Regarding the unseen : reading the offstage in Harold Pinter's early plays

Goh, Qi Wei

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READING THE OFFSTAGE IN PINTER'S PLAYS

**NANYANG
TECHNOLOGICAL
UNIVERSITY**

**REGARDING THE UNSEEN: READING THE OFFSTAGE IN
HAROLD PINTER'S EARLY PLAYS**

GOH QI WEI

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SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

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GOH QI WEI

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

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Abstract

As a result of its close ties with theatre, drama has often been associated with sight and this has, understandably, led to readers paying more attention to the 'seen', while inadvertently pushing the 'unseen' into the background. However, the 'unseen' parts of a play (i.e. the offstage) are equally, if not more, important than the 'seen' in driving the action of a drama. Therefore, this paper plans to examine the offstage, by rereading Harold Pinter's first four plays, *The Room* (1957), *The Birthday Party* (1957), *The Dumb Waiter* (1957) and *A Slight Ache* (1958) and attempt, firstly, to argue for the importance of the offstage *in drama* and, secondly, to challenge the usual claims of 'menace' associated with the outside/offstage of Pinter's early plays. Ultimately, I hope to suggest that the offstage in Pinter's drama actually possesses the potential to help characters free themselves from the confines of the room/stage which they are trapped in.

Regarding the Unseen: Reading the Offstage in Harold Pinter's Early Plays

Introduction

Derived from the Greek words 'theatron' (the seeing place) and 'theasthai' (behold), 'theatre' has a long history of privileging the sense of sight. Such partiality is largely prompted by stage performances' dependence on the audience's gaze for their existence – characters live out the spectrum of human emotions and more in the span of a few hours but it would all be pointless if no one is there to watch it happen. Hence, it is only natural that performers and audiences pay attention to what will be *seen* in a performance. However, as sensible as this practice is, such favouring of the 'seen' in theatre inadvertently implies that the parts of the drama which are unseen (i.e. in the offstage) are of far less consequence to a play.

This, of course, is clearly not the case. Offstage action and/or characters very often function as the driving force of a play. From the murder of King Laius in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (429 BC) to Ophelia's suicide in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, from the missing Protopopov in Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (1901) to the persistently absent Godot in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953), the offstage often shapes a play in more ways than has been widely acknowledged. Playwrights across time, space, cultures, languages, etc. have, at one point or another, exploited the advantages of the offstage to help fulfil their various dramatic visions. The Greek tragedians, for instance, used the offstage to 'hide' death and violence. This, on one hand, avoids the necessity of engaging actors in life-threatening acts but on the other hand, so R. Sri Pathmanathan argues, it is also 'commonplace of stage-craft that horror can be conveyed more effectively through the suggestive power of words on the imagination than by actual spectacle' (6). In words echoing Pathmanathan, Safi Mahmoud Mahfouz similarly contends that in more recent times, absence is a 'theatrical device' (393) to American playwrights like Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Edward

Albee and Sam Shepard, since ‘absence may make [offstage characters] appear more powerful to us simply because we only know them by inference’ (392).

Such inferential abilities are equally appealed to when playwrights use the offstage to transcend the physical limits of the stage. Although these ‘limitations’ have often been used by detractors of drama as justification for the form’s obsolete status in the age of television and film, playwrights from as far back as the 16th century have found ways to overcome such restrictions. For instance, according to Beliz Güçbilmez, ‘reported’ offstage events in Shakespearean drama ‘[construct] an enlarged and wide-spread representation space ... this extensional and external diegesis provides an enlarged range of sight to the audience topographically, cognitively, and of course imaginatively’ (153). Decades later, Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen made similar moves when he extended the action of his plays beyond the stage and manipulated this divide between the ‘seen’ and the ‘unseen’ to exemplify the tension between larger (socio-political) forces and private individual lives.

Evidently, the unseen parts of a play are not simply complementary to onstage action and characters. In order to fully study a play, it is useful (and perhaps even necessary) to study the offstage as well. However, some issues have to be addressed before this plan can commence. For one, how should anyone go about studying the offstage? Writing on the offstage in Samuel Beckett’s plays, Shimon Levy points out that the ‘[o]ffstage should be regarded as the link between drama and theatre’ (54). It straddles both worlds but does not really belong to either and this liminal condition requires one to consider both theatre *and* drama when deciding the approach for a project like this one.

Consequently, the distinctions between drama and theatre have to be clarified first. To do so, I turn to a story which the British playwright, Tom Stoppard, has shared on many occasions, about an Oxford college’s performance of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1610-11):

... Now the stage was a lawn, and the lawn backed on to a lake ... the director had had the foresight to put a plank walkway just underneath the surface of the water ... Ariel says his last words and he turns and he runs and he gets to the water and he goes splish splash, splish splash, right across the lake and into the enfolding dark ... ultimately his little figure disappeared from view. And at that moment, from the further shore, a firework rocket was ignited and just went whoosh into the sky and burst into a lot of sparks ... This is the thing: you can't write anything as good as that. If you look it up, it says "Exit Ariel" ("The Event and the Text" 200)

Apart from distinguishing theatre from drama, the story, in William W. Demastes' words, also 'emphasize[s] that [Stoppard] is forever aware of the fact that the drama he writes is a text meant to be staged as "theatre"' (25). With that in mind, it only makes sense that a study of the offstage, a term more often associated with theatre, has to first begin with *drama*. After all, theatrical performances are, first and foremost, dictated by the words which the playwright writes, and these words are even more pertinent to the offstage which, by virtue of its unseen nature, does not enjoy the advantages of a director's 'foresight'. Therefore, while the offstage is ostensibly associated with theatre, I argue that it is in fact an investigation of the offstage *in drama* which is key to understanding the unseen parts of a play.

If sight is fundamental to the theatrical experience, how does one 'see' the offstage – a concept that by its very definition cannot be seen? As Güçbilmez elegantly puts it, '[t]he visibility [of theatre] creates its own eager witnesses; on the other hand offstage is a forbidden area for real visitors and onlookers, where we have reached the boundary of seeing' (154). Such a task is made possible in *drama* where the words, so Elissa S. Guralnick argues, allow us to 'see' both presence and absence:

The fact is that visual imagery falters in expressing any number of concepts that language quite readily enables us to see: for example, a thousand-sided figure, or a man *not* scratching his nose. In addition, language can clarify images that are inherently ambiguous ... images do not come fully clear unless assisted by a caption. The words, in effect, create the pictures. (“The Visual Challenge” 26)

Consequently, a *physical* stage is not necessary to the study of the offstage (in drama) since it is with our mind’s eye that we see the offstage. It requires, above all else, our *imagination*. Stoppard was right when he pointed out the impossibility of writing anything as good as the Oxford college’s enactment of Ariel’s exit, but, conversely, there are moments when theatre cannot perform anything as good as what is written down and subsequently read.

Furthermore, it is perhaps useful to remember that the ‘seen’ did not always enjoy its current special position in theatre. Early modern theatre-goers, for instance, often spoke of ‘hearing’ rather than ‘viewing’ a play. Hamlet himself, in anticipation of the players’ performance in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, announces that ‘we’ll *hear* a play tomorrow’ (emphasis mine 2.2.457). Plays were celebrated for their dialogue and speeches, not the action, costumes or set. Admittedly, this emphasis on the auditory aspect of plays is largely lost amongst contemporary audiences but words still very much form the bedrock of any play, specifically with regards to the offstage. According to Stephen Ratcliffe, a concern with the offstage is a concern with things that ‘audiences watching and listening to the play will [not] notice, not because they are not there but because the performance of the play happens too quickly’ in the unstoppable forward movement of the performance (xiii). Hence, the study of the offstage is a private experience (as in reading drama) rather than a public one (as in a theatre) – it is necessary that one should be able to examine a play at his/her will, so as to

give the offstage its deserved attention. It is for this reason that a study of the offstage in drama demands a close analysis of the actual words written by the playwright(s).

As such, to loosely borrow Harry Berger Jr.'s phrase, I propose an 'armchair interpretation' (xii) of the plays to be discussed in this paper (more will be said of these plays later on). Notably, Ratcliffe also uses this 'armchair interpretation' in his insightful *Reading the Unseen: (Offstage) Hamlet* (2009). He asserts that '[t]he play I am reading is therefore not the play an audience is watching in the theater but an *idea* of that play' (emphasis mine, Ratcliffe xiv). Similarly, in my paper, I am chiefly interested in considering the aspects of a play which are not seen and may not be noticed in a conventional viewing. As the earlier quote from Levy suggests, the offstage is the link between theatre and drama and therefore, its eternal intermediary condition (between reality and imagination) means that it can never arrive at a state concrete enough to exist outside the mind. It is, above all else, an *idea*.

But what exactly does this idea constitute? Similarly intrigued by the unseen, Güçbilmez attempts to define the offstage as that which:

lies between the fictionality of the stage and the reality of the auditorium. It exists in relation to the stage – but in that relationship, as the prefix 'off' suggests, it carries a negative denotation. With its ambiguous, transitory nature, the offstage softens the sharpness between the fictional and the real world: it is related to both but possessed by neither. It's where we are in limbo. (154)

Alternatively, Jonathan Walker describes offstage action as:

inhabit[ing] the larger spatial contexts and temporal backgrounds, both past and coterminous, from which the visible scenes onstage emerge, and it may also be said to include the space and time of events that the action might project into future contexts. (78)

I say Güçbilmez ‘attempts to define’ the offstage because, as the above definitions show, the emphases placed by critics differ – Güçbilmez is clearly concerned with the divide between reality and fiction while Walker focuses on the spatial *and* temporal aspects of the offstage. This is made even more complicated when other critics writing on related notions (of the offstage) have different words for it: Hanna Scolnicov, for instance, describes (what I call) the stage and the offstage as ‘perceived space’ and ‘conceived space’ (5) while Michael Issacharoff refers to two forms of dramatic space – the ‘onstage and offstage (mimetic and diegetic) ... Mimetic space is represented onstage and made visible to an audience. Diegetic space is *described*, that is, referred to in the dialogue, and therefore confined to a merely verbal existence’ (58).

Such different explanations definitely do not make defining the offstage easier but the difficulty of this task precisely highlights certain fundamental issues regarding the study of the offstage. Firstly, the seemingly divergent work on and related to the offstage is reflective of the fact that not much has been said and written about the subject. There is no terminology or grounding principle that is agreed upon or established enough to guide current works interested in the offstage and this lack of a guiding framework is particular proof of the necessity for pursuing this project. But the difficulties in explaining what the offstage *is* has much to do with the nature of the offstage as well. While there are differing opinions on how to describe and define the offstage, the one thing that is agreed upon is the offstage’s unseen nature. Not being seen is the very basis of the offstage’s existence and so by this very ‘definition’, it is plastic, malleable and thus, paradoxically, should not or cannot be defined. Or rather, more accurately, the offstage rejects a general definition (beyond the fact that it is the unseen parts of a play). While it may be possible to come to a conclusion on what the offstage is in a particular play (though even then, it is likely that its definition might change

in the course of the play), to try to give it a general definition is problematic and, perhaps, impossible.

Therefore, in order to make any claims on the offstage, it is necessary to root the following discussion in specific dramas and perhaps nothing is more suitable for this investigation than the works of the late British playwright, Harold Pinter. I had suggested above that various playwrights had given due attention to the offstage but none of them engage with the offstage in quite the same way as Pinter. For while most playwrights have at one point or another employed the offstage as a ‘tool’ to help either heighten their plays’ dramatic effects and/or to get around technical limitations, Pinter very often made offstage action and characters the central concern(s) of his works. From Rose’s fear of the external cold and danger in *The Room* (1957) to Teddy’s return home in *The Homecoming* (1964), from Beth and Duff’s reminiscences about a life outside their kitchen in the 1967 *Landscape* to Deborah’s lost thirty years in *A Kind of Alaska* (1982), Pinter’s plays often draw our attention to what is *there* rather than *here*, what is *then* rather than *now* – what is, in other words, in the offstage.

There is much material in Pinter’s stage plays to investigate the offstage with but for the purposes of this paper, I will be using the playwright’s first four plays, *The Room* (1957), *The Birthday Party* (1957), *The Dumb Waiter* (1957) and *A Slight Ache* (1958), as my primary sources of reference. Often described as Pinter’s ‘room invader’ plays, these four works are chiefly concerned with the people and/or time-space beyond the staged room. In fact, this concern is hinted at in the bicoloured rendering of Andrzej Klimowski’s design on the cover of *Harold Pinter: Plays 1* (1996), a faber and faber publication in which these four works are collected. The cover image of a set of doors opened just enough to reveal the darkness on the other side is one which dominates all of Pinter’s early plays. Significantly, it

is not the open door but the image's focus on the darkness beyond the door that makes it such a suitable choice.

Of course, this attention to the darkness beyond the stage can similarly be seen in other Pinter plays as well: in *Landscape and Silence* (1968), for instance, memory becomes a recurring theme and darkness literally impinges on the playing area. Memory's importance in these more 'difficult' plays introduces a subtler and more confusing feature to the offstage – time. However, since the offstage is as yet still in its infancy in dramatic criticism, a more basic understanding of the offstage in drama has to be developed first, before more extensive and complex work can be done on it. This is not to say that time does not feature in the plays to be discussed here – it is simply not the focus. With the length of this paper in mind, a better approach will be to work with plays which provide a simpler and broader sense of the offstage and Pinter's first four 'room invader' plays do just that. The fact that the action of these four plays is confined to one room makes explaining and demarcating the offstage in the plays a comparatively straightforward affair – anything and anyone outside the fictional room is unseen and hence, automatically part of the offstage.

It is also worth recognising that in later Pinter plays like *One for the Road* (1984) and *Mountain Language* (1988), the offstage goes on to assume overtly political connotations. Undeniably, such symbolic use of the offstage is worth considering as well but it is the formal, rather than political, aspects of the offstage which I am more interested in here. Therefore, on the occasions that the plays gesture towards politics, as in *The Birthday Party*, the political undertones will be acknowledged but not necessarily expanded upon. Instead, I will focus on the way in which the offstage in Pinter's first four plays actually draws out the metadramatical elements inherent in the works. After all, the characters of these plays are all, at one point or another, intrigued by who or what lies beyond the room they inhabit.

In fact, when Irving Wardle, in his 1958 *Encore* review of Pinter and David Campton's plays, described Pinter's (and Campton's) works as 'comedies of menace', he was referring particularly to the characters' concern with the offstage world outside their room(s) – their ostensible fear of 'intruders' is inextricable from their awareness of larger forces at work in their lives. However, even as I say this, it is important to clarify that Pinter's characters *never* possess the kind of full consciousness which Luigi Pirandello's six characters or Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern share. As far as Pinter's characters are concerned, their fictional world is 'real' but they also suspect or know that their lives are not their own to live.

Nevertheless, while the 'playwright' controls the characters' lives from his position in the offstage, the offstage itself also has the potential to provide characters' with freedom from the room/stage they have been made to remain in. As the plays progress, the stifling, limiting and entrapping qualities of the room/stage grow more and more acute, making the offstage all the more attractive. And so even while the characters in the earlier plays (*The Birthday Party*, *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter*) do not succeed in achieving freedom for themselves, they pave the way for characters in *A Slight Ache* to attain their long-awaited liberation.

Consisting of four main chapters, each focusing on one play, this paper will endeavour to track (across the four plays) the characters' progress in breaking free from their room/stage prison. Success does not happen immediately, particularly in *The Birthday Party*, but as we shall see in the first chapter, there is clearly hope at the very end.

1. *The Birthday Party*: Stumbling upon the Multiplicity of the Offstage

I said to the man one day, 'What are you doing here?' And he said. 'Oh well I used to be ... I'm a pianist. I used to play in the concert-party here and I gave that up.' ... And when I asked why he stayed, he said, 'There's nowhere else to go.' (76)

— Harold Pinter

Faithfully recorded by Michael Billington in *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter* (1996), the above exchange details a time in Harold Pinter's life when he was touring as an actor in L. du Garde Peach's *A Horse! A Horse!* (1953). It is no secret that many of Pinter's works were inspired by real encounters in the playwright's life and Pinter himself had shared this particular story on many occasions: it was the summer of 1954 and Pinter met a man at a pub in Eastbourne while in search for a place to stay. The man brought him to his lodgings where Pinter met the landlady and landlord and the circumstances of this man's life was to become the foundation for Pinter's first three-act play, *The Birthday Party* (1957).

The play begins with a man, Petey, returning home from work. His wife, Meg, stands at the kitchen hatch and serves up breakfast in '[t]he living-room of a house in a seaside town' (3). The normal domestic set-up is quickly complicated with the introduction of Stanley, their lodger, but the real disturbance is caused by the arrival of Goldberg and McCann, two gentlemen who claim to be seeking lodgings at the house. Their ambiguous origins, coupled with hints of Stanley's past connection with the two strangers, immediately mark them as threats. The strangers' intimidating qualities are further perpetuated when they force Stanley to attend his own birthday party (despite the latter's insistence that it is not his birthday). The party ends in chaos and violence as Stanley attempts to strangle Meg and ostensibly attacks next door neighbour, Lulu. He comes away from the party broken and McCann and Goldberg, ignoring Petey's feeble protest, insist on taking Stanley away – for his own good, they say. The play concludes with Petey and Meg on stage, in virtually the same set-up as it began.

Clearly, Stanley is the dramatised version of the man from the pub and the man's refrain of having 'nowhere else to go' finds its way into the play proper when Stanley declares at one point that '[t]here's nowhere to go' (20). Charles A. Carpenter suggests that the tragedy of *The Birthday Party* 'lies ... in the appalling absence of alternatives' ("Symbolic" 393). Even though Stanley's situation as a lodger is not ideal, the world outside Meg and Petey's house seems particularly devoid of choices. This is further reinforced when Stanley is forcibly removed from the room/stage by Goldberg and McCann. In many ways, Stanley's insistence on his lack of choices reveals an inherently fatalistic attitude – specifically, the attitude of a man who either suspects or is aware of the predetermined nature of his life. After all, as Martin S. Regal rightly points out, 'while there is no apparent cause, all this takes place with grim inevitability' (28). Stanley's removal from the room/stage appears to be unpreventable; Goldberg and McCann's mysterious presence and the fact that they seem to take orders from an authoritative offstage figure suggest that Stanley's end had been decided long before the duo's appearance.

However, there are also moments in the play which indicate that perhaps choices are not lacking for Stanley but that he cannot see their existence. Penelope Prentice contends that 'Stanley's inertia results from his inability to imagine choices' (25) and indeed, like the man from the pub, Stanley appears incapable of envisioning alternatives to his current situation. Although he never steps out of the boarding house, he insists that the (offstage) world outside is simply 'nowhere'. Undeniably, many of the other characters do try to make Stanley do their bidding but, in many ways, they only succeed because Stanley *allows* them to do so. He expresses fear and anger, for instance, when facing Goldberg and McCann but makes no real effort to resist their attempts at bullying him. Ultimately, Goldberg and McCann succeed in 'breaking' Stanley and taking him to the offstage 'organisation' they work for but in light of the ambiguities in the play, I argue that the offstage in *The Birthday Party* is not simply a

source of terror. Instead, I believe that it can also function as a means for characters to resist the dictates of the larger force(s) present in their lives. Of course, Stanley does not ultimately manage to achieve freedom here but the ambiguities (regarding his future) – ambiguities perpetuated by the offstage – actually hint at the possibility for the offstage to contribute to his liberation.

The unmistakable presence of a larger, controlling force in Stanley's life has led to a preponderance of political readings in analyses of *The Birthday Party*. Charles Grimes, for instance, observes that '[m]ore recent reinterpretations ... [examine] how *The Birthday Party* dramatizes power structure, and the possibility of political action' (37) and John Stokes points out that '[t]he enthusiasm of the *Encore* critics reveals the political dimension of Pinter's work' (31). They disclose 'his abiding perception that political reality invariably lies buried beneath official language' (Stokes 31). In other words, as Michael W. Kaufman argues, 'the crisis in Pinter's plays arises when his characters realize that their own inner impulses are in irreconcilable conflict with the role society expects them to play' (168). '[T]he totalitarian "organization"', which Goldberg and McCann belong to, is, according to Dirk Visser, 'a metaphor for any dictatorial regime' (340).

Politics, so it seems, has become *the* focus in criticisms of *The Birthday Party*. However, as Billington suggests, it is unclear whether or not the political aspect of the play 'was conscious on Pinter's part' (*Life and Work* 82). When asked for a reason for the play's endurance, Pinter tentatively admits that 'it's possible to say ... that two people knocking on the door of someone's residence and terrorising them and taking them away has become more and more actual in our lives ...' (qtd, in Billington, "Fighting Talk"). Such hesitation on Pinter's part is a reminder that though these political readings may be reinforced by Pinter's own involvement in politics in his later years, life (and the play it is being represented by) is not wholly political. After all, as Pinter himself writes to the editor of *The Play's the Thing*, 'I

am sure that readers of your magazine fully acknowledge the double, treble, quadruple life lived under the term life ... [t]o supply an explicit moral tag to an evolving and compulsive dramatic image seems to me facile, impertinent and dishonest' (*The Birthday Party II* 15). Apart from politics, the 'evolving and compulsive dramatic image' also allows for different strands of interpretations – interpretations which differ significantly from but are not completely incompatible with the predominantly politicised discussions.

One can just as well read the hints of dictatorship in the play metadramatically: Stanley is forced towards a tragic end by the tyrannical 'organisation' which Goldberg and McCann take orders from. Although Stanley is clearly aware of the existence of this 'organisation', it is uncertain if he knows what exactly it refers to and neither Goldberg nor McCann address this issue explicitly. In light of this ambiguity, this 'organisation' or entity which directs characters' speech and action, can be regarded as the offstage 'playwright' – the unseen man who dictates the fate of the characters. Yet, while ostensibly similar, this should be distinguished from the meaning making Author-God whom Roland Barthes symbolically killed in 1967. The 'playwright' here is neither the source of all answers nor is he all-powerful. Although he commands the lives of his characters with his words (as all playwrights do), the play's ambiguities hint at the possibility for an ending which does not insist on Stanley's persecution. In its eternal state of uncertainty, the offstage, where Stanley's future lies, seems to possess the ability of encompassing multiple scenarios, all at once.

The action of *The Birthday Party* is confined to '[t]he living room of a house in a seaside town' (3). Hence, the offstage here refers to the time-space outside the house *as well as* the other unseen areas of the house – most importantly, Stanley's room. Notably, Meg and Petey's house is a 'boarding house' (Pinter 6) where, as Michelene Wandor points out, 'the domestic territory is not privately controlled: it is either rented, or semi-public, in the

boarding-house, an intermediate point between public and private' (59). Rather than a destination, the room/stage in *The Birthday Party* is more a point of transition for Stanley. Introduced as a lodger, Stanley's presence in the room/stage is clearly not meant to be permanent; from the outset, it is made known that he will or has to leave eventually. A choice regarding his future (in the offstage) has to be made – does he return to his offstage room and carry on life as a part of Meg and Petey's household or does he leave the house altogether? Unfortunately, the options set out in front of him are not particularly attractive.

A possible life presents itself in the form of Meg, who obviously treats Stanley as more than just a lodger. Exactly what he is to her becomes evident when Meg, wondering if 'Stanley [is] up yet' (4), decides that she is 'going to wake that boy', she is 'going to call that boy' (7). Like a mother to a child, Meg even 'made him' drink the tea she brought up for him, she 'stood there till he did' (7). Treating Stanley like a son furnishes her with the authority a mother has over her child, allowing her to prolong or even insist on his continual stay in the house. This 'seduction' of Stanley develops further when she exchanges the role of mother for that of a lover as she speaks of the 'lovely afternoons' she had 'in [Stanley's] room' (13), '*ruffles his hair as she passes*' (12) and '*tickles the back of his neck*' (13). Beneath these displays of affection lies the determination to possess him, to keep him to his offstage room, for him to not 'go away again' because she wants him to 'stay here. You'll be better off. You stay with your old Meg' (17).

Stanley, however, does not reciprocate Meg's feelings – he '*recoils from her hand in disgust*' (13), tells her that she is 'a bad wife' (10) for forgetting Petey's tea and calls her 'a succulent old washing bag' (12). He resists her attempts to dictate his life and even turns to intimidation, frightening her with stories of unknown men arriving: '[t]hey're coming today. They're coming in a van' to take her away (18). E. T. Kirby believes Stanley 'has intuited that she will recognize and respond to the image, the men from the van with a wheelbarrow, a

projection of his own “dread-full” state much as it will be realized in the play’ (160). By transplanting his fears of the offstage onto Meg, Stanley seeks to transform her into the fearful (and thus, weaker) of the two and rid himself of her hold over him.

Unfortunately, this does little to alter anything since Meg simply ignores the claims he makes about himself, insisting that ‘[i]t’s your birthday, Stan’ (29) and dismisses his objection by asserting that ‘[o]f course it is’ (30). In a sense, new life is imposed on Stanley with this change in birthday as his existence becomes forcibly bound up with Meg’s. She proceeds to finalise this through her speech at the birthday party when she refers to him as ‘my Stanley now’ (49). Claiming that ‘he’s the only Stanley I know, and I know him better than all the world ... I could cry because I’m so happy, having him here and not gone away ...’ (Pinter 49), Meg, as Martin Esslin proclaims, ‘has succeeded in making him regress to the status of a little boy, a child’ (*A Study* 78).

Alternating between care and seduction, Meg seeks to make Stanley helpless and hence entirely dependent on her. Evidently, continuing his stay at the house is not the best situation for Stanley to be in but the world outside does not seem any better. When asked, Petey declares that it is ‘[v]ery nice’ out today, ‘there’s a good breeze blowing’ and he ‘wouldn’t say it was cold’ (8). Such pointless descriptions say little of the alternatives beyond the door – life without appears no better than life within. In fact, there is even a possibility that life outside is worse. Andreas Fischer, for instance, suggests that ‘the security [Stanley] believes to have found is treacherous Meg’s sexual advances are a hint as to what may be waiting for him outside’ (496).

This perhaps explains Stanley’s wariness towards the impending arrival of Goldberg and McCann. Although the duo represents an alternative to Meg’s stifling affections, they also possess the potential for chaos and terror. Indeed, upon entering the room, Goldberg and McCann make immediate attempts to undermine Meg’s authority. As Wandor observes, they

‘take over Meg’s territory in a way which goes beyond the prerogative of lodgers, by deciding to give Stanley a party for his birthday’ (58). Goldberg asks Meg if she is ‘going to have a party [for Stanley]’ (27). ‘We’ll bring him out of himself’ (27), Goldberg assures and proceeds to make plans and assign tasks, superseding Meg in the process. If this birthday is truly a way to lay claim on Stanley, then Stanley’s ‘birth’ has as much to do with Goldberg as it does with Meg.

Carpenter agrees with this when he suggests that Meg and Goldberg ‘engage in a semi-conscious tug of war, with Stanley’s umbilical cord as the rope, until Goldberg triumphs by virtue of superior tactics and strength’ (“Symbolic” 393). Meg tries (in vain) to re-establish her authority in the play when she claims that ‘it would have been easier last week’ to put Goldberg and McCann up but Goldberg quickly exposes the untruth when he asks, ‘Why? How many have you got here at the moment’ (25), forcing her to admit that she in fact has only one lodger. Subsequently, when Stanley tries to persuade McCann and Goldberg to leave, claiming that ‘[w]e’re booked out. Your room is taken. Mrs Boles forgot to tell you. You’ll have to find somewhere else’, Goldberg merely ignores him and ‘congratulate [him] on [his] birthday’ (38). Like Meg, Goldberg overrides Stanley’s every attempt to speak for himself but unlike Meg, Goldberg’s confident and cheerful barbarism proves more successful as Stanley gradually succumbs to his commands, particularly during the birthday party.

In fact, ‘birth’, in the sense of ‘origin’, is precisely what gives Goldberg the ‘superior tactics and strength’ to take Stanley from Meg (Carpenter, “Symbolic” 393). There are repeated hints in the play that suggest that the men have a shared past. From a formal perspective, this is indeed the case since all three men, as characters, evidently ‘originate’ from the same place – the offstage. Indications of this prior acquaintance first arise when Meg informs Stanley, at his insistence, that one of the new lodgers is called ‘Goldberg’. Upon hearing this, Stanley ‘*slowly sits at the table, left*’ and when asked if he knew them, he ‘*does*

not answer' (29). His lack of response, though inconclusive, is telling since he is visibly affected by the information. Of course, this in no way proves that Stanley is fully aware of the offstage as *offstage*; there is no overt evidence to show that the characters do not accept their reality as 'real'. However, by drawing attention to the 'unseen' and hinting at the larger significance of people and things from the offstage, *The Birthday Party* emphasises the self-reflexive undertones inherent to any offstage references. Whenever Stanley considers people and events from or in the offstage, he is always (inadvertently) drawing *readers'* attention to both the 'reality' of his world *and* the inherent artificiality of this world – these events and people (which we cannot see) emphasise the physical boundary between the stage and the offstage, reminding us of the constructed quality of the world which the characters inhabit.

Therefore, when Goldberg and McCann make further references to their shared past – 'why did you leave the organization?', 'why did you betray us?' (42) – they are essentially informing us of Stanley's 'rightful' place in the outside/offstage. In addition, the duo's questions serve to highlight the temporal qualities of the offstage, bringing to mind Jonathan Walker's definition of offstage action. Walker suggests that offstage action 'inhabits the larger spatial contexts and temporal backgrounds, both past and coterminous, from which the visible scenes onstage emerge' (78). In emphasising what happened *before* the present moment on stage, Goldberg and McCann alert us to the fact that there is much that has 'happened' which we were not witnesses to. Consequently, it becomes evident that Stanley's present idea of life outside the room/stage is very much informed by this 'past life' which he seems to share with Goldberg and McCann. And this is precisely that which stops Stanley from working towards his freedom – although offstage action 'may also be said to include the space and time of events that the action might *project* into future contexts' (emphasis mine, Walker 78), Stanley's lack of imagination regarding the outside/offstage ensures that his choices for the future are limited.

Unable to see beyond his past (with Goldberg and McCann) and his present (with Meg and Petey), Stanley cannot bring himself to project a better alternative future in the offstage. In this respect, his lack of choice has as much to do with himself as it does with Meg, Goldberg or McCann. For instance, in a conversation with Lulu, the next door neighbour, Stanley talks about leaving the house for good:

STANLEY. (*abruptly*) How would you like to go away with me?

LULU. Where.

STANLEY. Nowhere. Still, we could go.

LULU. But where could we go?

STANLEY. Nowhere. There's nowhere to go. So we could just go. It wouldn't matter. (20)

However, when Lulu invites him out for a walk, he informs her that 'I can't at the moment' (20). Significantly, this inability to leave is self-imposed. In fact, Prentice believes that 'Goldberg and McCann did not arrive on a premeditated mission but that Stanley initiates and invites his own destruction' (24). 'When Stanley tries to escape before the party McCann threateningly requests but, it is important to note, does not *force* him to stay. Stage directions explicitly indicate Stanley freely backs away from the door when he is given the option to leave, a similar option he earlier refused with Lulu' (Prentice 30).

While it is debatable if Goldberg and McCann arrive with a plan to remove Stanley, it is evident that Stanley does not really resist Goldberg's dominance and this, in turn, compels us to reconsider the extent of Goldberg's power over Stanley. At one point during the birthday party, Goldberg orders Stanley to get 'a drink for your guest ... Now raise your glasses. Everyone standing up? No, not you Stanley. You must sit down' (49). These directions, which Stanley complies to, do indeed suggest Goldberg's ability to order Stanley around but they also, intriguingly, read very much like the directions a playwright or director

might give to a character/actor. In fact, Pinter himself took on the role of Goldberg in BBC's 1987 television adaptation of the play, and in playing Goldberg, Pinter (intentionally or unintentionally) draws attention to the fact that Goldberg, quite literally, speaks the words of the 'playwright' – despite his confident front, he is nothing more than a mouthpiece for the controlling force in the offstage.

In "Pinter As Painter-Poet, Pinter As Comedian" (1993), Bert Cardullo suggests that Goldberg and McCann 'are agents of a higher force that has decided Stanley's fate' (127). Goldberg is the epitome of the traditional, unquestioning and unthinking character who is completely at ease with himself and what he has to do. In response to McCann's query if they were in the right house, Goldberg declares that '[s]ure I'm sure' (21). He is a man who has 'got a position' (23) and is well-versed in the language of his 'employer'. He reminds McCann not to 'worry yourself' and even encourages him to '[l]ook at me' and '[t]ake my tip' (21). But Goldberg's confidence and self-assurance stems from ignorance rather than a deep understanding of his position or role in the larger scheme of things.

Unlike Stanley, Goldberg does not question his purpose in the room/stage. He constantly refers to an unseen past but these reminiscences happen so often that they simply seem like a way for him to confirm and, more importantly, *convince* others of his existence. Most of the time, he has no real reason for telling his stories; moreover, with every story he tells, a pattern begins to develop – '[w]hen I was a youngster, of a Friday, I used to go for a walk ... with a girl who lived down my road' (37), 'Friday, of an afternoon, I'd take myself for a little constitutional, down over the park ... I'd say hullo to the little boys, the little girls ...' (53). As these patterns set in, his stories seem less like events that did actually happen and more like empty lines spoken by an actor. The (physical and temporal) distance from which Goldberg talks about these past events highlights the inherent hollowness of his stories

and, by extension, emphasises the comparable emptiness of Goldberg's existence as a man who has 'got a position' (23).

As a result, we begin to see him less as a menacing intruder and more as the ignorant character he is. Simon O. Lesser suggests that 'the cruelty of the exploiters is not confined to the exploited group' (37) and Harold Hobson corroborates this notion when he writes in his review of the play that '[t]here is something in your past ... [which] will be looking for you and you cannot get away. And someone will be looking for *them* too'. While Lesser and Hobson's comments suggest politicised interpretations, they make just as much sense applied to the characters themselves – Goldberg and McCann are decidedly not free to do what they will. In fact, in a letter to Peter Wood, Pinter admits that '[t]he play dictated itself, but I confess I wrote it – with intent, maliciously, purposefully, in command of its growth' (qtd. in Baker 48). Although they are the apparent villains of the play, it is clear that Goldberg and McCann are as much subjected to the manipulations of the offstage force as Stanley is.

However, while the duo is often seen and spoken of together, McCann is not as unthinking as Goldberg. Billington rightly points out that '[McCann] has from the start shown nervous apprehension and a precarious stability' (*Life and Work* 80). When he enters the empty living-room for the first time, McCann asks Goldberg '[h]ow do we know this is the right house' (23), declares that 'I'm just all right once I know what I'm doing. When I know what I'm doing, I'm all right' (24) and wonders if it '[i]sn't ... about time someone came in' (22). Unlike Goldberg, McCann questions their situation and the actions which they are to take and such doubtfulness, unsurprisingly, invites the similarly questioning Stanley to seek to establish some form of connection with McCann.

Gerald M. Berkowitz makes the intriguing observation that 'Stanley's first impulse on encountering the invading Goldberg and McCann is to insist that he is not who he appears to be' (86). Despite the potential danger which the intruders represent, Stanley attempts to

clarify his status (as lodger) in the boarding house and actually associates himself with McCann. On meeting McCann, Stanley asks the man a series of questions and reveals his awareness of a larger entity controlling their lives in the process. More importantly, he seeks to draw McCann's attention to this manipulative presence when he insists to the other man that '[t]here's a lot you don't know. I think someone's leading you up the garden path' (35). At another point in Act Two, Stanley grips McCann's arm and tries to get the latter to admit to the presence of a larger conspiracy – 'you knew what I was talking about before, didn't you' (36)?

However, McCann denies any such knowledge, '*savagely* [hitting Stanley's] *arm*' (36) to prove his point. This denial occurs again when Stanley refers to an unnamed 'he' – '[h]as he told you anything? Do you know what you're here for? ... Or hasn't he told you?' (36). Yet, despite McCann's insistence that he has no idea what Stanley is referring to, his agitated reaction, coupled with his own questions to Goldberg earlier in the play, suggests otherwise. Significantly, the following exchange regarding McCann's offstage past further hints at the fact that there is more to the whole affair than he is willing to admit:

STANLEY. I've got a feeling we've met before.

MCCANN. No we haven't.

STANLEY. Ever been anywhere near Maidenhead?

MCCANN. No.

STANLEY. There's a Fuller's teashop. I used to have my tea there.

MCCANN. I don't know it.

STANLEY. And a Boots library. I seem to connect you with High Street. (33)

Once again, despite his denial of all these associations, the abruptness and emphatic nature of McCann's replies indicate the opposite. In fact, '[a] little Austin, tea in Fullers, a library book from Boots' (50) are some of the things Goldberg himself mentions a little later on when he

makes one of his many references to his past. These overlaps in detail would not have become evident had Stanley not voluntarily questioned McCann on them. In exposing the similarities between his own situation and the duo's, Stanley emphasises that McCann and Goldberg are as much 'victims' to the whims of the unseen 'playwright' as he is. Therefore, the relationship between the three men is not that of 'tormentor' and 'victim' but rather that of prisoners thrown into a single cell, forced to fight with each other in order to survive.

Consequently, it comes as no surprise when interaction between Stanley, Goldberg and McCann end violently. Even as Stanley tries to coax McCann into revealing his own doubts and queries, Stanley is similarly exposed to Goldberg and McCann's efforts at making him part of the 'organisation' again. In particular, they seek to wear down Stanley's presence in the room/stage when they inundate him with a series of nonsensical questions a little later on in the play:

GOLDBERG. What's your trade?

STANLEY. I play the piano.

GOLDBERG. How many fingers do you use?

STANLEY. No hands!

GOLDBERG. No society would touch you. Not even a building society.

MCCANN. You're a traitor to the cloth.

GOLDBERG. What do you use for pyjamas?

STANLEY. Nothing.

GOLDBERG. You verminate the sheet of your birth. (45)

Lorraine Hall Burghardt argues that '[t]he questions create confusion because they are absurd, pointless, seemingly unrelated, and frequently unanswerable. So the effect is the un-defining of Stanley' (383). The logical answers which Stanley tries to give are all rendered pointless since they are either dismissed or used against him; this cross-examination

successfully removes the credibility of Stanley's words. More accurately, Hugo Bowles suggests that the duo's questions '[show] them taking possession of speaking rights within the discourse space and ultimately forcing Stanley into silence through the intimidatory power of their questions' (153). Reminiscent of exchanges between lawyers and witnesses in court, where the questioner seeks to direct the witness's story by evaluating the replies (from the witness) in his/her own terms, Goldberg and McCann's hostile line of questioning quite literally robs Stanley of his voice – we never hear Stanley speak again beyond this scene in the play.

Prevented from articulating his defiance, Stanley can only resort to violence in order to force the interrogation to a close. He '[kicks] GOLDBERG *in the stomach*', then '*seizes a chair and covers his head with it. MCCANN and STANLEY circle*' (46). Alberta E.

Feynman argues that '[t]he dramatists of the absurd ... frequently use the behavior and language of childhood in order to represent in concrete image personality that is underdeveloped, half-formed, ill-shapen'; the playwright 'depresses his image of humanity to something wholly sub-human' (23). In *The Birthday Party*, Stanley's violent outburst makes him akin to this 'sub-human' which Feynman speaks of. While this 'dehumanisation' may be a depressing sign to Feynman, in Stanley's case, it actually serves to remind us of the inherent impermanence of his existence as 'Stanley'. After all, regardless of how 'real' their world seems to be, the *characters* are all ultimately 'less-than-human' and Stanley's reaction to Goldberg and McCann's verbal torture inadvertently draws attention to this fact.

Thus, despite Goldberg and McCann's apparent success in making Stanley part of the 'organisation' again, Stanley always finds new ways to challenge the 'reality' of his situation. This is exacerbated during the party, when Meg and Lulu decide to play blind man's buff. Lulu explains the rules to McCann – 'You mustn't be touched. But you can't move after she's blind. And if she touches you then you become blind' (56). Karen F. Stein sees the

game as ‘a metaphor for man’s groping efforts to know and relate to the alien world’ (426). Indeed, when Stanley walks, blindfolded through the room (as per the rules of the game) ‘*into the drum and falls over with his foot caught in it*’ (Pinter 57), he demonstrates how strange the room/stage has become for him – the environment he once took for granted is clearly no longer the same.

Things become even stranger when Stanley, in the middle of his blindfolded walk, shockingly ‘*begins to strangle [Meg]*’ (58). This unusual behaviour compels Esslin to wonder if Stanley is ‘destroying the last vestige of his status as an artist? Or putting an end to his being Meg’s little boy’ (*A Study* 78)? His motivations may continue to remain a mystery but the consequences are obvious. By strangling Meg, Stanley, as Lesser points out, ‘gives Goldberg and McCann the excuse they have been looking for to also use physical force to subjugate him’ (41). However, they are prevented from further action because as they rush forward, presumably to stop Stanley from killing Meg, a sudden ‘BLACKOUT’ (58) descends upon the stage.

As this darkness falls upon the stage, the offstage’s function (as a means to resist the dictates of the unseen ‘playwright’) grows conversely clearer. For as long as the blackout lasts, all onstage action is rendered ‘unseen’ and consequently, we can see the offstage as ‘impinging’ on the stage. Through this ‘impingement’, Stanley’s subjugation is never fulfilled – we never actually see what Goldberg and McCann were planning to do to him. More precisely, the darkness of this (off)stage prevents Goldberg and McCann from carrying out their orders. At the end of Act Two, ‘*The stage is in darkness*’ and in this darkness, Goldberg and McCann ‘*turn and stumble against each other*’ (59). Although they eventually find the torch, ‘STANLEY, *as soon as the torchlight hits him, begins to giggle. GOLDBERG and MCCANN move towards him. He backs, giggling, the torch on his face ... He backs*

against the hatch, giggling. The torch draws closer. His giggle rises and grows as he flattens himself against the wall. Their figures converge upon him' (59-60).

Carpenter argues that these giggles are Stanley's reaction to 'his forced rebirth into [society] ... his giggling intensely communicates not only the expected pangs of terror, but also the knife-edge sensation of absurdity' ("Symbolic" 397). But laughter has other functions too. As Mikhail Bakhtin propounds in *Rabelais and His World* (1965):

The serious aspects of class culture are official and authoritarian; they are combined with violence, prohibitions, limitations and always contain an element of fear and of intimidation ... Laughter, on the contrary, overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations. Its idiom is never used by violence and authority. (90)

Supported by the darkness of the room, Stanley's giggles seem to challenge the authority of Goldberg and McCann, suggesting the duo's (and, by extension, the unseen force's) inability to fully control him. As Lois Gordon records in *Pinter at 70* (2001), Pinter himself proclaims that '[i]t was apparent to me what [the characters] would not, could not, ever, say, whatever one might wish' (5). While Pinter undeniably dictates the speech and action of his characters, there comes a point between the playwright's writing and the reader's reading when things are no longer in his hands: 'When the thing was well cooked I began forming certain conclusions. The point is, however, that by the time the play was now in its own world. It was determined by its own engendering image' (qtd. in Gordon 6).

Unfortunately, whatever potential the offstage may have for characters' rebellion, this fight for liberation is not to be fulfilled in *The Birthday Party*. In Act Three, McCann '*ushers in STANLEY, who is dressed in a dark well-cut suit and white collar ... He is clean-shaven*' (Pinter 75); Dirk Visser notes that we are 'made aware that something really gruesome has been going on offstage by McCann's declaring that he does not want to go back into

Stanley's room' (335). Between the darkness which separates Act Two and Three, Stanley has transformed from the fighting, kicking lodger to a passive, helpless figure – he makes an effort '*to speak, fails and emits sounds from his throat*' (78). Harriet and Irving Deer see him as 'a creature at best of a few grunts, essentially an object, empty, without human identity, meaning or will, a man in appearance only' (29). Notably, there is a distinction between the fighting 'sub-human' from the party and this 'man in appearance' in Act Three. At the party, Stanley fought actively for his life but now, clean-shaven and in a suit, he appears to be a different person altogether. As Visser argues, the oppressors attempt 'to conceal what they have done to their victim by dressing them up nicely so that they appear normal citizens again' (336).

Ultimately, Stanley is removed from the room/stage by Goldberg and McCann, who plan to take him to the hitherto unmentioned Monty, presumably their 'employer'. But while Stanley is unable to resist the commands of the offstage Monty, there are hopeful hints at the end of the play that suggest that the offstage's simultaneous ability to function as a means for characters to achieve their freedom. Significantly, Petey, of all people, stumbles upon this possibility in the conclusion of the play. Unlike all the other characters in *The Birthday Party*, Petey is the only one who is able to go where and do what he pleases: in Act One, he leaves for work even though Meg tells him to stay for his tea first (10) and in Act Two, he rejects McCann and Goldberg's invitation to attend the party because '[i]t's my chess night' (38). Seemingly unrestricted by the commands of Meg, Goldberg, McCann and, by extension, the offstage Monty, Petey is perhaps the most fitting figure to 'discover' the advantages of the offstage.

In the climactic scene when Goldberg and McCann prepare to take Stanley off stage, Petey pleads with Stanley to not 'let them tell you what to do'. Although it is uncertain if his plea has any effect on Stanley, Petey clearly takes his own advice when Meg returns to the

stage. Rather than relate the facts, Petey allows Meg to believe that Stanley is ‘still in bed’, ‘still asleep’ (80). In a 1971 interview with Mel Gussow about a later play, *Old Times* (1970), Pinter suggests that ‘[t]he fact that [the characters] discuss something that he says took place – even if it did not take place – actually seems to me to create the time and the moment vividly in the present, so that it actually takes place before your very eyes – by the words he is using’ (qtd. in Kreps 48). In a similar way, simply by his insistence, Petey’s ‘lie’ at the end of *The Birthday Party* introduces a certain level of uncertainty to Stanley’s future. This ‘lie’ allows Petey to stumble upon the multiplicity of the offstage; as far as we are concerned, Stanley can be on his way to the ‘organisation’ with Goldberg and McCann *as well as* in his room, sleeping.

Provided with two undesirable alternatives throughout the course of the play, Stanley’s offstage future has to be kept ambiguous in order for him to avoid the mandate of the play-text. After all, as Prentice reminds us, ‘ambiguity actually keeps alive the possibility of choice and responsibility’ (40). With Petey’s ‘lie’, Stanley’s offstage future remains uncertain and everything is left ‘vague and fluid. Situations never assume a definite shape; either their outlines are left hazy and obscure or we are given two flatly contradictory versions of something and never told (if either) is correct’ (Lesser 36). The clean-shaven Stanley we encounter in Act Three is, in essence, not the Stanley who first walked into the room. In his attempt to keep the news of Stanley’s departure from Meg, Petey discovers the possibility of two Stanleys and inadvertently shows us how Stanley can move from having ‘nowhere to go’ to being in two places at once.

Although the prospect of staying on with Meg or leaving with McCann and Goldberg is equally unpalatable, Petey’s ‘lie’ demonstrates the slim possibility for a character to reject the conclusion(s) written for him. In a world where choices are limited and the future looks bleak, Stanley can at least refuse either of these endings. Stokes may have been making a

political rather than a metaphysical point in his essay, but his words are similarly a commentary on the fate of the characters themselves when he argues that 'Pinter allows a slim margin of freedom, or potential freedom ... To lose the power of choice, to have that taken from you is to lose freedom that counts' (38-9).

Admittedly, Stanley does not attain freedom in *The Birthday Party* but the fact that the play ends in almost the same way it begins, with Meg and Petey in the room/stage, indicates that the 'intruders' actually bring less chaos with them than we imagined. While the offstage in *The Birthday Party* does possess undeniably terrifying qualities, it also holds the key to the characters' liberation. The ability for the offstage to house multiple scenarios provides Stanley with the opportunity to *not* choose from the limited choices provided for him. However, Stanley's inability to see beyond the immediate menace of the offstage compels his failure to rebel against the unseen, offstage force. Clearly, when it comes to the offstage, imagination is as important to the characters themselves as it is to the readers of the play. Fortunately, this lamentable blindness is 'rectified' in *The Room*, where the character(s) recognise and subsequently admit to the room/stage's limitations, allowing them to see more than just potential danger in the offstage.

2. *The Room*: Seeing Freedom in the Offstage

—thou hast eyes,
 Yet see'st not in what misery thou art fallen,
 Nor where thou dwellest nor with whom for mate.
 Dost know thy lineage? Nay, thou know'st it not (15)
 – Sophocles

Blindness afflicts Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (496 BC); he sees but is blind to all the signs pointing him towards the inherent tragedy of the knowledge he seeks. In some ways, Stanley in *The Birthday Party* shares a similar blindness with Oedipus when he insists on the 'nothingness' of the offstage. Like the king, Stanley's lack of sight leads him towards a tragic end. Significantly, this blindness develops into a pattern when we take into consideration Pinter's other early plays. In *The Room* (1957), Rose, the central character, is similarly unable to see beyond her immediate environment and situation. However, as the play progresses, it becomes evident that Rose's blindness is not quite the same as Oedipus'. Unlike the arrogant king, Rose eventually shows that she does indeed know 'in what misery thou art fallen' (Sophocles 15) and this knowledge helps her to avoid the fate that befalls Stanley at the end of his play. Despite being physically separated from the offstage, she is nonetheless able to see the potential it has in helping her achieve her freedom and in this respect, Rose is perhaps more capable of resisting her fate than Stanley is.

Written and first performed in 1957 at The Drama Studio at the University of Bristol, *The Room* was Pinter's first official foray into playwriting. Set in '[a] room in a large house' (85), the one-act play opens onto Rose and Bert, presumably husband and wife, having breakfast in what appears to be a normal working-class home. Rose serves a silent Bert food while he reads a magazine. Mr Kidd, the supposed landlord, calls on them but leaves without doing or saying anything significant. Eventually, Bert leaves for work and a couple, Mr and Mrs Sands, arrives soon after, claiming to be in search of the landlord. Their appearance presents the possibility of Rose's eviction and she seeks to allay this worry when Mr Kidd

enters the room a second time. However, she is side lined by his introduction of Riley, a blind, black man from the basement. This ostensible stranger arrives, on behalf of Rose's father, with the sole purpose of asking her to 'come home' (108) and just when she seems about to comply, Bert returns and attacks the blind man. The curtain falls but not before the stage blacks out over Riley, lying (possibly dead) on the ground, while Rose, 'clutching her eyes', announces that she '[c]an't see. I can't see. I can't see' (110).

Ostensibly, *The Room* and *Oedipus the King* have little in common but the former's emphasis on blindness (both metaphorical and literal) compels references to this most famous of Greek tragedies – a fact that other critics have also picked up on in their readings of *The Room*. Most significantly, Kirsten Morrison is quick to point out that '[i]n Oedipus Rex, the problem is clear; the irony lies in Oedipus' blindness regarding how the pieces fix together; the audience knows there is ample cause for all that has happened and is happening. In *The Room* there is no such clear causality' (389). As with *The Birthday Party*, uncertainty rules in this Pinter play. Again, nothing is fully explained and, as Morrison argues, in *The Room*, 'it is the character – not the audience – who sees what is coming, who knows the hidden causes, and this makes a profound difference' (389). Despite their shared inability to see beyond the room/stage they each inhabit, Stanley and Rose are intrinsically different in their blindness. Rose is ultimately *willing* to admit to the suffocating confines of the room/stage she inhabits and, more importantly, recognises in the offstage the potential for escaping these confines.

However, it is not immediately apparent what and exactly how much Rose knows about the outside/offstage. Her 'conversation' with the persistently silent Bert in the first half of the play often dwells on the differences between the room they are in and the world outside the room – '[i]t's very cold out, I can tell you. It's murder' (85). These repeated comparisons between the room and the world outside have been a source of interest to critics and have spurred a wide spectrum of interpretations centring round this 'divide'.

Paraphrasing Gertrude Stein, Roger Copeland, for instance, argues that ‘Pinter’s room is a room is a room. Of course, on some level(s) it’s also a womb and a tomb (even a cave)’ (133). F. J. Bernhard, on the other hand, thinks the room ‘has come to stand for a profoundly experienced notion of warmth, friendliness, and security ...’ (187). This, however, seems to be at odds with James T. Boulton’s belief in ‘Pinter’s fascination with human isolation and insecurity’ (137).

The differences in opinion amongst the three critics are evident but in placing these views alongside each other, something more noteworthy comes forth – all three interpretations are, despite their differences, motivated by a similar desire to decipher what the room *is* to the play, partly explaining why Copeland, Bernhard and Boulton’s analyses focus almost exclusively on the room itself. But since Rose makes such overt and frequent comparisons between the room and what is outside, an intrinsic connection is formed between the room and its external time-space. Thus, any attempt at uncovering the symbolic value of the room would require paying comparable attention to what is *outside*. After all, as Shimon Levy asserts, ‘[t]he notions of *there* (beyond) and *then* (future and past) influence the here and now in different ways’ (56). In the case of *The Room*, *there* and *then* simply refers to the offstage; since the room conveniently takes up the whole of the playing area, then everything and everyone outside the room/stage naturally makes up the offstage.

Consequently, whether or not we see the room as a ‘womb’ or a ‘tomb’ would depend on how we read the offstage of this play. Specifically, do we regard the offstage of *The Room* as a menacing or sympathetic entity? In speaking of Henry Woolf’s original production of the play, Michael Billington points out that it ‘emphasised the play’s humour and saw Riley as a mythical man coming with a message of liberation’ (*Life and Work* 68). He then goes on to add that Pinter ‘[deals] with the perils of withdrawal from the outside world and the emotional hazard of turning a room into a fortress’ (Billington, *Life and Work* 69). Unlike

Bernhard, Billington (and I) disagree that the room/stage is a warm and secure place for Rose. In fact, as the play progresses and other characters arrive from the outside/offstage, it becomes increasingly evident that the room/stage is nothing more than a 'prison' for her. When Riley finally makes an appearance, he offers her the opportunity for freedom and unlike Stanley in *The Birthday Party*, Rose sees and seizes this chance to leave. Admittedly, her ending can hardly be considered a happy one – she does not manage to depart and free herself from the room/stage – but, as we shall see, her ability to recognise the potential for freedom in the outside/offstage places her in a better position at the end of her play than Stanley is at the end of his.

Writing at a time when realism was no longer in vogue, Pinter nonetheless insisted on various realistic elements in his dramatic works. In his opening stage directions for *The Room*, he specifies a set with 'gas-fire', 'rocking-chair', 'foot of a double-bed [protruding] from alcove', 'gas-stove and sink' (Pinter 86) and thus, in Copeland's opinion, 'return[s] the art of serious playwriting to the sort of "room" that serious playwriting (prior to Pinter) was supposed to have outgrown' (129). Consequently, this re-introduction of the 'room' and its ostensible 'realism' are not to be taken at face value. Like *The Birthday Party*, the fictional world of *The Room* may be believable but Pinter in no way seeks to represent life 'as it is'. After all, as the playwright himself once declared, 'I'll say that what goes on in my plays is realistic, but what I'm doing is not realism' (qtd. in Knowles 75).

Rose may treat her reality as 'real' and may not be fully conscious of herself as character and the room as stage but her attention to and awareness of the room and the world outside the room makes it clear that there is more to the room (and the time-space beyond it) than what appears on the surface. As Dilek Inan (partly quoting Katherine Worth) points out, the room is:

... a symbolic space: it is not an ordinary room but a 'psychic space, a speck of consciousness cursed with a vivid awareness of its own significance and insecurity in a world ruled by forces outside itself' (Katherine Worth 32).

Thus this study sets out to decode the strong sense of an environment beyond the room ... which is described through communication, speech and memory.

(Inan 38)

While there is little evidence to suggest that Rose is conscious of the offstage as offstage, it is nonetheless evident that she is, above all else, very concerned with and conscious of the world outside the room/stage and this awareness in turn suggests the presence of deeper significances in the outside/offstage. Consequently, in order to uncover these deeper significances or, in Inan's words, to decode 'the strong sense of an environment beyond the room' (38), it is necessary to turn to Rose's 'conversation' with Bert and attempt to make some sense of the unseen world beyond her room/stage.

Ostensibly, this seems like a straightforward affair. Or rather, what the outside/offstage is *to Rose* appears straightforward enough. Leonard Powlick rightly argues that in Pinter's plays, 'instead of viewing an objective reflection of the world as the playwright perceives it, we are seeing a subjective, distorted world as the character perceives it ... The play is not seen through a fourth wall, but is filtered through a consciousness – the consciousness of the central character' (26). In the case of *The Room*, Rose wonders 'how they live down there [in the house's basement room]. It's asking for trouble' (85). She informs Bert that '[i]f you want to go out you might as well have something inside you. Because you'll feel it when you get out' (85). All these claims point towards the outside/offstage as a place that is cold, unfriendly and potentially dangerous. In fact, Rose's comments have led critics like Martin Esslin to regard the outside world as a threat: 'a room with a door; and outside the door a cold, hostile world. The room is warm and light. Outside

it is winter, cold and dark' (*Playwright* 51). Copeland seeks to discuss this notion more generally when he states that '[t]he essential ingredients [of Pinter's plays] rarely change: A room, a safe, enclosed space of some sort. Characters who feel not only secure, but "at home" in that space' (23).

However, on closer reading, it transpires that Rose's knowledge about the outside/offstage is ultimately limited and it is doubtful if we can simply take her words at surface value. After all, much of Rose's assertions about the outside/offstage are based on her *past* experiences there. For instance, she asks Bert if he 'ever [saw] the walls? They were running' (86), before congratulating herself on saying 'no straight off' when 'they offered us the basement here' because she 'knew that'd be no good' (89). Admittedly, the fact that she actually has prior experience outside the room/stage should give some weight to her assertions but the information which she provides is also problematic precisely because her knowledge of the outside/offstage is restricted to the past. She admits as much when she declares that 'I don't know who lives down there now' (87). As the earlier quote from Levy asserts, the outside/offstage refers to both '*there* (beyond) and *then* (future and past)' (56) – Rose's knowledge is clearly insufficient in helping us consider the outside/offstage *now*.

Instead, Austin Quigley rightly determines Rose's real feelings towards the outside/offstage when he points out that '[Rose] emphasizes the benefit of the cosy warmth in the room but dwells on the windy, cold world outside the house' (Quigley, *Pinter Problem* 83). Despite her criticism of the outside/offstage, Rose is, above all else, *curious* about it and cannot help but ask questions – 'I've never seen who it is. Who is it? Who lives down there? I'll have to ask. I mean, you might as well know ...' (86). Consequently, being aware of Rose's curiosity compels *us* to rethink what we think we know about Rose and the outside/offstage.

Penelope Prentice believes that Rose has ‘a desire to remain comfortable, safe, and in one place, pitted against the equally powerful desire to remain free, to go out into the world, even to seek and confront danger as Bert does and Riley’ (54). Regardless of what she says about the outside/offstage, the overwhelming attention which Rose gives to it indicates her underlying desire to be *there*. In fact, this unspoken desire induces us to wonder whether Rose, despite being conflicted about the outside/offstage, really feels ‘comfortable’ and ‘safe’ in the room/stage. Her praises for the room/stage – ‘this room’s all right for me’ (86), ‘we’re all right. You’re happy up here’ (87), ‘[t]his is a good room’ (89) – occur so often that she never really sounds genuine. Furthermore, the fact that she finds it necessary to repeat how ‘I’m quite happy where I am’ (87) hint at the contrary. Quigley also indicates as much when he argues that ‘[t]he unpleasantness of her view of the world outside is born of her need to believe it is ugly in order to substantiate her contentment at being inside’ (*Pinter Problem* 85). In light of this, Rose’s criticism of the outside/offstage appears to be no more than a cover-up on her part – a cover-up to conceal the fact that she is more miserable in the room/stage than she claims.

However, this cover-up cannot last for long; although she seeks to emphasise her lack of contact with the outside/offstage – ‘we’re not bothered, And nobody bothers us’ (Pinter, *TR* 87) – her ‘entombed withdrawal is, in fact, subject to endless interruption’ (Billington, *Life and Work* 67). Ultimately, the boundary between the room/stage and the outside/offstage which Rose had been attempting to erect is systematically dissolved with the arrival of Mr Kidd, the Sandes and Riley. Upon meeting these individuals, Rose is eventually forced into admitting the truth that she has always known but refused to acknowledge – the fact that the room/stage is emphatically *not* the haven she claims it to be.

The first visitor to the room/stage comes in the form of Mr Kidd. And from the outset, interaction with Mr Kidd proves to be a challenge. Even before he actually steps in,

Mr Kidd appears to already be making (intentional or unintentional) efforts at inducing Rose to remove the boundaries between the room/stage and the outside/offstage which she established earlier on:

A knock on the door. She stands.

Who is it?

Pause.

Hallo!

Knock repeated.

Come in then.

Knock repeated.

Who is it?

Pause. The door opens and MR KIDD comes in (89).

Esslin suggests that ‘by an accumulation of such basically, realistic detail, Pinter succeeds in building up an atmosphere of menace, of Kafka-esque uncertainty’ (*Playwright* 53).

However, I disagree – the identity of the person on the other side of the door is clearly kept a mystery here but this uncertainty is more confusing than menacing. Why does Mr Kidd not answer Rose? Can he not hear her? And why does Rose merely stand but not move towards the door? Surely it is only logical to open the door yourself if the person on the other side does not do so.

Significantly, this inaction on Rose’s part occurs again in a later scene with Mr and Mrs Sands. Claiming that they ‘heard they’d got a room to let here’ (101), the couple from the outside/offstage was apparently informed by ‘[t]he man in the basement [that] there was one [room available]. One room. Number seven he said’ (102). Even though number seven is the very room Rose is in and the apparent availability of it would suggest her eviction, Rose does not really do anything to stop it. Other than assert feebly that ‘[t]his room is

occupied', Rose merely '*watches the door close* [behind Mr and Mrs Sands], *starts towards it and stops ... goes to the rocking-chair, sits, rocks, stops, and sits still*' (102).

Taking into account Rose's attempt to cover up her misery in the room/stage, her inaction in these two scenes is clearly reflective of a reluctance to face what lies outside/offstage. After all, stepping outside the room/stage to clarify and, more importantly, *confirm* her eviction would, regardless of the answer she receives, mean that she has to face up to her 'secret'. Only when she refuses to clarify the issue of her possible eviction, can Rose avoid facing both the necessity of admitting to her misery as well as the disappointment should her departure from the room be proven false.

Seemingly content with keeping the status quo, Rose seeks to satisfy her curiosity about the outside/offstage by posing questions to characters from *there*. Upon seeing Mr Kidd, for instance, Rose attempts to coax information from him, although communication with her landlord proves to be as unproductive as conversing with Bert. While Bert stays stubbornly silent, Mr Kidd is voluble but similarly provides nothing to alleviate Rose's ignorance – when questioned about the number of floors in the house, Mr Kidd replies, 'well, to tell you the truth, I don't count them now' (92). And perhaps even more strangely, he claims that 'I can take my pick' when Rose asks him '[w]here's your bedroom now then, Mr Kidd' (93)?

However, his cryptic answers are not intentional attempts to withhold information from Rose. Instead, Mr Kidd's strange responses actually nudge Rose closer to the outside/offstage – the lack of satisfactory answers encourages her to ask more questions and when these questions are further left unanswered or half-answered, they serve to suggest to Rose that real knowledge about the outside/offstage cannot be attained this way. It is impossible to achieve any satisfactory knowledge about the outside/offstage if she insists on maintaining her cover-up. Mr and Mrs Sands similarly emphasise this point when they (in

their search of the landlord) dismiss Rose's information of the outside/offstage as inaccurate, insisting that Mr Kidd is 'not the bloke [they're] looking for' (95). Admittedly, Mr and Mrs Sands are unable to provide an alternative answer themselves (since they have forgotten the name of the man they are trying to get hold of). But the conviction in which Rose's information is denied – 'Kidd? No, that's not it' (95) – nevertheless makes us doubt the authority of Rose's words. After all, the Sandses' confidence in what the landlord is *not* called reminds us that Rose's knowledge about the outside/offstage is ultimately limited.

What is revealed, however, through Rose's conversation with Mr and Mrs Sands, is the reason for her persistent desire to cover up her misery in the room/stage. Whilst arguing over the name of the landlord with his wife, Mr Sands points out that 'Mrs Hudd [Rose] seems to know Mr Kidd very well' (99). Upon hearing this suggestion, Rose immediately denies such an idea and stresses, for the second time in the play, that 'we keep ourselves to ourselves ... We don't bother anyone else. That's the way it should be' (99). Barbara Kreps argues that '[i]nvolvement is shunned in Pinter's early dramas, not because it is impossible, but because it is potentially threatening' (55). This, I believe, is true but while Kreps sees Rose's reluctance to step outside/offstage as having something to do with the potential threats of the outside/offstage, I argue that there are alternative ways of considering Rose's fear.

As Quigley points out, 'the very fact of [Rose] saying this, the very need to verbalize what might well have been assumed, raises the possibility of her doubts [about the room] as well as her reasons for overcoming those doubts' (*Pinter Problem* 81). Therefore, while it is true that involvement (with the outside/offstage) is shunned by Rose, it is not the outside/offstage that she finds threatening but rather the very room/stage she is in. Rose's insistence on the way things 'should' be done suggests, on one hand, that there is a correct way of behaving in the room and, on the other hand, reveals her *terror* at being accused of

not having behaved accordingly. Therefore, when Mr and Mrs Sands question her relationship with Mr Kidd, they, so Prentice asserts, function as ‘agent[s] of stripping away illusions of safety’ (48), forcing Rose to reveal her inherent fear of the room/stage.

Morrison rightly observes that ‘[e]xcept for the final few moments of the play, there is nothing apparent in events themselves to warrant the degree of fear that is generated within Rose’ (389). However, it is necessary to bear in mind that Rose intentionally deflects our attention from the ‘menace’ of the *room/stage* for most of the play. In fact, Francesca Coppa argues that Pinter’s ambiguities in speech are a commentary on how we ‘cannot assume from just a brief encounter with them what side the characters are on ... human beings have depths that can only become evident in moments of dramatic or comedic crisis’ (50). Our inability to know can refer to the play in general or to Rose in particular – even though we have been ‘following’ her for most of the play, there is every possibility that we still do not really know her.

This cannot be truer than when Riley arrives from the outside/offstage – rather than ‘Rose’, Riley refers to her as ‘Sal’ (108) and she, significantly, does not deny that the name is hers but merely requests that he does not call her by it. Although we never discover if ‘Sal’ is really her name, the fact that she does not deny it suggests that it might very well be and this possibility grows stronger when we notice that none of the other characters actually refer to her as ‘Rose’ either. Consequently, this woman by the name of Rose whom we thought we knew, suddenly becomes someone we must try to understand anew. And to do so, we have to begin with her relationship with Riley.

Gerald M. Berkowitz sees Riley as ‘the very personification of the blackness, coldness and uncertainty that are [Rose’s] opposites’ (85), but it is arguable whether Rose is really as different from Riley as she claims when he first enters the room. She treats Riley with hostility upon his arrival, insisting that ‘I don’t want you up here. I don’t know who

you are. And the sooner you get out the better' (106) but her curiosity about the outside/offstage prevents her from keeping this act up for too long:

You've got what? How could you have a message for me, Mister Riley, when I don't know you and nobody knows I'm here ... you're a blind nut and you can get out the way you came.

Pause.

What message? Who have you got a message from? Who? (108)

Despite the insults which she throws at him, Rose is clearly unable to resist Riley and the outside/offstage he represents. When Riley claims to bring with him a message from Rose's father, asking her to 'come home' (Pinter, *TR* 109), he suggests, as Esslin explains, that 'she is living in Bert's room, in his household under false pretences, as an outsider' (*Playwright* 58). On one hand, this merely emphasises the room's inherent unsuitability for Rose while on the other hand, Rose's 'pretence' emphasises the 'act' that she has to put on in the room/stage. With that in mind, the outside/offstage seems like a more suitable 'home' for Rose/Sal, the woman who has turned out to be as much a member of the outside/offstage as Mr Kidd and the Sandeses are.

Eventually, Rose discloses to Riley that 'I've been here ... Long', 'The day is a dump. I never go out' (109), essentially admitting, for the first time in the play, that her existence in the room/stage is in fact a form of house arrest. Remaining inside is more of an enforcement than a choice or, as Prentice points out, 'that room which [Rose] defends as a kingdom is quite subtly revealed as a prison' (52). Unlike other characters, Rose does not (or perhaps *cannot*) physically step out of the room/stage. The closest she comes to doing so happens after Bert's departure when she '*takes a bin from under the sink, goes to the door and opens it*' (95). However, she never manages to step out because she finds Mr and Mrs

Sands standing on the threshold. Out of politeness, Rose invites the couple in to ‘have a warm’ (96) and the bin, suffice to say, is never taken out.

This inability to leave the room/stage in her own terms means Rose requires a guide of-sorts and, in this case, her guide takes the form of Riley, the blind man from the offstage basement. In an interview with Michael Billington, Pinter reveals that he has often seen Riley ‘as a messenger, a potential saviour who is trying to free Rose from the imprisonment of the room and the restrictions of her life with Bert’ (*Life and Work* 35). Riley’s insistence, on behalf of her father, that Rose ‘come home’ (108) is in fact an ultimatum – does she stay and remain in misery or does she leave and face the consequences which come with departing? Ultimately, Rose/Sal decides on the latter, relegating her time in the room/stage to the past – ‘I’ve been here’ – before touching Riley’s eyes, ‘*the back of his head and his temples with her hands*’ (109).

Prentice points out that when Rose touches Riley, ‘her hands already employ the gestures of the blind’ (50), suggesting that her blindness occurs the moment she decides to join Riley in the outside/offstage. Therefore, this blindness that Rose eventually develops is not so much a physical blindness as it is a representation of her newfound ability to ‘see’ like Riley. Robert Altman’s 1987 television adaptation of *The Room* clearly shares this point of view: Rose (played by Linda Hunt) is shown to be fumbling about the room after touching Riley’s face, making it clear that she has already become as blind as Riley at this point in the play. This in itself ensures that Rose’s ending will differ from Stanley’s. Significantly, she manages to take this first step towards freedom largely because there is no Goldberg and McCann in *The Room* to make her do things she does not wish. Rather than threaten Rose’s safety, the characters from the outside/offstage here expose her cover-up, push her to face her fears about the room/stage and, in general, help her recognise the freedom which the outside/offstage can offer.

However, although there is no Goldberg and/or McCann here to subjugate Rose, there is Bert, who returns to the room/stage just as Rose seems about to leave, thus compelling her to remain in the room/stage to fulfil her role as ‘wife’. Bert’s silence in and absence from the bulk of the play often makes him appear inconsequential but upon his return to the room/stage, it becomes clear that he has a certain hold over Rose. Notably, in Altman’s television adaptation of *The Room*, his importance is foregrounded from the outset. Altman’s production begins with a close-up of Bert (played by David Hemblen) building a miniature model of a room in a glass bottle. Eventually, it is revealed that the model in the bottle is an exact replica of the room Rose and Bert inhabit. On one hand, this detail (which is not included in Pinter’s writing) emphasises the room/stage as a trap for the inhabitants and perhaps even hints at Bert’s awareness of the room as artificial. On the other hand, one wonders if Bert’s involvement in the creation of this miniature room suggests that he has some sort of control over the goings-on in the room/stage? If so, are we to see him (like we see Goldberg and McCann) as a proxy of the unseen power in the offstage?

These are, of course, particular questions which arise from Altman’s production, but it is clear from the play itself that Bert does have some level of control over Rose’s movements, especially when he disrupts her plan to leave with Riley. Significantly, Bert does not return in the same manner as when he left. Instead, he comes back able to speak for himself and this newfound ability sees Bert dominating the ‘conversation’ (as Rose did with him at the beginning):

BERT. I got back all right.

Pause.

ROSE. Is it late?

BERT. I had a good bowl down there.

.....

BERT. I caned [the van] along. She was good ... she took me there. She brought me back ... (109 – 110)

This reference to the van as female induces Esslin to regard this as an indication that Rose has ‘failed to hold [Bert’s] affection’ (*Playwright* 59). ‘[H]is sexual energy is no longer focused on Rose; the van ... has ousted her from his affections’ (Esslin, *Playwright* 59-60). However, this presupposes that Bert’s affections were fixed on Rose in the first place but as Prentice rightly argues, ‘nothing demonstrates that any of Bert’s sexual interest is focused on Rose’ (52). Instead, it is notable that Bert speaks more like a person reciting a speech than one having a spontaneous conversation.

In particular, Bert repeatedly emphasises that he ‘got back all right’ (109,110) – this claim essentially references the ‘conversation’ he had with Rose before he left for work. In the first half of the play, Rose repeatedly expresses her concerns that the roads are icy, worrying that it might be dangerous for Bert to drive. She eventually reassures him (and herself) that ‘[you’re] a marvellous driver ... You know how to drive’ (88). Thus, when Bert informs her that he ‘got back all right’, he is in fact attempting to continue where they left off. However, like Rose before him, Bert repeats himself on this point and with every repetition, his words begin to lose greater significance. Subsequently, the increasing hollowness of his words highlights the inherent falseness of Bert and Rose’s relationship – they are not so much husband and wife but *characters* who are husband and wife. Bert does not reassure Rose because he wants to but because he is compelled to. As the play nears its conclusion, we are increasingly reminded of the artificiality of the room in the first place: Bert’s return to the room/stage is not a choice of his own – Rose’s earlier pronouncement that ‘I’ll have some cocoa on when you get back. You won’t be long’ (94), demands his homecoming. As with a magician’s trick, the performance is only considered complete when what has disappeared makes a reappearance. Therefore, when Bert stops Rose from leaving,

he does so not as a husband but as a character determined to play out his given role – a role that cannot be fulfilled if Rose leaves.

Consequently, this explains Bert's attack on Riley at the end of the play. Upon seeing Riley in the room, Bert calls him '[l]ice', strikes him, '*knocking him down, and then kicks his head against the gas-stove several times*' (110). Billington regards this shocking violence as indicative of Bert's jealousy, explaining it as a 'mixture of sexual and racial fury' (*Life and Work* 69). But there is no sign of emotion attached to Bert's act – after attacking Riley, Bert merely '*walks away*' (110). Bernhard might have a more accurate assessment of the situation when he indicates that '[a]cceptance of the rules of the games, not anger with them, underlies the dramatic action' (186) – Bert does what is necessary for the continuation of his existence (as a character) in the play. In his speech, Bert points out to Rose that '[t]here was no cars. One there was. He wouldn't move. I bumped him. I got my road ... I got hold of her. I go where I go. She took me there. She brought me back' (110). On the surface, Bert is referring to his van (she) and an encounter with another car on his way back but this speech similarly comments on the three people currently in the room/stage. Bert's reasons for attacking Riley are largely selfish: since 'she' is the one who 'brought [Bert] back' (110), then she cannot leave (with Riley) if Bert wants to carry on playing his role. Like Goldberg and McCann in *The Birthday Party*, Bert has to get rid of Riley in order to maintain his own existence in the play.

Esslin regards the violent end to *The Room* as a flaw, arguing that the violent acts which end the play are 'melodramatic devices that are out of keeping with the subtly built-up terrors of the opening scenes' (*Absurd* 237). But as has been repeatedly emphasised throughout this chapter, terror or menace does not exist in the outside/offstage; Bert's attack on Riley is precise proof that menace comes from within. Unfortunately for Bert, his successful removal of Riley actually ensures that things cannot return to the way they were

before. In Pinter's opinion, 'Riley has always been a redemptive figure' (qtd. in Billington, *Life and Work* 35) and 'redemption' – in the archaic sense of the word – refers to the act of buying one's freedom. In this case, Riley's death functions as payment for Rose's freedom, the 'price' paid for Rose's 'membership' in the outside/offstage. Pinter himself suggests that pain is sometimes necessary in drama – when 'the right word, or the right act jolts [the characters] into their proper life. When that happens the pain is worth having' ("German Shakespeare Prize" 33). If we do subscribe to Pinter's views, then the attack on Riley is but the necessary 'pain' to jolt Rose into her 'proper life', away from the room/stage.

With Riley's death, Rose embodies his role as the blind figure from the outside/offstage; *The Room* concludes with Rose clutching her eyes, declaring that she '[c]an't see. I can't see. I can't see' (110). Coppa argues that '[b]y declaring herself blind, Rose declares that she is, on some level, like [Riley], connected to the person who previously represented everything that she seemed to fear ... she aligns herself with Riley' (51-2). Although Rose is unable to physically leave the room/stage and actually achieve her freedom at the end of the play, her blindness ensures that her function in the room/stage (as 'wife' to Bert) can no longer be as before.

Of course, it is possible to argue that Rose is no better off than Stanley by the end of *The Room* but her ability to see the potential for freedom in the offstage accords her with the blindness of one who is in the know. Powlick believes that '[t]he play is not seen through a fourth wall, but is filtered through a consciousness – the consciousness of the central character' (26) and thus, when Rose announces her inability to see at the end, a '*Blackout*' (Pinter, *TR* 110) occurs and darkness descends. With her newfound blindness, Rose helps *us* see the world as she now sees it and while we are unable to witness her physical freedom from the room/stage, the darkness of the outside/offstage (which we literally see), compels

the curtain to fall and, as a result, frees *us* from the 'hostage situation' which the play has held us in.

Significantly, while Rose begins her play from a position of relative ignorance, the characters of Pinter's next play, *The Dumb Waiter*, know and admit to the restricting nature of the room/stage from the very beginning. Like Stanley and Rose before them, they too are 'prisoners' to the time-space which constitutes the room/stage; but unlike Stanley and Rose, the characters of *The Dumb Waiter* seek actively to break out of their prison. Unfortunately, the controlling presence of the larger, unseen entity is stronger than ever before and this, as the next chapter will suggest, ultimately prevents the two characters of the play from progressing beyond their prison in any significant way. Instead, they appear destined to repeat their lives in the room/stage over and over again.

3 *The Dumb Waiter*: Falling into a Loop Between the Stages

VLADIMIR. ... What do we do now?
 ESTRAGON. Wait.
 VLADIMIR. Yes, but while waiting (9)
 – Samuel Beckett

Waiting constitutes Didi and Gogo's essential experience in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1956). It is also the essential experience of the central characters in Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* (1957): two men sit in an enclosed room, looking for ways to distract themselves as they await the arrival of an unspecified individual. At one point, frustrated by the non-arrival of their subject, one of them complains that '[a]ll you do is wait, eh? Half the time he doesn't even bother to put in an appearance, Wilson' (129). To all intents and purposes, this rant, which emerges close to midway through the work, just about sums up the 'plot' of the play. As with Beckett's work, *The Dumb Waiter* places its characters in an unending wait, continually putting off the arrival of the subject(s) of their attentions. However, while Didi and Gogo manage to find some relief with the arrival of characters like Lucky and Pozzo, the characters in Pinter's play are cut off from all human contact. Ultimately, this isolation will come to affect their (in)ability to leave the room/stage and achieve their desired freedom in the outside/offstage at the end of the play.

As with *The Birthday Party* and *The Room*, Pinter shies away from providing details in *The Dumb Waiter*, choosing to once again keep identities, relationships and backstories ambiguous. Furthermore, the premise of the play remains similar to the two earlier works: thrown into 'a basement room' (113), Ben and Gus, two apparent hit-men, wait for the commencement of their 'job'. Instructions are expected to come, possibly, from a man named Wilson, who may or may not be their employer. However, unlike Rose in *The Room*, Ben and Gus are obviously strangers to the room/stage and thus, do not belong to the basement room which they currently inhabit. In fact, it is evident from the outset that they seek, above all else, to leave the room/stage the moment they can – '[t]he sooner we're out of this place the

better' (137), declares Gus at one point. However, this departure from the room/stage is contingent on the completion of their 'job' and for that to happen, they will first need to know when their 'victim' will arrive.

Unfortunately, being 'outsiders' does not give Ben and Gus access to knowledge about the outside/offstage of *The Dumb Waiter*. The very nature of Ben and Gus's 'job' requires them to remain where they are (in the room/stage) and as Rose learns in *The Room*, knowledge about the outside/offstage can only be attained when one is physically *there* rather than *here*. Therefore, the only thing Ben and Gus can do is to wait patiently for the arrival of their 'victim'. Unsurprisingly, the two of them spend the course of the play in search of means to pass the time: Ben reads the newspaper while Gus attempts, at moments, to draw him into conversation. Alternatively, Gus tries to make tea or go to the lavatory but circumstances often hinder his actions. The 'plot' only starts to pick up when the serving hatch or 'dumb waiter' makes an appearance. Yet even then, they remain in relative inaction since the dumb waiter merely brings with it senseless notes from upstairs. Confusion and growing desperation finally culminates in the puzzling final scene when Gus steps through the door left only to re-enter soon after from the door on the right, supposedly as the victim they have been waiting for all along. Expectedly, nothing is explained and all we are left with is a tableau of the partners staring at each other as the curtain falls.

While a summary of the play does not (in itself) reveal anything about the outside/offstage that we do not already know from Pinter's first two stage works (a larger, unseen presence in the offstage appears to control the lives of the onstage characters), it does, however, reveal the presence of unexpected parallels between *The Dumb Waiter* and Pinter's previous two plays. Aside from the unchanging set and the persistently ambiguous conversations which the characters share, this play specifically situates Ben and Gus in '*a basement room*' (113), a room which Rose refers explicitly to time and time again in *The*

Room. Furthermore, like Goldberg and McCann from *The Birthday Party*, Ben and Gus are (apparent) hit-men – or at the very least, their chief purpose in the room/stage is to fulfil the orders of a mysterious unseen power in the outside/offstage. These parallels between the plays, when noticed, open up room for us to establish links between Ben and Gus's room/stage and the basement room which Rose is so obsessed with. Alternatively, we may be inclined to regard Ben and Gus as different 'versions' of Goldberg and McCann – the same men in a different setting, working on a different 'job', under different names. In fact, the relationship between Ben and Gus is very similar to the relationship which Goldberg and McCann share in *The Birthday Party*: Ben, like Goldberg, is the senior and more compliant figure (to the unseen 'organisation' they work for) while Gus is the inquisitive junior partner.

However, even as such connections between the plays are drawn, it is also necessary to admit that the evidence present is thin and these conclusions are decidedly tenuous and perhaps even pointless. It is, after all, doubtful if Pinter was even conscious of these echoes (from the previous plays) when he was writing *The Dumb Waiter*. Nevertheless, the echoes themselves are still worthy of our concern because what is *not* pointless is the fact that these ostensible references to *The Birthday Party* and *The Room* remind us that the 'reality' of Ben and Gus is merely one of many. We cannot seek to understand them and their situation based simply on what we can see and hear of their world – what Ben and Gus consider as definite or 'real' may not necessarily be so. Furthermore, the fact that they both appear conscious of the things that are 'wrong' with the room/stage draws attention to its essential artificiality: Gus, for instance, asks Ben if he 'noticed the time that [lavatory] tank takes to fill' (117). Later on, he points out that he did not sleep very well because '[i]t's not much of a bed' (117), insisting that 'we've always had clean sheets laid on up till now. I've noticed it' (120).

In pointing out the deficiencies of the room/stage, Gus inadvertently emphasises the disparity between how an actual room *should* look and how the room/stage they inhabit *is*. As

with Stanley and Rose in the previous two plays, Gus may not be fully aware of the room as stage but by continually pointing out the deficiencies of the room/stage, he draws attention to the ‘inauthenticity’ of the room he inhabits. The un-ignorable links between Rose’s basement room and Gus’s room/stage further serves to remind *us* that the room which Ben and Gus inhabit is no more than a manifestation of someone’s (the reader’s?) imagination – it is a stage *made* to look like a room. Although Ben tries to dismiss Gus’s concerns about the room/stage by pointing out that ‘[w]e’re not staying long’ (119), his lack of precise information regarding the length of their stay suggests that this might not be the case. Unable to know or even predict when their ‘victim’ will arrive, all Ben and Gus can do is wait. Consequently, they are, for the most part of the play, unable to play the role that they have been assigned to (by the unseen power they work for) and thus, we are compelled to regard them as not so much hit-men but rather, *characters* waiting to play their parts as ‘hit-men’.

You ‘come into a place when it’s still dark, you come into a room you’ve never seen before, you sleep all day, you do your job, and then you go away in the night again’ (118) – such is the life of a hit-man according to Gus. For Ben and Gus, being a hit-man is at once distinct from and similar to being a character. After all, characters, like hit-men, enter a place (the stage) while it is still dark, do their job and leave in the darkness (after the curtain falls). More importantly, Pinter characters, according to Francis Gillen, ‘have always been fragmented beings caught in a world of fact which does not satisfy them and a world of meaning which eludes them’ (477). In their inability to fulfil their roles as ‘hit-men’, Ben and Gus, are precisely such ‘fragmented beings’ – incomplete until their ‘victim’ arrives to give them the opportunity to finally play out their designated roles in full.

In many ways, fragmentation appears to be a fate that all (semi) conscious characters in Pinter’s plays face. Stanley is reduced to a pathetic, garbling figure at the end of *The Birthday Party* while the conclusion of *The Room* sees Rose stumbling across the room/stage,

blind. Yet, while Stanley and Rose's 'fragmentation' develops gradually (in conjunction with their growing awareness of the room/stage's limitations), Ben and Gus, in seeking to leave the room/stage from the outset, seem made to be 'incomplete'. Kept from playing their assigned roles, they are like the Hamlet and Henry V of Susan Sontag's *Against Interpretation* (1966): they 'see themselves as acting parts – the part of the avenger, the part of the heroic and confident king leading his troops to battle ... the personages of metatheatrical characters in search of action' (135). Unfortunately, action in *The Dumb Waiter* is always only *about* to happen. As Martin S. Regal reminds us, 'they are awaiting instructions, time appears to pass quite slowly. Gus and Ben cannot act until they receive notice and are thus "immobilised"' (29). Consequently, Ben and Gus can only ever be 'incomplete' characters – characters which lack the complexities and depth that we see in Hamlet and Henry V.

Specifically, Ben and Gus's 'incompleteness' manifests in their flatness as characters and, importantly, their flatness is also that which distinguishes them from Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon. While Didi and Gogo are so similar to each other that their lines are often interchangeable, Ben and Gus are clear opposites: Ben reads while Gus asks questions. Gus leaves the room occasionally while Ben always stays inside. Ben is polite to the mysterious figure upstairs while Gus lashes out in violent fits. Since opposites can only continue to oppose each other if either side remains consistently the same, Pinter essentially insists on the flatness and unalterable nature of the two characters when he specifies such distinctly contrasting personalities for Ben and Gus. As such, we do not expect Ben and Gus to develop in any significant manner in the course of the play.

Admittedly, flatness in characters is typically considered undesirable in writing – a convincing and compelling tragic hero, for instance, requires depth and complexities. But in comedy, flat characters hold a particularly important and central position. In *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), E. M. Forster argues that flat characters 'are best when they are comic. A

serious or tragic flat character is apt to be a bore' (50). In light of this, perhaps it is only to be expected that *The Dumb Waiter*, which Charles A. Carpenter describes as 'a mock-melodramatic farce' (280) which 'roguishly exposes the absurdity of dread' ("Absurdity" 285), should possess such memorable, flat characters like Ben and Gus.

As mentioned, their flatness is largely reflected in their obviously contradicting personalities. Esslin relates these contradictions and subsequent fights between Ben and Gus to a power struggle: for instance, their arguments over the use of the phrase 'light the kettle' or 'put on the kettle' (Pinter, *TDW* 125) 'is here quite manifestly a dispute about authority, a fight for dominance' (Esslin, *A Study* 74-5). Conversely, Penelope Prentice argues that 'violence in Pinter's work ensues when a character attempts to maintain rather than to gain dominance' (12). Regardless of the focus of their individual arguments, both critics clearly agree that the fights between Ben and Gus have to do with power. However, in suggesting this, Esslin and Prentice seem not to notice that these arguments between Ben and Gus are really the essence of the play's comedy, especially on the occasions where Ben attempts to assume authority as the senior partner:

BEN. Of course there is! Do you know what it takes to make an Ormitha
Macarounada?

GUS. No, what?

BEN. An Ormitha -? Buck your ideas up, will you? (137)

Speaking of the advantages of flat characters, J. L. Styan purports that 'in drama flat characters can be most appropriate when they isolate a single aspect of human nature' (*Drama* 55). This is exactly what happens in the above exchange – Gus's innocent honesty shows Ben up, exposing the latter's inherent ignorance regarding their situation. In fact, Elin Diamond regards Ben and Gus as akin to the comedy team, Laurel and Hardy, where '[b]oth are incompetent, but Hardy bullies and blames Laurel for their catastrophes while Laurel,

chastened, pauses, then resumes his delicately choreographed mischief' (*Comic Plays* 96-7). To Diamond, this process occurs in Ben and Gus's relationship as well – Ben, despite knowing little of their world, bullies Gus and convinces both of them of his superiority anyway (*Comic Plays* 97). Importantly, it is our awareness of Ben's ignorance that makes comedy, rather than their power struggles, the focus of the interactions between the two characters.

However, having said that, it is perhaps even more important to point out that comedy in *The Dumb Waiter* is not merely present for laughs; it actually says something profoundly serious about Ben and Gus's existence in the room/stage. In examining the qualities of round and flat characters, Stephen Koch makes a significant point when he emphasises that '[s]ince they are incapable of change, flat characters can go on and on and on' (95). Round characters come equipped with a purpose and this compels them to transform through the course of the work, '[t]hey are [thus] not locked into the comedy of some frozen, interminably repetitious destiny' (Koch 96). While round, often tragic, characters like Hamlet develop along the course of the play, flat comic characters like Ben and Gus are clearly locked into this 'frozen, interminably repetitious destiny'.

In fact, repetitions in *The Dumb Waiter* occur from the moment the play opens: Ben 'lying on a bed, left, reading a paper. GUS sitting on a bed, right, tying his shoelaces, with difficulty' (113). What follows is an elaborate sequence where Gus alternately 'unties his shoe-lace[s] and slowly takes off the shoe[s]' to pull out 'a flattened matchbox' and 'a flattened cigarette packet' while Ben watches from his bed (113). The repetition (Gus does the same to both shoes) seems to imbue his shoes with particular significance but in accordance with Koch's point, it is perhaps not the object but the repetition itself that we should regard as noteworthy. We feel there is significance in the action and watch Gus (as Ben does from his bed) merely because there is nothing else to look at in the room/stage. Of

course, this repetition is not limited to the opening scene. (In)action recurs repeatedly in *The Dumb Waiter* for Ben and Gus as the unseen force consistently prevents them from completing any action within the room/stage.

In *The Dumb Waiter*, nothing is allowed to run through to its logical conclusion; cause and effect do not correspond. For instance, the lavatory, as Gus mentions early on in the play, does not flush as we would normally expect it to – when the chain is pulled. Quigley points out that when the lavatory is flushed ‘and nothing happens, we have a manifest cause with no obvious effect. When the lavatory subsequently flushes, it is so long since Gus pulled the chain that the initial impact is one of effect without obvious cause’ (“Tacit Dimensions” 4). Everything in *The Dumb Waiter* is always a little out-of-sync and the displacement between cause and effect ‘obstructs’ Ben and Gus from the action (their ‘job’) which they are meant to play. Action in the room/stage is often spurred through an introduction of something new – Gus discovers the picture of ‘The First Eleven’, an envelope of matches appears under the door, Gus finds crockery in the kitchen, etc.. However, the picture ‘doesn’t say’ (Pinter, *TDW* 117) which first eleven it is and as Esslin further points out, ‘[t]hey want to make tea but are frustrated. They have no matches. An envelope with matches is mysteriously pushed under the door. But even then they don’t have the shilling to put into the gas meter’ (*Absurd* 238).

Since the flush, matches and crockery are unable to serve their intended function, Ben and Gus are repeatedly forced back into inaction. Carpenter sees the comic in this, believing that ‘typical of farce, mechanical objects suspend nature’s laws and follow theirs’ (“Absurdity” 280). Comedy often arises when the consequence of something is contrary to our expectations. In his *Laughter* (1900), Henri Bergson suggests that ‘[t]he laughable element ... consists of a certain mechanical inelasticity, just where one would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being’ (13). By preventing

Ben and Gus from accomplishing anything of significance, Pinter keeps them continually in the same spot, continually attempting the same act over and over, almost as if they are rehearsing for what is to come. Indeed, a rehearsal is precisely what they engage in when Ben insists on giving Gus his instructions (presumably for the assassination) even though '[w]e always do it the same way' (142). The ostensible pointlessness of their rehearsal compels us to laugh at them as we would a hamster on its wheel. But this comic quality does not exist in the play merely to delight; while the hamster chooses to run, Ben and Gus have no such choice. In their inability to 'act', Ben and Gus seem to suffer a fate that is worse than Sisyphus. In accordance to Albert Camus's assertions,¹ Sisyphus may very well find joy in his repeated actions but Ben and Gus, in repeatedly *not* acting, do not seem to even have that privilege.

Consequently, the two of them are forced to maintain their perpetual state of waiting, but waiting is a particularly difficult state of being when one has no sense of the passing of time. Stuck in a basement room, Ben and Gus have no windows to look out of and are in a sense, 'blind' to the outside/offstage. This 'blindness', notably, has a tremendous effect on their experiences in the room/stage – on being asked why he wants a window, Gus replies that 'I like to have a bit of a view, Ben. It whiles away the time' (118). Without a point of reference from the outside/offstage, Ben and Gus essentially exist in a perpetual present. Ben's reassurance that '[w]e're not staying long ... We'll be on the job in a minute' (119) gives no comfort since there is no sense of actual temporal progression for them – at one point Gus announces that 'I feel like I've been here years' (137). Even their only link to the outside/offstage world – the newspaper – is a symbol of 'present-ness'. While it may tell them the day's news, it does very little to acknowledge the passage of time. As a result, Ben

¹ See Albert Camus's "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942). The essay concludes that '[t]he struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy'.

and Gus find themselves in a constant state of limbo – always hovering in anticipation for the next thing. While time undoubtedly passes in the course of the play, the men's isolation from the outside/offstage prevents them from experiencing it and as far as they are concerned, time remains at a stand-still.

In “Ibsen's John Gabriel Borkman and Time” (2012), Eli Park Sørensen introduces the notion of ‘post-drama’ to Henrik Ibsen's penultimate play. Sørensen believes that *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896) ‘explores with painstaking insistence the lateness of dramatic time, a lateness that, on the one hand, displaces everything, while on the other, it renders all the unresolved issues of the past meaningless, insignificant’ (277-8). *John Gabriel Borkman* takes place eight years after the titular Borkman (who was convicted of embezzlement) is released from jail. He spends most of the play attempting (unsuccessfully) to return life to the way it was before. Sørensen argues that in setting the play after Borkman's release from jail, Ibsen makes it a ‘meta-fictional, allegorical text that explores the time after traditional drama has come to an end’, where the ‘actual drama’ (drama which subscribes to a traditional form) ‘is displaced to the past ... and then *replaced* by a present that is characterized by an undramatic, prosaic, or subjective temporality’ (287).

Of course, *The Dumb Waiter* is in no obvious way similar to Ibsen's play but this notion of ‘post-drama’ is nonetheless intriguing and can be adapted to help us understand the offstage in Pinter's work. Sørensen believes that Borkman's yearning for the past transforms the play into a drama that occurs after the ‘actual drama’ has happened:

It is as if [*John Gabriel Borkman*] presents a *post-drama* where the curtains have fallen, the audience gone home – a ghostly stage where dialogues and actions seem to have been replaced by passive characters absorbed in their isolation and tranquil monologues. The play's present evokes a post-time atmosphere ... (289)

Although Ben and Gus do not long to reconstruct a lost past, their perpetual wait for a future incident evokes a *pre-time* atmosphere instead; everything Ben and Gus do hinges on the expectation of the incoming ‘victim’. In many ways, there are two dramas at play in *The Dumb Waiter*: the ‘actual drama’ of (imminent) assassination and the ‘pre-drama’ – the drama of waiting – we have been reading. And from the outset, Ben and Gus have made it clear that it is the former rather than the latter state that they want to be in.

Significantly, this notion of the ‘pre-drama’ is also that which fundamentally separates *The Dumb Waiter* from *The Birthday Party* and *The Room*. In the first two plays, the offstage has largely been associated with *there* (external space) but *The Dumb Waiter* reminds us that the offstage is also about *then* (time) as well. Trapped in a perpetual state of waiting, Ben and Gus, unlike Stanley and Rose in the earlier plays, are less concerned with the space outside/offstage and more interested in the *time beyond* their present moment of wait. Of course, when Stanley and Rose talk about their pasts, they do gesture to the temporal aspects of the offstage but this is also precisely where the plays separate. In favouring *future* incidents over the past and/or present, Ben and Gus draw attention to the offstage’s ability to encompass both past *and* future events (something neither Stanley nor Rose, with their reminiscences, do in *The Birthday Party* and *The Room*). As Jonathan Walker points out, offstage action inhabits ‘the larger spatial contexts and *temporal* backgrounds ... it may also be said to include the space and time of events that the action might project into *future* contexts’ (emphases mine 78). Specifically, it is important to note that while freedom for characters is vaguely related to their departure from the room/stage in *The Birthday Party* and *The Room*, it is never clear what exactly about the offstage possesses such potential. Thus, when Ben and Gus ‘project into future contexts’ (Walker 78) in *The Dumb Waiter*, they inadvertently clarify this doubt – freedom for characters is intrinsically connected to their ability and/or willingness to see a *future* for themselves in the offstage.

Offstage incidents in *The Birthday Party* and *The Room* are largely restricted to the past – characters either reminisce about something or someone reports events that had happened outside/offstage to those in the room/stage – and this impedes Stanley and Rose’s ability to achieve freedom in the offstage. Since our notion of the offstage (of Pinter’s first two plays) is constructed almost entirely based on Stanley and Rose’s (unhappy) memories of their pasts, it is unsurprising that the offstage appears (at least initially) menacing. Notably, both Stanley and Rose seem to wish, at some point, to escape the very past they speak of: Rose’s initial fear of the outside/offstage is very much built on her memories of her past experiences there – she initially believes, for instance, that the offstage basement is dangerous and unsuitable for living because she had been down there before. Stanley too admits to past associations with the offstage when he claims that ‘I wouldn’t have left [home], but business calls. Business called, and I had to leave for a bit. You know how it is’ (34). Despite his insistence on his desire to return, the vagueness of his references to ‘home’ is evident. In fact, this insistence serves to suggest that returning (to his past life in the offstage) is not something Stanley necessarily desires.

But unlike Stanley and Rose, Ben and Gus see the offstage in terms of their future: Gus envisions a life beyond the time-space of the room/stage when he suggests to Ben that ‘[w]e could go watch the Villa’ after they finish their ‘job’ (121). Importantly, this ability to ‘see’ or imagine a *future* in the outside/offstage is precisely that which imbues the offstage with its liberating potential – they are closer to leaving because they believe they can. As Noam Chomsky states on the cover of the 1997 issue of *Wired*, ‘[i]f you assume that there’s no hope, you guarantee there will be no hope. If you assume that there is an instinct for freedom, there are opportunities to change things’. Characters like Stanley can only meet with a tragic end if they associate the offstage exclusively with the past (something which they cannot and do not want to return to).

In fact, this point seems to be further emphasised in a later Pinter play, *Landscape* (1967): the central character, Beth, is so wrapped up in her memories that she stays completely stationary (in the room/stage) throughout the play. There is little sense of progression since she appears unwilling and/or unable to be drawn out of her reminiscences, despite her husband's efforts at planning for their future. However, even as I insist on the inherent connection between Ben and Gus's freedom and their ability to envision an offstage future, the offstage ultimately only presents a *potential* for freedom; Ben and Gus cannot be truly liberated until their 'victim' arrives and they finish their 'job'. Consequently, they read, sit, stand and argue with one eye constantly on the door, hoping to catch the first glimpse of the outside/offstage when the time finally arrives.

Unfortunately, the end to their waiting is not as straightforward as they first envisioned. Despite being fully aware of the room/stage's entrapping qualities, Ben and Gus are nonetheless still subjected to the control of the unseen, offstage power. In fact, the unseen power's presence is much more acute in *The Dumb Waiter* than in the two previous plays. For while Goldberg and McCann often refer to the 'organisation' they work for in *The Birthday Party*, the 'organisation' does not actually make its presence known in any other way. Conversely, in *The Dumb Waiter*, Ben and Gus are constantly reminded of the fact that things are not within their control – the room/stage is often intruded upon by 'things' from the outside/offstage, particularly when either of them (usually Gus) begin to ask deeper questions about their situation and make plans for their future. Midway into the play, Gus declares that he would 'like to see another football match' and suggests (to Ben) that they return the next day to 'see the Spurs' (122). Significantly, the moment Gus starts making these plans for their (near) future, '[a]n envelope [consisting of twelve matches] *slides under the door, right*' (122). The fact that someone provides Gus with matches when he is 'always running out' (124) makes it clear that there *is* a larger, unseen force watching their every

move. More significantly, although Gus talks of going to a football match, he is provided matches for the stove instead – he is permitted the match that the unseen power finds suitable to bestow upon them and not the match he prefers. Evidently, Gus and Ben are unable to do anything without the consent and supervision of the unseen power.

But this does not stop Gus from questioning his situation. He ‘start[s] to think’ (131) about the room/stage and their ‘job’, pointing out their isolation – ‘[y]ou never see a soul, do you? – except the bloke who comes. You ever noticed that’ (130)? He then proceeds to talk about a previous ‘job’ and wonders ‘[w]ho clears up after we’ve gone? ... What if they never clear anything up after we’ve gone’ (131)? And it is at this point that the dumb waiter chooses to make an appearance – ‘*There is a loud clatter and racket in the bulge of wall between the beds, of something descending*’ (131) – indicating some progress in ‘plot’, finally. However, the dumb waiter merely brings with it senseless orders for food like ‘[t]wo braised steak and chips. Two sago puddings. Two teas without sugar’ (131). Ben and Gus are naturally stumped by this but interestingly, there seems to be no doubt as to their need to fulfil these orders. The box goes up while they ponder the food orders and Gus cries ‘[g]ive us a chance! They’re in a hurry, aren’t they’ (132)? The fact that they even consider providing for these orders reveals Ben and Gus’s inherent subordination to the unseen power. Despite their seeming awareness of their artificial and trapped situation, they do not resist orders from the unseen power. In this respect, *The Dumb Waiter* echoes Beckett’s *Act Without Words I* (1957): like the man in Beckett’s play, the two of them are prevented from leaving the stage and, upon being trapped, are provided with various objects (from the offstage) which they are meant to ‘play’ with.

Of course, the man in Beckett’s play eventually refuses to comply, but Ben and Gus are always eager to please the unseen power. Unable to even make tea for themselves, Ben and Gus are ill-equipped to provide the food requested but they nevertheless struggle to

decide on a course of action, finally agreeing to '*pile everything [Gus has] on the plate*' (134) and send it up the dumb waiter. By offering what they have rather than what was requested for, Ben and Gus essentially fail to fulfil the task set out for them by the unseen power. This, inadvertently, hints at their eventual inability to play out their designated roles as 'hit-men' later on. Furthermore, since a flat, comic character is destined to repeat his/her actions, then this 'exchange' with the dumb waiter can simply be seen as a 'rehearsal' to Ben and Gus's subsequent, tragic ending.

In the final few moments of the play, Ben and Gus, suitably unnerved by the food orders from above, ready themselves for the arrival of their 'victim'. Gus '*goes towards the door on the left*' 'to have a glass of water' (148) and soon after, Ben receives orders from the dumb waiter's speaking tube, informing them that he [presumably the 'victim'] 'has arrived and will be coming in straight away. The normal method to be employed' (148). Upon hanging up, Ben shouts for Gus to no avail. He starts towards the lavatory but before he reaches it,

The door right opens sharply. Ben turns, his revolver leveled at the door.

GUS stumbles in.

He is stripped of his jacket, waistcoat, tie, holster and revolver.

He stops, body stooping, his arms at his sides.

He raises his head and looks at BEN.

A long silence.

They stare at each other.

Curtain (149)

Confusion and questions naturally arise – how did Gus get from left to right? Who removed his clothes? Are we to see him as the actual 'victim' all along? Many critics have considered the ending of *The Dumb Waiter* as a sign that the inquisitive and increasingly rebellious Gus

is to be eliminated. William Baker, for instance, suggests that ‘the curtain comes down as the two fight a battle of life and death for dominance and survival’ (44). Similarly, Esslin sees tragedy for Gus, believing that ‘whoever it will be who enters by the door will have to die’ (*A Study* 69). Furthermore, Gerald M. Berkowitz, voicing comparable but more explicit views, states that this re-entry shows how ‘Gus has failed his test by having the effrontery to assume that he had a right to anything, and he has to be destroyed’ (89). Evidently, according to these critics, when characters question their situation and existence in the room, as Gus does throughout *The Dumb Waiter*, they have to be punished by death.

Undeniably, this appears to be the conclusion that the ending invites but the scene itself in no way suggests that *death* is to be expected – the play merely ends with Ben and Gus ‘[staring] at each other’ (497). Significantly, the play’s atmosphere of anticipation and expectation persists to this very last scene. The curtain comes down before we can find out what happens to the two. Pinter’s refusal to even specify the nature of the stare (horror, surprise, comprehension?) leaves everything characteristically in the dark. However, as confusing as the ending may be, it is arguably not a surprising one. Quigley, for one, believes that what is in the outside/offstage is not very different from what we have witnessed in the room/stage so far:

[i]n the early plays, the people ... offstage alluded to by the characters ... seem quite continuous in scale and scope with the local experience of the characters onstage ... Wilson in *The Dumb Waiter* holds out no more promise for providing access to something radically discontinuous or potentially transcendent than ... Riley [from *The Room*]. (“postmodernism” 19)

Since Ben and Gus seem destined to not be able to fulfil the tasks set out for them by the dumb waiter, it should perhaps come as no surprise that they are unable to fulfil their roles as ‘hit-men’ at the very end. While the ending appears to suggest that Gus is the intended

victim, R. A. Buck asserts that '[e]ven though Gus entering the right door is certainly an interesting possibility, the text simply does not allow it as the sole possibility ... To come up with anything definitive about this play ... defeats the whole purpose of the linguistic ambiguity we are forced to face' (46).

Therefore, perhaps the best way to read the ending is to recognise, like George E. Wellwarth does, that 'there is neither a hidden meaning nor any superior force that might be hiding a putative meaning' (221). What we perceive is all there is. Of course, this in no way suggest that the play's ending should not be taken seriously but the seriousness of the ending is one that stems from Ben and Gus's existence as flat, comic characters. As Koch asserts, '[s]ince they are incapable of change, flat characters can go on and on and on' (95). Thus, when Gus returns to the room/stage at the end of *The Dumb Waiter*, what we witness is neither the arrival of Ben and Gus's freedom nor the impending assassination of Gus, but the two characters falling into a loop between the room/stage and the outside/offstage.

Pinter, according to Buck, 'leaves open the possibility of doors in our lives that lead to nowhere at all – doors, in other words, that merely look like doors, but only dupe us into believing in their expected function' (47). That is to say, doors which are nothing more than props. Gus's entrance from the right is a reminder that as flat, comic characters, all Ben and Gus can expect through the door is but a return to the beginning where Gus, '*stripped of his jacket, waistcoat, tie, holster and revolver*' (149), reverts to the half-dressed state of '*shirts, trousers and braces*' (114) which we saw at the very beginning of the play. In many ways, what Gus experiences is not unlike that which the narrator of Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* (1967) goes through. At one point in the novel, the narrator is brought to 'eternity' and there he enters a place which 'has no size at all ... because there is no difference anywhere in it and we have no conception of the extent of its unchanging coequality' (O'Brien 133). He is invited to walk through the next doorway but, as the policeman informs

him, 'even if we stay behind you it is probable that you will find us there to meet you' (O'Brien 134). Similarly, when Gus enters the same room/stage he just exited, he draws attention to the very eternity of his existence. As a (flat comic) character, he is destined to walk through the door, into the same room, over and over again.

In Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966), the Player declares that '[w]e do on stage the things that are supposed to happen off. Which is a kind of integrity, if we look upon every exit being an entrance somewhere else' (19). But while walking off stage in Stoppard's play brings one into the world of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603), the 'exit' and 'entrance' in *The Dumb Waiter* are just the same either way. For all its symbolic qualities, the door that separates the room/stage and the outside/offstage here quite simply leads back to the same spot. Although Ben and Gus are aware of the freedom which awaits them in the offstage future, the cycle which they fall into makes it impossible for them to break out of the room/stage. However, in the next play, *A Slight Ache*, this loop between the stages is skillfully avoided by the central character and freedom finally appears within grasp.

4 *A Slight Ache*: Moving towards Liberation in the Offstage

SIGNORA PONZA. What? The truth? The truth is simply this. I am the daughter of Signora Frola, and I am the second wife of Signor Ponza.

Yes, and – for myself, I am nobody, I am nobody ...

PREFECT. Ah, but no, madam, for yourself ... you must be ... either the one or the other.

SIGNORA PONZA. Not at all, not at all, sir! No, for myself, I am ... whoever you choose to have me. (232)

– Luigi Pirandello

How does anyone even begin to approach and understand a character who professes to be ‘nobody’? In Luigi Pirandello’s *Right You Are (If You Think So!)* (1917), the inhabitants of an unnamed town are presented with two conflicting stories about the familial history of the newly arrived Signor Ponza and his mother-in-law, Signora Frola. Believing that the Truth of the tale depends on the identity of Ponza’s wife, the townspeople turn to her in the hopes of illuminating matters. Unfortunately, she perpetuates the confusion by insisting that the truth to her identity lies not with her but with the townspeople themselves because she is ‘whoever you choose to have me’ (Pirandello 23). For the other characters (as well as readers) of the play, Signora Ponza’s declaration is an understandably confounding one. However, as the Signora indicates, a ‘nobody’ serves a purpose higher than mere confusion – in being ‘nobody’, Signora Ponza (who is largely in the offstage) allows readers and the other characters to decide for themselves who or what she is, thus emphasising the fact that there is never just one answer to the question: what *is* the offstage?

Importantly, an equivalently enigmatic figure, as L. A. C. Dobrez points out in his essay, can be found in Harold Pinter’s *A Slight Ache* (1958). In Pinter’s play, the characters in the room/stage are visited by a matchseller from the outside/offstage. Passive and silent, the matchseller makes no attempts to clarify or explain his identity and in this respect, he is as much a ‘nobody’ as Signora Ponza is. And like Signora Ponza, the matchseller’s passiveness provides the other characters in *A Slight Ache* with the opportunity to decide for themselves

what he is, thereby bestowing them with a degree of ‘power’ unknown to those in Pinter’s three earlier plays.

Originally written for the BBC Third Programme, *A Slight Ache* had its initial broadcast on 9th July 1959 and was subsequently adapted for the stage and performed at the Arts Theatre, London in 1961. Keeping to the pattern developed across his first three stage plays, Pinter similarly sets this work indoors, in ‘[a] *country house, with two chairs and a table laid for breakfast at the centre of the stage*’ (154). A couple, Edward and Flora, sits across the table from each other, going through their daily rituals and attempting to engage in conversation. Conflict between the two is quickly evident; their conversations are strained and rife with tension and they seem unable to see eye to eye about most things, particularly when it comes to the outside/offstage.

Edward, an intellectual of-sort, leads his life within the confines of his house. He cuts himself from the world outside and even their garden, ‘*suggested at the back of the stage with flower beds, trimmed hedges, etc.*’ (154), is of no interest to him. On the contrary, it is apparent that the garden is an important, if not central, part of Flora’s life. In Michael Billington’s words, her ‘very name invokes the goddess of flowers and whose opening lines implies a delighted curiosity about nature’ (*Life and Work* 98). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that upon noticing a matchseller standing by their back gate (in the outside/offstage), Edward immediately views the stranger as a threat while Flora simply regards the matchseller as a ‘nice old man’ (159). Edward’s fear of the matchseller develops into an obsession, leading him to demand for the stranger to be invited into their house. Despite Flora’s contrary opinions, Edward believes that he can uncover the reason(s) behind the matchseller’s presence when he questions the man himself.

However, just like Pirandello’s townspeople, Edward’s plan fails when the matchseller turns out to be completely unresponsive to all attempts at engaging him in

conversation. Faced with such unexpected silence, Edward's anxieties and insecurities eventually turn into physical weakness as he collapses in the middle of his 'interrogation'. Conversely, Flora, who is unperturbed by the matchseller's reticence, treats the man with unusual familiarity (as one would a lover and/or son) and eventually even claims him as her own. The play concludes with Flora handing Edward the matchseller's tray of matches, presumably signalling his replacement of the outsider as matchseller, before leaving for the outside/offstage with the stranger she has come to name 'Barnabas'.

Clearly, the matchseller is the main source of intrigue in the play but perhaps what is even more intriguing are the reactions which this 'nobody' elicits from Edward and Flora. The couple's differences regarding the garden extends to their views of the matchseller as well and these opposing opinions lead Billington to read in the play, 'marital discord, domestic disharmony, male bluster masking fierce insecurity versus female compassion revealing a strong sense of self' (*Life and Work* 98). Alternatively, Varun Begley, in reference to the opening scene where Edward sits '*reading the paper*' (Pinter 153), notes the tension which underlies Edward and Flora's relationship when he points out that '[a] torso and a face concealed by a newspaper engender a kind of suppressed loathing for the inviolable spectacle of self-absorption on the other side of the breakfast table or living room' (171).

In other words, Billington and Begley believe that a power struggle underlies Edward and Flora's relationship. However, Austin Quigley contradicts these claims when he, rightly, argues that Pinter 'is less prepared to reduce relationships to mere battles for power and more prepared to explore the variety of ways in which competing claims can be made upon the characters' allegiances and interests' ("postmodernism" 20); as Ben and Gus have shown in *The Dumb Waiter*, power struggles, though present, are often not the focus of Pinter's works.

In this play, Edward and Flora's 'competing claims' (largely involving the matchseller) are crucial in predicting the success they might have in achieving freedom at the end of the play.

Silent and passive, the matchseller is nothing like the 'intruders' of Pinter's earlier plays. Unlike Wilson of *The Dumb Waiter*, he actually makes an appearance but he neither attempts to gain control as Goldberg does in *The Birthday Party* nor, like Riley of *The Room*, tries to convince Edward and Flora to leave with him. Instead, his passivity indicates a lack of menace and motive(s). Thus, for the first time in a Pinter play, the characters appear to have no need to battle against a larger, manipulative force (masquerading as an 'intruder') from the outside/offstage. Instead, the matchseller's silence provides Edward and Flora with the opportunity to tell their own stories. Unfortunately, Edward's conviction of the matchseller's malicious motives compels him to seek and wait for non-existent answers from this outside/offstage man. Meanwhile, Flora makes good use of the matchseller's silence to tell stories of her past *and* possible future in the outside/offstage. She even takes on the role of the 'playwright' when she assumes 'control' of the other characters' endings. Ultimately, Edward is replaced by the matchseller/Barnabas while Flora's ostensible role as 'playwright' allows her to avoid the tragic ending(s) which Pinter's other characters have met with so far.

Since the ending which the characters eventually obtain is largely dependent on their perceptions of the matchseller and his function in the play, an understanding of the matchseller is thus essential to understanding Edward and Flora. As mentioned, the matchseller is no intruder but instead, is invited into the house under Edward's orders (163). Insisting that the matchseller is 'not a matchseller at all ... He's an imposter' (163), Edward seeks to question the outside/offstage man and learn more about him in the process. Notably, his desire to uncover the mysteries associated with the matchseller is one shared by readers too. In fact, in an early essay on drama, Pinter himself wrote that '[b]etween my lack of biographical data about [characters] and the ambiguity of what they say lies a territory which

is not only worthy of exploration, but which is compulsory to explore' ("The echoing silence"). However, *A Slight Ache*'s original form as a radio play makes the task a complicated one – how we perceive the matchseller's existence (and by extension, Edward and Flora's presence in the play), depends very much on the medium in which the play is to be presented.

Proponents of the 'blindness' of radio have (understandably) often regarded the stage adaptation of *A Slight Ache* as 'inferior' to the original. Martin Esslin, for one, strongly believes that 'in its radio form the play is bound to be more effective, because then it can remain open whether the central character, the matchseller ... actually exists or is no more than a projection of the two other characters' fear' (*Playwright* 77). Elissa S. Guralnick clearly agrees with Esslin when she insists that 'the matchseller's physical condition is no mystery: it is easily deduced from his physical presence' in the stage play ("The Mind" 123). Indeed, the stage form of *A Slight Ache* is less able than the radio version to accommodate certain interpretations since the stage's reliance on 'sight' makes representing the intangible problematic. As J. L. Styan best explains, '... the blind medium of radio in its unique power upon the ear of stimulating the imagination makes for a kind of drama which can embrace subjects film and theatre may never approach' (*Elements* 287).

Styan may be right in suggesting that radio can take on subjects that drama and/or theatre cannot but it is also arguable that the matchseller is similarly capable of taking on abstract notions in the stage version of the play (which is my chief concern here). Billington, who has a more generous view of the stage play, states that '[w]hen the play was later televised and staged – highly effectively – it became a more obvious study of territorial takeover and psychological displacement. On radio, one was left with the teasing possibility that the matchseller might simply be a fantasy-figure' (*Life and Work* 97). More importantly, in perhaps the most extensive and intriguing analysis of the play, Katherine Burkman

compares *A Slight Ache* to Euripides' *The Bacchae* (405 BC), arguing for 'the many parallels between the Greek drama and *A Slight Ache*' (*Dramatic World* 51). Burkman believes that '[a] ritual reading of the play suggests not that the matchseller is Edward's projection but that he is an aspect of Edward, who in one sense plays both roles' (*Dramatic World* 49). Notably, this notion of dual roles is echoed by Leonard Powlick, who posits that the matchseller is 'the "other" who has been lurking inside Edward, whose presence has often been suspected but always denied' (29).

In light of these claims, I wish to apply this intriguing notion of the matchseller as Edward's 'other' to an analysis of the offstage and suggest that the matchseller, who is *the* outside/offstage character of the play, can similarly be seen as the 'other' of the stage; in other words, he is the personification of the outside/offstage. Shimon Levy, in writing on the offstage in relation to Samuel Beckett's *Godot*, indicates that 'Godot, by dramatic character and theatrical definition, is offstage. Not only does he exist there – he is the personification of offstage, rather than just being off this stage or another' (117). Obviously, since the offstage is 'unseen', *Godot* never actually takes the stage. Thus, when the matchseller steps into the room/stage in *A Slight Ache*, doubts (regarding the validity of this 'representation' of the outside/offstage) are inevitably raised.

However, any attempt at representing the unrepresentable is in itself always a paradoxical endeavour. Zoran Milutinović, in reference to Kazimir Malevich's painting, *White on White* (1918), suggests that only by standing at the point between representation and non-representation can an artist attempt the impossible:

By remaining on the edge of the abyss, any art that strives to fulfill the demand acquires the ambiguity of being simultaneously a success and a failure. It has failed to represent the unrepresentable – which could only have been expected – but by having chosen to cease representing the

representable, ... it points to the locus of failure: by representing “nothing,” by avoiding representing something, yet still representing, it – in Adornian terms – announces the unrepresentable by negation. (343)

Perhaps, it is for this particular reason that the matchseller stays resolutely silent in *A Slight Ache*; even when the matchseller steps into the room/stage and is finally ‘seen’, his presence is largely negated by his silence. Burkman lends support to this claim when she points out that ‘the menace is portrayed as utterly passive in this play. Its demands are never stated. It is simply there’ (*Dramatic World* 48) while Berkowitz, in similar terms, stresses that ‘[e]ven in the stage version he neither speaks nor reacts, strongly suggesting that he is not really there at all’ (91). Despite his un-ignorable physical presence, it is important to remember that the matchseller is, to all intents and purposes, ‘nobody’.

In referring to Beckett’s *Endgame* (1957), Alain Robbe-Grillet suggests that ‘[e]verything that is *is here*, off-stage there is only nothingness, nonbeing’ (123) but crucially, ‘nothingness’ does not necessarily mean a complete absence of life – the matchseller, for instance, clearly exists in the stage play. It is worth considering, at this point, what Henri Bergson says about ‘nothingness’ in *Creative Evolution* (1911): ‘we cannot imagine a nought without perceiving, at least confusedly, that we are imagining it, consequently that we are acting, that we are thinking, and therefore that something still subsists’ (279). Therefore, ‘nothingness is an image full of things ... a perpetual leaping from one to the other, and the refusal ever to come to rest finally on either’ (Bergson, *CE* 280). Physically present but absent in speech and action, the matchseller, in accordance with Bergson’s notion of ‘nothingness’, stands at a point between *something* and *nothing*.

And his ‘perpetual leaping from one to another’ (Bergson, *CE* 280) is precisely that which separates the outside/offstage of *A Slight Ache* from the outside/offstage of the three previous plays. For while the other Pinter characters merely follow the instructions of the

‘intruders’, Edward and Flora (consequent of the matchseller’s silence) are given the opportunity to tell their own stories. In fact, storytelling appears to be an essential requirement for them, because as Ellen F. Schiff observes, ‘[i]n confining his dramatic action to events taking place exclusively or primarily in one room, Pinter accomplishes several striking effects. One of these is the creation of history-less characters’ (91). Like other duos in the previous plays, exchanges between Edward and Flora are stilted, repetitive and very often lead nowhere. However, while it is easy enough to read this as a sign of their ailing marriage, their pointless conversations are also at least partly explained by David Pattie’s comment on ‘Absurdist’ drama:

All these characters exist in a dramatic timespace that is indistinguishable from the timespace of performance. They cannot rely on a past history to confirm their own existence, their own subjectivity; but they can define themselves, even if it is only from moment to moment, in the actions and the words that they perform day after day and night after night. (394)

Therefore, for Edward and Flora, storytelling is a means of survival, a means to ensure their continual existence in the play. As Roland Barthes asks in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), ‘Doesn’t every narrative lead back to Oedipus? Isn’t storytelling always a way of searching for one’s origin, speaking one’s conflict with the Law, entering into the dialectic of tenderness and hatred’ (47)? ‘History-less’ characters like Edward and Flora are confronted by what Robert Skloot refers to as ‘an individual’s existential obligation to create the self’ (265) and in this case, the unresponsive matchseller gives Edward and Flora an unprecedented opportunity to shape their own ‘plots’ (through the stories they tell him).

Timothy Walsh argues that the moment a work of art lapses ‘into darkness, wordlessness, and silence’, it ‘engenders a necessary fluid quality, preventing a work from lapsing into a static finality and insuring that a living quality of uncertainty and untapped,

unrealized potential resonates perpetually around the work' (19). In *A Slight Ache*, the matchseller's silence makes him 'a genuine enigma ... He lends himself, in other words, to pure speculation – a process in which the mind partly creates what it partly apprehends' (Guralnick, "The Mind" 114). His lack of resistance towards the onstage characters' direction of their own 'plots' is one that is unlike the 'intruders' of Pinter's three earlier plays: in *The Birthday Party*, Goldberg interrogates Stanley and thus, shapes Stanley's story with his questions. Similarly, Mr Kidd commandeers the conversation between him and Rose in *The Room* while the dumb waiter, in *The Dumb Waiter*, systematically interrupts Gus's questions about their existence in the basement.

However, the matchseller in *A Slight Ache* does not seek to shape Edward and Flora's stories in any observable way. His silence neither confirms nor denies any of Edward and/or Flora's stories, thus allowing them to have some say in and about their own lives. As Hugo Bowles professes, '[n]arrators' power stems from their freedom to control the dynamics of an episode so that they can tell their stories in the way they want' (152). Consequently, in giving 'the other characters a chance to project their own personalities' (Burkman, "Ritual" 335), the silent matchseller hands over the 'power' (which the 'intruder' usually possesses over the other characters) to Edward and Flora.

Unfortunately, Edward cannot see this; he meets the matchseller without realising that he, Edward, 'is subjected not to some outer force but to forces that lie within him' (Burkman, *Dramatic World* 52). His refusal or inability to see the matchseller as a 'nobody' compels him to seek meaning from the matchseller. Instead of revealing anything insightful about himself – 'I jot down a few observations on certain tropical phenomena' (167) – Edward constantly breaks away from his stories to inundate the matchseller with questions – 'What will you have? Sherry?' (166) 'Do you know the district?' (167) ? Do you live in the village?' (167). This questioning echoes Goldberg and McCann's interrogation of Stanley in

The Birthday Party but in this case, it is the interrogator who eventually breaks down because, despite all his questions, Edward fails to ask the most important one of all: Who am I?

Consequently, it is only to be expected that ‘the confrontation [between Edward and the matchseller would turn] into a compulsively self-defining and self-justifying monologue that is actually a confession that Edward’s entire self-image is a sham’ (Berkowitz 90). Faced with the matchseller’s daunting silence, Edward speaks incessantly to ease his discomfort. In his ramblings, he depicts himself as a man who ‘entertain[s] the villagers annually ... I’m not the squire, but they look upon me with some regard’ (167). In addition, he is ‘a home bird’ (168) who ‘write[s] theological and philosophical essays’ and ‘Africa’s always been [his] happy hunting ground’ (167). However, this identity cannot sustain itself since his stories often contradict each other – does he write essays on ‘the dimensionality and continuity of space ... and time’ (161), ‘about the Belgian Congo’ (161) or ‘theological and philosophical essays’ (167)? Things are not helped by his subsequent admission that he has ‘[n]ever been [to Africa] myself’ though he has ‘[s]tudied the maps’ (167).

Unsurprisingly, Edward’s stories about his (offstage) past take on a similar pattern of contradictions and incoherence: he begins a tale about the daughter of a squire who once lived in the village but cannot remember her name: ‘Sally. No, no, wait a minute, no, it wasn’t Sally, it was ... Fanny. Fanny. A flower’ (167). Clearly, he lacks the details required to tell his stories properly and this, I argue, has much to do with the fact that Edward ‘cedes to the matchseller’s virtual control of their whole interaction’ (Guralnick, “The Mind” 121). Refusing to believe that the matchseller has no answers and/or motives, Edward constantly waits for the man’s response. He repeatedly asks the matchseller if ‘you [said] something’ (178) but of course, what Edward hears is merely his own voice. The relief which Edward displays when the matchseller appears to finally follow his directions – ‘ah, you understand

me' (170), 'Aaaah! You're sat. At last. What a relief' (171) – is further proof of his dependence on the stranger to determine the direction and/or success of his storytelling.

Ultimately, he can only shout at the matchseller, 'God damn it, I'm entitled to know something about you! You're in my blasted house, on my territory ...' (178-9), but this rant is obviously pointless. The offstage, as Levy suggests, is like a black hole which 'dramatically *and* theatrically – sucks us all in' (55) and in absorbing everything that comes its way, the offstage black hole reflects nothing back:

[*Pause.*]

I say, can you hear me?

[*Pause.*]

I said, I say, can you hear me?

[*Pause.*] (168)

Unable to understand this, Edward uses storytelling as a way to bide his time while he waits (futilely) for the matchseller to divulge his non-existent secrets. However, as Ben and Gus have shown in *The Dumb Waiter*, waiting only keeps one perpetually in the present; it prevents Edward from moving towards the future and, more importantly, to his freedom in the outside/offstage. According to Milutinović, 'from the point of view of action, waiting is empty and can only be understood as sheer negation of drama' (346). In light of this, Edward's eventual collapse at the end of the play is simply inevitable, especially 'when the series of clichés with which he describes the way he lives is greeted with complete silence, he cannot help but hear their hollow sound himself' (Burkman, "Ritual" 331).

The first signs of his disintegration come about when Edward begins referring to his time in the room/stage in the past tense: 'how well I remember this room, how well I remember this den ... Yesterday now, it was clear, clearly defined, so clearly' (179). 'I was polished [*Nostalgic.*] ... I could pour hot water down the spoon-hole, yes, easily, no

difficulty, my grasp was firm, my command established, my life was accounted for' (179). Although the events he speaks of are recent, Edward refers to them as something in the long past. Powlick suggests that this is indicative of how '[h]e cannot go on. He has begun to repeat himself, he cannot find further words which will recall the days when he was young' (30). Indeed, we see him growing physically weaker as he claims to have 'caught a cold. A germ. In my eyes. It was this morning. In my eyes. My eyes. /Pause. *He falls to the floor*' (182). Importantly, when he draws our attention to his eyes and its 'slight ache', we realise, as Powlick did, that 'it is not Edward's "eyes" so much as it is his "I" – his Self, his identity – that has been affected' (31). Edward's inability to see the matchseller as 'nobody' makes him as blind as Stanley from *The Birthday Party* – neither men can find freedom because they both believe that there is nothing they can do. Thus, the only ending available for Edward is one where he collapses on the floor, still craving answers from the matchseller.

Fortunately, this stubborn blindness is not shared by Flora. Rather than see the matchseller as a menace, Flora views him as merely 'a very nice old man' who is 'always there' (159). Hence, she 'really can't understand' (160) when Edward, upon first noticing the matchseller, declares that '[f]or two months he's been standing on that spot ... [t]wo months I haven't been able to step outside the back gate' (159). 'It used to give me great pleasure, such pleasure, to stroll along through the long grass, out through the back gate, pass into the lane. The pleasure is now denied me' (159-160). It is now evident that Edward's concerns are unfounded – there is no indication that the passive matchseller has any intentions of stopping Edward and Flora from leaving the room/stage – but it is not always obvious how comparatively sensible Flora's views (regarding the outside/offstage) are, especially when they are often overshadowed by Edward's louder voice.

Powlick believes that Pinter's plays are 'not seen through a fourth wall, but [are] filtered through a consciousness – the consciousness of the central character' – and that 'we

are seeing a subjective, distorted world as the character perceives it' (26). However, in the case of *A Slight Ache*, Edward and Flora's opposing attitudes towards the outside/offstage mean the audience really has to grapple with two different consciousnesses instead of one. In fact, Guralnick suggests that Flora and Edward 'inflict upon each other their various impressions of the world that they inhabit. The winner of their game is the one whose impressions prevail when there is conflict' ("The Mind" 101). Edward evidently has the upper hand for most of the play, specifically when he patronises Flora's efforts in showing him the flowers in the garden:

EDWARD: Is that honeysuckle? I thought it was ... convolvulus, or something.

FLORA: But you know it's honeysuckle.

EDWARD: But I tell you I thought it was convolvulus.

[Pause.]

FLORA: It's in wonderful flower.

EDWARD: I must look. (153)

But when he continues to *not* look, Edward dismisses Flora's concern with the garden as trivial. Championing Edward, Powlick further argues that the play 'shows us, first of all, that the play is Edward's – i.e. that the play speaks to us from Edward's point of view. It is Edward's world which is presented to us, and we perceive it in exactly the same manner as Edward perceives it' (27). However, if we do agree with Powlick, then we essentially also agree with Edward's insistence that 'it's very treacherous weather' when Flora suggests that he 'work[s] in the garden this morning. We could put up the canopy' (154).

Yet, the truth is, despite his ostensible superiority, we are reluctant to believe that it is anything other than 'the height of summer' (155) – Flora's words – because even Edward himself admits that his knowledge of the outside/offstage is limited in comparison to his

wife's. Realising that he cannot win Flora in the debate over flower names, for example, Edward attempts to save himself from embarrassment by insisting that 'I don't see why I should be expected to distinguish between the plants. It's not my job' (154). Whether or not we accept his excuse, the statement irrevocably acknowledges (albeit reluctantly) Flora's authority in all things associated with the outside/offstage. Indeed, Edward can only ever *attempt* to exert his control over the environment because as Guralnick rightly points out, '[w]hether meaning to or not, Edward validates Flora's initial perceptions' ("The Mind" 117) – after killing an intruding wasp at breakfast, Edward changes his tune and claims that it is 'a beautiful day' to 'work in the garden this morning' (Pinter, ASA 158). On hindsight, Powlick may be right after all in suggesting that the play is filtered through a consciousness except that the consciousness which really matters here is Flora's and not Edward's.

Therefore, when Flora takes her turn at cracking the mystery of the matchseller, it is quickly evident that her affinity with the outside/offstage puts her in a better position to deal with the stranger. Rather than panic when she is met by the man's silence, Flora 'goes over to [the matchseller]' and 'mops his brow' (Pinter, ASA 175), ensuring that her first meeting with the matchseller is 'more eventful than Edward's and also more direct' (Guralnick, "The Mind" 115-6). Roy Sorensen posits, '[s]ince silence conveys nothing on its own, it is usually sensitive to context. Depending on the circumstances, silence can convey assent, dissent, or uncertainty. Its message is heavily context-dependent' (135). Although Flora similarly poses questions to the matchseller, she does not really expect answers and thus, the matchseller's silence always comes across as a form of agreement:

I say, you are perspiring, aren't you? Shall I mop your brow? With my
chiffon? Is it the heat? Or the closeness? ... May I? You don't mind?

[Pause. She mops his brow.] (175)

Since Flora never seeks validation for her stories, she is, paradoxically, guaranteed the matchseller's confirmation of them. This guarantee is further exploited by Flora when she 'writes' the matchseller into her own stories

Claiming that she has met the man before, Flora quickly lapses into a story about being raped by a poacher in her past (174). She meets her assailant again years later when she 'was a Justice of the Peace for the county' and he had 'grown a red beard' (175). It soon transpires that she thinks the matchseller to be the very same man and his lack of protest comes across as agreement to her claims. Oddly, despite believing the matchseller to be her past assailant, Flora does not revile him but, instead, asks him to '[t]ell me all about love. Speak to me of love' (176). This move, admittedly, makes her already shocking story even more unbelievable. In fact, Esslin dismisses her story as 'the sexual fantasies of [Flora's] youth' (*Playwright* 79) while Guralnick suggests that Flora 'remade the old man in her own lustful image' ("The Mind" 116). However, as Barbara Kreps argues in her analysis of Pinter's *The Basement* (1967), 'the truth or falseness of their objective existence in material reality is consequently ... quite beside the point; for as Pinter explained to [Mel] Gussow, "So much is imagined and that imagining is as true as real"' (53). How 'real' Flora's stories are, is perhaps less consequential here than how successful she is in telling them.

And, in comparison to Edward's disjointed tale(s), Flora's stories are undoubtedly more successful – while Edward desperately seeks meaning from the matchseller, Flora has no doubts as to who the matchseller is, '[h]e's a very nice old man', and what he is doing, '[h]e's selling matches, of course' (159). In fact, she is certain that the matchseller is 'harmless, unfortunate ... old, that's all ... he's not here through any ... design, or anything, *I know it*' (emphasis mine 173). Rather than wait for the matchseller to explain himself, Flora simply imposes her own perceptions on him. Therefore, she is able to inform Edward, with much confidence, that '[h]e'll move on. I can ... make him', 'I'll find out all about him, I

promise you. I shall go and have a word with him now, I shall ... get to the bottom of it' (173). This confidence, however, raises Edward's suspicions: he '*seizes her arm*' and demands to know '[what] are you plotting' (174). But, of course, there are no conspiracies or secrets; Edward's failure with the matchseller lies in the fact that he is 'much too heavy-handed, in every way. You should trust your wife more, Edward. You should trust her judgment, and have a greater insight into her capabilities' (Pinter, *ASA* 174).

As the bullied wife to Edward, Flora is often regarded as a complementary figure to her husband and so, lives (metaphorically) on the margins. In fact, critics such as Berkowitz, Coppa and Powlick barely mention her in their analyses of the play. However, it is precisely because Flora stands at such a liminal position in the play that she is able to see the matchseller for the 'nobody' he is. Edward himself makes an inadvertent reference to her knowledge regarding the outside/offstage when, at one point, he declares that 'you know *nothing*' (emphasis mine 173). But knowing 'nothing' is not necessarily as undesirable as Edward suggests. As mentioned, 'nothingness' is a quality of the outside/offstage, thus knowing 'nothing' is, effectively, to know the outside/offstage. Furthermore, it is precisely this knowledge which allows Flora to 'reverse' the control that the 'intruder' usually has over the characters in the room/stage. Referencing Daniel Gerould and Jadwiga Kosicka, Safi Mahmoud Mahfouz points out that:

dramatists populate their plays with absent characters to theatricalize the symbolic unseen forces that control man's destiny. Women, themselves one of the margins in traditional thought, have helped develop the postmodern valuing of the margins and the ex-centric to get rid of the power problematic centers. (397)

Significantly, the silent, passive matchseller here does not seem to 'control man's destiny' in the manner which Goldberg and McCann do in *The Birthday Party*. In fact, his reticence

provides Flora with the opportunity to extend her storytelling to the matchseller himself – by the end of the play, Flora goes as far as to define and direct *his* future. Importantly, it is in light of this ‘control’ over the matchseller that Flora is able to obtain an ending different from Edward’s.

Unlike Edward, who simply half-tell stories of his past to fill in the matchseller’s silence, Flora makes up stories about herself *as well as* the matchseller. In fact, these stories are often developed from her earlier tale of the matchseller as a potential lover. She insists, for instance, that ‘[i]t’s me you were waiting for, wasn’t it? You’ve been standing waiting for me. You’ve seen me in the woods ... and you came and stood, poor creature, at my gate, till death us do part’ (176-7). Subsequently, she takes this further and proceeds to project a *future* for the matchseller, deciding that she is ‘going to keep you ... you dreadful chap, and call you Barnabas’ (176). She will ‘put [the matchseller] to bed and watch over you ... I’ll buy you pretty little things that will suit you. And little toys to play with’ (177). As mentioned in *The Dumb Waiter*, freedom from the room/stage is largely associated with the characters’ ability to envision a future in the outside/offstage, but when Flora projects this future for the matchseller, her storytelling abilities affects more than just her own ending.

Interestingly, Billington notes that for one of the play’s radio broadcasts, the matchseller was ‘jokingly billed in *Radio Times* as being performed by David Baron’ (*Life and Work* 96), which was Harold Pinter’s early stage name. If we see this joke as, in some way, also suggesting that the matchseller is a shadow or proxy of the playwright, then when Flora ‘takes control’ over his life (through the stories she tells about his future), she essentially transcends the role of ‘character’ to take on the ostensible role of the manipulative ‘playwright’. By this I do not mean that Harold Pinter, the actual man who writes the words of the play, has lost power over his characters – that is, of course, technically impossible. Instead, by ‘playwright’, I am referring to Pinter, the *idea* of the playwright we all have when

reading the play – the unseen force in the offstage whose presence we are all, to varying degrees, aware of. The man who, though never mentioned by the other characters, is as much ‘part of’ the play as they are.

In his acceptance speech for the German Shakespeare Prize in Hamburg, Pinter spoke of the struggle between himself and the characters he writes, admitting that:

You create the word and in a certain way the word, in finding its own life, stares you out, is obdurate, and more often than not defeats you. You create the characters and they prove to be very tough. They observe you, their writer, warily ... there is no question that quite a conflict takes place between the writer and his characters and on the whole, I would say the characters are the winners”. (32-3)

In the case of *A Slight Ache*, ‘victory’ comes about when Flora forcibly imposes her storytelling onto the matchseller and his future life, rather than the other way round. She gives the matchseller a name (Barnabas) and according to Schiff, ‘[b]eing able to call things by their names – however commonplace and insignificant – somehow confers a sense of mastery over them’ (93). Edward also recognises this power in name-calling when, at one point, he demands that Flora ‘stop calling me Edward’ (173). Nevertheless, regardless of Edward’s protest, Flora’s ‘mastery’ over the two men becomes stronger as the play moves closer to its end.

Right before she begins making her way to the outside/offstage with the matchseller/Barnabas, Flora stops and specifically hands Edward the matchseller’s tray of matches, thereby making her husband the new matchseller while Barnabas/the matchseller takes the newly-emptied place next to Flora. In addition, she makes it clear that tragedy awaits both Edward *and* Barnabas/the matchseller – while Edward lies collapsed on the floor, Barnabas will be ‘on [his] deathbed. Why shouldn’t you die happy’ (177)? More importantly,

as she ushers him towards the outside/offstage, Flora tells Barnabas that '[t]he summer is coming. I've put up your canopy for you. You can lunch in the garden, by the pool. I've polished the whole house for you' (184). These details clearly parallel Edward's life in the room/stage – the fact that Barnabas' time with Flora will turn out to be the same as Edward's signals the lack of progress or change in the two men's future; rather than move on to something else, they merely take turns replacing each other's positions. In a sense, this exchange of roles is very much similar to the loop which Ben and Gus fall into at the end of *The Dumb Waiter* – freedom in the outside/offstage is unattainable for these characters which are doomed to repeat themselves over and over.

Significantly, a similar ending can also be found in another Pinter play, *The Basement* (1966), where a man, Law, is visited by his friend and his girlfriend, Stott and Jane. Unfortunately, the visit turns awry when the visitors take possession of Law's bed and gradually, his entire flat. But most intriguingly, the play proceeds to repeat itself at the end, except that this time, Law, rather than the initial Stott, is the one standing outside, seeking entrance into the flat with Jane. The three characters of *The Basement*, like Edward and Barnabas/the matchseller, seem destined to fall into a never-ending cycle.

However, I argue that in *A Slight Ache*, Flora is actually able to avoid this loop that the others fall into because in drawing attention to the replacement between Edward and Barnabas/the matchseller, Flora keeps her own ending a mystery. We assume that she, like Jane in *The Basement*, repeats her role as wife (but to Barnabas/the matchseller this time). Yet, unlike *The Basement*, the curtain in *A Slight Ache* falls as '*she and the MATCHSELLER start to go out*' (184); we never actually see the play repeat itself in the way *The Basement* does. As such, it is never clear what happens to Flora. Unlike the two men in the play, her end is kept in flux. In fact, she seems to consciously make herself seem comparatively less important by concentrating her storytelling efforts on what will happen to the matchseller,

choosing to constantly deflect attention away from herself to the two men. But in this case, inconsequentiality is to be desired because by making no mention of her own future, Flora is able to hide under the seemingly more significant issue of the men's replacement and thus successfully avoid the loop between the stages herself.

Undoubtedly, Flora's avoidance of the loop and eventual success in stepping outside/offstage has much to do with the ostensible role of 'playwright' which she takes on through her storytelling. This departure from the room/stage is a feat that none of the characters in the previous three plays have managed and her position as 'playwright' seems to emphasise the fact that freedom from the room/stage is not achieved by simply stepping off stage. Instead, freedom is strongly associated with the 'playwright' – that figure who creates, who calls the shots, who determines the fates of others in the play.

Of course, that is not to say that in taking on the role of the 'playwright', Flora somehow manages to wrest power from Harold Pinter or that she has somehow transcended her fictional realm to influence the real world in which Pinter and us exist (after all, Pinter could very well have written the ending differently). Rather, in being able to influence the lives of her counterparts, Flora acquires qualities akin to a playwright (she becomes, in a sense, a 'version' of the 'playwright', in the way that Wilson is in *The Dumb Waiter*) and it is in this role that she is able to attain the freedom (from the room/stage) which various characters in the four plays desire. This special position which Flora is in, in turn, leads us to wonder if the only character who can be truly free from the room/stage is quite simply the 'playwright' and/or his various 'selves'?

After all, characters invariably find themselves in a paradoxical position when it comes to the offstage – while freedom (from the room/stage) is contingent on an offstage future, a character's very existence is also conditional on them being 'seen'. A successful move towards the offstage, where s/he is bound to become 'unseen', would mean the end of

the character's being. As David Pattie points out, characters (particularly those in 'Absurdist' drama) can only define themselves 'from moment to moment, in the actions and the words that they perform day after day and night after night minute by minute' (394). Consequently, a character has to be prepared to 'die' if s/he wants to be free of the room/stage – Henrik Ibsen's Hedda Gabler or Shakespeare's Ophelia are just some of the famous characters who have turned to suicide as a 'solution' to their situations. However, an exception appears to exist in the character of the 'playwright'. S/he is not subjected to such laws of existence; while the ending of *A Slight Ache* is ambiguous, it leaves us in little doubt of Flora's continual 'existence' in the offstage. In fact, it is precisely because the 'playwright' is *there*, in the foggy darkness of the offstage that his/her existence is stronger than ever.

Conclusion

‘Is that you?’ (3), Meg repeatedly asks Petey in the opening scene of *The Birthday Party*. This question might as well be directed at every ‘intruder’ who steps through the door in the four Pinter plays discussed in this paper. While distinctly different, it is clear (from the various references to an offstage presence each time) that the ‘intruders’ in all these plays arrive in the room/stage, under the orders of an unseen, manipulative force in the outside/offstage. But what makes Meg’s question such an appropriate one for the ‘intruders’ is the fact that the question *clarifies* rather than asks the identity of the subject. After all, there is little doubt that the offstage figure behind these ‘intruders’ is simply the ‘playwright’ himself, the figure whom we are all familiar with but do not see in the room/stage. However, despite, or precisely because the ‘playwright’ never actually appears in person, his existence in the plays is undeniable. As Skloot argues, life ‘is possible only in half-light. Seeing nothing of someone is the same as seeing everything; both are a condition, in life and in theatre, of non-existence’ (266-7). Considering how the ‘playwright’ is at once absent but present in the play, he must be, in accordance to Skloot’s assertions, more ‘alive’ than some of the other characters. ‘To Pinter, we *are* dead if we are not seen, but we are alive, most secure, and strongest when we are dimly perceived (and, of course, when we are silent) as a force to be reckoned with’ (Skloot 268).

By controlling the lives of the various characters of *The Birthday Party*, *The Room*, *The Dumb Waiter* and *A Slight Ache* from his position in the darkness of the offstage, the ‘playwright’ proves, time and time again, to be this very ‘force to be reckoned with’ (Skloot 268). As mentioned, the ‘playwright’ referred to here is not Harold Pinter, the biographical man who lived from 1930 to 2008. Rather, it is the *idea* of Pinter whom we glean from the plays, the ‘playwright’ who has dissolved into the very words he wrote, the figure who now lives beyond his allotted time, in the manner which Shakespeare had craved for his lover

when he wrote, in Sonnet 81: ‘You still shall live, such virtue hath my pen, / Where breath most breathes, even in the mouths of men’. In now ‘being one’ with his words, the ‘playwright’ in Pinter’s plays is himself as much a ‘character’ as he was once flesh and blood and is thus, as much open to our interpretations as Stanley, Rose, Gus and Flora are. The exception here being that his unseen and yet undeniable presence in the plays keeps him from ever taking on a fixed identity.

In fact, depending on the individual plays, the ‘playwright’ takes on different forms; his name and position evolves in accordance with the situation – he is Monty in *The Birthday Party*, Rose/Sal’s father in *The Room*, Wilson in *The Dumb Waiter* and less obviously, Flora in *A Slight Ache*. The knowledge of these different figures in or from the offstage draws our attention to the absent presence of the ‘playwright’ and it is precisely this which makes the ‘playwright’ noteworthy in an examination of the offstage in drama. In some ways, the ‘playwright’ embodies the very idea of the offstage since he, like the offstage, is similarly a crucial but unseen part of the play. Most importantly, unlike most of the other characters, his perpetual presence in the offstage keeps the ‘playwright’ free from the imprisonment of the room/stage.

It has been the running argument of this paper that the characters’ liberation from the room/stage lies, potentially, in the outside/offstage. Or more precisely, in the future that the characters may have in the outside/offstage. But characters like Rose and Gus of *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter* are often unable to leave the room/stage (despite their desire to) because their existence and obligations to the play compel them to stay. Conversely, the ‘playwright’ sends proxies in the form of Goldberg and McCann, Riley, the dumb waiter and the matchseller to take his place, thus avoiding the necessity of making an actual appearance in the room/stage himself. But despite his absence from the room/stage, the ‘playwright’

looms over the characters and they in turn sense his presence and the power he has over them, even if they are not fully conscious of his influence.

Timothy Walsh argues that ‘we know of the “missing matter” only through the impression it leaves on the visible and detectable segment of reality: the known continually implicates the unknown, just as the conspicuous perpetually leads us towards the recondite’ (4). In the case of Pinter’s plays, the ‘missing playwright’ leaves his impression ‘on the visible and detectable segment of reality’ that is the very words of the plays we read (Walsh 4). In paying attention to the words of the plays, we are bound to grow aware of the existence of the offstage ‘playwright’ and this awareness leads us to consider, in Ratcliffe words, how far ‘an essential absence ... forces us to imagine the missing parts or person based on the words the play uses to “perform” them’ (105-6).

Since it seems that it is only through the words we read that we are able to ‘view a performance’ of the offstage, perhaps reading drama is, ultimately, the best way to examine the offstage of a play. Or more accurately, perhaps in the case of the offstage, the distinctions between drama and theatre are far and few between since, as Levy claims, the ‘offstage should be regarded as the link between drama and theatre’ (54) – in drama, as in theatre, we depend on the words of the plays to imagine the offstage into existence. Thus, at this concluding point in the paper, we once again return to that all important connection between words, imagination and the offstage. In fact, the evident significance of words, particularly in *A Slight Ache*, leads me to further consider the importance of storytelling in an analysis of the offstage.

Importantly, by story I do not simply refer to Flora’s made-up tales about her past but stories in relation to drama as a whole. While some differentiation has to be made in the reading of novels and the reading of drama, the two forms actually share certain basic similarities, one of which is precisely the presence of storytelling. As Manfred Jahn

propounds, there is much use in comparing ‘the reading of plays to the reading of novels’ (662); while a play is often written with the intention of being performed, ‘a play’s text must be read and understood as a piece of narrative fiction before it may be used as (and possibly turns into) a recipe for performance containing “instructions” by the playwright’ (Jahn 672).

It has been established from the outset of this paper that reading drama is fundamental to understanding the offstage. But it is possible that there are merits to reading drama as narrative fiction first, particularly in light of Monika Fludernik’s assertions – although stage directions are ‘originally instructions for the actors and director’, ‘for readers of playscripts, their function is an eminently narrative one’ (Fludernik 375). As Brian Richardson argues in detail in “Drama and Narrative” (2007), most methods commonly used to analyse narrative fiction are very much applicable to the analysis of drama as well (142-51). Considering the offstage’s reliance on words for its existence, it is possible that reading drama like we do novels might just provide more depth to future studies of the offstage, depth which this paper is unable to currently accommodate due to its length. But while this method is not fully commented on and developed here, it is nonetheless clear that the reading of drama turns *nothing* (ignoring the offstage) into *something* (‘seeing’ the offstage). By concentrating on the words and not the actual performance of the play, reading drama lies somewhere between the words of Pinter and the theatrical performances themselves. Once again, as Skloot argues, life ‘is possible only in half-light. Seeing nothing of someone is the same as seeing everything’ (267) – if we wish to consider the offstage in all its entirety, it is perhaps crucial that we should always maintain this in-between position in our approach to the plays.

Pinter himself asserts in his 1962 speech at the National Student Drama Festival in Bristol, ‘A blank page is both an exciting and a frightening thing. It’s what you start from ... In that page is something or nothing. You don’t know until you’ve cornered it’ (“Writing for the Theatre” xiv). With this paper, I had begun, both literally and metaphorically, from a

blank page with regards to the offstage; little has been said of the offstage in drama, least of all the offstage in Harold Pinter's plays. In the course of this paper, the offstage of Pinter's first four plays has come to represent the potential for freedom to the respective character(s) trapped in the room/stage. But the ambiguities which are fundamental to the offstage's existence makes it almost certain that this is not the only interpretation that can be made about the dramatically unseen. Like the characters of Pinter's works, we too have to open our eyes to the infinite possibilities of the offstage which are hidden within the visible world of the play-text.

As Walsh eloquently states, '[w]hether it be tracks in the snow or starlight ... the various vehicles for seeing what isn't there, for sampling the infinitely shifting aftertastes of absence, press upon us from all sides, so that we too easily forget how a large part of our consciousness is formed in response to encountered absences and thwarted expectations' (11). I have tried to show in this paper that the offstage (of Pinter's plays) is more apparent to us than we imagine and we look upon it far more often than we think in our reading of plays. But looking without perceiving is pointless. Only when we recognise the significance of the offstage in our reception and understanding of Pinter's plays in particular and dramatic works in general, are we able to see far and beyond the scenes played out before our eyes.

(30 689 words)

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