CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Harold Pinter occupies a very significant position in contemporary British theatre. A dramatist, scriptwriter, short story writer, director and actor, he has become a political voice of Human Rights issues.

Harold Pinter was born in Hackney, a working-class neighbourhood in London’s East End, on 10th October, 1930. The rise of anti-Semitism in Europe during the 1930s had a direct impact on East End which had a predominantly Jewish population. Living in this environment affected Pinter’s conception of the class system present in Britain at that time: it educated him as well as to where the Jewish people fit into that system. Pinter’s life was thus shaped by his heritage. Martin Esslin describes the locality of East End where Pinter grew up as a “political battlefield” (“Theatre of Cruelty” 32). With the outbreak of World War II, Pinter with his family and the rest of his community was evacuated from the city; he did not return to London until he was fourteen. He recalls:

On the day I got back to London, in 1944, I saw the first flying bomb, I was in the street and I saw it come over …. There were times when I would open our back door and find our garden in flames. Our house never burned, but we had to evacuate several times. Every time we evacuated, I took my cricket bat with me. (Esslin, The Playwright 12)

Pinter’s sense of a lost childhood is exemplified by his innocent desire to take his cricket bat with him each time his family was evacuated from their home. Mel Gussow’s interview with
Pinter, “A Conversation with Pinter,” discusses Pinter’s youth. Pinter claims that he remembers very little about his childhood, “… if you ask me to tell my childhood stories, I would find it almost impossible” (Gussow 29). Pinter’s lack of memory of his youth suggests that he tried to repress a past that was too hard to forget; he claims that, “I can’t remember so much, but it is not actually forgotten. It exists—because it has not simply gone. I carry it with me. If you really remember everything you would blow up. You can’t carry the burden.” (Gussow 29). Pinter’s reflection suggests that his need to forget his childhood led him to withhold the trauma he lived through then, only to have it manifest itself in his plays.

About his childhood experiences in wartime London, Michael Billington says that despite the trauma and horror of the wartime deeply rooted in his psyche, Pinter, however, often was able to take a way out of this internal conflict:

Like many people who grew up during the Second World War, Pinter remembers it through a series of graphic snapshots: as he talks of the past, people, places and incidents come to life in his imagination. A sense of disruption was also a crucial part of wartime experience. (7)

Pinter began his career as an actor and an occasional poet. He studied acting at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London. He produced in rapid succession the body of work which made him the master of the comedy of menace. So he was credited with the invention of a new dramatic style known as comedy of menace, and his name has been adopted as descriptive of a type of theatre under the term “Pinteresque”.

It is important to reiterate that many of the defining qualities of Pinter’s plays are a result of the world that he grew up in. In Austin E. Quigley’s “The Language Problem,”
Quigley suggests that Pinter’s experience as a minority Jewish person influenced his use of menace in his plays. Quigley states that Pinter discovered that he had to rely on a verbal defence to protect himself:

I went to a Jewish club, by an old railway arch, and there were quite a lot of people often waiting with broken milk bottles in a particular alley we used to walk through. There were two ways of getting out of it—one was a purely physical way, of course, but you couldn’t do anything about the milk bottles—we didn’t have any milk bottles. The best way was to talk to them. (Quigley, The Language Problem 279)

Pinter uses language not only as a tool for creating an atmosphere of menace, but also as a tool for survival in this terrifying world. Steven H. Gale noted this particular story in his lecture “Butter’s Going Up: Harold Pinter and the Artistic Process” at the Humanities Nobel Lecture Series at the University of Calgary. He states that Pinter’s method of “talking his way through it” (the back alley), was how he lived his life; his was merely ‘talking his way’ through all of his plays. Pinter’s plays are influenced by events and moments from his past, whether or not they are consciously recognizable. For example, his plays are noted for their use of silence and cryptic small talk. Pinter’s major plays are usually set in a single room, whose occupants are threatened by forces or people whose precise intentions neither the characters nor the audience can define. Often these characters are engaged in a struggle for survival or control. It is arguable that Pinter’s plays depict his lifelong awareness of the discrimination of a minority group, all due to his own victimization as a Jew. Pinter constructs emotional rather than rational links, through language, by which he implies what he does not explain as is proved in his speech to the Seventh National Student Drama Festival
in Bristol, where he says, “A language, I repeat, where under what is said, another thing is being said” (Pinter, Various Voices 24).

He is unique in expressing his awareness of the menacing world around him in this extraordinarily subtle way. This leads many critics to say that he is a gifted, talented dramatist who only expresses the darker side of life. Pinter has now arrived at a stage in his development as a dramatist which can best be described as the zenith, and many critics have no reservations in calling him their greatest playwright. The themes of his early plays of threat and menace are perfectly blended with the political and human concerns of his drama of the 1980s, as well as with the holocaust and death-motives as introduced in Ashes to Ashes. These themes are extended into conflict and the terror of the loneliness of human situation. Hence Pinter's greatest achievement seems to be:

A style capable of the subtlest modulations, in which the prosaic is always merging into the terrifying. No other living dramatists convey such a sense of the constant possibility of the irruption of the unknown and the destructive into our daily lives. (Coweli 135)

The British theatre in the early fifties of the twentieth century was dominated by the Angry Young Men, a group of writers who took up socio-political problems as their subject. But the period following World War II also saw the emergence of a particular style of theatrical presentation called the Theatre of the Absurd and prominent among its exponents were Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco. Some critics consider Pinter an absurdist, (the Beckett influence), others an existentialist, and some others regard him as a naturalist. Ronald Knowles says, “With his outstanding success by the early 1960s, Pinter was frequently
associated with the social realism of the “Angry Young Men” and with the Absurdism of Beckett and Ionesco. (3)

Despite being a contemporary of Osborne and Wesker who project the contemporary world in a socio-political context, Pinter, under the influence of Samuel Beckett and Kafka, views contemporary world in another way. With his firsthand experience of the atrocities of World War II, for Pinter life becomes meaningless and senseless; the existence of human beings comes under the scrutiny of the so called welfare government and a sense of security is a farfetched concept. To represent the menacing life of human being, he finds the most suitable theatrical expression which later becomes familiar as the Theatre of Absurd.

The Theatre of the Absurd, a term coined by Martin Esslin, is applied to plays that focus on and reflect the absurd nature of the human condition. The roots of this type of literature can be traced to Greek and Roman times where the people strove to challenge their fate and desired to escape from the ‘absurdity’ of their existence through their courage and heroic actions. The theatre of the Absurd is an expression of profound despair but also of grim humour at the condition of humanity at a particular historical moment, and the condition of humanity in general, throughout time. In 1942, the Existentialist writer Albert Camus was calmly asking why, since life had lost all meaning, man should not seek escape in suicide. Camus argued that it is a divorce between man and his life which truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity. He defines absurdity:

A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land
to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity. (qtd. in Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd* 23)

According to Ionesco, “Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless” (qtd. in Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd* 23).

The Theatre of the Absurd is commonly associated with Existentialism, as Existentialism was an influential philosophy in Paris during the rise of the Theatre of the Absurd; however, to call it Existentialist theatre is problematic for many reasons. It gained this association partly because it was named (by Esslin) after the concept of "absurdism" advocated by Albert Camus. Absurdism is most accurately called Existentialist in the way Franz Kafka's work is labeled Existentialist: it embodies an aspect of the philosophy though the writer may not be a committed follower. As Tom Stoppard said in an interview:

I must say I didn't know what the word 'existential' meant until it was applied to Rosencrantz. And even now existentialism is not a philosophy I find either attractive or plausible. But it's certainly true that the play can be interpreted in existential terms, as well as in other terms. (Hudson 58)

However, the Theatre of the Absurd is not entirely the same as Existential Theatre. In the latter there is explication and debate, a philosophical argument and the reasoned promulgation of their world vision. Absurd Theatre expresses its senselessness of the human condition by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought. A primary difference between the Theatre of the Absurd and Existentialism is that the Theatre of the Absurd shows the failure of man without recommending a solution. In a 1966 interview,
Claude Bonnefoy, comparing the Absurdists to Sartre and Camus, said to Ionesco, "It seems to me that Beckett, Adamov and yourself started out less from philosophical reflections or a return to classical sources, than from first-hand experience and a desire to find a new theatrical expression that would enable you to render this experience in all its acuteness and also its immediacy. If Sartre and Camus thought out these themes, you expressed them in a far more vital contemporary fashion". Ionesco replied, "I have the feeling that these writers—who are serious and important—were talking about absurdity and death, but that they never really lived these themes that they did not feel them within themselves in an almost irrational, visceral way that all this was not deeply inscribed in their language. With them it was still rhetoric, eloquence. With Adamov and Beckett it really is a very naked reality that is conveyed through the apparent dislocation of language" (Bonnefoy 122). The Theatre of the Absurd has, we can say, renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being— that is, in terms of concrete stage images.

The Theatre of the Absurd has four main features: First, it depicts a world in which God is absent so there is no divine or transcendental “audience” to witness the human drama. Moreover, it often depicts a world in which metaphysical foundations and spiritual comforts are gone. Furthermore, it depicts a world in which morality and truth are relative. Finally, it often depicts a world in which language has lost its meaning and relevance; it is no more a tool of communication. In fact language depicts paradoxically the breakdown of communication in which language itself has become vicious and cruel.

World War II was the catalyst that brought the Theatre of the Absurd into existence. The global nature of this conflict and the resulting trauma of living under the threat of nuclear annihilation put into stark perspective the essential precariousness of human life. During this
period, a prophet of the absurd, Antonin Artaud (1896-1948), appeared. Antonin Artaud rejected realism in the theatre, calling for a return to myth and magic and to the exposure of the deepest conflicts within the human mind. He demanded a theatre that would produce collective archetypes and create a modern mythology. It was no longer possible, he insisted, to keep using traditional art forms and standards that had ceased being convincing and lost their validity. Although he would not live to see its development, The Theatre of the Absurd is precisely the new theatre that Artaud was dreaming of. It openly rebelled against conventional theatre. Whereas traditional theatre attempts to create a photographic representation of life as we see it, the Theatre of the Absurd aims to create a ritual-like, mythological, archetypal, allegorical vision of the world closely related to the world of dreams. The focal point of these dreams is often man's fundamental bewilderment and confusion, stemming from the fact that he has no answers to the basic existential questions: why we are alive, why we have to die, why there is injustice and suffering. It was as Ionesco called it —anti-theatre. It was surreal, illogical, conflictless and plotless. The dialogue often seemed to be complete gibberish. And, not surprisingly, the public’s first reaction to this new theatre was incomprehension and rejection.

At the same time, the Theatre of the Absurd also seems to have been a reaction to the disappearance of the religious dimension from contemporary life. The Absurd Theatre can be seen as an attempt to restore the importance of myth and ritual to our age, by making man aware of the ultimate realities of his condition, by instilling in him again the lost sense of cosmic wonder and primeval anguish. The Absurd Theatre hopes to achieve this by shocking man out of an existence that has become trite, mechanical and complacent. It is felt that there is mystical experience in confronting the limits of human condition.
As a result, absurd plays assumed a highly unusual, innovative form, directly aiming to startle the viewer, shaking him out of his comfortable, conventional life of everyday concerns. In the meaningless and Godless post-Second-World-War world, it was no longer possible to keep using such traditional art forms and standards that had ceased being convincing and lost their validity.

One of the most important aspects of absurd drama is its distrust of language as a means of communication. Language has become a vehicle of conventionalised, stereotyped, meaningless exchanges. Conventionalised speech acts as a barrier between ourselves and what the world is really about. In order to come into direct contact with natural reality, it is necessary to discredit and discard the false crutches of conventionalised language. Objects are much more important than language in absurd theatre: what happens transcends what is being said about it. It is the hidden, implied meaning of words that assume primary importance in absurd theatre, over and above what is being actually said. The Theatre of the Absurd strives to communicate an undisclosed totality of perception—hence it has to go beyond language.

Absurd drama subverts logic. It relishes the unexpected and the logically impossible. According to Sigmund Freud, there is a feeling of freedom we can enjoy when we are able to abandon the straitjacket of logic. Rationalist thought, like language, only deals with the superficial aspects of things. Nonsense, on the other hand, opens up a glimpse of the infinite. In trying to burst the bounds of logic and language the absurd theatre is trying to shatter the enclosing walls of the human condition itself. Our individual identity is defined by language, having a name is the source of our separateness - the loss of logical language brings us towards a unity with living things. In being illogical, the absurd theatre is anti-rationalist: it
negates rationalism because it feels that rationalist thought, like language, only deals with the superficial aspects of things. Nonsense, on the other hand, opens up a glimpse of the infinite. It offers intoxicating freedom brings one into contact with the essence of life and is a source of marvellous comedy.

The Theatre of the Absurd makes use of abstract scenic effects, many of which have been taken over and modified from the popular theatre arts: mime, ballet, acrobatics, conjuring, music-hall clowning. Much of its inspiration comes from silent film and comedy, as well as the tradition of verbal nonsense in early sound film (Laurel and Hardy, W C Fields, the Marx Brothers). It emphasises the importance of objects and visual experience: the role of language is relatively secondary. It owes a debt to European pre-war surrealism: its literary influences include the work of Franz Kafka. The Theatre of the Absurd aims to create a ritual-like, mythological, archetypal, allegorical vision, closely related to the world of dreams.

At the time when the first absurd plays were being written and staged in Western Europe in the late 1940s and early 1950s, people in the East European countries suddenly found themselves thrown into a world where absurdity was an integral part of everyday living. One did not have to be an abstract thinker in order to be able to reflect upon absurdity: the experience of absurdity became part and parcel of everybody's existence.

Hitler's attempt to conquer Russia during the Second World War gave Russia a unique opportunity to further the cause of [the Soviet brand of] socialism. In the final years of the war, Stalin turned the war of the defeat of Nazism into the war of conquest of Central Europe and the war of the division of Europe. In pursuing Hitler's retreating troops, the Russian Army managed to enter the territory of the Central European countries and remained there for
a long time. The might of the Russian Army made it possible for Stalin to establish rigidly ideological pro-Soviet regimes, hermetically sealed from the rest of Europe. The Central European countries, whose pre-war political systems ranged from feudal monarchies (Rumania), semi-authoritarian states (Poland) to a parliamentary Western-type democracy (Czechoslovakia), were then subjected to a militant Sovietisation. The countries were forced to undergo a major traumatic political and economic transformation.

The Western Theatre of the Absurd highlighted man's fundamental bewilderment and confusion, stemming from the fact that man has no answers to the basic existential questions: why we are alive, why we have to die, why there is injustice and suffering. East European Soviet-type socialism proudly proclaimed that it had answers to all these questions and, moreover, that it was capable of eliminating suffering and setting all injustices right. To doubt this was subversive. Officially, it was sufficient to implement a grossly simplified formula of Marxism to all spheres of life and Paradise on Earth would come. It became clear very soon that this simplified formula offered even fewer real answers than various esoteric and complex Western philosophical systems and that its implementation by force brought enormous suffering.

From the beginning it was clear that the simplified idea was absurd: yet it was made to dominate all spheres of life. People were expected to shape their lives according to its dictates and to enjoy it. It was, and still is, an offence to be sceptical about Soviet-type socialism if one is a citizen of an East-European country. The sheer fact that the arbitrary formula of simplified Marxism was made to dominate the lives of millions of people, forcing them to behave against their own nature, brought the absurdity of the formula into sharp focus for these millions. Thus, the Soviet-type system managed to bring the experience of
what was initially a matter of concern for only a small number of sensitive individuals in the West to whole nations in the East.

This is not to say that the absurdity of life as experienced in the East differs in any way from the absurdity of life as it is experienced in the West. In both parts of the world it stems from the ambiguity of man's position in the universe, from his fear of death and from his instinctive yearning for the Absolute. It is just that official East-European practices, based on contempt for the fundamental existential questions and on a primitive and arrogant faith in the power of a simplified idea, have created a reality which makes absurdity a primary and deeply-felt, intrinsic experience for anybody who comes in contact with that reality.

The rise of the Theatre of the Absurd in the Eastern Europe is connected with the period of relative relaxation of the East European regimes after Stalin's death. In the first decade after the communist take-over of power, it would have been impossible for anyone to write anything even distantly based on his experiences of life after the take-over without endangering his personal safety. The arts, as indeed all other spheres of life, were subject to rigid political control and reduced to serving blatant ideological and propagandistic aims. This was the period when feature films were made about happy workers in a steelworks, or about a village tractor driver who after falling in love with his tractor becomes a member of the communist party, etc. All the arts assumed a strong political bias. Twentieth century developments, in particular the inter-war experiments with structure and form in painting and poetry, were outlawed as bourgeois decadence.

In the years after Stalin's death in 1953, the situation slowly improved. The year 1956 saw two major attempts at liberalisation within the Soviet Bloc: the Hungarian revolution was defeated, while the Polish autumn managed to introduce a measure of normalcy into the
country which lasted for several years. Czechoslovakia did not see the first thaw until towards the end of the 1950s: genuine liberalisation did not start gaining momentum until 1962-63. Hence, it was only in the 1960s that the first absurdist plays could be written and staged in Eastern Europe. Even so, the Theatre of the Absurd remained limited to only two East European countries, those that were the most liberal at the time: Poland and Czechoslovakia. After the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, it became apparent that Russia would not tolerate a fuller liberalisation of the East European countries. Czechoslovakia was thrown into a harsh, neo-Stalinist mould, entering the time capsule of stagnating immobility, in which it has remained ever since. Since it had been primarily artists and intellectuals that were spearheading the liberalising reforms of the 1960s, the arts were now subjected to a vicious purge. Many well-known artists and intellectuals were turned into non-persons practically overnight: some left or were later forced to leave the country. All the Czechoslovak absurdist playwrights fell into the non-person category. It is perhaps quite convincing evidence of the social relevance of their plays that the establishment feared them so much it felt the need to outlaw them. Several of the banned authors have continued writing, regardless of the fact that their plays cannot be staged in Czechoslovakia at present. They have been published and produced in the West.

The East European Absurd Theatre was undoubtedly inspired by Western absurd drama, yet it differed from it considerably in form, meaning and impact. Although East European authors and theatre producers were quite well acquainted with many West-European absurd plays from the mid to late 1950s onwards, nevertheless (with very few exceptions) these plays were not performed or even translated in Eastern Europe until the mid-1960s. The reasons for this were several:
First, West-European absurd drama was regarded by East-European officialdom as the epitome of West-European bourgeois capitalist decadence and, as a result, East European theatrical producers would be wary of trying to stage a condemned play—such an act would blight their career once and for all, ensuring that they would never work in theatre again. The western absurdist plays were regarded a nihilistic and anti-realistic, especially after Kenneth Tynan had attacked Ionesco as the apostle of anti-realism: this attach was frequently used by the East European officialdom for condemning Western absurd plays.

Secondly, after a decade or more of staple conservative realistic bias, there were fears among theatrical producers that the West European absurd plays might be regarded as far too avant-garde and esoteric by the general public.

Thirdly, there was an atmosphere of relative optimism in Eastern Europe in the late 1950s and the 1960s. It was felt that although life under Stalin's domination had been terrible, the bad times were now past after the dictator's death and freedom was only a matter of time. The injustices and deficiencies of the East European systems were seen as due to human frailty rather than being a perennial metaphysical condition: it was felt that sincere and concerted human effort was in the long run going to be able to put all wrongs right. In a way, this was a continuation of the simplistic Stalinist faith in man's total power over his predicament. From this point of view, it was felt that most Western absurdist plays were too pessimistic, negative and destructive. It was argued (perhaps partially for official consumption) that the East European absurdist plays, unlike their Western counterparts, constituted constructive criticism.

The most famous, and most controversial, absurdist play is probably Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* where plot is eliminated, and a timeless, circular quality emerges
as two lost creatures, usually played as tramps, spend their days waiting—but without any certainty of whom they are waiting for or of whether he, or it, will ever come. The characters of the play are strange caricatures who have difficulty communicating the simplest of concepts to one another as they bide their time awaiting the arrival of Godot. The language they use is often ludicrous, and following the cyclical pattern, the play seems to end in precisely the same condition it began, with no real change having occurred. In fact, it is sometimes referred to as “the play where nothing happens.” Its detractors count this a fatal flaw and often turn red in the face fomenting on its inadequacies. It is mere gibberish, they cry, eyes nearly bulging out of their head—a prank on the audience disguised as a play. The play’s supporters, on the other hand, describe it as an accurate parable on the human condition in which “the more things change, the more they are the same.” Change, they argue, is only an illusion. In 1955, the famous character actor Robert Morley predicted that the success of Waiting for Godot meant “the end of theatre as we know it.” His generation may have gloomily accepted this prediction, but the younger generation embraced it. They were ready for something new—something that would move beyond the old stereotypes and reflect their increasingly complex understanding of existence.

The forms of theatre since they are determined by the laws of cultural change, should respond to the transient nature of man’s condition in society. This response is found in the dramas of Samuel Beckett, Edward Albee, Eugene Ionesco, Harold Pinter, and others. These playwrights have been grouped together by Martin Esslin under the title of a book called Theatre of the Absurd, though Esslin, emphasizes that, “The category suggested by the book’s title had merely been intended to draw attention to certain features the works discussed had in common, different and diverse as they were” (Theatre of the Absurd 12).
Esslin explains that Theatre of The Absurd creates a new and vital dramatic expression that corresponds to man's condition in society. Theatre of the Absurd is an expression of its age. The basic beliefs and assumptions of the former ages have been shattered and man is left to a life that has lost all meaning:

Theatre of The Absurd is facing up to a deeper layer of absurdity—the absurdity of the human condition itself in a world where the decline of religious belief has deprived man of certainties. Where it is no longer possible to accept simple and complete systems of values and revelations of divine purpose, life must be faced in its ultimate, stark reality. (Esslin, Theatre of the Absurd 401)

Esslin goes on to explain that the absurdists see the world as essentially mysterious and unintelligible, devoid of rational purpose and clearly deductible rules of conduct. As Pinter explains in an interview with John Russel Taylor:

I do so hate the becauses of drama. Who are we to say that this happens because that happened, that one thing is the consequence of another? How do we know? What reason have we to suppose that life is so neat and tidy? The most we know for sure is that the things which have happened have happened in a certain order: any connections we think we see, or choose to make, are mere guesswork. Life is much more mysterious than plays make it out to be. (Pinter, “Accident” 184)

Absurd drama is then, "... the projection of an inner, psychological reality........the fantasies, dreams, hallucinations, secret longings and fears of mankind" (Esslin, Reflections 6). The absurd dramatist is communicating his "... most intimate and personal intuition of the human
situation, his own sense of being, his individual vision of the world” (Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd* 402-403) and is presenting "the audience with a picture of a disintegrating world that has lost its unifying principle, its meaning and its purpose—an absurd universe” (Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd* 11). Theatre of the Absurd, though, is not concerned with debating or arguing the absurdity of the human condition, it merely presents it in terms of stage images. This idea is further developed by Esslin as follows:

Theatre of The Absurd is not concerned with conveying information or presenting the problems or destinies of characters that exist outside the authors inner world, as it does not expound a thesis or debate ideological propositions, it is not concerned with the representation of events, the narration of the fate or adventures of characters, but instead with the presentation of one individual's basic situation. It is a theatre of situation as against a theatre of events in sequence, and, therefore, it uses a language or patterns of concrete images rather than argument and discursive speech. And since it is trying to present a sense of being, it can neither investigate nor solve problems of conduct or morals. (Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd* 403)

The main action in Theatre of The Absurd communicates “a pattern of poetic images” (Esslin, *Reflections* 182) which do not tell a story. The central image determines the form of the play. Thus, the formal pattern of each play expresses the basic conception of that play. Therefore, for this theatre to develop, it must provide new languages, techniques, and forms to convey its changing modes of thought. As Eugene Ionesco explains:

Every movement, every new generation of artists brings a new style; or tries to bring one because it realizes, obscurely or clearly, that a certain way of saying
things is worn out and that a new way of saying them should be found, or that the old worn-out language, the old form should disappear, because it has become incapable of containing the new things which have to be said. (Ionesco 157)

Thus, Theatre of The Absurd discards both the "old worn-out language," and the "old form," in an attempt to formulate a new dramatic expression that corresponds better to man’s condition in his present society. Theatre of The Absurd is, then, the effort to bring new forms to existing ideas.

As truth and reality are not absolute qualities, the harmonizing of new forms with new perceptions of reality is not necessarily amenable to the process of reasoning. Hence, the irrational in Ionesco's and Pinter's plays, the breakdown in communication and bizarre; and meaningless, repetitive actions of the characters in most of the absurd plays explain that reality itself is faulty:

……… we prefer to subscribe to the view that there is shared common ground. I think there's a shared common ground all right, but it is more like quicksand. Because 'reality' is quite a strong, firm word, we tend to think, or to hope, that the state to which it refers is equally firm, settled and unequivocal. It doesn’t seem to be. (Pinter, Writing For The Théâtre 22)

Thus, man finds himself in a frightening and illogical universe, in which the means of communication, language is questionable. Therefore, the play with its suppositions of having solutions to all problems of character motivation, plot and psychology of man’s action, no longer works. Theatre of the Absurd has no solutions and does not attempt to find any.
Theatre of the Absurd strives to portray its sense of the senselessness of the human situation; further it attempts to achieve a unity between its assumptions and the form in which they are expressed. Pinter joins form and content using language to present a picture of reality itself. As Katherine Burkman points out:

Though Pinter is distinctly a poetic rather than a problem-solving playwright, he is by his own proud admission in large part a traditionalist. Despite his lack of certain kinds of explicit information about his character and plot, in form Pinter is not far from the well-made play of Ibsen as many of his fellow absurdists ;... ... and he is ultimately concerned with the shape both of words and of his entire dramatic world. (7-8)

Though a Pinter play may appear to be absurd, a careful examination of the form of the play will prove Pinter’s concern with the needs a character voices as the reason behind the language used. The major body of Pinter’s works can be seen in terms of thematic progression. The first stage of Pinter’s works with *The Room* (1957), *The Birthday Party* (1958), and *The Dumb Waiter* (1960) presents the idea of an individual’s fear without exploring the origin of menace. In the second stage including *A Slight Ache* (1961), *The Dwarfs* (1963), and *The Caretaker* (1960) Pinter begins to explore the cause of menace that develops from emotional needs. The third stage with *The Collection* (1962), *The Lover* (1963) and *The Homecoming* (1965) emphasizes movement and change, with Pinter exploring different psychological needs. The fourth stage with *Landscape* (1969), *Silence* (1969), *Old Times* (1971), *No Man’s Land* (1975) and *Ashes to Ashes* (1996) is an extension of Pinter’s vision and his main concern, present in his work since the beginning, the problem of self and sense of isolation of the human condition.
Throughout his drama we are confronted with a picture of contemporary man defeated by society around him as he fails to communicate with other men. The constant threat of disruption of the status quo, menace, is felt throughout his work. Although there is a change of emphasis in the tone and technique as Pinter progresses in his writing, there is no fundamental change in his vision. For example, in the early plays Pinter uses cabaret devices and blackouts to bewilder the audience or create a mood of menace. In the later plays he does not resort to such tactics; instead he uses memory and past recollections to produce the intrusion.

In Pinter's plays the reaction—physical, mental or spiritual—never ceases and is never complete. The audience is made aware of the obstacle throughout the play. The obstacle is Pinter's characters inability to communicate their basic fears or define their urgent needs in their relationships. In striving to form these relationships, the characters are negotiating not only the terms of their relationship but their very identities. The language they use does not attempt to define truth or reality; it is the way in which character is revealed. This use of language is the method by which Pinter's plays ultimately become dramas. The best form of conflict is that in which one human will is pitted, against itself, as it makes the drama even more arresting and intense and this is to be found in Pinter's plays.

Pinter's characters are struggling to achieve a sense of reality and self-image. Throughout the progression of his work, Pinter has become increasingly concerned with the question of time and its effects on states of mind. Pinter's awareness of the problems of time and reality and their combined function within the language used, as was revealed in many of his statements, is manifested in his characters' need to establish what Pinter called a "... common ground" (Pinter, Writing For The Théâtre 22). To linger in the past is safer than
living in the present which may, at any moment, deny the "... common ground." In 'striving to achieve the, "... common ground ..." the characters constantly come “up against” their own inability to communicate. The characters' linguistic battles are the means by which their identities are created. His characters are ordinary people with ordinary problems that are never solved. Pinter explained his point of view in this following passage: “I am interested primarily in people; I want to present people to the audience, worthy of their interest primarily because they are, they exist, not because of any moral the author may draw from them.” (qtd. in John Taylor 296)

As he explores what it means to live in this modern world, Harold Pinter moves away from the “well made play” with its artificial provision of background information and character motivation to a drama that reflects more of the unknown that surrounds us daily. Though Pinter has often reminded his critics and audiences that we should suspect explanations provided by authors, we can hardly deny that comments he made early in his career strike a chord for our understanding the uncertainty and confusion dramatized in his plays. In an interview with John Sherwood on B. B. C. European Services, Pinter says:

The explicit form which is so often taken in twentieth century drama is … cheating. The playwright assumes that we have a great deal of information about all his characters, who explain themselves to the audience. In fact, what they are doing most of the time is conforming to the author’s own ideology. They don’t create themselves as they go along, they are being fixed on the stage for one purpose, to speak for the author who has a point of view to put over. When the curtain goes up on one of my plays, you faced with a situation, a particular situation, two people sitting in a room, which hasn’t happened
before, and is just happening at this moment, and we know no more about them than I know about you, sitting at this table. The world is full of surprises. A door can open at any moment and someone will come in. We’d love to know who it is, we’d love to know exactly what he has on his mind and why he comes in, but how often do we know what someone has on his mind or who this somebody is, and what goes to make him and make him what he is, and what his relationship is to others? (Harold Pinter)

Pinter dramatizes the arbitrary, the illusions, the contradictions. In his everyday world, men and women live out their experiences in the midst of uncertainty and relativism. As James Hollis points out, in his works Pinter is able “to fuse the absurdist consciousness with overtly conventional realism to achieve a dramatically viable amalgam” (Hollis 9). Whether we agree with those critics who view Pinter as a dramatists of the “Theatre of the Absurd” with its focus on the senselessness of life and the devaluation of ideals, purpose and communication or simply acknowledge that his works reflect a “realistic” view of a fragmented world, it is clear that his characters, like Len in The Dwarfs, force us to explore our own identities:

The point is, who are you? Not why or how, not even what. … It’s no use saying you know who you are just because you tell me you can fit your particular key into a particular slot, which will only receive your particular key because that’s not foolproof and certainly not conclusive. … You’re the sum of so many reflections. How many reflections? Whose reflections? Is that what you consist of? (Pinter, Plays 2 99-100)
Ironically Pinter has his audience share the stage with his characters as he creates a drama where the audience knows no more that the characters and, indeed, forces us to search for some understanding of ourselves in the “reflections” we see before and around us.

Despite an illusion of naturalistic theatre with the everyday language and stage sets reminiscent of Ibsen and Chekhov, Pinter’s drama is that of the characters of the modern world. In Pinter’s plays, his dramatic space is filled with people threatened by the known and the unknown, with couples who are strangers to each other, with families whose bonds seem unnatural and unexpected, with old men, lost and alone. Pinter depicts his characters at a decisive or turning point in their lives. In other words, his heroes are at a threshold of existence and non-existence, identity and non-identity. Thus, while displaying the clash between the inside and the outside, Pinter draws another contrast which is the either sides of the threshold. On this threshold Pinter’s characters are pretty much alone and desperate. They are clumsy casualties trying to establish an order to make life livable for them. But the more they try the more they sink into the void. In his plays after The Room, Pinter elaborates on the themes already present in his first play. In his plays, during the struggle between the inside and the outside—and naturally between the one/s inside and the one/s outside—the opposing parties may be battling over a room or a house; over a person; over power and over all or one of these. In the struggle between the one /s inside and the one/s outside the outsider is always the intruder who shatters the order of the one/s inside. However, the outsider does not have a fixed face. The outsider may appear as some person/s, as unidentified powers, as the past of the character in question, or his other self, as society in general or as more danger and threat unnamed. During those struggles the characters try not to appear defenseless, they don masks and conceal their true selves. Alliances change, several weapons are used, deceit is acceptable, and strategy is a must. The characters struggle to cover up their nakedness and
vulnerability. The ritual of existence or the bitter game of life is carried on incessantly and persistently. As in *The Room* the struggle over a person, over a room/house, over power and the merciless struggle between the inside and the outside with the intrusion pattern appear in *The Birthday Party, The Dumb Waiter, A Slight Ache, The Caretaker, Night School; The Dwarfs, The Collection, The Lover, Tea Party, The Homecoming, The Basement, Old Times, No Man's Land* and in *Betrayal* in various degrees of intensification, emphasis and dimensions. In *The Birthday Party* the outsiders and the intruders are Goldberg and McCann. With the mission of having to fetch Stanley to Monty they pursue and find Stanley in his shelter and claim that they will make a man out of Stanley. Although they appear as emissaries of a mysterious underground organization they are more likely surrogates of society. Having somehow rebelled against the norms of the established order Stanley has to pay the price. After passing the initiation rites he will be reborn according to the wishes of society. Neither his haven nor the motherly Meg can protect him. He cannot escape from the fate of every man and is dragged out of his shelter to look into the world. Aston, in *The Caretaker* and Gus, in *The Dumb Waiter* experience more or less the same fate like Stanley. Gus is not forgiven when he questions the order of Wilson, who is most probably the representative of society. Aston, on the other hand, is a direct mirror image of Stanley. In a way, his situation of having undergone shock treatment in a mental institution alludes to what may happen to Stanley in Monty's organization. After all, Stanley may be a patient of Monty's institution at large. After the shock treatment Aston is turned into an invalid but lives in harmony with society. Stanley, at the end of the play, appears in a dark suit which signifies the uniform of uniformity. Gaining territory (bed / room / house), a person, and power is the prerequisite condition of existence.
When Pinter looks at the problematic of existence he does not fail to see the dialectical relationship between the victor and the victim. In the merciless strife to exist the hunter and the hunted, the usurper and the usurped, in other words the victor and the victim prove to be one and the same in many plays.

Pinter’s achievement has been to discover that language serves as a means of negotiation, a weapon of attack, and a source of evasion. Pinter’s theatrical world is a lethal testing ground in which individuals are hunters or prey, a place characterized as much by humor as insecurity, fear, domestic battles and betrayal, and official intimidation. Patterns of dominance permeate the canon. In fact, for Pinter power/control behavior is rooted in the wish to kill one’s opponent, or in the converse fear of being “killed,” metaphorically annihilated. Thus for Pinter the crime enacted in plays from the first phase of his career, like The Birthday Party, and his most recent work, such as One for the Road or Party Time, are linked in that they depict “the destruction of an individual” (Gussow 69). For this writer, fear and aggression are at the core of human behavior. From Pinter’s perspective, violence in his work is an expression of dominance and subservience, a response to a pervasive threat. In turn that threat informs not only those who will achieve dominance but also the tools they will employ to achieve that dominance. Hence, in such works as One for the Road and Mountain Language, Pinter depicts physical and psychological torture, erotic sadism, and human rights abuses. As he told his interviewer Mel Gussow, what interests him as a writer and as a citizen of the world is not the statements of contemporary politicians but “the suffering for which they [politicians] are responsible. It doesn’t interest me—it horrifies me! (Pause.)” (Gussow 40). In short, his plays are not about “ambiguities” of power or abstract crimes; they dramatize in “a series of short, sharp, brutal images” (Gussow 70) or in
chillingly comic ways the abuse of power. Regarding the vision of Pinter in this perspective Leslie Kane says:

Pinter’s vision remains the most compellingly serious of our time. Indeed, only Pinter recognizes the common cause linking criminal violence with crimes of the heart—any acts that destroy rather than promote human relationships. Hence, according to Penelope Prentice, for example, although comedy illuminates his vision to awaken consciousness, as Pinter pushes his work to frontiers of tragedy to evoke uneasy laughter, his audiences are not always sure that they have permission to laugh. In fact, Pinter’s comedy magnifies the universal conflict for survival and power to illuminate how it attaches to criminal destruction. And while early works often dramatize sources of violent conflict among lower class, small time, onstage criminals, his most recent work enters the halls of power to reveal the wellspring of global violent conflict as little different from conflict at any level. Much of Pinter’s earliest work dramatizes conflicts between onstage petty criminals or hoodlums who may or may not be taking orders from offstage, unseen characters engaged in malicious destruction of organized and/or political crime. Pinter’s other early work and middle work, such as The Caretaker, The Go-Between, The Homecoming, and Betrayal, largely dramatize crimes of the heart. His late plays and his more recent work for stage and film, however, are distinctive in his dramatization of the sexualized, eroticized violence and the erotics of torture. One for the Road, Mountain Language, The Handmaid’s Tale, The Trial, and Celebration all portray either civil, political, or war crimes or crimes of the heart, or both. Except for his torturer plays, the
powerful alongside the ineffectual almost always reveal themselves as equally responsible for destruction. And while Pinter, who is a fine actor, has admitted “a yen” to play what he calls “the sinister parts”—and he has done so brilliantly as Goldberg in *The Birthday Party*, Mick in *The Caretaker*, and the Interrogator in *One for the Road*—he is driven as a writer to focus upon the crimes perpetrated by those who “terrorize” the individual. (Kane 3)

So in the world of Pinter the process of victimization is closely associated with crime, cruelty and violence done by the victimizer who uses language as a weapon to instill physical as well as psychological torture. In this perspective Pinter’s plays are very close to Antonin Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty. Antonin Artaud concludes the preface to his 1938 manifesto on the Theater of Cruelty, *The Theater and Its Double*, with the following paragraph:

… when we speak the word “life,” it must be understood we are not referring to life as we know it from its surface of fact, but to that fragile, fluctuating centre which forms never reach. And if there is still one hellish, truly accursed thing in our time, it is our artistic dallying with forms, instead of being like victims burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames. (Artaud 13)

Harold Pinter makes the following comment in a programme note for the Royal Court production of *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Room* in London in March, 1960:

The desire for verification is understandable but cannot always be satisfied. There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. The thing is not necessarily either true or false: it can be both true and false. The assumption that to verify what has
happened and what is happening presents few problems I take to be inaccurate. A character on the stage who can present no convincing argument or information as to his past experience, his present behaviour or his aspirations, nor give a comprehensive analysis of his motives, is as legitimate and as worthy of attention as one who alarmingly, can do all the things. The more acute the experience the less articulate its expression. (Pinter, *Plays I* ix)

Both Pinter and Artaud seek to express the reality behind all attempts to rationalize or conceptualize human behavior. Beneath the rational framework of civilization lies a reality, a core of human existence, which cannot be expressed solely through language or the conventional dramatic plot with its pattern of action, climax and denouement. Artaud conceived the Theater of Cruelty to reflect this hidden and unknown reality. Pinter has manifested a modern version of Artaud’s concept though he has acknowledged no direct influence from the French poet and visionary. Pinter and Artaud have the similar ideas as to the function of the theatre and their views on the nature of man and the world he inhabits are also akin to, as the above quotations indicate.

Artaud attacks the restrictive nature of such forms as language, which are like bandage covering the raw sores of reality. Artaud thought the Theater of Cruelty should expose the wound:

… the domain of the theater is not psychological but plastic and physical. And it is not a question of whether physical language of theater is capable of achieving the same psychological resolutions as the language of words, whether it is able to express feelings and passions as well as words, but whether there are not attitudes in the realm of thought and intelligence that
words are incapable of grasping and that gestures and everything partaking of a spatial language attain with more precision than they. (Artaud 71)

On the other hand Harold Pinter says on the articulateness of silence:

There are two silences. One when now word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed. This speech is speaking of a language looked beneath it. This is its continual reference. The speech we hear is an indication of that which we don’t hear. It is a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smoke screen which keeps the other in its place. When true silence falls we are still left with echo but are nearer nakedness. One way of looking at speech is to say that it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness. (Pinter, Plays 1. xiii)

Pinter’s concept of nakedness is very close to one aspect of what Artaud meant by cruelty. In the Pinter canon, a man is most naked when he is most vulnerable and this vulnerability comes at the point where he has no more stratagems such as language with which to cover himself. Cruelty and violence, as envisioned by Artaud, and manifested by Pinter, is the process by which man is rendered naked and vulnerable, and is also the result of that process—the state of nakedness itself. The stratagems are removed through inevitable confrontation with other human beings in the struggle to acquire the basic necessities of life such as food, shelter and clothing, and to satisfy basic emotional demands for sex, love, friendship; in the necessity to endure plan, loneliness, fear, and ultimately, death; in the struggle to acquire such necessities and satisfy such demands. The weaker inevitably perish in the struggle, while the strong survive.
The confrontations involve a certain degree of violence but this violence is a consequence of the confrontations and not the cause. In the same way, violence is not the cause of cruelty, as envisioned by Artaud, nor is it the cruelty itself, but may occur as a result of the existence of cruelty. A man is facing the cruelty of existence when he finds himself stripped of all pretence, helpless, unable to defend himself; finds himself clinging to life when he knows it is absurd and meaningless; when he finds, like Gus and Ben in *The Dumbwaiter*, there is no more food to serve in accordance with the order to serve some strange foods.

The process of victimization is the method by which man is made aware of his true self and true nature of the world. In Pinter, the principle method by which the state of cruelty is manifested is victimization. Characters like Davies in *The Caretaker* and Stanley in *The Birthday Party* are truly akin to Aratud’s “victims burnt at the stake signaling through the flames.” As Artaud says, “There is no cruelty without consciousness and without the application of consciousness. It is consciousness that gives to the exercise of every act of life its blood-red color, its cruel nuance, since it is understood that life is always someone’s death” (Artaud 102).

The victimization in Pinter’s plays is closely linked to the struggle for dominance, control and survival. The victimization most often takes the form of manipulation of one character by another or by a group of characters. The victimization may have a sexual basis, as in *The Homecoming*, where Ruth dominates a trio of males, or in *A Slight Ache*, where a woman, Flora, brings about the impotence of her aging husband through a desire to keep him young and vital. Victimization may be social, as in *The Dumbwaiter*, where the organization victimizes its own members, or in *The Birthday Party*, where an intended victim becomes an
executioner, both of himself and the organization, when the attempted victimization releases
instinctual forces within him.

It is the process of victimization and the end result of that victimization through an
ensuing violence that constitutes the existence of cruelty, as Pinter manifests it and as Artaud
envisions it. Cruelty is the inevitable movement of life itself, a movement which occurs
without any rational, preconceived plan. Life moves inevitably but irrationally, according to
necessity. The process of victimization involves pressure, which is also cruel. Victimization
is the closest dramatic approximation to this inevitable pressure of existence, which stripes
away layers of pretence and exposes whatever is fearful and hidden. Harold Pinter’s
metaphor for the condition of man in the modern world is a room or an enclosed space in
which the confrontation and the struggle for control, dominance and survival take place.

Almost every playwright presents an image of man in the theatre which has an effect
on the spectator whose emotions and feelings are purged; but if the theatre re-defines man for
the spectator it must present an image of man being re-defined. In Pinter, this image results
from the process of victimization. This stripping away of the false masks of civilization, for
example, the concept of man as a strictly limited creature, operating within a specific and
rational framework, constitutes an ensuing violence from the existence of cruelty.
Victimization is a dramatic manifestation of the philosophical idea of cruelty. Pinter appears
to be carrying on the violence perpetrated by the torturer and endured by the victimized
without any historical basis, except that the past, as it affects the lives of the characters, is one
of the forms that restrict and bind them and keep them from perceiving that inner reality,
metaphysical awareness or consciousness of self. Pinter’s plays have a social context but he
is far from a social realist. Society, like the past, is another form which tries to restrict the
individual’s capacity for growth or decay. This idea is most forcibly expressed in *The Birthday Party*, where representatives of the system, Goldberg and McCann, in their attempts to make Stanley Weber a useful member of the organization, release instinctual forces which give Stanley a brief, but violent, identity, and consumes him.

The violence in Pinter’s plays always involves a struggle for control and power, dominance and survival, and ultimately the establishment of identity. In this struggle, one person is victim, and the others are victimizers. If there is one room and three people to share it, one or more persons are ejected. If there are two men and one woman, the men must either share the woman or fight for possession; if there are two men and one cheese roll, one man eats while the other goes hungry. Pinter seeks to return the theatre to its origins to make it express what is most elemental and basic in man.

One of the characteristics of Pinter is his use of language, not to convey a realistic impression of life, but rather to show the superficial reality that is created by words. Language in the plays is a defense mechanism the characters employ to hide their vulnerability. Language is also employed to give force and direction to the plastic and visual elements in the plays, and, paradoxically, it is these elements which help to expose the superficial reality the language represents. Pinter’s language provides verbal reinforcement for the visual images which he is trying to project. Not words, but actions are remembered in thinking of Pinter’s plays—Stanley in *The Birthday Party*, blindfolded and groping, trying to rape Lulu who is spread-eagled on the table; Edward crushing the wasp in *A Slight Ache*; Mick terrorizing Davies with a vacuum cleaner in *The Caretaker*.

Obviously Pinter is unwilling to state anything about his plays but wants them to speak. Even he has disapproved the label ‘didactic’ for his plays. It is true that his plays are
not escapist with pleasure loving people moving truly and living satisfactorily. They reveal how man is caught and detained in fear, doubt, uncertainty, stupidity, insouciance and at the same time tends to entertain humour, joy, ambition and possession. Pinter shows the way his generation gripped by an innumerable emotions and experiences. He has not compromised his art to suit his audience. He relishes the conflict in an audience by making him to think shrewdly on his own theatre and nowhere the audience is allowed to enjoy the sort of given comfort, console and entertainment.