Another Variation on the Theme of *The Golden Bough*: Victim and Victor as One

"And what rough beast, 
it's hour come round at last, 
slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?"\(^1\)

The one-act drama *A Slight Ache* has much in common with Pinter's other comedies of menace—*The Room*, *The Birthday Party*, and *The Dumb Waiter*. Here too the weasel from the first lurks under the cocktail cabinet and emerges in a form both explicit and mysterious. The matchseller who haunts the back gate of Edward and Flora's house in *A Slight Ache* is as concretely described, as realistically present, as the Negro visitor to Rose's room, the Jewish and Irish agents of Monty who descend upon Meg's boarding house, and the voice of the dumb waiter, which makes its demands on the killers in their basement room. Yet the reason for the matchseller's presence in *A Slight Ache* is as mysterious as the appearance of the menacing figures in Pinter's previous plays, and on one level his
identity is left equally obscure. We never learn in so many words who he is; certainly we do not learn it in his words, since the matchseller is silent throughout the play.

But the matchseller differs in several significant ways from the menacing figures in the earlier plays. He stands at the back gate of the house of a well-to-do couple—the lower-class victims of menace in the previous plays have given way to Edward, the country gentleman. The setting in which he moves is no longer a closed room; the action moves from breakfast room to scullery to study to garden, and the garden’s presence on stage throughout is an important change of atmosphere from the closed-in settings of the other plays. Finally, the menace is portrayed as utterly passive in this play. Its demands are never stated. It is simply there.

The confrontation of ragged, stinking matchseller and elegant country gentleman has been interpreted on a social level by Augusta Walker, who sees the matchseller as a victim of the upper classes—"a spectre of his class, their [Flora and Edward’s] discarded refuse, come to haunt them." Edward’s apologetic treatment of the matchseller and his comic attempts to bridge the social gap between them do indeed suggest a theme of social tension in the drama. And Malpas’s point that Edward is drawn as a usurper whose working-class origins are disclosed in his confrontations with the stranger contributes to a reading of the play in the light of class struggle. In such a reading the play would become a variation on the theme of The Golden Bough, the displacement of king-priest-god by a usurper who will in turn be displaced, in the modern idiom of social conflict.

The tension in Pinter’s drama, however, moves on a metaphysical and poetic plane as well as on a social one. Far from a thesis or problem play, A Slight Ache incorporates whatever social problems it deals with into an exploration of the mystery of life and its renewal. Its setting
reflects Edward's mind, "its openness representative of his mental vulnerability"); and Edward, as we discover through his interactions with the setting and his wife and the matchseller, is significantly different from Pinter's early victims, not merely in social station but in the more complex role he plays as the drama's victim-victor.

Whereas Stanley in *The Birthday Party* was seen as the dying god defeated in an *agon* with his tormentors but rising again in the new image they will manufacture for him, Edward in a far more complete way plays both roles in his *agon*. Stanley is to be remade in the image of Monty's desire; but as *A Slight Ache* progresses, Edward is identified with the matchseller who haunts him and who replaces him in his own home. In *A Slight Ache*, victim and victor are no longer victim—they are, in a sense, one and the same.

Esslin suggests that the play's radio audience (*A Slight Ache* was first performed on the BBC's Third Programme, on July 29, 1959) could never even verify the existence of the silent matchseller whose presence might be a mere projection of the couple and whose silence invests him "with the terror of the unknown." Still, the matchseller appears on stage in the play's subsequent stage and television versions, and the drama is conceived as an *agon* between the two men. A ritual reading of the play suggests not that the matchseller is Edward's projection but that he is another aspect of Edward, who in one sense plays both roles.

Important clues to the double role that Edward plays in *A Slight Ache* and to the play's ritual meaning may be uncovered by exploring the double role played by the god Dionysus in Euripides' play *The Bacchae*. Here, no less than in *A Slight Ache*, the events of the play are more shocking than uplifting. The undefeated spirit of the tragic hero is missing as Pentheus, who denies the power of the god Dionysus, must pay for his blindness at the hands of the fierce Maenad followers of the god who are led by his own mother. Once in the power of Dionysus, Pentheus is
paraded through the streets dressed as a woman and is reduced to a figure of ridicule: tragic recognition for this young man is limited to a pitiful plea to his frenzied mother for his life.

The more terrible recognition scene in the play is that of the mother, Agave, who later comes to see that the head she holds as her prize of the hunt is the head of her own murdered son. As William Arrowsmith suggests, this cruel scene shifts the balance of sympathy in the drama away from the triumphant god, who appears in the final epiphany as "a pitiless, daemonic, necessitous power."  

*The Bacchae*, however, may be less an indictment of the god  than an exploration of the ritual idea that god and victim are one, that the drama of Pentheus and Dionysus is the drama of the death of the old season and the birth of the new—the ritual expulsion of evil and the induction of good. Such a reading accounts in part for the particular nature of the tragic pleasure one feels in the play despite the unrelieved horror of its ending.

According to Northrop Frye, the sacrifice that is at the center of the ritual in *The Bacchae* is the very stuff of which tragedy is made. Sacrifice and tragedy, which is a mimesis of it, according to Frye, both share in a paradoxical sense of rightness and wrongness at the hero's fall. There is a sense of communion with the sacrificial victim, "the dividing of a heroic or divine body among a group which brings them into unity with, and as, that body," and a sense of wrongness, of need for propitiation, "the sense that in spite of the communion the body really belongs to another, a greater, and a potentially wrathful power."  

This double reaction, investigated at length by Freud in his *Totem and Taboo* in terms of the ambivalent feelings we all have for the primal father whom we would both destroy and become, is evident in *The Bacchae*. Here Agave must pay for her union with the god with a full realization of horror at the act of killing her son and with exile. This
The paradoxical nature of sacrifice as curse and as blessing is clarified also in terms of the double role played by the god in the play. The play's myth, Hathorn suggests, reflects early customs of sacrificing human beings or kings "in the character of Dionysus." The ritual base helps explain why Pentheus is tricked into going as willing victim; he is the seasonal god of fertility who is assured a rebirth. Agave becomes the destroyer as well as the preserver of her son in her role as fertility goddess: and the god appears in his epiphany at the end of the play only after his other self has been reborn, the body reassembled by Agave and the others.

The above reading of *The Bacchae* has not satisfied all students of Greek tragedy, nor is it offered as a necessarily final interpretation of it. It has been, however, an important one lately for many, and becomes significant here because of the many parallels between the Greek drama and *A Slight Ache* and because of the light that a ritual reading of the Greek play may shed on a ritual reading of the modern one.

In both *The Bacchae* and *A Slight Ache*, then, a seasonal ritual may be seen to underlie the action, in which god and victim may be seen as one and the same. The opponents in the comic or tragic agon, the alazon and eiron, may be regarded as roles played by one god in different masks.

The alazon is an impostor, one who claims he knows more than he does; he is an enemy of the god, the eiron, who pretends that he knows less than he does. As previously noted, Frazer believed that the sacrifice of the old king became associated with the killing of a scapegoat (an alazon) upon whose head were "heaped the sins of the past year." The alazon too could serve as a scapegoat "for the injury done the god during the fertility ritual."

The god who is savior must be hated and slain. He has a double nature; he who is venerated, he who is reviled. Before the resurrection there is the crowning with thorns. The
alazon is one of the disguises worn by the god-hero before he is sacrificed; he is also by the same token, the “antagonistic” self that must be disowned before the worshipper is “possessed” by the god.\textsuperscript{15}

The sense of reconciliation evoked by The Bacchae is there, not because we exalt Dionysus as a necessary power over his weak victim, but because we sense the ritual beneath the events, the oneness of god and victim and the projection of both from the tribal group. Whether the mother-priestess presides over the death initiation of her son into manhood or over the death of the king-fertility god to initiate the new year, the cruelty of the sacrifice is mitigated by a suggestion of the new life to follow. And while the death of the old is emphasized, one senses the breaking down of tribal resistance to the god and all he stands for, a necessary event if the alazon and eiron are to be reconciled and give way to some figure in between, perhaps Aristotle’s idea of the golden mean, neither alazon nor eiron.\textsuperscript{16}

The compassion displayed by Agave, her father, and the chorus at the play’s end, which Arrowsmith suggests makes them superior to the god,\textsuperscript{17} is simply the refinding of humanity. And this humanity can be found only by allowing the animal side of man its province. Euripides becomes the humanitarian only by giving complete reign to the wonder and terror of that in man which projects the god Dionysus.

Stanley in The Birthday Party is in many respects a modern version of Pentheus as he refuses life’s celebration. For him that celebration holds a forced death and initiation or resurrection. Stanley does not play the roles of both victim and victor in the play, however, since his roles are forced upon him by a truly malevolent power in whose image he is re-created. Edward, on the other hand, plays the role of alazon and eiron in A Slight Ache. He is subjected not to some outer force but to forces that lie within him.
The opening scene of A Slight Ache, in which the middle-aged Edward and Flora discuss the weather and their garden over breakfast, comically introduces Edward as god of the dying year and Flora as fertility goddess. Edward, hidden behind his newspaper during the couple’s ritual interchange, reveals himself as ridiculously out of touch with his wife and his surroundings.

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.
Flora: The whole garden’s in flower this morning. The clematis, the convolvulus. Everything. I was out at seven. I stood by the pool.
Edward: Did you say—that the convolvulus was in flower?
Flora: Yes.
Edward: But good God, you just denied there was any.
Flora: I was talking about the honeysuckle. (Pp. 9-10)

Superficially, the scene is merely amusing as it captures the small talk of people who are enacting a breakfast ritual. On one level the couple indulges in the “cross-talk” that Pinter believes people so often make in a “deliberate evasion of communication,”18 but on another level the conversation displays a particular kind of withdrawal on Edward’s part. When Flora insists that Edward knows perfectly well what grows in his garden and Edward insists that he does not, he is revealing very early in the play the
nature of his blindness, the source of the "slight ache" in his eyes. Edward is out of touch with things that grow, with the examples of fertility in his own garden. He is out of touch too with Flora, whose name reflects the garden over which she presides as a kind of goddess. Thus Edward, in his comic way, is from the first a candidate for the role of the year god who must die, the old king of ancient ritual who represents the dying winter season and must be sacrificed to make way for the new.

Although Flora is depicted as an earth mother who will preside over the coming sacrifice, a comic and absurd tone mocks her role even as it is defined. Here is no maenad follower of Dionysus who sings, like the chorus in Euripides' *Bacchae*, of the wonders that flow from the fertility god:

> With milk the earth flows! It flows with wine!
> It runs with the nectar of bees!\(^{19}\)

Instead, a sense of clipped-off growth prevails. The names of the flowers, extravagantly sexual in connotation, sound ridiculous in the mouth of Flora, who produces a staccato rather than a flowing effect with her use of alliteration and her choppy sentences. "The whole garden's in flower this morning. The clematis, the convolvulus. Everything. I was out at seven. I stood by the pool" (p. 9).

Hence, while Pinter is setting the stage for the same kind of ritual drama that Francis Cornford suggests gave birth to ancient comedy and tragedy,\(^{20}\) his rhythms are modern as well as ancient. Even as the tragic situation is set forth, the fertility goddess figure assumes a ridiculous shape; and comedy and tragedy mingle as they so often do in Pinter's dramatic world.

The tragic situation that develops as the play progresses is the sacrifice of Edward as scapegoat. As the play moves toward Edward's recognition of his identity with his opponent, however, Edward and the matchseller may be
seen, on one level of the play’s meaning, as two masks worn by the same person.

Initially, Edward describes the matchseller as an im­
postor, as the alazon who typically pretends to be what he is not and must be exposed by Edward the eiron, the one who knows more than he professes to know. Like Pentheus, who found the disguised Dionysus a charlatan, Edward identifies the matchseller as a fake.

**Edward:** Damn. And do you know I’ve never seen him sell one box? Not a box. It’s hardly surprising. He’s on the wrong road. Off everybody’s route. The whole thing’s preposterous.

**Flora:** (going over to him.) I don’t know why you’re getting so excited about it. He’s a quiet, harmless old man, going about his business. He’s quite harmless.

**Edward:** I didn’t say he wasn’t harmless. Of course he’s harmless. How could he be other than harmless? (P. 16)

In this discussion, tension builds. The insistence that the matchseller is innocuous, combined with the idea of his being an impostor, suggests that he may well be harmful, that his presence at the gate for the last two months is not merely a nuisance but a menace.

As the menace grows, the matchseller himself appears to grow larger; he seems to Flora and Edward to take on the form of a bullock.

**Flora:** Good Lord, what’s that? Is that a bullock let loose? No. It’s the matchseller! My goodness, you can see him through the hedge. He looks bigger. Have you been watching him? He looks like a bullock. (P. 17)

Edward picks up the image of the bullock, the sacrificial animal or scapegoat, when his aching eyes push him to­ward the decision to confront the impostor.

**Edward:** It’s quite absurd, of course. I really can’t tolerate anything so absurd, right on my doorstep. I
haven't wasted my time. I've hit, in fact, upon the truth. He's not a matchseller at all. No, there is something very false about that man. I intend to get to the bottom of it. I'll soon get rid of him. He can go and ply his trade somewhere else. Instead of standing like a bullock a bullock, outside my backgate. (Pp. 18-19)

Pentheus too comes to see the disguised god as a bull, a form in which the god of vegetation was frequently worshipped and sacrificed.

PENTHEUS: I seem to see two suns blazing into the heavens. And now two Thebes, two cities, and each with seven gates. And you—you are a bull who walks before me there. Horns have sprouted from your head. Have you always been a beast? But now I see a bull.

DIONYSUS: It is the god you see. Though hostile formerly, he now declares a truce and goes with us. You see what you could not when you were blind. (Pp. 195-96)

At the same time that Pentheus and Edward insist on the absurdity of the intruders into their lives and declare that they will get rid of them, their vision of them in the form of a bull is at the very least an intuition of the godhead of the adversary.

As Edward defines the matchseller as alazon—impostor and sacrificial animal—the tone of the play becomes somewhat sinister. The absurd is present, and the situation, as Edward suggests, is rather farcical; but Edward's fear is very real. The menace is invited in, and the "harmless" one brings with him a terrible reality. Edward is now revealed as the true impostor, the bullock who must be sacrificed. Just as the tables have been turned on Pentheus, whose efforts to shackle and jail Dionysus end only in the young king's own victimization, so Edward's attempt to ensnare his visitor ends in his own defeat.

The mute matchseller may indeed be part alazon, no matchseller at all. But he serves too as a peculiar instance of the eiron, accomplishing by his very silence what Soc-
rates, the classical type of all eirons, accomplished by his questions and what Dionysus accomplished by his invitation to Pentheus to see the Maenad revels—the exposure of the alazon. Confronted with the silence of the matchseller, Edward is forced to look within himself, to confront the absurdity of his whole existence.

That absurdity is partly exposed as Edward tries to define himself to the matchseller.

I write theological and philosophical essays (pause) Now and again I jot down a few observations on certain tropical phenomena—not from the same standpoint, of course. (silent pause.) Yes, Africa, now. Africa's always been my happy hunting ground. (P. 23)

Edward's pretense of having "been around a bit" seems just as foolish as his expectation that the speechless and ragged matchseller standing before him has been around the world he describes. Soon Edward starts bragging, becoming more the buffoon as he goes; and when the series of clichés with which he describes his way of living meets with complete silence, he cannot help but hear their hollow sound himself.

Oh, I understand you met my wife? Charming woman, don't you think? Plenty of grit there, too. Stood by me through thick and thin, that woman. In season and out of season. . . Let me advise you. Get a good woman to stick by you. Never mind what the world says. Keep at it. Keep your shoulder to the wheel. It'll pay dividends. (P. 24)

When the clichés with which Edward has lived his life and which he now uses to protect himself from the matchseller fail to evoke a response, Edward becomes more and more frightened. Noting the matchseller's glass eye, a counterpart to his own aching eyes, he becomes exhausted and calls for air and for his wife. The account he then gives her of the matchseller is a good description of himself.
He's like jelly. A great bullockfat of jelly. He can't see straight. I think as a matter of fact he wears a glass eye. He's almost stone deaf. almost not quite. He's very nearly dead on his feet. (P. 29)

Finally, half dead on his own feet, cut off from life, Edward confronts the matchseller a second time and admits the resemblance and kinship he has been fighting: "Why did I invite you into this room? Well, why not, you might say. My oldest acquaintance. My nearest and dearest. My kith and kin" (p. 36).

The ensuing confusion about whether the matchseller is laughing at Edward or crying for him is important. Edward is, after all, both comic and tragic; the movement of the scenes exposes him as both to the audience and, through the matchseller's reactions, to himself. Overcome by his own insights and confused by the matchseller's reactions to him, Edward finally falls to the floor before the matchseller, who rises at Flora's command to take Edward's place.

When Flora presents her husband with the matchseller's box and role, the ritual sacrifice is complete. The alazon Edward has been exposed by the eiron matchseller. With Flora's aid, the old has been expelled and the new brought in. The sacrifice of tragedy is followed by the feast and marriage of comedy, in which the earth mother joins her new mate.

The fundamentally ritualistic structure of the play is reflected not only in the agon of the plot, but in many of the play's details as well. The references to weather, for example, which occupy a central part of the dialogue, underscore the movement of the seasons that is at the base of the ritual of the dying god.

The play opens at the height of summer, but for Edward, the dying god of winter, the weather is frightening. While his wife discourses on the beauties of the day, he informs her that the weather is "treacherous," and the weather becomes momentarily beautiful for Edward only after he
kills the "first wasp of summer." The drowning of the wasp in the pot of marmalade, a comic version of the central sacrifice of the play, is surrounded by the usual cross-talk of husband and wife and carries a mock-heroic tone as Edward pours water down the spoon-hole of the marmalade pot. After the wasp is dead, Flora speaks of the "awful experience," but Edward suddenly speaks of the beautiful day.

Only Edward's perception of the presence of the matchseller at the back gate ends his rapture, and from that point the play moves steadily toward the sacrifice in which Edward is victim. In the wasp episode, however, Edward appears as both victim and victor. On one level the wasp symbolizes the matchseller, the arrival of summer, "the first wasp of summer," over which Edward triumphs. On another level, however, the wasp is a symbol of Edward as victim—another indication of the essential oneness of the two characters. Edward complains during the killing scene of the slight ache in his eyes, so that even in his moment of triumph his future role as victim is prefigured. Still, after the "murder" he does have a brief sense of renewed life, expressed in his recognition of the day's beauty. The incident serves as a flashback. The dying god was once the young god.

Indeed, Edward refers to the wasp incident at the play's ending with great nostalgia, treating the morning of the play's opening as if it were the morning of his life. Reflecting on his now ebbing strength, he says:

I was polished. (Nostalgic.) I could stand on the hill and look through my telescope at the sea. And follow the path of the three-masted schooner, feeling fit, well aware of my sinews, their suppleness, my arms lifted holding my telescope, steady, easily, no trembling. My aim was perfect. I could pour hot water down the spoon-hole, yes. (P. 35)

All is in the past tense now, for even Edward begins to see that his role as the polished murderer of the wasp is ridicu-
Edward's final speeches continue to reflect his concern for the weather and his role as the dying god of winter. He insists that he was able to cope with winter but describes a withdrawal to a womb-like state of passivity into which the menace of summer began to creep: "But then, the time came. I saw the wind. I saw the wind, swirling, and the dust at my backgate, lifting, and the long grass, scything together... You're laughing at me! Aaaahhh!" (p. 39).

Here is the anguished cry of death, and at this instant Edward sees the elderly matchseller as young, recognizing his now youthful usurper as the young god. Now, too, Flora, who throughout the play has dwelt on summer at its height, announces that "summer is coming" (p. 40). As the matchseller rises to take Edward's place, the sense of seasonal change is emphasized by Flora.

There is no real contradiction in Flora's insistence during the play that summer is at its height and that it has just arrived. In her seduction scene with the matchseller, the restrained English matron emerges clearly as a sexual and motherly figure and gives the matchseller his rightful name.

Hmmmnn, you're a solid old boy, I must say. Not at all like jelly. All you need is a bath. A lovely lathery bath. And a good scrub. A lovely lathery scrub. (Pause.) Don't you? It will be a pleasure. (She throws her arms around him.) I'm going to keep you. I'm going to keep you, you dreadful chap, and call you Barnabas. Isn't it dark, Barnabas? Your eyes, your eyes, your great big eyes. (P. 32)

The day of Saint Barnabas, June eleventh in the old-style calendar, was the day of the summer solstice, and Barnaby-bright is the name for the longest day and the shortest night of the year. Flora merely recognizes her new god as the incarnation of summer itself, the advent of which is considered to take place at its height.
Though many seasonal fertility rituals were celebrated in spring, the opposition of winter to summer, which was also commonly celebrated, is more proper to the tone of Pinter's drama. E. O. James, in Seasonal Feasts and Festivals, notes that many such festivals were celebrated at the height of summer in order to preserve a sense of "renewal at a time of decline." Hence, though Edward is rejected as the god of winter, and though Barnabas appears at the play's end as the "young god," reference is made to Barnabas's death as well. Flora says to him: "And I'll buy you pretty little things that will suit you. And little toys to play with on your deathbed. Why shouldn't you die happy?" (p. 33). The play, then, is hardly an unqualified hymn to spring.

Recognizing its undercurrent of ritual, then, clarifies the structure of A Slight Ache and helps to explain the nature of much of its content. Ronald Hayman cannot see the dramatic validity of the protracted wasp episode or of Edward's "slight ache," but both elements are clearly integral to the play's ritual meaning. The changing age of the matchseller, the changing time of summer, the changing attitudes toward the weather, all fall into place in terms of mythical logic which apprehends events, "not chronologically or sequentially, but as they cluster about some significant center of recurrent ritual."

Although recognizing the ritual basis of the play and its counterpoint with the daily rituals of the couple helps clarify its structure and meaning, the manner in which Pinter uses the ritual gives the play its particular flavor and significance. Edward's uncertainty about himself and his position in life undoubtedly does have some of the social undertones some of its critics have pointed to. His death agonies may even reflect the lingering death of Edwardian England. An Edwardian of many hobbies and an expert in none, Edward's very announcement of his pain as a slight ache suggests in this interpretation a typically
British restraint as well as a typically modern inability to articulate today's prevalent malaise or anxiety. Pinter too, on a broader basis, is surely depicting a modern crisis of identity in his portrayal of the alienated Edward.

Inarticulate as he is about his condition, Edward nonetheless gains a measure of self-knowledge in the course of the drama, his clichés giving way to a poetic expression of his insight. *A Slight Ache* takes much of its ritual rhythm from *The Bacchae*, but it is close also to the rhythms of *Oedipus Rex*. Man is no longer a mere victim of outer forces in this play; the menace is within. Like Oedipus, Edward would escape man's fate only to find that it lies within him. Oedipus, seeking the murderer of the king, found himself and suffered his own decree of banishment. So, too, Edward sought to rid his home of a menace. When he invited the menace in, confronting the matchseller in hopes of dispelling him for good, he too, in a sense, was faced with himself, and was himself banished from his home. Oedipus's growing insight, climaxed by physical blindness, also finds a counterpart in *A Slight Ache*, in which Edward's failing vision is accompanied by a growing insight about his own identity. Stanley was hiding from the menace without. Edward invited that menace in and faced it as himself. Gone are the grand gestures and articulate sufferings of Oedipus, but the rhythms linger faintly on.

Flora's role as a fertility goddess continues, though, on a more comic level. Agave, in Euripides' *Bacchae*, also plays the role of a fertility goddess, but she is given a moment of tragic recognition when she realizes she has killed her own son. Death as well as life takes on a terrible reality and full meaning in the Greek play. Flora's somewhat casual disposal of her husband and her vulgar embracing of Barnabas, on the other hand, tend to rob the ritual of tragic dignity. The horror of death as it is perceived by Edward remains, but life is envisaged rather as horrifying and ridiculous than as terrible and wonderful.
The absurdities of the play do not evoke laughter and tears so much as they prevent the full experience of either.

Perhaps the deepest irony of the play is its presentation of the eiron as a mute matchseller. True, his image gives the other characters a chance to project their own personalities (Edward sees him as jelly; Flora, as solid), but for the representative of summer to appear as ugly, stinking, and passive is as much a mockery of the life process as is the artificial garden in which the couple pretends to live. The images are the extremes of frigidity and bestiality, with Flora reigning as a tragi-comic queen.

In one sense, then, A Slight Ache looks back to the earlier comedies of menace. Edward and the matchseller, another aspect of himself, are not treated as heroic victors any more than Dionysus or Pentheus, another aspect of the god, are treated as heroic in The Bacchae. Edward’s faltering belief in himself and his position in life has much in common with Stanley’s timid sense of himself. And in a sense Edward is the victim of Flora, whose ongoing, life-giving force will always take on the new god—an indication too that the matchseller may well be her victim when the wheel turns again.

In another sense, though, Edward’s position as victor-victim in this play takes on meanings absent from the earlier plays. In Pinter’s tragi-comic vision, fertility itself is mocked, but a kind of renewal does take place in the drama. Curtiss M. Brooks, who has detected a similar mythical structure in Waiting for Godot, points out that in Godot spring never arrives. No matter how ugly or comic the image in Pinter’s play, on the other hand, life is renewed; no matter how ludicrous, the god of summer does arrive and receives an embrace, a welcome. He may not be the forceful, though cruel, god Dionysus; but he plays his role and Flora receives him.

Though Pinter mocks ritual renewal here as he did in The Birthday Party, the renewal in A Slight Ache is more
valid; its rhythms more nearly approach a sense of ongoing life. Gone from this play is the outside force that dominates the action of *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter*. No Monty, no Wilson appear—only the characters in the *agon*. Hence, Edward in his double role is truly victor as well as victim in the life cycle enacted; and no suggestion occurs that an outside force manipulates the cycle. Victim and victor are one in this play, in which the rhythms beneath the mockery are suggestive of celebration. The contention for the priesthood of Nemi is seen as cruel and absurd, but vital and alive nonetheless.