

HAROLD PINTER (1930-2008)

Nobel Prize-winning playwright, screen writer, director and actor.

MAIN PRIMARY TEXTS

The Room (1957), *The Birthday Party* (1957),
The Caretaker (1959), *The Homecoming*
(1964)

OTHER TEXTS CONSIDERED

The Examination (1955), *The Dumb Waiter*
(1959), *The Hothouse* (1958), *Tea Party*
(1963), etc.

FOCUS

Identity presented as fragile throughout Pinter's oeuvre, though issues of personal identity are most fully explored in the early 'room plays', or 'comedies of menace'

•**Lack of identity**- several characters are presented as having no traceable identity- to the point where the audience (and possibly they) do not know their real names

•**False identity**- many characters could be described as 'imposters'- they are purposefully misleading those around them about their true identity- either that, or they are willing to accept any identity haphazardly imposed on them by others

•**Metamorphosis**- in some cases, characters trade identities within the duration of the play- does this suggest the arbitrariness of identity, or something more significant?

•In other cases, the notorious 'victim/victimiser' roles present in many of Pinter's plays are switched: the ultimate victim of the play can be seen in earlier scenes to be 'victimising' someone else

•**Breakdown**- Often, the apparent 'breaking down' of a character's identity leads to a mental breakdown or sudden physical impairment – most commonly blindness

Therefore, identity is presented as fragile in Pinter's early work in many different ways. There have been several critical works which have sought to provide explanations for these identity crises, ranging from: personal crisis as representative of the larger social crises prevalent in post-war Britain, to the fractured identities of the characters as representative of the fractured identity of Pinter as a London born Jewish playwright growing up after World War 2.

Fractured Identity in the Work of Harold Pinter

CONCLUSIONS

- The causes of the fractured identities of Pinter's characters are wide reaching
- Though Pinter was not overtly addressing contemporary fractures in British society, they clearly impacted upon his early work in the form of a concern with: race, immigration, religion, etc.
- However, these concerns do not legitimise Pinter being termed an 'Angry Young Man', and being placed within the same group as post-war British playwrights such as John Osborne and Edward Bond
- Pinter was more concerned with individual human behaviour than a larger social problem- and perhaps most significantly- with the way in which our use of language allows us to control our own identities- whether through overtly lying, withholding information, talking excessively in order to avoid a problem, etc.

SECONDARY CRITICISM

Though there is a range of criticism available on Pinter's work, his popularity appears to have waned in recent years. Though seminal works such as Michael Billington's *Harold Pinter* (2007) are extremely useful, much of the best criticism available is from the 1970s/80s, a time at which Pinter was writing new plays regularly and beginning to enter a new literary genre: political writing. This move into the overtly political caused a wave in secondary criticism, as academics sought to create links between Pinter's early 'room' plays and his later political plays.