

Harold Pinter the Wordsmith: *Celebration*.

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Abstract

Nobel Laureate for Literature (2005), Harold Pinter, has established himself as one of the greatest writers in a body of literary work that consists of thirty-two plays, twenty-one film scripts, one novel, and numerous poems. Besides being a prolific writer, he has been a director, an actor, and a political activist in the second half of the twentieth century. As Brigitte Gauthier writes in her preface to *Viva Pinter*, 'Harold Pinter was the Shakespeare of our century'¹. The language in his work, which designedly unlocks the tremendous power of words, is usually concise, fragmented and humorous with a political insight. His study of the structures of language is indeed strikingly present in his very last output *Celebration* (2000), a play whose production coincides with Pinter's 70th birthday and the new millennium. As the characters exchange stories in a luxurious restaurant in London, they find themselves in a battle of words in order to gain superiority, if not recognition, in a subtle power struggle which bears both concealed and noticeable hostility. While the play proposes a sense of lost culture and bygone morals in a milieu of celebration, the characters' initiatives are misplaced in a world of mystery in the new millennium.

Introduction

Pinter has been regarded as one of the most influential English playwrights of the twentieth century. His innovative and influential theatrical style has created such terms as Pinteresque, the Pinter pause, the Pinter moment, and Pinterland. He has contributed greatly to the Theatre of the Absurd and pioneered the 'angry young man' movement by staging plays that treat working-class social realism. In his fifty years of prolific writing career he has produced plays to explore power struggles and hostile relationships among people, futile attempts at communication, emotional cruelty, and the nature of memory. On the surface his dialogue consists of pauses, silences and civilized manner, but underneath manners there lies a strong sense of menace. His most renowned plays *The Caretaker* (1960), *The Homecoming* (1965), *Betrayal* (1978), *A Kind of Alaska* (1982), *Celebration* (1999) and his most highly praised screen adaptations *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1990), and *Lolita* (1997) are tour de force which evidence Pinter's mastery in exploring the anatomy and power of words.

While his early plays such as *The Room* (1957), *The Dumb Waiter* (1959), *The Caretaker* (1960) are characterized by untailored, colloquial, working-class speech, his later plays such as *Betrayal* (1978), *Party Time* (1991), and *New World Order* (1991) portray a

more refined class of people's language expressive of a more subtle use of speech that bears sinister tone underneath an urbane surface. Indeed in *Celebration* we can investigate into verbal abuse buried under a civilized language. The elegant characters in a milieu of classiness employ psychological cruelty, and their only aim is to survive in a battlefield where their means of endurance depends on how ingeniously they manipulate words. The strong sense of menace and cruelty in the plays is accompanied by an element of humour as a result of Pinter's exceptional, inventive, and highly powerful theatrical style. His dialogue employs a realistic reproduction of the beat of everyday speech in a mode of evasiveness which is actually common in daily conversation. Indeed, British Drama Professor Roger Copeland has acclaimed Pinter's dialogue for this matter by asserting that 'No playwright has ever possessed a better ear for the way people actually speak than Harold Pinter.'²

Celebration, with its comical attitude, is a change in mood and character after the severe outlook of political plays that Pinter wrote between 1985 and 2000. The play was produced in March 2000 in a double bill with Pinter's first play, *The Room*, at London's Almeida Theatre. It is set in 'the best restaurant in Europe' and hosts high-profile characters at two separate tables. At Table One, Lambert and his brother Matt dine with their wives, Julie and her sister Prue, celebrating the anniversary of Julie and Lambert. At Table Two, a younger couple, Suki and Russell chat with each other. Their talks not only reveal previous betrayals and distorted memories but also they find themselves in a battle of wits. As the owners of the restaurant Richard and Sonia, and the entertaining Waiter meander between tables, the drama reflects on today's society within an enigmatically comic mode.

Analysis

Pinter gives voice to a group of characters who have come to dine at a restaurant after a gig which is a rather common act for the majority of middle-class Londoners. Although the play is peopled by upscale characters, the coarse vulgarity of the lower-class characters in Pinter's previous plays is even more present in *Celebration*. As the play progresses, the characters enter a world of verbal and emotional abuse. They are at an expensive restaurant following an evening at the theatres which is indeed rather commonplace among middle class English people. In this case the setting of a classy restaurant is highly apt in order to examine metropolitan manners thoroughly. However, as Michael Billington argues 'No one ever gets a Pinter play on a single viewing or reading'.³ *Celebration* is no exception. On the surface Pinter depicts six Londoners who go out to enjoy themselves in a restaurant; however, it soon

becomes clear that other than sheer entertainment there is another level which reflects a sinister air to the meaning of the play. The brothers at Table One introduce themselves as 'strategy consultants' and thus reveal ambiguous and precarious backgrounds. Pinter audiences may easily predict that 'strategy consultants' is evocative of hostility and threat, which is portrayed in an earlier play *Precisely* where two strategy consultants discuss in a highly refined manner the precise number of civilian deaths following a nuclear bombing. The brothers are also reminiscent of peacekeepers in *Party Time*. Indeed, the brothers Lambert and Matt in *Celebration* emphasize that as peaceful strategy consultants they keep the peace worldwide without guns, which in the Pinteresque sense is rather rhetorical and ironical.

The characters' trivial conversation just before they start dinner, in fact, builds up the play's punch peacemeal. Almost every exchange suggests more than what it really pronounces. When Lambert raises his glass to his wife and to his anniversary, he impolitely stops his wife from making a speech to which Julie responds by implying a sense of cruelty layered under a genteel conduct: 'But darling, that's naked aggression. He doesn't normally go in for naked aggression. He usually disguises it under honeyed words.' (42).⁴ It is clear that Julie suffers under her husband's hostility. Lambert expresses rudely: 'We've been married for more bloody years than I can remember' (43). Although it is Julie and Lambert's anniversary there is no sign of love between them. On the contrary, they display an intense dislike and show their abhorrence of each other in a battle of wits. While Lambert ignores his wife and makes fun of her by saying that she is a loyal wife under the table, Julie suggests him to buy a new car and drive it into a brick wall. (11).

A similar wordplay, which bears mockery, insult and menace, takes place between the younger couple at Table Two. Russell and Suki tease each other cruelly. When they talk about Russell's character with empty rhetoric, Suki tells her husband: 'Yes, the thing is you haven't really got any character at all, have you? As such. Au fond. But I wouldn't worry about it. For example look at me. I don't have any character either. I'm just a reed. I'm just a reed in the wind. Aren't I? You know I am. I'm just a reed in the wind.' (13). Russell's respond is awful: 'You are a whore'. In order to keep up appearances Suki answers back by merging Russell's own words, or rather by defending herself with her husband's tactics: 'A whore in the wind' (13). As in the earlier plays like Ruth in *The Homecoming*, and Anna in *Old Times* Suki is cunning enough to hide her displeasure and plays the game of words rather competitively. For Pinter's female characters, anything goes to smash the enemy. And indeed, Suki appears to

accept her husband's insults and control her temper only to fight back in a stronger manner than him and hold the power to conquer his husband's vanity in this war of nerves. Suki continues to play the game calmly. While her husband continues to pester her by imagining her 'with the wind blowing up (her) skirt', Suki never loses her sense of calmness and in a cool manner she carries on with this talk in which she has found herself trapped. However, in Pinter's dialogues there is no hard distinction between the victim and the victimizer. She twists the power balance by lecturing him about men and sensation: 'How did you know the sensation? I didn't know that men could possibly know about that kind of thing. I mean men don't wear skirts. So I didn't think men could possibly know what it was like when the wind blows up a girl's skirt' (14). In other words, Suki always defends herself by the power of words and becomes triumphant over her husband by controlling her serenity, whereas the husband suffers defeat because of his inability to control his temper. He becomes paralysed by his wife's past life, which involves infidelity, and hence trapped in Suki's enigma.

Pinter details the superficial lives of middle-class professionals as he has portrayed in *Betrayal* where every character betrays one another in a world of vacuum and pretension. Almost in every dialogue polite and rude manners are juxtaposed with each other. While the characters at Table One talk about how lovely it is to be at the restaurant, in essence their conversations emphasize a sense of the horrid psyche. By using offensive language they make each other uncomfortable. When Prue, Julie's sister, reminisces a memory from their childhood home, she intentionally distorts the civilized atmosphere of the elegant restaurant: '...when we were babies, when we used to lie in the nursery and hear mummy beating the shit out of daddy. We saw the blood on the sheets the next day.' (21). However, the feeling of abhorrence is ignored and veiled under the repeated rhetoric of how 'lovely' it is to be at the first-class diner. The characters' stream of language in fact reveals their inherent insecurities.

The sisters' chat becomes ridiculous when they both want to kiss Richard, the Chef, on the mouth. The characters' illogical and irrelevant statements emphasize an intricate sense of anxiety, uncertainty and aggression. Lambert emphasizes the fact that 'the standards are maintained with the utmost rigour' in the restaurant. In order to reflect the parallelism between maintaining 'the very highest fucking standards' and 'rigour', which is a precise word to suggest a sense of forceful strict obedience, Lambert's choice of words here is striking. At Table Two, Suki and Russell also tease each other by playing word games. They use foul language in order to give each other embarrassment and discomfort. Suki talks about

Russell's colleagues: '...when you introduce me to them, they'll treat me with respect, won't they? They won't want to fuck me behind a filing cabinet?' (26). Each deplorable moment created by the use of offensive words is followed by an instant of refined conduct in order to highlight the deceitful aspect of language. Pinter depicts how language can be illusory and misleading when employed by insincere people. The characters' attitudes to each other and the language they exploit, in fact, underline any banal everyday circumstance when words are used to distort facts. Indeed the characters' constant juxtaposition of refined and vulgar expressions concurrently suggests Pinter's disapproval of the insincere use of language. He comments on the nature of language: 'A language, where under what is said, another thing is being said'.⁵ Again in an interview, Pinter states clearly that he remains passionately political. Apart from his overtly political plays which he has written in the 1980s and 1990s, almost all of his plays communicate political concerns indirectly. Pinter is not only contemptuous of the abusers of power but he also censures people who ignore the atrocities happening in their immediate environment: 'There's a very low anger that resides in any respectable, intelligent person in this society about what goes on, and how impotent we seem to be to correct what goes on, and how we give power to people who don't deserve to possess power because they abuse it, and manipulate it, and treat people with contempt'. In a way Pinter is criticizing the brothers' manners in their misuse of power and their implementation of psychological oppression on their wives.⁶

Sheridan Morley claims that *Celebration* is Pinter's 'funniest and also perhaps his most accessible script' (Morley, 2000). Ironically, the couples are not in the mood for celebration. As the evening proceeds they find themselves revealing some distasteful truths from their past lives. Lambert recalls an earlier lover in an idyllic environment where he used to take her girl for walks along the river, which is reminiscent of a pleasant romantic relationship between Bates and his girl in Pinter's much earlier play *Silence* (1969). Upon learning that the girl was not herself but someone else, Julie recounts her first meeting with Lambert in an episode where two memories overlap. Her sister, Prue, focuses on Julie's account in which she talks about the day when Lambert falls in love with her on the top of a bus:

PRUE I'll never forget what you said. You sat on my bed. Didn't you? Do you remember?

LAMBERT This girl was in love with me — I'm trying to tell you.

PRUE Do you remember what you said? (36–37)

There are other moments in the play where the characters' memories overlap each other. Pinter's earlier memory plays also deal with how memory works. In such plays as *Old Times*, *Silence*, *Landscape* and *No Man's Land* the characters retreat into their own realms of memory, perhaps to reflect a sense of loss, regret or a desire to live in a fantasy world because the reality of present time is unbearably oppressive. In order to survive in a setting where the character is faced with the naked truth, Pinter's characters usually withdraw into the realm of memory instead of responding to the immediate question as a tactic. This in itself creates a drama of distress and desperation which is part of everyday life. Lambert and Julie immerse into different memories which reflects their lack of connection.

In parallel terms, at Table Two, Russell confesses to his wife Suki that he has betrayed her with a secretary in the past and he likens secretaries to politicians who love power: 'She just twisted me round her little finger' (7). However, to Russell's surprise Suki knows everything about secretaries because she has worked as a secretary once: 'In my time. When I was a plump young secretary. I know what the back of a filing cabinets looks like' (8). She becomes superior to Russell as she recounts her own sexual liaisons as a secretary: 'I could hardly walk from one filing cabinet to another I was so exited [...] men simply couldn't keep their hands off me, their demands were outrageous, but coming back to more important things, they're right to believe in you, why shouldn't they believe in you?' (9). As Russell fails to take control of the interaction, Pinter, indeed, displays re-remembering extramarital affairs and their effect on all parties involved, which have also been a recurring theme in such earlier plays as *Old Times* and *Betrayal*. While the characters mainly talk about sex and power, their exchanges of insults continue at separate tables.

Ben Brantley is also fascinated by Pinter's use of dialogues in which the characters are forced to 'talk their way through separate mazes'⁷ Although they are couples and relatives, in reality each character is lonely, scared of each other and they can be rather cruel and impolite in order to survive in a continual war of words. In that sense, the play's ritzy title, glamorous characters and elegant setting, is deceptive where in reality the playwright is actually presenting a world of predators and victims, 'of intimate strangers and hateful love-making'.⁸

As Pinter continues to portray a slice of victims' and victimizers' lives with their instable and mysterious accounts, the restaurant has become a shelter for them even for a brief moment. The playwright depicts an urgent need for accord and sanctuary amongst chaos and cruelty. For example, Russell describes himself as a 'disordered personality' whom some

people would describe as a 'psychopath' (39). However, when he is in this restaurant he has a sense of 'equilibrium and harmony'. He admits that normally he feels 'malice and hatred towards everyone', but here he feels 'love'. It is because of the intangible ambience which surrounds the characters in the restaurant. The owner, Richard, connects the indefinable ambience of the restaurant to the public house of his childhood that he used to go with his father. He declares that the restaurant is inspired by the pub in his childhood.

Michael Billington emphasizes Pinter's continual fascination with 'hermetic, insulated figures who suddenly find their space invaded and their territory threatened'.⁹ In a satirical manner, Pinter reveals lives of arrogant and impolite people. These smart characters are reminiscent of the group of characters in *Party Time* who are similarly cut from the outside world. Accordingly, the restaurant has become a haven for the diners in which they can retreat themselves. Outside of the restaurant there is a world in which the two brothers work as strategy consultants 'enforcing peace'. Pamela Fisher, too, underlines the fact that the outside world is threatening and it is 'held at bay while the restaurant sanctuary caters to every mood and whim'.¹⁰

The Waiter is also one of the characters who finds solace and refuge in the restaurant. He feels himself at loss in a world of mystery and despair. The Waiter's introjections into the couples' speeches consist of irrelevant narrations, related to some cultural or historical events. The Waiter's fantastical reminiscences of his grandfather establish a sheer contrast to the couples' empty speeches. He introjects absurdly by telling the couples at Table One and Two: 'It's just that I heard you talking about T. S. Eliot a little bit earlier this evening' (31), or 'It's just a little bit earlier I heard you saying something about the Hollywood studio system in the thirties' (49), or 'Well, it's just that I heard all these people talking about the Austro-Hungarian Empire a while ago and I wondered if they'd ever heard about my grandfather' (65). His Grandfather's acquaintance with T.S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, Thomas Hardy and James Joyce is symbolic in a sense that Pinter underlines the great British literary tradition which is an unfamiliar subject in the empty surrounding of the restaurant. Here the Waiter's phantasmagoria of grand literary names and the British heritage in fact romanticizes Englishness and reminds the audience of lost values at the dawn of a new millennium. After a series of bizarre and fantastic combinations, repeated at various times in the play, it becomes clear that the restaurant is 'like a womb' (33) to the Waiter as it is to all the other characters. As Burkman denotes in Pinter's *Celebration* and in his previous plays that revolve around

celebrations such as *The Birthday Party*, *A Kind of Alaska* and *The Homecoming*, ‘there is a pre-oedipal desire to return to the womb or to hide out from life, as well as a terrible fear of death, which is as fearful as life’.¹¹

A sense of nostalgia and lost values is emphasized in the Waiter’s final moving speech. Indeed a phantasmagoric world is magnified by the Waiter’s telescope that he received as a gift from his grandfather. He imagines that he could watch life on a boat on the sea through the telescope: ‘My grandfather introduced me to the mystery of life and I’m still in the middle of it. I can’t find the door to get out.’ (72). He respects his grandfather and he finds himself as a lesser man than his grandfather, because while the grandfather has found that door, the Waiter himself is weak and desperate in a world of mystery and dead end. Although he feels himself in a loophole like Andy who is on his deathbed in Pinter’s *Moonlight* (1993), his last words ‘And I’d like to make one further introjection’ (72), is in fact one more effort to continue. The tragic mood at the end of the play where the Waiter waits in vain is very much a reflection of the human condition where we are mostly inefficient and helpless when faced with life’s mysteries. In retrospect, the audience comes to realize that the play does not only ridicule the three couples’ empty and cruel interactions but also visualizes the tragedy that is inevitable and deplorable.

Although the Waiter’s accounts about his grandfather’s eventful life are simultaneously laughable and sad, Sheridan Morley identifies a strong sense of undeclared menace and mystery juxtaposed to the young waiter’s ‘extraordinary false-memory fantasies’¹² In addition to the menacing tone, the Waiter’s comic fantasies about his grandfather, argues Katherine Burkman, suggest a lost culture and lost values that he longs to recapture. At the play’s end the Waiter occupies the stage alone. He is lost as ever, and is left cut off in complete silence. The Waiter’s final words are addressed to the audience as he confesses that he is in the middle of a mysterious life which was introduced to him by his grandfather and how he yearns for an escape from the pain of everyday life.

As Suki asserts, ‘The past is never the past’, all the characters in the play are haunted by their past, and the present moment is very much under the influence of old times. For example, Lambert recognizes Suki from old times. He remembers being lovers and having a relationship with her by the banks of the river. This remembrance is symbolic of a fantasy of lost love, a desire for anything that is lost in the past really, whether it is a long gone exemplary grandfather, an idyllic past life, a bucolic English lifestyle or past literary

traditions. After all, Pinter depicts nostalgic memories in a touching mode veiled under hostile conversations. As the old couples, and indeed Pinter himself as an old man, approach the inevitable end, the playwright illustrates an almost certain presence of pensive mood, nostalgia and lament. While Julie utters that she would not like another go around with life, Lambert opposes and announces that he would like to live again. He insists that 'I'm going to make it my job to live again. I'm going to come back as a better person, a more civilized person, a gentler person, a nicer person.' (56). Lambert romanticizes a different kind of life which might include love.

In a way, the characters compete to exist in a setting where past and present merge and where they are forced to face up to their memories and plan to act cleverly according to their immediate circumstances. For the characters the stage, which is a total challenge with sudden twists, can be both amusing and anarchic. In Pinter's ingenuity, everyday clichéd speech shifts into realms of aggression and insult.

Pinter admits that he has mixed feelings about words; one of which is related to delight and fascination and the other is related to nausea. As he derives a considerable pleasure from tackling with words, he also finds them such a burden and 'a stale, dead terminology' which pushes one into 'paralysis'.¹³ Thus Katherine H. Burkman deservedly identifies *Celebration* as a 'cautionary play for the new millennium' which anatomizes the empty lives of three couples dining at an elegant restaurant in London. Indeed, Pinter's characters instruct the audience against the use/abuse and exploitation of language in a series of exchanges where the characters both cherish words but at the same time are paralyzed by words. Therefore the characters' mundane responses actually build up the forthcoming tension where they talk about various subjects from incest to betrayals. Thus the ordinary interchanges bear a strategy which causes a sense of threat and hostility.

Conclusion

Typically Pinter's characters use words as weapons and their exchanges have become a power struggle in a war of words. Although there is no action in *Celebration*, there is a merciless struggle among wits and words. Under the characters' ordinary celebratory language exists a complex sinister set of themes about love and hate relationships. Ben Brantley, too, underlines the fact that Pinter's cryptic and unutterably British dialogue, 'the vulgarity of the nouveau riche knows no culture barriers'.¹⁴ In this context, it is not surprising

that the setting of a restaurant which is the place for public behaviour does not establish contrast to the characters' continuous insults and offences. In this struggle of maneuvering among words, and a series of non sequitur, Pinter evokes a life of fantasy, facts and lies and thus creates an atmosphere of complexity, and demands from the audience to appreciate this complexity. In David Morley's words, 'complexity is what writers pass through to gain simplicity and clarity'.¹⁵ Similarly, Pinter's play represents a kind of journey where complex and fragmented matters unfold with the clear image of the Waiter imposing a speech that indicates how vulnerable and intricate emotional connections are.

¹ Brigitte Gauthier, 'Preface to *Viva Pinter*'. The International Symposium, 22-24 March 2007.

² Roger Copeland, 'A Room of his Own'. The Theatre Communications Group. 2006. <http://www.tcg.org/publications/at/2001/room.cfm>

³ Michael Billington, 'We are catching up with this man's creative talent at last'. *The Guardian*, 1 March 2007.

⁴ All references are to this edition of *Celebration: Harold Pinter, Celebration & The Room*. London: Faber and Faber, 2000.

⁵ Harold Pinter, 'The echoing silence'. *The Guardian*. 31 December 2008. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2008/dec/31/harold-pinter-early-essay-writing>.

⁶ Louise Jury, 'Harold Pinter: Not a Word Out of Place'. 22 February 2007.

⁷ Ben Brantley, 'Pinter's Silences, Richly Eloquent'. *The New York Times*. 27th July 2001.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Michael Billington, 'Space Invaders'. *The Guardian*. March 2000.

¹⁰ Pamela Fisher, '*Celebration* and *The Room*'. *San Francisco Examiner*. 21 September 2001.

¹¹ Katherine H. Burkman, 'Desperation in Harold Pinter's *Celebration*'. Paru dans *Cycnos*. Volume 18 n°1, mis en ligne le 16 juillet 2008.

¹² Sheridan Morley, 'Pinter Double'. *The Spectator*. 1 April 2000

¹³ Harold Pinter, 'The echoing silence'. *The Guardian*. 31 December 2008. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2008/dec/31/harold-pinter-early-essay-writing>.

¹⁴ Ben Brantley, 'Lifting the Art of Name-Dropping to a Cosmic Level'. *The New York Times*. 6 December 2005.

¹⁵ David Morley, 'Warwick Writing: Complexity'. 2011. http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/newsandevents/warwickbooks/complexity/david_morley/