

## Social Satire in Harold Pinter's Celebration

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### Abstract

Harold Pinter was one of the most important dramatists in the modern and the contemporary age. Pinter presented his own dramatic realm in which he turns the theatre into a moral institution. He employed the elements of several schools of drama and manipulated them in order to deliver his ethical messages emphasizing the necessity to regain and renew the world's morality in order to face the political and social injustices committed against humanity. His writings developed over more than fifty years in style, techniques and his interests. However, his main concern was his social and political satire.

### هجاء اجتماعي في مسرحية "الاحتفال" للكاتب هارولد بنتر

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### المستخلص

ان الكاتب هارولد بنتر واحد من اهم كتاب المسرح في العصر الحديث والمعاصر يقدم بنتر مجاله المسرحي الخاص الذي يحول المسرح الى مؤسسة اخلاقية لقد تطورت كتابته من حيث الاسلوب ، التقنيات والميول على مايزيد عن خمسين سنة ومع هذا بقي موضوعه الرئيسي الهجاء السياسي والاجتماعي . في مسرحية " الاحتفال " يصور بنتر مثال عن جيل نشأته وتربى على مبادئ القوى والنفوذ من دون ثقافة . بالرغم من انتقاد المجاميع الثلاثة الذين يحتفلون بالمطعم فان التأكيد الاخلاقي واضح كواحد من اهم الافكار الرئيسية في المسرحية . يركز الكاتب على الماضي الذهبي عندما كانت الاجيال تتربى على نظام من الخلاق ، الحضارة والثقافة . ان المجاميع المحتفلة في المطعم هي نماذج عن الناس الذين يسيطرون ويحكمون العالم بالاضافة الى تقديم جيل جشع وجاهل كاحد نتاجات الحرب .

In *Celebration* Pinter portrays an example of the generation that has been raised on the principles of power and money without any education. In spite of his social satire of the three groups celebrating in the restaurant, Pinter's emphasis on morality is obvious as one of the major themes in the play. He focuses on the golden past when generations were raised according to a system of ethics, culture and education. The celebrating groups in the restaurant are samples of the people who control and rule the world; an ignorant greedy generation that is also the product of war.

Over four decades Pinter's plays have progressed from the subversion of contemporary theatrical form, especially the realistic well-made play, through the exploration of time and perception, to the engagement with the international politics of individual freedom.<sup>1</sup> With the production of Pinter's plays of the 1990s, Pinter was described as the nexus between the postwar European avant-garde and British mainstream theatre.<sup>2</sup>

According to the critic Keith Peacock, Pinter's drama has a profound effect beyond the theatre itself since he succeeds in alerting his audiences' perception of the world about them. Pinter's depiction of human behaviour has influenced how man views the behaviour of his fellow humans.<sup>3</sup>

*Celebration* was written in 1999 and was first presented by the Almeida Theatre Company at the Almeida Theatre, London, on Mach 16, 2000. It is about three couples who gather in the most expensive restaurant in London. At one table in the restaurant, two couples are celebrating a wedding anniversary. Lambert, who is a loud and foul-mouthed individual

in his forties, celebrates his wedding anniversary with his wife, Julie, who is in her forties too. His brother, Matt, is attending the celebration with his wife, Prue, who is Julie's sister. At another table, a shady investment banker, Russell, celebrates his recent promotion with his wife, Suki, who works as a teacher. Russell confesses a fling with his secretary.

At the same time, the manager, Richard, with his assistant Sonia and a young waiter, who has extraordinary false memory fantasies, begin to assert themselves as something more than the restaurant staff. The young waiter – named, simply, Waiter in the play – interjects his recollections of a remarkable grandfather who claims that he knew famous writers, art stars and politicians of the early and mid twentieth century.

Lambert recognizes Suki as a woman he has loved. He therefore invites her and Russell to join them at their table. Lambert insists on paying the bill for everyone. All exit, except the Waiter who offers more final interjections. He has the last words in the play.

*Celebration* depicts two banquets and tables in a very expensive contemporary restaurant. A kind of surreal impression of a disastrous sameness in emptiness is given at the knowledge that the two couples consist of sisters being married to brothers. The characters in the play seem to forget anything that matters. Lambert, for example, forgets the important occasion of the celebration of his wedding. Lambert's inability to remember is suggested by the opening lines of the play:

WAITER

Who's having the duck?

LAMBERT

The duck's for me.

JULIE

No, it isn't.<sup>4</sup>

Lambert's lack of knowledge is accompanied by his childlike demand which shows a tone of despair that underlines his conduct throughout the play. He says, "what about me? What did I order? I haven't the faintest idea. What did I order?" (6) His demands are treated with indifference by his wife. Each one of the dining couples forgets what ballet or opera he or she has attended that very evening. In fact, when Richard asks them whether they have been to a theatre or a ballet, neither the men, nor the women are able to answer him. They are vacuous about anything cultural. The couple at the second table share the same ignorance when they are asked by Sonia about what they have been doing, Russell and Suki claim that they have been to the opera where "there was a lot going on. A lot of singing. A great deal, as a matter of fact. They never stopped." (27) Suki's explanation indicates their ignorance and shallowness.<sup>5</sup>

There is an obvious lack of connection between husband and wife revealed through their lack of communication. Through their conversation, there are exchanges of insults: Russell accuses his wife of being a whore; and Julie advises her husband to "go and buy a new car and drive it into a brick wall." (11) Although Suki makes a great effort to hide her contempt for her husband, she belittles him even while she seemingly plies him with compliments. She tells him,

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? (10)

Her explanation why his bosses believe in him shows her contempt towards him. Russell, on the other hand, demands respect from Suki, whom he cannot respect. Suki equates her love for him with money when she tells him, "I mean, listen, I want you to be rich, believe me, I want you to be rich so that you can buy me houses and panties and I'll know that you really love me." (8)<sup>6</sup>

In *Celebration*, Pinter juxtaposes the idea of wealth with power with the aim of presenting an example of the nouveau riche, whose vulgar ways are not obscured by their copious wealth.<sup>7</sup> Lambert's conduct reveals that the concept of money and power are the only things he believes in as he waves fifty-pound notes around after he finishes his dinner. He gives two of them to Richard and one to each of the male and female waiters. His view of Sonia is of a lap-dancer, when he dangles the money in front of her décolletage and tells her to put it in her suspenders.<sup>8</sup> The work of the brothers as strategy consultants requires force and violence which is accompanied by wealth, since money remains in the service of power.<sup>9</sup>

The play shows how women as well men are capable of exercising power. Julie says, "The woman always wins." (58) Russell, who boasts of his power relationships, complains of being exploited by his secretary. He says, "They're all the same, these secretaries, these scrubbers. They're like politicians. They love power. They've got a bit of power, they use it." (9) Pinter depicts empowered elites who see themselves as continuously imperiled by those below them, and who want to control the world. With these scenes of power relationships, the play suggests mobility within social hierarchy; women have inherited the power of men. The play refers to the fact that abusive power and its violence have not changed, but the specific identities of the dominators and the dominated have become unpredictable.<sup>10</sup>

The language which the diners use is obscene and filled with sexual terms. The play provides an accurate exploration of the language of the London East End's shady business milieu and nouveau riche gangsters.<sup>11</sup> Those diners seem to be detached from their past. Their talk of the past is largely connected to subjects of personal affairs. Even their talk of their children implies their emotional detachment from their children as when Matt says, "Children. They have no memory. They remember nothing. They don't remember who their father was or who their mother was .... They don't remember their own life." (42) Pinter's social satire shows the coarse and vulgar surface of those lives.<sup>12</sup> Pinter presents a microcosm of post-Thatcherite Britain, a description of a society controlled by greed and deteriorating educational and intellectual standards.<sup>13</sup>

In sharp contrast to the three couples of the diners, there is the young Waiter whose recollection of the past is a jumbled kaleidoscope of twentieth-century culture and whose emotions are centred on his grandfather. The character of the young Waiter, who interjects through describing his grandfather's memories, represents lost values, and he is insulted by those very would-be chattering classes. His role is a reminder of the dying stratum of society and at the same time addresses the other characters with gentle ridicule.<sup>14</sup> The Waiter "in whose hands the legacy of the past resides ... can only be 'interjected' into the vacuous lives of the celebrators from some realm of desperate memory and hope."<sup>15</sup>

The play portrays three worlds through its characters. The two tables present two worlds, two registers. One is apparently a crass, predatory and successful struggle for power being concealed by wealth, with men and women behaving badly in public. The other one, Russell's and Suki's world, is controlled and suave. What rises to the surface about these two worlds is betrayals, mistrusts and lightly buried phobias.<sup>16</sup> The characters of these two worlds feel anguished and desperate because of their failure to authenticate their existence in any way other than the assertion of power which means that their social gestures conceal the real feelings of fear and pure aggression.<sup>17</sup>

The third world depicted in the play is represented by Richard, Sonia and the Waiter. The diners create a sexualized identity of Sonia and the Waiter who spend most of the play

trying to challenge such identity through Sonia's revelation of little romantic adventures in her past, and the Waiter's stories of the famous people his grandfather knew.<sup>18</sup>

Each character struggles to create an individual identity in the face of the uncertainties of an environment that always threatens to subvert the possibility of selfhood which is revealed through the characters' desperate attempts to invent their traditions. Through the diners' conduct, *Celebration* becomes a dramatization of the results of the breakdown of traditional bourgeois values. Thus, the play is considered a caricature of a high-level consumer society.<sup>19</sup>

The Waiter's interjections present a touching nostalgia for the values of the past that he does not experience. These values exist as part of a pattern of myths he has inherited from upper-class culture represented by the high art, aristocratic history and the popular culture of Hollywood in the thirties and forties of the twentieth century.<sup>20</sup> His interjections give a more human backdrop to the greed and gloating of the diners and serve to depict him as a seeker of historical past and culture. This is also achieved through recounting the impossible acquaintances of his grandfather whose memory sums up the artistic and political tapestry of the twentieth century.<sup>21</sup>

The Waiter utters three monologues, which he calls interjections, in the play. Through these interjections, he obsessively refers to a realm of cultural achievements in sharp contrast to the present.<sup>22</sup> Referring to his grandfather, he says,

He knew them all, in fact, Ezra Pound, W. H. Auden, C. Day- Lewis, Louis MacNeice, Stephen Spender, George Barker, Dylan Thomas, and if you go back a few years he was a bit of a drinking companion of D. H. Lawrence, Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, W. B. Yeats, Aldous Huxley, Virginia Woolf, and Thomas Hardy in his dotage. (30-31)

He also says,

He used to knock about with Clark Gable and Elisha Cook, Jr. and he was one of the very few native-born Englishmen to have had it off with Heady Lamarr. (46)

The Waiter's final speech is a kind of poetic evocation of a past based on love, familial connection and the mystery of various perspectives. His last speech refers to the lost happiness in a world that values only pleasures and power from which he is excluded because it is a world controlled by people like the diners.<sup>23</sup> It also shows the defeat of the Waiter's attempts to engage in the act of articulation because he is left alone. Another thing which the last speech of the Waiter reveals is the source of conflict that lies in the most intimate human relationships, between friends, lovers and marriage partners.<sup>24</sup>

The Waiter's speech also serves to unite the world of the diners to the brutal realities of a worldwide torture.<sup>25</sup> He says,

He [his grandfather] knew these people where they were isolated, where they were alone, where they fought against savage and pitiless odds, where they suffered vast wounds to their bodies, their bellies, their legs, their trunks, their eyes, their throats, their breasts, their balls. (61)

The wounds the Waiter talks about bring back the effect of torture. Pinter combines the suffering of an artist being in exile and the suffering of a victim of political violence.<sup>26</sup>

With this mixture of fury, humour, compassion and hope, Pinter presents the empty lives of the play's characters which make its title *Celebration* ironical.<sup>27</sup> It is obvious that neither group of the diners is in a real mood for celebration. It seems that they suffer from a lack of self-respect, self-trust and self-love. However, Lambert's mood changes when he recognizes Suki as a girl from his past. Suki is a symbol of Lambert's lost love. He says, "I fell in love once and this girl fell in love with me back. I knew she did" (33). This explains his generosity as he insists to pay for everyone including Russell and Suki. He has nostalgia for his past.<sup>28</sup> However, the diners remain "cocooned in their affluent present, and if that present has a past at all, it does not extend beyond sexual encounters more or less fondly remembered."<sup>29</sup>

According to the critic Mark Batty, the play gives a disturbing suggestion that the foundation of peace-keeping to the new world order has become an abused term and a smokescreen for imperialistic power strategies.<sup>30</sup> The clue of the political dimension of the play is shown through the revelation that Russell is a banker, and the two gangsterish brothers are strategy consultants who do not carry guns but are "Worldwide. keeping the peace." (56) Lambert and Matt announce the nature of their work while they enjoy a meal with their wives in the most expensive restaurant in the city to celebrate Lambert's and Julie's wedding anniversary. The groups of people, who gather in this restaurant seeking the delights of food and fun, represent the powerful minority happily steering the course of new Europe and redefining the global power network at the end of the century. Pinter provides a subtle and careful warning that there are "plenty of celebrations to come" (63) for the peace-keepers.<sup>31</sup>

Robert Gordon, a critic, interpreted *Celebration* in terms of the symbol of the restaurant, describing the play "A Drama of Environment".<sup>32</sup> The presentation of the restaurant is interpreted as a symptom and signifier of the reductive materialism of contemporary culture. Through this presentation, Pinter masterly reveals the postmodern subject with a clinical analysis of the developing ways in which power relations have over the last thirty years been produced by the formations of consumer capitalism. Besides, there is a cultural meaning of the restaurant, since it functions as a means to valorize the gross materialism of contemporary culture through its style or class.<sup>33</sup> Suki tells Richard, "Everyone is so happy in your restaurant. I mean women and men. You make people so happy." (36) Richard states,

My father once took me to our village pub. I was only that high. Too young to join him for his pint, of course. But I did look in. Black beams. ... Well, holding the ceiling up in fact. Old man smoking pipes, no music of course, cheese rolls, gherkins, happiness. I think this restaurant –which you so kindly patronize – was inspired by that pub in my childhood. I do hope you noticed that you have complimentary gherkins as soon as you take your seat. (38-39)

Apart from Richard's talk about the décor of the restaurant which is in direct line with the traditional symbol of community represented by his village pub, the real function of the restaurant is to veil the contradictions within the *status quo*, appeasing the diners by offering them sensory pleasures and the comfort of exclusive privilege as gratifications designed to dull their naked fear and aggression. In fact, this restaurant celebrates the exchange of feudal system of class privilege with the power of money. Thus, it is run on strictly authoritarian principles.<sup>34</sup> Lambert comments on this point when he observes,

this is the best and most expensive restaurant in the whole of Europe – because he [Richard] *insists* upon proper standards, he *insists* that

standards are maintained with the utmost rigor, you get me? That standards are maintained up to the highest standards, up to the very highest ... standards. (24)

As a place, the restaurant gives different meanings to the different characters of the play. It is a symbol of a womb for the Waiter who says, "This place is like a womb to me. I prefer to stay in my womb. I strongly prefer that to being born." (32) It stands as a retreat for the guests, and for the staff. It is a place where visitors can be welcomed and received on the restaurant's own terms.<sup>35</sup>

### Conclusion

Pinter has moved from the simple boarding house where Stanley lives in *The Birthday Party* (1958) to a very expensive restaurant where power and money meet in *Celebration* (2000). This transition shows the maturity of the idea of man's suffering; from Stanley who is tortured by hired killers to the guests of the restaurant who are responsible of the tragic destiny of man's suffering since they have power and money which are the main qualities of controlling the world. The guests' ignorance of culture and literature is compared with the Waiter's knowledge as he keeps referring to his grandfather's education. This comparison portrays the ironic situation of the contemporary age when the ruling elite, who control the world, are groups of ignorant people who use obscene language and lack any family ties; while the educated have nothing to do except yearning for the golden past when education and social values were considered the high standards in a society. Man's suffering continues as long as such people control the world imposing new standards that must prevail.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> D. Keith Peacock, *Harold Pinter and the New British Theatre* (London: Greenwood Press, 1997), p160.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.162.

<sup>4</sup> Harold Pinter, *Celebration and The Room* (New York: Grove Press, 1999), p.5. All subsequent references to this play are cited parenthetically within the text by page number.

<sup>5</sup> Katherine H. Burkman, "Desperation in Harold Pinter's *Celebration*", *Cycnos*, vol.18, n.1(2001), pp.3-5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Grimes, *Harold Pinter's Politics: A Silence Beyond Echo* (Madison: Rosemond, 200), p.158.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Gordon, "*Celebration* in Performance: the Drama of Environment", *The Pinter Review: Collected Essays 1999-2000*, ed. Francis Gillen and Steven H. Gale (Florida: The University of Tampa Press, 2000), p.70.

<sup>9</sup> Grimes, p.130.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.129.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Esslin, "Harold Pinter: From *Moonlight* to *Celebration*", *The Pinter Review: Collected Essays 1999-2000*, ed. Francis Gillen and Steven H. Gale (Florida: The University of Tampa Press, 2000) , p.28.

<sup>12</sup> Ronald Knowles, "Harold Pinter 1998-2000," *The Pinter Review: Collected Essays 1999-2000*, ed. Francis Gillen and Steven H. Gale (Florida: The University of Tampa Press, 2000), p.185.

<sup>13</sup> Esslin, p.29.

- <sup>14</sup> Michael Billington, "An Experience of Pinter: Address to the International Conference on Harold Pinter", *The Pinter Review: Collected Essays 1999-2000*, ed. Francis Gillen and Steven H. Gale (Florida: The University of Tampa Press, 2000), p.50.
- <sup>15</sup> Katherine H. Burkman, "Harold Pinter and the Case of the Guilty Pen" *The Pinter Review: Collected Essays 1999-2000*, ed. Francis Gillen and Steven H. Gale (Florida: The University of Tampa Press, 2000) , p.20.
- <sup>16</sup> Peter Raby, "Tales of the City: Some Places and Voices in Pinter's Plays", *The Cambridge Companion of Harold Pinter*, ed. Peter Raby (London: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.59.
- <sup>17</sup> Gordon, p.68.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.70.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.70-71.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.70.
- <sup>21</sup> Mark Batty, *Harold Pinter* (Horndon: Northcote, 2001) , p.117.
- <sup>22</sup> Grimes, p.130.
- <sup>23</sup> Billington, "An Experience of Pinter: Address to the International Conference on Harold Pinter", p.50.
- <sup>24</sup> Grimes, p.132.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.133.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>27</sup> Burkman, "Desperation in Harold Pinter's *Celebration*", p.3.
- <sup>28</sup> Penelope Prentice, *The Pinter Ethic: The Erotic Aesthetic* (New York: Garland, 2000), p.392.
- <sup>29</sup> Reitz, p.177.
- <sup>30</sup> Batty, pp.116-117.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>32</sup> Gordon, p.66.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.66-68.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p.68.
- <sup>35</sup> Billington, "An Experience of Pinter: Address to the International Conference on Harold Pinter", p.50.

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