THE DRAMATIC WORLD OF HAROLD PINTER
The dramatic world of Harold Pinter: its basis in ritual

Introduction

In art, in myth, and in ritual
man symbolizes his position of mystery
vis-à-vis the universe.¹

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. Despite the vivid naturalism of his characters' conversations, they behave very often more like figures in a dream than people with whom one can easily identify, at least on superficial levels.

Up to a point, Pinter himself is an excellent if reluctant guide to his mysterious dramatic world. "If you press me for a definition, I'd say that what goes on in my plays is realistic, but what I'm doing is not realism."² Here the playwright points to what his audience has so often sensed as distinctive in his style: its mixture of the real and the sur-
real, its exact portrayal of life on the surface, and its pow­erful evocation of that life which lies beneath the surface. His plays, Pinter suggests, are about “the weasel under the cocktail cabinet.”

Ominous undercurrents lurk, for example, beneath the most mundane exchanges over the breakfast table of the lower-class Meg and Petey in The Birthday Party or the upper-class Flora and Edward in A Slight Ache.

Meg: Is that you, Petey?
Pause.
Petey, is that you?
Pause.
Petey?
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.⁴

Flora: Have you noticed the honeysuckle this morning?
Edward: The what?
Flora: The honeysuckle.
Edward: Honeysuckle? Where?
Flora: By the backgate, Edward.
Edward: Is that honeysuckle? I thought it was convol­vulus, or something.
FLORA: But you know it's honeysuckle.
EDWARD: I tell you I thought it was convolvulus.

Pause.

FLORA: It's in wonderful flower.
EDWARD: I must look.\textsuperscript{5}

The now famous Pinter pause, which punctuates the breakfast conversations of these two couples, heightens the effect of noncommunication which Pinter's observant ear records and his pen so readily and amusingly orchestrates, whether the focus be cornflakes or honeysuckle. The repetitions and lack of logic of ordinary conversation that the tightly knit realistic play so rarely includes are carefully woven into the texture of Pinter's dramatic world and give it its distinctive combination of the banal and the strange.

As the Pinter dialogue continues, however, the weasel gradually emerges from under the cocktail cabinet. Invariably the trivia of the characters' lives fails to save them from the sacrificial acts which are at the center of the action. At the end of \textit{The Birthday Party} Meg and Petey still converse over the breakfast table, but the play has revolved around the sacrifice of Meg's beloved boarding house guest Stanley who has been "taken away." At the end of \textit{A Slight Ache}, Flora continues to discuss the flowers in her garden, but she now addresses the silent matchseller who has emerged from his threatening position at the back gate to usurp her husband's position in his home.

But 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 in the manner of an Ibsen. Although Goldberg and McCann take Stanley away in \textit{The Birthday Party}, we never know why or whose orders they act upon. The absurd demands of the voice in \textit{The Dumb Waiter}, are followed by the frightened killers, Gus and Ben; but the source of the orders is nameless. In \textit{The}
Homecoming, Ruth decides to make her home with her husband's family rather than with her husband and children, but we are given no explicit reason for her choice.

An audience unused to unresolved mystery in its drama is naturally baffled and threatened by such withholding of information. Some of his critics have accused Pinter of willful mystification, skipping every other line of a normal conversation, or deliberately keeping the audience in the dark. Others have found his characters too grotesque or special to be relevant. "The more acute the experience the less articulate its expression," is Pinter's own defense of his technique. The playwright does not seek to mystify or puzzle his audience; he merely explores experience at levels which are mysterious and which preclude the kind of clear explanation of life which the tradition of the well-made play has often delivered in the form of thesis or message. Not interested in the political concerns of such contemporaries as Osborne or Wesker, Pinter prefers to explore his characters as they appear "at the extreme edge of their living, where they are living pretty much alone." As Martin Esslin suggests, Pinter's exploration of that in life which is not easily verifiable leads him back to such essentials in drama as "the suspense created by the elementary ingredients of pure, pre-literary theatre; a stage, two people, a door; a poetic image of an undefined fear and expectation."

Esslin's placement of the playwright among the poetic absurdist offers an important clue to an understanding of Pinter's dramatic world. The absurdist dramatists, he suggests, are no longer telling stories but exploring states of being and revealing patterns. In such plays one is no longer interested in what is transpiring in the present: one is concerned, rather, with the nature of the unfolding pattern or poetic image. The theatre of the absurd, writes Esslin, demands a response similar to that given to abstract painting, sculpture, or poetry. It grips the spectator "both on
the level of the archetypal image that strikes chords in the deepest layers of the mind and on the level of a highly intellectual interpretive effort."9

Esslin sees the shift from the well-made play to the absurdist poetic play as a reflection of man's sense of the absurdity of existence, his feeling of existential anguish. He defines the absurdist technique as existentialist in form as well as in content—a general breaking up of a rational order of event, character, and setting to better reflect the world as it is perceived.10 Walter Kerr goes a step farther and reserves the existentialist technique for Pinter alone. Only Pinter, he insists, "does not simply content himself with restating a handful of existential themes inside familiar forms of playmaking. He remakes the play altogether so that it will function according to existential principle."11

According to Kerr, even Samuel Beckett presents his images as concept, whereas Pinter involves us in a Kafka-esque world of anxiety—in a concrete world of present realities in which the pattern eludes and involves us.12 While we seek the conceptual "nub" in a Beckett play, in the world of Pinter's drama "we give existence free rein, accept it as primary, refrain from demanding that it answer our questions, grant it the mystery of not yet having named itself."13

At the same time, however, that Pinter's art reflects the mysterious universe as he perceives it, it also attempts to approach the mystery that it reflects. Kerr's irritation with Pinter when the writer seems to betray "a belief in essential nature"14 reveals the critic's bias rather than the playwright's weakness. Though Pinter is distinctly a poetic rather than a problem-solving playwright, he is by his own proud admission in large part a traditionalist. Despite his lack of certain kinds of explicit information about his characters and plot, in form Pinter is not as far from the well-made play of Ibsen as many of his fellow absurdists; he is fond of curtain lines and curtains, and he is ultimately
concerned with the shape both of words and of his entire
dramatic world. "For me everything has to do with shape,
structure, and over-all unity," Pinter noted in an inter-
view—a statement which does not contradict his assertion
that his creative process is not conceptual, that he follows
his characters whither they lead him.

The point is that Pinter's characters lead him continu­
ally to the very rhythmic structures which have informed
great dramatic works since drama's origin in primitive
ritual. Rather than focusing on lack of communication,
Pinter concerns himself with the way people fail to avoid
that communication from which they wish to run. While
other absurdist writers often allow their characters to suc­
cceed in avoiding communication, Pinter's dramatic world
is one of action in the old Aristotelian sense of the word.
The playwright himself is aware of the movement toward
communication in his work and its dramatic finality.

We have heard many times that tired, grimy phrase, "failure
of communication," and this phrase has been fixed to my
work consistently. I believe the contrary. I think that we com­
municate only too well in our silence, in what is unsaid, and
that what takes place is continual evasion, desperate rear­
guard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves. I'm not
suggesting that no character in a play can ever say what in
fact he means. Not at all. I have found that there invariably
does come a moment when this happens, where he says some­
thing, perhaps, which he has never said before. And where
this happens, what he says is irrevocable, and can never be
taken back.

Pinter goes on to describe his own struggle with com­
munication and the nature of that territory he chooses to
explore. Words, he says, both please and discourage him,
almost to the point of nausea. The bulk of them so often
become "a stale dead terminology" that it is very easy to be
overcome by paralysis. "But if it is possible to confront this
nausea, to follow it to its hilt and move through it, then
it is possible to say that something has occurred, that some­thing has even been achieved."\textsuperscript{18}

Language, under these conditions, is a highly ambiguous commerce. So often, below the words spoken, is the thing known and unspoken. 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 there lies a territory which is not only worthy of exploration but which it is compulsory to explore. You and I, the charac­ters which grow on a page, most of the time we're inexpres­sive, giving little away, unreliable, elusive, evasive, obstruc­tive, unwilling. But it's out of these attributes that a language arises. A language, I repeat, where, underneath what is said, another thing is being said.\textsuperscript{19}

The distinction between problem and mystery is a helpful one for an approach to the hidden language and name­less weasel of Pinter's drama. In mystery, the objective and the subjective merge. While man confronts problems in life, he is a part of life's mysteries. In Pinter's one-act play, \textit{A Slight Ache}, Edward puzzles over a matchseller who hovers continually at his back gate. When he invites the matchseller in, the middle-aged Englishman comes to feel a strange kinship with him: problem gives way to mystery as Edward realizes his own involvement in the action. The matchseller is never realistically identified. He doesn't speak a single word in the entire play. Still, the play's ac­tion reveals Edward approaching the stranger and finally in absolute imitation exchanging places with him. Like the savage who realizes that "a breach of alienation between himself and the universe" can be only intermittently closed, "not closed in actuality, but mimetically,"\textsuperscript{20} Edward approaches the matchseller and assumes his role. Only in this way can he approach the mysterious depths in himself which he has feared and now is forced to accept.

If man may close the gap between himself and the mys-
terious universe only mimetically, not actually, through ritual, myth, and art, Pinter has availed himself of all three methods of imitation in his drama. Just as the primitive rites of ancient religions work their way into the structure of art, in drama as notably as in painting and sculpture, ritual becomes part of Pinter's dramatic world, in which it is used for the playwright's own tragi-comic purposes.

A reading of Pinter's plays in the light of the ritual rhythms which structure them involves an understanding of two distinct kinds of rituals which the playwright sets in counterpoint with each other. On the one hand, the plays abound in those daily habitual activities which have become formalized as ritual and have tended to become empty of meaning, an automatic way of coping with life. These automatic and meaningless activities contrast in the plays with echoes of sacred sacrificial rites which are loaded with meaning and force the characters into an awareness of life from which their daily activities have helped to protect them. My contention is that beneath the daily secular rituals which Pinter weaves into the texture of his plays—"the taking of a toast and tea"—beat the rhythms of ancient fertility rites, which form a significant counterpoint to the surface rituals of the plays and which often lend the dramas their shape and structure.

John Russell Brown notes Pinter's concern with secular, everyday ceremonies of social activity that have become formalized or frozen into patterns of social behavior. He remarks on Pinter's continued interest in such rituals, "from a birthday party to a homecoming, through seeking living space, taking possession, or taking 'care' of a room, to taking breakfast or lunch, taking orders, fulfilling routines, visiting, collecting, and so on." Hugh Nelson also notes the revelation of family stress in The Homecoming through "the small rituals of family living: breakfast, tea, dusting, opening and closing windows."
The opening of Pinter's first one-act play, *The Room*, offers an excellent example of the author's typical use of such daily rituals.

* Bert is at the table, wearing a cap, a magazine propped in front of him. Rose is at the stove.  

  Rose: Here you are. This'll keep the cold out.  
  She places bacon and eggs on a plate, turns off the gas and takes the plate to the table.  
  It's very cold out, I can tell you. It's murder.  
  She returns to the stove and puts water from the kettle into the teapot, turns off the gas and brings the teapot to the table, pours salt and sauce on the plate and cuts two slices of bread. Bert begins to eat.  
  That's right. You eat that. You'll need it. You can feel it in here. Still, the room keeps warm. It's better than the basement, anyway.  
  She butters the bread.  
  I don't know how they live down there. It's asking for trouble. Go on. Eat it up. It'll do you good.  
  She goes to the sink, wipes a cup and saucer and brings them to the table.  
  If you want to go out you might as well have something inside you. Because you'll feel it when you get out.  
  She pours milk into the cup.  
  Just now I looked out of the window. It was enough for me. There wasn't a soul about. Can you hear the wind?  
  She sits in the rocking-chair.  
  I've never seen who it is. Who is it? Who lives down there? I'll have to ask. I mean, you might as well know, Bert. But whoever it is, it can't be too cozy.  
  Pause.  
  I think it's changed hands since I was last there. I didn't see who moved in then. I mean the first time it was taken.  
  Pause.  
  Anyway, I think they've gone now.  
  Pause.  
  But I think someone else has gone in now. I wouldn't like to live in that basement. Did you ever see the walls? They were running. This is all right for me. Go on, Bert. Have a bit more bread.
She goes to the table and cuts a slice of bread.
I'll have some cocoa on when you come back.
She goes to the window and settles the curtain.
No, this room's all right for me. I mean, you know where you are. When it's cold, for instance.24

As Rose continues her virtual monologue, the breakfast ritual becomes a desperate attempt on her part to sustain her life with her husband, to protect them both from all that is outside the room, whether it be the weather, the dangerous environment of the basement, or the possible strangers—"foreigners"—who may inhabit it. The repetitiveness of the dialogue, its constant references to the warmth of the room and the dangers without, suggest an unspoken fear of some unnamed danger.

As in the rest of Pinter's dramatic world, the rituals of daily life are seen at one and the same time as comic and ineffectual, and as tragic and pathetic. Their emptiness is exposed with all the intellectualty of Ionesco's kind of irony, but the effort to sustain them is explored with all the sympathy of Beckett for his two Godot clowns, desperately improvising their routines in a void. But in The Room, as in all Pinter's dramas, the secular ritual is set in tension with a more primitive religious rite. The "foreigner" does emerge from the basement. He is killed by Rose's returning husband, and Rose is stricken blind. Action occurs. The secular rituals are unable to protect Rose from the sacrificial rite that climaxes the play and destroys forever the security of the room.

At the center of the action of most Pinter plays is the pharmakos, or scapegoat, of ancient ritual and tragedy, the victim whose destruction serves in a special way to re-establish certain basic relationships in the family or community. Hugh Nelson considers Teddy, the returning son in The Homecoming, as such a victim. "The ostensible hero is transformed," he writes, "into a pharmakos, or scapegoat, a transformation with which we are familiar from Pinter's earlier plays."25 Indeed, Nelson's reading of The
Homecoming suggests his understanding of Pinter's use of secular daily rituals and sacred primitive ones in counterpoint as he describes how the veneer of civilization in that drama gives way to the primitive elements below the surface. He writes:

The concept of family which Max and Lenny have is clearly a collage of empty clichés but beneath the verbal gloss, as beneath a politician's pancreas, what we see in the attitudes and response of the characters and in their relationships to each other is a reality which is prehistoric and primitive, a world where appetite reigns.²⁶

It is possible, of course, to explore the ritual basis of almost any work of dramatic art, and of much nondramatic art as well. The school of "myth critics," which has arisen in modern times and followed in the footsteps of James Frazer and the Cambridge school of anthropologists, has explored the close connection between ritual, myth, and art.

With Jane E. Harrison's publication of Themis in 1912, the theory of the Cambridge anthropologists that ritual precedes myth, that myths indeed are verbalizations of rituals, became generally available.²⁷ The theory was later endorsed by the influential philosopher Ernst Cassirer, who believed that "man acts first and rationalizes his conduct later."²⁸ Although definitions of myth vary widely and debate rages amid anthropologists and the recent breed of literary anthropologists as to whether ritual or myth came first, Clyde Kluckhohn's dismissal of the debate as meaningless seems most clarifying. Stress should rather be put, writes this renowned anthropologist, on "the intricate interdependence of myth (which is one form of ideology) with ritual and many other forms of behavior."²⁹ Kluckhohn goes on to explain:

Those realms of behavior and of experience which man finds beyond rational and technological control he feels are capable of manipulation through symbols. Both myth and rit-
ual are symbolical procedures and are most closely tied together by this, as well as by other, facts. The myth is a system of word symbols, whereas ritual is a system of object and act symbols. Both are symbolic processes for dealing with the same type of situation in the same affective mode.  

Kluckhohn further comments on the common psychological basis of myth and ritual.

Rituals and myths supply, then, fixed points in a world of bewildering change and disappointment. . . . For myth and ritual have a common psychological basis. Ritual is an obsessive repetitive activity—often a symbolic dramatization of the fundamental "needs" of the society, whether "economic," "biological," "social," or "sexual." Mythology is the rationalization of those same needs, whether they are all expressed in overt ceremonial or not.

Those critics concerned with the connections between myth and literature have recognized the inevitable and productive relationships between ritual and myth and the arts. The artist, like the primitive myth-maker, seeks to envision a basic unity in life, to deny death, and to affirm life. He too works through symbols and shares with the primitive myth-maker a desire, albeit often unconscious, to "promote social solidarity as well as solidarity with nature as a whole in time of social crisis."

Like the ritualist and the myth-maker, too, the artist allows the irrational its province. Joseph Campbell writes that myth "is dreamlike and, like dream, a spontaneous product of the psyche; like dream, revelatory of the psyche and hence of the whole nature and destiny of man." The myth critic, following Jung, believes that the primitive still lurks in the most civilized of men who, despite the advances of science, "recreates nightly in his dreams the primordial symbols of ancient myth."

Pinter lends himself to ritual or mythical critical examination more than many of his contemporaries, partly be-
cause he focuses continually on the primitive qualities which lurk beneath the civilized veneer of modern life and erupt into that life, and partly because his determination to confront the mysterious, unsolvable regions of man's existence has led him into the realms of myth and ritual. The playwright disclaims any reading knowledge of anthropology, and his myth-making qualities are not the self-conscious ones of the poet Yeats, who sought to write "not drama, but the ritual of a lost faith." He becomes rather the daytime dreamer who is drawn to the same ritual patterns which Northrop Frye suggests have drawn men through the centuries to deal in similar archetypal patterns with the mystery of our being.

Total literary history moves from the primitive to the sophisticated, and here we glimpse the possibility of seeing literature as a complication of a relatively restricted and simple group of formulas that can be studied in primitive culture. If so, then the search for archetypes is a kind of literary anthropology, concerned with the way that literature is informed by preliterary categories such as ritual, myth, and folk-tale. We next realize that the relation between these categories and literature is by no means purely one of descent, as we find them reappearing in the greatest classics—in fact there seems to be a general tendency on the part of great classics to revert to them. This coincides with a feeling that we have all had; that the study of mediocre works of art, however, energetic, obstinately remains a random and peripheral form of critical experience, whereas the profound masterpiece seems to draw us to a point at which we can see an enormous number of converging patterns of significance. Here we begin to wonder if we cannot see literature, not only as complicating itself in time, but as spread out in conceptual space from some unseen center.

"How myth gets into literature is variously explained by the Jungian racial memory, historical diffusion, or the essential similarity of the human mind everywhere." How ritual and myth get into literature or into Pinter's dramatic world is not a major object of concern in this study, but the
influence of Frazer’s pivotal mythical study, *The Golden Bough*, on modern literature gives some interesting cause for speculation. Whether Pinter is directly familiar with Frazer’s classic, he is by his own admission widely read. The cyclical theory of culture which Frazer’s book propounds has doubtless reached him through such writers as T. S. Eliot and James Joyce, who have made conscious and explicit use of Frazer’s theories and images in their works. The ideas of Frazer, Harrison, and Murray are so much a part of the modern literary consciousness that Pinter could hardly have avoided an awareness of them.

John B. Vickery discusses Frazer’s work as a modern myth on man’s quest for survival, a literary work in its own right, which is actually “less a compendium of facts than a gigantic quest romance couched in the form of objective research.”[^39] Vickery believes that many modern writers have been deeply influenced by Frazer’s work both in subject matter and approach. These writers not only share his focus on the scapegoat figure, and on death and resurrection, but “for them as well as for Frazer, harvesting, lovemaking, bearing the sins of others, and performing the menial deeds of daily life, all reflect in different ways what is taken to be the essence of life.”[^40] That essence, Vickery suggests, is discussed by Frazer, who “mediates between the external and internal worlds of Marx or Darwin and Freud”[^41] and considers the individual and the land “the twin foci of man’s endless battle for a viable existence, themes which have been as inexhaustible for modern literature as they have been imperative for modern life.”[^42]

*The Golden Bough*, then, with its rich storehouse of ritual and mythology, became “the discursive archetype and hence matrix” of twentieth-century literature, according to Vickery, because “it was grounded in the essential realism of anthropological research, informed with the romance quest of an ideal, and controlled by the irony in divine myth and human custom.”[^43] Certainly Frazer’s *Golden
Bough kings offer an excellent metaphorical clue to the ritual sacrifices at the center of Pinter's drama.

Pinter, then, as he consciously or unconsciously traces basic ritual patterns in his dramatic world, is reaching back over the centuries to archaic rhythms which have always dominated drama at its best. He is also treating those rhythms in a highly individual, even unique, way and is moving at the same time in the mainstream of much in modern literature which has already gained the stature of the classic and which is pressingly and seriously relevant to our times.

"If you press me for a definition, I'd say that what goes on in my plays is realistic, but what I'm doing is not realism." What goes on in Pinter's plays is realistic, as he suggests; but if his drama is taken as realism alone, it is bound to appear grotesque. Taken as poetry it begins to make sense as image and pattern. Because the images and patterns of his drama are based in ritual, a study of the dramas' ritual counterpoint may well help to reveal what it is in Pinter's dramatic world that, as he also suggests, is "not realism." If Pinter's drama employs ritual to approach the mysteries of life, one may well in turn approach that drama through an attempt to understand his use of that ritual.