

## HAROLD PINTER'S TRAGICOMIC TECHNIQUES

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"Tout est comique, tout est tragique"  
IONESCO

Ionesco's words chosen for the motto apply as well to his own writing as to Pinter's, although the two playwrights stand on diametrically opposite poles of the dramatic universe: both are often filed as "absurdist" (Esslin 1968; Taborski 1967), the former due to the distortion of reality, the latter due to overemphasized faithfulness. Pinter has never made an *expressis verbis* pronouncement of his being a tragicomic writer, yet the essence of his conception of the world is laid open in the frequently quoted "Everything is funny, even tragedy is funny" (Esslin 1968:272). The statement, although not so brilliantly paradoxical as that of Ionesco, throws much light on Pinter's dramatic *Weltanschauung* at whose roots the tragicomic vision lies. The goal of this essay is to analyse the ways in which the vision is embodied in Pinter's dramas and methods of dramatic technique through which it is communicated.

Before any such analysis can be attempted it is necessary to make a clear statement of what is understood here by "tragicomedy", since the term often causes misapprehension. The word was first used by Plautus in *Amphitryon* to denote a play in which low and high-born characters appear side by side. Although, understandably, the semantic capacity of the term has been growing for the last 2200 years, the basis of the hybrid genre remained unaltered, always being some kind of combination of diverse components. At present a clear distinction can be made within tragicomedy, dependent both on the nature of elements combined and the manner of combination (Guthke 1966; Herrick 1969; Styan 1963). Thus, on the one hand, the core of tragicomedy may be a mixture of elements typical of comedy and tragedy as two distinct literary genres: mingling of *dramatis personae* from all stations of life, mixing of styles proper to tragedy and comedy, or dealing with a tragic subject

matter in *oratio comica* and vice versa, jumbling together of serious and comic incidents in one drama, or furnishing a potentially tragic play with a happy *dénouement* — the so called *tragedia mista* (Herrick 1969:69). On the other hand, the essence of the genre may be a fusion (not a mixture) of the tragic and the comic understood as metaphysical qualities in the Ingardenian sense, interdependent and inseparable within one work. The relation of the two types of tragicomedy is analogous to the relation of a physical combination of two elements to their chemical compound, i.e., in the first instance the separation of the elements is physically fairly feasible, whereas in the second it is impossible. To use Schlegel's metaphor: one cries with one eye and smiles with the other.

After a preliminary taxonomic examination of Pinter's dramas three plays have been selected for analysis, as belonging to the "fusion" type of tragicomedy: *The caretaker*, *The dumb waiter*, and *The birthday party*. I have found no representative of the "mixture" type. Within each of the chosen plays the tragicomic is effected in a different manner. In our analyses we shall dispense with symbolic interpretations that have been made up and repeated since the appearance of *The room* (Esslin 1968; Wellwarth 1964), however enticing they may be, i.e., Davis from *The caretaker* will be considered neither as an Oedipal figure nor as a biblical Adam. We shall not go beyond the level of the represented world: Davis will be treated as Davis, Mick as Mick, and Aston as Aston, and the patterns of relations between them as patterns of relations between three human beings cast into a certain situation. Some *clichés* persistently echoing in Pinter criticism, such as "suspense, menace, anxiety" (Esslin 1968 and 1970; Kitchin 1966; Taylor 1969) will have to be occasionally recalled here, yet only in their function of contributing to the tragicomic effect.

The tragicomic of *The caretaker* is projected against the background of reciprocally suitable atmosphere: the setting up of the mood as a preparation for the plot development and *dénouement* produces the effect of homogeneity. The aura of both awe and laughter is achieved on the one hand by comic, and on the other by menacing stimuli.

The public are trapped into the mood in the very instant the curtain goes up: a man (Mick) is sitting on the bed, "expressionless, looking out front... Silence for thirty seconds" (Pinter 1967:7). Then, on hearing footsteps, the man silently goes out. Two other men enter the room. The effect is suspense: somebody's absence may always anticipate his sudden return. Mick's absence throughout the first act is ominous enough to forbid light-hearted laughter. Though the enigma of his absence is soon unravelled (the beginning of the second act), our doubts as to his plans remain undissolved. The uncertainty and anxiety — the chief agents of menace in *The caretaker* — are even intensified, for they are now fanned more frequently: if the menace producing sti-

mulu are hardly pronounced in the first act, the laughter provoking ones being in the foreground, in the second and third act they operate in the same degree and often simultaneously.

The comic stimuli spring from a number of sources. The very appearance of Davis should make the audience smile: shapeless trousers, sandals, an overcoat and a waistcoat — no shirt, however. Much of the potential comic hinges, of course, upon the idiosyncracies of the player, yet the garment pictured in the stage directions is funny in itself. The tatterdemalion's appearance is particularly effective in evoking the comic response when contrasted with his "aristocratic" behaviour, e. g., Davies has no shirt, yet he is capricious about the style of shoes: "...these are too pointed, you see" (Pinter 1967:15). The comic of Davis's aspirations versus what his person really represents is put in a nutshell by himself when he is spinning the yarn of his good breeding and at the same time makes linguistic mistakes: "We was brought up with right ideas" (Pinter 1967:10).

The verbal comic of *The caretaker* is to a great extent dependent on Pinter's dramatic innovations: having broken away from the set type of stage dialogue he makes his characters speak in a realistic or even over-realistic way, with the redundancies and roundaboutnesses of everyday speech. Here is Davis talking about his visit to a monastery:

"...I said to this monk, here, I said, look here, mister, he opened the door, big door, he opened it, look here, mister, I said, I come all the way down here, look, I said, I showed him these, I said, you haven't got a pair of shoes, I said, enough to keep me on my way. Look at these, they are nearly out, I said, they're no good to me. I heard you got a stock of shoes here. Piss off, he said to me. Now, look here, I said, I'm an old man, you can't talk to me like that. I don't care who you are. If you don't piss off, he says, I'll kick you all the way to the gate. Now, look here, I said..." (Pinter 1967:14).

Linguistic mistakes, repetitions, tautology, stammering — all the worst that colloquial speech may offer is accumulated in Davis's parlance. Sentences of the type: "He don't live here, do he?" or "Them bastards in the monastery let me down again" (Pinter 1967:40) are apt to provoke laughter response throughout the performance.

The comic and the menacing coincide in the scenes of teasing Davis. The tramp is defenceless, Mick makes game of him. Though his ascendancy over Davis is evident, he tries to crush him completely:

"MICK: What is your name?

DAVIS: I don't know you. I don't know who you are.

Pause.

∴ Eh?

D.: Jenkins.

M.: Jenkins?

D.: Yes.

M.: Jen...kins.

*Pause.*

M.: You sleep here last night?

D.: Yes.

M.: Sleep well?

D.: Yes.

M.: I am awfully glad. It's awfully nice to meet you.

*Pause.*

What did you say your name was?

D.: Jenkins.

M.: I beg your pardon?

D.: Jenkins!

*Pause.*

M.: Jen...kins" (Pinter 1967:32).

And a few moments later when he proposes the beggar to take the flat on lease. Feigned affability is mixed with threat:

"MICK: You are stinking the place out. You're an old robber, there is no getting away from it. You don't belong to a place like this. (...) Here you are. Furniture and fittings, I'll take four hundred or the nearest offer... You can reckon water, heating and lighting at close on fifty. That'll cost you eight hundred and ninety of you're all that keen. Say a word and I'll have my solicitors draft you out a contract. (...) Bathroom, living-room, bedroom and nursery. You can have this as your study...

Who do you bank with?" (Pinter 1967:36)

On the one hand, one may laugh at the stream of absurd statements but on the other, one realizes that the comic harangues of Mick are only a camouflage for something unsaid, something he plots, something that in view of his humiliating behaviour cannot be but maleficent. The SOMETHING is unknown. The menacing uncertainty makes the laughter acute.

Any of the moments of teasing Davis when regarded separately is an epitome of the mood of the whole play: sympathy scourged with uneasy laughter.

So far our analysis of the comic which, for reasons given below, might be labelled "situational", concentrated on its function of making up the mood. The comic stimuli operated momentarily: humorous dialogue, Mick's speeches, Davis's jargon, etc. We dealt with the tramp's behaviour with no or little reference to his personality.

The separation of personality from behaviour, even though it may seem artificial, is deliberate. Though the latter is but a visible expression of the former, there is a difference in theatrical perception of the comic of the one and of the other. A character's behaviour offers momentary stimuli which produce a momentary reaction. A comprehensive picture of personality, on the other hand, being the result of perception of several patterns of behaviour is far less instantaneous: a character may stop "behaving", yet the image of his personality remains in our consciousness. An entrance of a character ap-

preciated earlier as a comic one often provokes laughter, though his behaviour may be entirely neutral this time. It is the image of his personality that calls forth the laughter response, the sight of the character being only the stimulant.

The above remarks will relevantly refer to Davis. One watches him and a smile of superiority at his personality accompanies laughter at his behaviour. When he addresses Aston with the word "mister" only when given some favour, or when he ingratiates with Mick, one knows that he is an obsequious sycophant; when he harps on his good-breeding one knows he is a little pretentious, uncritical snob; when he fakes up stories about his names, papers etc., or tries to fish "a few bob" out of Aston he is a fibber and a trickster; when he tries to play the two brothers off against each other he is a perfidious schemer. The portrait is completed step by step: Davis is tactless, quarrelsome, garrulous, xenophobic, disloyal, unfriendly. He is an egoist, a boaster, an impostor and a boot-licker.

Pinter subjects Davis, and here he approximates the satirical type of drama, to our sense of criticism and humour. He makes the tramp's personality the theme of the play: Davis is a living accumulation of those faults and weaknesses of mankind which so often stand in the way of making our lives passable. However, the theme of *The caretaker* coincides with the vehicle of the plot: it is not the circumstances that shape Davis's personality — it is his personality that creates the circumstances and changes situations. Pinter ridicules his vices without making him a flat character: the tramp, although he verges upon caricature, is a living, feeling, though not too thin-skinned person. He deceives himself as well as others about his "going down to Sidcup", but it is not a nasty trick. It is an escape from the absurdity of aimlessness. He produces this white lie for himself as a refuge from the hopelessness of his existence. His craving for an aim to live for, his constant nervousness, his pretensions for good manners, and xenophobia, which are but an unconscious compensation for his misery, make one feel for him. He is a worn out old man with probably a miserable past and hardly any future. His efforts to make himself believe that he is an established member of society arouse sympathy. One feels pity, yet one laughs at the same time, because, it is cruel to say, Davis is comic in his craving for permission to remain in Paradise.

The comic of Davis's personality is not the kind of the comic that makes us burst with cheerful and light-hearted laughter. The *dénouement* brings a clear realization of the fact that those very features of his character that force laughter upon us are the causes of his final defeat. All the tramp's weaknesses and faults lead consequently to his expulsion. His egoism and unfriendliness, his sycophancy and quarrelsomeness, pretentiousness and ingratitude — those very traits that functioned as comic stimuli throughout the play — are summed up in the last, genuinely moving, scene. The discrepancy between wish

and fulfilment, between effort and realization, is absolute. The ironical futility adds bitterness to the tragicomic: Davis had got his chance, but failed to take advantage of it precisely because of trying to take advantage.

*The caretaker* is Pinter's only tragicomedy in which the protagonist's personality performs the function of the *spiritus movens* and so vastly contributes to the final effect. In the analyses of the remaining two plays our attention will be focused on situation rather than character: if in *The caretaker* it was Davis who triggered situations, in *The dumb waiter* and *The birthday party* situations overwhelm the protagonists. The situations themselves are arranged and manipulated by indefinable powers.

The background atmosphere in *The dumb waiter* is achieved in a manner similar to that of *The caretaker*. The comic results mainly from the absurdities of an overrealistic dialogue and from unexpected "autonomic" actions of inanimate objects, e. g., flushing of the lavatory, orders from the dumb waiter. The same factors are sources of menace and anxiety: the lavatory flushes without being pulled, the dumb waiter bringing fantastic orders implies a mysterious power. Suspense is achieved by means of two omnipresent questions: who are the two men in the basement? who is going to be murdered? The anxiety is reinforced by the irony lurking from behind apparently banal and meaningless utterances. The full awareness of the irony comes together with the *dénouement*. It is only the moment when Ben and Gus face each other, and one of them is going to be killed in next to no time that we realize their, plausibly quasi-conscious, hinting at and anticipating of the murder throughout the play. Below are examples of this kind of hidden verbal irony:

"GUS: I thought perhaps you might know something.

*Ben looks at him.*

I thought perhaps you— I mean—have you got any idea who it's going to be tonight?

*They look at each other.*

BEN *at length*: Who it's going to be?

*Silence.*

BEN: You'd better get ready, anyway" (Pinter 1966:50—51).

"GUS: (...) You've missed something out.

BEN: I know. What?

GUS: I haven't taken my gun out, according to you.

BEN: You take your gun out—

GUS: After I've closed the door.

BEN: After you've closed the door.

GUS: You've never missed that out before, you know that?" (Pinter 1966:65—66).

The cocktail of anxiety, menace and suspense serves as the background for the tragicomic. The tragicomic itself results from the manner of presentation of pivotal moments: analogous situations are laid on two levels — the tragic and the comic ones.

The scene closing the play presages death of one of the characters. Before the curtain goes down both men are subjected to the ordeal by silence:

"The door, right, opens sharply. Ben turns, his revolver levelled at the door. Gus stumbles in. (...)

*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."*

(Pinter 1966:71).

This final confrontation of the executioner and the victim is but a repetition of an earlier similar episode in which the combat of wills is rendered into the combat of different views on language:

"BEN: Go and light it.

GUS: Light what?

BEN: The kettle.

GUS: You mean the gas.

BEN: Who does?

GUS: You do.

BEN: *his eyes narrowing*: What do you mean I mean the gas.

(...)

BEN: Light the kettle! It's common usage.

GUS: I think you've got it wrong.

BEN: *menacing*: What do you mean?

GUS: They say put on the kettle.

BEN: Who says?

*They stare at each other, breathing hard.*

(...)

*BEN, grabbing him with two hands by the throat, at arm's length*: THE KETTLE, YOU FOOL!

(...)

*Gus raises his foot.*

GUS: Shall I try it on here?

*Ben stares. Gus strikes a match on his shoe. It lights.*

GUS: Here we are.

BEN, *wearily*: Put on the bloody kettle, for Christ's sake.

*Ben goes to his bed, but realizing what he has said, stops and half turns. They look at each other..."* (Pinter 1966:47—49).

The analogy between the scenes is evident. The difference is that one of them is a token of death, i.e., it is potentially tragic, whilst the other is a highly comic verbal duel. We obtain, thus, a two-sided image of the murderer-victim confrontation. The ironical exchange of roles (it is Ben who loses the verbal duel) adds poignancy to the picture.

The final scene, as we have already stated, is potentially tragic: the ominous confrontation of the two men might plausibly result in the death of one of them. The moment when Ben and Gus "stare at each other" (Pinter 1966:71) is dramatically very effective: the silent "dialogue" intensifies our awareness

of the ironical and brutal *anagnorisis*. It must be noted, however, that although the expectation of death contributes to the general aura, it is not the core of the tragic in the play. The tragic essence should be searched for on a more universal level, i.e., in the overall situation in *The dumb waiter*.

The relationship between Ben and Gus as well as their actions are determined by a mysterious organization — a power which rules the microworld of the play. We are never told what this power is nor what its aims are. We only witness the effects of its workings. Gus's presumable death serves as a magnifying glass to depict the relentlessness of this power: by means of its omnipotence and indefiniteness the death impending over one character is transformed onto the level of total intimidation.

The omnipotent power orders Ben and Gus to kill people. The two men never learn why they murder, nor do they care too much. The scene of giving instructions reminds one of a programming of a computer:

"The instructions are stated and repeated automatically.

BEN: When we get the call, you go over and stand behind the door.

GUS: Stand behind the door.

BEN: If there is a knock on the door you don't answer it.

GUS: If there is a knock on the door I don't answer it.

BEN: When the bloke comes in —

GUS: When the bloke comes in — "etc. (Pinter 1966:64).

The impending death, the indefiniteness and cruelty of the ruling power, and the impotence of its pawns, result in a depressing and menacing image of *The dumb waiter* universe. The tragic is not so much in the presumable death of one of the characters, but in their complete dependence on the savage god, in the absurdity of their becoming automatic slaying machines and, most of all, in the whimsicality of the force, no matter what we call it: fate, god or dumb waiter.

The overall situation is miniaturized and caricatured in the grotesque episode with the food-lift, which is a mini-play itself. The same mysterious ruling power which orders Ben and Gus to kill people orders them unexpectedly to send up dishes. First come two braised steak and chips, two sago puddings and two teas without sugar, then the whims become more and more crotchety: Macaroni Patitsio, Ormithea Macarounada, Bamboo Shoots, Water Chestnuts with Chickens, Char Sin and Beansprouts, Scampi. All the food that the killers have is a bar of chocolate, biscuits, half a pint of milk, one Eccles cake and a packet of tea. They send it all up and after a while a complaint is lodged:

"The Eccles cake was stale... The chocolate was melted... The milk was sour...

The biscuits were mouldy..." (Pinter 1966:62).

Thus, similarly to the picture of the murderer-victim confrontation, the picture of the microcosm of the play is two-sided. The power which rules the

microcosm of the play is capable of evoking both the feeling of awe and amusement. There seems to be nothing more illogical in sending orders for bamboo shoots than in sending orders for homicide. The situation presented in the dumb waiter episode is the situation presented in the whole play but seen in a distorting mirror. Both are equally absurd: the two-sided picture we get is a tragicomic picture of the Ubu-like microcosm of *The dumb waiter*.

The mysterious power of *The dumb waiter* takes on human qualities in *The birthday party*: its two visible tentacles are Goldberg and McCann. The psychology of the protagonist is far less important than it was in the case of *The caretaker*. Similarly as in the analysis of *The dumb waiter*, we shall concentrate on the semantic structure of the represented world. What will perhaps need a closer scrutiny than in the other plays is the way in which the image of this world is communicated.

The basic pattern of the play is: a man in search of a refuge — a destructing force — man's destruction. All other facts, e.g. Stanley's being a pianist or Goldberg's Jewish origin, though they lend themselves to many interpretations, are only a dramatic superstructure. The third element of the pattern (man's destruction) does not need elucidation: the annihilation of the protagonist is total. The question that may be asked concerns the interrelation of the first and the second element: whether man has any chances in his efforts to find a refuge or in his struggle against the destructing force. The answer given by the play is negative. Stanley has no place to hide: his world is the world of Goldberg and McCann. Pinter stresses the fatalistic impossibility of escape in his poem *A view of the party*:

"For Stanley had no home.

Only where Goldberg was,

And his bloodhound McCann,

Did Stanley remember his name." (quoted after Esslin 1970:81).

The reinforcing factor is Stanley's loneliness: in the climactic moments of his life all relations and bonds turn out to be superficial and apparent.

Simultaneously to the story of Stanley's destruction the story of Meg's love — motherly or sexual, or both — develops. For Meg Stanley's annihilation means a loss of a person to love and impossibility of fulfilment. The only memento that remains is a broken drum with two sticks.

The play, thus, is a tragic metaphor of a human situation. The stories of two people end with their defeat: Stanley's downfall is final, Meg is left to live in the world of illusion. The image created by the play is a tragic image of loneliness, destruction and loss.

From the formal point of view *The birthday party* is constructed most clearly of the three plays in question. The division into acts corresponds to the division into prologue, climax and epilogue.

The first act is a preparation: a typical Pinteresque amalgam of menace, suspense and the comic, though it must be noted that the latter is not so prominent as in *The caretaker* and *The dumb waiter*. The comic is based mainly on the nonsense of everyday language, e. g. (Meg and Petey are talking about Stanley):

“MEG: Is Stanley up yet?  
 PETEY: I don't know, is he?  
 MEG: I haven't seen him *down* yet.  
 PETEY: Well then, he can't be *up*” (Pinter 1963:10).

Suspense and anxiety accompany the entrance of two agreeable gentlemen: Mr Goldberg and Mr McCann, who gradually change into two tormentors. Apparently without any recognizable reason they heap upon Stanley a cascade of idiotic questions and statements. There is a menacing contrast between their appearance and the “job” they do: Goldberg is an average “man in his sixties”, McCann — an average “man in his thirties” (Pinter 1963:9). They have common interests, common manners and common memories. As sinister and sadistic brainwashers they become two grotesque figures.

Grotesqueness dominates the whole second act. The reality becomes a nightmare — gloomy and comic at the same time. The moments of idyllic recollections and innocent flirtation alternate with the moments of torturing Stanley. Even the tortures themselves are grotesque, e. g., they shine a torch in Stanley's face wishing him happy birthday and many happy returns of the day.

Stanley's weak resistance is of no avail. He is forced to take part in his own birthday party on a day which is not his birthday at all. Because he is a pianist he gets a boy's drum as a present — Meg cannot afford a piano. To make the situation more preposterous Goldberg asks him to play a little tune on the drum and Meg welcomes the idea with enthusiasm. She is in her highest spirits: the two gentlemen have chosen her (“a woman in her sixties”) to be the *belle* of the ball.

In the midst of grotesqueness and absurdity Stanley sits still and seems alienated. His alienation, however, is only apparent. The characters of the nightmare ball moving around him, the paradoxical situation of the birthday which is his death day rather, exert pressure upon his mind to the point of breakdown. The crowning moment is the blind man's buff play — a metaphor of groping in the dark, of chance, and of preponderance of one over another. In the moment of his greatest impotence (he is blindfold) Stanley makes his last, and also grotesque, effort to prove he is still a human being: he tries to strangle Meg and rape Lulu.

The beginning of the third act brings some relief. There remains the atmosphere of a hangover, but reality, though gloomy, becomes reality again.

Lulu has remorse, Meg — a headache, Petey insistently asks about Stanley. As soon as Stanley arrives in the room the grotesque starts again. Again Goldberg and McCann heap upon him a torrent of *clichés*:

“McCANN: We'll renew your season ticket.  
 GOLDBERG: We'll take tuppence off your morning tea.  
 M.: We'll give you a discount on all inflammable goods.  
 G.: We'll watch over you.  
 M.: Advise you.  
 G.: Give you a proper care and treatment.  
 M.: Let you use the club bar.  
 G.: Keep the table reserved” (Pinter 1963:87).

Stanley is turned into a puppet symbolically deprived of the human capability of linguistic communication:

“GOLDBERG: Well, Stanny boy, what do you say, eh?  
 STANLEY: Uh — gughh... Uh — gughhh...  
 McCANN: What's your opinion, sir?  
 STANLEY: Caaahhh...Caaahhh” (Pinter 1963:89).

The play viewed as a whole is a fusion of reality and nightmare: both intervene and overlap. One faces reality that seems to be a nightmare, or a nightmare that seems to be reality — crooked, deformed, comic and gloomy. The spirit that controls it is the spirit of the grotesque. The message is tragic.

In isolation the tragic idea communicated by the play loses its poignancy and the formal grotesqueness may seem purposeless. Only when appreciated together — the tragic communicated through grotesque — as they must be, for they are parts of each other's meaning, the tragic and the grotesque unite in the tragicomic.

Our goal was to analyse various techniques by means of which Pinter achieves the tragicomic effect. To procure a typology of three tragicomedies would be an exaggeration, yet a brief summary will make our argument more systematic:

- a. In *The caretaker* the tragicomic results from the presentation of a protagonist whose personality, being comic, is the cause of his incompatibility with others, and thus brings about his failure,
- b. in *The dumb waiter* the tragicomic is the effect of caricaturization of a tragic or potentially tragic situation on the comic level,
- c. in *The birthday party* the core of the tragicomic is the tragic message communicated in a grotesque way.

In all the three plays the tragicomic is framed by the general mood: a mixture of menace and anxiety. Thus, even though diverse qualities are fused, the result is a new sublime harmony.

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