



Deception and Betrayal in Harold Pinter's The Dwarfs.

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Abstract

This paper aims at showing the devastating deception that surrounding the characters in Pinter's play *The Dwarfs*. *The Dwarfs* as a play is very unintelligible on stage as Pinter himself admitted in one of the interviews saying that the staging of the play was "regretted by everyone except me to do *The Dwarfs* which is apparently the very intractable and impossible piece of work. It is basically a play that illustrates the deep and vivid sense of betrayal, deception, illusion and love. The conflicting problem imposes betrayal as shown in Len's goals and objectives, the central character of the play. Human suffering arising from the sense of failure and frustration of man's search for love, friends and belonging. *The Dwarfs* explores the theme of deception and frustration arising from a betrayal of friendship in which the protagonist's hopes for genuine human contact are shattered by the deception and duplicity of the same proposed friends. The main theme of *The Dwarfs* is the frustration arising from a betrayal of friendship. The protagonist's hopes for genuine human contact are shattered by the duplicity and betrayal of friends. Even superficial ties of contact are missing. The play stresses lack of possibility of genuine friendship in a world of shifting affiliation, allegiance and betrayal.

Harold Pinter is one of the most admired playwrights to appear in the English theatre since 1957 when he began his career with *The Room*. After three decades of playwriting, Pinter is now acknowledged as one of the major playwrights of the world. Like many of his contemporaries, Pinter is a playwright who deals with the existential problems of man in a hostile universe.

The Dwarfs may be regarded as Pinter's general statement on "betrayal and distrust"¹, adopted from his unpublished novel of the same name completed in 1950, it antedates the plays and is therefore examined as a seminal work which contains most of the themes he later developed in his dramatic output. Pinter has acknowledged the presence of autobiographical elements in the novel and in the play. "*The Dwarfs* is based firmly on my own youthOn my own life, my own experience"² but it remains the most ambiguous of his works. With his characters, Mark, with his Portuguese antecedents, seems to represent some aspects of Pinter whose family is said to have originally come from Portugal.³

In the unpublished novel discussed by Martin Esslin,⁴ Mark and Len are both Jews (as Pinter is), and the setting is strongly reminiscent of Hackney and the East End where Pinter grew up. Mark is shown in the novel and in the play as an actor, and perhaps his reaction to Len's comment, "may be they do not want to watch you at all. May be they'd prefer watch someone else. Have you ever asked them?"⁵ reveals Pinter the actor's own doubts and fears about his place in his profession.

The emphasis on the similarities between Mark and Pinter denotes the playwright's attempt to voice some of his personal preoccupations, Mark's refusal to answer Len's question "do you believe in God" (p.111) may, then, be indicative of the attitudes which Pinter projects in his plays. God and the devil, good and bad as such are not present in his world; nor are his characters preoccupied with metaphysical speculations. But Pinter's obsessive exploration of feeling of insecurity, of fears of betrayal by personal and socially –conditional relationships, makes the play a metaphor expressive of man's tragic inability to overcome his limitations. In his unpublished novel, there are four characters, Pete, Mark, Len and a girl, Virginia, a school teacher. Virginia is a shadowy forerunner of Pinter's women who reveal a dichotomy in their natureFlora in *A Slight Ache*; Sally in *The Collection*. The women have pretensions to some form of intellectuality and culture; but the other half of their selves is considered as a sexual object not only by men, but even by themselves. Virginia's betrayal by Pete and her betrayal of Pete (she is the one who reveals Pete's contempt for Mark in the novel), foreshadow the betrayal in man-woman relationships in Pinter's plays.

In the play *The Dwarfs*, however, betrayal is only of male friendships and the woman, Virginia, is omitted altogether. The theme of fantasy, as seen here, reveals Pinter's attitude to its function. His characters who indulge in fantasy are shown to have a precarious hold on reality, because "the person who does not act in reality and only acts in fantasy becomes himself unreal"⁶. Len does not know who he is, and he needs to hold on to his sense of reality by defining himself through his possessions " there is my table...there is my chair. There is my table. That is a bowl of fruit. There is my chair. There are my curtains..... this is my room ...there are my shoes on my feet."(p.96) Sorter in *Being and Nothingness* has explained this concept thus " the totality of my possessions reflects the totality of my being . I'm what I have"⁷. Len tries to define his identity by reflecting on what he has, rather than on what he is, because what he has is capable of defining, while what he is, is nebulous.

Early in the play Pinter communicates to the audience that Len is unfit for the normal world. He shares with many of difficulty in adjusting to reality in seeing things as they are. Even the room he lives in, does not keep its shape, but "only in his room Len is able to feel that a dangerous movement of reality is being arrested. The room is a fixture, a thicket in which one is safe from ambush."⁸

The Dwarfs materialize in Len's imagination to connect the world of reality with his own private, lost world. In his hallucinated mind, he frequently identifies his friends Mark and Pete with the dwarfs. Sometimes he includes himself in their brotherhood as well. This is especially clear in the unrevised version of the play which has some monologues by Len to imply this connection. The unpublished novel is said to be explicit in suggesting identities, in demarcating relationship and portraying their deterioration, but the revised version bounds in ambiguities. The changes in this version mainly involve the pruning of those references to the dwarfs which identify them directly with Pete and Mark, at least in Len's fantasy. Martin Esslin observes about Len that "the uncertainty about the speaker's own identity merges into his uncertainty about the identity of others and into the general problem of verification."⁹. Therefore, the comparative clarity of the unrevised version in identifying the dwarfs with Mark and Pete and sometimes with Len himself is sacrificed in the revised text.

Mark's features, as befits one who wears a mask, have no distinguishing characteristics. He is merely what the existentialists call the "mass man " and is a social product playing a social role. Therefore, he has no feeling of insecurity because "I've got a home. I know where I live"(p.111) unlike Mark's luck of identifying features, Len seems to have no features at all, since his personality has not been confirmed by another. In spite of his house being older than Mark's, Len asks "why haven't I got a home?"(p.111) The feeling of insecurity is an existential one and cannot be apprehended rationally. To escape his lack of assurance Len retreats into a world which doesn't require him to live with his torment... a world of private fantasy where the mask answers the demands not of society but of his own inner compulsions and requirements.

Pete, in Len's fantasy behaves as the dwarfs do, even to his preference for rats, as a symbol of betrayal which is frequently referred to in both versions of the play. in Len's version both Mark and Pete are waiting to obliterate his identity. Pete can destroy like a gull kills a rat, cruelly without compunction. Mark is more refined in his attempts at execution when he invites Len into his spider's web to consume his individuality.

Pete and Mark, in the early parts of the play, are seen either through the eyes of Len or shown only in his presence. Lucina Grabbard observes that "Len is the core, the real self. Mark and Pete are projections of his conflicting selves."¹⁰. This corresponds to Jung's theory of the "persons" and the "shadow" where the "person" signifies a role through man relates to his world and the "shadow" is his "personal" "unconscious."¹¹ which consists of his inferior and primitive desires. Pinter, in concretizing the "shadow" and presenting it in simultaneously with the persona, emphasizes the delusory nature of his characters' conception of themselves. The perception of man's individuality is determined by his preference in the roles he assumes and does not depend on the room he inhabits because "a particular slot, which will only receive your particular key...is not fool proof and certainty not conclusive."(p.111) neither body-identity nor a deceptive memory- based identity can provide a valid basic for an apprehension of the self. If, then, there is no continuous identity, it is impossible to know another, except by the role he plays and the mask he assumes and this unknowability of man and his individuality is the postulate on which Pinter's plays are based. It is a part of social pretence to confirm another's mask because of the need of confirmation of ours as well. Therefore, it is a "conspiracy", a "joint preference"(p.112), a confirmation based on deception. It is also a self-deception, since we play in choosing our roles. The true identity, however, remains mysterious because it is delusive. There are echoes of Pinter's prose-poem "Kullus" (1949), and his prose piece "The Examination" (1955)¹², in the suggestion that Mark and Pete have taken Len over and stifled his personality. Len's revenge is to betray Pete's confidence. His betrayal of Pete is in his own mind merely pre-emptive, a counter-move to protect himself from them. It does not make him experience a sense of guilt because "destructiveness" in fantasy goes on without the wish to make compensatory reparation, for the guilt that prompts towards preserving and making a mends loses its urgency."¹³

Probably the dwarfs in questions, are his friends who have belittled themselves by their meanness. That is perhaps the reason Len visualizes them to be tiny, dirty, creatures who have been rummaging in his yard. At one time they had a place in his heart, but gradually they have either deserted him or automatically they have been relegated to the back yard because of their attitude and behaviour towards him. Disgusted Len takes

on Mark and bursts out in anger: "You're a snake in my house" (p. 107) and when Mark expresses his shock at this outburst Len opens the flood-gates of his anger:

"You're trying to buy and sell me. You think I'm a ventriloquist's dummy. You've got me pinned to the wall before I open my mouth. You've got tab on me, You're buying me out of house and home, you're a calculating bastard." (p.107). And a little later Len's bitterness finds expression when he says : "both of you bastards, you've made a hole in my side, I can't plug it! Pause . I've lost a kingdom" (p.107).

Len's sojourn in the hospital from which he emerges a new man, seems to be suggestive of a kind of treatment that was given to Stanley in the birthday party and to which the inmates of the hothouse were subjected, where he comes back after his stay in hospital, the dwarfs are ready to leave since their work is done. That they existed only in Len's fantasy is not in doubt, but his hallucination had made life less insupportable and more companionable. Oliver Sacks in his book, *Awakenings*, has discussed the case of a patient, Mrs. C, who, when her intervals of lucidity were increasing, observed wistfully, "They were all disappointed now... the little people and things which have been keeping me company. Then I will be my old plain self again."¹⁴ He refers to the illness as a state of "disorganized and terrifying hallucinatory paranoia with multiple Lilliputian. Hallucinations of sight and sound."¹⁵ Len, too, discovers that his hallucination seems to be disappearing and that the dwarfs are getting ready to go their way. But, like Mrs. C., he is wistful.

The unpublished novel antedates all of Pinter's plays. Therefore, even though *The Dwarfs* was not performed till (1960) it must be considered to have been the first to reveal all the major aspects that Pinter developed in his works starting from *The Room*, because they reproduce most of the themes found in the novel. Thus, Len is one of Pinter's characters who is "frightened of the world, afraid that any impingement will be total, will be implosive penetrative, fragmenting, and engulfing."¹⁶ He is among the earliest of Pinter's characters that use "fiddles" to aid communication. "Fidget fiddles..... facilitate communication by reducing anxiety surrounding the situation."¹⁷ they consist of a single activity which is unrevealed to the immediate predicament. Len trying to repair the recorder when the play opens, and at various times fiddling with different objects such as with an apple (p.103) and a toasting fork (p.104) are examples of this.

This play reveals themes which reoccur in all of Pinter's works. It reveals the world which on the surface is like a scrubbed yard with a bush and a flower, but underneath is full of the dwarfs. At the outset, they all portray a surface of ordinary living, but as they progress, assume a nightmarish proportions which engulf this ordinary scrubbed appearance. What, then, is reality and what is illusion.... The fantasy that had appeared to Len's highly excited imagination, or the world which revealed itself when he lost his ability to look behind everyday life, when fantasy took backset to reality. Pinter reveals Man's dilemma in an unresponsive world, and progress delusion as a means to confront his bewildering loneliness and unuttered fears of betrayal. This is not an adequate solution to Man's existential problems since delusion leads to destruction; but it affords a temporary truce in the hostilities mounted by the perpetually shifting vicissitudes of everyday living.

In *The Dwarfs* Len wins the battle against the intruder. But his experience is a totally different one. He is not crushed like Albert though. As Albert gains insight into the mechanism of the outside world, Len recognizes the meaning of existence. Len realizes that there can be no fixed identity. Identity and human relations are subject to change as is the room. At the end of the play Len welcomes his new barren room which will soon be loitered and his new existence in it. He knows that he will experience an endless sequence of existences in an endless chain of rooms, in the flux of time. Like Stanley and Aston he goes through the initiation rites. However, while Stanley and Aston are castrated socially, he is totally reborn to play the game of life. Unlike Albert who is frightened to go through the rites he is eager to live in the new reality.

Notes

- 1- Lawrence M. Bensky, " Harold Pinter ", p.357.
- 2- Joan Bakewell, " In a empty Banstand," Harold Pinter in conversation with Joan Bakewell, *The Listener*,. 82(6 Nov. 1969), 630-631.
- 3- Martin Esslin, *Pinter the Playwright*, 4th ed.(1970; rpt. London: Methuen,1982), p.14.

- 4- Ibid., pp.126-130
- 5- Harold Pinter, The Dwarfs, In Pinter Plays: Two(1977; rpt. London: Methuen, 1981), p.98.
- 6- R. P. Laing, The Divided Self. (1960, rpt. Harmond Worth: Pelican Books, 1981), P.85.
- 7- Jean Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness, trans., Hazel E. Barnes(New York, 1971) p.754
- 8- L. A. C. Dobrez, The Existential and Its Exists: Literary and Philosophical perspectives on the Work of Becket, Ionesco, Genet and Pinter(London: The Anthlone Press, 1986), p.315.
- 9- Martin Esslin , Pinter The Playwright, p.125.
- 10- Lucina Paquet Gabbard, The Dream Structure of Pinter's Plays: A Sycho-analytic approach (London: Associated University Press, 1976), p.128.
- 11- Frieda Fordham, An Introduction to Jung's Psychology, (1953, rpt. Harmond worth: Penguin Books , 1976), p.50.
- 12- Harold Pinter, "Kullus" and " The Examination" in Poems and Prose, 1949-1977(1978, rpt.(London: Eyre Metheun Ltd.,1980), pp.49-59
- 13- R. D. Laing, The divided Self, p.85.
- 14- Oliver Sacks, Awakenings, rev.ed.(1973), rpt. London:Picador, 1982), p.156.
- 15- Ibid., p.154.
- 16- R. D. Laing, The Divided Self, p.83.
- 17- Robert R. Smith and Robert W. Hawkes, "The Fiddle Factor: Social Binding Functions of Distractions," The Journal of Communications, 22(1972. New York: Hastings House Publishers Inc., 1976), p.152.

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