



Harold Pinter

(1930- 2008)

Life and works

Harold Pinter was born in Hackney, East London, in 1930, into a **Jewish working-class family**. He was educated at Hackney Grammar School from 1941 to 1947. His adolescence was marked by experiences of prejudice and violence, and by **the squalor of the East End surroundings**. In 1948 he entered the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and was thereafter a professional actor, working **both for the BBC and for repertory theatres**. At the age of eighteen, he declared himself a conscientious objector on the ground of his **radical pacifism**, resulting perhaps from the years of his boyhood during the Second World War. In 1956 he met **the actress Vivien Merchant, who became his first wife** and performed the female roles of many of his works. Pinter's first play, *The Room*, was produced in 1957, followed by *The Birthday Party* in 1958 and *The Dumb Waiter* in 1959. These plays attracted critical attention but went unnoticed by the public. **It was *The Caretaker* (1960) which established Pinter's fame in Britain and abroad as a master of the 'comedy of menace'.**

During the 1960s Pinter mainly wrote one-act plays for radio or television: *A Slight Ache* (broadcast by the BBC Third Programme in 1959 and staged in 1961), *The Dwarfs* (1961), *The Collection* (1961), *The Lover* (1963) and *Tea Party* (1965). These works were marked by a shift towards the social and psychological sphere, which found confirmation in *The Homecoming* (1965).

In the 1970s he published full-length plays, *Old Times* (1971), *No Man's Land* (1975) and *Betrayal* (1978), which were labelled '**plays of nostalgia**'. He has also written extensively for the cinema: his screenplays include *The Servant* (1963) and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981). In the 1980s Pinter became a leading campaigner on various public issues such as civil rights in Britain and American policy in Latin America. **The war with Iraq in 2003 led him to turn to poetry:** his collection, *War*, criticised the leaders of the US and the UK for their decision to go to war and was awarded the Wilfred Owen award for poetry. After winning the **Nobel Prize in Literature in 2005**, Pinter announced his decision to **retire from playwrighting in favour of poetry**. He died in 2008.

The pattern of Pinter's plays

The starting point of his plays is always a **commonplace situation which gradually becomes full of mystery and fear owing to the introduction of symbolic or even supernatural elements**. In Pinter's early plays there are two people in a room which represents their only refuge against the hostile world outside. These characters are afraid they may be driven from it and their fear increases when the arrival of an intruder (sometimes another character or an animal, or even an object) completely upsets the balance of their life. The result can be blindness, madness and sometimes death.

The repetition of this scenario can be regarded as a metaphor for what Pinter perceives as **the essential isolation of the individual** and his wish to avoid communication with the outside world.

Characters

Pinter's typical storyline is as indefinite as the world surrounding his characters: **his plays do not follow a logical, sequential pattern**. His method of characterisation also breaks with tradition: **the audience is not given any information about the characters' past**, their social background, their physical appearance. Even their names are not certain: they are deliberately mixed up, just as their actions are inconsistent and their statements contradictory, so that the audience's desire for verification is frustrated. The unfolding drama of each play is a process of exploring **how we relate to other people** and what the true extent of an actual relationship is. In this enquiry **the family**, with the ambivalence of its relationships, **emerges as a fundamental social unit**.

A menacing atmosphere

The **impossibility of identifying truth** becomes one of Pinter's main subjects as well as a source of suspense; his plays are thrillers of a new, disturbing kind, where the author does not give a solution to the mystery, nor does he expect his audience to solve it.

A theatre of language

Language, labelled '**Pinterish**' and '**Pinteresque**', is perhaps his most original contribution to the **Theatre of the Absurd** (→ 7.9). He has often been praised for his 'tape-recorder ear', for his skill at recreating the average everyday conversation with its colloquialisms, repetitions, incorrect syntax, *non sequitur* and pauses. Like John Osborne (→ 7.18), Pinter specialised in **one-sided dialogues**, with one character doing most of the talking while the other preserves a protracted silence. **Silence is an essential part**, often the climax of his use of language. He distinguishes between two kinds of silence: 'One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is employed'. According to this view, **speech becomes a sort of screen man uses to conceal his vulnerability**. Pinter's may be defined as 'a theatre of language' since suspense, tension, tragedy and laughter spring from his ability to combine the impression of reality with complete control of sound and rhythm; in this respect **his language is poetic, rather than naturalistic**.

Pinter's mastery of language and accuracy of observation, his economy of technique and depth of emotion, and, above all, his **ability to turn ordinary lower-class people and events into a poetic vision of universal validity** justify the success of his works and the important place he has won for himself among the greatest British playwrights.

**COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION****1 READ the texts and answer the following questions.**

- 1 What is the typical setting of Pinter's plays?
- 2 How do the characters relate to it? What does that symbolise?
- 3 What is new about Pinter's characters? How does that affect the audience?
- 4 Why is Pinter's theatre defined 'comedy of menace'?
- 5 What does 'Pinteresque' mean?
- 6 What characterises Pinter's dialogues?
- 7 What does Pinter think of silence?
- 8 What is the function of speech?

A Slight Ache

(1959)

PLOT, SETTING AND CHARACTERS

A Slight Ache is a **one-act play** centred around an **affluent middle-class couple**, **Flora and Edward**, who live in a **country house surrounded by a garden**. As usual in Pinter, the play starts with a commonplace situation – the two characters having breakfast in the garden and talking about trivial matters – which is gradually invested with anguish. As a matter of fact, for the previous two months their quiet and boring life has been disturbed by the presence of **an old man** who is standing at the back gate of their garden, **trying to sell matches to passers-by**. Since hardly anybody ever passes there, Edward and Flora wonder what the matchseller is trying to do and decide to invite him in to find out. The mysterious man, however, never speaks throughout the play, so that Edward's attempts at conversation turn into a nervous monologue which exposes the intellectual pretences, snobbery and weakness of the speaker. Gradually Edward seems to lose vitality, he suffers from a slight ache in his eyes and eventually goes blind. The effect of the matchseller's silence on Flora is quite different. When she is with Edward, she acts as the kind, gentle, dutiful wife, but the encounter with the old

man provokes her into the sexual fantasies of her youth. She is attracted and excited by him and in the end she hands Edward the matchseller's tray and leaves the room with the old man.

THEMES

Originally conceived as a radio play, *A Slight Ache* contains all the typical features of Pinter's works: the **fight for living space**, for a territory to be conquered and defended; the arrival of a mysterious intruder who upsets the certainties of the characters; the symbol of sight-diminution and blindness, which may stand for **loss of identity and final disintegration**; the here-and-now situation which shows the characters facing the existential problems of **love, fear, solitude, incommunicability, death**; the atmosphere of mystery and ambiguity; the sense of the absurd arising from the closely interwoven comic and tragic elements.

STYLE

Stylistically, the play shows Pinter's fine ear for the absurdities of the clichés of middle-class speech, and his careful exploration of the dramatic **potentials of silence**.

*Key idea***The intruder**

A Slight Ache is also regarded as the last of the so-called 'comedies of menace'. In fact, the intruder is not kept out of the room at all costs but willingly brought in. The real menace does not seem to be outside

but inside the individual. In this respect, the matchseller is not meant as a realistic character but as a sort of mirror reflecting the different sides of the characters' personalities, acting as the focal point of their anxieties.

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION**1 READ the texts and answer the following questions.**

- 1 In what sense does the play start with a commonplace situation?
- 2 What is strange about the character of the matchseller?
- 3 What different effect does his attitude have on the other two characters?
- 4 What typical ingredients of Pinter's theatre are there in the play?
- 5 What are the features of Pinter's style in this play?
- 6 Where is the real menace to be found?



The matchseller

Harold Pinter
A Slight Ache
(1961)

The passage below focuses on the figure of the intruder, a mysterious matchseller, and the reactions his presence creates in the two characters, Edward and Flora.

FLORA and EDWARD are discovered sitting at the breakfast table. EDWARD is reading the paper.

[...]

5 EDWARD Ah, it's a good day. I feel it in my bones. In my muscles. I think I'll stretch my legs in a minute. Down to the pool. My God, look at that flowering shrub over there. Clematis. What a wonderful... [He stops suddenly.]

FLORA What?

[Pause]

Edward, what is it?

[Pause]

Edward...

10 EDWARD [thickly] He's there.

FLORA Who?

EDWARD [low, murmuring] Blast¹ and damn it, he's there, he's there at the back gate.

FLORA Let me see.

She moves over to him to look. Pause.

15 [Lightly.] Oh, it's the matchseller.

EDWARD He's back again.

FLORA But he's always there.

EDWARD Why? What is he doing there?

FLORA But he's never disturbed you, has he? The man's been standing there for weeks.

20 You've never mentioned it.

EDWARD What is he doing there?

FLORA He's selling matches, of course.

EDWARD It's ridiculous. What's the time?

FLORA Half past nine.

25 EDWARD What in God's name is he doing with a tray full of matches at half past nine in the morning?

FLORA He arrives at seven o'clock.

EDWARD Seven o'clock?

FLORA He's always there at seven.

30 EDWARD Yes, but you've never... actually seen him arrive?

FLORA No, I...

EDWARD Well, how do you know he's... not been standing there all night?

[Pause]

FLORA Do you find him interesting, Edward?

EDWARD [casually] Interesting? No, No, I... don't find him interesting.

35 FLORA He's a very nice old man, really.

[...]

EDWARD Go and get him.

She goes out. Silence.

EDWARD waits.

40 FLORA [in the garden] Good morning.

[Pause]

We haven't met. I live in this house here. My husband and I.

[Pause]

I wonder if you could... would you care for a cup of tea?

[Pause]

Or a glass of lemon? It must be so dry, standing here.

1 Blast. Al diavolo.



[Pause]

45 Would you like to come inside for a little while? It's much cooler. There's something we'd very much like to... tell you, that will benefit you. Could you spare² a few moments? We won't keep you long.

[Pause]

50 Might I buy your tray of matches, do you think? We've **run out**, completely, and we always keep a very large stock. It happens that way, doesn't it? Well, we can discuss it inside. Do come. This way. Ah now, do come. Our house is full of **curios**, you know. My husband's been rather a collector. We have goose for lunch. Do you care for goose?

She moves to the gate.

55 Come and have lunch with us. This way. That's... right. May I take your arm? There's a good deal of **nettle**³ inside the gate. [*The MATCHSELLER appears.*] Here. This way. Mind⁴ now. Isn't it beautiful weather? It's the longest day of the year today.

[Pause]

That's honeysuckle⁵. And that's convolvulus. There's clematis. And do you see that plant by the conservatory⁶? That's japonica⁷.

Silence. She enters the study.

60 **FLORA** He's here.

EDWARD I know.

FLORA He's in the hall.

EDWARD I know he's here. I can smell him.

FLORA Smell him?

65 **EDWARD** I smelt him when he came under my window. Can't you smell the house now?

FLORA What are you going to do with him, Edward? You won't be **rough** with him in any way? He's very old. I'm not sure if he can hear, or even see. And he's wearing the oldest –

70 **EDWARD** I don't want to know what he's wearing.

FLORA But you'll see for yourself in a minute, if you speak to him.

EDWARD I shall.

[*Slight pause*]

FLORA He's an old man. You won't... be rough with him?

EDWARD If he's so old, why doesn't he seek shelter⁸... from the storm?

75 **FLORA** But there's no storm. It's summer, the longest day...

EDWARD There was a storm, last week. A summer storm. He stood without moving, while it raged about him⁹.

FLORA When was this?

EDWARD He remained quite still, while it thundered all about him.

[Pause]

80 **FLORA** Edward... are you sure it's wise to **bother** about all this?

EDWARD Tell him to come in.

FLORA I...

EDWARD Now.

She goes and collects the MATCHSELLER.

85 **FLORA** Hulloo. Would you like to go in? I won't be long. Up these stairs here.

[Pause]

You can have some sherry before lunch.

[Pause]

Shall I take your tray? No. Very well, take it with you. Just... up those stairs. The door at the...

[*She watches him move.*]

2 **Could you spare.** Potrebbe dedicarci.

3 **nettle.** Ortica.

4 **Mind.** Attenzione.

5 **honeysuckle.** Caprifoglio.

6 **conservatory.** Serra.

7 **japonica.** Camelia.

8 **doesn't he seek shelter.** Non cerca riparo.

9 **it raged about him.** Infuriava intorno a lui.



90 the door...
 [Pause]
 the door at the top. I'll join you... later. [She goes out.]
The MATCHSELLER stands on the threshold¹⁰ of the study.
EDWARD [cheerfully] Here I am. Where are you?
 [Pause]
 Don't stand out there, old chap¹¹. Come into my study.
 95 [He rises.] Come in.
The MATCHSELLER enters.
 That's right. Mind how you go. That's... it. Now, make yourself comfortable.
 Thought you might like some refreshment, on a day like this. Sit down, old man.
 What will you have? Sherry? Or what about a double scotch? Eh?
 [Pause]
 100 I entertain the villagers annually, as a matter of fact. I'm not the squire, but they
 look upon me with some regard¹². Don't believe we've got a squire here any more,
 actually. Don't know what became of him. Nice old man he was. Great chess-
 player¹³, as I remember. Three daughters. The pride of the county. Flaming red
 hair. Alice was the eldest. Sit yourself down, old chap. Eunice I think was number
 105 two. The youngest one was the best of the bunch. Sally. No, no, wait a minute, no,
 it wasn't Sally, it was... Fanny. Fanny. A flower. You must be a stranger here. Unless
 you lived here once, went on a long voyage and have lately returned. Do you know
 the district?
 [Pause]
 Now, now, you mustn't... stand about like that. Take a seat. Which one would you
 110 prefer? We have a great variety, as you see. Can't stand¹⁴ uniformity. Like different
 seats, different backs. Often when I'm working, you know, I draw up one chair,
 scribble¹⁵ a few lines, put it by¹⁶, draw up another, sit back, ponder, put it by...
 [absently]... sit back... put it by...
 [Pause]
 I write theological and philosophical essays...
 [Pause]

- 10 **threshold**. Soglia.
 11 **old chap**. Vecchio mio.
 12 **regard**. Considerazione, rispetto.
 13 **chess-player**. Giocatore di scacchi.
 14 **Can't stand**. Non sopporto.
 15 **scribble**. Scribacchio, scarabocchio.
 16 **put it by**. La metto da parte.

READING COMPETENCE

1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their meaning.

- 1 finished
- 2 worry
- 3 impolite
- 4 group
- 5 hedge
- 6 rare objects

2 READ the text again and do the following activities.

1 Say whether the following sentences are true or false. Correct the false ones.

- 1 Edward's muscles ache.
- 2 He is pleased to see the old man at the gate.
- 3 Flora is very polite with him.
- 4 Edward and Flora are married.
- 5 They invite the stranger to lunch.

**2** Focus on the stage directions in the passage.

1 What aspect of acting do they mainly refer to? Tick as appropriate.

☐ Movements.☐ Facial expressions.☐ Tone of voice.☐ Gestures.☐ Silence.

2 Try to explain what this method of dramatising the pauses between lines aims at.

3 Complete the table below with the elements which convey a sense of menace and the comic elements.

Menace	Comic elements

4 Write down the elements which give the matchseller a mysterious, threatening quality.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

5 The man *seems* / *does not seem* violent or dangerous.**6** He *has* / *does not have* the status of a character.**7** The matchseller has the function to

A embody the theme of homelessness.

B mirror the characters' anxieties.

C address the characters' mercy.

8 Underline some examples of meaningless clichés of middle-class speech in Flora's speech.**9** Complete the paragraph with the words from the box.

superiority	insistence	shabby	boasts
uniformity	collect	proud	flowers

Flora and Edward are very **(1)** of their house and garden, as the **(2)** on the names of the **(3)** shows. They **(4)** curios. Edward says he cannot stand **(5)** and **(6)** about his essays. The matchseller contrasts with the couple since he is old, **(7)** and disgusting, but is also able to destroy their pride and sense of **(8)**

10 Choose the ending you think most suitable for the play.

A Edward will phone the police and have the matchseller arrested.

B Edward will be turned out of the house by his wife and replaced by the matchseller.

C Edward will get the matchseller to move away from the back gate and go and sell his matches somewhere else.