Pinter’s Language of Anxiety and Menace

Pinter’s plays are, in a sense, experiments in presenting states of mind. These experiments are necessitated both by his need to reach beyond the concerns of realist drama, and by his acute awareness of the limitations of conventional dramatic methods. Pinter’s method is to use characters and his dialogues in such a way to undermine the effect of realism, in order to communicate more than what realism can. To him, “the more acute the experience, the less articulate its expression” (Introduction “Writing for...” 11). He explores the possibility of using even ‘silences’ and ‘pauses’ in his plays to articulate experiences which usually remain inarticulate.

A craftsman with a gift of the subtle use of language, Pinter expresses his attitude to language and silence in these oft-quoted lines:

There are two kinds of silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed. This speech is speaking of language locked beneath it. That is its continuous reference. The speech we hear is an indication of that which we don’t hear.

(Introduction “Writing for...” 14)

Pinter uses these two kinds of silences to express the feelings and states of mind of his characters.

Most of his early plays present characters who are prone to anxiety. Pinter makes his characters show peculiarities of behaviour which psychologists would identify as responses characteristic of anxiety-ridden minds. Some of these behavioural peculiarities are: ① talking too much, ② talking little, ③ evasiveness, ④ reading, ⑤ repetition in speech, and ⑥ resorting to violence.
Talking at length is a trait shared by many of the characters in the plays he wrote in his first phase. Rose in *The Room*, Gus in *The Dumb Waiter*, Meg and Lulu in *The Birthday Party*, and Edward and Flora in *A Slight Ache* are some of them. Rose is a woman in her sixties. When she appears on the stage she seems to be a dutiful wife very much concerned about her husband and herself. In the opening scene itself she speaks of many things, especially about the security she feels in the room and the wifely obligations she owes to her husband. However, there are frequent indications in her words that she is considerably tense at heart, even when her husband is there to protect her in the room.

During her first dialogue lasting about ten minutes, Rose speaks casually about the threats she feels outside, and at the same time, about the security she feels inside her room:

ROSE. Here you are. This'll keep the cold out... Still the room keeps warm. It's better than the basement anyway. (7)

While talking to her husband, Rose expresses anxiety of various kinds. Besides her apprehension about the outside, she seems to be bothered about her neighbours. She says, “I don’t know how they live down there. It is asking for trouble” (7). She keeps on telling him, “Eat it up. It’ll do you good” (7). After a few minutes we hear her speak again: “It’ll be dark in a minute as well, soon (she rocks). It gets dark now...” (9). This feeling resounds in her words: “This is a good room. You’ve got a chance in a place like this. I look after you, don’t I Bert” (11). In these words we can see a disturbed state of mind which makes her speak in the same vein for a long time.

True to her apprehension, an external interference—Riley, a stranger—comes in
with a message for her. She becomes eloquent once more. She asks him, “What do you think you are up to? We are settled down here, cosy, quiet, and our landlord thinks the world of us, we’re his favourite tenants, and you come in and drive him up the wall, and drag my name into it!” (29). Whenever Rose talks at length, she is tense and her words indicate some unspecified anxiety in her.

In the play The Dumb Waiter, we see Gus as equally tense as Rose in The Room. While Gus and Ben speak through the speaking tube, occasionally Gus becomes eloquent and rebellious. When he realises that they are not in a position to satisfy the demands made by the authority upstairs, he goes on speaking at length about their pitiable plight and the indifference of their masters. Gus remarks, “What are we supposed to drink?” (63). Their anxiety is caused mainly by their total ignorance of what happens upstairs. Again he asks: “You don’t think they’re just going to sit here and wait for stuff to come up from down here, do you?” (64) According to Martin Esslin, “the main element of comedy [in the play] is provided by the brilliant small talk behind which the two men hide their growing anxiety” (TA 69). Gus’s excessive talking is an effort to mask his anxiety.

In the opening scene of The Birthday Party, Meg repeats her questions thirty three times almost consecutively. Hardly seeking any relevant information, and hardly backed by serious desire to know, these questions indirectly manifest her anxiety. The questions are mostly silly and insignificant, and Petey’s responses too are casual in nature and indifferent in tone. Giving Petey cornflakes, Meg asks him:

MEG. . . . Are they nice?

PETEY. Very nice.
MEG. I thought they would be nice. (she sits at the table.) You got your paper.

PETEY. Yes.

MEG. Is it good?

PETEY. Not bad.

MEG. What does it say?

PETEY. Nothing much. (9-10)

This sort of small talk with no focus reveals a disturbed mind. Guido Almansì and Simon Henderson find here “the paradigm of existential chat” (43). They point out that “[Meg] plays her futile word games for the serious purpose of having her own existence confirmed by the sound of a reciprocal voice, by the mere sequence of a mutual exchange” (43). This sequence of mutual exchange comes out of existential anxiety. This anxiety makes their words and sentences short and brief. Again while Meg is reading the newspaper Petey comments:

PETEY. I’ve finished my cornflakes.

MEG. Were they nice?

PETEY. Very nice.

MEG. I’ve got something else for you.

PETEY. Good. (11)

When Meg announces that two men are coming there to stay, Stanley becomes upset. Realising this Meg asks whether Stanley knows either of them and Stanley recalls the name of one of them. Sensing his anxiety, she too becomes tense and starts speaking as if sharing Stanley’s state of mind:

MEG. That’s right. That was one of them.
(Stanley slowly sits at the table, left.)

Do you know them?

(Stanley does not answer)

Stan, they won't wake you up, I promise. I'll tell them they must be quiet.

(Stanley sits still)

They won't be here long, Stan. I'll still bring you up early morning tea.

(Stanley sits still)

You must be sad today. It's your birthday.

(A pause) (35)

Stanley in the play also speaks too much when he is possessed by anxiety. When Meg informs him of the arrival of the visitors, he asks a number of questions.

STANLEY. Who are they?

MEG. I don't know.

STANLEY. Didn't he tell you their names?

MEG. No.

STANLEY. (pacing the room) When was this? When did he see them?

(20)

The strange visitors arouse not only curiosity in Stanley but also anxiety. Again when he hears that they have come, this flares up his curiosity.

STANLEY. They have come?

MEG. They're very nice, Stan.

STANLEY. Why didn't they come last night? (34)
And when Stanley is asked about his past, once more he becomes anxious, and turns
eloquent:

MCCANN (sitting at the table, left). You in business?

STANLEY. No. I think I'll give it up. . . . (40)

Whenever Stanley speaks at length he is found to be in a state of anxiety and tension. An
anxiety of the same kind can be observed in Goldberg and McCann also when they reach
the seaside boarding house. Goldberg asks McCann:

GOLDBERG. McCann. What are you so nervous about? Pull yourself
together. Everywhere you go these days, it's like a funeral.

MCCANN. You may be right. (28)

His brief answers are indicative of his anxiety.

In A Slight Ache, when Edward and Flora are threatened by the presence of a
strange matchseller outside their house, they become nervous and uneasy about it.

Edward doesn't get the meaning of his stay there, so he first sends his wife Flora to get to
the truth about the Matchseller. But when Edward and Flora face him, they feel a kind of
fear about him. When Flora faces the Matchseller, she speaks at length with deep
curiosity. She speaks non-stop without waiting for his reply.

Again when Edward speaks of his boyhood he becomes breathlessly fluent. The
way he speaks and the things he speaks of are indicative of his anxiety. During his
monologue, he asks him at times, “Did you say something?” (194), even though the
Matchseller has not made any utterance. Then Flora asks, “Why didn’t I invite you into
the room. That’s your next question, isn’t it? Bound to be” (195). The long-winded talk
of these characters can be taken as a manifestation of the anxiety and uneasiness they feel
in their respective contexts in life.

In sharp contrast to ‘talking too much,’ some characters of Pinter speak too little. This also can be explained in psychological terms. People suffering from anxiety often become ruminative and excessive anxiety sometimes makes them silent for a long while. They remain deaf to the surroundings and do not respond to others properly. So, silence in some characters in Pinter can be taken as “meditative repose” that can be “a part of all anxiety disorder . . . the major symptom in the overanxious disorder” (Duke and Nowicki, Jr. 426).

In The Room, Bert, the husband of Rose talks so little that the audience assume that he is deaf and dumb. He keeps silent all the while whereas his wife is violently garrulous. She keeps on asking foolish and meaningless questions and speaks of her concern over Bert and the security she feels inside her room. In the mean time, her husband seems to be tongue-tied and does not even respond to her with a nod. Even in the presence of Mr. Kidd, Bert does not answer the questions showered upon him. Guido Almansi and Simon Henderson recognise a pattern in Pinter’s presentation of such characters: “There is a garrulous partner, usually female, who tries to communicate with a laconic friend, usually male . . .” (35). Here the garrulous partner is Rose and the laconic friend is Bert. Both of them are sufferers from anxiety. One manifests it through eloquence and the other through silence.

In The Dumb Waiter Gus keeps on asking questions, most of which are irrelevant, and at times foolish. Sometimes theirs is a game of words to while away the time. The very act of waiting for their victim creates anxiety in the two thugs Ben and Gus. Ben keeps quiet whereas Gus becomes eloquent. His questions are so much ad nauseam that
he flares up at a point:

BEN. . . . What’s the matter with you? You’re always asking questions.

What’s the matter with you? (49)

It is obvious that Ben too is in a state of anxiety, but inclined rather to keep silent, he
admonishes Gus, “Why don’t you just do it and shut up?” (49)

Their anxiety is doubled when they unexpectedly get the orders from upstairs
through the speaking tube and the dumb waiter, and when they realise that they are not in
a position to satisfy the orders inasmuch as they are running short of the things ordered.

Even now the two men respond in their characteristic vein, Ben being silent and Gus
Again he protests: “You don’t think they’re just going to sit there and wait for stuff to
come up from down here, do you?” (64). Here, even though Gus and Ben are not as
convincingly eloquent and silent as Rose and Bert are in The Room Ben tends to be
laconic and Gus garrulous.

Discussing the relation between mental state and the manner of speech, F. J.
Bernhard observes that, “Short phrasing, both rhythmically and syntactically, establishes
.. essentially nervous, quick character” (190). In A Slight Ache, Flora becomes mystified
when she watches Edward keeping a wasp covered with a pot. Now the words she utters
express her anxiety. Most of the words she speaks are monosyllabic:

FLORA [whispering]. Do you want me to lift the lid?

EDWARD. No. no, no. I’ll pour down the spoon hole. Right . . . down the
spoon-hole.

FLORA. Listen!

EDWARD. What?
FLORA. It’s buzzing.

EDWARD. Vicious creatures.

[Pause] (173)

The short phrasings, the brief monosyllabic words she utters here, can be interpreted as signs of Flora’s anxiety at the moment.

A pair of characters, one keeping silent while the other keeps on talking at length, is an image Pinter uses in many of his plays, especially in the early ones. About the image, Pinter, in an interview with Joan Bakewell, reminisces two people in a room when he went into a room which he had never been before:

It was rather an odd image: a little man cutting bread and making bacon and eggs for a very big man who was sitting at the table quite silent, reading a comic. The big man never spoke—I was there about half an hour—the little man had a lot to say and he was in the meantime cutting this bread and butter. (qtd. in Almansi and Henderson 35)

The little man and the big man he refers to here appear in his plays as talkative wife and silent husband, talkative friend and a silent listener. Through the incessant speech of one character and the long silence of the other what Pinter conveys is a truth about the characters. Both the talkative character and the silent partner reveal their anxiety, though the means of expression are different. Rose’s chatter to Bert and Bert’s silence; Meg’s prattle to Petey; the anxious talkativeness of Gus and the silence of Ben; the occasional chatter, and the occasional silence of Flora are all indications of their anxiety.

Evasiveness is yet another kind of response shown by Pinter characters. Such characters tend to avoid strangers as well as strange and unpleasant situations at the same time, which is a way of “avoiding all situations, thoughts or feelings which might arouse
anxiety” (Horney 53). They do not want ‘involvement.’ Barbara Kreps observes that involvement “is shunned in Pinter’s early dramas, not because it is impossible, but because it is potentially threatening” (55). This is more obvious in his early plays than in his later ones.

Rose in The Room is afraid of meeting strangers, she is even tense in her own room. She appears to be agoraphobic and at times xenophobic. Marshall P. Duke and Stephen Nowicki Jr. observe: “To reduce the likelihood of setting off an anxiety reaction, agoraphobic people may limit their outside activities even to the point of never leaving home” (245). In a way, her anxiety is manifested through her lengthy speech, at the same time she seems to be xenophobic. She speaks about the security of the room as against the insecurity of the outside, because she expects an “inscrutable stranger arriving into a set piece, traditionally organized situation and threatening to overrun it” (Eveling 76). She believes that she is secure in her room. So she makes others and herself believe that she doesn’t bother about others, and says:

ROSE. . . . If they ever ask you, Bert, I’m quite happy where I am. We’re quiet, we’re all right. You’re up here. It’s not far up either, when you come up from outside. We’re not bothered. Nobody bothers us. (9)

Here we can see a kind of ‘self-alienation’ that is caused by her xenophobia. But when she actually faces strangers she treats them with hospitality. The tendency of evasiveness comes up only when she apprehends that she is going to meet a stranger, as when Mr Kidd knocks at her door.

Again, when Mr Kidd goes out she has a couple as guests, and Mr Sands, one of them, asks her whether she knows Mr Kidd. Her response is typical of the mystifying
Pinteresque nature:

ROSE. No I wouldn’t say that. As a matter of fact, I don’t know him at all. We’re very quiet. We keep ourselves to ourselves. I never interfere. I mean why should I? We’ve got our room. We don’t bother anyone else. That’s the way it should be. (21)

Here she wants to keep herself to herself. Her unwillingness to reach out to others or to entertain others is very obvious. She is a recluse and does not want to go out of her room. It is long since she went out, and Mr Sands asks her about it:

MR SANDS. Why haven’t you even been down there, Mrs. Hudd?

ROSE. Oh. Once a long time ago. (26)

With her aversion to strangers and the agoraphobic fear of the outside, she is afraid not only of the basement but also of the outside at large. The visitors, one after another, add to her anxiety, though she treats them hospitably when they come. A. C. Dobrez comments: “As always, uncertainty and confusion add to her tension” (324).

In this play, Bert is also unwilling to entertain strangers, and his uneasiness is expressed through his silence. Even his responses to his wife are minimal. He does not even care to have a look at the guest, Mr Kidd. Whatever may be the message he brings, they are unwilling to meet him. This evasiveness is a symptom of avoidant personality characterised by excessive anxiety.

A similar method of depicting mental states is used by Pinter in presenting anxiety in The Birthday Party also. As Rose shelters herself in her own room, Stanley takes shelter in the boarding house. He does not like the presence of the two men who are expected there. This news is a shock to him. The excitement
he shows at the news of these two visitors is worth noticing:

MEG. I’m expecting two gentlemen.

(He turns)

STANLEY. What?

MEG. You don’t know that, did you?

STANLEY. What are you talking about?

MEG. Two gentlemen asked Petey if they could come and stay for a couple of nights. I’m expecting them. (She picks up the duster and begins to wipe the dust on the table.)

STANLEY. I don’t believe it. (20)

Stanley’s refusal to believe it is an expression of his uneasiness about the prospect of encountering strangers. He goes on to say:

STANLEY. They’re coming in a van.

MEG. Who?

STANLEY. Do you know what they’ve got in that van?

MEG. What?

STANLEY. They’ve got a wheel-barrow in that van. (24)

As a matter of fact, the visitors do not bring any wheel-barrow; nor have they informed him anything like that. Stanley is seeing things out of his anxiety. He shudders at the mention of the name ‘Goldberg,’ when Meg tells him the name of one of the visitors. And she, appreciating his anxiety over the guests, tries to put him at ease:

MEG. . . . Stan, they won’t wake you up, I promise, I’ll tell them that they must be quiet.
(Stanley sits still.)

They won't be here long, I shall still bring you up your early morning tea.

(Stanley sits still)

You mustn't be sad today. It's your birthday. (35)

Still, he is not satisfied with her words. At a point when they are making arrangements for celebrating his birthday, he flares up and speaks to their face:

STANLEY. Let me—just make this clear. You don't bother me. To me, you're nothing but a dirty joke. But I have responsibility towards the people in this house. They've been down here too long. They've lost their sense of smell. I haven't. And nobody is going to make advantage of them while I'm here (A little less forceful). Anyway, this house isn't your cup of tea. There's nothing good for you, from any angle. So why don't you just go, without any more fuss. (45)

Obviously, Stanley says he feels very tense in their presence, and it is his anxiety that makes him so plain about it.

In The Dumb Waiter, while the thugs are waiting for their next victim an envelope slides under the door. This frightens them, and Ben orders Gus to open the door and ascertain whether there is anybody. Hesitant at first, Gus opens it only at the second command:

BEN. Open the door and see if you can catch anyone outside.

GUS. Who me?

BEN. Go on.
(Gus stares at him, puts the matches in his pocket, goes to his bed and
takes a revolver from under the pillow. He goes to the door, opens it,
looks out and shuts it.) (46)

He goes on to say: “I wonder who it’ll be tonight” (49). Gus’s words and his quipping
himself with a revolver, are all indications of some vague apprehension and anxiety.

Yet another image common to Pinter’s early plays is that of characters who appear
to be absorbed in reading. Bert and Rose of The Room, Petey and McCann of The
Birthday Party, Ben and Gus of The Dumb Waiter, and Edward and Flora of A Slight Ache
are all characters who prop up newspapers and magazines to hide themselves behind them.

Guido Almansi and Simon Henderson comment:

Pinter’s laconic males tend to hide behind the propped-up
newspapers, reading out the occasional snippet, while their
blabbering wives try to engage them in proper conversation

... (38)

In The Room, and The Birthday Party Rose and Meg chat while their husbands are
engaged in reading newspapers. In The Dumb Waiter, it is a male character who chatters
in the absence of a female one. In A Slight Ache, reading and talking are shared by
Edward and his wife, Flora. Rose in The Room, Meg in The Birthday Party chat while
their husbands are engaged in reading newspapers. In The Dumb Waiter, it is the male
character who chatters, while in A Slight Ache, reading and talking are shared by Edward
and his wife, Flora. A close study shows that in each of these cases, the act of reading is
primarily meant as an occasion to present characters in a disturbed state of mind.

At the start of the play The Room, the stage direction says that “Bert is at the
table, wearing a cap, a magazine propped in front of him” (7). Bert is seen absorbed in his magazine all the while Rose is talking to him. Though many questions are thrown at Bert, he does not respond to her. Just as Rose’s talking is an outcome of her anxiety, Bert’s reading is a defence mechanism to hide his other preoccupations. When Bert goes out, Rose is left alone. Now her anxiety about the outside grows further and she picks up the paper, but puts it down at once. Rose takes the magazine to read but her loneliness and the expectation about an impending menace outside make her all the more tense, and she puts the paper back. The very same act is seen again when she is alone as Mr and Mrs Sands go out. Once again, she takes the paper.

In The Birthday Party, we see Petey always with a paper. At the start of the play, he appears propping up the paper and reading it, while his wife is asking him a series of questions. The next morning, Petey is again seen with a paper. Now he leaves the paper behind him once more and McCann tears it into pieces. Petey comes back and sees the paper torn into many pieces. He takes the strips and studies them. It is as if he could not escape the compulsion to read the paper.

The next occasion when he is seen absorbed in the paper is when Goldberg and McCann take Stanley away forcibly in spite of his attempt to prevent them. Then, in his helplessness and anxiety, he once more falls back on reading the paper. Not being able to get a fresh paper, he tries to read the strip of paper left out there by McCann.

The strips of paper fall to the floor. He looks down at them. Meg comes past the window and enters by the back-door. Petey studies the front page of the paper. (86)

Petey knows that there is some conspiracy behind the disappearance of Stanley. But,
towards the end of the play, when Meg asks him where Stanley is, though he knows that he has been taken by Goldberg and McCann, he lies to her, and pretends to read. This lie is prompted by his shyness and anxiety, as Charles Carpenter says:

Petey conceals his shame behind the daily paper, then unwittingly exposes it in the form of an emphatic wish, lying to her that Stanley is asleep.

(109)

In *The Dumb Waiter*, Pinter makes more effective use of the technique of making his characters read. At the start of the play, the two thugs are seen eagerly waiting for their victim. They are very tense. Ben, at regular intervals, rattles a paper and reads it while watching his partner, Gus. The first word he utters in the play is 'Kaw' (35), which is here an interjection expressing the anxiety and impatience he feels as he goes through the paper. If Bert of *The Room* keeps reading while Rose is talking to him, Ben keeps reading all the while as his partner Gus talks to him. Whenever he refers to an item of news in the paper he utters the word 'Kaw,' which occurs five times in the play. When Ben and Gus are talking about Wilson, who is supposed to be their master, Ben gets angry and he grabs the paper Gus is reading. Gus, irritated, asks him:

GUS... How many times have you read the paper? (52)

This is another indication that Ben is not reading the paper for any information; but the reading is only a subterfuge to cover his anxiety.

Expecting their next victim at hand, Ben gives Gus his instructions on how to handle him when he faces him and these instructions, in turn, put Gus into a state of anxiety. He goes to lavatory and comes back asking Ben why the matches had been sent to them if the master knew that there was no gas. This makes Ben a bit fidgety and he
asks:

BEN. What are you asking about?

   (Gus stares down at him)

GUS (thickly). Who is upstairs?

BEN (nervously). What's one thing to do with another?

GUS. Who is it though?

BEN. What's one thing to do with another?

   (Ben fumbles for his paper on the bed) (67)

Here too his nervous and repeated question 'what's one thing to do with another' is immediately followed by his fumbling for the paper. When Ben gets the last message, he seems very much upset and here the stage direction makes the point clear:

   (Ben hangs the tube. He goes to his bed and lies down. He picks up his paper and reads . . . Ben throws the paper down.)

BEN. Kaw!

   (He picks up the paper and looks at it.)

Listen to this!

   (Pause)

What about that, eh?

   (Pause)

Kaw!

   (Pause)

I have you heard such a thing. (69)
His picking up of the paper and throwing it down again and again indicate his anxiety and agitation at the moment. Again he picks up the paper and throws it down as he gets ready to murder his victim. Surprisingly, it is revealed to the audience that the next victim is Gus himself. He is upset because of the strange message he gets that he should murder his friend and partner, Gus.

A Slight Ache also opens with two characters on the stage. A man is reading while the other, his wife, is talking to him. They seem to take the paper when they are in a state of anxiety. Casually a wasp that flits over there is shut up in a pot by Edward. Flora is terribly afraid of it and wants to kill it and get rid of it, while Edward is sportily playing with it. This makes her tense and anxious and she takes the paper and tries to read. The words they exchange at this point reveal the anxiety of these characters, in spite of the apparent interest in the paper:

FLORA. What are you doing?

EDWARD. Be quiet. Slowly ... slowly ... carefully ... on ... the ... pot! Ha-ha-ha. Very good.

(He sits on the chair to the right of the table)

FLORA. Now he is in the marmalade.

EDWARD. Precisely.

(Pause. She sits on a chair to the left of the table and reads the ‘Telegraph’) (171)

The recurring pattern of one reading while the other is talking is a method employed with a purpose. In each of these situations, the characters on the stage do exchange words, with no meaningful communication. The purpose of these scenes is
not furthering any action, or depicting any purposeful talk. As the exchanges between
the characters lack in focus and purpose, the attention of the reader/listener turns to
the motivation behind the words. Such close attention reveals states of mind which
could not have been presented through conventional dialogue. Scenes and
conversations like these no more function as they do in conventional theatre. Rather,
they merely become occasions to reveal minds and experiences which otherwise
remain incommunicable.

Mutual distrust is a common phenomenon in modern life. Karen Homey says
that “a great majority of us have to struggle with problems of competition . . . distrust of
others and of our own selves . . . that may be present in a neurosis” (34). The reflection
of this neurotic life can be seen in Pinter’s plays. Most of his characters fail in
establishing strong and solid relationships, though they long for them. One individual’s
distrust of another is the main cause of this failure. This distrust in human relationships
can be seen in his characters at a deeper level. The very presence of another person
creates feelings of insecurity in the mind of the individual.

In The Room, Rose seems to be ill-at-ease in her own room even in the presence
of her husband. At the outset of the play she is seen speaking at length about the
security she feels inside her room as against the insecurity of the outside. She is very
much concerned about looking after her husband. But as the play progresses, the
audience become suspicious of her intentions. Her over-anxiety about the husband
would appear to be a kind of make-believe. Towards the end of the play, when she talks
to a strange Negro, she reveals that she is a prostitute tired of entertaining customers:

ROSE. . . Oh, these customers. They come in here and stink
the place out. After a handout. I know all about it. (29)

There are hints in her words to Bert that she is cajoling him into going out. She tells him that she had talked to Mr Kidd about him:

ROSE. . . . I mentioned to Mr Kidd this morning that you would be doing a run today. I told him you hadn't been too grand, but I said, still, he is a marvellous driver. I wouldn't mind what time, where, nothing, Bert. You know how to drive. I told him . . . (10)

While Rose makes efforts to send him out, he shows his unwillingness to leave the room. This unwillingness is also a symptom of his distrust of her. And the distrust is caused by his suspicion about her fidelity. As far as he is concerned, his anxiety comes true when he happens to see Riley with her. It is because of this anxiety that he wants to murder Riley at the very first sight. Rose’s distrust of her husband may be caused by her punishment anxiety engendered by her guilty conscience. She expects punishment from outside at any moment. Even her husband can turn to be a menace. She knows that Bert can be violent and dangerous, as he proves to be at the end of the play. So she is afraid that he can, at any time, become violent towards her.

A similar distrust of each other can be seen in the couple Petey and Meg in The Birthday Party. Petey’s distrust is expressed through his indifference to Meg. Petey’s evasive answers are indicative of indifference:

MEG. [ . . ] What time did you go out in the morning, Petey?

PETEY. Same time as usual.

MEG. Was it dark?

PETEY. No it was light. (10)
Whatever may be his attitude, she continues to be very dutiful to him. Here she seems to be as dutiful and loving as Rose of *The Room*. Petey is doubtful of her relationship with Stanley. She has an ambivalent relationship (mother/whore) with Stanley. She wants the company of Stanley.

Even Stanley has his own mistrust in his relationships with Meg and Lulu. When they approach him, apparently with sexual overtures, he refuses to accompany them:

- MEG. Are you going out?
- STANLEY. Not with you.
- MEG. But I’m going shopping in a minute.
- STANLEY. Go.
- MEG. You’ll be lonely, all by yourself. (19)

To Lulu’s invitation he responds almost like this:

- LULU. So you’re not coming for a walk?
- STANLEY. I can’t at the moment.
- LULU. You’re a bit of washout, aren’t you? (26)

On these two occasions, Stanley seems to be very indifferent. This indifference is the result of his distrust of them.

When Goldberg and McCann come to the hoarding house to take Stanley away, they seem to be very nervous. The reason for their nervousness can be seen in their words:

- GOLDBERG. McCann, what are you so nervous about? Pull yourself together. Everywhere you go these days it’s like a funeral.
- MCCANN. That’s true.
GOLDBERG. True? Of course it is true. It's more than true. It's a fact.

MCCANN. You may be right.

GOLDBERG. What's it, McCann? You don't trust me like you did in the old days? (28)

Here Goldberg's complaint is that McCann does not trust him as he did in the past. The same is the case with McCann; he cannot trust Goldberg. This mutual distrust is caused by their anxiety. One of the reasons for their anxiety is their loss of trust in others. If at all they try to trust another man, it is only with a dread that they would be disillusioned at any moment. This expectation of disillusionment engenders anxiety in the relationship. So these characters cannot but distrust each other, because of their anxiety.

In The Dumb Waiter, Ben and Gus are seen waiting for their victim, being employed by a master, who is a stranger to them. They have misgivings about their master, their victims and even about themselves. While they are waiting, several questions are asked by Gus. He doesn't feel secure about the room in which they are put up:

GUS. I wouldn't like to live in this dump. I wouldn't mind you had a window, you could see what it looked like outside. (39)

This is only a symptom of his distrust in many other things. His distrust of his partner is revealed when he wants to examine Gus's bag:

BEN. . . . (Gus exits, left. Ben looks in the bag. He brings out a packet of crisps. Enter Gus with a plate.)

(Accusingly, holding up the crisps.)

Where did these come from? (56)
This question throws light on the point that Ben doesn’t totally take him into confidence. This kind of distrust can be seen in the words of Gus when he asks:

GUS. Why did you stop the car, this morning in the middle of the road?

BEN. (lowering the paper). I thought you were asleep. (41)

Ben doesn’t give Gus a clear answer. He evades the question. The reason behind these repeated questions and the evasion of answers is their anxiety that is produced by mutual distrust.

In *A Slight Ache*, Edward and Flora are on the stage as a mutually distrusting couple. Edward is often suspicious of his wife Flora who doubts his potency. When they happen to see an old Matchseller at the back-gate of their residence, Edward is shocked. Edward wants to know the truth about this stranger’s arrival. He makes an attempt to know that, but fails. Then his wife volunteers to make an attempt at it. Then she justifies herself and insists on the point that he should trust his wife:

FLORA. Edward, you’re hurting me! (pause) [with dignity.] I shall wave from the window when I’m ready. Then you can come up. I shall get to the truth of it, I assure you. You’re much too heavy-handed, in every way. You shall trust your wife more, Edward. You should trust our judgement, and have greater insight into her capabilities. (190)

Here what she wants from him is his trust in her. She demands it because she knows that her husband doesn’t trust her. The meaning of this mutual distrust becomes clear as the play reaches its end. Edward bursts out when he realises her motives in sympathising with the Matchseller:

EDWARD. Ill? You lying slut. Get back to your trough. (193)
As the play ends Edward’s anxiety becomes real. His wife, Flora goes with the Matchseller leaving him in the lurch.

Repetition in dialogue is a dramatic device that has been practised by all major dramatists. Master dramatists like Shakespeare used it for producing laughter in the audience. Pinter’s genius in comedy makes the repetition in dialogue provoke laughter. But a close look at these characters reveals the anxiety behind the repetition.

The device of repetition, so prevalent here, is not, of course, Pinter’s own discovery. It is the stock-in-trade of oratory, comedy and drama, and of all speech. But Pinter uses it with astonishing persistence, repeating the simplest phrases until they yield the secret of their character’s hidden activity. (Brown 25)

In Pinter’s early plays the characters’ ‘hidden activity’ is caused by their anxiety. In their emotional crises in different contexts, Pinter’s characters repeat certain words and sentences revealing the anxiety of the characters. Instances of these can be seen in these selected early plays.

In The Room, when Rose meets Mr and Mrs Sands, they start arguing on a trivial point. Mrs Sands seems to be a bit tense. During their discussion about a star she asks:

MRS. SANDS. You didn’t see a star?

MR SANDS. Why not?

MRS. SANDS. Because I’m telling you, I’m telling you I didn’t see a star.

(20)

This kind of repetition can be seen again when Rose asks Mr Kidd whether he is the landlord:
ROSE. Listen, Mr Kidd, you are the landlord, aren't you? There isn't any other landlord?

MR KIDD. What? What's that to do with it? I don't know what you're telling about. I've got to tell you, that's all. I've got to tell you. (25)

Here Mr Kidd is asked to reveal a thing that he wants to suppress. Rose's questions embarrass him, and this is the reason for his repeating certain words in his speech.

When Mr Kidd informs her that somebody in the basement wants to see her, she is not ready to entertain the visitor and keeps on giving the same answer to the question why she doesn't want to see him:

MR KIDD. . . . Mrs Hudd, have a bit of pity. Please see him. Why don't you see him?

ROSE. I don't know him.

MR KIDD. You can never tell. You might know him. (27)

In the first act of The Birthday Party Petey and his wife Meg are presented sufferers from anxiety. Meg's anxiety is expressed through her excessive conversation over her husband. Petey on the other hand, is reticent and avoids her questions with some oft-repeated words uttered at regular intervals. At the outset of the play, while he is chatting with his wife, we hear the word 'nice' many times. As Richard Dutton says “The irritatingly all-purpose 'nice,' in fact recurs ten times in three very spare pages of dialogue” (91). When Meg tells Stanley that two gentlemen are coming there to stay for a couple of days, Stanley asks for some details about them. Meg conceals many things and she does not give him any satisfactory answer; instead calls him: "a liar," and this is repeated several times.
When Stanley is informed of the arrival of the two guests, he all of a sudden becomes anxious and repeats hysterically that they're looking for someone. Meg negates it emphatically by repeating, “They’re not” (24).

While Goldberg and McCann are grilling Stanley with their questions, they too repeat many questions:

GOLDBERG. Do you recognise an external force?

STANLEY. What?

GOLDBERG. Do you recognise an external force?

MCCANN. That’s the question!

GOLDBERG. Do you recognise an external force, responsible for you, suffering for you? (50)

And towards the end of the play, when they are about to go back, Goldberg and McCann have a dispute on how they should be called:

GOLDBERG (opening his eyes regarding MCCANN). What—did— you—call—me?

MCCANN. Who?

GOLDBERG (murderously). Don’t call me that! (He seizes MCCANN by the throat.)

NEVER CALL ME THAT!

MCCANN (writhing). Nat, Nat, Nat, NAT! I called you Nat. I was asking you, Nat. Honest to God. Just a question, that’s all, just a question, do you see, do you follow me? (76)
Some of these repetitions appear to be the natural response of the characters when they want to make sure that their words have been heard. But there are contexts in which the repetitions of words or sentences are obviously out of place. This too can be seen to be part of Pinter’s method. True to his method of mixing the devices of realist and non-realist drama, he makes use of a subtle interplay of the natural and the unnatural in the responses of the characters, leaving the borderline between the two vague. These repetitions are not meant to arouse laughter, but to know the unsettled mind of the characters.

Repetition in dialogue can be seen in A Slight Ache also. Sometimes Edward and Flora repeat some words because of their anxiety. When Edward first notices the presence of the Matchseller at the back-gate of his house, he becomes anxious and his actions and words are worth noticing:

EDWARD. Why what is he doing there?

FLORA. But he’s never disturbed you, has he? The man’s been standing there for weeks. You’ve never mentioned it.

EDWARD. What is he doing there? (175)

After a while when Flora tries to mitigate her anger and anxiety by indifferently defending the Matchseller, Edward becomes more anxious. This makes Flora too anxious:

FLORA. (off) Edward, where are you?

Edward? Where are you, Edward?

(She appears)

Edward?
Edward, what are you doing in the scullery? (176)

The restlessness in him makes Edward verify the truth about the Matchseller. He decides to go out to keep Flora away:

EDWARD. Keep away.

(pause)

(slowly) I want to speak to that man. I want to have a word with him.

(178)

Then to console him, Flora advises him to inform the police of the strange Matchseller. Then her speech also becomes repetitions:

FLORA. Why don't you call the police and have him arrested?

(He laughs) (pause)

Why don't you call the police? (179)

When Edward comes back from the Matchseller, Flora asks him whether he has got anything from him, then his answer is repetitious which shows his anxiety.

EDWARD. A little. A little. (188)

Hearing this, Flora too decides to try a hand at it. Then she is very tense.

FLORA. I'll tell you what. Look. Let me speak to him. I'll speak to him.

(189)

The repetition in her suggestion also indicates her anxiety at that moment. Then Edward two times asks her consecutively, "what are you plotting?" (190)

As Flora is having an interview with the Matchseller, Edward grows angry and a bit anxious. So he shouts at her from the hall:

EDWARD. Well?
(footsteps upstage)

Well?

FLORA. Don’t come in

EDWARD. Well? (193)

Towards the end of the play, he becomes all the more anxious and tense in his interview with the Matchseller, then too, he repeats some words:

EDWARD. Did you say something?

(pause)

Did you say something?

(pause) (194)

It is just to reveal his anxiety, the dramatist makes him repeat these words

Violence in Pinter is a major theme in Pinter criticism. The characters in the plays of Pinter sometimes turn violent when they are overwhelmed with anxiety. “A pattern of violence declares itself in Pinter’s first plays—visible violence in The Room and The Dumb Waiter, imminent in The Birthday Party” (Pesta 58).

In an interview with Bensky, Pinter justifies his depiction of violence, saying, “the world is a pretty violent place. It’s as simple as that, so many violence in the plays comes out quite naturally. It seems to me an essential and inevitable factor (Interview “Violence . . .” 3). Violence in a Pinter play is often an indication of the anxiety in the character. Tom Milne sees violence in Pinter as a reflection of social problems. He says that we are, as any reader of the daily press will know, “living in an Age of Violence . . . . The individual, unable to come to terms with society, unable or unwilling to place his ideals at its service, is crushed by society” (40).
The tension in the individual when he confronts society is often expressed subtly in a Pinter play through the violent behaviour of the characters. Violence is one of them. Some characters of Pinter become catatonic on the stage, and some become violent all on a sudden expressing their inner conflicts resulting from anxiety.

Peter Hall, a well known Pinter director, rightly comments on the different inside of Pinter characters:

So most of the characters preserve their cool, however hot their cool is inside. Equally, physical violence can suddenly be unleashed, which is an expression of the tensions that have been developing beneath this often very urbane surface, and people crack each other over the head or beat each other up or kill each other... (“Hall Interview” 76)

This is true even in the case of his very first play The Room. Bert in this play is very cool outwardly, but very tense inwardly. This tension grows as the play progresses and it reaches its climactic stage when he meets Riley, the blind Negro with his wife in her room. Then he becomes violent. When he comes back, he is shocked to see the Negro in his room.

(He regards the NEGRO for some moments. Then with his foot he lifts the arm-chair up. The NEGRO falls on to the floor. He rises slowly).

RILEY. Mr Hudd, your wife—
BERT. Lice!

(He strikes the NEGRO, knocking him down and then kicks his head against the gas-stove several times. The NEGRO lies still. BERT
Bert here becomes violent because his suspicion about his wife has come true as he sees
the NEGRO with her and his anxiety is beyond endurance, and it finds its expression in
violence.

Stanley becomes violent in The Birthday Party, when Meg teases him as she
offers tea. His strong language shows his violent nature:

  MEG. It's good tea. Good strong tea.
  STANLEY. This isn't tea. It's gravy!
  MEG. It's not.
  STANLEY. Get out of it. You succulent old washing bag. (18)

It is in this same manner that Lulu speaks to him when he turns down her invitation to
accompany her for an outing.

  LULU. So you're not going out for a walk.
  STANLEY. I can't at the moment.
  LULU. You're a bit of a wash out, aren't you? (26)

In Act II of The Birthday Party, when Stanley becomes a victim of the torture
meted out to him by Goldberg and McCann, he loses his temper and gets violent:

  Stanley rises. He begins to move towards MEG, dragging the drum on his
  foot. He reaches her and stops. His hands move towards her and they
  reach her throat. He begins to strangle her. MCCANN and
  GOLDBERG rush forward and throw him off. (63-64)

While McCann and Goldberg are impatiently waiting for Stanley to take him, their talk
reveals their anxiety and gradually slips into a heated exchange. During this speech,
McCann calls Goldberg 'Nat’ and ‘Simey’ and this infuriates Goldberg and in no time
seizes him by the throat and warns him:

GOLDBERG (opening his eyes, regarding MCCANN). What—did—you—call—me?

MCCANN. Who?

GOLDBERG. (murderously) Don’t call me that! (He seizes him by the
throat) NEVER CALL ME THAT!

MCCANN (writhing). Nat, Nat, Nat. NAT! I called you Nat . . . (76)

These mutual exchanges and rows are the manifestations of anxiety.

In The Dumb Waiter, Ben and Gus while waiting for their victims, they get
violent at times and this indicates their anxiety. On one occasion, Ben asks Gus to light
the kettle and Gus disagrees with Ben in the grammatical propriety of the usage. He tries
to correct Ben by changing it into ‘put on the kettle.’ And out of this violence brews:

BEN. Light the kettle! It’s common usage!

GUS. I think you’ve got it wrong.

BEN. (menacing) What do you mean?

GUS. They say put on the kettle.

BEN. (taut) Who says?

(they stare at each other, breathing hard)

( . . . )

GUS. What does the gas --?

BEN (grabbing him with two hands by the throat, at arm’s length).

The kettle you fool!
Their simple argumentation on the accuracy of the phrase easily leads to a fight. This is another symptom of their anxiety. One minute later, Gus criticises Ben for his repeated reading of newspaper. Ben gets angry and comes forward to give him a swipe:

BEN. What are you doing, criticising me?

GUS. No. I was just—

BEN. You’ll get a swipe round your ear hole if you don’t watch your step.

(52)

After a while Ben detects a pack of crisps from Gus’s bag. All on a sudden he becomes suspicious of him and this suspicion rouses his curiosity.

BEN. . . . Where did these come from?

GUS. What?

BEN. Where did these crisps come from?

GUS. Where did you find them?

BEN (hitting him on the shoulder). You’re playing a dirty game, my lad!

(56)

Towards the end of the play, when Gus gets an order through the tube for food, he gives a negative answer that they are running short of supply. Hearing this Ben gets angry:

(Ben seizes the tube and flings Gus away. He follows Gus and slaps him hard, back-handed, across the chest.) (68)

In A Slight Ache too, violence is seen in a mild form. Still from the very beginning of the play Edward shows some symptoms of anxiety and it manifests in its violent form when he catches a wasp and keeps it in a pot. In a way he is sublimating his anxiety through
punishing the wasp. It is while teasing the wasp that he first feels a slight ache in his eyes.

EDWARD. I have a slight ache in them.

FLORA. Oh, dear.

EDWARD. Yes, a slight ache. As if I hadn’t slept. (172)

As they finish putting the wasp into the pot, they get more and more anxious. The more anxious they are, the more violent they become:

EDWARD (briskly). You do know I’ve got work to do this morning, don’t you? I can’t spend the whole day worrying about a wasp.

FLORA. Well kill it?

EDWARD. You want to kill it?

FLORA. Yes.

EDWARD. Very well. Pass the hot water jug. (173)

Towards the end of the play Edward is again found emotionally disturbed. After having an interview with the Matchseller, he comes to Flora and he seems suspicious about the Matchseller, and Flora defends him by telling him that he is harmless. This makes him all the more agitated and when she says she can find all about him, he becomes violent:

EDWARD (hissing). What are you plotting?

FLORA. I know exactly what I shall—

EDWARD. What are you plotting?

(He seizes her arms.)

FLORA. Edward, you’re hurting me! (189-190)

After that she goes to the Matchseller and talks for a long while with him and reports that
he is ill and this provokes Edward. He bursts out violently.

FLORA. He’s dying.

EDWARD. Dying. Not dying.

FLORA. I tell you, he is very ill.

EDWARD. He’s not dying! Nowhere near. He’ll see you cremated.

FLORA. The man is desperately ill.

EDWARD. Ill? You lying slut. Get back to your trough! (193)

Edward gets angry because he suspects that her wife is in love with the Matchseller. This suspicion produces anxiety and it is manifested in the form of violence.

Here the truth is that almost all characters of Pinter suffer from anxiety. And it is revealed in one way or another. Anxiety, when it is concealed, finds expression in disguise in different characters. They manifest it in different ways in different contexts.

Several factors in post-war life tend to make man neurotic. Loud noises from traffic and machines, large crowd, open place, narrow place, large buildings, and sometimes even telephone ring create a sense of menace. Pinter’s characters, in his early plays, are acutely conscious of the threats they face in their lives. These characters sometimes appear to be anxious, neurotically and otherwise. Some of the menace in Pinter is real and some is imagined. Real or unreal, menace makes his characters tense and anxious.

In their anxiety, the characters feel that something dreadful is going to happen to them. Their sense of security is shattered as this feeling creeps into them. Rose in The Room, Stanley in The Birthday Party, Ben and Gus in The Dumb Waiter, and Edward and Flora in A Slight Ache, are characters who are haunted by a sense of menace. These
characters believe that some catastrophe is lurking nearby and will turn up at any moment. Whether it is only a hallucination or something based on their empirical experience, they are always ill-at-ease because of this feeling.

Pinter presents menace as an expression of reality. As Esslin says, “his method (sic) of work are day-dreams, almost hallucinations. Their very realism is part of their menace: it is their ability of outliving of the most frightening of nightmares” (PSP 53).

Every man may face menace at any moment in his living days. At least the uncertainty of death makes man expectant of it at any time. This expectation is enough cause to create an atmosphere of menace. Thus the menace in his plays is the expression of truth as he sees and experiences it.

Pinter’s first play The Room, as Stephen H. Gale says, “introduces the creative pattern, the subject of menace with the related concepts are explored and the techniques that Pinter was to utilize for several years” (24). Rose in this play is scared of the outside; and she says, “It’s very cold out, I can tell you. It’s murder” (7). Threat in this play is represented by the basement and a character called Riley. And her reaction to it creates the atmosphere of menace in the play. She feels secure inside the room and she compares this security with the insecurity of the outside. The feeling that the outside is hostile to her constitutes the feeling of menace in this play. When asked about it in an interview Pinter said, “Outside the room there is a world bearing upon them which is frightening. I’m sure it is frightening to you and me as well” (qtd. in Esslin, TA 266).

In his concern with the problem of menace, Pinter can be said to belong to the tradition of Franz Kafka. Pinter acknowledges the influence of Kafka, a source of inspiration for several writers of the twentieth century. The direct influence of Kafka can
easily be traced in the early plays of Pinter. Kafka’s works invariably made an attempt to present man’s pitiable plight of helplessness before the cruel and sadistic force of menace. As Cohn and Dukore say, “Like Kafka and Beckett, Pinter finds both comedy and menace in the ambiguity of the universe” (618). Pinter’s early plays especially The Birthday Party and The Dumb Waiter have similarities with Kafka’s The Trial. In both these plays menace comes from outside. The menace that the characters, Stanley of The Birthday Party, and Ben and Gus of The Dumb Waiter face comes to them virtually like a punishment meted out to them for no known reason. This kind of punishment is a striking theme introduced by Kafka through his popular works, The Trial and The Castle. The influence of these books have undoubtedly helped Pinter formulate the idea of menace that runs through his early plays. Kafka’s K is seen in Stanley and Gus, for they are both punished for no justifiable reason.

The devices used by Pinter for creating an atmosphere of menace in his plays can be categorised as (1) minimal communication (2) mystifying episodes (3) violence (4) intruders and (5) interrogation.

Pinter uses minimal communication as a device to express the anxiety of his characters. Pinter’s plays have been called “the drama of non-communication” (Williams, 393). This technique of minimum communication is one of the factors that create an atmosphere of menace in his plays. Many of his characters speak little. His early plays are “built around non-exchange of information” (Schechner 176). Bert of The Room, speaks very little even when his wife speaks to him all the while she is with him. He remains dumb and deaf even when his guests call on him.

“The sense of threat is suggested by the lack of information about things,” says
Dobrez (324). His plays are without exposition and at times he frustrates his readers and audience by deliberately leaving them without sufficient information about his characters and their motives. When Bert of The Room strikes Riley calling him 'Lice' and murders him, we are taken aback, as we are not given the reason why he is killed. We are not sure whether Bert is Rose's husband or lover, whether he is a van driver or any other professional. We do not know who Riley is or why he calls Rose back to her father.

When Meg, Goldberg and McCann celebrate Stanley's birthday, we do not get any clue as to why they are bent on it, though Stanley is not sure about his birthday. We are not certain about the identity of the characters Stanley, Meg, Petey, Goldberg, and McCann and Lulu. On one occasion Stanley says that he was a pianist:

STANLEY. Played the piano? I've played the piano all over the world.
All over the country. (BP 22)

At another point Goldberg and McCann accuse him of having committed several crimes

MCCANN. Why did you betray us? . . . (48)

GOLDBERG. Why did you kill your wife? . . . (49)
And after a while McCann asks him:

MCCANN. Who are you, Webber? (52)
These contradictory questions often baffle the audience and readers.

When Ben in The Dumb Waiter gets his master's order to shoot his partner Gus, the audience are dumbfounded, because they do not know why Gus is being killed. There are hints in the play that Ben and Gus are hired killers. Still we are not able to find out their master who employs them or why they are employed. The play creates an air of suspense and mystery through the technique of minimum communication. The very title
of the play “dumb waiter” in itself becomes a medium to order many things but never
gives any clue as to what it is or who is behind it. When the Matchseller of *A Slight Ache*
abducts Edward’s wife Flora, nothing is given about the reason. In this play the
Matchseller is a source of menace to the characters Edward and Flora, when he simply
loiters near the back-gate of their residence. Edward and Flora very earnestly try to get to
the truth of his presence there. As they fail the audience also fail in getting to the truth of
his visit. Here too the audience share the feeling of menace launched by the presence of
the Matchseller.

This method of minimum information about the characters and their motives has
been noticed by many of Pinter’s critics. As Charles Marowitz says “Pinter has the art of
creating maximum tension by providing minimum information” (92). Pinter rarely makes
the identity of his characters clear. They are only names and even these names are
confused purposefully. Such strange characters and the strange situations they are in are
sufficient to perplex the audience and this perplexity leads to an atmosphere of menace.

“Pinter intensifies expectations by creating a seemingly innocuous situation and by
subsequently interjecting first minor, then more shocking disturbances” (Gallagher 246). In
this manner he sometimes makes his audience laugh, and at other times he shocks them by
presenting some piquant and disconcerting episodes onstage. Though Pinter emphasises
that he is a very traditional dramatist, every other play by him presents some shocking
episode to shock his audience in an offbeat style. “Pinter reveals himself as a master of the
veiled threat that lurks in the most normal—as well as the most extraordinary—situations,
and the most mundane conversations” (Baker and Thabachnick 24).

In the first play *The Room*, the confusion about the landlord itself creates an
atmosphere of mystery. Rose takes Mr Kidd for the landlord and she tries to ascertain it, though the visiting couple Mr and Mrs Sands do not agree with it:

ROSE. Listen, Mr Kidd, you are the landlord, aren’t you? There isn’t any other landlord. (25)

Now the answer he gives makes nothing clear:

MR KIDD. What? What’s that to do with it? . . . (25)

Statements and questions that mystify the reader/the audience abound in the play. About the contradictory elements in the play Stephen H. Gale says, “The question of the landlord’s identity, Riley’s name, Rose’s name, and whether or not Sands were ascending or descending the stairs are all fragments of this problem” (28). Over and above, the ending of the play is quite unexpected, though Rose had an inkling of such a calamity at the very outset. The audience also share with her the presentiment of the imminent menace. She is waiting for a knock at the door. And the door of the room becomes a menacing thing, “the focal point of a nameless menace” (Esslin, TA 267). It is through this that the outside threat enters. Gale goes on to comment: “There is a door in the room, the very existence of which contains menace, for it might be opened at any time and who or what might enter is unknown” (34). Sometimes Pinter confuses his audience by making his characters lie to each other. Menace usually comes from an unexpected corner. This too confounds the audience.

The Birthday Party posits a situation in which an individual faces punishment for no reason. Stanley Webber who shelters in a seaside boarding house is taken away by two strangers named Goldberg and McCann. They harass him and punish him without convincing him of the crime he has committed. Pinter presents the act of meting out
punishment without giving any reason, but when it is presented onstage, it creates an atmosphere of menace. There is no indication of the crime the individual has committed; nor is there any certainty as to who he is. Nor does he say anything about Goldberg and McCann. All that they say and do is mystifying to the audience. Goldberg has a habit of confusing things. As Martin S. Regal says, “Obfuscating temporal sequence is a major part of Goldberg’s tactics, even where it is so crudely effected as to amount to parody” (23). The emasculation process on Stanley is a calculated episode to make the audience stunned. At that moment the perplexity Stanley feels is shared by the audience also.

The episode of Lulu’s inviting Stanley to accompany her on an outing, and Stanley’s flat refusal may appear strange. More surprising are the episodes of Stanley’s rape attempt on Lulu and Goldberg’s raping her. Meg’s ambivalent attitude to Stanley is also far from the normal behaviour. These strange episodes presented in a strange manner are meant to add to a sense of menace on the audience.

The Dumb Waiter has several episodes that strike the reader or the viewer as strange. Ben and Gus have no idea about the victims they have to face. They are not informed of the place they are put up. The messages they get from upstairs through a speaking tube are puzzling not only to Ben and Gus but also to the audience. The play ends with one of the murderers facing death from his own fellow-killer for no reason. The series of events occurring without any cause rouse fear in the audience. A Slight Ache too presents mysterious happenings on the stage. The very appearance of the Matchseller is enough to cause uneasiness in the audience. The last episode when the Matchseller abducts Flora leaving Edward in the lurch, leaves the audience confused.

Intruders are common in most of the early plays of Pinter. These intruders can be
taken as the representation of a third party intrusion in human life. The constant intrusions which formed part of the war during Pinter’s boyhood must have made an indelible impression upon his mind. About the menace through intruders John Russell Taylor says:

The menace comes from outside, from the intruder whose arrival unsettles the warm comfortable world bounded by four walls, and any intrusion can be menacing, because the element of uncertainty and unpredictability the intruder brings with him is in itself menacing. And the menace is effective almost in inverse proportion to its degree of particularisation the extent to which it involves overt physical violence or direct threat. (324)

Pinter’s first play The Room, as George Wellwarth says, is a “story about two people living in a tiny globe of light set in an immense and menacing void of darkness” (199). It presents a powerful intruder. The intruder makes the other characters fearful. Rose is frightened at the news that a stranger is coming to occupy her room. The intruder Riley plays a spoil-sport and his presence drives away the comfort of her room. From the very beginning of the play, Rose feels ill-at-ease just because she has an apprehension that something remains outside biding its time. The feeling that something is awaiting a chance to intrude upon the quietude of another is enough to create the atmosphere of menace in the play. “The play calls for a symbolic interpretation. Riley, threatening the womb-like security of the room, serves as a death figure, for while Riley dies, his stigma is passed on to Rose” (Pesta 55).

There are different intruders in The Room. “The first intrusion is when she faces
Mr Kidd. And Mr and Mrs Sands are the second intruder. She ushers them out, but her sense of security has been shattered: the outer forces are beginning to encroach on her” (Wellwarth 199). From start to finish, she has been under the threat and the audience also remain tense, and such a situation creates an atmosphere of menace. Rose in this play faces menace many times. Arnold P. Hinchliffe says she faces intruders five times: “the first menace is life itself; the second, Bert’s Illness; the third, a whimsical and forgetful landlord; the fourth, the Sandses; the fifth, a visitor who menaces because of a past Rose would presumably prefer to forget” (47).

In The Birthday Party, the intruder comes as the guests of the boarding house. The news of the arrival of Goldberg and McCann creates fear in Stanley. He speaks with an air of fear:

STANLEY. You haven’t heard it?
MEG. No.

STANLEY (advancing). They’re coming today.

(...)

STANLEY. They’ve got a wheelbarrow in that van. (23-24)

This reveals his fear. This creates an atmosphere of menace which is maintained throughout the play.

In The Dumb Waiter, the intruder is the dumb waiter itself. Amidst the easy discussion of Ben and Gus about some commonplace things, there looms a dumb waiter which makes them confused. They are shocked on seeing it. They do not get any idea about the commands they get from it. They are shocked on seeing it. They do not get any idea about the commands they get from it. Still they are constrained to obey them. It expects the blind obedience of its commands, and this makes them embarrassed. In A Slight
Ache, a matchseller appears as the menace. The very first sight of this simple vendor causes a shudder in Edward. Though Flora feels amused at first sight, she too loses her peace of mind at the end of the play. Menace is felt at the start and it continues to grow as it progresses. And it comes true as it is expected by him and he is replaced by the matchseller.

Though Pinter expresses violence as the reflection of his lived experience, it serves as an effective method of creating an atmosphere of menace in his plays. In his early plays, Pinter uses it in such a way as to make the audience feel that it is strange. And the strangeness of the violence creates the atmosphere of menace in these plays. In his first play The Room, we see violence coming from an unexpected corner. Riley is killed by Rose's husband without convincing us of the reason for the murder. In The Birthday Party, Goldberg and McCann approach Stanley in a patronising manner. When Meg proposes to celebrate the birthday of Stanley, they seem happy. But they prove to be very violent and brutal in their treatment of Stanley and Lulu. Stanley is emasculated and made speechless in their treatment; and Lulu is seduced by Goldberg, and the violent episodes baffle the audience all the more because they are also strange.

In The Dumb Waiter, violence occurs in the form of one of the two killers, waiting for their victim, killing his partner. In A Slight Ache, the explicitly violent episode is Edward's sportive game of killing wasps. Except this minor episode, no shockingly violent episode occurs; still, when Flora goes with the Matchseller leaving her husband behind, violence has been committed against the peaceful life of a couple. Thus all the four plays in this study display violence which serves the purpose of creating an atmosphere of menace in them.
In several of his plays, Pinter presents menace through the device of interrogation, the interrogation sometimes being a questioning game. Some questions embarrass the listener; and at times some answers embarrass the questioner. Some apparently comic questions ironically create fear in other characters. In most cases, the questions do not elicit convincing answers, and the questions do not appear to expect any. The questions, and the entire scene of interrogation thus become a theatrical device meant to create an atmosphere, and the atmosphere created in each such scene is one of a sense of menace. In The Dumb Waiter, we know that most of the questions asked by Gus are meaningless and meant for whiling away the time, but “the fact that he asks them portends something fearful” (Dukore, WLS 18). In The Room, the questioning game is seen in its seminal form. Its full bloom is seen in The Birthday Party. Here is where he uses this technique most effectively. The interrogation sometimes shocks the characters as well as the audience, and sometimes takes the form of a ritual. In a ritualistic style Pinter creates an air of terror which is conducive to the atmosphere of menace.

GOLDBERG. You hurt me, Webber. You are playing a dirty game.

MCCANN. That’s a Black and Tan fact.

GOLDBERG. Who does he think he is?

MCCANN. Who do you think you are?

STANLEY. You’re on the wrong horse.

GOLDBERG. When did you come to this place?

STANLEY. Last year.

GOLDBERG. Where did you come from?

STANLEY. Somewhere else. (48)
Here, these questions appear to be silly, but when these questions are repeated, they make grilling effect. And this tone creates an atmosphere of menace.

In *The Dumb Waiter*, most of the questions are popped up by Gus. In this play the counter questions and intimidating answers of Ben also create the atmosphere of menace. When Gus asks some funny questions Ben gets angry, the anger itself being the outcome of fear.

BEN. You never used to ask me so many damn questions. What’s come over you?

GUS. No, I was just wondering.

BEN. Stop wondering. You’ve got a job to do. Why don’t you just do it and shut up? (49)

A kind of ritualistic questioning and answering is seen in this play also. When Ben gives instructions to Gus, it is done in the manner of a ritual:

BEN. If there’s a knock on the door you don’t answer it.

GUS. If there’s a knock on the door I don’t answer it.

BEN. But there won’t be any knock on the door.

GUS. So I won’t answer it. (64)

Beneath the comic surface of the exchange, here too lurks a sense of menace.

A sense of mystery is a dominant feature of Pinter plays. Mystery of various kinds are implicitly presented in them. The intangible secret of creation is the be-all and end-all of almost all the plays of Pinter. Man and his motives are hard to understand. Pinter concentrates on these metaphysical problems in his plays. Ray Orley, in a study of menace in Pinter’s plays calls it “metaphysical menace” and he goes on to explain it by
saying that “This is the menace engendered by an alien, incomprehensible universe” (126).

The mystery of the universe and of man is a perennial source of raw material for the existentialist writers. The influence of these writers is evident on Pinter’s works, he being “above all a playwright fascinated by man’s metaphysical isolation, evanescence, futility, hostility, and narcissism” (Dace 223). In The Birthday Party, along with the ritualistic interrogations, Goldberg asks some questions which sound like riddles. As H. R. Hays comments, “Goldberg’s desperation is perhaps a clue to Pinter’s point of view—the world is inexplicable and more terrible than we think” (qtd. in Otley 133). This is why some critics have classed Pinter with the absurdist playwrights. The strange ways of God or nature are always grist to his mill. The riddles of birth, growth, and death are often repeated in his plays. The recurring theme of “the menace that visits the sequestered person suggests the obscurity of human condition, for this man, like mankind, is unsafe and without certainties in this universe” (Dukore, HP 28). The feeling of seclusion, and claustrophobic fear of Rose, Stanley, Ben, Gus, and Edward are reflection of such a philosophic vision.

Pointing out how menace in the plays of Pinter is a dramatic device, Tish Dace writes:

Instead of supplying us with neat solution usually contrived for plays, Pinter artfully deploys menace (in the early plays) and mystery (in the later work) to tantalise our attention. He creates myth of the modern psyche which seems to touch universal responses in men and women reared to repress violence, rage, fear and sexuality and to substitute
guilt for joy. A sort of poet-laureate to the age of anxiety, Pinter
substitutes indefinable dread for more routine dramatic action. (222)

Menace can be found to assure a set pattern in a Pinter play. As the play opens, the characters show an apprehension about something which is unknown. After a while, it becomes a threat which creates an atmosphere of menace in the play. As William Baker and Ely Thabachnick comment, “Pinter’s message is the atmosphere itself, the growing fear and doubt, the sudden, savage violence as an outlet for the fear, the uselessness of the violence” (29). In almost all of the early plays, menace is external. It may be taken as the externalisation of the anxiety of the character. Menace in Pinter’s plays has some characteristic features.

An unknown fear lurks in every man and sometimes manifests itself as a menace. Even as man is born, he feels the separation anxiety. When he comes out of the womb, he feels that he is deprived of the comfort he had enjoyed there. His anxiety and fear remain in him until his dying day. The menace Pinter presents in his plays has its roots in fear and anxiety. After his birth, man seeks a place as secure as the womb. As Arthur Ganz says, “the fear that what lurks in the inner self will force us to acknowledge its presence” (7). Thus he begins to feel that the outer world is hostile to him and the only place that can give him shelter is a room. In the nostalgia of his lost womb he identifies this room with it. To the characters of Pinter, even their rooms prove to be an insecure place, because of the threatening outside. Their sense of security is shattered as the rooms are invaded in the end. “The invasion of a room,” as Ganz says, “then, is the central action in each of Pinter’s major plays”(13).

Rose, in The Room, expresses her attachment to the room very emotionally. She
speaks of the room in an emotive tone, “No, this room’s all right for me, I mean, you know where you are...” (8). Again after a short while she says, “This is a good room. You’ve got a chance in a place like this. I look after you, don’t I Bert” (11). She tries to believe that she and her husband are secure within the room. The room is the womb she wants to be always in, the slightest feeling that she is going to lose it is something beyond her endurance. So everything or everybody outside her room is an invader. The excessive preoccupation with the security of the room leads to an equally strong consciousness of the outside, which is taken to imply everything opposed to security. This creates an atmosphere of menace.

In The Birthday Party, Stanley is almost in a plight like that of Rose’s. Stanley’s womb is his room in the seaside boarding house. He does not like the outside. This is why he feels a shudder when he hears that two guests are expected there. He is like a child who does not like growing up. When he is taken away forcibly and tortured by the guests, he loses his sense of security in the room and this fear is one of the major factors that create the atmosphere of menace in the play.

In A Slight Ache, the Matchseller appears as the menace. Though, he is seen by Edward and Flora alike, it is Edward who is threatened by him. He feels so because of the fear in him that he may lose his wife. This fear has been there when he becomes conscious of his incapacity of satisfying Flora’s physical needs. This is why Stephen H. Gale says, “In A Slight Ache, the unfulfilled emotional needs of man and woman are the source of menace” (75).

Thus the atmosphere of menace in the four early plays of Pinter takes its origin from the innate fear lurking in the characters. In The Room, and The Birthday Party, the
menaced characters are not ready to leave their room, because they suspect that menace is waiting outside to maul them. In *The Dumb Waiter*, the menacing characters themselves are menaced when they are controlled by an unknown force. Anyhow, they are not brave enough to make a breakthrough, and it shows their fear and the helplessness arising out of this fear.

One’s society poses certain threats to the individual in such way as to create a feeling of menace in his life. The menace in Pinter’s early plays can also be taken as the threats that an individual faces from the society. As Bernard Dukore says “Pinter paints a variety of pictures of modern man beaten down by the world around him, of man reduced and of man in the process of being reduced to cipher in the vast social structure” (“THP” 47). In existentialist thought, an individual is condemned to be free, and his sense of freedom alienates him from his society. To him hell is “the other.” In his first play, *The Room*, Pinter presents Rose as an alienated person. She does bother the outside. She takes the outside to be a hostile force. The xenophobic nature she manifests may be a symptom of the sense of alienation she feels. To her, the other, in Sartrean sense, is “Hell.” Every guest is a nuisance for her. Menace does not leave her alone, she is haunted by it in one way or another.

In *The Birthday Party*, Stanley, a recluse, as he claims, is only an ex-pianist by profession. One impression that the play leaves is that he is alienated from the society and hence hiding himself within the four walls of his room. Simon O. Lesser finds reflected in the play “the fundamental economic division in society, the division between exploiters and exploited” (37). Even in the boarding house, Stanley is haunted by a hostile force in the form of Goldberg and McCann. He is caught and subjugated by
the brutal force of society. The torture that he suffers may be taken as the harassment an
artist faces in his society. Martin Esslin argues that the play is "an allegory of the
pressures of conformity, with Stanley, the pianist, as the artist who is forced into
respectability and pin-stripe trousers by the emissaries of the bourgeois world" (Esslin,
TA 271). Ruby Cohn comments: "The religion and society which have traditionally
structured human morality, are, in Pinter's plays, the immoral agents that destroy the
individual" (56).

The political system at times becomes a threat to an individual when it harasses
him for no sufficient reason. Though Pinter has repeatedly denied his interest in politics;
on close analysis, it becomes clear that he has reacted to the political system of his days
even as he started writing plays. Later in an interview with Nicholas Hern, he admitted that
the play, The Dumb Waiter had "a political metaphor" and "the chap who is upstairs and is
never seen is a figure of authority" (Interview "Hern Interview" 7). The Pinter who has
made the bold statement that "US foreign policy could best be defined as: kiss my arse or
I'll kick your head in" (qtd. in Gregory 328) has never been without politics.

In The Room itself he has expressed the interference of an external power in the
private affairs of an individual. The privacy of Rose and Bert can be lost at any moment
when they hear a knocking at their door, which might suggest a system that unfairly
encroaches upon the freedom of individuals. The play that followed it expressed the theme
of interference in a more explicit manner. The Birthday Party presents Stanley who is
tortured for no reason as it has happened in concentration camps of Hitler's Germany. The
Dumb Waiter, which can be taken as a symbol of the instrument of torture shows almost
directly an analogy of the agents of the ruling system blindly harassing individuals simply
at the request of their masters. Those who question it may be put to death. A Slight Ache also indirectly presents the appearance of a threatening force which is capable of snatching away an individual's freedom and property which are all the more important for an individual. This is why Ruby Cohn comments that, "Pinter has created his own distinctive and dramatic version of Man vs System" (56).

Pinter has a way of treating the action of his plays in such a way that the reader or viewer feels "no hard distinction between what is real and what is unreal." (Introduction "Writing for . . ." 11). In Pinter's perception of truth, in spite of human desire for unqualified distinctions between what is true and what is untrue, there is no such a thing as knowable absolute truth. Sometimes, he makes his characters psychotic with an intention of confusing his readers about illusion and reality. When a man is psychotic "we never know whether we are seeing what he is imagining or what is really happening. In short, we learn what it is like to be psychotic, the hallucination is absolutely real" (Gottfried 290). Pinter thus employs a technique of shifting between the planes of illusion and reality.

It is still a matter of dispute whether the menace we feel in the early plays of Pinter is illusion or reality. In a sense it can be said that the menace is a mystery. Stephen H. Gale makes a distinction of the menace in the early plays with the comment that "Whereas The Room, The Birthday Party, and The Dumb Waiter are based on an actual menace and the action which grows out of that menace, A Slight Ache, represents a new development as it concentrates on the derivation of menace" (74). Then he concludes a study of the early plays with a note that "a distinguishing feature of the menace is its indeterminate source; the threat itself is never truly identified . . ." (64). Arthur Ganz
comments: "The feeling of dislocation that the audience experiences as the play moves back and forth between the realistic psychological mode and symbolic one accounts . . . for the sense of menace that pervades Pinter's world" (7).

Critics like Martin Esslin, Arnold P. Hinchliffe, and Lucina Paquet Gabbard consider menace to be the hallucination of the guilty conscience of the characters. The menace the characters feel at the start of the play can be said to be real, because it proves to be true at the end. Rose's apprehension that something dangerous is awaiting outside becomes true when she faces the stranger who claims to be a messenger from her father. Rose is acutely aware of the existence of menace, still she tries to ignore it, but "menace does creep in" (Gale 27), and the menace felt by Rose comes true and it proves to be destructive, whether it is Riley or Bert. In the early part of the play, we get an impression that Rose's anxiety is a neurotic one. But as the play ends we realise that it is a real one.

In The Birthday Party, Stanley speaks of his apprehension as he is seen first in the play. The news of the arrival of the two guests Goldberg and McCann creates anxiety in him. Meg tries to convince him otherwise. She consoles him by making him believe that the guests are, in no way, a threat to him. She guarantees that he will get the care and protection that he has been given there. Meg is under the impression that his fear is just because of a neurotic anxiety. But things take a different turn as the play progresses. In the end, Stanley is seen speechless and spent-up because of the harassment he has suffered in the hands of these cruel guests. In this play too the fear of the menaced character comes true.

In The Dumb Waiter, Gus asks many questions about his duty. He is very particular to know the whereabouts of his master. In the course of the play, Gus becomes
aware of a threat, which, perhaps he assumes to be from their master. His misgivings about the master are hushed up by Ben. Quite unlike Meg, here Ben does not try to console him by soothing words:

GUS (with growing agitation). I asked you before. Who moved in? I asked you. You said the people who had it before moved out. Well, who moved in?

BEN (hunched). Shut up.

GUS. I told you, didn’t I?

BEN (standing). Shut up! (67)

As the play ends it is seen that even his companion is made to turn against him. Here too the menace, as Gus felt in the opening of the play, comes true.

In A slight Ache, the unexpected appearance of the Matchseller creates anxiety and fear in Edward. When he expresses the threat he has felt about him, Flora tries to ease him of his tension by speaking of the harmlessness she curiously feels about him.

EDWARD. What in God’s name is he doing with a tray full of matches at half past nine in the morning?

(...)

FLORA. Do you find him interesting, Edward?

EDWARD [casually]. Interesting? No. No, I... don’t find him interesting.

FLORA. He’s a very nice old man, really. (175)

In spite of her efforts to make him believe that the Matchseller is not a threat, Edward realises the threat in him when he goes away taking his wife with him.
The central subject of all the early plays of Pinter is the anxiety and menace experienced by man in the twentieth century. These being mental states, the playwright conveys them through the words and behaviour of the characters, rather than through any ‘action’ in the conventional sense. While the characters do go through the process of interactions among one another, the intended focus of attention is not on these interactions but on the mental states that prompt them.
Works Cited


Anxiety in the Early Plays of Shepard

Shepard’s plays, especially the early ones, were written when he was passing through difficult times in New York city, and his play 4-H Club deals with the problems of poverty and unemployment of the youth of those days. Icarus’s Mother, Red Cross, and Action express his apocalyptic vision. In The Unseen Hand, he protests strongly against the totalitarianism that was spreading sporadically during and after the Second World War. As Leslie Wade writes, “he has fascinated audiences with an effulgent, often hypnotic drama of American anxiety and ambition” (1). Wade adds: “His plays may be viewed as artefacts (sic) that document contemporary American History” (2).

The plays of Shepard, shorter in comparison with Pinter’s early plays appear to be fragments. Bigsby observes that, Shepard “has the 1960s desire to make fragments cohere and the 1970s belief that truth may ultimately lie in those fragments” (CITAD 3:221). His plays appear to have no satisfying ending. He once said in an interview with Carol Rosen: “I hate endings. You have to end it somehow. I like beginnings. Middles are tough; but endings are just a pain in the ass. It’s very hard to end stuff” (Interview “Silent Tongue” 36). This comes from his conviction that “Everybody’s caught up in a fractured world” (UH 44). In order to present this “fractured world” he sometimes resorts to myths, which according to him are the expression of the mystery around us, and David J. DeRose observes that, “Sam Shepard has created his own myth, but his life and his art seem to be a constant struggle to retain control of that myth” (2).

Richard Gilman remarks that many of Shepard’s plays “are in fact extraordinarily resistant to thematic exegesis” (ix-x), and Gerald Weales seems