

Harold Pinter: A Short Introduction

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Harold Pinter is one of the greatest dramatists of modern age. He was born on 10 October, 1930 in Hackney, a working class neighbourhood in London's East End. Pinter's family was originally Portuguese (Jew) whose name was Anglicized from 'da Pinta', when they arrived in England early in the twentieth century via Eastern Europe. His parents both Jewish, were Hyman (Jack) and Frances Pinter. Hyman was a ladies tailor, hard working and mildly prosperous and Harold was his only child.

The early education of Harold Pinter was completed from Hackney Downs Grammar School. He particularly admired his English master Joseph Brearley who was devoted to Theatre and who directed him as Macbeth and Romeo. Inspired by Brearley, Pinter wanted to join Oxford or Cambridge University for higher studies, but at that time, a knowledge of Latin was required of candidates wishing to enter most of the British Universities and Pinter had no Latin. Instead, he managed to get a grant to study at RADA, in London. His decision to learn acting at RADA may have seemed all the more ill-advised when he found himself unhappy at RADA. Pretending a nervous breakdown he left RADA after two terms and roamed about the streets, instead of attending classes and for some time continued to draw his grant and kept his parents ignorant of what had happened. In 1948, on his 18th birthday he became eligible for National Service in the armed forces; this was the system that used to operate in Britain where by all young men had to serve two years in armed forces. Pinter declared himself a conscientious objector, someone whose moral beliefs compel him to denounce war and refuse to engage in military service. Twice he appeared before the magistrate who might have sent him to prison, instead they fined him - first ten then twenty pounds.

In August 1950, he had two poems published in a magazine called Poetry London. These poems were 'New Year in the Midlands' and 'Chandeliers'. In 1953 Pinter was selected to appear in a classical season of plays being held at the King's Theatre, Hammer Smith, London by Sir Donald Wolfit, a famous actor and theatre manager. It was here that he first met actress Vivien Merchant and later married her in 1956. Here Pinter adopted the stage name David Baron.

Pinter wrote the drama 'The Room' (1957) as his first play which was performed by the University of Bristol's Drama Department. His first full length play 'The Birthday Party' baffled reviewers in 1958 and ran only three nights in London. It later made a strong impression on television and was successfully restaged in 1964, by which time Pinter's reputation had been established by 'The Caretaker' (1959), which was also filmed. Several one act plays - 'The Dumb Waiter', 'A Slight Ache', 'The Collection' and 'The Lover' - originally written for B.B.C, radio or television, have been produced in the theatre. A third full length play, 'The Homecoming' was presented by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1965. He has also contributed highly characteristic sketches to West End revues and has adapted 3 novels for the screen: 'The Servant' (by R. Maugham), 'The Pumpkin Eater' (by P. Mortimer) and 'Accident' (by N. Moseley). His plays (which are classed as 'comedies of menace') have claustrophobic settings, drab and occasionally sinister; the characters fail to communicate with one another, and the truth about their situations is not always clear. Pinter has an uncanny ear for dialogue, investing prosaic conversations with intensity, suggestiveness and ambiguity. ~~His ultimate~~

The term "Comedy of menace" best describes the early plays of Pinter. Since the source of

the menace is often not explicit, the effect is a strong sense of floating anxiety. Set in an enclosed area, usually one room, the play implies that the world outside that room is threatening; the circumstances seem ordinary but there is a generalized, unspecified horror settling beneath the action. Mystery and terror are frequently created in the form of unanswerable accusations; nothing is verifiable, and there is a chilling sense of the isolation of people. In his later plays, Pinter transfers the mind. Characters in later plays are well educated and have the means to communicate, but they still choose not to do so. Pinter's strength in this display of non-communication lies in skilful use of language and dialogue which shows the influence of Samuel Beckett. He uses realistic language to underscore the difference between what people say and what they mean, and to emphasize his character's disinclination to understand one-another. Much of the menace as well as the humour of his plays derives from this non-communication.

To have taken possession of so much territory from avant-garde theatre to the mass media - is evidence of Pinter's unusual position on the English scene. In March 1964, Pinter won the British screen writer's Guild Award for his screen play of 'The Servant' a novel by Rosin Maugham. In 1965 Pinter won the British Film Academy Award for the best screen play of 1964. In March 1967, he won the Tony Award for 'The Homecoming' - a full length play.