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Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü

THE TRAUMA OF EXISTENCE AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING IN THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD THROUGH A DECONSTRUCTIVE READING

Yüksek Lisans Tezi

Gökçe DEMİRDAĞ

İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Anabilim Dalı

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Tez Danışmanı: Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Önder ÇETİN

İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Anabilim Dalı

İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Yüksek Lisans Programı

ETİK KURALLARA UYGUNLUK BEYANI

Ege Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Müdürlüğüne sunduğum The Trauma of Existence and the Search for Meaning in the Theatre of the Absurd through a Deconstructive Reading adlı yüksek lisans tezinin tarafımdan bilimsel, ahlak ve normlara uygun bir şekilde hazırlandığını, tezimde yararlandığım kaynakları bibliyografyada ve dipnotlarda gösterdiğimi onurumla doğrularım.

Gökçe Demirdağ

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ÖZET

İkinci Dünya Savaşı sonrası dönemde Avrupa'da ve dünya genelinde sarsıcı yıkımlar yaşanmıştır. İnsanlar umutsuzluk, anksiyete, yalnızlık ve korku gibi duygularla çevrelenmiştir. Bu durum bireyi dış dünyadan korkar halde anlamsız bir hayata sürüklemiş, varoluşunun amacını sorgulamaya itmiş ve sonucunda da anlamsız bir bekleyişe zorlamıştır. Hayatını dört duvar içerisinde hapsolmuş şekilde geçiren birey, absürt bir hayat yaşamaya başlamıştır. Varoluşuna anlam bulamayan birey, dünya ile uyumsuz hale gelmiş ve birey aksiyon almaktan bütünüyle vazgeçerek yabancılaşmış, yalnızlaşmış, çevresiyle iletişimini koparmış ve dış dünyadan gelebilecek her türlü şeye tehlike gözüyle bakmaya başlamıştır.

Bu tezde, yalnızlaşan modern bireyin Absürt Tiyatro'daki betimlemeleri incelenecektir. İngiliz oyun yazarı Harold Pinter'ın *The Room* (1957) *(Oda), The Birthday Party* (1957) *(Doğumgünü Partisi), The Dumb Waiter* (1960) *(Git Gel Dolap)* adlı oyunları savaş sonrası psikoz ve Varoluşçuluk felsefesi çerçevesinde ana karakterlerin varoluş krizleri merkeze alınarak incelenecektir. Karakterlerin neden varoluşlarını sorguladıkları, anlam arayışlarını ne şekilde sürdürdükleri analiz edilecektir. Bu inceleme sonucunda oyunlardaki karakterlerin varoluş krizlerini atlatarak hayatta bir anlam bulup bulmadıkları irdelenecektir. Karakterlerin hayatla baş etmeye çalışma şekilleri incelenerek, yazarın izleyiciye ve okuyucuya ne anlatmak istediği, iletişimsizliğin ve anlamsızlığın hüküm sürdüğü dünyada var olmak için hangi çözümü önerdiği analiz edilecektir.

Oda oyunu zaman ve mekân bilgisi olmaksızın ana karakter Rose'u bir odanın içerisine hapseder ve bütün oyun boyunca Rose'un dış dünyaya karşı duyduğu korkuları yansıtır. Eşiyle ve odaya girip çıkan kişilerle arasındaki iletişimsizlik, dış dünyayı bu kişilerden duyduklarından yola çıkarak gözlemlemesi ve bu yüzden bir türlü dışarı çıkmaya cesaret edemeyişi gözler önüne serilir. Savaş sonrası psikozu yansıtacak şekilde dış dünya ölümcül, karanlık ve kasvetli şekilde tasvir edilir. Bir şekilde hayata kendini dahil etmiş bireylerin aksine Rose stabil, pasif ve yalnızdır. Oyunun sonlarına doğru Rose'un geçmişinden gelen bir misafir Rose'un korkularının vücut bulmuş halidir. Rose bu misafirle karşılaşması sonrasında kör olur. Pinter Rose'un görme

yeteneğini alarak bir nevi Rose'un varoluşunu sonlandırır çünkü Rose görmek dışında dış dünyayla hiçbir şekilde bağlantı kurmamaktadır. Dünyaya karşı yalnızca bir gözlemci konumunda bulunan Rose'un kör olması, bir nevi kendine bir anlam aramak için yeterli cesareti gösteremeyişinin bir cezasıdır.

Doğumgünü Partisi oyunu ana karakterini bu kez bir misafir olarak gözler önüne serer. Stanley Webber'in misafir olarak bulunduğu ev onu dış dünyadan korumaktadır. Oyun boyunca Stanley'nin eve gelebilecek diğer misafirlerden korktuğu ve çevresindekileri dil yoluyla manipüle ettiği gözlenir. Hayatta bir amacı olmadan misafir olduğu evde zaman geçiren Stanley'nin korkuları gerçek olur ve bir organizasyon için çalışan iki yabancı kendisini arayarak eve gelirler. Dış dünyaya yalnızca konuşma yoluyla bağlı olan Stanley, bu iki yabancının kendisine sorduğu varoluşu sorgulayan soruların yanı sıra, gördüğü sözel ve fiziksel şiddet sonrası varlığını tamamen kaybeder. Konuşma yetisini kaybeder, anlamsız seslerden başka bir ses çıkaramaz. Var olduğunu yalnızca konuşabilmesi sayesinde anladığımız Stanley artık sembolik olarak yok olmuştur. Düşünemeyen, konuşamayan, sorgulayamayan bir birey haline gelmiştir.

Git Gel Dolap oyunu, bu kez bir organizasyon için çalışan iki tetikçiyi merkeze alır. Bu iki tetikçi şehir şehir dolaşarak öldürme emri aldıkları kişileri öldürürler. Öldürmek kadar korkunç bir eylemi sebebini sorgulamadan yerine getiren Ben ve Gus bir mekanizmanın parçası işlevi görmektedirler. Oyunun sonuna kadar sorgulamadan içinde bulunduğu bodrum katında bir yemek asansörü aracılığıyla gelen emirleri yerine getiren Ben ve bu emirleri neden yerine getirdiklerini, asansörün diğer tarafında kimin olduğunu merak eden Gus arasındaki fark gözler önüne serilir. Ben sorgulamadan hayatı olduğu gibi kabul etmiş, kendi görevini yerine getirmekte ve bu şekilde var olmaktadır. Gus ise hayatı sorgulayarak, yaptıkları işin sebebini merak ederek düzen bozan birey konumunda görülür. Oyunun sonunda Ben'e odaya giren bir sonraki kişiyi öldürme emri gelir ve odaya giren kişi Gus olur. Bir kez daha, sorgulayan bireyin varoluşunun sona erdirildiği görülür. Bütün bunların sonucunda Pinter, her ne kadar tehlikeli ve korkutucu olsa da dış dünyaya çıkıp bir amaç bulmak gerektiğini savunmaktadır. Aksi takdirde bireylerin varoluşları sona ermeye mahkumdur.

ABSTRACT

In the period after the Second World War, there were traumatic events all over the world. People fell into a state of hopelessness, anxiety, loneliness and fear. This situation made individuals afraid of the outside world. As a result, their lives became meaningless and they were forced to wait. The individuals who had to spend their lives between four walls started to live an absurd life. They were not able to find meaning for their existences, thus being out of harmony with the world. They completely rejected the world and became lonely individuals. There was a lack of communication between them and they started to see every person and everything as dangerous and menacing.

This thesis focuses on the lonely modern individual's situation and its reflection on the Theatre of the Absurd. English playwright Harold Pinter's first three plays *The Room* (1957), *The Birthday Party* (1957) and *The Dumb Waiter* (1960) will be analysed within the framework of post-war psychosis and Existentialism. It will be put forward that the main characters question their existences. Also, the ways they try to carry on their search for meaning will be analysed. As a result, it will be put forward whether or not the characters can overcome their existential crises and find meaning. By analysing the characters' ways of trying to overcome their traumatic experience of life, what the playwright tries to convey in these plays and what solutions he recommends in order to exist in a world in which there is no meaning and communication will be examined.

The Room centres on Rose who is stuck in a room, with no background information of place and time. Rose's fears of the outside world are seen throughout the play. There is lack of communication between Rose and her husband. She observes the outside world through her husband and other people's views. As a result, she is unable to go out. The outside world is depicted as deadly, dark and menacing; which is representative of the post-war atmosphere. Unlike the individuals who are a part of life, Rose is stable, passive and alone. Close to the end of the play, a guest coming from Rose's past is reflective of Rose's fears. Rose becomes blind as a result of her encounter with this guest. By taking Rose's ability to see, Pinter puts an end to her existence in a way, because Rose cannot connect with the world in a way other than observing it. The fact that Rose becomes blind is a punishment for her not being brave enough to search for meaning.

The Birthday Party presents its main character as a guest. The house in which Stanley Webber is a guest protects him from the outside world. Throughout the play, it can be observed that Stanley is afraid of outsiders who may come to the house to get him and that he manipulates other people via speech. Stanley's fears come true and two outsiders working for an organization come searching for him. Stanley, who is connected to the world only through speech, entirely loses his existence as a result of verbal and physical violence along with the two outsiders' questions concerning existence. He loses his ability to speak and becomes unable to make a sound other than meaningless utterances. Stanley's existence is lost symbolically. He becomes an individual who cannot think, cannot speak and thus cannot question.

The Dumb Waiter focuses on two gunmen working for a similar organization. These two gunmen go around from town to town and kill the people as they are ordered to do so. Ben and Gus carry out the terrible act of killing others without question. However, the difference between Ben and Gus is seen throughout the play. Ben obeys orders without question until the end of the play, whereas Gus is curious about who is on the other end of the dumb waiter and why they obey these orders. Ben accepts the world as it is without question and carries out his mission, choosing to exist in this way. On the other hand, Gus questions the world and wonders why they do this job, and is thus seen as the individual who disturbs the order. At the end of the play, Ben is ordered to kill whoever walks through the door next and that person in Gus. Once again, it is seen that the individual who questions is taken out. As a result, Pinter suggests that no matter how dangerous and menacing it may be, one must go out and find purpose. Otherwise, their existences are bound to cease.

INTRODUCTION

The nineteenth and the twentieth centuries marked important historical and cultural breakpoints in Europe and in the world. Before the two world wars, Europe was going through important scientific innovations. The conservativeness of the eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries started to be replaced with scientifically and culturally important changes. All this was interrupted when the First World War broke out in 28 July 1914. The war caused the deaths of 40 million people including military and civilians. Shortly after the war traumatised the confused and horrified European, more scientific innovations took place; like the nuclear fission in 1938. Such capability in the field of science intimidated people. Shortly after this, the Second World War took the lives of nearly 75 million individuals when it ended in 2 September 1945, leaving people all the more frightened and in a state of sheer depression. The catastrophe of war shattered the previous religious beliefs of individuals and created an atmosphere of distrust and loneliness in the world. Thus, the wars became the most important turning points of the century. In the preface of *The Will to Power*, which was written between November 1887 and March 1888, Nietzsche foresees what the next two generations would bring. He states:

> For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect (3).

United with the destructive effects of the war, individuals started to feel that there is no meaning in anything since death will put an end to life after all. As a result, philosophers, European writers and thinkers represented the changes in belief and in people's lives in their work. In other words, they wanted to reflect the loneliness and fear of individuals to their work because the main concern of post-war Europe became whether there was a purpose of existence or not. Existentialism, which was already an emerging movement in the nineteenth century in Europe concerning the individuals' search for meaning in life and of their existences, came to be the leading philosophical way of thinking. As more and more people fell into depression and despair, twentieth-century Existentialists like Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre and many others focused on

trying to make sense of the depressive world around them. As the governing movement in these two centuries, Existentialism thus created the grounds for many important philosophical and theatrical movements like the notion of the Absurd, which had many different meanings for a variety of philosophers, writers and playwrights.

The idea of the Absurd mainly suggests that there is a disharmonious relationship between the individuals and the world, which prevents them from finding a purpose in life and makes them believe that they are utterly alone in the world. The idea of the Absurd is thus related with Existentialism. Existentialism is a philosophical movement which started in the mid-nineteenth century and continued to impact art and philosophy in the following century. Existentialism evolved together with philosophers like Søren Kierkegaard, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Nietzsche. Existentialism is mainly associated with the meaningless and absurd world. It is also closely related with concepts like anxiety, boredom and dread, which will be analysed in detail in the following chapter. As the governing movement in the period after the Second World War, Existentialism asks what the purpose of existence is. In this regard, it is closely related to the Theatre of the Absurd, evaluating the feeling of purposelessness, loneliness and fear in the world. Thus, together with playwrights like Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Harold Pinter and many other absurdists, the Theatre of the Absurd centred on the status of the European people after the Second World War.

This thesis aims to analyse the Theatre of the Absurd as a product of avant-garde theatre in post-war Europe. The first three absurdist plays of English playwright Harold Pinter; *The Room*, *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter*, will be analysed in terms of the existential crisis of the main characters and the different ways they try to cope with it. Through an analysis of the plays, it will be put forward that the characters' search for meaning in the world differ from one another. In relation to their different ways of searching for meaning, it will be revealed that the characters are unable to find meaning in their current state. As a result, why and how all of these characters' existences are taken from them will be put forward through an analysis of the verbal torture Pinter presents.

These plays are chosen because the main characters have different ways of trying to make sense of the world and all mutually, though in different ways, lose their existences in the end. They question the system, the outside world and the reason for their existences. However, the more they try, the more they fail. They cannot make sense of their surroundings and their lives without finding the courage to leave the rooms. Thus, Pinter points out that it is impossible for individuals to find the meaning of their existences if they are stuck inside the rooms. Existence becomes a traumatic experience for the characters that refuse to face the real world. Therefore, this thesis aims to put forward that in order to exist, individuals must have the courage to face the absurdity of the outside world even though it is menacing.

When selected plays are studied, Deconstruction will be used to analyse each theatrical fragment; such as time, place, characters, and language. Twentieth century French thinker Jacques Derrida initiated the term Deconstruction, stating that it does not consist of defined rules, it is merely a method of reading a given text "based upon conventional notions of the stability of the human self, the external world, and of language and meaning" (Habib 99-100). As a teacher of Philosophy, Derrida was closely interested in Kierkegaard and Heidegger (Habib 100), who are two of the most important philosophers mentioned in this thesis when Existentialist philosophy is analysed. Habib identifies Deconstruction with logocentrism, which he explains as: "... any system of thought which is founded on the stability and authority of the Logos, the divine Word" (101). Logocentrism is a self-explanatory word in that it takes "the word" in the centre. Habib goes on to argue that *Logos* keeps together the relationship between signifier, which is the word, and the signified, which is the concept it refers to (102). In this regard, deconstructing will be essential to analyse the latent meaning behind Pinter's plays. Habib states that through this method, "the world and the human self could be interpreted in terms of their origins, their meaning and purpose in life ..." (102). In this regard, despite the fact that the selected plays in this thesis are products of absurdist theatre and do not directly constitute meaning; deconstructing them in each component will reveal what Pinter means in these plays. Furthermore, in *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, Peter Barry states that deconstructing is "applied post-structuralism" (70). According to Barry, deconstructing

a text means bringing out the unconscious rather than the conscious level of it (71). Then, focusing on the latent meaning of the word, by centring on *Logos*, one will figure out what the overall meaning is. Barry gives an example to reveal the function of Deconstruction. He states:

> ... the word 'guest' is cognate with (that is, has the same original root as) the word 'host', which in turn comes from the Latin word *hostis*, meaning an enemy. This hints at the potential double aspect of a guest, as either welcome or unwelcome, or as changing from one to the other. This notion of 'hostility', then, is like the repressed unconscious of the word, and the process of deconstruction, in revealing the unconscious of the text, might draw upon such disciplines as etymology in this way. (71)

Thus, it can be seen that deconstructing the selected plays will be the most useful method in uncovering the meaning Pinter conveys. Moreover, Barry's example is closely related to the plays in which outsiders are not regarded as guests but enemies. As Deconstruction focuses on gaps, breaks and discontinuities (Barry 72), it will be useful when analysing silences that Pinter uses in his plays.

Thus, the reason for deconstructing the plays is that Pinter purposefully hides some information to create absurdity and menace. Deconstructing the plays, together with the analysis of absurdity and menace, will contribute to revealing what Pinter means in the plays, how Pinter makes use of the Absurd and why they are relevant with the notion of existence. Moreover, language as a weapon in power relations and lack of communication will be analysed to contribute to the verbal torture the outsiders put the characters through. The room as a supposedly safe haven and the chaotic outside world will be analysed in terms of their contribution to the menacing atmosphere. As a result of close examination of the texts, it will be pointed out that Pinter uses this absurdity as a metaphor for the modern individuals' imprisonment in the post-war world, thus leading to the end of their existences.

The first chapter of this thesis aims to focus on the situation of Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in terms of search for the self and how philosophers and writers explained existence in the period after the Second World War. Accordingly, Existentialism in the nineteenth and the following century as a philosophical context

will be analysed. The notions that constitute the basics of Existentialism such as anxiety, despair and boredom will be evaluated, since they are closely related to the characters' crises. Furthermore, as mentioned before, important historical changes took place in the aftermath of the two wars. As human beings became more and more powerful in the world, a change in their belief system emerged. This change, with Nietzsche's important regard "the death of God", gave rise to a new search for meaning of existence and thus Existentialism in the twentieth century was born, defending the fact that existence inherently does not have meaning unless people find meaning for themselves. This is called "self-overcoming" by Nietzsche, which is related to the characters' psychological journeys. Without finding that meaning and without the idea of God, there was no purpose in trying to live according to a plan. This meaningless way of living is thus related with the notion of the absurd, which will also be analysed in the first chapter as a basis for the Theatre of the Absurd and Pinter's theatre.

The second chapter sets out to present the origins of the Theatre of the Absurd in order to connect it to the Existentialist movement. The Theatre of the Absurd will be analysed with its individual parts; such as tragicomedies, language, time, place and characters as theatrical components. Furthermore, Harold Pinter will be studied as an absurdist playwright since his usage of the Theatre of the Absurd is different from that of the former absurdist playwrights. Also, Pinter's usage of language and dialogue will be studied within the context of Existentialism and the Absurd. Thus, Pinteresque will be analysed in his comedies of menace, which is also named for Pinter's plays as an individual genre. The fear of menace; which causes loneliness for the characters, disharmonious relationship with the world (the absurd), and lack of communication, inactiveness and meaninglessness will be analysed as the main components of his absurdist plays.

In the third chapter of the study, *The Room*, *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter* will be studied. Each element of the plays mentioned above; such as time, place, characters, language, communication and lack thereof, the absurd, menace and the fruitless search for meaning will be examined. As a result of this examination, it will be concluded that the characters are mutually bereft of their existences because they merely question the world, and refuse to be a part of it. Thus, Pinter suggests that in order not to

be vulnerable to the menace that may come from outside world; one must leave the room and face it. Otherwise, it does not matter for the world whether they exist or not. They are taken out by the system, though for different reasons.

CHAPTER 1
EXISTENCE AS A TRAUMA AFTER WORLD WAR II

1.1. Europe in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries and the Search for the Self

World War I (1914-1918) and World War II (1939-1945) were among the major historical, political, economic and social events of the twentieth century. They changed the fate of the world uncontrollably and irreversibly. So many lives were lost in both wars and people found that everything they ever believed in was gone. As mentioned before, when the World War II broke out in 1939, people had already been living in the aftermath of World War I. The world was already damaged and shaken with 37 million people's (civilian and military) death. Europe was a waste land, as represented in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). The more the people could not give meaning to their existences, the more they became fragmented individuals. All their beliefs about former values started to be displaced by insecure thoughts and anxieties. James R. Hollis states:

> Albert Camus noted that the nineteenth century opened to the sound of falling ramparts. Standing amid the rubble of that century Matthew Arnold concluded, "There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve". (2)

Despite the fact that World War II was expected to be "the war to end all wars" (Innes 380), it shattered the modern individual's beliefs in the world even more than before and altogether started a new, psychological war in the minds of the traumatized people all around the world. After the World War II, which started with Hitler's invasion of Poland and ended with Germany's defeat; the whole world had to confront irreversible damages. As a result, Europe went through a long-lived phase of depression and desperation for years to come. During the phase of six years of war, too many European cities were shaken to its very foundations and people from many parts of life; soldiers and civilians alike, lost their lives as a result of war-related causes like malnutrition, diseases (spread both from natural causes and from the rotting corpses), vast starvation, killing camps. As a result of the deaths in Nazi camps, there was a huge imbalance in population as well: women outnumbered men which thus affected the birth rates. These

were of course vitally catastrophic for Europe which had never gone through such destruction with the advancements in technology since the Great War. Tony Judt states in *Post-war: A History of Europe Since 1945* that: "Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War offered a prospect of utter misery and desolation [...] Europeans *felt* hopeless, they were exhausted—and for good reason" (69). This good reason that lead to the hopelessness and exhaustion is, first of all, the death rates. At the end of the war in 1945, Europe was a cemetery. The World War II cost the lives of 60 million soldiers and civilians, 11 million people died on the German concentration camps (6 million of which were Jewish people that were killed in the Holocaust), and 200.000 people died as a result of the United States' bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Gainor et. al. 68). Like every war in the history of the world, the World War II changed everything from the foundations and affected the modern individual thoroughly. After the war ended, four per cent of the world's population was gone, borders were redrawn, countries spent nearly all of their economic power on war, cities were destroyed (which led to vast homelessness), children were orphaned, and people went on to be killed in the death camps even after the war ended (Judt 14-6). Eventually, the world became a dark, hopeless place for the modern individual. The misery, desolation, hopelessness and exhaustion led to a new world which no longer paid homage to its settlers. It was then a world without purpose, hope and harmony.

In a time like this, hope and meaning in the world were no longer possible. The twentieth century modernity crashed the restrictions that had come with tradition; however, everything the European individual held dear was then at stake. Thus, in this all the more waste land-like world, the modern European individuals started to feel desperate as to their place in this new, damaged world. *Status quo ante bellum*[1] was no longer possible, as Judt also states: "A return to the way things had been before 1939 was out of the question almost everywhere" (119). Bringing back the atmosphere of Europe (which was transforming from tradition to modernity) before the wars was not politically, socially, economically and psychologically possible. This atmosphere which was devoid of familiarity affected the modern European and left them clueless as to find

[1] Protecting the prewar atmosphere

reason in this dark world, thus rendering them strangers in a strange land. Albert Camus summarises the situation of the Modern European in his *The Myth of Sisyphus:*

> A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. (13)

Then, individuals who were no longer able to identify themselves in the world which was devoid of meaning, they started to feel alienated in the places which they used to call home. There was nowhere to run to, and their existences started to feel like an exile which they had to serve their time in. Moreover, together with the effect of industrial innovations and changing religious beliefs, this new, post-war world made the individual even more alienated and fragmented than before. For them, their environments became places that absorbed them and locked them in a cage and the outside world was no longer safe, both in the microcosmic and macrocosmic levels. Eventually, having been unable to find a better world to live in or unable to find the reason and meaning in it, existence unavoidably became a trauma for the people of the modern age who wanted to find meaning to their existences in the world.

1.2. Existentialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

Existentialism is an avant-garde movement in Europe which started mainly in mid-nineteenth and twentieth century. Existentialism is associated with the ideas of philosophers and writers like Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Cardullo argues in "Experimental Theatre in the Twentieth Century: Avant-gardism, the absurd, and the postmodern" that the nineteenth century philosophers introduced the idea of "godless universe" and that they sought to find absolute values and truths, thus they started questioning human beings' existence and their status in this godless universe (11). Then, in order to understand French Existentialism which gave way to a new understanding of theatre called The Theatre of the Absurd, the philosophy behind Existentialism and the concepts that later characterised the Theatre of the Absurd should first be recognised.

Thus, the philosophy of nineteenth century philosophers will first be examined within the framework of Existentialism.

To begin with, Existentialism can be fairly summarised as the individual's effort on the way to self-fulfilment. Before different philosophers' arguments on the matter can be analysed, the movement should initially be comprehended from Socrates' philosophy. In the preface to *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction*, Thomas Flynn explains that this way of thinking, in its basic sense, goes back to Socrates' philosophy called "care of the self" (1). According to Flynn, what Socrates means by "care of the self" is that individuals should find their own meaning in the world by constructing a sense of self, through which essence/soul can live forever even if the body dies. Existence in the world is not at all ephemeral if one wills it to be. It will be seen in the following sections that different philosophers' thoughts are gathered from this statement. Similarly, Cardullo states: "...the existentialist begins by asking, 'What does it mean 'to be' or 'to exist'?" (11). All other existential questions come from this basic question searching for the meaning of life. This is the starting point of this philosophy for thinkers and writers alike.

In the nineteenth century, the main proponents of this philosophy were Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche although at the time the term had not been coined yet. Still, it is their separate philosophies, which will be explained further in the following sections; that created the grounds for what later became Existentialism and gave way to Absurdism. Despite the fact that neither Kierkegaard nor Nietzsche claimed to be Existentialists, their ideas in this period is definitely associated with this philosophy.

Despite the fact that Kierkegaard never identified himself to be an Existentialist (the term had not been coined at the time), his philosophy definitely forms the basis of the following centuries' philosophy. First of all, Kierkegaard believes that in order to become an individual, people should find their own truth. It is only then that one can talk about existence fully. As a devoted Christian philosopher, also referred to as the father of theistic Existentialism, Kierkegaard writes in one of his journals from 1835 that: "My focus should be on what I do in life, not knowing everything, excluding knowledge on what you do. The key to find a purpose, whatever it truly is that God

wills me to do; it's crucial to find a truth which is true to me, to find the idea which I am willing to live and die for" (Kierkegaard, Journals 1A, n.p). Accepted to be one of the first claims of Existentialist philosophy, this claim means that it is the duty of the individual to find the meaning of life that God intended for them. This can be accepted as the base on which later Christian Existentialists constructed their philosophies, which will be explained through Sartre's Existentialist philosophy. Kierkegaard called this subjective or existential truth throughout his philosophy. Then, it can be said that in the act of giving meaning to existence, everyone is responsible for realising themselves. There is not a truth which is true for all the individuals in the world, but separate truths which can only be found when looked for by each individual. Thus, there is no such thing as purpose of life or meaning of the world that is mutual for all people for that would be impossible and improbable. According to Kierkegaard's subjectivity theory, then, each individual's task is to search or create their own meaning in the world through having faith in God. This way of thinking is paradoxical, because it both limits the individuals' free will and also encourages self-fulfilment. Steven M. Emmanuel point out in *Kierkegaard and the Concept of Revelation* that: "The absurd is neither nonsense nor anything that can be known within the categories of human understanding" (44). This view of the world is in keeping with the post-war atmosphere in Europe, which did not provide any sort of hope for the individuals.

1.2.1. Anxiety, Despair and Boredom

Apart from his examination of the purpose of life and, in relation with self-fulfilment, Kierkegaard focuses on the concepts of anxiety, despair and boredom. These concepts later came to be some of the main problems that were dealt with by philosophers, authors and playwrights in the following century within the framework of the Theatre of the Absurd. As Kierkegaard states in *The Concept of Anxiety*, anxiety occurs when the individual realizes that he is alone in the world (171). Anxiety both causes the individual to act on his instincts and to refrain from them. In order to be free of anxiety, one should be free of the difficulties brought about by freedom in the first place. Individuals should accept themselves the way they are and also accept that they have the right to choose. He explains that " [...] anxiety is the dizziness of freedom,

which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks down into its own possibility...” (61). The feeling of anxiety, then, occurs when the individuals are in-between the choices since they have the freedom to choose. It can be concluded that anxiety urges individuals to act but at the same time makes them overwhelmed by the freedom of choice, which incarcerates the individuals.

Despair is another term which can be closely examined within Kierkegaard’s philosophy. Related with anxiety, despair can be explained as the feeling that individuals get when they are in a state of hopelessness and indecisiveness. He states in *The Sickness Unto Death* that when individuals cannot find equilibrium between who they are and who they can be (finite and infinite) they suffer from the sickness of despair: “Despair is the imbalance in a relation of synthesis” (12). Individuals should be who they are, but they also should not stop searching for who they can be. When one fails to do both equally there is a constant feeling of hopelessness. This despair makes the individuals unable to be themselves, and thus, is a sickness. As a result of this despair, the individual is unable to be the self he wishes to be (19). When the individuals cannot be who they want to be, they become anybody. As a result, they get into even more despair in order to be rid of that self and to become their desired selves. Then, it can be concluded that being rid of despair goes through finding the subjective truth. When the individuals find the truth that is true for them, they can be who they wish to be and thus avoid the feeling of despair.

Another concept in which Kierkegaard was interested was boredom. Boredom comes with the undeniable meaninglessness and absurdity of life. It is a state of being that is associated with the individual’s remaining in the purposelessness of the world, or simply passing time. In his *Either/Or*, after he asks what the meaning of life is, Kierkegaard argues that: “If only there were a higher expression, a stronger one, then at least there would still be some movement. I lie stretched out, inert; all I see is emptiness, all I live on is emptiness, all I move in is emptiness” (n.p) His philosophy at this point may also be associated with Nihilism, however boredom is a concept that Existentialism and the majority of Existentialist writing is concerned with. The meaninglessness of life leads individuals in a feeling of boredom in which they do not find anything worthy of doing, which relates to the absurd. For the individuals, their

existences turn into a means for passing time in the world in which they cannot associate themselves with anything whatsoever. Vincent McCarthy argues in "Kierkegaard and Existentialism": "Kierkegaard-Haufniensis (Kierkegaard's pseudonym in *The Concept of Anxiety*) does not develop the connection at any length but does describe boredom as continuity in nothingness" (my brackets, 113). Once again, boredom is associated with the inability of the individuals to find meaning in the world, which renders them unable to act. Their reluctance to act makes them pass time in the "nothingness" of life on a daily basis. Then, it is a concept that is caused by despair in whom individuals are and who they wish to be; because they do not have a self to decide on which move to make, like a chess player who does not know the rules of the game. Then, it can be said that according to Kierkegaard's philosophy, avoiding anxiety, despair and boredom can only be possible by finding a sense of self in the world, which is the subjective truth and/or the respective purpose of life for individuals.

1.2.2. Nietzsche and the Death of God

Another important philosopher that vastly affected the Existentialist thought was Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche is accepted to be the father of Atheistic Existentialism. He is also the father of Nihilism, which is similar in part with the ideas and worldview put forward by the Existentialists. Nietzsche's groundbreaking thought that marked an important point in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was his remark "God is dead!" This remark is seen in Nietzsche's works like *The Gay Science* and his magnum opus[2] *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1991). He states in *The Gay Science*: "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him" (181). Nietzsche's remark basically means that the technological advancement that came with the Enlightenment and the nineteenth century has replaced belief and faith in God and threw suspicion in the minds of the individuals about everything they held dear at that time. Accordingly, this change is appropriate to the status of the fragmented individuals of the following century. In a godless universe in which individuals are left alone, the world no longer holds meaning and purpose, which is what Nihilism also supports. Since there is no God, it is entirely up to the individuals to create a self and become what they are, as Nietzsche will later

[2] Masterpiece

remark. Through this realisation of the self, the individuals will overcome the indifference of the universe towards them and will get rid of the "despair"-to use Kierkegaard's term-that comes with the absurdity of such a life.

Nietzsche's Existentialist philosophy puts forward a notion which he called "self-overcoming[3]" throughout his philosophy. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche points out that: "Man is something that shall be overcome" (22). This self-overcoming, as the term suggests, can only be achieved through the individual's endeavour. Each individual should realize themselves through a series of transformations. This idea can be seen throughout Nietzsche's philosophy. In *The Will To Power*, Nietzsche states: "... one must possess something in order to *be* something […] one must want to have more than one has in order to *become* more" (77). Whatever purpose one has in order to survive and evolve, one must have more than that in order to achieve a self. In other words, individuals should not only accept who they are, but they also should do more than they are capable of to overcome themselves. This is the basic idea behind Nietzsche's self-overcoming philosophy. André van der Braak argues in *Nietzsche and Zen: Self-Overcoming Without a Self* that self overcoming is not about reaching the true meaning of life, it is about the constant struggle to reach the truth; and thus there are no stages of self-overcoming, contrary to Kierkegaard (28). Thus, it can be deducted that what is important is not reaching respective truths for every individual, what is important is being in the endeavour to overcome oneself. The individuals should seek to create a newer sense of self and set a purpose for themselves in life. Whether they reach their purpose is not of importance.

1.2.3. Power

Nietzsche was interested in power in the self overcoming process, which will later be seen in the absurdist plays in the form of power struggles and power relations. The individuals seek power, according to Nietzsche, but they are not after pleasure (*The Will to Power* 373). Moreover; what Nietzsche means by power is not in terms of physiology. Dr. Linda L. Williams from Kent State University argues that: "... Nietzsche discusses power in the context of feelings, drives and desires-a more subtle

[3] Selbstüberwindung

rendering of power than merely physical power. Power becomes a psychological motive; it explains actions, whether those actions are individual or collective" (11-12). However, since the process of self-overcoming is about the individuals' spirits rather than their bodies, reaching that end is about how the individuals feed their spirits with power. The more the individuals confront the ways of life, the more powerful they can become. Nietzsche states in *Beyond Good and Evil* that: "... the strength (or power) of a spirit should be measured according to how much of the 'truth' one could still barely endure ..." (my brackets, 49). Then, the individuals who achieve this sort of power are able to become more than what they are, as Nietzsche puts it. It can be stated that finding power in one's own existence is measurable through how much of the reality of life one can bear. In this regard, the individuals who overcome themselves are the ones that are able to endure the trauma of existence. The self-overcome individuals are the ones who are more potent, and they are the individuals who can make something worthwhile out of their lives and existences in the short term, and for the greater good in the long term. Then, it can be said that although Nietzsche knows and embraces the absurdity of life, he still puts forward that the individuals have to give meaning to life in order to carry on. Otherwise, without searching for the reasons for existence and the purpose of their respective lives, the individuals cannot become more; in other words, they cannot survive because they cannot endure the emptiness of life. Nietzsche states in *The Gay Science* that: "Gradually, man has become a fantastic animal that has to fulfil one more condition of existence than any other animal: man *has to* believe, to know from time to time *why* he exists; his race cannot flourish without a periodic trust in life-without faith in *reason in life*" (75). The individuals who have this *trust* in life and not *reason* in life are thus able to understand the reason for existence and come through the difficulties and obstacles that go in their way. What Nietzsche means can be summarised as such: It is not important to know the reason for existence or for life, what is important is the effort to try and find a purpose, to have belief and trust that there is a reason for existence. It is this belief that makes existence significant. The characteristic that differentiates humans from animals is the belief they must have in life. Otherwise, existence is blank and life is futile.

Nietzsche's philosophy of finding the reason for existence and fulfilling a sense of self, then, is not about whether or not individuals achieve all their desires. To become what one is means embracing the good and bad sides of the spirit and rendering oneself powerful enough to try to realise oneself in the world. If existence is more than a blank notion, then that void should be filled with a purpose in life which can be found within every individual. This purpose cannot be the same for everyone, but it is an effort that may make life endurable, which is what will give the power one needs to fulfil the process of self-overcoming.

After the World War II, Existentialism came to be the main philosophy throughout Europe and especially in France. Existentialist philosophy was presenting questions which were in the minds of the individuals and artists after war destroyed all of their beliefs, displaced them and left them clueless as to what was the purpose of war and what is the purpose of life in general. At such a politically challenged time, it fit well with the status of Europeans who were feeling shaken and confused as they started to question their place in the universe after the catastrophe of war. Cardullo states:

> Understandably, existentialism struck a responsive chord during and after World War II, for the world had seemingly gone mad as personal choice was abdicated in favor of blind adherence to national leaders and policies, even when such obedience entailed condoning almost unbelievable cruelties or crimes against humanity. (11)

People were left alone in the world in the aftermath of the war, having lost everything they held dear, having lost trust in the world leaders, and having lost their faith in their own lives because everything had lost its value. Thus, it was inevitable that Existentialist philosophy came to be the main understanding of philosophy for thinkers and artists of all forms of art.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, French Catholic philosopher Gabriel Marcel coined the term Existentialism in his *The Philosophy of Existentialism* and he was also one of the earliest Existentialist philosophers. Marcel's philosophy coincides with the aftermath of World War I and is thus associated with the alienation and abandonment of the individuals in the world. In the aftermath of the war, the individuals

as masses were left in a state of constant loneliness and they lacked a sense of self-worth, and they became estranged both to themselves and to each other (Flynn 90). In such a world, there was no hope for the individuals to overcome themselves or go through the necessary stages to realize their purpose in the world, as Nietzsche and Kierkegaard respectively remarked in the former periods. Marcel puts forward a solution and suggests following "fanaticized consciousness" (Flynn 90). What he means by this is that certain political and social measures should be followed in order to take the individuals out of their collective abandonment; or their loneliness caused by the war. The philosopher should rid the individuals altogether from their loneliness by raising their awareness to become aware that they are not abandoned in the world, and thus they should find purpose in life. In this regard, Marcel's philosophy is close to that of Nietzsche. Flynn states that: "The operative term is 'communion', which, in his (Marcel's) vocabulary, signifies mutual respect among members of a group who share a common interest and concern" (my brackets, 91). Then, it can be said that Marcel believes that the individuals could find a meaning in life through acknowledging the existence of other individuals who are in the same situation as a commune. Then, without acknowledging that they are not alone in the world, the individuals cannot get rid of the feeling of abandonment they are constantly overwhelmed with.

To sum up, Marcel claims that the truth is not known; therefore the individuals should not be after the knowledge of truth. If the individuals are after truth and meaning in the world, then they simply should be after experiencing life itself. Hubert L. Dreyfus points out in *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*: "... 'real' experience is lived, rather than known, and the individual who would truly experience her life should attend to the details of her actual living. It is the living that counts, not the thinking about living" (196). The key word, then, is awareness rather than knowledge, which is related to Nietzsche's Existentialist philosophy. However, this concept contrasts to that of Kierkegaard since he was a proponent of subjective truth. According to Marcel, one must therefore be aware of their and others' existences and must live through the experiences to reach to fulfilment. Only then the individuals can get rid of the feeling of estrangement in the world and be independent of the thoughts that prevent them from moving forward. This also brings about freedom, which is one of the basic

concerns of Existentialist philosophy. As Marcel states in *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, freedom and truth are inseparable (80). The individuals reach freedom when they are free of the things that make them alienated to themselves, to the world and to each other. To conclude, the key to self-overcoming for Marcel, then, is awareness of the existence of oneself and of others, and searching for the shared experience of truth rather than the mere knowledge of it.

Other philosophers at the beginning of the twentieth century, like Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger were philosophers who affected Existentialist thought. German philosopher Karl Jaspers' philosophy was highly inspired and influenced by that of Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's. He was accepted to be the founder of "Existenzphilosophie" as stated in *Situating Existentialism: Key Texts in Context* (Judaken 69), which literally means philosophy of existence. According to Jaspers' philosophy of existence the individual is certain of the fact that nothing is absolute in the world, there are no objective truths and no solid grounds that each thing is based on (70). Jaspers, then, accepts Kierkegaardian idea of subjective truth on the way to self-realization. Heidegger gave his opinions on human existence in *Being And Time*, and in this sense his opinions are in close relationship with Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and post-war French existentialists like Camus and Sartre. Heidegger regards existence as a state of being thrown into the world without purpose called "thrownness" (Habib 60). Another feature Heidegger focuses on is called "existentiality" or "transcendence", which means that individuals must try to realize themselves (Habib 60). The third feature is "fallenness", where individuals fail to realize themselves and lose their true selves for the sake of everyday life (Habib 60). Then, Heidegger regards existence as a state of being cast into the world with no purpose, proposes that individuals must try to realize themselves by finding a purpose, and they should avoid moving away from their purpose. In other words, according to Heidegger, individuals' purpose in the world is to try to realize themselves.

In the aftermath of World War II, Existentialist philosophy evolved to the sense it is used in today, especially with the ideas of French philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. The reason why existentialist philosophy became the main philosophy of interest after World War II is because it accepts that human existence

inherently does not have a meaning, which is exactly the case of the individuals of post-war Europe who had to deal with this feeling of meaninglessness. Existentialist philosophy emphasises that existence is accidental as the world is simply chaotic. Since it is chaotic-and together with two consecutive World-Wars it was even more chaotic than before, there can be no reason or aim in one's existence in the world. Accordingly, Flynn argues that: "... existentialism defends the intrinsic value of what its main proponent Sartre calls the 'free organic individual', that is, the flesh-and-blood agent" (n.p). Then, the philosophy itself puts forward a form of thinking that is after the self-fulfilment of the free individual and challenges the human condition, which is related to Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's notion of self.

French Existentialism was the main form of thinking in the aftermath of World War II, and it affected life in Europe to a certain degree, especially in literary circles. For instance, in his *Existentialism Is a Humanism,* which was a speech given one year after the end of World War II and in a highly dark era, Jean Paul Sartre argues that Existentialism puts forward the idea that "Existence precedes essence" (20), which came to be the most basic claim of post-war Existentialist thinking. Individuals are not predestined to do anything, it is up to them to decide and take responsibility for what they want to do with their lives. Thus, if the individuals do not take action, existence is hollow as will later be observed in the absurdist plays. In this sense, existence is not something the features of which are, or can be, predetermined. Individuals do not carry within themselves some sort of innate characteristic. Mainly, Sartre means that individuals cannot be created according to a plan, their existences are defined by what they make of themselves (70). To put the matter in another way, they define their own existences by finding a meaning. In this regard, Sartre differentiates humans from every other thing and explains that the individuals are not created for a plan, and thus are free to fill their hollow existence with whatever purpose or meaning they wish. Despite the fact that life has no meaning on its own, individuals can give meaning to it through certain values by *living it* (51) and thus fill this "hollow existence". It is only then that one can be sure of one's existence; by thinking, by acting and by taking responsibility for these actions.

Existentialist thinkers, according to Sartre, can be divided into two: Christian existentialists and Atheist existentialists. They both accept the basic idea behind Existentialist thinking; that existence precedes essence. Christian existentialists support the "divine plan", like Kierkegaard. There is no meaning for existence but there is a divine plan for everybody and that is how existence will gain meaning. On the other hand, Sartre points out that the Atheist existentialists believe that life is meaningless because the universe is Godless (22-3). According to Atheist existentialists (Sartre being one of them) individuals are what they make of themselves, and their existences gain meaning according to that. In this regard, the first principle of existentialism is, as Sartre states:

> ... there is no human nature since there is no God to conceive of it. Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives of himself only after he exists, just as he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. This is the first principle of existentialism. (22)

Having been thrown into existence is a sign of a chaotic world; it proves that there is no purpose for that person's being in the world. Then, according to Sartre's statements, right after realising that one exists; one should simply search for the ways to construct an identity. Individuals should seek to fulfil their existences to "become" an individual, which renders them free to do anything (23). In other words, the individuals are responsible to acknowledge their own presences and realize themselves, which essentially supports the idea that human beings are utterly free. The world is not there for the sake of the human being. It is devoid of order and thus cannot simply be explained through reason. In such a world, the human beings realize themselves and can only be sure of their existences through action. Cardullo similarly states: "This philosophical movement thus sought to free the individual from external authority as well as from the authority or weight of the past and to force him to discover within himself the grounds for choosing and doing" (11). The thought that is generally associated with Existentialism is, then, freedom or the freewill of the individual to take responsibility of his actions in his search for meaning in life in order to simply "be". However, the freedom of choice and the realization of it put the individuals in a feeling

of “anguish”, as Sartre names it throughout his philosophy. Sartre also puts forward: “Existentialists like to say that man is in anguish. This is what they mean: a man who commits himself, and who realizes that he is not only the individual that he chooses to be, but also a legislator choosing at the same time what humanity as a whole should be, cannot help but be aware of his own full and profound responsibility” (*Existentialism* 25). Anguish does not refer to a psychological form of fear in the sense it is used in today. Sartre uses the term, then, to refer to the fact that when the individuals are aware of their freedom to choose between endless possibilities, they get in a feeling of anguish.

Moreover, according to Sartre, the individuals may not always feel that they are free to choose, which can be seen in the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd. Feeling that one does not have freedom in the sense of self brings with it what Sartre calls “Bad Faith” in his *Being and Nothingness* (47). If the individuals accept everything to be the objective truth, and do not follow their own desires and where their own freedom of choice directs them to, they live through Bad Faith. The individuals who are in Bad Faith also lie to themselves because it is an illusive self and not the real self. In the *Early Sartre and Marxism*, it is pointed out: “Not only are their (individuals who are in Bad Faith) images more limited and weak than perceptions, but such people are described as ‘fleeing’ reality, a term which Sartre would later employ to describe bad faith” (Coombes, my brackets, 278). Those who avoid reality and choose to live in emptiness, then, are in Bad Faith and are unable to reach to a true sense of self. This true sense of self is named by Sartre as “authenticity”. Sartre’s existentialist philosophy, then, rejects stereotyped behaviour and supports the search for true self. Since it supports a form of self-overcoming without being bound by anything else, it can be said that Sartre’s philosophy in the post-war era is rather close to that of Nietzsche’s in the previous century.

As mentioned above, this form of thinking brings with it the idea of authenticity. Authenticity can be seen as the opposite of Bad Faith. In other words, authenticity is escaping Bad Faith. Authenticity is closely related with the self-fulfilment of the individual. It is Sartre’s solution to the question of self-realization, finding *raison*

d'être[4]. In relation to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche's way of thinking, the individuals must create an authentic sense of self in the world. In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre states: "Authenticity and individuality have to be earned" (246). No matter which philosophers' term one chooses to apply, either self-overcoming or self-fulfilment, all Existentialist philosophers support the fact that the individuals must create an identity and individuality for themselves. These unique identities are authentic selves. Webber points out in *Jean-Paul Sartre: Key Concepts*: "Authenticity is rather the recognition of the particular person that you are. This has two dimensions: One is recognition of what it is to be a person [...] The other is the recognition of the particular commitments that one has [...]" (140). Then, the individuals should be faithful to their decisions and values in order to fulfil an identity. Moreover, they should embrace these decisions and values since they are the reason for their existence in the world. This is the way to reach to self-fulfilment or to have an authentic self.

In light of this discussion, it can be said that what Sartrian Existentialist philosophy utterly defends in terms of the self-fulfilment of the individuals is mainly being aware of one's existence, pursuing to fulfil an authentic self, and freedom. Similarly, Downs points out in *The Art of Theatre: Then and Now*:

> Existentialists hold that human beings are utterly alone, without purpose or mission, in a universe that has no God. The absence of God means that humans have no fixed destiny, but, for the existentialists, this is not a negative, for without God humans can create their own existences, purpose, and meaning. (395)

These concepts are important for post-war Europe and especially for post-war European drama because its concern is the fragmented European individual. Since Existentialism in its all forms is after the self-fulfilment of individuals; the fragmented, aimless and abandoned individuals of post-war Europe is its main concern.

Finally; Existentialism, along with many other "isms" of the twentieth century, brings Nihilism with it and the two philosophies are somehow confused with one another. Despite the fact that Existentialism and Nihilism are closely related to each other, they are not suggesting the same thing. The reason for this misunderstanding is

[4] Reason for living

the that Nihilism also suggests that there is no meaning, value or purpose of life and of existence, resulting in an existential crisis. What differentiates the two philosophies is that Existentialism offers the individual to find their own meaning through freewill, whereas Nihilism utterly rejects the value and meaning of everything. To put forward a clearer distinction: Existentialism suggests that individuals can give meaning to their existences through taking responsibility for their actions through their freewill and thus realize themselves. Nihilism suggests, on the other hand, that there is no meaning in the world and it is also meaningless to try to give meaning to it, because nothing will come from such an effort, since nothing comes from nothing.[5] Furthermore, Ophir points out in "A Concept of Nihilism for the Coming End of the World" that according to Nietzsche, Nihilism is "the idea of valuelessness, meaninglessness" (64). In this regard, Nihilism rejects the same thing as Existentialism. Ophir goes on to note: "... nihilism is the negation of the value (or meaning, significance, validity or truth) of differences within a given realm" (64). This is not to say, however, that nothing exists. Nihilism simply annihilates the value given to the things (Ophir 65). At this point, whereas Existentialism supports taking action (because action is what defines existence), Nihilism does not see a point in taking action. If this is so, then there is no point in human beings' living their lives and this is where the two philosophies differ. Dreyfus points out that existentialist movement can be seen "as a reaction to the psychological effects of nihilism" (210). Despite the fact that the two philosophies share certain characteristics, Existentialism is more like a reaction to Nihilism than a continuation of it.

Also, in a Nihilist world where God no longer exists, everything is now permitted to the individuals. However, this is the exact situation that the Atheist Existentialists are not pleased with (Sartre *Existentialism* 28). The Atheist Existentialists defend that the Nietzschean idea that "God is dead" is not a relieving thing for Christian Existentialists because it means that there is nothing after this material world waiting for humans, and no promised land to come for them. This leaves the individuals alone in the world, and it is a world which is nearly destroyed by war, at that. If God is dead, then there is not a divine plan for them and thus no order or meaning in the universe.

[5] Ex nihilo nihil fit

The individuals cannot trust each other, and remain alone. The universe is simply chaotic and there is no reasonable point whatsoever in trying to give meaning to it.

1.3. The Notion of the Absurd

A vastly important concept within Existentialism is the notion of the Absurd. The Absurd had long been a concern of Existentialist philosophers like Kierkegaard as mentioned in the previous chapters. However, in the aftermath of the World War II, along with Sartre, Algerian philosopher and writer Albert Camus greatly affected the philosophy in post-war Europe with his thoughts on the Absurd. Edward J. Hughes argues in the Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Camus*, in the period Sartre and Camus gave their works, European people were feeling forlorn and desperate (5). The world was living through the reminiscent of World War II and Europe was in psychological as well as social, economic and political crisis. The world was going through loss of belief in all the values that defined their lives (Hughes 5). In a time like this, the concept of the Absurd was one of the most important concerns of the Existentialists. For this reason, especially Sartre's and Camus' philosophies on the Absurd will be discussed together.

The notion of the Absurd can be roughly explained as the disharmony between the individuals and their surroundings. It is the failed effort of the modern individual to find meaning in the world to reach to a sense of self. It is impossible to reach this sense of self because of the Absurdity of the world. Sartre asserts that the Absurd is "man's relationship to the world" (*Existentialism* 74). Sartre goes on to claim that the notion of the Absurd cannot simply be explained to reside in man or in the world; it resides in the disharmonious relationship between them because existence is "being-in-the-world" (76). Then, given the fact that the individual is bound to *be* in the world and live the same monotonous day over and over again, this notion becomes something that is inseparable from the individual. The world's inexplicableness is what makes the individuals to feel the Absurd, rather than to have the idea of it. Chui summarizes Camus' idea of the absurd as such:

> For Camus, absurd existence is marked by a series of habits— rising in the morning, going to work, coming home, eating, sleeping—which ultimately

> end in death. Life is meaningless, and the absurdity of life lies in man's intrinsic desire to continue living tomorrow even though tomorrow is another day closer to death. (5)

This is the general idea behind the notion of the absurd. Therefore, it becomes the basic human condition of *being-in-the-world*. Furthermore, the individuals do not give explanations or solutions for anything, for they are unable to find out what. They merely describe the world before them as it is, without an ounce of hope or any idea of the future whatsoever. Since there is no meaning, there is no purpose; and since there is no purpose there is no future. The individuals, let alone realizing themselves, simply wait for the ultimate end: death. The world becomes a mere tool for passing time, because death is unavoidable. Similarly, French playwright Eugène Ionesco defines the notion of the absurd as such: "Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose . . . Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless absurd, useless" (qtd. in Newton *Modern* 144). The notion of the absurd, then, is the post-war individuals' meaningless, purposeless manner of life in the world as they are disconnected with the world.

Camus likens this status of the absurd individual to that of the famous king in Greek mythology: Sisyphus. Sisyphus is bound to roll a rock up to a hill which goes down, and Sisyphus rolls it up again, which would last forever without reaching to the apex. This meaningless action came to be a metaphor for the meaninglessness and absurdity of life. Doing the same things everyday makes the individuals fall in a state of repetition without reaching to an end. However, to cope with the absurd, the individuals must accept that this action is futile, and embrace it regardless. Camus states in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that "One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (111). In this regard, if the individuals imagine Sisyphus happy, then they should accept the futility and irrationality of the world and go on living. This is the only way to not give in to hopelessness, anxiety and despair. According to Albert Camus, then, despite the fact that the world is absurd and the individual feels abandoned and reluctant, they must revolt and endure nevertheless. This is one of the ways to cope with the absurdity of the world and create some meaning and purpose despite the absurdity of it. Bennett explains in *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd* that

Camus thinks people had better live in spite of the meaninglessness of the world, which is the only way to rebel against the absurdity of life (16). The individuals, then, must become conscious of the meaninglessness of the world. In the end, they should revolt to this meaninglessness and create their own meaning, even if it is also an absurd endeavour. The feeling of absurdity comes when the individuals understand that existence is hollow, life is strange and there is no harmony between the individuals and the world. Whatever action the individuals take, it feels strange because it will never reach to a solid point that will prove anything. Similarly, Albert Camus remarks in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "... that denseness and that strangeness of the world is the absurd" (20). The irrationality of the world imprisons the individuals in it and makes them unable to achieve self-realization; this is where the absurd manifests itself. What does not make sense, then, makes the individuals become reluctant to act. Camus explains the Absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus* as such:

> At this point of his effort (to give meaning to the world) man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born out of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. (my brackets, 31-2)

Then, absurdity occurs when the individuals are aware of the meaninglessness of the world and have to live in it. The world is silent and it does not do anything to give relief to the forlorn individual. However, the Absurd is not "the end" for anything. Rather, it is the beginning. The Absurd is merely a perception of the world. Foley points out in *Albert Camus: From the Absurd to Revolt*: "The absurd, then, as conceived by Camus is fundamentally an epistemological claim addressing an ontological need; that is, a claim regarding the knowledge we can have of the world" (8). It can be deducted once again that what is in question is not nonsense but disharmony caused by failing to have that knowledge. Assuming that something is absurd can only be possible within the framework of the individual's feelings towards that thing. If there is disharmony between the thing and the individual, then it is absurd. To conclude, what is absurd is neither the world nor the individual. What is absurd is the individuals' need to explain the world with reason and failing to do so, which means that the individuals find themselves unable to adapt to the world and that they simply do not understand the

world. Then, the Absurd is the disharmony that individuals feel when they realize there is no meaning in anything and contrastingly think that there should be. The individuals feel an existential urge to give meaning to the world. Acknowledging the world's absurdity is the conclusion one reaches, it is the knowledge, or awareness, of the world rather than the meaning of it.

Another remark Albert Camus makes about the Absurd is that it is a limitation to the individuals' freedom as he explains in *The Myth of Sisyphus.* It does not give liberation to the individuals; it binds them (65). It must be reminded at this point that Kierkegaard formerly remarked anxiety to be the dizziness of freedom. Camus accepts that everything is permitted because of God's absence, but it does not mean that the individuals are entirely free. This reflects the Kierkegaardian and/or Sartrian paradox between freedom and the world. The individuals are free to do anything, but world's absurdity disables them to act on anything. Consequently, there is no need for hope in such a world which does not promise a better end. Camus goes on to argue: "This absurd, godless world is then peopled with men who think clearly and who have ceased to hope" (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 85). If the individuals cease to hope because they are not free, then there is no meaning in trying to reach self-realization, for that would be unnecessary and also paradoxical and thus, impossible. The absurdity of the world thus makes all the possibilities for the happiness of the individuals cease to exist.

On the other hand, to deal with the feeling of the Absurd, Albert Camus also puts forward committing suicide as a way of escapism (which he does not suggest). Suicide later came to be an important notion within the framework of the absurdist plays. Camus puts forward in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that the individuals can reach to two conclusions after acknowledging the meaninglessness of the world. As mentioned above, they can either search for ways of recovery by embracing the absurdity and carrying on living; or they can commit suicide. There are two ways the individuals can commit suicide: Philosophical or physical suicide. Philosophical suicide is the same as Kierkegaard's solution: waiting for a God-given, meaningful world in another realm because the world does not make sense. He remarks in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that:

> To say that that climate is deadly scarcely amounts to playing on words. Living under that stifling sky forces one to get away or to stay. The important thing is

> to find out how people get away in the first case and why people stay in the second case. This is how I define the problem of suicide and the possible interest in the conclusions of existential philosophy. (32)

In this regard, philosophical suicide is a way to end the anxiety that the absurd world weighs on the individuals. Physical suicide, on the other hand, would be to refuse the possibility of a meaningful and better life provided by a divine being. What one can do in this world is either to put their faith in the afterlife, or to revolt against the absurd and try to create meaning. Furthermore, Avi Sagi explains in *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd* that:

> Camus emphasizes that staying alive is an expression of revolt, while suicide is a form of resignation. Suicide provides an answer to the problem of the absurd, but the solution it offers is nothing more than the dismissal of existence. The equation is thus a choice between absurd human existence and death, and suicide chooses death. The absurd is 'simultaneous awareness and rejection of death'. (68)

Then, it can be concluded that Albert Camus does not support physical suicide because that would be utterly rejecting the existence, and that would not make sense. Similarly, since physical suicide means choosing to end one's own existence, committing suicide does not give meaning to existence and is thus paradoxical. What should be done instead is to try to revolt as much as one can to the trauma of existence and reach to self-awareness.

The notion of the Absurd will be further examined within the framework of the Theatre of the Absurd and Harold Pinter's theatre in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 2

THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD AND HAROLD PINTER'S THEATRE

2.1. Avant-garde Theatre

The notion of the absurd can be traced throughout literature and drama long before the occurrence of the existentialist plays and the Theatre of the Absurd in the post-war period. The notion of the absurd started to be examined in Ancient Greek theatre, together with such plays like Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound.* In this sense, absurd has a wide range of explanations and examples. James R. Hollis states: "It is possible to make the definition of the 'absurd' so broad as to include playwrights as diverse as Shakespeare and Adamov simply because some of their characters seem to be confronting the absurdity of their situation" (4). One example is French playwright Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (1896) which is accepted to be the first absurdist play. As a predecessor of the Theatre of the Absurd, Alfred Jarry satirizes in his play the power hungry king Ubu, compounding elements from many Shakespeare plays like *Macbeth* and *Hamlet.* Herr explains in *A Companion to Satire: Ancient and Modern* that Alfred Jarry's play is actually a puppet play, satirizing illogical human behaviour and that it consists of nonsensical language and grotesque and sexual comedy (470). These are some of the elements that later came to characterise the Theatre of the Absurd as it will be explained in detail in the following parts.

Absurdist writing is accepted to be part of avant-garde theatre because it is highly unconventional and thoroughly groundbreaking. As mentioned before, the reason for the occurrence of this new form of theatre is the death of god, loss of fate in social values, and the replacement of faith in god with faith in science, and as a reason for all of these; World War II. Cardullo points out: "... avant-garde drama was directly affected by the new god of science—by new scientific discoveries and the advanced technologies of the machine age, in their constructive as well as destructive capacities" (10). Cardullo goes on to state:

> World War II was thus a turning point not only in the individual lives of so many artists and intellectuals but also in the history of the avant-garde as a whole. Avant- garde drama written after World War II, like the drama produced

> between the two world wars, was to be affected by new scientific discoveries and the advanced technologies of the machine age, but in this case they were those that made possible the splitting of the atom and the demented, conveyor-belt efficiency of gas chambers—which is to say, technologies whose immediate effect was overwhelmingly negative, indeed, incomprehensibly catastrophic. (10)

This catastrophic effect was war, and it inevitably affected dramatists of the era as they were "... geographically displaced, politically silenced, morally co-opted, or simply executed" (Cardullo 10). Former values and morals that helped people and dramatists explain the world around them were no longer capable of doing that. Similarly, Arnold P. Hinchliffe argues in *Harold Pinter*: "It is difficult to be complacent when the roots of one's existence are shaken, which is what the Absurd at its best does" (40). Thus, world started to seem like a place which was devoid of meaning, which was dangerous and destructive. As a result, drama they started to write in this period is usually avant-garde.

Furthermore; in the years following the World War II, many theatre buildings were destroyed and damaged. However, new theatres, new playwrights, and of course, new subject matters occurred shortly after the war, and dramatists continued to write with groundbreaking changes. European theatre was still under the effect of Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty and Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre, which presented theatre as a means of social and political analysis. In the post-war period, together with the effects of Existentialism and the notion of the Absurd mentioned before, the plays were superficially a blend of both theatres' concerns. Eventually, the main concern of European drama started to be the meaninglessness of the world and the modern individuals' absurd status in it.

Similarly, in France, as Existentialist philosophy continued to develop and be embraced by more and more philosophers and writers, a new group of playwrights started to write. These new playwrights were sharing an absurdist view of the world. Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, along with many other writers of the century, wrote about the absurdity of life. Their subject matters entirely focused on the utter meaninglessness of the world. It can be seen that post-war understanding of drama shares the basic idea behind Existentialist philosophy explained in the previous sections:

life is meaningless as death is inevitable. The hope, or ways of self-realisation put forward by Existentialists or any other philosophers is shattered because of war. Thus, the characters of such works are exemplars of the modern individuals who are too weary to carry on as a result of the war. Martin Esslin similarly states in *The Theatre of the Absurd* that Existentialist playwrights and plays present meaninglessness of life and that they show the devaluation of ideals and purpose (qtd. in Cardullo *Experimental* 12). Existentialist plays were thus the main understanding of the drama in the post-war period in Europe. Playwrights wrote plays questioning human beings' existences in the world and whether existence meant anything. Cardullo also argues: "... the plays themselves are logical constructs that depend for their effect on ratiocinative[6] devices, discursive thought, and consistent or coherent character" (12). Later, Cardullo states that writers like Camus and Sartre focused on explaining irrational content with rational form (12). Then, it can be said that Existentialist plays are logically written and they consist of the former periods' theatrical devices with the basic act structures, characterisation and setting. Playwrights reflected a world in which the characters go through basic existential problems and ask existential questions, and they explain that world with coherent theatrical devices.

2.2. Emergence and Characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd

The main understanding of drama born in the aftermath of the World War II is different both in form and content. This new different form and content is called The Theatre of the Absurd by Martin Esslin. His work *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) is canonical because Esslin gives the post-war understanding of drama a name and defines its characteristics in this book for the first time.

First of all, it is important to shed light on Esslin's explanation of the word "absurd". Esslin remarks that absurd does not mean ridiculous, it means: "out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical" (*Theatre* xix). This is very important for absurdist plays because the word absurd can be easily misunderstood. Absurd deals with disharmony, and does not refer to ridiculousness. Similarly, the contents of these plays are not ridiculous, they are simply disharmonious.

[6] Reasonable thinking

In this sense, it can be said that Esslin uses the term absurd in the same way with Albert Camus; to convey the tragic situation of human beings in an ambiguous and disharmonious life. As mentioned before within the framework of Existentialism, the feeling of the absurd comes when the individuals cannot adapt themselves to the world, or cannot be in harmony with the world. The situation of "being out of harmony with the world" was felt by the entire Europe at the time and thus created an entire field of drama. Similarly, all playwrights that wrote absurdist plays handled the notion of the absurd as the modern human condition, as it was formerly put forward by Albert Camus. Furthermore, Martin Esslin remarks that the Theatre of the Absurd is about the status of modern Europe, it shatters former theatrical conventions and styles, the plays should be interpreted within the perspective of the Theatre of the Absurd only, but that the playwrights never accepted any labels and they were not part of any theatrical school or movement (*Theatre* xii-xviii). Despite the fact that there are no certain rules that the absurdist playwrights all agreed on, there are some mutual points that can be seen in their plays. As it is stated in the introduction to *The Norton Anthology of Drama,* among the playwrights of this new theatre there were: "... a shared rejection of conventional dramatic structures and skepticism toward rationality, language, and the coherent subject of traditional philosophy and drama" (70). Then, the Theatre of the Absurd entirely rejects the theatrical conventions that marked pre-war drama. Similarly, Chambers argues in *The Continuum Companion to Twentieth Century Theatre* that although the absurdist playwrights did not form a coherent movement, the absurdist plays commonly reject realistic setting, realistic characters and situations, reasonable plots; and they reflect meaninglessness and the collapse of everyday language (767). Moreover, the dramatists that wrote absurd plays also reject the possibility of religious or philosophical meaning in the world (*The Norton Anthology of Drama* 70). Nietzsche's remark, which presented a godless universe, then, can be traced in the works of the absurdist playwrights. It can be deducted that the main objective of the plays is to put forward the utter meaninglessness of the world and the purposelessness and despair of the individuals that came with it. The reason for the rise of such Dramatic change, Martin Esslin states, is the human condition in a world which is full of shattered beliefs of all sorts (*Theatre* xix). Together with this loss of belief, the wars traumatized

people by driving them into hopelessness, fear, anguish and despair. In this regard, it can be said that it was useless to put any effort in anything, because death was the ultimate, inevitable end. This situation of not being able to know what to do in life and the question of whether anything is of any worth, which are very basic existential/ontological questions, define the basic shared features of these plays. From a different viewpoint, Newton points out in *Modern Literature and the Tragic*: "'Absurdist' writing has a strong relation to Modernism, most obviously through the work of Samuel Beckett, but it is a form of Modernism that in the second half of the twentieth century sees little if any grounds for hope or optimism" (144). Then, it can be deducted that as an avant-garde way of writing, absurdist drama is a part of Modernism and reflects the Modernist standpoint in representing the fragmented, hopeless and shattered individuals of post-war Europe. Newton goes on to explain:

> It could be argued, however, that absurdist drama does generate an opposition between human belief, hope or expectation and a universe that is senseless or arbitrary, so that attempts to discover meaning in it are doomed to failure and the sense of being rooted or of having a purpose in life lost. (145)

Absurdist drama, then, regards 'hope' in such a world to be a meaningless endeavour. In this sense, it can be said that absurdist drama is compatible with the Existentialists' view of the world.

Furthermore, as mentioned before, Theatre of the Absurd has different form and content. Absurdist plays, unlike Existentialist plays, reflect the absurdity of the world and the tragedy of the human beings in it in an equally absurd manner. As the Theatre of the Absurd rejects former conventional dramatic structures, playwrights take on a new form to situate their plays. Cardullo states: "The dramatists of the Theatre of the Absurd, by contrast, strive to express their sense of metaphysical anguish at the senselessness of the human condition in a form which mirrors that meaninglessness or ultimate lack of purpose" (12). Similarly, in *Macmillan Modern Dramatists: Harold Pinter*, it is argued: "The sensation of metaphysical anguish when confronted by the absurdity of the human condition is the chief theme of the Theatre of the Absurd, which avoids discursiveness in dramatising it" (Dukore 5). Then, it can be said that the existential anxieties of the individual are analysed from the perspective of absurdity.

Playwrights find it impossible to present the catastrophe brought about by the war in a manner consistent with the absurd relationship between the individual and the world. Similarly, Sevda Şener states that the Theatre of the Absurd sees the universe as an incomprehensible and an unexplainable chaos (my translation, 297). This is in relation with the main idea behind Existentialist philosophy and with the views of its proponents. If the universe is chaotic, then it cannot be explained through reason. In *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Esslin quotes from Samuel Beckett's essay on James Joyce and paraphrases Beckett's words:

> ... the form, structure, and mood of an artistic statement cannot be separated from its meaning, its conceptual content; simply because the work of art as a whole *is* its meaning, *what* is said in it is indissolubly linked with the *manner* in which it is said, and cannot be said in any other way. (12)

Then, trying to put forward the absurdity of the individuals in coherent, orderly and reasonably structured plays is regarded to be improbable. Chui argues in the introduction to *Affirming the Absurd in Harold Pinter*: "Many Absurd plays lack conventional plots. At times their characters appear to give meaningless speeches that contradict their actions; time and chronology are often disjointed..." (5). In this regard, it can be said that the forlorn individual's disharmonious relationship to the desolate world can only be explained through an equally forlorn and desolate style of writing. It would be highly wrong for the characters to speak reasonably when they are still damaged by war. Hollis similarly argues that the playwrights would be doing something wrong if they were to make the same point in the same way (9). To sum up, in an unprecedented era like this, drama similarly must be different from that of the former period. Cardullo states that the Theatre of the Absurd disregards cause-effect relationship, and devices like exposition, complication, turning point, climax and dénouement in a classic five-act structure play (12). For example, Irish theatre critic Vivian Mercier regards Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* as "a play where nothing happens twice" as the two acts the play consists of are the same. In this sense, as Cardullo also states, the absurdist plays have a circular narrative, not a linear one and thus it does not solve the problems it proposes (12). The Theatre of the Absurd, then, is

highly avant-garde and it is reflective of the era it is written in. Then, playwrights' reflection of the world in their plays is both realistic and absurd.

2.2.1.Tragicomedies

Within the framework of the Theatre of the Absurd, tragicomedies hold an important place and the majority of the absurdist plays are tragicomedies. The playwrights who wrote absurdist plays were under the impression that the absurd human condition could best be defined through tragicomedy. For this reason, so many absurdist plays are called tragicomedies by their writers. Sevda Şener points out that this new form of tragicomedy is composed of dark humour and it is grotesque, and that the playwrights aim to represent their characters as dim-witted, coward and confused in a godless, orderless universe as part of a chaotic society, and that in the absurdist plays the feeling of danger reinforces tragedy whereas the clumsy characters reinforce comedy (my translation 304-5). Human condition in post-war Europe, then, is not only tragic but it is also comic. Furthermore, as it was argued formerly, Kierkegaard argues that the absurdity of the world brings about dizziness or a kind of anxiety to the individual. Getting rid of that anxiety can only be possible through presenting the tragicomic human condition in the world. Norrish puts forward in *New Tragedy and Comedy in France, 1945-1970* (1988) that for Ionesco, the only way to cope with this absurdity is being aware of the tragicomedy of the human condition and finding the equilibrium between them (11). This new kind of tragicomedy is different from the former understanding of tragicomedy in that it is rather avant-garde, and is much more inclined to dark humour. Similarly, Esslin remarks in *The Theatre of the Absurd* that the reason why absurdist plays reinforce tragicomedy is because the audience is unable to identify with the main characters of these plays and as they cannot understand their motives, they find themselves laughing at the tragedy of the characters that are thus rendered "less human" than the audience (Esslin 301). It can be said that witnessing the tragicomedy of these less human, fragmented characters make the audience more aware of the status of post-war European individuals. It can be remarked that however tragic the situation might be; the characters' lives are represented in the form of comedy because it is easier to distance oneself from something that is comic than something that

is tragic. Tragedy makes it easier for the audience or the reader to identify with and thus fails to provide the loneliness of the individuals in their world. This can be seen as the reason why so many absurdist playwrights tended to put comedy to use and combine it with tragedy, like Harold Pinter. His use of comedy was so unique that the genre of his plays were titled Comedy of Menace by writer Irving Wardle; which can be summarised as a genre combining the notion of threat, violence (thus tragedy) and comedy, which will later be fully examined in the following section.

2.2.2. Language of the Theatre of the Absurd

Together with the concept of absurdity comes the question of language in the Theatre of the Absurd as language is the means of communication. Up until the occurrence of the Theatre of the Absurd, meaning had been provided with language in the plays. What the characters meant was conveyed through their words and dialogues. Their motivations were understood via the explicit use of language. Similarly, Hollis argues in *Harold Pinter: The Poetics of Silence*:

> Perhaps man has always lived in the space between words, for it is the mysterious conspiracy between language and man which gives rise to the conception and embodiment of meaning. The motive of meaning is found precisely in man's impulse to overcome through language the apparent barrier between the outer and inner environments which he inhabits ... The outer world may continue to exist as matter apart from mind, but existentially it is experienced as inner. (1)

Then, people try to make sense of the world around them and of their inner worlds through language. It is through language that people try to express the meaning they seek to find in the world and solve their existential problems. However, communication is something which is refrained from in the absurdist plays, the characters of which suffer from the same existential anxieties. It is seen that language is not sufficient for the characters to communicate and to convey meaning. Then, meaning must be conveyed in other ways. For example, it is seen in Samuel Beckett's and Harold Pinter's plays that meaning is hidden within images and long silences rather than actual words. Even if there is dialogue, it is full of misunderstandings because words and full

sentences mean different things for each individual because of their failing to provide objective truth; the examples of which will be given in the following chapters. To sum up, there is a lack of communication between the characters because language lost its value, and it is not enough to make sense of the word. Hollis points out:

> One of the central tenets of the absurdists is the breakdown, even the impossibility, of communication in our time. Ionesco reduces this complex phenomenon to a simple conclusion, "I detect a crisis of thought, which is manifested by a crisis of language; words no longer meaning anything". (13)

The fact that words no longer mean anything is actually related with their not meaning enough to convey what individuals really feel. Words are not strong enough for characters to identify and understand the world around them. Thus, this leads to meaningless communication and weak dialogue. Similarly, Cardullo explains that "language is downgraded" in the absurdist plays and: "Although the characters frequently talk as volubly as do the figures of conventional theater, they usually recognize that they are indulging in a word-game that ridicules the very use of language by distorting it or making it as mechanical as possible" (12). Then, language is no longer a trustworthy component of communication between human beings; words are devoid of former meaning. Esslin refers to this as "the disintegration of language" (*Theatre* 44). In this regard, disintegration means that language is unable to provide the meanings for the words; they are hollow. The words the characters utter do not comply with their actions on stage. Martin Esslin argues: "... what *happens* on the stage transcends, and often contradicts, the *words* spoken by the characters (*Theatre* xxi). The action that is shown onstage is *out of harmony* with what the uttered words suggest, in order to symbolise the lack of communication between individuals in post-war Europe. Esslin thus regards the Theatre of the Absurd as part of the anti-literary movement of modern Europe (*Theatre* xxi). Then, throughout the Theatre of the Absurd, it is seen that words are no longer adequate for communication, and they no longer hold the meaning they formerly did, and this is the main reason why it is considered to be anti-literary. Moreover, this anti-literariness, and all other anti-conventions of the Theatre of the Absurd caused some playwrights like Eugène Ionesco to regard their theatre as "anti-theatre" (my translation, Şener 300). Ionesco's anti-theatricality puts forward the

meaninglessness of language perhaps even more than so many other playwrights', in such plays like *Chairs* (1952) and *Rhinocéros* (1959). Esslin states in *The Theatre of the Absurd* that for Ionesco, language is meaningless and communication is impossible because words leave out their personal association, or their subjectivity, for each person (95). They mean something different for everybody and are thus unable to bring the individuals on a common ground of understanding.

The problem of language is also associated with the loss of religious faith in post-war Europe. The reason for this must be the alienation and the fragmentation of the individuals who are unable to put their faith in a divine being or in a savior, and are thus in a state of spiritual despair, failing to find the rights words to communicate what the world or existence feel like to them. Similarly, Campbell argues in *Exiled in Paris: Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Samuel Beckett and Others on the Left Bank* that for Arthur Adamov (an important absurdist playwright), since language is an inadequate tool for communication, the word "god" does not relate its former meaning (60). If the word "god" no longer connotes faith, trust, heaven, forgiveness and a promised, meaningful world, then words are eviscerated and they lack meaning. The plays within The Theatre of the Absurd are full of such examples and devaluation of language among characters.

However, it can be said that the void created by nonsensical language is filled with symbols, images and action in the Theatre of the Absurd. This return to action rather than communication is regarded as a return to the mime play of antiquity by Esslin (*Theatre* 232) because all meaning is given with nonsensical behaviour and movement instead of spoken words. In this sense, this kind of non-verbal communication and being in the world are reinforced in different aspects by each playwright: some in the form of waiting or passing time in the world as Samuel Beckett did, and some in the form of being trapped in the house or room, which can be seen in Harold Pinter's plays.

2.2.3. Time, Place and Characters

Another important aspect of the Theatre of the Absurd is that the plays are devoid of time and place, since they are not vastly important. The reason for this might

be that the playwrights aim to defamiliarise the world as much as possible for their audience to convey the sense of desolation and loneliness of the characters in the world. Cardullo points out that in the Theatre of the Absurd time is flexible and place is generalised (12). The playwrights do not provide any given knowledge as to where or when the action is taking place, or if they do, it does not refer to a familiar place (my translation, Şener 302). This functions as a means to symbolise the post-war chaotic world and gives a sense of claustrophobia. It is seen nearly in all of the absurdist plays that the characters never know where they are, or what time it is. Even if they ask each other, a moment later they ask again, and are surprised to find out that it has only been a few minutes since. They are unable to pass the time beneficially, and are thus unable to reach to a meaning in the world because they cannot at all comprehend the concept of time.

Moreover, the playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd also do not present their characters as heroes. The characters are alone in the world, which is compatible with the status of post-war Europe. In this sense, the characters lack action and thus, they are static (Şener 304). This complies with the characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd, because absurdist plays do not tell stories of heroic people who do heroic things, unlike the theatre understanding in the former periods. They do not reach to a solution. The theatre of the Absurd simply presents the human condition in the world as it is, without providing a linear plot, as mentioned before. The reader/audience is not supposed to understand what has happened in the play, because nothing generally happens, which is seen in Samuel Beckett's plays more than any other's. It is not possible to summarise what happens either in *Waiting for Godot* (1949) or in *Endgame* (1957), all action is provided with rather nonsensical language. Superficially, it can be said that Beckett situates "waiting" as the absurd human condition or as a means to pass time because there is nothing else worthy of doing (*Theatre* 17). The same can be traced in Pinter's *The Room* (1957) and *The Dumb Waiter* (1960), which will later be deeply examined. All being post-war plays; they have common characteristics, as do so many other absurdist plays.

Furthermore, in the Theatre of the Absurd, the characters are most of the time seen to be tangibly fragmented in order to represent the shattered human condition and

the sickness in the soul (Kierkegaardian despair) and anxiety in the post-war Europe. "The symmetrical character pairs", (to use Esslin's term) in these plays form one soul or one individual, one symbolising body and the other symbolising soul and vice versa (Esslin *Theatre* 62). In other words, the absurdist playwrights seek to put forward that the post-war European individual cannot be an independent being, the "free organic individual", or, "the flesh-and-blood agent", to use Sartre's terms (Flynn *Existentialism* n.p.). Two forlorn individuals can make only one individual, and can only then form the flesh-and-blood agent. This is what is meant by the statement "fragmented individual" in post-war Europe.

To sum up, it is seen in the plays of these playwrights, and throughout the Theatre of the Absurd that plot, time and place are of no importance and that the characters are fragmented individuals who are vastly dependent on each other to try and make sense of the world around them. It can be stated that from Beckett and Adamov's ragged tramps to Ionesco and Pinter's characters that are a part of a shattered society, the Theatre of the Absurd is composed of characters whose existences have become traumatic, rendering them utterly alone in the world.

2.3. Harold Pinter as an Absurdist Playwright

During the catastrophic days of the World War II, Harold Pinter was fifteen years old. Esslin argues in *Pinter: a study of his plays* that towards the end of the World War II in 1944, Pinter was in London. There, Esslin explains, he saw the first flying bomb, and nearly every time he opened the back door to the garden, he saw it almost destroyed by the bombs (12). This kind of traumatic experience undoubtedly left traces in the playwright as it was also seen in his plays. Furthermore, it is stated in *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter* that by the time he was eighteen (in 1948, three years after the end of the World War II), he was called for National Service, which he refused because he could not see the point of war and he became a conscientious objector[7] (Stokes 31). Given the childhood trauma he suffered, it is no surprise that he rejected serving in the army, because, as Esslin states in *A Study of His Plays*, he was "aware of the suffering of war" (13). By that time, he had no religious beliefs and was

[7] A person who refuses to serve in the army for conscientious reasons

entirely antiwar and apolitical. However, his later work became more and more political (Sierz 32). Raby points out in *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter* that he was brought to trial for his refusal to serve in the army in the following year and was arrested and fined for it (Raby xii). His attempts in writing (mainly poems) correspond to exactly one year after his arrest, in 1950. After years of writing and acting, he started to show interest in writing drama and wrote his first play *The Room* in 1957, followed by *The Birthday Party* in 1958 and *The Dumb Waiter* in 1959. In the following chapter, these three plays will be analysed in detail. However, it is fit to say that Pinter's early plays are full of the existential concerns that Pinter had as a child and as a playwright, which stem from the destructive effect the war had on Pinter and on the world. Similarly, Luckhurst states in *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter* that the effect of war in Harold Pinter's childhood is reflected upon his plays (108). As a result, Pinter's characters carry the existential anxieties Existentialist philosophers talk about. Their dialogues are full of existential concerns of being in life or of being human. Katherine H. Burkman states: "Pinter prefers to explore his characters as they appear 'at the extreme edge of their living, where they are living pretty much alone.'" (6). The characters are utterly alone in the world and this is how Pinter explores the tragic condition of the absurd individual in post-war England. Even in the characters' silences, as it is stated in *Pinter: a study of his plays*, there are hidden moments of questioning the meaning of life and a state of deep thinking and anxiety (Esslin 231). Characters are faced with existential questions which are impossible to answer; they can no longer communicate with words for they are deprived of only one meaning. There is the feeling of entrapment and claustrophobia in places which used to be familiar and there is estrangement and distrust between people who are no longer eager to communicate with one another (Esslin 239). Similarly, it is stated in *Affirming the Absurd in Harold Pinter*: "This estrangement of man from language, his companions, his past, and his unforeseeable future contributes to what Martin Esslin terms 'The Theatre of the Absurd,'..." (Chui 2, 3). Then, it can be deducted that Pinter's characters, no matter how static their lives are, want to continue their daily routines because they think that the alternative is dangerous for them. The world outside of their rooms feels like a dark

place within which there is only danger and strangers who mean to harm them. William Baker states in *Harold Pinter*:

> The characters desperately wish to maintain their regular routine, however boring it may be. They unsuccessfully attempt to resist the incipient or overt threat arising from newness or scepticism or a good dose of reality. The threat will inevitably penetrate the vulnerable surface of certainty the characters erect around themselves with language and repetitive actions. (40)

Thus, it can be said that Pinter's characters are alienated to the world because they are scared of it, which is compatible with the post-war atmosphere in Europe. They would rather stay at home all the time instead of going out and facing the reality of the world which is frightening for them. They are, once again, defamiliarised and are out of harmony with the world. At this point, Harold Pinter himself states: "When a character cannot be comfortably defined or understood in terms of the familiar, the tendency is to perch him on a symbolic shelf, out of harm's way" (qtd. in Dukore *Macmillan* 7). Then, it can be said that Pinter's characters are made unfamiliar within their surroundings because they cannot be identified in relation to those surroundings. Pinter provides this with inconsistencies throughout his plays. This usually occurs in the form of different assumptions as to the characters' backgrounds, different names, strangers, confusing facts that those strangers utter out of nowhere. Dukore also explains: "Pinter's characters may contradict themselves; they may have more than one name; and what they say is open to several interpretations" (*Macmillan* 8). It can be argued, then, that disharmony, unfamiliarity and obscurity are at the centre of Pinter's plays. The reason for this may be that Pinter relates his characters to the play as they are seen. He does not want to project information which is impossible to know at that point in the characters' life, especially when looked from outside. This is why the audience is left without answers as to what just happened on the stage when the play comes to an end. Burkman points out in *The Dramatic World of Harold Pinter: Its Basis in Ritual*: "... he (Pinter) follows his characters whither they lead him" (my brackets, 8). Bernard F. Dukore similarly points out that Pinter sees his characters to be: "... inexpressive, giving little away, unreliable, elusive, evasive, obstructive, unwilling" (qtd. in Dukore *Macmillan* 11). Then, Pinter sees his characters as independent individuals, he himself does not know

everything about them, and thus reflects them as he sees them. This is why his characters are defamiliarised, because they do not give much away. His characters are utterly alone beings. Also, Hollis remarks in *Harold Pinter: Poetics of Silence* that Pinter's characters are: "... open and incomplete as all men are open and incomplete" (8). Then, Pinter's characters are not heroic beings; they are forlorn and flawed just like in real life.

Pinter's use of the absurd is distinctive. He was largely affected by French Absurdism and from Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett and after some time, Eugène Ionesco. They all reflect individual's existential fears in their works, like Pinter. Newton points out in *Modern Literature and the Tragic* that Beckett and Ionesco's effects on him is the reason why he did not use traditional form and content and was inclined to using absurd form and absurd content (148), which in compatible with the form and content of the Theatre of the Absurd. Still, Pinter's style and his use of the absurd are unique. Perhaps a better understanding of Pinter's unique use of the absurd can be made through a superficial comparison between Beckett and Pinter. First of all, it is stated in *Modern Literature and the Tragic* that unlike Beckett, Pinter does not reject traditional characterisation and plot (Newton 148). It is argued: "Rather, his (Pinter's) approach is to use them but at the same time to defamiliarise them in such a way that the audience's expectations about both are severely disrupted" (my brackets, Newton 148). Then, Pinter makes use of traditional characterisation and plot but makes the audience feel distant to them. In this way, Pinter makes sure that the audience cannot possibly understand what is going on onstage and is unable to make assumptions about the plot and the characters. Another point is on Beckett and Pinter's respective use of existentialist concerns. American writer and critic Walter Kerr points out that whereas Samuel Beckett's dramatic images are reflected simply as concepts, Pinter's existentialist approach reflects a more Kafkaesque anxiety (qtd. in Burkman *Dramatic* 7). The reason for this might be that anxieties that Pinter's characters are faced with are familiar and worldly because they take place in a familiar setting. Correspondingly, Esslin argues that Pinter takes Samuel Beckett's claustrophobic and apocalyptic setting and applies it to the everyday life of post-war England (Esslin *Pinter: a study of his plays* 36). In this sense, Pinter's use of the absurd is more akin to reflect the real life of

post-war European than Beckett's, whose characters are more ragged and belong more to the symbolic realm of Beckett's post-apocalyptic world. Similarly, James R. Hollis states: "Pinter does not dehumanize his characters as Beckett and Ionesco sometimes do; they remain 'human, all-too-human'" (9). Then, Pinter's characters are more down to earth, struggling with more familiar problematic. It can be deducted that in Pinter's plays, the audience watches the existential traumas of people of post-war Europe especially as they try to make sense of the world around them. Hollis points out in *Harold Pinter: Poetics of Silence*: "The starting point for absurdist drama (and that of Pinter) is the relocation of meaning as a metaphysical category toward meaning as a complex of existentially experienced emotions such as dread, guilt, and uncertainty" (4-5). Then, in Pinter's plays, absurdity is provided by placing meaning in a realm built with anxiety, guilt and ambiguity. One contributing factor that may be added to this realm may be fear, which is the main reason preventing the characters from trying to find the meaning of their existences. Hollis goes on to state that such emotions become internalized and part of the inner world of the individual. From the Kierkegaardian perspective, it can be said that these become a sickness in the spirit, causing a disharmony between the individual and the world. Thus: "This interiorization of modern literature may typically be witnessed in ... the conversations of Pinter's characters which are in fact interior monologues shaped and tempered not by the subject at hand but by the demands of the spirit" (Hollis 5). In other words, Pinter's characters' dialogues are shaped with the existential anxieties they hold within, and with their urge to make sense of the world. As a result, Pinter observes his characters in their most desolate moments and in their anxieties, even to the point where violence occurs. The audience watches characters that are too afraid to go out because outside world is full of terrors. In this sense, it can be concluded that Pinter's plays reflect more mundane fears and anxieties.

Pinter's plays add something new to the field of absurdist drama. It can be said that the characters' fear of the outside world is an element of absurdity in his plays. The supposed comfort the room provides as a familiar thing, and the danger that the door brings to the everyday life of the characters are components of absurdity in the plays. Hinchliffe argues: "Pinter opens up one of the ordinary doors through which we enter the universal situation" (41). This universal situation is the human beings' tragic

situation in the universe which they cannot make sense of. Just like Pinter's opening the garden door to disaster, his characters similarly open the door to anticipated but unknown danger. Because of their fear of the outside world, the characters prefer staying in the room their whole lives and thus live purposeless, meaningless lives. Nothing is explained as to why it is so dangerous outside, so that the audience also thinks that the outside world is full of dangers that are impossible to speak of. Similarly, Dukore points out in *Macmillan Modern Dramatists: Harold Pinter*: "Because events and actions are unexplained, and apparently illogical or unmotivated, the world seems capricious or malevolent. One can rely upon nothing" (27). The absurdity also lies in the fact that the characters' relation with the outside world is limited to a minimum of four walls. They do not know what to do; nor do they know what is outside. It can be conducted that they are in constant fear all the time of the door opening, and strangers barging in. Thus, in Pinter's plays there is always the Kierkegaardian anxiety, despair and boredom which stems from being entrapped in a dangerous and violent world.

Pinter's plays are absurdist plays also because of the fact that the plays are both comic and tragic. Pinter writes comedies, and according to Esslin, he is parallel to Ionesco in this sense because life's absurdity for them is "funny" (Esslin *Theatre* 205). Esslin goes on to quote from Pinter to explain the absurdity of Pinter's plays:

> Everything is funny; the greatest earnestness is funny; even tragedy is funny. And I think what I try to do in my plays is to get to this recognizable reality of the absurdity of what we do and how we behave and how we speak. (205)

Then, Pinter finds everyday behaviour, everyday speech and everyday activity to be funny and absurd. However, Esslin argues, life is funny up to a point and that point is when the horror and tragedy of the human situation rise to the surface (Esslin *Theatre* 205). This horror and tragedy can be the moment that the door opens and the characters are faced with the strangers in Pinter's plays. It is that point when things stop being funny, everything becomes uncertain and subjective (Esslin *Theatre* 205). Furthermore, Esslin goes on to quote from Pinter: "There is a kind of horror about and I think that this horror and absurdity go together" (*Theatre* 206). It can be concluded then, that in Pinter's plays the absurdity of life can be followed in their being funny until they cease to be funny because the characters realise how full of violence and horror life is. The

same works for the audience. The plays are not comedies in the Aristotelian sense of disguises, misunderstandings and happy endings with marriages. The plays' comedy stems from the familiarity of their absurdity. James R. Hollis explains:

> Much of the laughter which one hears in Pinter's audiences seems a species of nervous laughter which releases tensions occasioned by characters becoming uncomfortably recognizable and situations unaccountably familiar. (5)

In Pinter's plays, what at first may seem unfamiliar and distant becomes disturbingly familiar. It causes identification with the characters that seem to act and speak in a bizarre way. However, the more they speak and interact, the more familiar their being-in-the-world becomes recognizable which causes a sort of anxious laughter on the part of the audience. Identifying the same existential concerns they unconsciously have with the seemingly confined characters onstage worries and at the same time humour the audience. In this regard, Hollis goes on to state that there is a kind of irony, too. He states that Pinter's irony within the scope of the absurdist theatre is an existential one and adds:

> Pinter's plays may be ironic at many levels but their most pervasive irony arises from our confrontation with the world we actually live in but do not recognize. We ascribe anonymity to the characters and situations of Pinter's drama precisely because they are too familiar, too disconcertingly close to where we live. (7-8)

This is the same reason why the audience's laughter is anxious. Audience's identifying themselves with Pinter's characters shows how realistic the plays are. The plays' tragicomedy and irony carries them on a level to help the audience realize their being-in-the-world.

Absurdity in Pinter's plays can also be affirmed because of the fact that he makes use of dialogue and speech in a rather different way. In Pinter, Esslin argues, everyday speech is absurd because it is repetitive, incoherent and lacks language's informative purpose, its logic or grammar and also, there is the avoidance of communication (Esslin *Theatre* 207). The characters are mostly seen avoiding speech, and when they speak they are usually seen arguing about the meanings behind the words. They are never seen arguing about what really matters, but about unimportant

things because they unknowingly want to evade facing the absurdity of life (Esslin *Theatre* 207). Additionally, Stokes argues in the *Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter* that this kind of use of language stems from Sartrian "bad-faith" (30-1), mentioned in the previous chapter. The characters, according to the critic, are in bad-faith because they refrain from their real problems and from the absurdity of life by "unawareness, self-deception and passive response" (31). Their unresponsiveness or their bad-faith, then, is in accordance with the Existential problems of the era. Furthermore, alienating the characters from language also alienates them from their past and their future and limits them to the alleged comfort of their room. Chui points out in the introduction to *Affirming the Absurd in Harold Pinter* that this is what makes the plays absurd in the sense Esslin uses the term (2-3). In other words, the plays are absurd because they reflect the forlorn and disharmonious human condition in the world with the use of deficient communication and language.

Moreover, it was stated in the previous chapter that Sartre sees the absurd as the individual's relationship to the world. Here, it can be said that Pinter shares the same point of view with Sartre. Stokes explains that for Pinter individual and society both exists and they make each other (30). Pinter, then, analyses the characters' absurd relationships with the world and their state of unresponsiveness through different use of dialogue, which will be further analysed in the following sections.

In addition, absurdity in Pinter's early plays can also be traced through their analyses of the familiar and the unfamiliar. Pinter, despite the fact that he focuses on real situations and characters in real surroundings, makes even the most basic things in life unfamiliar for the reader/audience and makes them question the nature of their existence by asking questions like: "Which came first? Chicken or the egg?", as in *The Birthday Party*. Such unanswerable existential questions are much deeper than this widespread question gives away. Pinter makes the audience alienated to the most common of things; like rooms and doors, and also makes the audience alienated to his own play by not providing information; thus making what was at first familiar, unfamiliar (Stokes 40). In Pinter's plays, then, as in real life, it is not possible to find meaning, and the Pinter's purpose is exactly this. The absurdity of life goes hand in hand with the absurdity of Pinter's plays, gaining ground with the existential anxieties

of the characters. James R. Hollis states: "Pinter seems to be the only playwright to fuse the absurdist consciousness with overtly conventional realism to achieve a dramatically viable amalgam" (9). His characters' absurdity, then, is presented in such a realistic way that the plays become part of drama and also of everyday life. From another perspective, Chui argues in *Affirming the Absurd in Harold Pinter*:

> ... however forlorn his (Pinter's) characters may appear to be, they are not condemned by their absurd fates but rather liberated through his underlying philosophical considerations and his dramatic technique. They are neither heroes nor anti-heroes, but simply beings that can attest to what Camus calls the 'magnificent' yet 'overwhelming' nature of absurd existence. (my brackets, 9)

Then, these existential anxieties are manifested in Harold Pinter's plays in a way to liberate the characters in the end, as there is always a questioning of their existences through the obscurity and the tragedy of life. This obscurity and tragedy, of course, are conveyed in the danger the outside world possesses. Esslin states in *Pinter: a study of his plays*: "We live on the verge of disaster" (20). He goes on to state that a hydrogen bomb may explode any time and one never knows when (20). The characters, then, live face to face with danger without knowing it, but they always feel like danger may come and are thus threatened by the idea of danger. Then, in light of this discussion, it can be concluded that this is where the notion of menace emerges within the framework of the absurd, but this will be fully discussed later on. In conclusion, the fact that Pinter always feels like the world is full of unknown and unexpected dangers is what makes him an absurdist playwright and his plays examples of the theatre of the absurd. Pinter's plays take place in this sort of environment and the characters are trying to hide themselves in the supposed security of their rooms while abstaining from reality, and thus absurdity, of the world.

Furthermore, Pinter's characters are very lonely beings. In their unwilling dialogues with each other, they are seen questioning things, trying to make sure that something is nice or bad, the breakfast is delicious, or not. They are trying to feel that they exist through the most common of activities. Esslin emphasises that Pinter's characters try to exist before they live in the outside world (*Pinter* 34). As it was mentioned in the previous chapter, the first claim of Existentialism, according to Sartre,

was that Existence precedes essence. Pinter's characters, are trying to get a hold of their existences and confront it first and understand that they exist, and once they overcome their anxieties, they face the outside world, or what is behind the door (*Pinter* 34-5). Esslin states: "... determined to tackle his characters at the very root of their existence, he (Pinter) was led to a seeming neglect of the less essential aspects of their life and personality" (my brackets, *Pinter* 34). Thus, the characters are unable to come face to face with society or to live in it, because they first need to understand the core of their own being and solve their own existential anxieties and fears. Once they do this, then they can step outside of the room. Moreover, according to Esslin, however realistic Pinter's plays are; they are still full of mystery, ambiguity and uncertainty, especially the characters (*Pinter* 38). Then, it can be said that it is these elements that make the plays absurd, unfamiliar and alienated to the audience while at the same time taking place in highly familiar settings with characters engaging in familiar daily routines. Still, the audience never knows anything, and thereby they share the anxieties and existential problems of the characters.

Additionally, Pinter's refusal to explain the meaning of his plays is in accordance with the characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd. It was mentioned before that Pinter never explains anything; he never gives information about his characters or about the events, if there is any. Similarly, Esslin argues in *The Theatre of the Absurd* that Harold Pinter rejects Bernard Shaw's well-made play because well-made plays give too much background information and they explain each character's motivations with meticulous detail (206). For Pinter, real life is not like that. In real life, nothing is known about a stranger or their motivation, thus, it is impossible to assign something as absolute fact. Pinter points out:

> I suggest that there can be no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false. A character on the stage who can present no convincing argument or information as to his past experience, his present behaviour or his aspirations, nor give a comprehensive analysis of his motives is as legitimate and as worthy of attention as one who,

> alarmingly, can do all these things. The more acute the experience the less articulate its expression. (qtd. in Hollis *Harold* 3)

Then, it can be said that Pinter is interested in the different perspectives of different people when relating a situation. In his plays, as he reflects the absurdity of life onto his characters and their inner worlds, he does not assign real and unreal or true and false. His characters' inability to give information about their lives is not unreasonable or disharmonious for him; it is just as plausible as a character who can, and maybe more. As what he talks about in his plays is menacing and realistic, expressing it openly becomes irrelevant for him. Similarly, from a realistic standpoint, it can be said that people do not know everything to the fullest in their encounters in life or with one another. It is impossible to know someone's past unless they openly explain it. Thus, the relationship between the past and the present becomes irrelevant to make sense of what is happening in the present time. Hollis argues: "... there is no vital connection between what is happening now and what happened then. In effect the past is severed from the present and the acts of the present are severed from each other" (6). This causes anxiety and despair in the characters because of its ambiguous nature. It reveals the fear of the unknown on the part of the characters, and thus makes them unable to realize themselves or reach to a meaningful sense of existence. As the characters' lives are unknown and thus fearful, the plays become mysterious. Burkman points out in *The Dramatic World of Harold Pinter: Its Basis in Ritual*:

> The playwright does not seek to mystify or puzzle his audience; he merely explores experience at levels which are mysterious and which preclude the kind of clear explanation of life which the tradition of the well-made play has often delivered in the form of thesis or message. (6)

It is fit to remind that this shift from well-made play to absurdist/existentialist play had begun before Harold Pinter, and together with the emergence of Existential philosophy. Burkman goes on to summarize Esslin's view of this change as such:

> Esslin sees the shift from the well-made play to the absurdist poetic play as a reflection of man's sense of the absurdity of existence, his feeling of existential anguish. He defines the absurdist technique as existentialist in form as well as in

> content—a general breaking up of a rational order of event, character, and setting to better reflect the world as it is perceived. (7)

Then, it can be said that like all playwrights, Pinter also tries to give a slice of life as realistically as possible, but without giving details or giving background information. The reason for this is that real life also does not explain anything. People's daily relationships with one another are not defined according to their past. Common things in life and random people one sees outside are not explained in detail beforehand. People have to figure everything out for themselves. This is the desired effect in Pinter's plays and it is why they are part of the avant-garde movement. Likewise, in an interview with author John Sherwood, Pinter argues:

> The world is full of surprises. A door can open at any moment and someone will come in. We'd love to know who it is, we'd love to know exactly what he has on his mind and why he comes in, but how often do we know what someone has on his mind or who this somebody is, and what goes to make him and make him what he is, and what his relationship is to others? (qtd. in Esslin *Pinter* 39)

This contributes to the overall effect of ambiguity in Pinter's plays. In real life, one never knows who will come through the door, or what they will do once the step in the room. In this regard, Esslin argues, this should be the same in a play and it is the best way to reflect "the tragedy of the human condition" (Esslin *Pinter* 39-42). It can be said that the ambiguity of life in Pinter's plays; such as the unanswered questions at the end of the plays and the intentional lack of information, contributes to the absurd status of the individuals and of their lives. Because, Esslin goes on to state, "... out of the wound of existential anguish springs the playwright's effort to come to terms with the world and its mystery, its suffering, its bewildering multiplicity" (55). In this regard, Chui explains in *Affirming the Absurd in Harold Pinter,* in his plays there is:

> ... redemption in despair, hope in despondency, and if Pinter's humor proves nothing else, solace in anguish. Menace is perpetual, the rock will roll on, but if affirmation promises any hope of happiness, then we must imagine Pinter's creatures happy. (10)

Then, in relation with the idea of the absurd and *The Myth of Sisyphus,* Harold Pinter as a playwright of the Theatre of the Absurd holds a liberatory stance. Unlike Beckett's

plays, in which there is a constant air of despair and insolubleness even after the plays end, in Pinter's plays there is the existentialist's search for philosophical salvation. Then, Pinter's dramaturgy lies in the fact that the passivity in the plays' beginning is disrupted by the sudden, unexpected action and violence and helps reflect the feeling of ambiguity, unexpectedness and absurdity of life in the plays, which is compatible with the real life. Violence is as abrupt as in real life, and as unreasonable and unexplainable. James R. Hollis puts forward: "But even though Pinter's plays often seem bizarre and rather mysterious, they are nevertheless overtly realistic in their mood and movements" (8). In other words, the plays' apparent mystery is welcomed by their equally realistic nature. This can be attached to the plays' existentialist approach to life and Pinter's presentation of the absurd.

In essence, Pinter's plays are set in the present, but this is vague also because Pinter does not provide his audience with information as to the characters' motives in the present time. This is the problem of verification. The plays do not verify the past or the future. Characters often say that "they do not remember" when they are asked specific questions. This helps to the overall state of ambiguity and absurdity of the plays and is compatible with the characteristics of the absurdist plays. Harold Pinter points out that his characters are unable to verify even the day before or a few minutes ago. He argues: "If you were asked to remember, you really cannot be sure of whom you met 20 years before. And in what circumstances" (qtd. in Dukore *Macmillan* 9). This is why there are the three dots, pauses and silences in Pinter's plays which are peculiar to him; which will be fully analysed in the following sections. Furthermore, Esslin explains in *The Theatre of the Absurd* that difficulty of verification is a major concern of Pinter's (206). He states: "There is the problem of the *possibility* of ever knowing the real motivation behind the actions of human beings who are complex and whose psychological makeup is contradictory and unverifiable" (Esslin 206). Pinter himself explains that audience's desire for verification is natural but cannot be satisfied because one thing is not entirely true or false, real or unreal for that thing can be both true and false, real and unreal (qtd. in Esslin *Theatre* 206). This is the idea behind Harold Pinter's plays' seeming meaninglessness, because nothing is verified. Dukore points out: "Although the unreliability of memory is a major theme of Pinter's later plays, it

inheres in his earlier works as well and is one reason for the difficulty of verifying what a character says" (9). Dukore also argues that characters are also unable to verify their own being, or "their essence", their attempts to clarify themselves remains fruitless (11). In this regard, the lack of verification represents the absurdity of real life and the tragedy of human beings; because nothing is known and there is no meaning in life. Similarly, Dukore goes on to argue that since events are ambiguous and unexplained, Pinter's world seems dangerous and almost evil because:

> One can rely upon nothing. What is apparently secure is not secure. A haven does not protect. A weapon vanishes without warning. Linguistic absurdity may suggest the absurdity of the human condition. Fear of a menace may suggest the universal trauma of man in the universe. (27)

Then, Pinter's characters' existential traumas and their tragedies are reflected in Pinter's plays in their being unverified and unsure of everything, their reluctance to communicate and thus their whimsical dialogue, and finally, their feeling like they are in danger all the time. Even in the security the womb-like rooms promise them turns out to be full of threat. It becomes impossible for characters to rely on the room, on each other, or on the world.

2.3.1. Pinteresque and Comedy of Menace

Pinteresque, less commonly known as Pinterese, is the term used to define specific devices used by Harold Pinter in his plays. Although it is unknown who gave the name to Pinter's style; like *Kafkaesque*, *Beckettian* or *Proustian* it has become an adjective referring to specific features of Pinter's dramatic structures, mainly his use of language and dialogue. However, Pinter refused to be categorised in such ways. In an interview with Lawrence Bensky in 1966, when asked about Pinteresque, Pinter expresses that he does not know what they are saying when they use "that word" and he states: "I think it's a great burden for me to carry, and for other writers to carry" (qtd. in Brewer *Harold* 211). Still, Pinter's refusal to not be identified with such terms did not stop the word from being used within the framework of post-war theatre. Uchman explains in *Pinteresque Dialogue*:

> Brewer's Theatre (a theatre dictionary) defines it in the following way: 'Pinteresque: Resembling the work or style of Harold Pinter. It is used especially of dialogue that resembles Pinter's in being oblique, repetitive, interspersed with lengthy pauses... , menacing, and loaded with hidden meanings. (my brackets, 387)

Pinteresque has become an important term in the field of drama to define Pinter's use of some very important devices like the three dots, pauses and silences in his dialogues, within which the underlying meaning is hidden. These devices contribute to the intentional ambiguity and absurdity of Pinter's plays and each defines different states of mind of the characters. From another perspective, Pinteresque is defined in *The Continuum Companion to Twentieth Century Theatre* as such: "... dialogue that is both naturalistic and enigmatic, loaded with significant (and insignificant) pauses" (Chambers 597). The dialogue is naturalistic because it resembles that of real life, with pauses, silences and repetitions. The dialogue is enigmatic, or incomprehensible, also because it is naturalistic. Some of the pauses are very important because the speaker pauses for a reason, and some are not very important because the speaker simply stops speaking. No matter the cause, Pinteresque dialogue is very unique and avant-garde within the framework of the Theatre of the Absurd.

First of all, as it was mentioned before, different use of language is an important aspect within the framework of the Theatre of the Absurd. The disintegration of language leads to lack of communication in the absurdist plays. However, the underlying cause for this lack of communication for Harold Pinter is his desire to reflect another kind of language, which is full of hidden meanings and silences. Pinter's wish to convey a world which is devoid of functioning human relations is provided by this different use of language. Pinter states, regarding this point:

> We have heard many times that tired, grimy phrase, 'failure of communication,' and this phrase has been fixed to my work consistently. I believe the contrary. I think that we communicate only too well in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is continual evasion, desperate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves. I'm not suggesting that no character in a play can ever say what in fact he means. Not at all. I have found that there invariably does

> come a moment when this happens, where he says something, perhaps, which he has never said before. And where this happens, what he says is irrevocable, and can never be taken back. (qtd. in Burkman *Dramatic* 8)

Pinter, then, does not believe that there is failure of communication in his plays. The characters refrain from communicating with one another and this causes a verbal lack of communication. However, Pinter gives importance to the point where his characters do not speak, and why. For him, what lies under the unsaid words is more important than the fact that they refuse to communicate. Similarly, Burkman also points out that verbal lack of communication is important in Pinter's plays, but that Pinter focuses more on the way people avoid communication (8). Because of this avoidance of communication, Pinter provides meaning with silences rather than with words. To sum up, it can be said that this is the *refusal* of communication rather than the *lack* of it and it gives way to silences within the dialogue. Dukore explains:

> To state that they fail to communicate is only sometimes accurate. More often they refuse to. Fearing to expose or reveal themselves, they use words as 'a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smoke screen which keeps the other in its place'. (8)

Thus, the reason for the characters' refusal to communicate with one another is because of their mutual fear to reveal too much of themselves because there is a constant distrust around. Similarly, Pinter talks about his characters and their unsaid words, and states: "It is in the silence that they are most evident to me" (qtd. in Esslin *Pinter* 45). This, according to Martin Esslin, is one of the most important things for Pinter's use of language because the best way of communication for people is through silence (*Pinter* 45-7). Characters say more about their motives or their states of mind with these silences than with the words they use. Because, as it was stated before, characters never speak about what matters or what is going on around them. Their words transcend the action onstage, which is a characteristic of the Theatre of the Absurd. Furthermore, Esslin argues that Pinter's use of silences and pauses is his reaction to the world (*Pinter* 46). His characters cope with their existential crises or the absurdity of the world through these different silences and pauses. Following their dialogue does not give the audience an idea about the characters' motives. Their words are unclear and do not give

a clue about what is going on. Then, it can be said that Pinteresque is defined by the use of what Esslin calls "oblique dialogue" which was introduced by Russian playwright Anton Chekhov (*Pinter* 212). This oblique, or indirect dialogue, is a way to hide the thoughts and anxieties the characters feel threatened by throughout the plays. As Esslin puts forward: "... the text hints at a hidden sub-text" in oblique dialogue (*Pinter* 212). Similarly, Hollis asserts in *Harold Pinter: Poetics of Silence* that Pinter uses silences to make the disharmonious relationship between the characters and language meaningful, through which he reflects the meaninglessness of their situation (2). Then, it can be said that Pinter gives a motive for the lack of communication and the disintegration of language in his plays. The inadequacy of words to make sense of the outer world and of the characters' inner worlds is reflected with the use of silences throughout the plays, where lack of speech becomes accordingly reasonable. Moreover, Uchman argues in *Pinteresque Dialogue*: "Pinter worked out his dramatic dialogue according to the idea that real-life conversations do not proceed smoothly and logically—they are full of unfinished sentences, repetitions and inconsistencies" (387). Then, it can be said that to show the absurdity of life in the plays, Pinter makes use of oblique language and accordingly, oblique dialogues. Knowles states in *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter* that this "estrangement, deformation of language" is Ionesco's basic technique (75). Similarly, Esslin argues that characters in Sophocles and Shakespeare plays speak clearer and more direct than they would in real life (*Pinter* 211). The characters in a Pinter play, then, communicate as people do in real life. This is the reason why Pinter chooses to give place to oblique dialogue, as it is the only possible way to convey the evasion of communication, thereby providing the unwillingness of individuals. Hayman points out: "This is the writing which succeeds by breaking all the rules of writing. It's good because it's so realistically full of bad syntax, tautologies[8], repetitions, pleonasms[9], non-sequiturs[10] and self contradictions" (qtd. in Uchman *Pinteresque* 387). The characters' conversations become as realistic as possible, just like one may hear on the road, on a bus or at home. In real life, sentences are not always

[8]Expressions that say the same thing twice
[9] To use more words than necessary to convey meaning
[10] An irrelevant, often humorous comment to a preceding topic or statement.

grammatically correct. They are full of silences, pauses, small moments of thinking, and thus they are repetitive. Pinter's characters speak in a manner consistent with real life. They feel and reflect their absurd situations not by gibberish, but by realistic conversation. Once again, Pinter presents the absurdity of life with familiar and identifiable, but in an equally menacing way.

In other respects, and relating to Pinteresque; this lack of verbal communication between the characters leads to the rise of the visual image onstage. As it was mentioned earlier, Pinter does not give much importance to what his characters say. Instead, he gives importance to what they do not say. Meaning, at this point, also occurs through the characters' actions and their mannerisms. Regal puts forward in *Harold Pinter: a Question of Timing*:

> According to Pinter, his plays often have their genesis in a visual image. He is impressed by the way his characters stand, sit or move, long before he makes them speak, and their relationship to each other often depends as much on visual as on verbal communication. (2)

In that case, it can be said that the importance of words decreases whereas the importance of silences and actions onstage increases in a Pinter play.

However, the greater part of Pinteresque is provided by Pinter's use of three dots, pauses and silences, as mentioned before. Peter Hall, who directed Pinter's plays for a long time both for the theatre and for film adaptations, identifies these usages in *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*. First of all, he explains that the three dots, or the ellipsis, is "...a kind of pressure point, a search for a word, a momentary incoherence" (163). Whenever there is the three dots in a Pinter play, then, it means that characters are searching for the right word to say, but is momentarily unable to do so. For Peter Hall, the three dots is "a very tiny hesitation" (qtd. in Dukore *Macmillan* 10). The characters do not have to find a new word to give full meaning, most of the time they are unable to do so, and they say the same word once again, or they say the opposite of what they have just said. Secondly, a pause, Hall goes on to state in *The Cambridge Companion*, is "...a longer interruption to the action, where the lack of speech becomes a form of speech itself" (163). The pause interrupts, or literally pauses, the action on stage. Whereas the three dots are a momentary state of thinking for the

right choice of word, the pause lasts longer and there is no speech, and the audience does not expect the dialogue to continue. Furthermore, Moore asserts in the preface to *Harold Pinter: Poetics of Silence* that part of Pinter's use of pauses stems from the fact that he was an actor before he started writing dramas, mostly in Shakespearean companies where pauses were used to define underlying meanings (viii). His use of pauses, then, has become an important device for his drama. Additionally, Hollis goes on to argue that during a pause, the speaker who stopped talking may be expecting an answer or a reaction from the other party (14) and that the speaker "... has reached the limits of language and now waits in silence for something to happen" (15). It can be said that the Pinter pause can be considered as playing an important part in the dialogues between characters.

Lastly, according to Hall, silence is the longest. He states that a silence is:

> ... extreme crisis point. Often the character emerges from the Silence with his attitude completely changed. As members of the audience, we should *feel* what happens in a Pause; but we can and should be frequently surprised by the change in a character as he emerges from a Silence. The change in him is often unexpected and highly dramatic. (*Cambridge* 163)

Pinter's use of silences, then, is a turning point for the characters. After each silence, the audience witnesses that there is a change in the character's behaviour and that the character is different from before the silence. The reason for this could be that the characters fall into silence because what they actually want to say is terrifying and they are scared. The silence can be the continuation of moments of realization for the characters. This is why silences are very important in Pinter's plays. Furthermore, Hall goes on to state: "By their use, the unsaid becomes sometimes more terrifying and more eloquent than the said" (*Cambridge* 163). Then, as Hall also states, these pauses are parts of the text as much as they are an interruption to it. Also, Moore argues that in his use of silence, Pinter obliges "... to the how of communication and not to the what" (*Harold* viii). Then, it can be said that the important element is not what is being said in Pinter's dialogues. What matters in his plays is how the communication, or sometimes the lack of it, is being reflected. Furthermore, the lack of communication in the plays can also be interpreted as deficient communication. Language and communication are

deficient, somehow flawed, because their purpose becomes not reflecting ideas but covering, hiding them. French writer Stendhal points out: "... man was gifted with speech to help him conceal his thoughts" (qtd. in Hollis *Harold* 15). Hollis goes on to argue:

> So much of the sound which surrounds us today is the product of our existential anxieties and represents our refusal to accept the consequences of our finitude and our isolation. This is the silence which lies behind language and which always threatens to break into our conversations in embarrassing ways. This is the silence which is most evident when the world is at its noisiest. This is *the silence which emerges when the most important things are left unsaid* (15).

Within the scope of the Theatre of the Absurd and Existentialism, then, speech and language is seen as something which does not cover the real thoughts, but is an exercise of trying to hide them. This form of speech in itself is considered to be silence when the speakers are at their most vulnerable and anxious states of mind. However, perhaps the best way to understand Pinter's silences would be to turn to his own explanation of it:

> There are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed. This speech is speaking of a language locked beneath it. That is its continual reference. The speech we hear is an indication of that which we don't hear. It is a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smoke screen which keeps the other in its place. When true silence falls we are still left with echo but are nearer nakedness. One way of looking at speech is to say that it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness (qtd. in Hollis *Harold* 15).

The second kind of silence Pinter talks about is when the speakers are trying to hide their true feelings and angst, as mentioned before. It can be accepted as more deceptive compared to the other kind of silence when the speaker stops talking. Refusal or avoidance of communication, then, does not only have to be in the form of complete silence. The speakers can refuse to communicate even when they are speaking, but by not talking about what are apparently on their mind. Furthermore, Hollis identifies another kind of silence, which can be observed in Pinter's plays. He explains that this silence occurs when the characters go through anagnorisis (*Harold* 16). Anagnorisis can

be summarised as the moment of sheer revelation for the character who had been clueless before. That moment of realization becomes groundbreaking in the character's life, thus speech becomes irrelevant because all facts have come out.

Another important device that can be interpreted within the scope of the Pinteresque is repetition, as mentioned before. Generally, repetition has an important place the Theatre of the Absurd, as reminiscent of Samuel Beckett. Often, repetition follows the three dots, which is the process of a small hesitation, as stated above. Then, repetition as a Pinteresque device can be interpreted together with the three dots. Also, Baker states in *Harold Pinter* that Pinter uses repetition to convey information (40). Repetition is used because, Baker states, it is: "... a reflection of characters struggling to articulate their feelings..." (40). It is, then, a moment of being unable to put the right words together. The characters repeat what they have just said, because there is no other word to say, or the alternative word is menacing for them. The use of repetitions within the difficulty of communication is avant-garde because it is a new characteristic which was almost never seen in the plays of former periods. Similarly, Burkman states: "The repetitions and lack of logic of ordinary conversation that the tightly knit realistic play so rarely includes are carefully woven into the texture of Pinter's dramatic world and give it its distinctive combination of the banal and the strange" (5). Then, it can be said that repetitions add to the desired effect of Harold Pinter's plays, which is to convey life as realistically as possible, with its abrupt nature.

English author and drama critic Irving Wardle named Pinter's drama as comedies of menace[11] in *Encore* magazine in 1958. In Pinter's plays, menace comes from the unidentified outside world and the dangers it may bring upon. Pinter provides this with the hidden meanings lying under the unsaid words. This is a means of menace for the characters in Pinter's early plays. Neil King explains in *Dictionary of Literature in English*: "Comedy of menace is a term originating in the 1950s to denote a type of play in which the *characters* feel, or indeed are, threatened, e.g. *Pinter's The Birthday Party*" (32). Then, it is a type of comedy which heightens the sense of fear. Similarly, Hinchliffe argues that comedy of menace hints at a mixture of genres and adds: "We

[11] The term "comedy of menace" was first coined by David Campton in 1957, which puns on "comedy of manners" (*Macmillan Modern Dramatists: Harold Pinter* 25).

find here a comedy that frightens and causes pain" (38). Pinter's interest in threats and menace obviously stems from the effect of war on him and on the people. Unlike the pre-war understanding of theatre, theatre in the post-war period is interested in the dangers human beings pose. As the trust between individuals is lost and people are afraid of what dangers may come next, such an interest in the idea of threat and menace is understandable on the part of Pinter who witnessed war and its destructive effect. Newton notes in *Modern Literature and the Tragic*:

> The main threat to humanity in the second half of the twentieth century comes from within the human realm itself and not from some non-human 'other', since human beings had created the means, most obviously nuclear weapons, that gave them the capacity for destroying themselves and the whole of life. (149)

Then, it can be said that Pinter's idea of menace defines a sort of danger which is expected from within and in this sense has more dangerous connotations for human beings. Also, through his particular use of menace, Pinter makes menace in his plays more mysterious by not providing a particular source of danger. Hinchliffe states: "... in Pinter's plays, the potency of menace derives from an inability to define its source or reason even though it is all-pervasive. If it can be categorized, it is simply the constant threat to the individual personality, a vague enough category to keep it alive" (40). Then, it is because the feeling of menace that the characters feel around them all the time is unidentifiable that the plays are so enigmatic and absurd at the same time. The feeling of menace, physical or verbal, is always around and it is an obstacle on the way of self-overcoming process of the individuals. In other words, the feeling of menace makes them unable to make sense of the world around them. Menace is also provided with setting in Pinter's plays. In his plays, Pinter places the menacing and absurd world in a more familiar setting compared to Beckett's plays, thus making them fuller of threat. Similarly, Hinchliffe explains that in Beckett's plays the menace becomes weakened because of the use of symbolic and unearthly landscape (41). He adds: "Pinter's terror and menace are greater because they exist in the house next door" (41). The use of such setting makes the audience feel closer to the unknown threat, and thus makes it easier for the audience to identify with the play and characters. In this sense, it

can be said that Pinter's placing the threatful setting in a familiar place contributes to the plays' absurd atmosphere.

From another perspective, the idea of menace, or threat, comes from the unsaid words. As mentioned in the previous section, these unsaid words and meanings give way to the three dots, silences and pauses. Peter Hall argues: "The unsaid becomes sometimes more terrifying by their use" (163). In the end, these hidden emotions come to surface and this is how violence occurs in Pinter's plays (164). Similarly, William Baker explains in *Harold Pinter*: "Once violence takes place, words become meaningless" (40). Then, it can be said that the frustration that is caused by the trauma of existence leads to an eruption of violence.

However, menace does not only come from unsaid words. Baker explains in *Harold Pinter* that there is xenophobia[12] in Pinter's works (42). Indeed, menace almost always occurs in the form of a stranger in Pinter's plays. Chui quotes:

> The menace comes from the outside, from the intruder whose arrival unsettles the warm, comfortable world bounded by four walls, and any intrusion can be menacing, because the element of uncertainty and unpredictability the intruder brings with him is in itself menacing. (qtd. in Chui *Affirming* 7)

Here, menace is regarded as intrusion of the unknown. From this perspective, it can be said that menace can also be seen as anyone or anything that interrupts the daily routine of the characters. Any outside effect, then, is dangerous. According to Chui, Pinter reflects this in his plays as such: "The term 'intrude' implies negative connotations and 'intruders' in Pinter's plays are ascribed a set of qualities that are contingent on social stereotypes: they are base, obnoxious, deceptive, scheming, and they often bear ill intentions" (7). To touch briefly, this also leads to the power struggles in Pinter's plays because the strangers/intruders become victimizers and main characters become victims (Chui 7). Then, the biggest proportion of the notion of menace is provided by the intruder figure whose intrusion brings about chaos ad causes violence to erupt in Pinter's plays. Baker states in *Harold Pinter*: "Pinter's work is pervaded with fear and human conflict, the fight for survival and space, especially embodied in the fear of the outsider and the foreigner" (42). The characters' absurdly repetitive daily routine and

[12] Fear of, or hostility to, strangers

their meaningless conversations are interrupted by the entrance of an outside force whose aim is unknown, and it is at that point that the characters come face to face with the tragedy of the world and its unknown threats.

However, sometimes menace is more ambiguous in Pinter's plays. There is a constant air of threat and danger about but the source of it is not directly shown or hinted. Dukore argues: "While menace may take the shape of particular characters, it is usually unspecified or unexplained -therefore, more ominous" (26). Then, it can be said that at this point the desired effect for the audience must be to feel threatened by some unknown source all the time, and to comprehend the disharmony between the characters and the world.

Pinter reflects in his plays the feeling of menace through the motif of the room and the door. Rooms and doors, as mentioned before, are reoccurring themes in early Pinter plays. Burkman asserts that the reason for such simplicity is, once again, because of the problem of verification in life:

> ... Pinter's exploration of that in life which is not easily verifiable leads him back to such essentials in drama as "the suspense created by the elementary ingredients of pure, pre-literary theatre; a stage, two people, a door; a poetic image of an undefined fear and expectation. (6)

In other words, Pinter's setting is almost always a room with four walls and two people in it living in an endless loop that is daily life and chores. The reason for this is that there is always unknown fear around, so Pinter finds life to be unverifiable. Thus it is impossible to give much explanation in a play as well. Similarly, Esslin explains: "The room, which is the center and chief poetic image of the play, is one of the recurring motifs of Pinter's work" (*Theatre* 199). Esslin then quotes from Pinter himself:

> Two people in a room-I am dealing a great deal of the time with this image of two people in a room. The curtain goes up on the stage, and I see it as a very potent question: What is going to happen to these two people in the room? Is someone going to open the door and come in? (qtd. in Esslin *Theatre* 199)

Then, it can be said that Pinter sees the outside world as a dangerous, violent and unfamiliar world in his own experience and reflects the world in his plays as such. The outside world which is damaged by the war is obviously threatening for Pinter and also

for his characters. Esslin points out that the door is: "... a poetic image of an undefined fear and expectation" (*Theatre* 199). "This undefined fear and expectation is what leads to menace in the plays and is the starting point of Pinter's plays for Esslin. Furthermore, Peter Thomson points out that the reason why Pinter chooses the room as a recurring motif is that people feel threatened, and as a result they choose to take refuge in the room (*Harold* 22). To sum up, it can be said that this stems from that moment in Pinter's childhood when he saw the flying bomb, or when he opened the garden door to disaster. Apparently this later reflected on his plays as the "door" being an image that welcomes threat, and the "room" or the "house" as places of security and shelter, although in the end it turns out that the room is not also very safe.

Furthermore, the notion of menace can be seen as the counterpart of Kierkegaardian anxiety. The characters' existential fears are reflected upon the unidentified strangers and what they may bring about through the door and into the room. Esslin argues:

> ... Pinter, like Heidegger, takes as his starting point, in man's confrontation with himself and the nature of his own being, that fundamental anxiety which is nothing less than a living being's basic awareness of the threat of non-being, of annihilation. (*Pinter* 35)

At this point, Kierkegaardian anxiety becomes menace. Also quoted in the first chapter, Kierkegaard states in *The Concept of Anxiety* that anxiety occurs when the individual realizes that he is alone in the world (171). Here, this loneliness happens within four walls. The individuals are alone because other people are dangerous. This revelation brings about the fear of annihilation, or of the fear of ceasing to exist.

Moreover, Esslin argues that the real menace is also in the uncertainty of the human condition because we cannot know who we are, what is real and what is not (*Pinter* 51-52). To sum up, it can be said that comedy of menace is about the absurdity of human condition. As human condition is both funny and tragic, the comedy of menace provides the necessary elements of both tragedy and comedy.

The idea of menace is also affected by the power struggles in Pinter's comedies of menace. Despite the fact that power struggles in Pinter's plays are more important within the scope of his later plays which are more political than absurd, there are

definitely power struggles in his early plays in terms of verbal violence and torture. Mary Luckhurst argues in *Torture in the Plays of Harold Pinter*: "Pinter's fascination with power politics, cruelty and violence is clear in his earliest plays ..." (358), which is definitely an effect of World War II. Pinter also states that violence is always a part of his plays because: "We are brought up every day of our lives in this world of violence" (qtd. in Luckhurst *Torture* 359). Power struggles between the characters, oppressors and oppressed ones, victors and victims are important because they are also elements that create menace in the plays. As mentioned before, power struggles are usually seen between the protagonists and the strangers that come from the outside world, showing the brutality and danger it holds. Sometimes this danger gets really physical, and most of the time it is in the form of verbal tyranny. Also, in Pinter's first three plays, there are power struggles between the pairs as well. Interchangeably, one of the characters oppresses the other, thus it is not always known who is oppressing whom (Dukore 59). This is obviously reminiscent of Samuel Beckett. However, Pinter's power struggles are more violent than Beckett's. Still, it can be said that in terms of comedy of menace, power struggles are also a means to show the unreliable, disharmonious relationships between individuals. David Ball argues on the matter of threat in *Tribute to Harold Pinter*: "Either someone or something threatens them from the outside, or there is a threat between them: one of them, for example, sneakily threatens others [...] The room is full of threat; all the characters try to be threatening at a given moment but, for the most part, in an unconvincing way." (147-8). In this regard, it can be said that the reason for shifting power struggles in Pinter's plays stem from the fact that the characters become the source of menace from time to time. Dukore exlains: "In their battles Pinter's characters use words and silences as weapons" (59). It can be said, then, that in Pinter's plays power struggles are determined though words. To put the matter in another way, words are used as powerful weapons in the characters shifting power relations.

To sum up, it can be said that the concept of menace in Pinter's plays occurs in many forms, sometimes separately, sometimes collectively. Menace can be in the form of unsaid words, strangers that carry the dangers of the outside world, the door that opens to outside and the room as a not very safe haven, as the counterpart of anxiety,

uncertainty of the human condition, and the power struggles between the pairs that the plays centre on.

Moreover, as characteristic of the Theatre of the Absurd and related with Comedy of Menace, Pinter's plays are also tragicomedies. The plays start with elements of comedy but then the plays take a turn and they become tragic and violent. Dukore argues: "Frequently Pinter's plays begin comically but turn to physical, psychological, or potential violence -sometimes, in varying sequences, to all three" (26). At this point, in the *Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*, Francesca Coppa states that threat and/or menace is created by comedy (45). She goes on to explain: "... the conflict that was funny in microcosm becomes unsettling or even horrifying when magnified and examined... What was comedy has now become menace; and lo and behold, they are precisely the same thing" (49). Then, it can be said that menace is both in the tragic and the comic characteristics of the plays. As mentioned before; the moment laughter stops, tragedy begins. Esslin similarly explains:

> ... much of the laughter that accompanies his plays up to that point where they cease to be funny, is already the laughter of precaution against panic, the whistling in the dark of people who are trying to protect themselves against the menace, the horror, which lies at the core of the action they are witnessing. (*Pinter* 51)

In other words, the moment tragedy/menace shows itself, it is no longer funny. It was mentioned before that for Esslin life is funny only up to a certain moment. That moment comes as the menace and/or tragedy of the human situation rise to the surface (Esslin *Theatre* 205). Then, it can be said that laughter is when the individuals are oblivious of reality. When they realize that there is a vague danger lurking around, the plays stop being funny and menace shows itself as Coppa explains: "Menace depends on ignorance; the terror of it stems from the vagueness of the threat" (51). The moment characters realize the absurdity of their own existences, then, the plays are no longer funny and are full of menace.

Then, it can be deducted that Harold Pinter's use of the absurd is unique. Despite the fact that he was largely affected from the proponents of the Theatre of the Absurd; like Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco, his style and his rather characteristic way of

conferring meaning in his plays is especially noteworthy. Pinter successfully takes the post-war understanding of a lonely, hopeless individual in a claustrophobic universe and applies to the everyday life of his characters. Like Beckett, his characters are stuck in the world. However, he differs from Beckett in that Pinter's characters are trying to protect themselves in the supposedly safe rooms and houses. In this sense, it can be said that Pinter gives a new impulse to the Theatre of the Absurd. His characters' fear of the outside world proves to be plausible and his factual and intentional lack of explanation contributes to the ambiguous and menacing atmosphere in his plays. The constant air of unreliability makes the audience all the more sceptical towards the strangers which the characters are afraid of. The idea of menace becomes sensible because the strangers are in the position of intruders who disturb the order in the rooms, that is, if there is any. Also, Pinter's use of dialogue becomes effective as his characters are more meaningful in their silences than in their words. Menace is so subtly interwoven in the dialogues that the characters and the audience always feel on the edge. In the next chapter, Pinter's first three plays will be analysed from the perspective of menace as an absurd notion.

CHAPTER 3
MENACE AS AN ABSURD NOTION IN THE PLAYS OF HAROLD PINTER

3.1. Menace as a Presentation of Existential Trauma in *The Room*

Harold Pinter's first play *The Room* is a one act play which was written in 1957. As the title suggests, it is about a room and the people who live in it. Not much is known about where the room is because Pinter only explains that the room is situated in a large house. From the very first lines of the play, Pinter raises an air of ambiguity as to the whereabouts of the room, its shape, its colour, and its characteristics in general. The only information Pinter provides is what the room contains. The room provides safety for Rose and Bert, an old couple living in the room. Throughout the play, Rose remains an observer to life. She keeps saying how she is so happy for being in the room and how safe and nice the room is as opposed to the world outside of their room, even the building itself. Pinter thus contrasts the room to the outside world, achieving the effect he wants to give with the symbolisation of the room as a safe haven and the outside world as a very dark and terrible place. However, no matter how safe Rose thinks the room is, the dangers the door and the outside world symbolise for Rose are compatible with the play's end, as the intruder Riley comes in and disrupts the safety of the room, causing Rose to go blind.

This chapter will generally analyse Pinter's use of menace as the cause of the characters' absurd stances in life and will mainly focus on the main character Rose's way of questioning the absurdity of life. Rose is a character that tries to understand the world through her eyes. So her inactive state of living is the reason why she goes blind in the end. It will then be analysed that Rose is questioning life through her sight, as a mere observer to the world around her. It will be concluded that as a result of her fears of the outside world and her lack of courage, Rose loses the only thing that identifies her, which is her eyesight. Thus, it will be stated that in order for a person to truly exist and fulfil the process of self-overcoming, he or she has to go out into the world and find their *raison d'être*; otherwise their existences, in whichever way they are identified, are bound to cease.

3.1.1. Menace and The Absurd Existence

Pinter uses the idea of menace and the absurd in his play *The Room.* The play represents the absurd relationship of the traumatised individuals with the outside world. In this sense, it can be said that absurdity is generated from the idea of menace in the plays as it is the characters' fear of danger and threat that makes their lives dull and their relationship with the world disharmonious. Despite the fact that the play does not hint at a mention of war, the world Pinter presents is a replica of post-war Europe with characters who do not trust each other, their existential crises and their coping mechanisms with the dangers proposed by the outside world. Although the play does not seem to convey any kind of meaning and seems highly unreasonable because nothing really happens, it can be said that Pinter takes an instant photo of the daily life of post-war Europeans and reflects how random life is, thus presenting life's absurdity.

The play alienates even the most common everyday deeds with its menacing atmosphere and mystery. Here, it must be noted that although the play does not seem to tell a story, the play's absurdity, the characters' loneliness, and their going about their lives without purpose creates this menacing and mysterious atmosphere. Pinter purposefully refrains from giving information about or making explanations on the action of his play. Dukore explains:

> What happens creates an atmosphere of suspicion and fear. Therefore ambiguities and contradictions are understandable, for people evade issues and refuse to reveal themselves. Such evasion and stealth are among the play's subjects. In other words, it is not the characters' background that is of major dramatic concern but their avoidance of revealing it. (29)

Then, looking for background information or trying to understand the characters' motives in *The Room* would be in vain. The play's realism places it in a realm that makes it familiar with the audience, thus creating the same atmosphere of menace that Rose feels throughout the play and altogether making the audience fear the menace, as well.

Pinter also creates this air of menace and absurd with his use of language. Language holds an essential place in the play because it is in characters' silences and

pauses that Pinter presents meaninglessness. Martin Esslin states in *The Theatre of the Absurd* that *The Room* includes:

> ... the uncannily cruel accuracy of his (Pinter's) reproduction of the inflections and rambling irrelevancy of everyday speech; the commonplace situation that is gradually invested with menace, dread, and mystery; the deliberate omission of an explanation or a motivation for the action. (my brackets, 199)

Thus, it can be said that *The Room* incorporates the aforementioned characteristics of the absurdist plays in the sense that it disintegrates language in a way to conflict the meaning. Thus, Pinter aims to show how such destruction like war affects relationships and how people's existential crises rise to surface in such claustrophobic atmosphere as post-war Europe. Therefore, as language is not enough for the characters, especially for Rose to communicate, all there is left for Rose to exist is her eyes, through which she observes her surroundings.

Rose's fear regarding the outside world is what makes her life meaningless. It becomes a form of waiting in the world as opposed to *being-in-the-world*. In an interview, when he is asked what the characters are afraid of, Harold Pinter answers: "Obviously they are scared of what is outside the room. Outside the room there is a world bearing upon them which is frightening. I am sure it is frightening to you and me as well" (qtd. in Hollis *Harold* 21). Then, Rose's everlasting cycle of being in the room is a representative of her state of being-in-the-world and makes her existence in the world futile. In the end, she meets a violent end. Through such presentation, Pinter portrays a human life full of despair showing that without a purpose life has no meaning. In Rose's case, without a purpose one loses what makes them human. It is up to the individuals to try and find this purpose; otherwise their existences are taken from them. For Rose, her fear of the outside world causes her to lose her eyesight. The woman who is so afraid of seeing the outside world loses the ability to see. In other words, the only thing that identifies and proves that Rose exists goes away, leading to her metaphorical death. Thus, it can be said that Rose's way of being-in-the-world is merely identified by her observance of the world. Her fear prevents her from stepping out of her shell and being a part of life, no matter how scary it may be. She suffers from what Kierkegaard calls despair and anxiety, thus being unable to reach self-overcoming.

In her one-sided conversation with Bert, she gives away her fears of what is outside the room:

> ROSE. ... 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, Bert. But whoever it is, it can't be too cosy.
>
> *Pause.*
>
> I think it's changed hands since I was last there. I didn't see who moved in then. I mean the first time it was taken.
>
> *Pause.*
>
> Anyway, I think they've gone now.
>
> *Pause.*
>
> But I think someone else has gone in now. I wouldn't like to live in that basement. Did you ever see the walls? They were running. This is all right for me. Go on, Bert. Have a bit more bread. (92)

Here, it must be noted that Rose keeps using the verb "see" throughout the monologue. Rose is only able to try to comprehend to world through her eyes, because she is unable to attain any other experience through living it. The more she cannot see the world, the more she becomes afraid of it and vice versa. She has never seen who moved in, so this person has to be scary for her. However, she has seen the walls of the basement, which is proof that she cannot live there. Then, her ability to see is the only thing through which she can identify things.

The play centres on Rose's loneliness in a world which seems to be full of dangers and mysteries for her. Thus, she refrains from going out, does not like strangers and is merely concerned with taking care of her husband. It is seen from the very beginning of the play that Rose contrasts the room with the outside world. For her, her biggest achievement in life is having found the room they are living in with her husband Bert. Rose keeps telling everyone how the room is very nice and cosy throughout the play. Bert does not seem to share the same feelings and remains silent up until the moment the play gets closer to the end; it is Rose who is talking all the time. Pinter starts the play with a basic act of daily routine: breakfast. Such normality is broken with

Rose's fear of what is outside the room. In one of her vey first lines, she says: "It's very cold out, I can tell you. It's *murder*" (my emphasis, 91). Rose can simply say that it is too cold outside, but she chooses to use the word "murder". From the very first lines of the play, Pinter wants to raise tension and create a menacing atmosphere by using such a word. Indeed, it was murder outside for Pinter himself during the years of war. So, it is understandable why outside world holds such connotations for Pinter. Rose goes on to say that the room is warm and that she cannot understand how anyone can live in the basement because "It's asking for *trouble*" (my emphasis, 91). Once again, the word "trouble" is used for the world outside the room, even though it is still part of the building the room is in. The only thing that keeps Rose and Bert safe, in her opinion, is the room.

> ROSE. This is a good room. You've got a chance in a place like this. I look after you, don't I, Bert? Like when they offered us the basement here I said no straight off. I knew that'd be no good. The ceiling right on top of you. No, you've got a window here, you can move yourself, you can come home at night, if you have to go out, you can do your job, you can come home, you're all right. And I'm here. *You stand a chance*. (my italics, 95)

Then, it can be said that Rose likes staying in the room and living the same day over and over again as a mere observer to life because she is too afraid to go out. She thinks because the room feels safe to her, one stands a chance. Furthermore, she does not mention her going out, but Bert's. Bert stands a chance of surviving because he will come back to the room even though he goes out. It is Bert's existence that is at hand, not Rose's. It is almost like Rose does not exist at all. Similarly, Esslin states in (*Theatre)* that the room becomes sort of a safe haven for Rose, which is the only security she finds in a menacing and hostile world (200). For her, staying in and living her life in this way is better than going out and asking for trouble. However, she does not seem to realise that this makes her life meaningless and absurd. From the very first lines of the play, it is obvious that this murderous and troubling world will somehow disrupt Rose's life which she tries so hard to keep together. Martin Esslin states in (*Pinter):*

> A warm room surrounded by a cold and hostile world is, in Pinter's case, already in itself a very dangerous situation. Somebody will be pushed from the warmth of the room out into the cold ... From the very first moments of the play Pinter stresses Rose's fears by her constant insistence on the cosiness and warmth of the room, as against the dampness and obscurity of the basement flat which had at first been offered to them. (61)

From the beginning, it is obvious that someone will go out into the cold as Rose stresses. Also, it is evident that this person will not be Rose. Rose is too passive of a character to go out, she is too scared. Bert will obviously be the one to leave the comfort of the room. His silence is impregnated with the fear Rose feels. Bert may be silent because he knows what is outside, so he does not speak at all as the truth is not endearing for him. However, he is part of a cycle as opposed to the static Rose. In other words, Bert exists whereas Rose observes.

Rose's equal curiosity and fear of the world outside the cosy room makes her unable to leave the room, making her life dull and purposeless. In *Harold Pinter*, William Baker analyses this situation as such: "Rose and Bert in their room have constructed a barrier of words and routine around themselves. Her nervous inconsequential banter has created deafness in Bert, her husband. Their world is one of utter boredom" (40). Then, it can be deducted that Pinter successfully combines elements of menace and absurdity in *The Room* with Kierkegaardian anxiety, despair and boredom. Again, Pinter provides the atmosphere of menace as a cause to absurdity in the play. It is the main reason why Rose's life is stuck in an absurd loop of staying in and taking care of her husband, ignoring everything in her life and about her existence. For Rose, their everyday life is a womb protecting them from the outside world whereas Bert is more inclined to go out. It is only when he goes out that his symbolic deafness is cured and he starts talking using sexual metaphors about his van.

> BERT. I got back all right.
> ROSE *(going towards him)*. Yes.
> BERT. I got back all right.
> *Pause*.

ROSE. Is it late?

BERT. I had a good bowl down there.

Pause.

I drove her down, hard. They got it dark out.

ROSE. Yes.

BERT. Then I drove her back, hard. They got it very icy out.

ROSE. Yes.

BERT. But I drove her.

Pause.

I sped her.

Pause.

I caned her along. She was good. Then I got back ... There was no mixing it. Not with her. She was good. She went with me. She don't mix it with me. I use my hand. Like that. I get hold of her. I go where I go. She took me there. She brought me back.

Pause.

I got back all right. (115-116)

Bert is apparently trying to establish superiority after he goes out and comes back. Up to this moment it was Rose who seemed to have power over Bert, but after his day outside the room, Bert comes back feeling somehow superior in his own way. Then, it can be said that only by going out can one overcome themselves, no matter what this may mean for each individual. Bert heals his deafness and his passivity when he goes out, finding his true self. Apparently, Rose should also do the same in order to truly exist, in whatever way possible. In Bert's case, he overcomes himself and feels "strong" and "manly" after such long passivity. For Bert, existing in the world may mean dominance, so he is the closer character to achieving a meaningful existence compared to Rose. His silence and deafness go away. The sexual innuendos he uses without being aware mean his self-overcoming process starts as he goes outside the room. Once again, existence precedes essence.

3.1.2. Imprisonment and the Threshold

Along with the constant mention of the outside world being dark and dangerous, Rose always talks about the basement which she is afraid of as it is "damp". Then, the basement, or the very first floor of the building is decaying and the apartment will not stand for long. The mention of damp proves that Rose will soon have to get out of the room as well. As the room is set on this building, and the play is set on the room, Pinter apparently wants to emphasise the unreliability of Rose's life. Similarly, according to Esslin too, this uncertain and ambiguous atmosphere is created mainly with the setting. He states:

> The mystery and dreamlike anxiety that pervades the first half of the play, in fact, emerges from the contrast between the clarity and realism of these well observed features and the layers of darkness which envelop this pool of light: the night outside, the basement, the large, unexplored house with its uncertain number of floors; ... (*Pinter: a study of his plays* 66)

Pinter's use of such setting is because of the fact that he wants to reflect the feeling of being stuck in the world. Rose and Bert are both stuck. Their respective loneliness refers to different states of being-in-the-world. Rose is not silent but observant, whereas Bert seems to be aware that the only way to exist in the world is through accepting it absurdity. Hinchliffe states: "Bert is isolated by his own silence, Rose is herself isolated within the emotional world of her own creation" (48). This is the reason why Rose is the one who does not stop talking about everything she sees and the one who observes the world whereas Bert has accepted life as it is but violent underneath. However, they are both stuck in the ambiguous setting. Bert's only relationship with the outside world is provided by his van which he inflicts with sexual connotations. Rose's relationship with the outside world is non-existent. Therefore, outside world is as unknown to the audience as it is to Rose. The only characters who seem to have seen outside are everyone else but Rose. In this regard, Rose becomes the embodiment of existential trauma. Her constant questioning the situation of the basement brings to mind the question of whether she has ever been outside during her life with Bert. It is obvious

that before the time the outside world became dangerous, she went out and she had a life. Now, her past and her current life are made ambiguous by Pinter.

On the other hand, the only other character who seems to feel the same feeling of existential trauma is Mr. Sands.

> MRS. SANDS. *(rising).* I didn't bring you into the world.
> MR. SANDS. You didn't what?
> MRS. SANDS. I said, I didn't bring you into the world.
> MR. SANDS. Well, who did then? That's what I want to know. Who did? *Who did bring me into the world?* (my italics, 106)

Mr. Sands' question may mean he does not know who his parents are. However, from an Existentialist point of view, he simply wants to know why he is alive and what the purpose of his *being-in-the-world* is. Apparently, Pinter wants him to mean both. No matter what he means, he feels stuck in his surroundings just like Rose. In Pinter's world, there is a connection between such blurry and ambiguous setting and the characters' feeling uncertain and claustrophobic in the world.

The Room is evidently set in a dream-like world. The ambiguity of it resembles a setting in a dream where the occupants do not remember their past, do not understand each other and cannot remember what they have just said, which is characteristic of the theatre of the absurd. The characters cannot be sure of their surroundings, including Rose who wants to know more. For example, neither Rose nor Mr. Kidd seems to remember how many floors there are in the apartment, which is incompatible. Mr. Kidd seems to be both the landlord and the caretaker, which is never clarified. Also, he once lived in Rose's room. In such circumstances he is supposed to know the number of floors in the apartment. However, he is oblivious.

> ROSE. How many floors you got in this house?
> MR. KIDD. Floors. *(He laughs.)* Ah, we had a good few of them in the old days.
> ROSE. How many have you got now?
> MR. KIDD. Well, to tell you the truth, I don't count them now. (98)

The house becomes nightmarish both for Rose and for the audience. Even if Rose manages to go out of the room and into the building, it is doubtful how many floors she will have to pass through. She wants to learn what may be waiting for her, but it is always unknown. She has to go out and find out for herself. Such veiling of information causes the fear of the unknown on the part of Rose. About this particular dialogue, it is stated in *Macmillan Modern Dramatists: Harold Pinter*: "Such comic passages also help create an atmosphere of menace, mystery, evasion, and matters deliberately concealed. Frequently Pinter's plays begin comically but turn to physical, psychological, or potential violence- sometimes, in varying sequences, to all three" (Dukore 26). Furthermore, the number of floors will not change even if Mr. Kidd counts them or not. This joke which is skilfully placed within Rose and Mr. Kidd's dialogue causes menace because it hints that maybe if he counts them, the number may turn out to be different. This obscures the setting even more and makes it all the more dream-like, or even nightmarish.

Then, the room has connotations of imprisonment and limitation. The familiar and secure four-walls that Rose spends her life in become a sort of prison, rendering their existences utterly meaningless. Similarly, it is stated in *Harold Pinter: Poetics of Silence* that in Pinter's plays, despite the fact that the rooms are presented in a naturalistic way, when the plays come to an end they turn out to be "sealed containers, virtual coffins" (Hollis 8). Likewise, the cosiness of the room at the beginning of the play is contrasted by the violence it witnesses at the end, together with Bert's sudden change of attitude and show of strength. Once again, as Hollis goes on to state, irony is apparent: "Thus the deepest ironic intent of Pinter's work is to make strange that which is familiar and to make familiar that which is strange" (8). Just like realizing that the characters' anxieties are that of real life, coming to terms with the fact that the rooms that seem safe turn out to be one's metaphorical coffin reflects Existential irony. Hollis goes on to argue: "The room is suggestive of the encapsulated environment of modern man, but may also suggest something of his regressive aversion to the hostile world outside" (19). As it was quoted from Pinter earlier, the room can be both things at the same time because there are no certainties as to something being either one thing or other. The room, thus, is a metaphor for a coffin confining Rose and making her

existences meaningless. On the other hand, Bert refuses to be locked in so he becomes part of the world. It can be stated that if one has no purpose in life, it does not matter whether they live or not. Existence becomes a trauma, thus life and death cannot be differentiated. One falls into despair, and waits for the unavoidable end. Undoubtedly, such a life might as well end right away. Pinter reflects this ambiguity in the play. Rose's observance is equated with Bert's silence. The only difference occurs when one of them leaves the room and the other does not. Then, Rose is represented as a character that is not brave enough to reach self-overcoming because of her entrapment whereas Bert leaves a mark in the world even though it is not a good one. He is somehow part of life whereas Rose is only encountering other people who live/exist. In short, the room as a place of imprisonment has a big impact on the way the characters identify, or fail to identify, their existences. Similarly, Martin Esslin states in *Pinter: a study of his plays* that Pinter wants to build an atmosphere of ambiguity of this sort and succeeds:

> And, yet, very characteristically already, by an accumulation of such basically realistic detail, Pinter succeeds in building up an atmosphere of menace, of Kafka-esque uncertainty. The silent giant van-driver (Bert), the anxious woman clinging to the warmth of her room, and the room being situated in a house of uncertain size, so that it seems suspended between an unexplored basement and a top that loses itself in a dim, unending flight of stairs, each of these details may in itself be explained away-in accumulation they create tension and foreboding. (my brackets, 62)

The unspecified, damp building which does not have a solid foundation symbolises the unknown, unexplained world which people are struggling in. Rose needs to find meaning not in, but out of the cosiness of the room, in the menacing outside world. What she does not know is that that cosiness is merely a façade.

Furthermore, the door opens for five times throughout the play. In each, someone comes into the room, which are all intimidating encounters for Rose. Each time gets more intense and is finalised by Rose's blindness. Each time, the action changes, because both Rose and the audience wonder what the outside world is about to bring in this time. The first time the door opens, Mr. Kidd comes in. Pinter does not specify whether Mr. Kidd is the landlord or the caretaker. He is both. He also notices

how cosy the room is. As a person who comes from outside, Mr. Kidd confirms that it is apparent that the room is very different from the rest of the building, the details of which are unknown. Mr. Kidd and Rose's conversation does not seem to be flowing and it does not add up. Rose does not know whether he had a woman helping him, and he does not know that there was a rocking-chair in the room. Moments later, he swears that he has seen it before, and moments after that he states that he wouldn't swear on it, and then asks if the chair was there when Rose and Bert moved in, once again (96-97). Here, Pinter skilfully manages to set the atmosphere in a way to estrange the audience from the play. Rose and Mr. Kidd both seem to suffer from a sort of amnesia, but no such mention is ever made throughout the play. Pinter wants the audience to think of the room as otherworldly, even as a kind of limbo. People who go in it forget details of the world and of their lives. They are suddenly bereft of the ability to communicate because of this instantaneous amnesia. They do not form reasonable sentences and they seem to forget their past. Then, the interior space is likened with a place where life/existence ceases. Similarly, it causes Rose's existence to gradually fade away as well.

The second time the door opens, a couple comes in. Rose is alone in the room as both Mr. Kidd and Bert have left. This young couple consists of Toddy and Clarissa Sands, who are unknown to both Rose and the audience. They terrify Rose at first because they come from the outside and, unlike Mr. Kidd, they are complete strangers to Rose. Mrs. Sands similarly says: "It's murder out. Have you been out?" (101), to which Rose answers: "No" (102). This young couple seem to contrast Rose and Bert because as Mrs. Sands also states it has been a long time since they have come in (102). Once again, the room's cosiness and warmth is emphasized, this time by Mrs. Sands. Moments later, same conversation repeats itself.

> ROSE. What's it like out?
> MRS. SANDS: It's very dark out.
> MR. SANDS: No darker than in.
> MRS. SANDS. He's right there. (103)

Rose is once again assured that outside world is scary for her, while at the same time Mr. Sands is foreseeing the end of the play when Rose becomes blind. For him, the

room is as dark as outside. The feeling of security and cosiness the room provides Rose start to fade away with the remarks of Mr. and Mrs. Sands. She keeps observing and trying to find out from others what the world is like. Regarding this, William Baker states: "Truth becomes a matter of personal perception ..." (*Harold Pinter* 41). Still, Pinter strongly goes on to emphasize the contrast between the room and everywhere else that is not the room. Rose's conversation with the couple goes on, but nothing is clarified. She cannot seem to understand what they are saying and vice versa. The couple thinks Mr. Kidd's name is Mr. Hudd, which is actually Rose and Bert's last name. The number of the landlords, whether Mr. Kidd is the landlord are discussed. Once again, ambiguity is apparent. Also, in their conversation with Rose, the couple first says they saw a man as they were going downstairs and then states that they were going up, which confuses Rose (107). This complies with the fact that Mr. Kidd cannot state how many floors there are in the building. Once again, the building becomes a dream-like place keeping Rose inside. The structure of the building becomes blurry; giving the feeling that there may be no way out of this building at all. Moreover, Rose is also suffering from amnesia because she does not remember ever entering the building. It is almost as if she came out of a cocoon directly into the room. All these details result in blurring the outside world for the observant Rose. She fails to clarify what surrounds the room. The more she remains inside, the more she goes further away from the real world. All this prepares Rose for what awaits her. Then, it can be said that Rose's constant efforts to give meaning to and understand the world never ceases but remains unsettled. Her efforts only cause her to be more afraid. When Mr. and Mrs. Sands tell her that when they were looking for the landlord they accidentally saw a man in the basement, the atmosphere of menace, threat and danger heightens. This man, Mrs. Sands says to Rose, told them that room number 7 is vacant, which is the room Rose lives in. Martin Esslin states in *Pinter: a study of his plays*: "To Rose the very idea that the room which she regards as hers should be talked about as being to let is tantamount to a death sentence" (63). Then, despite the fact that it may be a misunderstanding, the idea that the room may be given away to other people makes Rose even more afraid because she realizes she may lose the only thing she can give meaning to, the room. In her opinion, it is Rose who makes the room safe and the idea of the room being rented

to somebody else is a threat for her. She can only observe the room through her eyes, and if that is taken from her, there is nothing left in the world for Rose.

After Mr. and Mrs. Sands leave, the door opens for the third time. It is Mr. Kidd once again. Rose's only concern at this point is whether her room has become vacant or not.

> ROSE. Mr. Kidd, what did they mean about this room?
> MR. KIDD. What room?
> ROSE. Is this room vacant?
> MR. KIDD. Vacant?
> ROSE. They were looking for the landlord.
> MR. KIDD. Who were?
> ROSE. Listen, Mr. Kidd, you are the landlord, aren't you? There isn't any other landlord? (109)

Rose's anxiety and her fear of being taken away to the outside world are apparent, not in the actual words she says, but in the ones she does not say. Hollis argues: "Rose's conversation betrays her anxiety. Again she does not say what she is really saying. She does not express her fears of being rooted out, of being supplanted from her cosy, womblike room" (24). She is saying many words, but none of which reflect her true angst, and is a form of silence by itself. Furthermore, Mr. Kidd does not seem to remember having spoken to Mr. and Mrs. Sands. It becomes ambiguous who they have spoken to. Suspense heightens yet again as there is obviously another person in the building whom nobody seems to know. Mr. Kidd mentions a man who has been staying in the basement and has been waiting for days for Bert to leave, and that he wants to see Rose. Mr. Kidd seems to be fed up with waiting with him. His eagerness to get rid of the man shows that the man is somehow menacing for Mr. Kidd.

> ROSE. Who is he?
> MR. KIDD. How do I know who he is? All I know is he won't say a word, he won't indulge in any conversation, just-has he gone? that and nothing else. He wouldn't even play a game of chess. All right, I said, the other night, while

> we're waiting I'll play you a game of chess. You play chess, don't you? I tell you, Mrs. Hudd, I don't know if he even heard what I was saying. He just lies there. It's not good for me. He just lies there, that's all, waiting. (110)

This stranger poses a threat for Rose. She does not know him, thus she will not speak with him. The way Mr. Kidd talks about the stranger actually proves that he is a secretive man and he may pose danger for Rose as he waits for Bert to leave the house and wants to see Rose when she is alone. Pinter does not explain anything else at this point, either. When Mr. Kidd leaves to bring the stranger in, the door becomes the symbolisation of menace and danger. In this sense, it can be said that the door is a symbol of violence and menace. Each time somebody steps out, Rose is unknowingly waiting in the room for the next stranger to come in. Similarly, Martin Esslin states: "And now again the door has become the focal point of suspense and tense expectation. When it opens, what will it disclose?" (*Pinter: a study of his plays* 64). This is representative of Europe after the World War II in the sense that at every corner of life people are expecting danger and menace, which prevents them from finding out who they are or who they want to be. One should not be going in the door, but should be going out of it. Pinter skilfully represents the post-war world he lives in with the images of the room and the door, Rose being stuck in it trying to observe the world as opposed to living in the world.

The fourth time the door opens it is the stranger Riley who comes in the door. Riley is a blind black man. Together with Riley's entrance, it is as if all of Rose's unsolicited anxieties and fears gain a solid ground because he is the only one of whom Rose seems entirely afraid. It becomes apparent that Riley wants to take Rose away. Hollis states:

> Rose knows that some one or some thing lurks out there and threatens her secure home. Indeed, something out there is calling to her and while she would reject its entreaty, Riley's entrance materializes all of the anxieties that beset her. (27-28)

Together with Riley becoming the embodiment of menace for Rose, her reaction to him is rude and violent. Esslin states that she is disgusted, afraid and racist (*Pinter: a study*

of his plays 64). Up to this point in the play, Rose was the one who seemed to fear and who was stuck. However, her reaction to Riley shows that she can also be violent and menacing. Pinter raises suspense up to and after this moment in the play. Riley, who is the stranger/intruder figure in the play is seen as the one who "disturbs Rose's evening", as she herself states (112). Before he could say anything, Rose calls him dumb and cripple and talks about him as a customer (113). Suddenly, Rose's observatory manner goes away and she falls in a state of sheer panic. Pinter's intentional lack of information as to the characters' background makes it easier to fill in the blanks. Rose may be a former prostitute. She may know who Riley is, or she may not. Once again, her mostly one-sided dialogue with Riley is filled with pauses as the tension in the play increases. Riley says: "Your father wants you to come home" (114), and moments later he calls her "Sal". Rose seems to remember this name, but gets angry at being called so. However, after this point Rose seems to tell the truth for the first time in the play. She seems to recognize what the problem with her life is as she says: "The day is a hump. I never go out" (115). Apparently, Riley represents a moment of realisation for Rose who seems to wake up from the dream-like state she has been in. The menacing stranger Riley becomes an intermediary for Rose to go out and find her purpose. The fact that she never goes out becomes the reason of her being unable to reach self-overcoming. Rose realizes that her monotonous way of life is the thing that prevents her from *being-in-the-world* and makes her existence absurd.

The fifth and the last time the door opens, Bert enters. After his day outside the room, he utters his first lines in the play which are "I got back all right" (115). He seems to reassure the fact that although it is dangerous and menacing outside he managed to come back. It is as if he wants to assure Rose that he is alright. When he sees Riley, he calls him "Lice!" and kills him. Pinter does not explain why Bert says something like this to Riley. It may be out of jealousy or it may be because Riley is known to both Rose and Bert. For the first time in the play, there is *silence*. As mentioned before silences are longer pauses to the action. After the silence, it is observed that the characters are completely changed, just like Rose who states that she is blind. Baker states: "Once violence takes place, words become meaningless. Rose and Bert, her husband in *The Room*, don't fully exhibit the full range of their selves till they confront

and destroy the intruder, Riley the blind Negro" (40). It is seen that violence in the play comes from Bert and not from the intruder as Rose expects. Riley shows no signs of violence towards Rose or Bert. Similarly, it is stated in *The Plays of Harold Pinter*: "... it becomes clear that the real- as opposed to feared – violence is embodied in the other person who has, as it were, a right to share her refuge, in the person of her husband, Bert" (Wyllie 70). It is the silent Bert's violent behaviour that makes Rose's fears come true. It is another way through which Pinter proves that the room seen as the shelter providing safety may not be that safe. The lines between shelter and prison become blurry, just like the lines between life and death become blurry for Rose. At this point, she is on the verge of an epiphany which will prove to her that she needs to confront life in order to exist.

All in all, each opening of the door heightens Rose's existential anxieties and her fears more. Martin Esslin explains that the ordinary event of a door opening and strangers coming in is an unordinary thing in Pinter's world because of the menace that surrounds the play (*Pinter: a study of his plays* 62). Then, Pinter takes something familiar and ordinary for the world and turns it into something unfamiliar and unordinary for his characters to emphasise their relationship with the absurdity of the world they are living in. The world Rose lives in is absurd because she cannot make sense of it. Her constant curiosity about whether somebody else lives in the apartment, whether there is a vacant room, how many floors there are in the building are proof that she cannot understand the world. From the Sartrian perspective of existence preceding essence, it can be said that Rose's trying to understand the dangerous world around her contributes to her trying to give meaning to her existence. She tries to become aware of her existence first and then she will go outside and face the world. This is Rose's tragic situation and existential crisis throughout the play. In other words; the room is a place where Rose is trying to understand the basis of her existence, her *raison d'être*. However, it must be the other way round. Her essence can be found in the outside world, not in the room. Then, she has to pass the threshold to the outside world, which becomes the place where she will fulfil her essence after she understands her place in the world as a person who is no longer afraid. She has to take action; otherwise her existence will remain hollow.

3.1.3. Blindness as an Existential Trauma

After the first and the last silence of *The Room*, Rose states that she has gone blind and that she cannot see. This can be interpreted as the kind of silence which comes after the character goes through a moment of revelation. Even though Pinter does not let his audience know what that revelation is, which is characteristic of him, it can be her realisation that now that she has lost her eyesight, she is bound to live in the room forever. In other words, she has lost the chance to find a purpose. She has lost her existence altogether. Similarly, Esslin states that Rose's going blind may be symbolising the fact that with Riley's arrival she goes through a moment of truth and that she accepts how intolerable her life actually is (*Pinter: a study of his plays* 65). No matter which ending the audience sees fit for Rose, it is clear that Pinter suggests one must not be afraid of meaninglessness and must go out of the room/the prison. Within the scope of Existentialist philosophy, this is regarded as the process of self-fulfilment or self-overcoming, respectively identified by Camus and Nietzsche. Since Rose refuses to exist, now the only thing that proved Rose was alive is gone. She can no longer observe. Her eyes are now closed like Riley, connoting that there is no difference between her living or dying as long as she lives like this. In other words, Rose's blindness can be regarded as a metaphorical death. By making Rose go blind, then, Pinter is stating that the only way to fulfil one's existence and get rid of existential trauma is being brave enough to confront the menacing world outside the damp apartments people live in. People must leave passivity in order to find meaning in the world. At this point, Esslin sees Rose as a woman who is tormented by dark intuitions and existential fears, and her blindness also as the symbolisation of the end of her relationship with Bert and her own death, whereas he regards Riley as the foreboding of Rose's future (*Pinter: a study of his plays* 66). After the play ends, Rose may step out of the door and remember her old life as "Sal". Once she is out there, she may regain her eyesight. If she remains inside, as scared as she has been throughout the play, she will never fully exist and will forever be blind.

Then, Riley can be considered as Rose's key to go out. Despite the fact that Rose is afraid of anyone who may want to take her away, Riley seems to be the only one who

cares for Rose. He wants to take her out of the room by calling her outside. Despite the fact that Pinter does not give information about him, Riley seems to want to free Rose so that she can finally live her life. Similarly, Pinter argues that for him Riley is:

> ... a messenger, a potential saviour who is trying to release Rose from the imprisonment of the room and the restrictions of her life with Bert ... inviting her to come back to her spiritual home; which is why he gets beaten up when Bert returns ... (qtd. in Baker *Harold* 41)

Riley's telling Rose that her father wants her to come home proves that Riley somehow wants Rose to become her old self "Sal". This old self is not explained to the audience, but Rose's fear of Riley proves they know each other. It becomes clear at this point that "Sal" represents Rose's true self. Apparently, something triggered Rose's fears of the world at some point in the past. It may be war or something else. Rose became this fearful, lonely and confined person without purpose. Then, Riley is the embodiment of self-realisation for Rose who is unable to leave the room by herself. This is why she realises how dull her life is only when Riley comes in. Then, Pinter is suggesting that in order to get rid of existential traumas, people need to step out of the room, which may be symbolising consciousness, and out into the dark and dangerous world. Otherwise, the end may be severe. However, Bert's killing Riley is all the more traumatic for Rose. Bert kills Rose's only way to step out of the room. It is Bert who she must leave. In the end, it is the individual who must be ready to do it. It must be he or she who decides to step out of the limitations bound by fear. Similarly, Wellwarth argues: "As a result, the womb is broken, and the dwellers are cast out from the light into the darkness" (qtd. in Hinchliffe *Harold* 46). Rose will have to face her fears and she no longer belongs in the light, thus her blindness. She will have to embrace the darkness outside the room. If and when she accepts the darkness that is the outside world, she can reach self-overcoming.

In conclusion, Harold Pinter's *The Room* makes use of the absurd caused by menace. Pinter aims to put forward that absurdity in the world does not exist by itself and is caused by the individuals' fear of the outside world and their existential anxieties and concerns. While the room looks like a safe haven protecting Rose, it becomes the embodiment of fear in which Rose's anxieties will come true. The door, a very ordinary object, becomes something that is full of menace, the opening of which dreads Rose.

Her dull life with her silent husband Bert and its destruction by the blind intruder make Rose unexpectedly compelled to face the world outside. The ambiguity of the setting is supported by the equally ambiguous dialogue and the characters' refusal to communicate with one another. By creating such an atmosphere, Pinter symbolises the terrors of war in the setting of a room. As a result of this discussion, it can be stated that Rose's stable existence which is identified with eyesight comes to an end, with Rose becoming blind. Pinter finishes the play by reshaping Rose and placing her in the threshold of the door which has been welcoming in the strangers throughout the play. She will either leave Bert and the room behind to find her true self, or she will remain blind in the room forever. Thus, Pinter states that one must create their own freewill through leaving behind the limitations that prevent them from finding a purpose for themselves. Then they will be able to regain their eyesight in what is already a dark and menacing world.

3.2. Silencing the Voice through Menace in *The Birthday Party*

The Birthday Party, which was written in 1958, is Pinter's first full-length play. The play consists of three acts and covers a span of twenty-four hours. *The Birthday Party*, with its stranger/intruder figures and its overall ambiguity, is based on the same existential concerns as *The Room*. In this play, Pinter's handling of menace and absurd is centred on interrogation and psychological and physical torture. In this play, Pinter transforms the room to a seaside guest house. Despite the fact that the play revolves around the same atmosphere as *The Room,* this time the dangers from the outside are more reasonable and menacing for the main character. Whereas the first play is metaphorical, *The Birthday Party* is psychologically challenging. *The Birthday Party* centres on a day in the life of Meg and Petey, a couple in their sixties, living in their seaside boarding house with their only guest Stanley Webber who claims to be a former pianist. Esslin states: "... Stanley Webber, a not so very young man in his late thirties, has found refuge from the troubles of life" (76). This time, it is an outsider who finds refuge in a house which is well-taken care of by a motherly woman. Similarly, James R. Hollis states:

> Pinter's second play, makes "the room" a bit larger, increases the number of characters in that room, and multiplies the complexity of their relationships; but it is also a play about a person who does not want to leave his room. (31)

Despite the fact that not much is known about Stanley's past, it is for sure that his reluctance to take care of himself and to go out of the house into the world makes him a character whose existence is rendered futile by forces unknown to the audience. Esslin states in *Harold Pinter: a study of his plays* that *The Birthday Party* is a metaphor for: "... a basic human situation, an existential archetype ..." (86). In this regard, it can be said that the play focuses, perhaps more than anything else, on Stanley's existential trauma. In *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Esslin similarly summarises the play as such: "It speaks plainly of the individual's pathetic search for security; of secret dreads and anxieties; of the terrorism of our world, ... of the tragedy that arises from lack of understanding between people on different levels of awareness" (116). Still, much of the action occurs when the two intruders Goldberg and McCann arrive and start interrogating Stanley. Lack of information about Goldberg and McCann's relationship with Stanley and their brutish interrogation towards him cause menace, resulting in the silencing of Stanley who questions the world throughout the play via speech. Therefore, his existence becomes traumatic. Pinter creates a character whose reluctance to act makes him vulnerable to the dangers of the world. Similar to Rose, Stanley is static. The difference is that there is still hope for Rose to go out into the world whereas at the end of the play Stanley falls into a state of trance and motionlessness. It becomes apparent that merely questioning the world is not enough to become a self and to find meaning in the world. In *The Room* and *The Birthday Party*, Pinter puts forward two inaccurate ways to face the irrationality of the world. If one is merely observing and trying to find the courage to go out like Rose, then they may have a hope. However, if one keeps questioning and interpreting the world only through words and without having an urge to act on them like Stanley, then that person ceases to exist. This chapter will point out how the unknown, menacing forces of the world silences a questioning man and altogether ceases his existence through physical and psychological dominance. Through such discussion, it will be concluded that one must accept to face the menacing forces of the world, whether it is one's dark past or the interrogators from an organization for a

crime committed. After that, they must go out into the world to find the answers to their questions.

3.2.1. The House as a Refuge

At the beginning of the play, Pinter presents the same daily routine with that of *The Room:* an old couple, a matronly woman taking care of her static husband, preparing breakfast for him. Once again, the play takes place in a single room, despite the fact that the characters go in and out of other rooms and the garden. Stage directions show characters, mainly Meg, disappearing and reappearing as they go out of the living room (9). It is almost as if they do not exist outside of the room. Pinter begins the play with this kind of imagery, placing Meg and Petey at the centre. The audience is at first faced with Meg's existential concerns. Meg, whose only role in the play seems to be filling voids in men's lives, is utterly alone and almost out of her mind.

> MEG. I've got your cornflakes ready. *(She disappears and reappears.)* Here's your cornflakes.
> *He rises and takes the plate from her, sits at the table, props up the paper and begins to eat. MEG enters by the kitchen door.*
> Are they nice?
> PETEY. Very nice.
> MEG. I thought they'd be nice. *(She sits at the table.)* You got your paper?
> PETEY. Yes.
> MEG. Is it good?
> PETEY. Not bad.
> MEG. What does it say?
> PETEY. Nothing much.
> MEG. You read me out some nice bits yesterday.
> PETEY. Yes, well, I haven't finished this one yet.
> MEG. Will you tell me when you come to something good?
> PETEY. Yes. (9)

Despite the fact that Meg goes out for shopping, she learns about the life outside of the house through her husband, who reads the newspaper to her. In other words, Meg learns about the outside world through her husband, through his way of making sense of the world. Similarly, it looks like Meg has not tasted the food she prepared for Petey. Her being-in-the-world is thus lessened by her life as a housewife. Her existence is made possible through other human beings like her husband and the guest Stanley, who also seem to be entirely dependent on Meg for survival. From the very beginning of the play, then, Pinter creates two individuals whose existences are made meaningless. Also, it is seen that Meg is dependent on Petey for love and affection which he does not give in return, for their relationship is almost on the level of master-servant. In this regard, it can be concluded that Meg and Petey are variations of Rose and Bert in *The Room.* Their lives are very similar; the matronly woman keeping safe the only thing in her life she can control, and the dependent husband who goes out for work and is unable, or maybe even unwilling, to show affection towards his wife. They are living their lives in a dull, repetitive way without purpose.

As mentioned before, *The Birthday Party* is set in a boarding house by the owners Meg and Petey, who are renting rooms for their guests. The house that the play is set in does not fully contrast with the outside world. The world outside of the house is not referred to as being entirely hostile or dangerous as in *The Room*. Meg asks Petey "Is it nice out?" to which Petey replies "Very nice" (9), and later Stanley's question "What's it like out today?" is answered by Petey as "Very nice" (11). Then, the world outside the living room is not scary and unknown this time. However, there is still something which makes the outside world ambiguous and menacing for the characters. Harold Pinter makes the world outside more approachable and less dangerous in this play, while at the same time leaving a question mark behind.

Similar to *The Room,* time is ambiguous in the play. Pinter does not mention what time it is, only that it is morning. He does not tell us whether it is summer or spring, he only tells us that it is not winter. Thus the characters are clueless of the time. Even the birthday party that gives the play its title seems to be misleading. Indeed, although Meg insists on that day being Stanley's birthday, Stanley refuses. Similarly,

Meg, who seems to go out for shopping every day, is unaware of how time and seasons work.

> MEG. What time did you go out this morning, Petey?
> PETEY. Same time as usual.
> MEG. Was it dark?
> PETEY. No, it was light.
> MEG. *(beginning to darn)* But sometimes you go out in the morning and it's dark.
> PETEY. That's in the winter.
> MEG. Oh, in winter.
> PETEY. Yes, it gets light later in winter.
> MEG. Oh.
> *Pause*.

Since her only purpose to go out is shopping, she cannot fully comprehend the way time works. Right after suggesting that it is nice outside, Pinter heightens the atmosphere of ambiguity. The world seems to work in ways which are unfamiliar and scary for Meg. The way she cannot make sense of time makes her look like she is almost a simple-minded woman. The "nice" world outside is still incomprehensible. She generally stays home because she can understand the order of things in the house; she keeps her husband and the guests safe, she goes out to buy food, she prepares the food and learns about all else from the people who really go out and face the real world. Meg's life as an adult is limited to the only place she can keep safe for herself and her guests. Like Rose's bragging about the safety and niceness of the room, Meg boasts about how her house is "on the list", meaning that the guest house is one of the best houses to stay in. On the other hand, the outside world remains as something which works mysteriously, as something that is magically sometimes dark and sometimes light. Furthermore, Meg's desire to be part of someone's life and to feel their affection as both a mother and a lover seem to be embodied in Stanley, whom she waits patiently to wake up and come downstairs for her to feed. Her interest is more on Stanley than anybody else. However, her affection towards him is not reciprocated by him. The moment Meg realizes that

Stanley is awake and coming downstairs, her excitement reaches its peak. It is almost as if she has found her lost purpose in life, which awakens as Stanley does. It is time for her to feed him, to be part of his life, to exist. Her feeding him like a child is imbalanced by the flirtatious behaviour she has towards him and blurs the line between the two. This is also apparent later when Meg gives Stanley his birthday present, even though Stanley says it is not his birthday. Meg is thus living a lie, trying to create an existence out of the situation she is in, refusing to reach to a real self-realization. In other words, her existence cannot precede her essence. Similarly, James R. Hollis argues that Meg's main function in the play is providing a safe-haven for Stanley: "We now know that there is a protective circle of warmth and maternal affection around Stanley, but there are also outsiders who are about to penetrate that circle" (33). In other words, Meg's maternal protectiveness over Stanley is the main reason why Stanley stays in the house, and is contrasted by the external forces which are sure to take Stanley out of his safety. Still, she remains clueless from the beginning of the play to the end. She has no idea what happens to Stanley, nor does she become aware of the fact that Goldberg and McCann take Stanley away in the end. Her only concern, as mentioned before, is making something out of herself. She wants to be Stanley's mother/lover, she wants her house to be "on the list", she wants to be "the belle of the ball" (39) even though she is none of these things.

The other character in the play, who is suffering from the weight of existence even more than Meg, is Stanley Webber. Stanley is a long term resident at the house hiding from something or someone unknown to the other members of the house and to the audience. He is unshaven and disorderly, wearing pyjamas and glasses (11). He does not go out of the house. He, similar to Meg, learns about the outside world from Petey.

> STANLEY. What's it like out today?
> PETEY. Very nice.
> STANLEY. Warm?
> PETEY. Well, there's a good breeze blowing.
> STANLEY. Cold?
> PETEY. No, no, I wouldn't say it was cold. (11)

Stanley does not seem to have a job. His presence in the house is promising of menace, for he is always on edge and anxious. Esslin states in *Harold Pinter: a study of his plays*:

> ... he has been idle for months, hardly goes out of the house (perhaps because he is too lazy to shave and dress, but perhaps because he is afraid of being recognized?), pours contempt upon his landlady, who stifles him with her motherliness, yet seems totally dependent on her, an adult who has regressed to the status of a babe in arms. (76)

Therefore, Stanley's being-in-the-world is absurd and meaningless because of his "idleness". His existential crisis stems from an unknown background story which makes him give up playing piano and hide in the boarding house. Sakellaridou explains in *Pinter's Female Portraits: A Study of Female Characters in the Plays of Harold Pinter*: "Stanley is sized up as the prototype of the existential man, an enigma himself placed in an inscrutable universe" (30). Then, he chooses to refrain from the absurdity of the world as he could not make sense of it. Additionally, in the second act, Meg's giving a boy's drum to him as the birthday present shows that he is not an adult, that he could not fulfil the process of self-overcoming, and thus he has no purpose in life. From another perspective, Esslin argues that Stanley is disappointed in the world because he was rejected in it (76-7). Once again, a menacing thought is the reason for the characters' relationship with the absurd world in which they are unable to find a place for themselves. Despite his unknown background, the important thing about Stanley is his reluctance to leave the house. His existence in the world is so painful for him that he hides in a house which is not even his own, and, as it turns out later on, with a fake name and possibly a fake past. The safety the house provides him is enough to make him believe that he is protected from the world. Hollis states: "Like Rose, he clings to the security of that house and refuses to go out. But the world cannot be shut out forever and *The Birthday Party* is the story of the destruction of Stanley's security by that external world" (32). Stanley's destruction apparently already starts before the beginning of the play, together with an event which is unknown to the audience. His hopeless status in life shows that he no longer has the urge to live, to find the meaning of his own existence, unlike Rose. Bennett refers to Stanley and characters like him as

"fragmented beings", and argues: "... these characters brush aside their 'absurd' situation and prefer to live in a world of contradiction where their desire are not met by the realities of the world, rather than contemplate their situation and make meaning for themselves" (55). Thus, it can be said that Stanley's way of hiding in Meg and Petey's household is proof of the fact that he is a man whose existence is taken from him by the outside world. Compared to Meg, however, Stanley seems further away from finding purpose. Meg looks like he has achieved a reason to live, which is to take care of Stanley. Regardless of her dependence on Stanley, she seems closer to finding meaning in the world unlike Stanley.

3.2.2. Menace

Similarly, along with the existential traumas the characters have, the menacing atmosphere is always sensible, especially on the part of Stanley. The secure connotation the house carries as a safe haven is broken with Petey's earlier mention of two men who want to stay in the house for a couple of nights (10). Dukore argues: "As before, the menace that visits the sequestered person suggests the absurdity of the human condition ..." (30). It is not known who these two men are, which heightens the atmosphere of menace that had been waiting in the background since the beginning of the play. Just before Meg talks about the two men, stage direction shows the street door slamming (13). Pinter raises tension and hints at the approach of the stranger-intruder figures and the menace they are carrying with them. In other words, it is made sure that the door, once again, will be the object welcoming menace to the house. It is a door, Martin Esslin states, "that opens on the unknown" (*The Theatre of the Absurd* 201). This time, the door opens and welcomes the two men which is about to bring Stanley's demise. Together with Meg's mentioning the two men to Stanley, the threat they pose for the safety in the house becomes explicit.

> STANLEY. What two gentlemen?
> MEG. I'm expecting visitors.
> *He turns.*
> STANLEY. What?

MEG. You didn't know that, did you?

STANLEY. What are you talking about?

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

STANLEY. I don't believe it.

MEG. It's true. (13)

Stanley seems to know who they are for he is startled by their mention, or he does not know who they are but he is sure that one day someone will come to catch him. His unknown background becomes questionable once again. From this point on, it is seen that Stanley becomes more attached to Meg and to the food she gives him. It seems to be the fear he has of the outside world and of these men which make him bound to stay in the boarding house. Contrary to this, Stanley also starts talking about a supposed job he has been offered: to play piano in a night club in Berlin. It is unclear whether this is true or not, but Stanley's saying this right after he learns about the two visitors raises suspicion. Hollis explains the situation as such: "Perhaps because his isolation is threatened Stanley then begins to talk about a job he has been offered ..." (33). Since the only sort of being-in-the-world he has is about to be taken from his hands, he feels that putting forward such a thing might prohibit the two men's coming and taking him away. Moments later he says: "They want me to crawl down on my bended knees" (14). Esslin asserts: "...clearly, Stanley *has* offended some powerful force. But who are *they* who want him to crawl down on his bended knees? and what could he, a harmless pianist, have done to *them*?" (*Pinter* 77). It might be the two men or it might be someone else, but Stanley is sure to be hiding from something, which makes him succumb to depression and lose his purpose in life which he claims was to have a world tour. In other words, the mention of these two menacing men evokes in Stanley the existential anxieties he has and reminds him of the reasons why he wants to hide. He shifts from a man wanting to have a world tour to a man who hides in someone else's house. He is sure that the two men are looking for someone, and he is almost sure that it is him. Similar to Rose in *The Room,* Stanley too is afraid of being taken away but is also afraid

to stay in the house which is no longer safe for him. Just like in *The Room,* then, the situation in *The Birthday Party* can be summarised as human beings' fear of being taken away from safety which also encapsulates them, making it impossible for them to fulfil a purposeful life. Esslin similarly points out that the play can be regarded as: "... an image of man's fear of being driven out from his warm place of refuge on earth" (*Pinter* 83). This is seen especially in Meg and Stanley. Stanley's fear of being taken away from the security of Meg's safe haven corresponds to Meg's equal fear of the outside world. She is also scared of losing the only thing in life that defines her: the boarding house. In the first act, when Stanley threatens Meg that the two men will come in a van with a wheelbarrow in it and take *someone* away, Meg is equally scared by the menacing thought. Stanley, as he is trying to scare Meg, also unknowingly reflects his own fears. Hollis explains:

> With the notion of a conspiracy in the back of his mind he turns on Meg and begins playing on her fears, the same kind of fears that Rose confessed. "They" are coming, he says. "They" are coming in a van and have a wheelbarrow in that van and are going to cart someone away. Although the threat is implicitly against Meg, Stanley ironically adumbrates his own end. (34)

From another perspective, Stanley may be trying to point the threat to Meg's direction because he unknowingly refuses to succumb to what may be coming for him. If someone is coming, Stanley wants them to be coming for Meg and not him. Furthermore, just as his fears capture him and scare Meg, there is a sudden knock at the door. Characteristically of Pinter, this knock at the door triggers the anticipation of menace and danger. However, it is Lulu, Meg's young neighbour bringing in Meg's present for Stanley's birthday. Pinter wants to create suspense, to strike both Stanley and the audience at a moment when the entrance of the two men is least expected. To put the matter in another way, Pinter thus makes sure that the two men will definitely come and they will pose danger for Stanley.

In such a menacing atmosphere, Lulu's dialogue with Stanley contributes to highlight the existential void Stanley is in and enables the audience to make sure how deeply anxious he is.

LULU *(offering him the compact).* Do you want to have a look at your face? *(STANLEY withdraws from the table.)* You could do with a shave, do you know that?

(STANLEY sits, right at the table.) Don't you ever go out? *(He does not answer.)* I mean, what do you do, just sit around the house like this all day long?

(Pause.) Hasn't Mrs Boles got enough to do without having you under her feet all day long?

STANLEY. I always stand on the table when she sweeps the floor.

LULU. Why don't you have a wash? You look terrible.

STANLEY. *A wash wouldn't make any difference*.

LULU *(rising).* Come out and get a bit of air. You depress me, looking like that.

STANLEY. *Air? Oh, I don't know about that*.

LULU. It's lovely out. And I've got a few sandwiches. (my italics 15)

Lulu's way of trying to take Stanley out into the real world is not at all menacing. She does not pose a threat like the two men do for Stanley. It is Stanley who makes Lulu depressed. He thinks that nothing will make a difference in his life which is meaningless for him. Still, no matter how scared he is of the mention of going out, he considers it, but only to run away and not to face the world. Their dialogue goes on with Stanley offering to run away with Lulu:

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. (my italics 16)

The only thing in Stanley's mind is to run away from the menacing intruders. Hiding defines Stanley's being-in-the-world, which does not cause a meaningful existence. It does not stem from a purpose Stanley finally has in life; on the contrary, his absurd condition in the world, his state of running away and hiding will go on.

Despite his fear of threat and danger, Stanley himself is definitely a menacing character. His fear of the outside world is not as passive as Rose's in *The Room.* There is hidden violence and primitive urges in Stanley which becomes apparent together with the birthday present Meg gives him. As mentioned before, the boy's drum reduces Stanley's being-in-the-world to a minimum, making him a little baby safe in his mother's arms while at the same time becoming the object through which Stanley shows his inner thoughts. At the end of the first act, Stanley starts beating the drum while walking around Meg. This act turns into his violently beating the drum without any musical intention. Hollis argues: "There seems no explanation for his behaviour other than that the threat which the outsiders represent to his security has thrown him back on rather primitive effects" (35). Should the outsiders come to take him, he will be ready to fight back, doing everything in his power to resist. Stanley's violently beating the drum and his ritualistic circling around Meg show that Stanley is also a violent and a menacing character. So, Stanley is the menace in the house. He is actually Meg's fears come true, whereas the two men will be that of Stanley's.

However, a big part of the menace in the *The Birthday Party* stems from Goldberg and McCann, the two intruders. Up to their entrance in the living room, the play's major source of tension is the coming of two intruders and the threat they pose, respectively on Stanley and Meg. Goldberg and McCann come in, apparently to fetch Stanley. In other words, the moment Stanley's fears come true is the moment these two men come. Despite the fact that Pinter never explains why they are after Stanley, or if Stanley is innocent or not, they come to cease Stanley's meaningless existence. Esslin argues that everything in the play other than this remains in the circle of light provided by the house: "The only area of darkness that remains concerns the reason *why* Stanley is hiding from the world, why Goldberg and McCann have come to spy on him" (*Pinter* 76). It can be said that the characters except for Goldberg and McCann are part of the world that protects Stanley, even though Stanley does not seem to be entirely happy with them either. Although this is not the life Stanley wishes to have, he does not seem to show any effort to follow a purpose for himself in life. It is not clear whether he really was a pianist, or if that was a lie that he made up to hide his real identity. Everything about Stanley, including his identity, remains ambiguous. Therefore, his

existence remains hollow and the menacing atmosphere that is built up together with Goldberg and McCann's arrival to the boarding house surely puts an end to it altogether.

In relation with their function of building suspense and menace in the play, Goldberg and McCann are ambiguous characters, too. It is not known whether they are spies, terrorists, agents or gunmen after Stanley. It is unclear whether Goldberg's first name is Nat, Simey or Benny. In short, Pinter does not state anything about their pasts or their motivations, either. They seem to follow a duty, judging from Goldberg's way of trying to relieve McCann who is nervous about the job. In this regard, Hollis argues that Goldberg is the brains of the duo whereas McCann is the muscle force (34). The only function the duo has in the play seems to be catching and taking away Stanley to a man named Monty who will supposedly "fix" him. No matter what motivation they have, the important thing is that they represent the menace that patrols outside, as Goldberg says to Meg: "If we hadn't come today, we'd have come tomorrow" (18). Menace, then, is inevitable. What matters is the fact that one must face menace before menace faces them. In this sense, it can be said that Stanley's relationship with Goldberg and McCann, whether they knew each other before or not is of the least importance. In the end; Goldberg and McCann comes to end Stanley's secure but meaningless life in the boarding house. Furthermore, Hollis explains that the duo may represent: "... 'the hostile, unknowable power that takes the place of God in the avant-garde drama's philosophical view of the human condition'" (41). No matter what motivation they have, or no matter who they are, Goldberg and McCann are figures symbolising the end of Stanley's hollow existence.

3.2.3. Dehumanisation through Verbal Violence

Stanley's downfall begins with his conversation with Goldberg and McCann at the beginning of Act 2 as it soon becomes an intense verbal interrogation, as if God is questioning him in the afterlife. Pinter points out that all of his dramas are about "terrorising through words of power-verbal power, verbal facility" (qtd. in Raby *Cambridge* 107). *The Birthday Party* is a play in which words are the reason that bring about one's end. The duo's interrogation of Stanley is the moment where menace peaks

in the play. Without telling Stanley anything as to what they are accusing him of, they make it clear that they are definitely after him. Peter Thomson states: "By ignoring, or at least obscuring, motive, Pinter concentrated his audience's attention on behaviour. The result is an uncomfortable diminution of human stature, and an equally uncomfortable analysis of human cruelty" (1). In other words, Pinter wants to draw attention to the way Stanley is demolished, not to why. Despite their unknown motivation, Goldberg and McCann's words have the effect of demolishing Stanley altogether. For example, Goldberg and McCann's desire to make Stanley sit down before they begin to interrogate him shows that they are trying to force their superiority unto him. Even though their urging him to sit down seems absurd and irrelevant, it marks the beginning of Stanley's fall. Stanley, who refuses to sit down, eventually has to. The two men want him to sit down so that they can overpower Stanley during the interrogation. Furthermore, Luckhurst states: "... there is no interest in 'confession' or information-gathering: the tormentors indulge in an exercise of cruelty and destruction..." (*Torture in the Plays of Harold Pinter* 360). In relation to this, Goldberg's telling McCann to ask Stanley to sit down also shows that they are not after questioning Stanley kindly. Despite the fact that Goldberg's words show otherwise, they will use force if they have to.

GOLDBERG. McCann.

MCCANN. Nat?

GOLDBERG. Ask him to sit down.

MCCANN. Yes, Nat. *(MCCANN moves to STANLEY.)* Do you mind sitting down?

STANLEY. Yes, I do mind.

MCCANN. Yes now, but—it'd be better if you did.

STALEY. Why don't you sit down?

MCCANN. No, not me—you.

STANLEY. No thanks.

Pause.

MCCANN. Nat.

GOLDBERG. What?

MCCANN. He won't sit down.

GOLDBERG. Well, ask him.

MCCANN. I've asked him.

GOLDBERG. Ask him again.

MCCANN *(to STANLEY).* Sit down.

STANLEY. Why?

MCCANN. You'd be more comfortable.

STANLEY. So would you.

Pause.

MCCANN. All right. If you will I will.

STANLEY. You first.

MCCANN slowly sits at the table, left

MCCANN. Well?

STANLEY. Right. Now you've both had a rest you can get out!

MCCANN *(rising)*. That's a dirty trick! I'll kick the shite out of him! (23)

Stanley's handling the situation becomes part of the comedy in the play as well. It is a fine example of comedy of menace in that it is both a comic scene and it shows Stanley's tragically absurd efforts to resist threat through the only thing he is good at: his ability to speak. His refusal to sit down and succumb to Goldberg and McCann proves that he somehow knows what will happen. The power struggle between Goldberg & McCann and Stanley, despite Stanley's efforts, is won by the menacing duo. He manages to reverse the situation only for a short moment. He cannot prevent the interrogation from happening, he finally sits down. Chui likens Stanley to Sisyphus for his surrender: "... Stan resembles a failed Sisyphus in that he gives up defending himself when he finally realizes the futility of his efforts and the absurdity of wanting to remain dominant in the house" (24). In the end, Stanley realizes that he will have to be taken away, thus his submission shows the fact that he finally agrees to stop his meaningless existence. In this regard, he is less powerful and less courageous than Rose, who never succumbs to violence and overpowering.

Furthermore, Goldberg and McCann's interrogation seems meaningless, but it is surely a powerful verbal torture. They ask Stanley questions which do not mean anything for the audience, but it hints at Stanley's past. They would like to overpower Stanley through dialogue, which has been the one thing Stanley used to question his surroundings. They ask him questions like why he left the organization, who he thinks he is and they accuse him of betraying the organization (23-4). At this point, one should not care for the meaning of words, but be interested in their function. Dukore argues: "... a word's meaning is not necessarily referential; in the interrogation scene the rhythms not the meanings of words have a devastatingly noncomic effect on Stanley" (35). It is the effect the questioning has on Stanley that causes his downfall. They go on to accuse Stanley of "being a fake", killing her wife (which Stanley refuses to have), then ask him why he hasn't got married, asking him why he changed his name (24-5). The conversation is heavily one sided, as Stanley does not answer any of the questions and is in shock. The interrogation turns to questioning him about whether the number 846 is possible or necessary (25). Therefore, what these questions mean is not important. Stanley refuses to take responsibility for any of the things that are asked to him, but he is also explicitly disturbed by the way he is being accused which, in the end, demolishes him. Silverstein points out: "Physical and linguistic violence combine, transforming Stanley into a victim of ontological and corporal disjuncture ..." (46). Therefore, Goldberg and McCann's verbal and possibly physical torture, which takes place offstage, rid Stanley of his spiritual and physical existence.

One important menacing point here is the fact that Goldberg and McCann take off Stanley's glasses. In spite of saying that he can see everything without them, the metaphorical blinding of Stanley is the first step of making him strip of his existence, similar to Rose's blindness at the end of *The Room*. What is being taken away from him, before he is physically taken away, is his power. Hollis states: "Stanley's whole identity is called in doubt by their dialectic. Even his name is stripped from him as a token of his lost identity" (37). They want to put an end to everything left of Stanley as a person, to reset his existence. They ask Stanley highly existential questions which are unanswerable.

GOLDBERG. Speak up, Webber. Why did the chicken cross the road?

STANLEY. He wanted to—he wanted to—he wanted to….

MCCANN. He doesn't know!

GOLDBERG. *Why did the chicken cross the road?*

STANLEY. He wanted to—he wanted to….

GOLDBERG. Why did the chicken cross the road?

STANLEY. He wanted….

MCCANN. He doesn't know. He doesn't know which came first!

GOLDBERG. Which came first?

MCCANN .*Chicken? Egg? Which came first?*

GOLDBERG and MCCANN. Which came first? Which came first? Which came first?

…

MCCANN. Who are you, Webber?

GOLDBERG. *What makes you think you exist?*

MCCANN. You're dead.

GOLDBERG. You're dead. You can't live, *you can't think*, you can't love. You're dead. You're a plague gone bad. There's no juice in you. You're nothing but an odour!

Silence ... (my italics 25-6)

Goldberg and McCann want to break Stanley psychologically so that they can take him away. Since he has been questioning things up until that moment, they want to fight him by asking him unanswerable questions. Goldberg's words do not suggest an inability on the part of Stanley, but a prohibition. It is not that Stanley is unable to live, think or love. It is that he is prohibited to. By asking him such existential questions which Stanley of all people cannot know, they remind Stanley of the fact that his existence is futile. He has no answers to what makes him think that he exists, thus he becomes unable to speak.

GOLDBERG. Steady, McCann.

STANLEY (circling). Uuuuuhhhhh!

MCCANN. Right, Judas.

GOLDBERG (rising). Steady, McCann.

MCCANN. Come on!

STANLEY. Uuuuuuuhhhhh!

MCCANN. He's sweating.

STANLEY. Uuuuuhhhhh!

GOLDBERG. Easy, McCann.

MCCANN. The bastard sweatpig is sweating. (26)

As mentioned before, up to this point, the only thing Stanley did was to speak. It was the only thing that defined his existence. He could not act, he just spoke. This can be likened to Rose's being strip of her ability to see and observe in *The Room*, which was what defined her existence. Now that Stanley is broken and he can no longer speak, his existence in the world is made utterly meaningless and pointless by Goldberg and McCann's brutish verbal torture. Therefore, the play becomes an allegory of the passive individual's psychological annihilation in the world. Hinchliffe points out that the play is about reducing individuals to nonentitiy and the fruitless effort they show to fight with it (57). Within this scope, the process of putting an end to Stanley's being-in-the-world continues in the supposed birthday party thrown by Meg, during which Stanley is still forced to sit down by Goldberg (27). Goldberg and McCann's insistence on making him sit down stems from their wish to make his passivity in the world permanent. At this point, Stanley is psychologically opt-out. In other words, he does not exist. Goldberg and McCann's psychological violence towards Stanley goes on as they turn off the lights for Stanley's birthday toast as McCann lights a torch and directs it to Stanley's face. This is a mock-interrogation scene which renders Stanley utterly static and terrorised. Luckhurst similarly states in *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*: "Stanley's annihilation is presaged at the end of Act Two, when Goldberg and McCann close in on him, the torch on his face, ..." (107). They light up Stanley's face in a dark world, symbolically transform him to another entity which is no longer Stanley.

The process of Stanley's downfall goes on as a game of blind man's buff is played, in which one person is blindfolded and the person he or she touches becomes

blind. Once again, the imagery of blindness is made apparent, recalling Rose's blindness in *The Room*. Being blind becomes a symbol of non-existence, a state of non-being-in-the-world same as being unable to speak. Then, it can be said that different encounters with different dangers in the world takes away parts of what makes individuals human. Similarly, as it becomes Stanley's turn to put the blindfold on, and he succumbs to a state of existential trauma, his violent and primitive urges that made him beat the drum at the end of the first act becomes manifest as he steps and breaks the boy's drum, tries to strangle Meg and rape Lulu in the darkness. Everything that makes one a human is entirely lost on Stanley. He is unable to speak and see, which is heightened by McCann's breaking Stanley's glasses. Esslin argues in *Harold Pinter: a study of his plays*: "... (Stanley) seems to have gone out of his mind as the avenging representatives of the organization finally lay hands on him" (my brackets 79). From another perspective, it can be said that his dehumanisation process of blinding proves Stanley's disappointment in the world which makes his existence unbearably pointless. This is seen at the end of the play where he comes in the living room after a long night with Goldberg and McCann, during which he was possibly subjected to physical torture as well. The following day when Petey asks what happened to Stanley, Goldberg answers: "Nervous breakdown" (33). From this reply, it may be deducted that Goldberg and McCann came to the boarding house not only to catch Stanley but also to break him. Then, the organization may be seen as a dark governing force in the world which takes out people who question the world. Their purpose is to try and take out as many people who try to exist as they can. It is up to the individuals to place themselves in the world before the organization takes and shapes them. The outcome and Stanley's current state of "dehumanisation" (Grimes 47) and non-existence, then, were Goldberg and McCann's initial purpose.

> *MCCANN goes to the door, left, and goes out. He ushers in STANLEY, who is dressed in a dark well cut suit and white collar. He holds his broken*
> *glasses in his hand. He is clean-shaven. MCCANN follows and closes the door. GOLDBERG meets STANLEY, seats him in a chair.*
> GOLDBERG. How are you, Stan?

Pause.

Are you feeling any better?

Pause.

What's the matter with your glasses?

GOLDBERG bends to look.

They're broken. A pity.

STANLEY stares blankly at the floor.

MCCANN *(at the table).* He looks better, doesn't he?

GOLDBERG. Much better.

MCCANN. A new man.

GOLDBERG. You know what we'll do?

MCCANN. What?

GOLDBERG. We'll buy him another pair.

They begin to woo him, gently and with relish. During the following sequence STANLEY shows no reaction. He remains, with no movement, where he sits. (37)

Then, if Stanley had gone out and tried to find a purpose to himself, he probably would not have fallen prey to the organization. Once again Pinter states that one must find their own purpose, otherwise they have to succumb to a way of life forced upon them. Furthermore, Goldberg and McCann say to the silent Stanley that he needs a new pair of glasses and that "he had been cockeyed for years" (37). Stanley is now wearing a suit and he has shaved. His current state completely contrasts with his state at the beginning of the play. Goldberg and McCann managed to change his view of the world. His broken glasses in his hands prove that his previous being-in-the-world is destroyed, he was forced to become even more purposeless and passive. He will look at the world through the organizations' glasses, metaphorically, and will become who they want him to be: silent and non-existent. Esslin states: "He is in a state of catatonic trance, unable to speak, without any human reaction ..." (*Pinter* 80-1). A few lines later in the play, it is made sure that Stanley will never be able to speak his mind again.

MCCANN. What's your opinion, sir? Of this prospect, sir?

GOLDBERG. Prospect. Sure. Sure it's a prospect.

STANLEY'S hands clutching his glasses begin to tremble.

What's your opinion of such a prospect? Eh, Stanley?

STANLEY concentrates, his mouth opens, he attempts to speak, fails and emits sounds from his throat.

STANLEY. Uh-gug … uh-gug … eeehhh-gag … *(On the breath.)* Caahh … caahh….

They watch him. He draws a long breath which shudders down his body. He concentrates.

GOLDBERG. Well, Stanny boy, what do you say, eh?

They watch. He concentrates. His head lowers, his chin draws into his chest, he crouches.

STANLEY. Ug-gughh … uh-gughhh….

MCCANN. What's your opinion, sir?

STANLEY. Caaahhh … caaahhh….

MCCANN. Mr Webber! What's your opinion?

GOLDBERG. What do you say, Stan? What do you think of the prospect?

MCCANN. What's your opinion of the prospect?

STANLEY's body shudders, relaxes, his head drops, he becomes still again, stooped. (38)

Despite the fact that Goldberg and McCann seem to expect an answer, or want him to speak, it is the total opposite. They want to make sure that Stanley cannot speak his mind, and they want to strip him of his last hopes. Pinter similarly explains that Goldberg and McCann want to destruct Stanley because he is "the questioning voice" (qtd. in Visser *Communicating* 329), just as Rose in *The Room* is the observing eye. Additionally, Stanley's failing to speak his mind shows he can no longer think or question. In relation with Descartes' philosophy "I think, therefore I am", Stanley's inability to think annihilates his existence. At this point, Luckhurst argues that Stanley's efforts to try to speak shows his "tragic dignity" (*Torture* 362). In other words, his desire to speak is a sign that he wants to prove his existence to them and his failing to speak is a sign that he can no longer exist. Since he has been afraid for so long, he now

does not have a chance of existing at all. Then, they succeed and Stanley gives up trying. Pinter argues that what makes individuals human is that they "can and must ask questions" (qtd. in Raby *Cambridge* 112). They manage to make a new man of him who is unable to think and speak. Therefore, by taking Stanley's ability to question things, they silence him altogether. This is why Goldberg threatens to take Petey along with Stanley when Petey says: "Stan, don't let them tell you what to do!" (39). In this regard, the birthday party, although it is not Stanley's real birthday, may be symbolising Stanley's rebirth, his being reintroduced to society which, in Goldberg's opinion, would never accept him in his previous state of being (25). Thus, it can be said that in this post-war representation of the world depicted in *The Birthday Party*, the characters' existences are torn away, same as their free will and their senses of self. In this regard, Goldberg and McCann's silencing Stanley can be seen as the world silencing individuals, taking away their existences. Compared to *The Room*, which proposes there is hope as long as one wills to go out, *The Birthday Party* presents a darker situation. One must face the menacing world, before they are faced by the dark forces governing it. One must not let their voice be taken away, otherwise they lose their identities.

With regard to Rose's blindness which symbolises an existential revelation and the state of being rid of existential concerns, Stanley's becoming mute and symbolically blind represents the end of his pointless existence. His worst fear has come true, he is being taken out but it is almost like he is not alive. Since the beginning of the play, he could only see with his glasses and was able to speak. Goldberg and McCann's silencing him and their breaking his glasses take all of Stanley's functions as a human being from him, leaving him mute and metaphorically blind. Therefore, Stanley's meaningless existence completely ceases. In other words, by taking his free will from Stanley, Goldberg and McCann take his existence away from him. Thus, the absurdity of life becomes more bitter and apparent for Stanley. He can now fruitlessly try to make sense of the world with the gurgling voices he makes. Pinter argues that these voices point at something and that it is the moment Stanley finally finds a meaning in life, but is unable to say so (qtd. in Raby *Cambridge* 109). At this point, it can be said that Stanley's muteness and Rose's blindness serve to the same function, for Stanley's

silence may also be representing a moment of late revelation or anagnorisis rather than an inability to think.

In relation with Existentialist point of view, it can be said that Stanley is made unable to rebel against the world. Despite the fact that it looks rebellious, his current situation is that of passivity. Pinter states in a letter to the director of the play, Peter Wood, that Stanley is: "... neither hero nor exemplar of revolt" (qtd. in Raby *Cambridge* 108). Therefore, it can be said that he does not rebel the absurdity of the world, as Camus recommends as a way to cope with existential anxieties. In relation with this, Stanley also does not try to reach to a sense of self. Pinter goes on to state in the letter that Stanley does not have self-knowledge and lives his life by refraining from it (108). It was mentioned earlier that Nietzsche argues that individuals must have self-knowledge in order to overcome themselves and endure the absurdity of the world, which is what Stanley lacks. Chui similarly argues that he rejects facing the absurdity of life (26). Therefore, he is unable to fulfil the process of self-overcoming. With his current status, it is for sure that Stanley is made insignificant by Goldberg and McCann, and that he has no chances of overcoming himself. Luckhurst regards this situation as "Stanley's loss of himself" and argues: "... he never had any understanding of what authentic self-expression might be..." (*The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter* 108). Also, from the Sartrian perspective, Stanley is in Bad Faith because he evades reality and maintains a hollow existence, which is an obstacle for him to reach to Authenticity, or a true sense of self.

In light of this discussion, Goldberg himself is somewhat similar to Stanley in his own existential concerns. Towards the end of the play, he shows signs of suffering from existential crisis as well. Esslin similarly argues that Pinter tries to convey existential anxiety through Goldberg (*Pinter* 81). Goldberg is questioning the nature of his own existence, whether what he is doing with his life is actually what he wants or not. Therefore, Goldberg is unable to make sense of the world, too. He is unable to identify himself as Nat, Simey or Benny. He asks Stanley why he changed his name, but his own name and identity seems to be undecided. His ambiguity is proof of his own existential anxieties and the way they impose on him.

> GOLDBERG. You know what? I've never lost a tooth. Not since the day I was born. Nothing's changed. *(He gets up.)* That's why I've reached my position, McCann. Because I've always been as fit as a fiddle. All my life I've said the same. Play up, play up, and play the game. Honour thy father and thy mother. All along the line. Follow the line, the line, McCann, and you can't go wrong. *What do you think, I'm a self-made man? No! I sat where I was told to sit. I kept my eye on the ball* ... (my italics 35)

Therefore, it can be said that Goldberg is also non-existent. Although he seems to be proud of his life, his words hide certain anxieties regarding the world. He, as he also states, is not a self-made man. He has never started the self-overcoming process. He is a man created by the organization, thus his existence does not make sense to him either. He is merely fulfilling an assigned project. As a man who is used to doing what he is told, Goldberg expects Stanley to be the same. Since he has no free will, he takes Stanley's away from him, leaving him silent and unquestioning like himself.

3.3. Loss of Self through Menace in *The Dumb Waiter*

The Dumb Waiter, Pinter's third play, shares much of the basic characteristics with the previous two plays. The one act play focuses on two gunmen named Ben and Gus who work for an unknown organization. They go from town to town whenever the organization attains somebody to kill, they stay in a house, the victim unknowingly comes to that house, is killed, and then the duo leaves. This time they are staying in a basement flat with no windows and two doors. They sit in the room and they wait for the orders to come. The orders come through a machine called "the dumb waiter", which is a simple machine that works like an elevator between the floors of the house and through which people send food. The person at the other end of the dumb waiter writes the orders on a piece of paper and sends it through the dumb waiter to the kitchen, and people prepare the food and send it back through it. Here, Ben and Gus receive the food order at the other end, prepare it without question and send it back. If no order comes, Ben and Gus merely wait for it.

It is seen that similar to *The Room* and *The Birthday Party*, this play is also set in one room, which is in Birmingham, and nowhere else is shown. Once again, Pinter does

not describe the outside world, the characters' past or their motives. Time and place are vague, though this time with some hints. However, time and place are still more Beckettian in the sense that the windowless basement brings to mind Beckett's claustrophobic post-apocalyptic world. It also reminds the basement Rose fears so much to go to in *The Room.* It is almost like a prison cell.

The Dumb Waiter centres on its characters' existential traumas and their relationships with the absurdity of the world of which they know so little of. Despite the fact that Ben and Gus seem to be more active and mobile compared to the characters from the two previous plays, they are not self-overcome individuals. However, what matters in Ben and Gus' evaluation in terms of absurdity and menace is the difference between their respective characters. Therefore, Ben and Gus can both be likened to Stanley's interrogators Goldberg and McCann in that they also seem to work for an organization that orders to kill people. Overall, it can be stated that existence, or being-in-the-world, is reduced to a state of waiting, or simply, passing the time. The world Ben and Gus live in is portrayed as absurd; their existences in it are rendered inane by their way of passing time. Menace occurs as a result of the absurdity of Ben and Gus' existences. However, Gus grows more and more curious of the nature of his existence and asks questions about the world. As a result, together with the contribution of the mysterious elements, the play leads up to the moment where the next victim of the organization becomes Gus. In this regard, Ben and Gus' existential anxieties will also be analysed in relation to their respective, and different, relationships with the absurd and menacing world they cannot seem to make sense of.

3.3.1. Time and Place as the Menacing Forces

First of all, time and place constitute the foremost element of menace and absurdity in the play. Lack of clarity regarding time is a more concrete element in *The Dumb Waiter* compared to the previous plays. Other than the fact that it is Friday, nothing is clarified regarding the time. The important point here is how the ambiguous time affects Ben and Gus. It is not clear which time of the day it is, what year or what month. Ben and Gus spend their time waiting for instructions most of the time, and they are alone. It is almost like they are frozen in a point in life where they cannot take action

unless they are told what to do. Thus, the state of waiting becomes a tool that marks the passing of time. Martin S. Regal explains: "Since there are only two characters, and they are waiting for instructions, time appears to pass quite slowly" (29) and adds: "Gus and Ben cannot act until they receive notice and are thus 'immobilised'" (29). Ben and Gus' immobility directly links with the ambiguity of time in the play and creates the atmosphere of menace and absurdity from the beginning. Whereas the slow passing of time or the state of waiting for something does not affect Ben, it is a major concern for Gus. While Gus spends moments of waiting through asking questions and querying everything, Ben chooses to spend the time by making himself busy with mundane activities like reading the newspaper. Ben, who is the muscle force of the duo, says to Gus that his (Gus') problem is that he does not have any interests. He adds: "I've got my woodwork. I've got my model boats. Have you ever seen me idle? I'm never idle. *I know how to occupy my time, to its best advantage*. Then when a call comes, I'm ready." (my italics 56). Then, being-in-the world is only a matter of finding a way to pass the time, or, "occupying the time". Thereby, time becomes a menacing territory to be defeated and in which one must linger until something comes up for them to do. Ben's way of passing his time symbolises many things about how he views his own existence in the world. He does not want to think about the world or try to make sense of it at all; he passes the time until a higher organ or an authority demands something of him. Thus, it can be said that Ben is not aware of the fact that his existence is rather hallow and futile. Moreover, Ben says: "Time's getting on" (54, 65) two times in the play. His repeating that time is going on is a reminder of the fact that they must not be idle and find a way to pass the time. On the other hand, the passing of time affects Gus in a different way. He is the brains of the duo, much like McCann in the former play. Therefore, his ability to regard things differently is the main reason why he cannot sit around and wait for the time to pass. Their ideas of time operate differently. As time flows, Gus feels the disharmonious relationship between himself and the world. Thus, it becomes impossible for him to sit and wait. Similarly, it is stated in *Harold Pinter's The Dumb Waiter*: "Gus, by contrast, refuses to fill time in the approved ways, and instead experiences idleness as a sort of fundamental dissonance (disharmony) between subject and world" (my brackets, Begley 77). Then, Gus is bothered with Ben's, and indirectly

his, constant state of waiting to pass the time. He says to Ben: “All you do is wait, eh?” (60). He goes on to ask him: “How many times have you read that paper?” (60), which angers Ben. Passing of time is not reasonable for Gus who cannot make sense of the world around him and thus refrains from waiting as a means of existence. Instead, he fills his time with questions in the form of complaints about their situation. Martin S. Regal argues: “Time moves slowly and incrementally as each of them find excuses to fill the silences, Ben with his newspaper snippets, Gus with his complaints” (29-90). To put the matter in another way, whereas Ben yields to the absurdity of the world and tries to find some things to do, Gus has no intention to do so. He asks: “What time is he getting in touch?” (55), to which Ben shows no interest. He does not want to pass time; he wants to understand what is going on and at what time certain things will happen. In this sense, Gus’ state of waiting for an unidentified man to get in touch with them is very different from that of Ben’s. Ben and Gus are equally unable to understand the workings of the world; including the passing of time, but their reactions to it is the determinant element. As a result, their respective existential crises are made apparent through their reactions to the passing of time, which will be analysed in detail later on.

Place, or setting, is of equal importance in reflecting the menace and absurdity of Ben and Gus’ world. As mentioned before, the play is set in a windowless, claustrophobic basement in Birmingham, with two doors opening to the unknown outside world and to the bathroom. The room is very different from a comfortable and secure room. Unlike the comfort Rose’s room or Meg’s boarding house provides, this basement is menacing by itself. It is argued in *Harold Pinter: A Study of His Plays*: “Again we are in a room enclosed by a dark, mysterious world outside. Again the people in the room are watching, in dreadful suspense, a door which is certain to open” (Esslin 69). The basement is in a building the owners of which are unfamiliar to Ben and Gus, and one the workings of which they cannot seem to comprehend. They assume it used to be the kitchen of a restaurant because there is a dumb waiter, but they are equally threatened by it for it seems to work with supernatural forces which are operating the dumb waiter. Despite the fact that the basement protects them from the outside world, it also encapsulates them with its ambiguity and unknown features and

will soon become a grave to the organization's victim. Once again, it is Gus who is disturbed by the claustrophobic atmosphere.

> *GUS wanders downstage, looks out front, then all about the room.*
> I wouldn't like to live in this dump. I wouldn't mind if you had a window, you could see what it looked like outside.
> BEN. What do you want a window for?
> GUS. Well, I like to have a bit of a view, Ben. It whiles away the time.
> *He walks about the room.*
> I mean, 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.
> *Pause.*
> I like to get a look at the scenery. You never get the chance in this job. (55)

It is seen that Gus is the opposite of Ben. For Gus, having an understanding of his whereabouts and knowing it is important. Gus' overall wish to make sense of the ambiguous and absurd world is, once again, symbolised by Pinter with the windowless basement. Gus would like to know who owns the place.

> GUS. You mean the people who ran this place didn't find it a going concern and moved out?
> BEN. Sure.
> GUS. WELL, WHO'S GOT IT NOW?
> *Silence.*
> BEN. What do you mean, who's got it now?
> GUS. Who's got it now? If they moved out, who moved in?
> BEN. Well, that all depends – (61)

The difference between Ben and Gus' reactions to the ambiguous and absurd world around them is apparent once again. Gus would like to know who owns the place to reach to an understanding of his surroundings while Ben has never thought of it before.

He asks Gus what he means, for Ben is unable to question the important things but simply wants to pass the time although he claims he is not idle.

3.3.2. Menace as a Means of Destruction

The Dumb Waiter is an example of comedy of menace, which makes use of comedy to reveal the menacing atmosphere around Ben and Gus. The play analyses this quite well. For example, Gus' repetitive actions at the beginning of the play are both absurd and comic. Gus ties his shoe, loosens it, looks inside it and finds an object in it twice. Ben's reactions to this are the same each time. "Their eyes meet. Ben rattles his paper and reads..." (54). From the beginning of the play, the repetitive actions are apparent. This repetitiveness makes the audience laugh while at the same time makes them question why they are acting this way. The same happens when the lavatory chain is being pulled twice but the flush does not work. The flush works all of a sudden some moments later. Gus pulls down the flush every time anyway. Despite the fact that it is comic, it also hints at a series of meaningless actions. Like Camus' Sisyphus, Gus tries to do something he knows will not happen. In other words, a meaningless act is being repeated although there is no result. This is comic, but at the same time menacing. It makes the audience, and Gus, think that some supernatural forces are haunting the basement. Additionally, as Ben and Gus recite their ritual regarding the moment the victim comes, Ben gives the orders and makes Gus repeat them. Gus interrupts, saying that Ben forgot to mention when Gus will bring out his gun. Although this kind of interruption to murder seems funny, it stops being comic the moment the audience realizes Gus comes through the door unarmed. As stated before, many critics are of the opinion that comedy ends when tragedy starts in comedy of menace. It is also applicable to *The Dumb Waiter*. Dukore states:

> When they repeat their instructions, Gus' recognition that Ben forgot the injunction for Gus to take out his gun is funny. When at the end Gus appears at the door without his gun, words become actuality and no longer funny. *The Dumb Waiter* is classically symmetrical and creates menace from initially comic elements. (40-1)

Then, death becomes a funny thing for Ben and Gus. It also makes them laugh when they read other people's death news in the newspaper. However, Ben taking orders to kill Gus does not make them laugh, for it becomes something unfamiliar and tragic for them. Dukore also states: "Death elsewhere, as reported, is comic; but imminent death, in the rooms, is not comic" (40). Ben's reading the news of death from the newspaper does not have a menacing effect on either Ben or Gus and is funny. Death is regarded as a threat for them only when there is a possibility of it happening in the basement, which is suspended until the end of the play. Up until this point in the play, the orders coming through the dumb waiter were merely food orders. However, just as the last order comes through the dumb waiter, which is to kill the next person who goes in the door, the play stops being comic (Hinchliffe 67). It is the point where comedy turns to menace. Regal argues:

> As in *The Birthday Party,* an exterior influence (in this case whoever is at the other end of the dumb waiter) introduces absurdities which unsettle the characters' expectations and thus the 'normal' sequence of events, while the incongruity of ordering exotic meals from two gangsters in a basement affects more laughter than suspense. (30)

The comedy provided by Ben and Gus' efforts to prepare food up until this point, then, also creates suspense because the person ordering the food is ambiguous and silent to the audience's ears. The absurdity of Ben and Gus' situation is presented through this comic sequence and ends when the next order turns out to be menacing.

Apart from its use of comedy and repetition, menace is apparent in every line of the play. The prison-like, windowless basement, Ben and Gus' occupation, their unconcerned small talk regarding their victim are all menacing. The audience is made aware of the fact that this time, menace will not necessarily come from outside, it will kill whoever comes from outside. Esslin states: "... we are ... made aware of the fact that whoever it will be who enters by the door will have to die" (*Pinter* 69). This always stays in the mind of the audience as the play carries on. The two characters, no matter the difference between them, are gunmen. Therefore, they are the embodiment of menace. Esslin goes on to argue: "Ben and Gus are looking at the door waiting for the victim to walk into the trap. This provides a very different element of suspense and a

very different focus for the spectator's fears and hopes" (70). Although it is not explained why anyone would come in, the room is represented as a menacing trap for anyone who might do so. Apart from the element of comedy, then, the play is full of menacing thoughts, ideas and characters. Furthermore, another point that marks the menace in the play is when Gus leaves the room momentarily and Ben checks his gun for ammunition (60). This is suspiciously threatening for it brings to mind the question of whether Ben will kill Gus or he simply checks his gun at that moment for unrelated reasons. Ben's continuous threatening behaviour and actions, Hinchliffe states: "... gradually build up a sense of something sinister behind the casual presence of two men waiting to do a job..." (65). The audience is thus made aware of the fact that menace does not always come through the door, sometimes it may come from the so-called secure atmosphere of four walls. Additionally, as the play hints at the fact that the victim is Gus, one of the menacing gunmen becomes potentially menaced. In *Macmillan Modern Dramatists: Harold Pinter* it is stated that the play focuses on victimisers instead of the victims (37). Unlike the two previous plays, this time it is the executioners who will be menaced while they set out as the menacing ones. In the former plays, the intruders were not menaced. They were very powerful, menacing and violent. However, in *The Dumb Waiter* victims are also victimisers. Then, it can be deducted that the world is not only dangerous for the victims, but also for the victimisers. Hinchliffe similarly claims: "... hired killers are just men like everyone else; they can only obey orders; and while menacing others they themselves can be menaced" (63). Through such reversal of the situation, then, Pinter states that menace is around every corner and it is up to the individuals to try and find a way to survive through it. Ben and Gus are two different kinds of individuals who try to do so. The former accepting life as it is and trying to find a meaning, the latter questioning why things the way they are. The one who does not survive in the end is, once again, the questioning one.

Similar to the two previous plays, menace also comes from ambiguity in this play. As characteristic of Harold Pinter's absurdist plays, ambiguity comes from the unexplained background information. In this play, the unclear information is as to the motivations of the organization Ben and Gus work for, Ben and Gus' personal lives, to

whom the basement belongs, why Gus is the questioning one whereas Ben is obedient and silent, who operates the dumb waiter and orders the absurdly specific food. Although the outside world is also ambiguous in this play, it has little importance this time. It is not the characters' fear of the outside world or an intruder to disturb the order that make them go through their own existential traumas, it is the ambiguity of their life in particular. Apart from all of the unclear and unexplained details in the play, Ben and Gus' personal anxieties are the main element of ambiguity. Esslin argues that Ben and Gus are very anxious characters and adds: "The two gunmen, anxious not to be discovered, are pathetically eager to fill this mysterious order from above" (*Theatre* 201). Their fulfilling the mysterious person's food orders becomes menacing in itself, because the person remains unknown. Despite the fact that it seems unreasonable, it represents the way Ben and Gus have so far been working with the organization: without questioning it. Thus, it becomes a way which connects Ben and Gus to the mysterious workings of the world, and thus makes them feel threatened. Furthermore, Pinter concludes the play with a question mark in the minds of the audience. Despite the fact that the new orders tell Ben to murder Gus and he points his gun at him, it remains ambiguous whether Ben will pull the trigger or not. This last ambiguity remains as a solid problem that marks the end of the play and places menace as the biggest trouble in Ben and Gus' absurd way of being-in-the-world.

3.3.3. Loss of Self through Revolt

Together with ambiguity, the characters' personal existential crises must be analysed as well. As briefly mentioned earlier, Ben and Gus are living through the same existential concerns as the main characters of the previous two plays. Hollis asserts that the gunmen are vulnerable like Stanley in the previous play and adds: "They are capable of the same spoken and unspoken fears, the same anxieties, the same conviction of guilt" (43). Then, Ben and Gus both suffer from the absurdity of the world. What cause the difference between the two characters and the reason why one of them eventually becomes the victim of the menacing occupation they have is their reactions to this absurdity. As mentioned before, Ben and Gus are respectively similar to Goldberg and McCann. Ben is the patronising one whereas Gus seems to be the one obeying orders.

However, this is not entirely true. Ben is definitely the one who plays along without questioning the orders and Gus is the one who wants to know more. In other words, despite the fact that they both are unable to understand how the world works, Ben is the one who refrains from trying to, whereas Gus is curious. As mentioned earlier, Harold Pinter argues that individuals must be able to ask questions, they must be curious. It can be deducted that for Pinter, this is essential in order to find a purpose in life. Since existence precedes essence, Gus is trying to understand his *raison d'être*, and then he can face the world. Ben, however, has no intention to do so. To put the matter from the Sartrian perspective, whereas Ben is in Bad Faith, refusing to see the absurdity of the world and simply waiting, Gus tries to live in Authenticity, trying to understand the world. While Ben is not fully a self, Gus is trying to revolt against absurdity and overcome himself. This can be regarded as the reason why Gus is killed. While Ben is not questioning the world or the orders he is given, Gus is constantly questioning. If individuals do what they are told, then they can be a harmless part of the world, but if they question it, they are immediately cast out.

> BEN. You never used to ask me so many damn questions. What's come over you?
> GUS. No, I was just wondering.
> BEN. *Stop wondering. You've got a job to do. Why don't you just do it and shut up?*
> GUS. That's what I was wondering about.
> BEN. What?
> GUS. The job. (my italics 60)

As can be seen in the dialogue, Gus would like to know more about the job whereas Ben tells him to stop being so curious about it. Similarly, Gus asks Ben so many times "What do you mean?" to which he cannot get answers since Ben also does not know what he means. When Gus wants to know who cleans up after they go, Ben points out that the organization has different departments for everything and that he (Gus) should not be querying about it (61). At another point, when Gus once again questions the nature of their job, Ben says: "What's one thing got to do with another?" (67)

Apparently, he cannot connect one thing with something else, and he is afraid to question them as well. Hollis states: "It is Gus who has been raising the question of meaning from the beginning while Ben has been unable to see what one thing has to do with another" (49). After this moment, Gus wants to know why "he" (the head of the organization referred to as "Wilson") is doing these things, playing a game for (67). This is evidently a rebellion against the absurdity of the world, a protest showing that he cannot bear the unknown anymore. Ben has no answers to these questions himself and it is seen that he becomes violent and yells at Gus to stop talking. Therefore, Gus' curiosity menaces Ben and he becomes afraid of him so he tries to silence him (67), which becomes a foreshadowing of the play's ending. It can be said that Gus is like Stanley, who asks questions and is becoming more aware of the world. From this perspective, Ben is like Goldberg who just does his job, passes the time and does not ask questions. Once again, the menacing ones become menaced by the workings of the world. Ben says to the questioning Gus: "Just get on with it mate. Get on with it, that's all" (61). This could be the reason why Ben is ordered to kill Gus at the end. Since Gus is becoming more and more curious, the organization wants to annihilate him, just like Goldberg and McCann do with Stanley. To put the matter in another way, the organization becomes the representative of the world which does not want to be understood. The moment one tries to make sense of it and wonders why things are the way they are, their dehumanisation process begins. The unquestioning Ben gets angrier and more violent with Gus, to try and stop him from becoming more aware of the disharmonious workings of the world. It is argued in *Harold Pinter: a study of his plays*: "Ultimately what is being conveyed is a complex existential situation-through its emotional tone: and in this case it is the emotional situation of simple people in a social context which is beyond their powers of comprehension" (Esslin 73). From this perspective, it can be deducted that Ben and Gus' situation in the world is the same as the situation of post-war Europeans, unable to understand how the world operates, why they have killed-and go on killing-these people. *The Dumb Waiter* is perhaps the play which represents Pinter's opinion on war the most among these three plays. As a conscientious objector, Pinter himself cannot understand the purpose of war. The effect the destructive war had on individuals is the same effect of their job on Ben and Gus,

which is a mixture of guilt and confusion. Whereas the former refuses these feelings, the latter embraces them. Esslin states:

> After all: is an army so different from the organization which employs Gus and Ben? In an army too men are sent to destinations where they have to await further orders as to when they are to start to shoot. Nor does the machinery by which orders pass in an army differ so very much from the manner in which Gus and Ben receive theirs. (*Pinter 73*)

In this regard, Pinter points to the meaninglessness of war and the way it operates through the meaninglessness of the organization's orders. Pinter objects to the absurdity of a killing order through the food order coming from an unknown person on the other side of the dumb waiter. Ben and Gus, then, can be seen as representatives of the anxious post-war Europeans in their inability to make sense of the world and of their existences in a destructive world. As mentioned in the first chapter, together with the loss of faith in religion, individuals became alone in the world in the post-war period. Similarly, Ben and Gus are alone in a world in which they cannot put their faith in anywhere. Hollis states: "Ben and Gus, then, are troubled humanity in the hands of an angry or indifferent God" (50). The mysterious "he" or "Wilson" they are waiting to hear from may be representing God or hope. In this regard, those who play the game like Ben can get along without much trouble, whereas the questioning ones searching for meaning like Gus must be annihilated. Hollis analyses the situation in relation to the play's title. According to him, the dumb waiter does not merely refer to the machine they use to send food, but symbolises Ben who "waits" and is rather "dumb" and goes on to argue:

> For example, a dumb waiter is a silent waiter; Gus is a silent waiter; he waits for that final silence wherein his destiny will manifest itself. But on the other hand, Ben is a dumb waiter. It is Gus who questions everything and because of his constant interrogation, he becomes a threat to the hierarchy and must be removed. (49-50)

Similarly, Hinchliffe states: "... Gus is becoming an individual and must be eliminated" (67). In this case, Gus slowly departs his duty as a puppet of the organization and thus becomes a threat, and eventually a target for it. His breakdown when they no longer

have any food left to send through the dumb waiter, his violent yelling through the speaking tube that they have nothing left and "the larder's bare" (64) is also important. It symbolically represents that Gus gave everything in his power and is unable to carry on in a world which he cannot find meaning. Hollis goes on to argue: "When Gus says the larder's bare and that they have no more to give, he means that men are played out, drained of their will to continue a game they did not begin and cannot control" (50). Then, it can be said that through presenting two very different reactions to the absurdity of the world, Pinter leaves it to the audience to decide. Individuals can either choose to rebel against it, as Sartre recommends, or close their eyes and play along. Despite the fact that blindness is not a theme in *The Dumb Waiter*, Ben's inability to rebel against the absurdity of the world and his acceptance of the things he cannot understand prove his metaphorical blindness. Hollis also points out:

> There seem finally two ways of responding to the absence of answers to a man's questions. He may continue his frustration by asking himself questions until he has pushed himself to the abyss. Or he can simply continue to play the game and hope he does not stumble along the way. Gus and Ben personify this central dilemma. (50)

From the perspective of Existentialist thinking and the absurdist plays' way of presenting it, Ben and Gus are representatives of two types of individuals in their reactions to the meaninglessness of existence.

Together with the different stances they have before the absurd world, the evasion of communication between Ben and Gus becomes an important part of the play. Among the three plays, *The Dumb Waiter* is the one in which evasion of communication is the most evident. As mentioned above, there is an evasion of communication on the part of Ben. Whereas Gus wishes to talk about what is troubling his mind, Ben refuses to talk about them and acts as if he is entirely unaware of such concerns. Gus' attempts to talk about what really matters (the workings of the organization, the man who gives them orders, the victims) are avoided by Ben who seems to be afraid to talk about them. In *The Theater of the Absurd*, Esslin argues that the two men are making small talk to hide their gradually increasing anxiety (202). Indeed, sometimes Gus is carried away as well when they talk about unimportant matters regarding football games, the weather,

what to eat or whether they should say “light the kettle” or “light the gas”. This small talk cannot be regarded as real communication for it does not solve any menacing problems Gus and Ben have. These problems, in spite of the different reactions Ben and Gus give to them, stem from the fact that they are unable to make sense of the world they are living in. For example, the mysterious matches come below the door just as they need matches to make some tea. Ben thinks someone left them and escaped whereas Gus thinks there is something more ambiguous to this situation than that. What is worth of communication at this point is how the matches mysteriously occurred, which is scary for them. However, the two refrain from communication and start arguing about whether they should say “light the kettle” or “light the gas”.

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?
GUS. Well, that’s what you mean, don’t you? The gas.
BEN *(powerfully).* If I say go and light the kettle I mean go and light the kettle.
GUS. How can you light a kettle?
BEN. It’s a figure of speech! Light the kettle. It’s a figure of speech!
GUS. I’ve never heard it.
BEN. Light the kettle! It’s common usage!
GUS. I think you’ve got it wrong.
BEN *(menacing).* What do you mean?
GUS. They say put on the kettle.
BEN *(taut).* Who says?
They stare at each other, breathing hard.
(Deliberately.) I have never in all my life heard anyone say put on the kettle.
GUS. I bet my mother used to say it.

BEN. Your mother? When did you last see your mother?

GUS. I don't know, about –

BEN. Well, what are you talking about your mother for?

They stare. (59)

The two restlessly try to speak so as to overlook the fact that they do not know who left the matches. They refuse to talk about important things and go in an unreasonable argument instead. Pinter explains that Ben and Gus argue whether to say "light the kettle" or "light the gas" on purpose, so that they can avoid what really matters: "that they are *both* in fact frightened of their condition, of their situation, of their state" (qtd. in Prentice *Pinter* 12). Ben dwells on the subject "deliberately", as stated within the dialogue, even though the two have no more to say to each other about it. Furthermore, the argument ends as Ben strikes Gus violently, calling him a fool (59). Ben in the end wearily says: "Put on the bloody kettle, for Christ's sake" (59). The insignificant argument ends as Ben, surprisingly, succumbs and chooses Gus' way to say it. They successfully disregard the important matter at hand, and turn the situation into a struggle for dominion on each other. It was mentioned earlier that neither Ben nor Gus comprehend how the organization works. As far as Ben is concerned, there are different departments for everything and their job is not to think too much about it. This lack of information about the job they do is the main reason why they are unable to communicate. Similarly, Esslin states in *Harold Pinter: a study of his plays*: "The failure-on the part of Gus and Ben-to understand the workings of their organization, their frustration and irritation finds its expression in the dialogue, which bristles with their difficulties of communication" (73). In other words, despite the fact that they talk to each other continuously, with only a few moments where they do not talk, there is no real communication. Furthermore, communication with the outside world is made possible through a speaking tube hung close to Gus' bed, which Ben and Gus discover close to the end of the play. Ben explains that you have to blow through the speaking tube, which reaches the other part as a whistle. Therefore, people at the other end of the speaking tube can understand that you want to talk to them. This ritual representing the wish to communicate is both absurd and funny. If one wishes to communicate, they

cannot directly begin with using words, but with meaningless voices. Gus uses it to yell at the people who order the food, whereas Ben uses it more appropriately. It is through the speaking tube that he receives the order to kill Gus. Thus, the means of communication becomes a menacing item proposing death and destruction and not real dialogue. By equating communication with death, then, Pinter presents communication as something which is no longer capable of meaning-making, but of destruction.

Lack of communication between Ben and Gus can be seen as the second type of silence that Harold Pinter identifies: a torrent of words is being spoken, but no communication takes place. Hollis argues that Ben and Gus are talking about mundane, daily, unimportant things when there are more important ones worthy of being talked about: "Gus and Ben fill the air with words about deficient ballcocks (regarding the flush) because they are unwilling or unable to broach the more important matter at hand" (my brackets 44).

> GUS. Have you noticed the time that tank takes to fill?
> BEN. What tank?
> GUS. In the lavatory.
> BEN. No. Does it?
> GUS. Terrible.
> BEN. Well, what about it?
> GUS. What do you think's the matter with it?
> BEN. Nothing.
> GUS. Nothing?
> BEN. It's got a deficient ballcock, that's all.
> GUS. A deficient what?
> BEN. Ballcock.
> GUS. No? Really?
> BEN. *That's what I should say.* (my italics 55).

As can be seen in the dialogue, Gus is trying to understand and is more aware whereas Ben is clueless, thus the conversation turns to a point where the two cannot

communicate. Their dialogue is absurd. Whereas Gus wants to communicate, Ben wants to wait in silence. Arnold P. Hinchliffe states:

> Pinter has learned how to play off a silent character with a loquacious one and also how to use total silence to emphasize edginess and the failure or unwillingness to communicate. Gus cannot bear silence, and Ben resents conversation; in each case, the method produces thought and communication. (64)

This thought and communication created by their different stances in life is, however, an insignificant one, which produces the edgy and comic dialogues between the two characters. Thus, Ben and Gus hide behind the funnily choreographed dialogues they share. Additionally, their disability to communicate brings about repetitions and silences in the dialogue. One repetitive ritual between the two is Gus' occasional "meaning to ask something to Ben" (54, 55, 56, 61). It can be said that Gus wants to communicate with the only person there is in the room. His desire to know more about the world is evident once again. Throughout Ben's process of reading the newspaper Gus struggles to ask him questions about the job. However, Gus' wish to communicate is declined each time. Instead, Ben interrupts Gus by reading from the newspaper, rejecting the approaching question. In other times, he gets violent and yells at him. The repetitiveness of Gus' wish to ask questions to Ben shows how obsessed Gus is with trying to get answers. Also, *The Dumb Waiter* completes a full circle as the play begins with Ben reading Gus news from the paper and ends with the same act, as in *The Birthday Party.* At the beginning of the play, Ben reads to Gus that an old man crossed the road and crawled under a lorry which ran over him (54). Gus' reaction is of surprise, shock and wanting to know more. He asks: "Who advised him to do a thing like that?" (54). Then, Ben reads that a girl of eight killed a cat (55). Gus wants to know who did it; how it was done and bets that the brother of the girl did it and blamed it on her (55). Gus' comments and questions about the news are representative of his stance in life, while Ben's unresponsiveness and passivity show his submission to the organization. At the end of the play, after slapping and warning Gus because he yelled through the speaking tube, Ben goes to read the same paper to Gus twice. Ben gives the same reactions himself, without Gus saying his lines. Gus reacts only when this

choreographic action comes to an end, but almost in a robotic way and in the way Ben would want him to.

> *They turn quickly, their eyes meet. BEN turns to his paper.*
> *Slowly GUS goes back to his bed, and sits.*
> *Silence.*
> *The hatch falls back into place.*
> *They turn quickly, their eyes meet. BEN turns back to his paper.*
> *Silence.*
> *BEN throws his paper down.*
> BEN. Kaw!
> *He picks up the paper and looks at it.*
> Listen to this!
> *Pause.*
> What about that, eh?
> *Pause.*
> Kaw!
> *Pause.*
> Have you ever heard such a thing?
> GUS *(dully).* Go on!
> BEN. It's true.
> GUS. Get away.
> BEN. It's down here in black and white.
> GUS *(very low).* Is that a fact?
> BEN. Can you imagine it.
> GUS. It's unbelievable.
> BEN. It's enough to make you want to puke, isn't it?
> GUS *(almost inaudible).* Incredible. (67, 8)

Gus reacts to Ben's stories *dully*, *very low* and *almost inaudible*. Therefore, it can be said that Ben succeeds in making Gus silent and obedient to the organization. He manages to stop Gus from questioning why things happened the way they have and to

make him merely react to things. Similar to Stanley's situation, then, it can be seen that Gus becomes silenced and is now unable to question. However, unlike Stanley, he still has the ability to speak. James R. Hollis states: "... Gus like Stanley can only struggle to avoid the judgment which is being levied against him. His life had had a certain meaning to him, but someone else has examined the evidence and reached a different conclusion" (49). Here Gus speaks, but cannot communicate. His determined way of trying to make sense of the world is reduced to a state of merely waiting in the world. From this point on, Gus is only able to utter the words Ben and the organization would want him to, without querying and wanting to know more. In other words, Gus is finally reduced to a state which is equal to Ben.

Furthermore, Pinter makes use of silences in places where no words are spoken as well. In the previous plays, silences where nobody spoke were rare. Silence becomes more important in this play. In *The Dumb Waiter*, Pinter begins the play with silence and ends it with a long one. Hinchliffe points out that in *The Dumb Waiter Pinter* starts using silences as part of the dialogue (64), perhaps instead of an interruption to it. Silence becomes essential in the dialogue in that it shows both the evasion of communication between the characters and works as suspense. At the beginning of the play, Pinter defines the atmosphere as such:

> *BEN is lying on a bed, left, reading a paper. GUS is sitting on a bed, right, tying his shoelaces, with difficulty. Both are dressed in shirts, trousers and braces.*
> *Silence.* (54)

This is followed by two more silences. In these moments, neither Ben nor Gus has something to say. Their meaningless actions mark the beginning of the play, hint at the absurdity of their being-in-the-world and show the inane states of the characters. Ben is reading a newspaper and Gus is inanely tying and untying his shoes, and for some reason, he finds a matchbox and a cigarette pocket in them. This creates suspense because such a scene shows that Ben and Gus are merely waiting for something in this basement flat in silence. James R. Hollis states: "Life for the two is a 'slow dance on the killing ground'. They are bored, they are surrounded by silence; they wait" (43). This initial stance of waiting carries on throughout the play until it ends in death. Once again,

this marks the characters' different stances in life. Pinter frequently uses silences to reflect this. For example, as Gus gets bored in the room, he asks Ben "Don't you ever get a bit fed up?", to which Ben replies "Fed up? What with?" (56), which is followed by a silence. Ben entirely rejects the fact that he is bored as he knows how to "occupy his time", and reads the paper. According to Ben, there is no reason to be bored. Gus, as he cannot understand how Ben does not get fed up with life, has no words to say after this, so silence takes place between them. Hollis goes on to argue: "Ben cannot confront the abyss either but he keeps his hands busy. He is perfectly adjusted" (45). In other words, Ben adapts himself to the world which he cannot understand, whereas Gus remains disharmonious. The imbalance between the two creates silences, where neither of them has something to say. Martin S. Regal states:

> The stage directions indicate a silence almost as often as a pause and both appear to consistently reflect on the dialogue, although the silences generally precede or follow more ominous statements or questions, such as 'That's enough, I'm warning you!' and I wonder who it'll be tonight?' The breaks in the dialogue form small bridges, Gus on one side, Ben on the other, neither willing to compromise and thereby lessen the tension that exists between them. The final image of them staring at each other across one of these bridges of silence blends comedy with horror as we see that the 'unknown' victim is in fact Gus. (30)

The silences in the play, then, function more as a link between Ben and Gus instead of interrupting their dialogue. Silences between them become "bridges", as Regal states, that are almost tangible. Moreover, as Regal also points out, the play ends with a long silence. At this point Ben has taken the orders to kill whoever walks in the room next, and the next person is Gus who seems to have been attacked.

> *The door right opens sharply. Ben turns, his revolver levelled 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. (68)

The long silence is representative of a moment of revelation in which the two can no longer speak but is aware of what is about to happen. Ben will obey the order without question and kill Gus. During the long silence, the audience can observe that Gus is "stripped of", that is, his clothes and gun were taken from him by force. Outside the basement, he was probably attacked by the organization and prepared to become the next victim, unable to attack his attacker. At this point there are no more words to say for either Ben, who is a proponent of silence throughout the play, or for Gus who has been also stripped of his right to express his opinion or ask questions, similar to Stanley.

As characteristic of comedy of menace and of Pinter in general, power struggle and verbal or physical violence are also important in *The Dumb Waiter*, as they lead to the destruction of Gus. The constant disagreement between Ben and Gus is provided in the play with their power struggle which seems to be overpowered by Ben, at times through verbal and physical violence. As mentioned earlier, Gus is the brains of the duo whereas Ben is the muscle force. In this regard, Gus is always presented as the more intelligent one. In their argument about whether the right form is "light the kettle" or "light the gas", Ben strikes Gus and yells at him when he realizes he will not be able to win the argument.

> BEN *(vehemently).* Nobody says light the gas! What does the gas light?
> GUS. What does the gas –?
> BEN *(grabbing him with two hands by the throat, at arm's length).* THE KETTLE, YOU FOOL!
> GUS takes the hands from his throat.

Ben becomes violent because he cannot compete with Gus' wit. The only solution he has is to overpower him through physical strength. However, as quoted before, Ben unknowingly says "put on the kettle" to Gus moments later, accepting Gus' version to be true. As was also quoted from Pinter earlier; Pinter's plays often focus on "terrorising through words of power" (qtd. in Raby *Cambridge* 107). In *The Dumb Waiter* too, language becomes a tool of terrorising and establishing superiority over the

other, together with physical violence. Similarly, Martin Esslin states in *Harold Pinter: a study of his plays*: "The battle of wills, he battle between two different outlooks on life, different temperaments, is translated into a battle between different views of language ... Their dispute about language is definitely a dispute about authority, a fight for dominance" (74, 5). Despite the fact that Ben seems to dominate Gus through physical strength, it is Ben who dominates him through his "words of power", which makes the fundamentally submissive and unquestioning Ben accept his bidding. Hinchliffe similarly argues that through this "... the inadequacy of his (Ben's) position of not questioning is revealed" (my brackets 65). At this point, what matters is how power is analysed. If physical strength is accepted as a source of power, then Ben is the dominant of the two. If wit is accepted to be power, then it would be Gus. Still, in the end, it is Gus who is silenced by the workings of the world. In this regard, it may be said that for Pinter, the world is operated through physical strength and violence, which caused the downfall of Europe in the post-war period. Gus' final state of being stripped of his clothes and gun represents his overpowered status. Begley states in *The Art of Crime: The plays and films of Harold Pinter and David Mamet*:

Physical cruelty is typically consigned to anticipation, memory, or offstage space. His (Pinter's) work is more centrally concerned with the sublimation of urges, the sedimentation of violence in posture, gesture, and speech, and the complicity of all such symbolic displacements with unrepresented barbarities. Hence, this preoccupation has often passed under the name of menace, or, more euphemistically, "power." (my brackets, 12) In other words, violence in Pinter's plays is hinted-at, remains in the characters' past, or happens off-stage. One can understand violence has taken place off-stage through the characters' way of behaviour, their posture, gesture or their words. Similarly in the closing moments of *The Dumb Waiter*, it is seen that Gus is somehow subjected to violence when he goes out the door, perhaps by the same person who has left the mysterious matches. He is thus stooped, his hands remain on his sides, his clothes and gun are taken from him. He is traumatised and his life is about to end. In this way, Gus is bereft of all things that may make him powerful. His process of becoming an individual is ceased, his being-in-the-world is stolen from him and he is dehumanised.

CONCLUSION

As a result of this analysis, it can be stated that *The Room, The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter* all represent characters who suffer from existential anxiety and the absurdity of the world. The three plays have similarities in terms of the characters' loneliness and despair in the world and in that they all represent individuals living in post-war Europe. All the characters try to cope with the absurdity of the world. The plays differ from one another in the characters' coping mechanisms. Whereas some of them prefer to accept the world as it is without question and do what they are told, the main characters are more inclined to questioning and rebelling against it. However, the result is the same in all three plays. The characters who cannot do more than merely question the world fail to cope with it and fade away, whereas those who choose to be part of it continue to exist.

As a result of an analysis of *The Room,* it can be seen that Rose's existence comes to an end because throughout her life in the room, she chooses to be only a spectator or an observer to life. Pinter chooses to show Rose as blind at the end of the play to symbolise the end of her existence. Riley the blind outsider scares Rose so much because he is the symbolisation of life outside the room, which is menacing for Rose. In the end, Riley is killed by Bert because of the same reason. Riley might take Rose away from Bert, whose existence is defined by his dominance over Rose. By killing the only chance for Rose to go out and have a life, Bert also symbolically tries to prevent Rose's possibility of a meaningful existence in the world. Therefore, Pinter states that in order to exist in the world, one must be part of the outside world even though it is dangerous. Rose must accept that life is meaningless and try to find a purpose in it in order to realize herself. However, Rose is stuck under the pressure caused by the menace and loses her eyesight. However, it can be said that there is still hope for Rose in the end. She realizes that her life is dull the way it is, therefore she may go out and find purpose. Then, Pinter states that the first step of finding a purpose is to accept that life is meaningless. If individuals can show the courage to go out into the world, they may realize themselves.

The Birthday Party presents a more psychologically challenging situation. Stanley becomes speechless through psychological and physical torture. He loses his

ability to speak and ask questions, which transform him into a man the organization sees fit. He becomes the individual the organization wants; unable to speak, unable to think, aware of the fact that some questions cannot be answered. Pinter once again asks the tragic question of whether it is better to question the world or to accept the meaninglessness of the world and try to find purpose in it. In *The Birthday Party*, Pinter presents a man who chooses to cope with the world by questioning it, but who fails. In the end, Pinter presents Stanley as immobile and inactive but as the perfect citizen in the eyes of the organization. Whereas the ending of *The Room* was promising of hope for Rose, the ending of *The Birthday Party* is more tragic. Rose may go out of the door and regain her eyesight, but Stanley is completely dehumanised. The questioning voice is silenced by the organisation. Furthermore, Goldberg is portrayed as a man who accepts that his purpose in the world is to follow orders. However, he is aware of the fact that he is not a self-made man, which shows that this is the only way to exist. Although it is a tragic fact, one must accept the absurdity of the world and try to become part of something in order to exist.

In *The Dumb Waiter*, Pinter focuses on the existential concern inside the organization which seems to be the governing power of the world. Just like Rose and Stanley, Gus is questioning the workings of the world. However, in a world in which rebellious ones fade away, Gus is represented as guiltier than Rose and Stanley. Rose and Stanley are characters who can be blinded and silenced easily, whereas Gus is part of the organization which is responsible for doing so. Therefore, Ben is instructed to kill his partner because he disturbs the order more than anyone. Questioning the purpose of the organization is unacceptable in this world, thus he is to be killed. Once again, Pinter makes his character face a tragic fact. In order for individuals to exist in a seemingly absurd world, they must accept the world as it is. When the menacing forces become menaced, it is the same absurd world that takes them out.

In light of this discussion, it can be concluded that none of these characters are able to cope with existential anxieties. They are overpowered and taken out by the operating power in the world, because they try to exist in the wrong way. Rose, Stanley and Gus cannot reach self-overcoming because they do not accept the absurdity of the world. Rose is the one who comes closest to accepting it in the end, but Pinter leaves the

decision to the audience. Stanley and Gus, on the other hand, are too far away from the solution. Stanley refuses to go out, thus the organization finds him. If he had gone out, he wouldn't have become non-existent. Gus, as part of the organization, pays the price with his life.

Overall, Pinter presents the tragic status of post-war European individual in these three plays. He asks the question of whether one must question the world in order to exist or one must accept it as it is. In this thesis, it is pointed out that questioning is necessary for existence but it is not enough to overcome the absurdity of life. If everyone questions and no one acts, then menacing forces always overpower and finally destroy those who refuse to find purpose. Although it may be dangerous, Pinter advises us to go out into the world and find purpose in a meaningless world. Tragically, the world order allows the existence of those who become part of it without question. Only then can one exist. If they refuse and choose to be an observer to others like Rose, they are blinded. If they hide from the world and question their existence through speech like Stanley, they are muted. If they refuse to follow a certain purpose and question the world like Gus, their existences come to an end. Therefore, even though it is absurd and tragic, people must find a purpose for themselves and live in accordance with it in order to overcome themselves. In short, it can be said that Pinter recommends the same solution as Existentialists like Nietzsche, Sartre and Camus. One must try to overcome oneself and should not look for reasons in order to exist in a world in which there is no objective meaning or purpose. Thus, it can be concluded that the way to reach self-overcoming is to try to find subjective truth.

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ÖZGEÇMİŞ

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