates an unstable psychological state. It is difficult to be certain of any character's statement in Pinter's plays; but if Davies' statement "I was brought here" is true, it is a further proof of this psychological instability (II.43). Mick's love for his brother, Aston, is evident, but he is dissatisfied with Aston's way of thinking. The breakage of the statue of Buddha, Aston's most favorite possession in the room, is an indication of his ambiguous feelings. It seems very necessary for them to have this homeless, naive tramp to be the "battlefield" of their fraternal conflict to end their unconscious conflict and establish a more satisfactory relationship than before. But, this is one side of the problem of the play. On the other side lies Davies' problem. Both Mick and Aston become a source of menace to Davies' new situation in which he tries to establish his identity.

In his *Understanding Pinter*, Ronald Knowles (1995) hints at the moral sense that intervenes Pinter's Plays. He says that "Davies is inevitably seen as much, if not more, a victim of circumstances than of his own limitations" (p.60).² One needs only to recall how often Aston awakens Davies in the middle of the night to stop the old man's noises which are common to such a tired, worried, hopeless, and old individual. Aston seems ready to offer Davies some physical objects such as a pair of shoes, clothing, and a second-hand bag. But he doesn't seem to be aware of the old man's need for physical and psychological comfort. He is even ready to expose Davies to cold, rainy weather.

Davies: Yes, but listen, you don't know what I'm telling you. That bloody rain, man, come right in on my head. Spoils my sleep. I could catch my death of cold with it, with that draught. That's all I'm saying. Just shut that window and no one's going to catch any colds, that's all I'm saying. (II.62, our emphasis).

One may raise the question: Is the exposition to the cold, rainy weather and that "bloody rain, man, come right in" on Davies' head a kind of intrusion? Of course, unaware of Davies' deteriorating psychological condition, Aston's suggestion to "sleep the other way round" (II.62) is an indication of the confrontation between Aston and the "supposed caretaker".

Furthermore, Davies goes to Mick complaining that "Couple of week ago . . . he sat there, he give me a long chat . . . about a couple of weeks ago. A long chat he give me. Since then he ain't said hardly a word." (III.68) This means that he is being completely isolated by Aston. Again, if Davies' indication of the "couple week ago" is certain, it will be obvious that Aston has talked with him only for the first day since the play covers a two-week time span. Thus, this kind of disrespectful isolation is very dangerous on a suffering individual as Davies who is aware of his social inferiority, ill-treatment by his employers and the customers in such places as the cafes where he is treated "like dirt". The loss of his social identity is furthered by outside intrusions, the threat of physical attacks: "I've had a few attacks." (I.18).

In addition to Aston's menace, Mick is a permanent, violent attacker on Davies. Pinter concentrates much on Mick's violent action in the play. It is ironic that Aston saves Davies from a physical attack in the cafe' and brings him to his room where he is subjected to an even more violent attack by Mick. Davies is considered to be an opportunist. Sometimes, the motive for establishing an identity as that of Davies is so uncontrollable that it compels the individual to commit anti-human acts.³ But this is not the case with Davies. If this fact is taken into consideration, then

Davies' being an opportunist, turning from Aston to Mick, is acceptable.

In *The Collection*, the dissatisfaction of the current relationship between each pair of characters is marked even in the beginning of the play. James ignores Stella's questions:

Stella: I'm going.

(pause)

Aren't you coming in today?

James: No. (122)

Harry also reveals his dissatisfaction with his young mate, Bill:

Harry: It's that stair rod. I thought you said you were going to fix it.

Bill: I did fix it.

Harry: Well, you didn't fix it very well. (p.123)

This kind of unstable relationship between each pair of characters is resolved at the end of the play by the effect of circular intrusions. James' intrusion into the relationship between Harry and Bill occurs when twice he forces his way into Bill's room trying to verify the story of Bill's intrusion into Stella's room in Leeds. Harry's intrusion into James' apartment serves to verify the same story. Although the play is filled with ambiguities and uncertainties with regards to the alleged meeting between Bill and Stella, both couples' relationships are supposedly stabilized. James returns to his wife intending to take her on a long holiday. The return to their emotional relationship is marked by Pinter's last lines of the play: "Stella looks at him, neither confirming nor denying. Her face is friendly, sympathetic." (p.157) This situation reflects much difference from their earlier views of each other: "Stella: . . . - he's just not been very well lately." (p.148) "James: My wife's not been very well lately, actually."(p.155)

The Homecoming is one of Pinter's early significant plays. The play is grounded in an urban sitting room. It sharply focuses on the significance of sex as a psychological need in human relationships. The unmet sexual needs account for the deterioration of the family relationship between Teddy and Ruth. Unexpectedly, Teddy and Ruth's return home

provokes a complex kind of reaction but it is in no way marked by the sentiments related to the welcome home party which the title of the play implies. Max's family relationships are destroyed by the death of Jessie who represents the mother-whore image.⁴ Her death turns the family into a mess. This is reflected in the beginning of the play when Max, the boss, asks Lenny, his son, about the scissors, but receives a brutally disrespectful reply: "Why don't you shut up, you daft prat?"(p.7). This kind of shocking behavior again is repeated through the intrusion of Ruth, Teddy's wife, who gradually replaces the mother-whore figure in the family. Ruth, the only female character in the play, finds herself in the all-male household. The family's desire for a woman who would satisfy their needs is revealed by Max's speech to Sam in the first act:

Max: When you find the right girl,
Sam, let your family know, don't forget,
we'll give you a number one send-off. I
promise you. You can bring her to live
here; she can keep us all happy. (p.15)

Undoubtedly, when Max sees Ruth for the first time he considers her to be a prostitute. He expresses his feelings in the first person: "I've never had a whore under this roof before. Ever since your mother died. My word of honor."(p.42). He even asks Teddy to dismiss her from his house: "Take that disease away from me. Get her away from me."(p.42). But as he realizes that she is his daughter-in-law with three children, his attitude toward Ruth and his son changes:

Max: Miss.
(Ruth walks towards him).
Ruth: Yes?
(He looks at her).
Max: You a mother?
Ruth: Yes.
Max: How many you got?
Ruth: Three.
(He turns to Teddy).
Max: All yours. Ted?

(Pause).

Teddy, why don't we have a nice cuddle
and kiss, eh?

Like the old days? What about a nice
cuddle and kiss,
eh? (p.43)

Max begins to equate Ruth unconsciously with his image of Jessie. He speaks in terms of the family as a whole: "Well, it's a long time since the whole family was together, eh? If only your mother was alive." The mother image is gradually accompanied with sexual feeling: "Mind you, she's a lovely girl. A beautiful woman" (p. 45). When his sons make sexual advances toward Ruth in his presence, the mother-whore image is completed. Max begins to think of asking Ruth to stay at home: "Perhaps we will keep her here." (p.70) Kenneth (1994) rightly remarks that "'the homecoming' more rightly refers to her [Ruth] than to her husband" (117). At the end of the play, Ruth has already established her position in the family. This is verified by the boss of the family:

Since poor Jessie died, eh, Sam? We
haven't had a woman in the house. Not one.
Inside this house. And I'll tell you why.
Because their mother's image was so dear any
other woman would have . . . tarnished it. But
you. Ruth . . . you're not only lovely and
beautiful, but you're kin. You're kith. You
belong here. (p.75)

The family and Ruth both have psychological needs to be fulfilled. Many clues in the play indicate that Ruth's emotional needs are not met by her husband. It is this mutual need, created by macrocosmic intrusion - Ruth and Teddy's intrusion- which will stabilize the psychological situation of both parties. Therefore, the purpose of the intrusion in this play is obviously very different from the hostile intrusion in *The Room*, Pinter's first play.

In studying Pinter's early plays: *The Birthday Party*, *The Dumbwaiter*, *The Room*, *The Caretaker*, *The Collection*, and *The Homecoming*, a thematic change can be noticed. While he emphasizes

the effect of physical and psychological menaces on his characters in *The Room*, he shifts to emphasize the human psychological needs of other characters in *The Dumbwaiter*, and *The Birthday Party*. He has created a dramatic pattern in *The Room* in which the physical and the psychological menaces are produced by macrocosmic intrusion which ends the drama tragically by destroying his characters' human relationships. Later on, in *The Caretaker* and *The Collection*, Pinter has developed this pattern to make macrocosmic 'intrusions' positive factors to stabilize the human conditions of his characters whose relationships are based on the fulfillment of their psychological needs. In *The Homecoming*, the macrocosmic intrusion serves to stabilize unsatisfactory human relationships on the basis of mutual fulfillment of his characters' emotional needs. Therefore, changes in the thematic development of Pinter's works are paralleled by changes in the use of macrocosmic intrusions in his aforementioned plays.

Notes

1. For more details on Pinter's use of language as a subject matter in drama, see Kennedy (1975).
2. Ondul (2000) states: "Pinter sees man's age as an old strife. However, he also sees that time has passed. Now, man is in such a condition that he no longer can name his victimizer." Therefore, there is always a feeling of fear that comes from the unknown, outside forces. Man lives in his own world and feels terrified by the external forces or intrusions. Davies in *The Caretaker* accepts being victimized without ever-caring to know the victimizer who evolved from the cosmos.
3. On the moral approach in Pinter's plays, see Hyes (1992).
4. Esslin sees that the mother image pervades the play. At least, as he remarks, one of the sons sees the mother as a sexual object, referring to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. For a detailed discussion, see Scott, ed. (1992): 172-78.

Works Cited

- Dukore, Bernard. (1962) "The Theater of Harold Pinter", *The Tulane Drama Review*, vol.6, pp 43-54.
- Esslin, Martin. (1992) "A Case for *The Homecoming*." In Michael Scott, ed., *Harold Pinter: The Birthday Party, The Caretaker & The Homecoming*. McMillan Co., London, pp. 172-178.
- _____. (1970) *The People Wound: The Work of Harold Pinter*. New York: Doubleday & Co.
- _____. (1984) *Pinter: The playwright*, New York. A Methuen Paperback.
- Gale, S. H. (1971) "Thematic Changes in the Stage Plays of Harold Pinter, 1957-1967." (a published Ph. D. dissertation, Dept. of English, University of Southern California), Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms.
- Hall, Peter. (2001) "Directing Harold Pinter's Plays". In *Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*. Cambridge University Press. London: 44-61.
- Hynes, Joseph (1992) "Pinter and Morality" *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Autumn, vol. 4, pp. 740-753.
- Kennedy, Andrew K. (1975) *Six Dramatists in Search of a Language*. Cambridge University Press, London.
- Kenneth, Bernard. (1994) "Pinter's *The Homecoming*." *Explicator* vol. 52 no. 2, pp. 116-120.
- Knowles, Ronald. (1995) *Understanding Harold Pinter*. University of South Carolina Press.
- Ondul, Selda. (2000) "The Hero as the Victim in Harold Pinter's Plays." <http://members.tripod.com/~warlight/selda.html>
- Pinter, Harold. (1976) *Plays: One, The Birthday Party, The Room, The Dumb Waiter, A Slight Ache, A Night Out*, Eyre Methuen Ltd, London.
- _____. (1977) *Plays: Two, The Caretaker, The Collection, The Lover, Night School, The Dwarfs* Eyre Methuen. Ltd, London.
- _____.(1966) *The Homecoming*. New York: Grave Press, Inc.

Received 29/1/2004