

Domestic Ecologies: a study of gender and domesticity within Harold Pinter's Rooms

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ABSTRACT

Harold Pinter's work opens the walls to the relatively closed rooms of domesticity. The room of the love affair, the unpredictable liaison, the cramped cluttered rooms of poverty and the disaffected. This study uses Pinter's rooms to analyse existing ideologies of gender, territory, power and domesticity. Pinter's rooms are more often than not reflections of familiar domestic spaces. This research investigates Pinter's rooms through a case study of a theatre set for one of his plays and textual analysis of selected works, developing an understanding of how Pinter's characters reflect behaviours within the domestic environment, mimicking while subverting domestic ecologies.

INTRODUCTION

For many theatre companies, Harold Pinter's plays are a staple inclusion to the company's season. Sometimes described as realist, other times absurdist, his works have a knack of unsettling an audience into an uncomfortable laughter, or a stunned silence. Narrative within the Nobel Laureate's work belong explicitly to the place in which it is being told. In this way, his plays are territorial in their specific relationship within the given space. The dialogue is often disjointed through a deficient acknowledgement or recounting of actions and conversations that may have taken place in diegetic spaces relative to the story. His stories are most often set within constrictive domestic settings where the audience will find themselves looking into a room within a house, perhaps a familiar space, with solid walls, real furniture, and maybe even a ceiling. The actors will be separated by the light on stage and the darkness that hushes the audience. Like the light from the microscope onto a subject, the audience will sit in the shadows, studying the physical and verbal interactions of the people framed by the given setting. The mimetic stage set will not only assist in this study of human ecology, but also admit the spectator to relate to the space; providing an opportunity for the audience to contribute their own memories pertaining to a room.

These rooms within Pinter's dramatic literature have both a metaphoric and physical presence. In the citation accompanying the playwright's Nobel Laureate it states, '...in his plays [he] uncovers the precipice under everyday prattle and forces entry into oppression's closed rooms.'¹ It is through this use of the room that we can analyse a study of relationships between subject and space, character and domesticity, and gender and object. In this study two themes will be addressed

through a selection of Pinter's works. The first theme investigates the territorial relationship Pinter's characters exhibit with their domestic space, is underpinned by playwright and anthropologist, Robert Ardrey's book *The Territorial Imperative*². The second theme looks at how Pinter's female characters illustrate the cultural phenomenon of the housewife, the hybrid creature that is one part house and one part woman, through textual analysis of dialogue within Pinter's plays. While there currently exists an extensive amount of literature that analyses Pinter's work, this study is concerned solely with his rooms, their presence and impact on inhabitants and narrative: how they construct hierarchies of gender, power and territorial aspirations. To understand the Pinter room, this study begins by examining the design of a theatre set for a 2007 production of *The Caretaker*.

I went into a room and saw one person standing up and one person sitting down, and few weeks later I wrote *The Room*. I went into another room and saw two people sitting down, and a few years later I wrote *The Birthday Party*. I looked through a door into a third room and saw two people standing up and I wrote *The Caretaker*³



Left
The character Aston in Vena Cava's production of *The Caretaker*, directed by Shane Jones, set design by Kirsty Volz and Florian Kaiser. Here we see the objects dominant in the foreground while characters, the very subjects, are situated in the background. Photo by Ian Knight.

THE TERRITORIAL IMPERATIVE

Pinter's stage directions for *The Caretaker* firstly call for, of course, 'a room'. This is followed by a list of more than 34 detailed properties and their locations within the room⁴. These prescriptive stage directions would at once appear to threaten the set designer's creativity. However, the set requires much more than the objects and furniture requested in Pinter's list. The set needs to contain and oppress its subjects; creating an environment that frames them in a way that is instantly recognisable to the audience. In a production of *The Caretaker* the role of the set is intrinsic to the story. The room is not owned by the characters; rather the characters belong to the room. It is the extent of their existence, it contains all that they possess: objects, beliefs and understandings. Ownership of this space is a core theme to the play as the characters engage in a territorial conflict over the room. The conflict itself binds them to the space, further oppressing their sensibilities and containing them within the room.

In the initial stages of developing the concept for the room, the play's director suggested Francis Bacon's triptych painting, *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*. The paintings describe three figures perched on different objects draped in various arrangements of delicate cloth. The background of each painting is a red scuffed surface defined with rough perspective lines drawn to indicate the boundaries of a room, a contained space. Pinter was a known admirer of Bacon's work⁵ and in these paintings there were three characters, just as *The Caretaker* has three characters, from which to develop a concept for the design. In Bacon's paintings, the objects upon which each of the figures is perched are too far in the foreground to judge the origin of the object; the legs have been cut off by the base of the painting's frame. This influenced the decision to raise the set so as to expose the structure of the floor and place objects within the structure. In this way there was an indeterminate quality to the excessive clutter of the props. There were penetrations in the floor where objects retracted out into the space of the room, framing the circulation paths of the actors. The wall surfaces were treated in the same scuffed surface as Bacon's paintings, but they were also in a state of physical decay. Still present and definite, the walls reflected their inhabitants.

While the set represents a room in decay, there is a balance of respect and destruction, of structure and organic decomposition. The walls had to be created before they could be deconstructed. The ceiling, cornice board, architraving and finished floorboards carefully created for a sense of realism, met with the absurd placement of objects appropriated by the decay of the room. The set was created in the hope that the audience would experience a disorienting realisation upon arrival. As Bernard Tschumi writes, 'that impossible moment where an architectural act, brought to excess, reveals both traces of reason and the immediate experience of space'⁶. That experience being a familiar domestic ecology simultaneously subverted by the claustrophobic oppression imbued by the occupation of this room. The set was designed to instantly hint to its audience the territorial struggle that was about to unfold in *The Caretaker*.



Above
Davies and Mick's first encounter as their territorial battle begins the objects on stage interrupting their interactions. Objects retracted from the floorboards dictate how the actors move while their characters fight over the same objects.
Photo by Ian Knight.

The Caretaker expounds the notion that the Pinter character is motivated by the need to defend his or her room⁷. In a number of Pinter plays, including *The Caretaker* and *The Homecoming*, there is this defence of territory brought about by the introduction of an intruder. Robert Ardrey writes that the intruder is invariably defeated and expelled from the proprietor's territory. Through his study of various species of animals and territorial behaviours, Ardrey concludes that there is an unknown energy that inhabits the occupant of the territory in their home⁸. In *The Caretaker* the apparently passive character, Aston, retains his home from the territorial challenge of an intruder, Davies. While the motives of the characters are ambiguous, there is an evident struggle for territory and power. Davies is easily manipulated by the third character, Mick, into a false sense that he is entitled to the role of caretaker of the flat. This role becomes dependent on Davies' ability to decorate the flat. When Mick discovers that he is incapable of his cosmetic aspirations for the space, Davies' claim to the role of caretaker is revoked⁹. For Mick, the value of the tenant is directly linked to the value of the apartment. There is no loyalty to the occupant, only to the appearance of the room. This convolution between person and space, the assimilation between individual and ecology becomes intensified when intersected with gender. Ardrey writes that it may be misunderstood that competition between males is motivated usually by the possession of females, however it is more often than not also for the possession of property¹⁰.

On protecting territory, Ardrey asks, how many men have died for their country? And then, how many women have done the same?¹¹ Pinter responds to this through the sole female character in his play *Homecoming*, Ruth, who is one woman who succeeds in defending and gaining territory. From her very entry into the all male household, she asserts her confidence and autonomy as an intruder within the home¹². This also contests Ardrey's theory that there is some universal recognition of territorial rights where the intruder is marked by a sense of inhibition¹³. Ruth transcends this ideology of the intimidated intruder as she interrupts the existing struggle for power within the house. Perhaps though, Ruth's claim for territory is not through action but association¹⁴. Drama theorist Hanna Scolnicov writes that the feminine is an element of space while the masculine is an agent for action. Where a male character would lay claim to a space through an action, a female character is assimilated with the space itself. She does not own or belong to the space, rather she is an element of space.

THE HOUSE AND WOMAN AS HYBRID CREATURE

When Ruth is introduced to the room in *The Homecoming*, a story is told to her about the home's structure being affected by the removal of a wall after the mother of the house had died. Here, there is an association between the structure of the house and the mother¹⁵. With the wall removed, the structure of the household had been altered and this is associated with the absence of the mother. This illustrates Scolnicov's rationale of the feminine being assimilated with space. The mother's womb is the first and most satisfying home in our existence and associations between femininity, the womb

and architecture are widely written about. This evaluation based purely on a woman's biological usefulness de-personalises women¹⁶. Rather than having a place in the house, they are the place of the house. The woman is literally a House/Wife, as Jane Blocker describes, the hybrid being of half house, half woman. The woman is either consumed by the house or has consumed the house¹⁷.

Pinter's female characters are also embodied in household objects. In *The Homecoming* Ruth's presence is compared to the disturbance of a chiming clock in the night¹⁸. In a philosophical argument about matter she also associates her own leg with the leg of a table¹⁹. The character of Emma in the play *Betrayal* also uses furniture and household objects to make sense of characters and situations. Throughout the play while Emma is in a relationship she is confined to a domestic setting, a room within the home, the apartment or a motel. It is only when Emma is not in a relationship that she is placed in a setting outside of the home. Emma's husband expresses the containment of femininity within domesticity when he says that women are not wanted in the squash club, the pub or the restaurant; that these are the places reserved for men²⁰. This demonstrates Scolnicov's concept of mimetic domesticity in the theatre confining women to the home²¹.

CONCLUSION

Pinter's rooms proffer an environment for contests of gender, territory and power. They play on theatre's most unsettling ability, that is, to mirror actual space. Through the physical reflections of domesticity, the audience is offered both a familiar setting to relate to and the opportunity to see a permutation of domesticity. By associating these concepts through space, the audience and the actors can share in a sense of reaching a new understanding. Elin Diamond writes about imitation in the theatre and its ties to femininity. She challenges mimesis, arguing that realist mimetic representations of space tie into traditional ideologies of femininity and the desire to imitate masculinity: the real belonging to the masculine and the mimetic belonging to the feminine²². Hilde Heynan writes in the same vein, placing the mimetic in opposition to the rational and associated with the feminine, although Heynan suggests mimesis as a tactic for subversion through the double gesture of assimilation and displacement²³.

As with the set for *The Caretaker*, there was the constraint of complying with the prescriptive stage directions and delivering the representation of a room, but there was also the opportunity for subtle subversion, to replicate and permute a familiar domestic room, to study a domestic ecology of how an individual behaves within the hidden confines of the home. This overlays a new understanding of the text, and a new representation of domesticity to the audience. The room in Pinter's work is a device through which the audience can reach a new understanding of this relationship between self and the domestic environment. It is never the same room, but it is always the room that frames the subject. It is through mimetic space that the play can communicate with the audience in a most potent way. Mimesis can acknowledge what is known, while also enlightening the spectator through subverting a familiar context.



NOTES

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3. Lawrence Bensky, *Theatre No. 3. Interview with Harold Pinter*. (Paris: The Paris Review Foundation, 2004).
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5. Penelope Prentice, *The Pinter Ethic: The Erotic Aesthetic*. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994). xxii-xxxv.
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7. Victor Cahn, *Gender and Power in the Plays of Harold Pinter*. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994) 8
8. Ardrey, *The Territorial Imperative*, 10
9. Pinter, *The Caretaker*, 34
10. Ardrey, *The Territorial Imperative*, 11
11. Ardrey, *The Territorial Imperative*, 12
12. Cahn, *Gender and Power in the Plays of Harold Pinter*, 84
13. Harold Pinter, *The Homecoming* (London: Methuen, 1966).
14. Hanna Scolnicov, *Woman's Theatrical Space*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 2
15. Cahn, *Gender and Power in the Plays of Harold Pinter*, 86
16. Sandra. M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "Towards a Feminist Poetic: Inflection in the Sentence" in *Intimus* ed. Mark Taylor and Julieanna Preston (Chichester, England: Wiley Academy, 2006) 122-123.
17. Jane Blocker, "Woman-House : Architecture, Gender and Hybridity in What's Eating Gilbert Grape." *Camera Obscura* 39. (November 1998) 126 – 150.
18. Pinter, *The Homecoming*, 12
19. Pinter, *The Homecoming*, 46
20. Harold Pinter, *Betrayal*, (London: Eyre Methuen, 1978).
21. Scolnicov, *Woman's Theatrical Space*, 4
22. Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater*. (London: Routledge, 1997) 1-14
23. HildeHeynan, "Modernity and Domesticity: Tensions and Contradiction" in *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial productions of gender in modern architecture* ed. Hilde Heynan (London: Routledge. 2005, 22-23

Opposite
Davies investigating his new environment prior to making advances on territory in *The Caretaker*. Here we see the character relating to space and object, an opportunity for the audience to study a domestic ecology. Photo by Ian Knight.