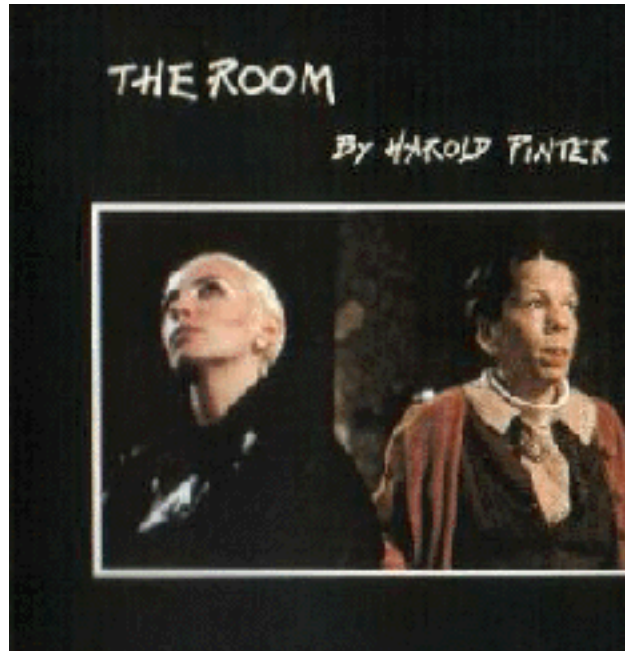


Harold Pinter and the Fragmentation of Working-Class Consciousness

Leonard A. Stone



Poster for the film of *The Room*, starring Annie Lennox and Linda Hunt and directed by Robert Altman

Introduction

During 1980s and 1990s, scholarship on the playwright Harold Pinter failed to locate the dramatist's fascination with working-class consciousness, just as scholarship prior to the 1980s failed to appreciate his interest in the working class. Pinter's (re)presentation of late-fifties working-class consciousness in *The Room*¹ can also be seen as a projection of sixties working-class consciousness -- the condition and quality of -- given the similar strains, disunity and non-coherence of working-class consciousness described in his plays after *The Room*. In short, depictions of working-class consciousness in his later plays are quite simply variations on the theme set out in his first play.

In *The Room* the consciousness of working-class characters is one of despair, even disrepair. Working-class consciousness in the hands of Pinter has become separate, single and individualist in preference to the common interest. Consciousness exists as a distinct entity to the exclusion of others. What exists now is *private consciousness*. In terms of

solidarity it bears none of the hallmarks of class loyalty and by de facto antagonism toward the bourgeois 'higher class'. Pinter's depiction of working-class consciousness is far removed from collectivist rhetoric. His conception of working-class consciousness is one of fragmentation, of particularism. Moreover, Pinter's working-class characters take this particularism to its extreme. It follows that working-class consciousness has not only been fragmented but also taken one stage further and extinguished. Pinter's working class -- like D. H. Lawrence's working class -- are not engaged in class conflict. They also lack any form of political consciousness. Working-class characters in Pinter's plays are oppressed. This oppression is taken a stage further with Pinter in that it now takes the acute form of mental anguish. What is left at the end of the day is that there is no longer a working-class consciousness as *class consciousness*. Instead, only private consciousness exists along with its petty bourgeois connotations.

The Room

In the first instance, the reader is left in no doubt that the characters in Pinter's *The Room* are working class (as they are in the majority of his early plays, e.g., *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter*). For instance, Bert's attire is stereotypical working-class dress: with his 'cap' and 'muffler'. More to the point Bert earns his 'living' in the distribution section of the economy as a van driver. At the opening of the play his partner Rose serves him what for many is a traditional driver's 'fry-up' -- bacon and eggs with sauce, bread and cup a of tea (p. 101). Most significantly all the characters speak in the idiom of their class, i.e., the working class. It is a 'restricted code' which leads Taylor to note: 'the language which the characters use is an uncannily accurate reproduction of everyday speech. In this respect Pinter far from being the least realistic dramatist of his generation is arguably the most realistic.'²

The 'room' itself lacks comfort and is poor and grubby. The working-class 'kitchen sink' is prominent (as contrasted to the middle-class 'drawing room') and the foot of the double bed 'protrudes from alcove', (p. 101). Accordingly this restricted setting remains far from any notions of middle-class affluence. According to B. Dukore, Pinter establishes this authenticity, i.e., of the working-class characters and their milieu, by taking a leaf out of Osborne's play *Look back in Anger*, which 'realistically depicted their milieu . . . which inspired young playwrights to portray similar people in a similar manner'.³

It is worth bearing in mind that the working-class 'everyday' speech of the characters, except for the silent Bert, forms a dialogue which in fact communicates little. Rose's opening monologue is just that -- a monologue! Her husband sitting and reading a magazine simply does not respond. This monologue is, however, important in itself because it contains linguistic links to various scenes in the play, e.g., comments about 'darkness' and 'murder'. Esslin views this speech somewhat differently. Rose is forcing her solitude on Bert: 'the woman is fighting to maintain the relationship. The man remains cold. When will he abandon the woman?'⁴ Either way there is no doubt that it remains an extremely difficult task to allocate any reasonableness to Rose's 'talk'; and indeed also to various forms of dialogue taking place throughout the play. Quite simply,

words cannot be taken at face value. This brings to mind the Clown's dictum in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*: 'words have grown false / I am loath to prove reason with them', (II, i).[5](#)

There is unwillingness, conscious or otherwise, of these human beings to communicate: to make contact with each other. Although conversations between, for instance, Rose and Mr. Kidd are comic, they also help create an atmosphere of evasion, non-coherence and menace. Here one must remember that dialogue between characters is disconnected, severed and at cross-purposes. Matters are concealed, deliberately or otherwise, and above all else confused. Take, for example, the following dialogue that takes place between Rose and Mr. Kidd:

'Anyone live up there?'

'Up there? There was. Gone now!'

'How many floors you got in this house?'

'Floors (he laughs) Ab, we had a good few of them in the old days!'

'How many have you got now?'

'Well, to tell you the truth, I don't count them now'.

'Oh!', (p. 108).

Quite aside from the imbecilic nature of this conversation, Kid it seems could be referring to tenants upstairs rather than floors. It remains uncertain. There is a kind of concealment. The unreality of memory also has an effect on dialogue according to Dukore.[6](#) Take, for instance, Rose, who is nonplussed when meeting Riley, whom she apparently knows: 'I don't know who you are' (p. 122).

It seems clear that these working-class characters fail to communicate with each other as they continually talk at cross purposes -- to the point of absurdity. Once again, note this verbal exchange between Rose and Mr. Kidd (while Bert remains silent):

'Hallo, Mr. Hudd, How are you, All right? I've been looking at the pipes'.

'Are they all right?'

'Eh?'

'Sit down, Mr. Kidd'.

'No that's all right. I just popped in like -- to see how things were going. Well, its cosy in here isn't it? I went out. I came straight in again. Only to the corner, of course!'

'Not many people about today, Mr. Kidd', (pp. 105-06).

Conversation is again confused, discontinuous and repetitious. Pinter himself confirms that his characters are 'inexpressive giving little away, unreliable, elusive, evasive and unwilling'.⁷ This particular conversation also contains elements of esoteric symbolism, especially concerning the seating arrangements.

The character structure of the working class people in *The Room* contain contradictions which are really inexplicable. Rose for instance talks of how warm the room is and yet she 'wraps her cardigan about her' (p. 104). Again, at one point Kidd rambles on about his family, yet he refuses to respond when Rose asks what his younger sister dies of. After his departure Rose says: 'I don't believe he had a sister, ever!' (p. 110). A further instance can be seen with references to the 'dark' of the outside, and yet the room in which the heroine lives is itself dark. According to Mr. Sands: 'Darker in than out for my money' (p. 113). This contradiction, this lack of explanation, remains a hallmark of Pinter according to Hinchliffe: 'Like all statement of fact in Pinter, they are capable of neither proof nor denial'.⁸

Overriding these contradictions, however, is the ever-present atmosphere of disturbance, anxiety, insecurity and fear. This is the post-war world, a world devoid of security or quietness of mind, calmness and assurance, certainty and safety and peace, in which the working class find themselves. *The Room* itself is, on one level, supposed to represent security from the outside world. According to J. Pesta, the room itself represents 'an island of conscious security afloat upon a dark sea'.⁹ It is a security liable to rupture from the outside. The room in fact remains the crucial element within some of the author's best plays. Pinter explains: 'I went into a room and saw one person standing up and one person sitting down and a few weeks later I wrote *The Room*. I went into another room and saw people sitting down and a few years later I wrote the *Birthday Party*. I looked through in a third room and saw two people standing up and I wrote *The Caretaker*'.¹⁰ According to Ganze, moreover, 'the room becomes for Pinter a way of blocking out the diffuse claims of the external world'.¹¹

Fear of this 'external' creates a dramatic tension within the play. Rose, for example insists that 'nobody bothers us' (p. 103). Yet the action of the play demonstrates a succession of intruders who in fact do bother them. The Hudd's room is directly threatened when Mr. Sands, enquiring about renting a room, informs Rose: 'the man in the basement said there was one. One room. Number seven he said!' Pause, Rose: 'That's this room', (p 118). As Esslin suggests: 'To Rose, the very idea that the room which she regards as hers should be talked about as being let is tantamount to a death sentence'.¹²

From a different perspective the room itself can be viewed within a Freudian context -- i.e., a 'womb-substitute'. The intruder comes from outside to disrupt the

supposedly 'comfortable world' bounded by four walls, to break the womb, as it were. Fear is centred on the unexpected knock on the door. Interestingly enough this fearful intrusion can arguably be related to the author's own childhood as a Jew growing up in the war in the East End of London -- a time when the menace of anti-Semitism would have particularly disturbed any child, especially a Jewish child. In this post-war world, however, the menace of violence is of a different kind -- specifically psychological. The actions of the working-class characters in this post-war world are in part based on this kind of fear, and in part based on inexplicable actions, both illogical and unmotivated. This new world seems capricious.

This last point is brought to bear by emphasis on linguistic absurdity. Pinter does little to construct rational links through dialogue. He implies what he does not elucidate. Life is contingent and, finally, absurd for the working-class character. It is worth remarking in turn that working-class consciousness is traumatised -- consciousness has become self-enclosed and self-destructive. These working-class characters in *The Room* are divided characters. They do not know who they are. J. Peter informs us that: 'Pinter is the master of the divided self. . . . Pinter's characters portray a well-balanced schizophrenia, and his characters tamper with it at their peril'.¹³ Pinter's plays are on one level plays about psychological warfare. *The Room* is such an example.

Psychologically his working-class characters are secretly anguished. Here we encounter their self-enclosed consciousness, or private consciousness, which is at odds with the outside world, the threatening social context. Bert, for instance, trivial as it may appear, even views cars as a threat. While making a delivery in his van he himself reacts violently when he sees one: 'I bumped him. I got my road' (p. 126). However, although the blind Negro, Riley, is the most non-realistic character in the whole oeuvre (his appearance at the end of the play, is confusing as he wants Rose, whom he calls 'Sal', to come home to her 'father'), it is necessary to grasp that it is his appearance which symbolises the 'threatening' social context.

The social context, in the sense of the community as an aggregate body, does appear as a threatening theme in a number of Pinter's plays, e.g., viewed as such by Stanley in *The Birthday Party*. This threat of a social context, a threat originating in society according to Gale,¹⁴ is a constant threat of invasion which creates an air of menace. As in *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter* the disintegration of the individual under the pressure of menace is precisely the disintegration of the self in the face of society. The point made by Gale that menace simply originates in society is brought about acutely in *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter*. Although no specific facets of society are singled out, it is society, community, or conceptually the social context which is itself singled out by Pinter. The dark-skinned Riley symbolises this 'dark outside' or social threat. Characters cannot cope rationally with the external -- hence, Bert's brutal assault on Riley: 'He strikes the Negro, knocking him down, and then kicks his head against the gas-stove several times' (p. 126). The outside world in the form of Riley has entered their room. It has penetrated their secluded consciousness, symbolised no less by the transference of Riley's blindness to Rose: 'Can't see, I can't see, I can't see' (p 126).

With the development of this secluded consciousness the absurd 'takes off', so to speak. This extreme private, as opposed to gregarious or social, consciousness means in effect that consensus is impossible. The crucial point to grasp here is that the use of language provides an excellent vehicle to illuminate this post-war breakdown in communication between these working-class characters. Language is used by the author to relate solely to the subjective private matter of the individual rather than as a vehicle for ideas in the traditional sense. Pinter himself in a speech to the National Student Drama Festival in Bristol in 1962 indicated his interest in the underlying 'private matter' of the individual, 'the thing unspoken'.¹⁵

The prominence of the underlying 'private matter' of the characters in *The Room* in effect means that consciousness itself is bound within the privateness of the individual. In short, the working class have become isolated as each character is severed from one another; working-class consciousness in Pinter's *The Room* has become dismembered. Fellowship has completely broken down. What is left is a series of sectionalised consciousnesses. Each character is 'roped-off', insular and almost totally confined to their private terms of reference. Pre-war collectivist working-class consciousness -- the collectivist rhetoric, for example, of D. H. Lawrence's working-class characters -- has been ruptured in Pinter's post-war world to such an extent that only a series of peripheral, inaccessible and remote consciousnesses now exist.

Clearly, fragmentation of working-class consciousness remains an understatement here. Consciousness is so withdrawn that it no longer pertains in any way to the idea of community. What should be understood is that Pinter's working-class characters, although experiencing the same environment (in this case the large house and room) and using the same working-class idiom of speech, nevertheless find themselves in a depth of space, cut adrift from one another. They are, then, completely disunited and disconnected. Characters cannot and do not make a conscious effort to communicate within a rational framework. Quite simply in Pinter's hands post-war working-class consciousness, as class-*consciousness* in and for itself, is absent.

Although a form of consciousness does exist with Pinter's working-class characters, namely private consciousness, it is an antisocial and apolitical consciousness -- apolitical in the sense that their stance or viewpoint does not have as part of its central purpose progressive intentions regarding the institutions through which power is exercised. However, as Scruton notes: 'Since all social change is likely to have some *effect* on those institutions and may even cause a necessary revision in their structure, it is always possible to give a political interpretation to a stance which is apolitical'.¹⁶ In this respect there may be no fundamental differences 'between these acts which have a political *intention* and those which merely have political consequences'.¹⁷ Nevertheless, in terms of a cogent body of political ideas and actions or even mere opinion, Pinter's working class show no preference for a political viewpoint. As such no political intentions accompany their acts, or any substantial consequences.

It can be stated that by not engaging in political activity or discussion, such apoliticalness can be construed as supportive of the status quo. However, to lend this air

of conservatism to an apolitical working-class consciousness does not really seem convincing. Especially with regard to a consciousness caught up in a whirlpool of irrationality and absurdity. In a general sense it is quite sufficient here to suggest that Pinter's working class in a political context possess an apolitical consciousness. Marx, as we know, had another term for this form of consciousness prevalent amongst the proletariat: false consciousness.

This apoliticalness (in terms of working-class non-political action) has serious political implications because these characters remain incommunicado with little or no platform of understanding. What is remarkable is that there is absolutely no possibility of political mobilisation through communication of socialist political ideas or political prescriptions. The author's own politicisation has not always been smooth. For example, in British general elections he voted left with Labour until 1979 when irritation with the trade unions led him to vote right with the conservatives. He voted Labour in 1983 and 1987.¹⁸ Today Pinter engages in 'issue politics', supporting, for instance, the former leader of Yugoslavia, Milosovic, and Kurdish rights; and opposing NATO operations and blood sports.

In his plays, furthermore, Pinter the pessimist offers no hope for working-class liberation. Any notions, for instance, of solidarity have been ditched in favour of an extreme version of an 'I'm all right, Jack' attitude. Any notions of altruism or class solidarity are completely absent. Instead a selfish 'pragmatism' rules the day.

From a different angle Pinter's working class, caught up in a modern world, *Gesellschaft*, find themselves alienated within the structures of advanced capitalism. Each character in this respect is estranged from himself, *entfremdung*. From a Hegelian perspective, Pinter's characters experience a divorce between the self and the objectifications which it has 'posited' out as itself. The fracture between the ideal objectification and the fallen self is experienced as a thoroughgoing imperfection in all conscious life. Hegel calls this state the 'unhappy consciousness'.¹⁹ Most significantly estrangement from the self is, as Scruton points out, 'conjoined with estrangement from others.'²⁰ Pinter's working-class character, alienated from his/her self (their *Geahungswesen*) and estranged from others, ceases to have reality for his/her self. Instead they project their essence and value, in a Marxist sense, into objects (in this case a room) which they pursue. Their life is seen only as a means, whereas the room is seen as an end, which in Rose's case is seen with an intrinsic value that in reality cannot belong to it. Pinter's proletariats are prime examples of alienated consciousness.

Pinter views working-class consciousness in terms of its consequences: mental alienation, mental anguish and insecurity. In this way the working-class characters are totally oppressed, both internally and externally. Once this is grasped we can see more clearly that they suffer acute inner-anguish while externally their oppression arises from false notions of security gained through petty bourgeois values such as, in this case, security through private property. This idea has permeated their consciousness. Never-to-be-realised petty bourgeois aspirations are, for example, in evidence with the brothers Aston and Mick in *The Caretaker*. In *The Room* a never-to-be-realised petty bourgeois

notion of security through private property is shown in a specific light by the author, i.e., predominantly its fallibility. In this respect the consciousness of Pinter's working-class characters, although depicted in its extreme, private form, conversely accrues more with petty bourgeois consciousness. What matters is that for Pinter's working class to adopt such a consciousness in its extreme form is to adopt it at their peril. The result in a very real sense is an extreme private fear of the social *per se*. As such the working class find themselves in a nightmarish situation. A modern dystopia where there is a complete absence of harmony.

Pinter's post-war Britain is a bad place to live in for its proletarian inhabitants. His characters find themselves living in what could be termed a modern, advanced capitalist dystopia, i.e., a bad place. In this sense, and only this, *The Room* can be located in the bad-place tradition of Swift and Samuel Butler and their twentieth century successors Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (1925), George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1944), and Aldus Huxley, *Brave New World* (1932). Although Pinter's characters do not fight against an all-powerful bureaucratic authority, inhabit a world of 'double talk', or find themselves part of a process of standardisation by enforced laws, they do inhabit an equally nightmarish world. What is perhaps less evident is that Pinter's dystopia is a psychological one. The world of the 'dark', alienated mind, no less. Each character exists within an irrational framework of behaviour. It is evident that there is consequently little or no harmony, and because there is no harmony, Pinter's disrupted world stands in complete contrast to utopian societies -- i.e., a world where harmony facilitates the emergence of an ideal social order.

No further comparisons can be made between *The Room* and other dystopian literary texts because Pinter's play does not trade in rule making and rule application -- the central core of dystopian/utopian texts. Rather, he trades primarily in the consciousness and dismal quality of working-class life. Even though the consciousness of Pinter's petty bourgeois working class remains detached from Marxist representations of working-class consciousness, his working class still share a number of essential features with Marxist notions of the position of the proletariat in an advanced capitalist society. For Pinter the working class are overshadowed by a higher class; by 'their' presence. The presence, that is, of 'their' values. Pinter's proletariat suffer the consequences of acquiring, at the hands of the dramatist, a dominant post-war, petty-bourgeois notion of individualism as a separate existence that takes precedent over the collective. There is no room for a collective being in this notion. Individuals in this extreme Pinteresque sense exist quite apart from any notions of working-class collectivist consciousness, a class existing *for* itself.

Pinter's working class in no way reflect the consciousness of middle-class characters found in 1950s and 1960s writings of Kingsley Amis and Iris Murdoch. There is a major difference between Pinter's representation of the acquired consciousness of his working-class characters and the bourgeois consciousness of Amis and Murdoch's middle-class characters. In short, Pinter's individualist working-class characters do not possess the wherewithal to sustain this individualist life. They do not have the necessary attributes to

carry it off -- e.g., education, relative affluence or confidence, to name but three attributes that are in attendance in the bourgeois consciousness of Amis's or Murdoch's characters.

Pinter's working class are disadvantaged in post-war British capitalist society. In this respect little has changed from some of the pre-war British writers who depicted the sorry plight of the working class in Britain. Orwell, for instance, earlier drew on this theme for some of his memorial writings -- e.g., *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

Pinter's working-class characters are unsuccessful in their lives. They are unsuccessful examples of socialisation in post-war Britain. What we have come to understand is that in terms of concrete attitudes Pinter's working class have little in common with Marxist representations of concrete working-class attitudes.

Conclusion

In Pinter's plays the capitalist system has no importance attached to it. Neither is there a shared recognition of collective identity; nor a community regulating attitudes. Moreover, Pinter's characters seem to 'float' rather than actually survive in a hostile system. A sense of 'what is' rather than 'what could be' pervades the consciousness of these proletarian characters. There is one overriding factor, nevertheless, which does unite Pinter's representation of the consciousness of his working-class characters with the type of working-class consciousness represented by Marx. That is quite simply the existence of a 'higher class'.

Pinter's working class, like the working class in D H. Lawrence or Orwell, are brought together for good or evil as a social grouping into a common experience -- that of the oppressive bourgeoisie. In contrast to Lawrence or Orwell the proximity of the bourgeoisie in relation to Pinter's working class is not a physical one (as it is for instance in Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*, or in the form of mechanisation in Lawrence's 'mining stories'). Rather, it is of a dominant psychological kind -- i.e., in the form of hegemonic bourgeois values and accompanying individualist notions. It is arguable that the room itself does in part concretise for the author this small-minded individualism (small property). Clearly, however, any other similarity between Pinter's working class and the working class of Lawrence or Orwell ends at this juncture. It may be hard to imagine but in Pinter's post-war Britain, finally, a type of petty bourgeois consciousness has superseded working class consciousness. Be that as it may, a final point may be worth mentioning. This is that Orwell would no doubt turn in anguish in his grave at this outcome, just as Pinter's working class turn in their post-war dystopian graves.

References

- [1](#) H. Pinter (1976) *Plays One*, London: Methuen.
- [2](#) J. Taylor, (1969) *Anger and After: A Guide To New British Drama*, London, Methuen: 325.
- [3](#) B. Dukore, (1982) *Harold Pinter*, London: Macmillan: 4.
- [4](#) N. Esslin, (1979) *Pinter - A Study of his Plays*, London: Methuen: 61.
- [5](#) W. Shakespeare in B. Dukore, *Harold Pinter*: 8.
- [6](#) B. Dukore, *Ibid.*: 9.
- [7](#) H. Pinter in B. Dukore, *Ibid.*: 11.
- [8](#) A. Hinchcliff, (1967) *Harold Pinter*, New York: Twayne: 43.
- [9](#) J. Pesta, (1972) 'Pinter's Usurpers' in A. Ganz (ed.), *Pinter: A Collection of Critical Essays*, New Jersey: Prentice: 125.
- [10](#) H. Pinter in A. Ganze (ed.), *Ibid.*: 12.
- [11](#) A. Ganze, *Ibid.*: 12-13.
- [12](#) M. Esslin, (1970) *Pinter: A Study of his Plays*, London: Methuen: 63.
- [13](#) S. Peter, (1981) 'Harold Pinter', *Sunday Times*, 28/6/81: 32.
- [14](#) S. Gale, (1978) *Harold Pinter: An Annotated Bibliography*, Boston: G.K. Hall: ixiii.
- [15](#) H. Pinter, (1976) 'Writing for the Theatre' in *Plays One*: 13.
- [16](#) R. Scruton, (1982) *Dictionary of Political Thought*, London: Macmillan: 19.
- [17](#) *Ibid.*: 19.
- [18](#) See 'Profile on Harold Pinter', *Observer*, 16/10/88: 13.
- [19](#) F. Hegel in R. Scruton, *Dictionary of Political Thought*: 11.
- [20](#) R. Scruton, *Ibid.*: 11.