

AT THE EDGE OF BEING:
ABSURDITY AND INSTABILITY IN THE WORKS OF FRANZ KAFKA AND HAROLD
PINTER

Adam W. Cheshire

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Approved by

Advisory Committee

Nicholas Laudadio Michael Wentworth

Paula Kamenish
Chair

Accepted by

Dean, Graduate School

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Abstract

The thematic similarities between the works of Franz Kafka and Harold Pinter have become a fruitful topic for critical discussion over the last few decades. In this essay I discuss what I see as one of the most important themes of Kafka and Pinter's writing: the instability of the human condition. Through the depiction of absurd interactions between characters, as well as the fragmented and distorted environments that pervade their works, Kafka and Pinter create a tension that resonates deep within the reader and the audience. My analysis of the techniques employed by Kafka and Pinter to create this unnerving tension is intended to illustrate the unique artistry these two writers share, and show why they have come to be seen as the literary representatives of the fractured and uncertain world of modern times. Using a definition of the literary absurd as that which challenges the expected notions of human action and interaction, I delve into the way Kafka and Pinter depict the absurd in their works, and how it reveals the instability of the human condition.

I. The Creative Essence: Absurdity and the Artist

Often times the greatest literature is the product of great strife. It is the unique ability of the artist to present the human experience in a way that elucidates and expands our understanding of the world, and if the writer finds his surroundings unprecedented in their dangers and uncertainties, then his work must attempt to break the perceived certainties of form and content to fully express his present condition. Franz Kafka's life of dislocation and alienation—growing up during the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, living as a Jew in Czech Prague, writing in the language of the Empire—has been exhaustively documented on numerous occasions¹, and has become, to many, an excuse to delve so deeply into a biographical reading of Kafka's work that the beauty of his art is lost at some point along the way. However, because of the changing, unknowable, and marginalized environment in which Kafka lived, he was able to bring a new literature to the world. For the British playwright Harold Pinter, the “sense of disruption” that he experienced growing up in World War II London allowed him to see how perilous and unknowable each moment is; it is a theme that powerfully resonates in all of his works, the “life-and-death intensity of daily experience” (Billington 8). In Cultural Studies: A Critical Introduction, Simon During says this of “modern everyday life”:

[It] emerges in the emptiness of a rootless social order...Nonetheless...it remains a space where people have a residual capacity to act freely, and where political dominance peters out. Hence everyday life is ambiguous: it is less meaningful than it ought to be, but it is where autonomy and resistance to the system still have some kind of chance. (28-29)

¹ The obvious example of which is Fredrick Karl's expansive “Franz Kafka: Representative Man,” which comes as close to a “definitive” biography as perhaps there will ever be. Similar (though considerably less dense) discussions on Kafka's fragmented upbringing in relation to his writing occur in Urzidil's There Goes Kafka and R.M. Alberes and Pierre De Boisdeffre's Kafka—The Torment of Man, among others.

During suggests that typical everyday life can provide a buffer against the external forces of “the system.” For Kafka and Pinter, whose everyday lives were so problematic, the “system” of which During speaks may have seemed to permeate all aspects of their lives. The works of Kafka and Pinter support the notion that everyday life does *not* provide a space to “act freely.” In their works, characters are confronted in their private, everyday lives, by the external forces that threaten to undermine their stability as individuals.

With the curiosity that surrounds the production of great literature, and the desire and need for scholars to find out *how* a writer’s life affects his creation, the unknowability of individual imagination is ignored, whether intentionally or not. In truth, can we deny the creative essence that Kafka and Pinter possessed long before the external world urged their writings in a particular direction? It would be naïve to believe that no one in Prague grew up under very similar, even nearly identical, conditions as Kafka. Pinter’s creative development during the tension and instability of World War II seems, in retrospect, more common than those who existed unburdened by the oppressive nature of a world war. There is a tendency to reverse engineer the importance and uniqueness of the life of a person after that person has been deemed culturally significant, especially the artist. As humans, we all possess the feelings (isolation, alienation, despair, uncertainty) that have come to be associated, in literature, with the works of Kafka and Pinter. It is the un-chartable and undiscoverable uniqueness of Kafka and Pinter’s creative essence that enables these writers to reach beyond the common conceptions of literature. In Kafka: The Decisive Years, Reiner Stach writes, “The richness of Kafka’s life...appears to have nothing to do with the social landscape...” (4). Such can be said of Pinter, as well, or for any writer whose works can be recognized by readers as reaching beyond the surface of our

external existence, to an inner sanctum rife with the unknowability of human (un)conscience. Kafka and Pinter's creations are so unnerving and disorienting because the reader and audience's expectation of the social landscape are disrupted by the actions and reactions of the characters to their external environment; however, this is also where the "richness" of the characters' existence adds a new dimension to the reader and audience's understanding of the underlying, "unseen" aspects of human existence; it is from this newfound sensation that the reader or audience recognizes the inherent qualities that have come to be identified as Kafkaesque and Pinteresque.

In our modern world, the terms Kafkaesque and Pinteresque have become adjectives used to describe the illogical and menacing situations and sensations of the modern, fractured world, and of the individual's struggle to find meaning in the midst of the deceptive and treacherous society whose purpose always remains elusive. Regardless of the debate over how influential their upbringings were, it makes sense that the feelings of dread and doom surrounding Kafka's Prague leading up to and during the first world war, and the vast and unprecedented destruction caused by the second world war that pervaded Pinter's London, enhanced these writers' ability to so powerfully construct the environments of fear and uncertainty the Western world has come to associate so closely with them. However, the question must still be asked: in all of twentieth-century literature, why do the epithets "Kafkaesque" and "Pinteresque" resonate so deeply? What is it about the feeling we get from Kafka and Pinter's works that urge a deeper association with them than a mere acknowledgment of their influence, and places their works above other writers in the way they depict the absurdity of the modern world?

The allure of Kafka and Pinter's writing lies in their ability to present characters and environments that exist naturally in an unnatural world, where situations the reader and audience

find illogical and surreal are commonplace and mundane to the characters. In The Theatre of the Absurd, Martin Esslin seeks to label Pinter and other profound and experimental playwrights of the twentieth century by how their plays show “the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational and discursive thought” (Esslin 6). These playwrights project onto the stage what Kafka had seen, felt, and described in his writings decades before; that is, Kafka saw how making the *content* of his work reflect the absurdity of society could change the way literature was capable of depicting the intensity of everyday life. However, what separates Kafka and Pinter from other writers is the way they manipulate the absurd, and how the haunting aspects of their writing unearth the shaky foundation upon which we all exist. For the literary absurd is not merely that which proposes humanity’s “senseless” condition; it is the dismantling of the accepted possibilities of human action and interaction. Because of the ways Kafka and Pinter depict the absurd, their works viscerally expose the instability of the human condition.

The lowly supplicant in Kafka’s “Descriptions of a Struggle” feels that “there has never been a time in which [he has] have been convinced from within [himself] that [he is] alive” (Stories 14). It could be said that this statement (by the supplicant) encapsulates the entire struggle of the characters that inhabit the works of Kafka and Pinter; that is, they are all attempting to battle the outside world that threatens to absorb them into a community that constricts the very individuality that must thrive in order to fully exist. We certainly see the supplicant wrestling with the idea that he might, in fact, not exist. The absurdity of his actions—laying prostrate, “his whole lean length on the floor...[clutching] his head as hard as he could and sighing loudly beat[ing] it in his upturned palms on the stone flag”—only serves to further ostracize him from his community, exacerbating the senselessness of his attempts to find a

spiritual connection with his environment. In Pinter's The Birthday Party, a mysterious and menacing man chastises another character, asking him "What makes you think you exist?" (Essential 66). The literary absurd seems to always be posing the question to the reader and the audience of whether or not an individual can thrive, can fully *exist*, in a world where he can make sense of nothing, and where danger and distortion pervade every aspect of his world. Kafka, as the literary mentor of absurdists to follow, sets no philosophical or theoretical background as to why the absurd inhabits his narratives; rather, as Esslin says of the Theatre of the Absurd, he "has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; [he] merely presents it in being" (6). Pinter's plays reinforce the concept of the absurd as a persistent aspect of the human condition, and not merely a symbolic device to address the insecurities of his characters. In Kafka and Pinter's works the reality of the characters' condition becomes a living nightmare in which there is no hope of escape.

The use of the term "reality" when discussing Kafka and Pinter can often times become more trouble than it's worth. There is a strong alliance of eager neo-psychoanalysts who flock toward the work of Kafka and Pinter, wanting so badly to see their texts as dream visions. These critics are ravenous for the buffet of oedipal angst and suppressed sexual aggression that they see simmering in a cauldron of fantasy. The critical readings that present Kafka and Pinter's works as dream narratives or allegorical representations of the subconscious ignore what Pinter himself has said on the subject. In an interview with Kenneth Tynan, Pinter dismisses the notion that his plays are born from a desire to illustrate some abstract theme, saying, "I start writing a play from an image of a situation and a couple of characters involved, and these people always remain for me quite real; if they were not, the play could not be written" (qtd. in Esslin 238). Claude-Edmonde Magny asserts that "Kafka does not know the end of his novel and the fate of his

characters any more than the reader and the characters themselves” (Flores 86), suggesting that Kafka’s creative process is similar to that of Pinter’s, in that both writers are more interested in how the stories extend beyond the omniscience of the author, which would seem to refute the argument that Kafka and Pinter employ carefully plotted “tricks,” as it were, to present their worlds in an allegorical space. Magny claims that viewing Kafka’s stories as “abstract allegory,” not only “oppose(s)...the spirit of Kafka and his conception of existence”, but ignores the revelation in Kafka’s work of “the essential absurdity of things” (87).

Another interpretation of Kafka and Pinter that limits the impact of their works is the notion of their writings as dream fiction. Critics who discuss the work of Kafka and Pinter as dream fiction, such as Hans Osterwalder, who believes “the basic dream mechanism of displacement and condensation are the unconscious creative principles underlying all these intractable, surrealist texts,” ignore the multivalent aspects of Kafka and Pinter’s work, and instead rely on tired and tenuous Freudian analyses. It is as if there are no other ways to view the foggy, snow-filled landscapes of Kafka, or discuss the struggle between father and son, without bringing in the great gray-bearded Viennese arbiter. The work of Kafka and Pinter is not a conscious or unconscious play on the structure of dreams. It is all too real; the notion of dreams—or a dream world—is another shadowy layer hiding the actuality of the menacing world. The characters that people the work of Kafka and Pinter can only hope that their situation is but a dream; they and the readers, however, can only exist in the waking present; like Joseph K., who is “weary of what had gone before and wearily awaiting what was to come,” the reader, too, must be confined to the absurd world in which he finds himself. Pinter, when discussing his screenplay adaptation of The Trial, remarked that Kafka’s stories are so powerful because “the nightmare is in the reality” (qtd. in Kane 146). Here Pinter seems to be objecting to the type of

reading of Kafka's work that seeks to ignore the painful and lacerating plight of human existence and the absurdities that stem from these "extreme cases of the human condition" (Struc 76). If we are to make sense of the "extreme" situations in which we find Kafka and Pinter's characters, and their reaction to them, then we must adhere to the idea that everything these characters see and feel is "real," in the strictest definition. If we do not, then we are merely "escap(ing) the brutality of the real by explaining it away" (Flores 89).

Kafka and Pinter create, not a dream narrative, but a dream-*like* narrative. This seemingly subtle difference is immense, because, in the case of a dream, we will soon wake when the day comes. In the works of Kafka and Pinter, the mist of dreams smothers every conscious breath the characters take. They cannot escape into sleep; there is something waiting for them in their dreams as well as their waking hours. The young visitor in "Up in the Gallery," is not weeping because he is in a heavy dream. He weeps because he knows that the "lovely lady, pink and white," in front of him is the reality, and he will never have the opportunity to live, as in his dreams, yelling "Stop! Against the fanfares of the orchestra..." (Stories 144); it might seem "as in a heavy dream" [wie in einem schweren Traum], but the character's reality is what the text holds. The snow-drenched country village in The Castle and the "thickly steaming" horses in "A Country Doctor" are haunting because they have somehow escaped from the land of dreams to attack the characters in their waking life; Gregor's "uneasy dreams" attack his body and literally transform him into a hideous insect; and the burning sun, scorching the condemned man's brow in "In the Penal Colony," seeks to destroy the man's mind before he has a chance to realize why he is even sentenced to death. The dream-like aspects of Pinter's plays are more subtle than those of Kafka's narratives. Because of the genre in which Pinter writes, he relies less on descriptive passages and more on the interaction between characters to create an

environment charged with nightmarish insecurities. The nonsensical language of two men interrogating a character in The Birthday Party, as well as the ridiculous and out-of-place food orders sent down to two assassins in a basement in The Dumb Waiter, possess the uncomfortable quirks and surrealistic qualities of a dream. In both plays, however, the undercurrents of death inject these dream-like scenarios with a piercing reality. Stanley, the interrogated character in The Birthday Party, tells his landlady near the beginning of the play that “[he] didn’t sleep at all” the previous night (Essential 24). In The Caretaker, one character tells another, “I don’t dream. I’ve never dreamed.” The other character’s reply is, “No, nor have I” (Essential 122). Pinter seems to frequently remind his audience that what they are witnessing is indeed the reality in which the characters exist. Like Kafka’s dream-imagery, Pinter’s dream-like scenarios serve to further disrupt the notion of a consistent and stable reality, and show how things often change in unexpected and inexplicable ways. In Kafka and Pinter’s works, these dream-like environments the characters inhabit affect the perception of each character in various ways, and enhance the reader and the audience’s ability to recognize the fractured and unreliable aspects of “reality” that the literary absurd attempts to depict.

II. Setting the Sights: Distortion and Destruction

The menace in the works of Kafka and Pinter encompass the entirety of the characters' environment. Many times situations that typically would not seem to be particularly frightening take on an eerie sense of desperation. Pinter presents the audience with language that is charged with a mysterious intensity and ambiguity, while Kafka informs the reader of a character's distorted environment through powerful and enigmatic images. The anxiety and paranoia that a character feels is reflected in the way seemingly "normal" circumstances gain an unnerving magnitude. Though the focus Kafka and Pinter give to certain objects and everyday interactions calls into question the clarity of certain character's perceptions, making them many times appear unreliable, it inevitably validates the actuality of the instability surrounding them.

In Pinter's The Room, we find Rose and her husband Bert, an elderly couple, in a seemingly cozy kitchen of a "large house" (Works 101). Rose seems anxious about Bert leaving for the night on an unspecified trip. She tells him, "It's very cold out, I can tell you. It's murder" (101). A few lines later, the audience finds out that Rose hasn't actually been outside to know the weather; she tells Bert, "Just now I looked out the window. It was enough for me." Rose's reliability is already called into question in the opening scene. There is a sense, however, that Rose is anxious about Bert's departure because of her general uneasiness about things beyond the room. Rose also seems preoccupied with the basement below them, and its unknown occupants:

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. (102)

Though there is nothing out of the ordinary about Rose's language, there is an underlying self-deceptiveness in the way she discusses her surroundings; it is as if she must reassure herself that the room is stable: "No, this room's alright for me. I mean, you know where you are." Rose's perception of the world beyond the room is apparently based upon assumption rather than fact. She does say she has been in the basement, but her warnings about its dangers seem unprovoked and unfounded. When Rose speaks about the basement, her ambiguity creates a feeling that she is talking about more than just the dangers of the cold when she tells Bert how "Those walls would have finished you off" (103). She believes that whoever lives below them "[is] taking a big chance." Pinter has used the subtlety of language to pervade Rose and Bert's quaint room with mystery. The simplest of interactions has become charged with meaning. Rose's ramblings are ostensibly the gossip of an old lady, and yet the atmosphere is thick with images of distortion and deception. Rose's rocking chair even acts as the creaky background that hints at the shaky foundation upon which Rose bases her opinions. With all the uncertainty pervading the room, Rose's self-deceptive language seems all the more indicative of her distorted perception:

She rocks.

If they ever ask you, Bert, I'm quite happy where I am. We're quiet, we're all right.

You're happy up here. It's not far up either, when you come in from outside. And we're not bothered. And nobody bothers us. (103).

Rose's happiness seems to be undermined by her fidgety demeanor and her seeming unhappiness with Bert leaving. She urges Bert to stay, telling him how she will "put the fire in later" (103).

This image of warmth and sexuality is fleeting as Rose reminds herself “it gets dark now,” hinting at the theme of blindness that will soon pervade Rose’s cozy room.

The ability of Kafka and Pinter to keep the reader and the audience in a state of uncertainty lies not only in their ability to suggest underlying tensions with such nuance and precision, but also in the way they never allow a definitive perspective to assert itself. While Kafka’s stories seem to hover in-between objective narrative and first-person point-of-view, the fact that there *is* such a fluctuation suggests the unstable condition of the world being described. The objective narrative suggests the world is an actuality, while the first-person point-of-view hints at its unreliability. Since Kafka presents environments that bend and distort the perception of his characters, the reader must do as Joseph K. decides is best and “adapt oneself to existing conditions” (Trial 121); therefore, the reader is in a perpetual state of reevaluating the positions presented to him. Kafka’s stories do, however, provide a central character the reader follows throughout the narrative. Pinter, on the other hand, as a dramatist, is more capable of presenting the fears and anxieties of numerous characters without relying on a specific “central” character with which to guide the story. All the characters are presented to the audience without a narrative filter. Therefore, it is the audience that must register the subtlety of Pinter’s cues in order to discover the reliability, if any, of the characters on stage.

The constant shift in perspectives refuses to allow the audience a comfortable position in which to view the play through the subjective lens of a single character; therefore, in The Room, though Rose’s view of the dangers of the basement and the outside world seem like mere paranoia, when a young couple shows up on her landing after Bert leaves and tells Rose about their visit to the basement, their description seems to validate Rose’s fear, and suggests to the audience that her paranoia might, in fact, be a symptom of a more tangible reality:

Between you and me, I didn't like the look of it much, I mean the feel [...] we went through a kind of partition, then there was another partition, and we couldn't see where we were going, well, it seemed to me it got darker the more we went [...] but someone asked if he could do anything for us [...] I don't know why they never put a light on [...] we went to the top of the house. I don't know whether it was the top. There was a door locked on the stairs, so there might have been another floor, but we didn't see anyone, and it was dark [...] (117)

Like Karl Rossmann wandering the belly of Mr. Pollunder's home in Kafka's Amerika, the Sanders find doors that should be unlocked locked and rooms that should be lit unlit; as in Kafka's tales, progression in Pinter's plays does not usually mean clarity, and Pinter only provides more images of darkness and distortion. Rose questions the Sands about the direction in which they were going, and the couple prove themselves to be unreliable characters, as well:

ROSE. You said you were going up.

MRS. SANDS. What?

ROSE. You said you were going up before.

MRS. SANDS. No, we were coming down.

ROSE. You didn't say that before.

MRS. SANDS. We'd been up.

MR. SANDS. We'd been up. We were coming down. (118).

Pinter uses the distorted perspective of the Sands, literally unable to tell up from down, to place the audience in a wholly unreliable environment. There is now no stable point of reference. The perception of the outside world is now as unreliable as Rose's mind seemed at the beginning of the play. Pinter does not ameliorate the instability of the perspectives. Instead, after the Sands

leave the room, the audience is presented with another enigma in the form of Riley. Riley, a blind man, is apparently the mysterious figure the Sands encountered in the basement. The absurdity of Riley's appearance in Rose's room creates another unnerving and distorting aspect for the audience. Pinter has shown the unreliable nature of Rose's perspective, and yet the fear Rose seems to have of the basement is realized by the introduction of Riley. Riley says he has come to deliver a "message" to Rose. Though Rose claims not to know Riley, his message that Rose's father wants her to come home intertwines the two in an intimate dialogue that further distorts the audience's perception of Rose's relationship with the outside world:

RILEY. Now I touch you.

ROSE. Don't touch me.

RILEY. Sal.

ROSE. I can't

RILEY. I want you to come home. (124)

Pinter's use of a false or hidden identity in his plays not only enhances the perplexity of the interaction between the characters, but it also suggests the deceptive and unstable condition of them as well. Riley, initially representing the intrusive darkness of the outside world, has now become linked with Rose's past. Riley's metamorphosis into sympathetic relation illustrates the multitude of shifting perspectives that destabilizes any definitive recognition of the truth. Riley, seen previously as the menace, is now far closer to Rose than Burt has ever been during the play. Burt's arrival back home at the end of the action now becomes charged with its own danger; his journey through the menacing dark has brought him back into the room, where Riley waits in his own darkness to discuss the future of Rose. At this point, all avenues to understanding anything further are cut off from the audience. None of the three characters is reliable, though for

different reasons. Bert has been traveling in the confines of his van, closed off from the events of his home while he has been away; conversely, Rose is incapable of a perception that extends beyond her room because she has stayed inside in fear of an outside presence, which seems to be Riley, who is in turn literally blind and unable to see the characters he is addressing.

Upon Bert's arrival he tells Rose of his journey through the night. Bert ignores Riley until after he is done, and then he knocks Riley off of his armchair. From the floor, Riley speaks:

RILEY. Mr. Hudd, your wife-

BERT. Lice!

He strikes the NEGRO, knocking him down, and then kicks his head against the gas-stove several times. The NEGRO lies still. BERT walks away.

Silence

ROSE Stands clutching her eyes.

ROSE. Can't see. I can't see. I can't see. (Works 126).

The instant Riley is murdered by Bert, Rose loses her sight; she is now literally blind to her surroundings. There is now even more uncertainty to her existence than at the beginning of the play. Not only is nothing revealed to Rose, but Pinter does not allow the audience a clear perception of the dynamics between the characters; every interaction appears unstable. Moreover, the setting of the play reflects this instability. Rose is confronted on all sides by unstable characters: Riley from the damp basement below, the Sands from the stairs above, Burt from the outside, and Mr. Kidd, the landlord, from somewhere in between. Rose becomes trapped in her room, and the external forces she encounters seem to fill the room with danger and

continue to distort her perception of the outside world until she finally succumbs to a state of utter paralysis and fear.

Critic Leonard Powlick suggests that the terror of Pinter's plays lies in the way Pinter presents harmless events through the consciousness of the characters' distorted perception. Because of this, Powlick argues, "all the events take on a new significance: a dumbwaiter becomes an object to be feared, a blind old man becomes a threat, a birthday party becomes an occasion of terror" (Powlick 26). While I obviously disagree that Pinter's plays are merely the projection of a specific character's subjective point of view, I agree that what allows the pervading menace in Pinter's works to be felt so deeply by the audience is how Pinter uses seemingly mundane occurrences in characters' lives to manipulate the space that exists on the stage. Like Rose's seemingly exaggerated precautions in preparing Bert for his journey, the intensity of a scene becomes disproportionate to the actuality of what is happening with the characters; these unexceptional events become charged with the anxiety and uncertainty of the play as a whole.

Pinter many times injects the mundane with a sense of murderousness. In the opening scene of A Slight Ache, a couple, Edward and Flora, are having brunch in their kitchen. The couple notices a wasp trying to escape a pot of marmalade. Edward decides to drown the wasp in the pot, and the scene acquires the ominous tone of dread and distortion that is to be seen later, in a more obvious manner, when Edward meets the matchseller. The seemingly insignificant death of the wasp takes a very emotional and even torturous trajectory:

EDWARD: Ah, yes. Tilt the pot. Tilt. Aah... down here...right down...blinding him...that's...it. (Works 174).

In this scene the wasp, which is the initial menace to Edward and Flora, is trapped in the pot—his world, as it were—and is blinded by Edward, who in turn becomes the menace from the outside. The importance of this scene resonates all the more when Edward—whose own perception is distorted by the “slight ache” behind his eyes—becomes trapped in his home while he shrivels under the eyes of the matchseller, who represents Edward’s own external menace. The absurdity of Edward’s scene with the matchseller becomes linked with the unexceptional killing of the wasp. Without the discomfort of the wasp scene, and how it encompasses the trapped and uncertain feelings of Edward’s position in his home, the ending of the play would not resonate as deeply, and the physical deterioration of Edward would not be as devastating. Pinter distorts the audience’s perspective by shifting the focus from a typically insignificant occurrence—the killing of a wasp—to the unexpected and surreal interaction (or lack thereof) of two grown men. The anxiety persistent in both scenes speaks to the essence of instability that resonates throughout the play.

Another instance in which Pinter uses a common event, a birthday, to invoke the instability of his characters is in The Birthday Party. Throughout the play there is ambiguity as to whether or not it is really Stanley’s birthday, suggestive of the uncertainty and misunderstanding that pervades the interaction between all of the characters in the play. The drum Meg gives Stanley for his birthday is almost grotesque in its simplicity, especially considering Stanley’s (supposed) past as an accomplished pianist. Stanley can only respond “(flatly) It’s a drum. A boy’s drum.” (Essential 48). Stanley’s mock enthusiasm with the drum at the end of Act One plays out like a boy’s temper-tantrum gone ominously askew, and it foreshadows the impending fractured psyche that Stanley succumbs to by the end of Act Two:

She watches him, uncertainly. He hangs the drum around his neck, taps it gently with the sticks, then marches round the table, beating it regularly. Meg, pleased, watches him. Still beating it regularly, he begins to go round the table a second time. Halfway round the beat becomes erratic, uncontrolled. Meg expresses dismay. He arrives at her chair, banging the drum, his face and the drumbeat now savage and possessed. (48)

As in A Slight Ache, a typical encounter with an object of seemingly little consequence becomes an event representative of the underlying rage and volatility of the human condition. Later in the play, as the “birthday Party” gets underway, McCann strategically places the drum in Stanley’s path during an elementary game of Blind Man’s Bluff. Stanley’s foot smashing through the drum coincides with his mental breakdown; his consciousness, held at bay by his crazed beats at the end of Act One, comes completely undone. The house now becomes a reflection of Stanley’s instability and distorted perception, as darkness descends upon the characters:

Stanley rises. He begins to move towards Meg, dragging the drum on his foot. He reaches her and stops. His hands move towards her and they reach her throat. He begins to strangle her. McCann and Goldberg rush forward and throw him off. Blackout.

There is no light at all through the window. The stage is in darkness. (78)

Just as the size of the little drum belies its large capacity for sound, Stanley’s mild demeanor before his breakdown belies the rage within him. Once again Pinter manipulates the expectations of the audience and unearths the actuality of the absurd menace waiting to dismantle his characters’ everyday lives.

Pinter's use of dialogue and his attention to the nuances of mannerisms is what cues the audience to the distortion of his characters' surroundings and builds the unnerving sense of menace. Kafka, writing in the narrative form, is able to place more focus on the description of the environments in his fiction in order to show how their nightmarish qualities disrupt the clarity of his characters. In The Trial, Joseph K. must wander through winding streets and buildings in an attempt to access the "High Court" that has charged him with an unknown crime. From the moment Joseph K. awakes to find two men in his room ready to prosecute him, the environment becomes a confusing conflation of environments. Each new room Joseph K. enters have been transformed to accommodate his prosecutors. When Joseph K. walks into the first room he recognizes it as Frau Grubach's room, except that "all the furniture, rugs, china, and photographs" has been removed. The room of another tenant is transformed into a make-shift courtroom: "Now the night table beside her bed had been pushed into the middle of the floor to serve as a desk, and the Inspector was sitting behind it" (10). Joseph K. is never in a stable place in which to gain some understanding of his supposed crime.

Joseph K.'s attempt to receive some knowledge about his supposed crime only leads him further into the distorted properties of his environment. The path to even the simplest of tasks is hindered by the maze-like set-up of the Court. When he arrives at what should be the entrance to the Court of Inquiry, Joseph K. encounters a typical puzzling structure in the Kafkaesque landscape:

K. turned toward the stairs to make his way up to the Court of Inquiry, but then came to a standstill again, for in addition to this staircase he could see in the courtyard three other separate flights of stairs and besides these a little passage at the other end which seemed to lead into a second courtyard. He was annoyed he had not been given more definite

information about the room, the people showed a strange negligence or indifference in their treatment of him, he intended to tell them so very positively and clearly. (35).

Joseph K. continues to encounter these enigmatic structures that contain some piece of the puzzle of his case. The disorienting nature of these structures reflects the deeper sense of uncertainty Joseph K. experiences as he descends into the complexities of the Court.

Often Kafka uses frightening and disorienting images to create a horrific atmosphere of uncertainty and paranoia. When he visits the Painter Titorelli to inquire about his case, Joseph K. comes across a disturbing scene:

This was an even poorer neighborhood, the houses were still darker, the streets filled with sludge oozing about slowly on top of the melting snow. In the tenement where the painter lived only one wing of the great double door stood open, and beneath the other wing, in the masonry near the ground, there was a gaping hole of which...issued a disgusting yellow fluid, steaming hot, from which some rats fled into the adjoining canal. At the foot of the stairs an infant lay face down on the ground bawling, but one could scarcely hear its shrieks because of the deafening din that came from a tinsmith's workshop at the other side of the entry. (141)

All the images in this scene converge and become its own chaotic world of darkness and grotesquery. Joseph K. is faced with no relief from the disorientation of his nightmarish environment; the image of the infant suffocating on the ground is specifically unsettling in the midst of the seemingly never-ending compartments of grime and labor that echo around the poor child. As Joseph K. makes his way to the living quarters of Titorelli, the building becomes another labyrinthine structure that threatens to suffocate Joseph K.; the enclosure seems to contract as he makes his way up the stairs, "...quite out of breath," and he finds each story

“disproportionately high” (141). The breadth and disorientation of the outside has been replaced by the smothering innards of the building: “The air was stifling; there was no well for these narrow stairs, which were enclosed on either side by blank walls, showing only at rare intervals a tiny window very high up” (141). Unable to perceive anything beyond the narrow stairwell, Joseph K. finally arrives in the distorted attic of Titorelli.

Kafka describes the atmosphere of Titorelli’s room with a claustrophobia that seems to oppress and distort Joseph K.’s perception from every angle. The attic seems to be more of a prison in which Joseph K. has found himself, suggesting that even those whom Joseph K. seeks for help can only further entrap him in the snares of the Court from which he so desperately attempts to extricate himself:

You could scarcely take two strides in any direction. The whole room, floor, walls, and ceiling, was a box of bare wooden plank with cracks showing between them....Behind K. was the window, through which in the fog one could not see farther than the snow-covered roof of the next house. (144-145).

With the claustrophobia becoming almost unbearable, Joseph K. is ready “to gulp down even mouthfuls of fog [to]...get air” (155). After his talk with Titorelli, who tells him that there is no way of ever being found innocent, only a continued postponement of guilt, Joseph K. is finally able to leave the attic; however, his unpredictable environment brings another constricting revelation as he opens the door by Titorelli’s bed to find the Law Court on the other side:

“Before him stretched a long passage, from which wafted an air compared to which the air in the studio was refreshing. Benches stood on either side of the passage” (164). Joseph K., relieved of the confinements of Titorelli’s attic, is once again met with the vast airless halls of the Court.

Kafka's description of Joseph K.'s environment illustrates his unstable existence and how he is trapped in a perpetual maze of distortion with seemingly no path towards clarity.

It can be seen how Joseph K. is bombarded on every side with opaque images and contracting and expanding spaces that hinder him from arriving at any clear understanding of his environment. Often Kafka creates uncertain and disorienting worlds with the extremity of weather, as well. Beyond the "fog and snow-covered roof" of Titorelli's attic, many of Kafka's characters exist in environments completely engulfed in one form of extreme condition or another. There is K.'s infamous arrival to the village in The Castle, where "The village was deep in snow. The Castle hill was hidden, veiled in mist and darkness, nor was there even a glimmer of light to show the Castle was there" (3). In the short story "A Country Doctor," the doctor says that "a thick blizzard of snow filled all the wide spaces..." (Stories 136). The image of the snow "gathering more and more thickly upon [the doctor]" places the him in a distorted and trapped environment, literally "unable to move" (136). "In the Penal Colony," Kafka uses the scorching heat of the desert to create an environment of uncertainty and death, where "the glare of the sun in the shadeless valley [is] altogether too strong, [and it is] difficult to collect one's thoughts" (193). The ways Kafka uses his environment, whether through the maze-like structures of The Trial or the snow-filled landscape of The Castle, always serves to position his characters in an uncertain world that seems to offer only more distortion.

While Kafka's narratives present seemingly endless, opaque, and labyrinthine environments, Pinter is able to use the space of the stage to create a similar unnerving effect. Many of Pinter's plays take place in one room, which builds in its claustrophobia and menace and refuses to allow a character any clear perception of his or her surroundings; he maximizes the intensity of everyday occurrences—a husband leaving for work, a couple having brunch—

until they become filled with a sense of paranoia and uncertainty. Like the expansive echo-filled worlds in The Trial, which create an emptiness and darkness that seems to envelop and threaten Joseph K., Pinter's claustrophobic environments serve to disorient his characters until the ordinariness of their everyday lives becomes inextricable from the strangeness of their immediate predicament. As the underlying menace presents itself to the characters, their perception has become so distorted that they are unable to escape and ultimately succumb to their unstable condition.

III. Community Watch: Perception and Power

An uncertain and distorted perception implies a degree of powerlessness. Kafka and Pinter suggest that there are always systems of power at work attempting to take advantage of characters weakened by their distorted perception. Kafka's narrative form allows the all-pervasive menace of authority to "speak," as it were, through, not only the thoughts and feelings of certain characters, but by using the atmosphere to assert its own sense of menace and strength. Because of the nature of the stage and the inability to visually display the landscapes that Kafka's stories can, Pinter deftly uses his dialogue and subtle mannerisms to show how his characters are caught in a perpetual struggle against subjugation.

In The Birthday Party, McCann and Goldberg are two mysterious and menacing men who arrive at a quaint seaside home and terrorize one of its tenants, Stanley. In their initial interrogation of Stanley, McCann and Goldberg disrupt Stanley's psyche with a bombardment of nonsensical questions and accusations. The irony and dark humor of this scene screams of Kafka's influence, and is particularly reminiscent of Joseph K.'s interrogation by two strangers in the opening scene of The Trial. Like Joseph K, Stanley reacts to his accusers and their illogical and seemingly irrelevant questions as if their presence were expected and possibly warranted. What adds to the irony and absurdity of the accusations is the logical structure McCann and Goldberg use when questioning Stanley:

GOLDBERG Is the number 846 possible or necessary?

STANLEY Neither.

GOLBERG Wrong! Is the number 846 possible or necessary?

STANLEY Both.

GOLDBERG Wrong! It's necessary but not possible.

STANLEY Both.

GOLDBERG Wrong! Why do you think the number 846 is necessarily possible?

STANLEY Must be.

GOLBERG Wrong! It's only necessarily necessary! We admit possibility only after we grant necessity. It is possible because necessary but by no means necessary through possibility. The possibility can only be assumed after the proof of necessity (Essential 63-64)

Here it is possible (and necessary) to see how Goldberg's senseless language from beginning to end exacerbates Stanley's position of subjugation and distorted perception. There is no starting logic to which Stanley can return. Once he answers Goldberg, Stanley is trapped by the language of the supposed authority. Stanley soon succumbs to the nonsensical bombardment of Goldberg and McCann, screaming out when he cannot answer the question of whether the chicken or the egg came first.

Like Joseph K., the sudden intrusion of strangers into Stanley's personal space confuses and disorients him. However, the reason Joseph K. and Stanley stay in a continuous state of instability is not necessarily the physical presence of an authority that presents illogical and unprovoked accusations, but the authoritative voice of some unknown system of power and the *idea* that there is some punishment awaiting them. Though speaking specifically about The Castle, Walter Corbella could be referring to many of Kafka's stories or Pinter's plays when he writes that the "power structures [of K.'s environment] are kept in place by a ubiquitous bureaucratic system and by the threat of a punishment that is seldom actually administered or experienced" (69). The type of "ubiquitous" bureaucracy that threatens Joseph K. and Stanley is

just as ambiguous as the accusations made against the two characters. The mysterious powers show up in strange places, and act as a sinister part of the communities.

Upon Joseph K.'s first trip to "The Court of Inquiry" for his interrogation he finds the entrance is nothing more than "a service entrance for trucks" (35), and there is nothing courtly or authoritative about the building. However, more than illustrating the absurdity of the court that is trying Joseph K. and its possible duplicity, the description of the general area in which the Court of Inquiry is located becomes indicative of how deeply its authority pervades the community:

Against his usual habit, he studied these external appearances with close attention...Near him a barefooted man was sitting on a crate reading a newspaper. Two lads were seesawing on a hand-barrow. A sickly young girl was standing at a pump in her dressing-jacket and gazing at K. while the water poured into her bucket. In one corner of the courtyard a line was stretched between two windows, where washing was already being hung up to dry. A man stood below superintending the work with an occasional shout. (35)

The Court is located literally *inside* the homes of the community. The Court, in fact, is made up of the faces of the community; Joseph K. is let into the first room of the Court by "a young woman with sparkling black eyes, who was washing children's clothes in a tub" (37). The Court's influence is so pervasive that even the children are a part of the judicial process. Making his way into the courtroom "a hand reached out and seized K. It belonged to a little red-cheeked lad" (38). The absurdity of Joseph K.'s trip to the Court of Inquiry is quintessential Kafkaesque, exuding a grand sense of humor in its dismantling of expectations while expressing the tension and paranoia of an encounter with an unknown menace and authority. As he "let himself be led

off” by the young boy, the sense that Joseph K. is an outsider facing an impenetrable system of power deepens and he is unable to clearly see those that will decide his fate:

...it seemed that in the confused, swarming crowd a slender path was kept free after all, possibly separating two different factions...K. saw scarcely one face looking his way, but only the back of the people who were addressing their words and gestures to the members of their own party. (38)

Joseph K. finds out after his interrogation that he is mistaken about the men in the courtroom being members of “different factions.” They are, in fact, one entity of the court, “they [are] all colleagues, these ostensible parties of the right and the left” (47), suggesting the closed systems of power that decide the fate of Joseph K. and permeate the community.

In The Birthday Party, McCann and Goldberg function as the oppressive and all-pervasive bureaucracy. Their dialogue is as impenetrable as the “swarming crowd” that refuses to allow Joseph K. any knowledge of their doings. Just as the absurd location of the Court of Inquiry becomes a symbol of how the bureaucracy permeates the community, the unfounded accusations dealt against Stanley on behalf of the mysterious “organization” to which McCann and Goldberg belong suggest the inescapable authority that pervades all aspects of Stanley’s existence, even the home of Meg and Petey. Directly after McCann asks Stanley why he left the organization, an organization of which Stanley seemingly has no knowledge, Goldberg inquires, “What would your old mum say, Webber?” (60). Later, McCann and Goldberg continue to vacillate between a ridiculous admonishment of Stanley’s personal life and his supposed connection with the organization:

GOLDBERG [...] When did you last have a bath?

STANLEY I have one every—

GOLDBERG Don't lie.

MCCANN You betrayed the organization. I know him! (61)

Pinter's dialogue disorients Stanley and the audience just as Kafka's maze-like description of the journey to the Court of Inquiry confuses Joseph K. and the reader. Both techniques serve to suggest the distorted atmosphere inhabited by the characters and the unknowability of the menace and the possibility of punishment that awaits.

From what we have seen of how Kafka and Pinter explore the "ubiquitous bureaucratic system" in The Trial and The Birthday Party it becomes clear that the systems of power in these texts are all-intrusive forces that pose a persistent threat to a character's stability. If we apply Walter Corbella's second reason for the continued success of the Castle's power structure, the "threat of punishment that is seldom actually administered or experienced," to The Trial and The Birthday Party, it makes a double impact on the instability and uncertainty of Stanley and Joseph K. It is apparent how the constant pressure from an enigmatic authority can cause these characters to break away into distortion and possible madness. The seemingly endless delaying of any *actual* punishment increases the tension of Kafka's novel and Pinter's play. However, even when the authority finally captures the accused, as happens at the end of both The Trial and The Birthday Party, there is still a delaying of the actual punishment. While this delay builds the tension and dread of the scenario, it also points to the uncertainty of the characters that are a part of the bureaucracy, suggesting that the instability of the human condition even affects those characters within a system of power, even if that structure itself never changes.

After almost a year of endless entanglements with the Court, Joseph K. is finally met "on the evening before [his] thirty-first birthday" by two men who come to carry out Joseph K.'s execution. As the men take him out of his home and into the silent and empty streets, an

epiphany seems to dawn upon Joseph K. It is as though in finally being presented with the actuality of his punishment he is no longer anxious of what is to come, and he seems to have found the clarity that eluded him throughout the novel:

“The only thing I can do now,” he told himself... “The only thing for me to go on doing is to keep my intelligence calm and analytical to the end....Am I to leave this world as a man who has no common sense? Are people to say of me after I am gone that at the beginning of my case I wanted to finish it, and at the end of it wanted to begin it again? I don’t want that to be said. (226).

Because of the constant deferment of punishment, Joseph K. was sinking deeper into the distorted landscape of his environment. Finally, however, it is as if by having a definitive ending to his trial Joseph K. can free himself of the seemingly inescapable cycle of bureaucratic distortion and manipulation.

When the two men finally bring Joseph K. to a “suitable spot” in a quarry in which to kill him, they are initially unable to carry out the execution; it is delayed once more as “the first [man] handed the knife across K. to the second, who handed it across K. back again to the first” (228). During this transaction Joseph K., for the first time in the novel, has the power to end his case; he “[perceives] clearly that he [is] supposed to seize the knife himself...and plunge it into his own breast” (228). The uncertain exchange of the knife between the two executioners, as well as Joseph K.’s inner monologue, implies how the machinations of the Court continue to function regardless of who is carrying out its work. Joseph K. decides not to kill himself until the two men strangle and stab him.

Stanley’s punishment is more ambiguous than Joseph K.’s. The audience never sees exactly what happens to him after McCann and Goldberg take him away at the end of the play.

If the audience is familiar with the plight of Joseph K. then they might assume Stanley inevitably succumbs to death at the hands of his two captors. The only certainty, however, seems to be Stanley's incapacity for a Joseph K.-like epiphany. The play suggests that Stanley has been completely broken by the intrusive authority and is beyond any self-realization that could provide him with some conclusive clarity. His only attempt at speaking in the final act is incoherent garble: "Uh-gug...uh-gug...eeehhh-gag... (*on the breath*) Caahh...caahh" (99). In the case of both Joseph K. and Stanley, their voices are silenced by the systems of power. Whether Stanley is being taken away to be "re-oriented" and "adjusted" to fit the standards of the organization, or whether McCann and Goldberg plan to kill him, in both scenarios Stanley, like Joseph K., has lost all power.

Joseph K. and Stanley are, in the end, unfortunate characters Kafka and Pinter use to illustrate the destructive effect systems of power can have on an individual. Through Joseph K. and Stanley's destruction, the reader and the audience recognize the actuality of the subjugation happening around them. Excluding K. of Kafka's The Castle, Joseph K. and Stanley are possibly the most extended examples by either writer of a single character that is blatantly and persistently attacked by the forces of bureaucracy. However, Kafka and Pinter permeate their works with situations where characters struggle against some sort of organization of power.

In Pinter's The Caretaker, a young man, Aston, describes to Davies, a vagabond whom he has allowed to stay in his flat, how he was institutionalized when he was younger. Before his subjugation, Aston "used to get the feeling [he] could see things...very clearly...everything...was so clear" (Essential 156). Aston's clarity of mind is unable to coexist with the community and, in very familiar Kafkan language reminiscent of the opening lines of The Trial, Aston tells Davies how "some kind of lie must have got around. And this lie went

around. I thought people started being funny [...] then one day they took me to a hospital, right outside London” (157). The community has forced Aston into a trapped space where they purge the clarity of sight he once had. The doctor’s ambiguous language leaves Aston pondering what condition, if any, he ever had: “He said that I’d got something, some complaint. He said...he just said that, you see. You’ve got...this thing. That’s your complaint.” We see how powerfully destructive the community is in this moment. Aston’s attempt to articulate what happened is torturous as he explains to Davies what the community decides is best for him: “And we’ve decided, he said, that in your interests there’s only one course we can take. He said...but I can’t...exactly remember...how he put it...he said, we’re going to do something to your brain” (157).

Michael Billington wrote that Pinter’s plays “[have] forged a direct connection between the private and public faces of power” (389). In The Caretaker, Pinter searingly captures how the family becomes this “private face” of the power system when Aston reveals that his mother signed off on the community’s decision to give her son shock treatment. For Aston, his mother’s betrayal is the end of his sanity, and his knowable, “clear” sight. It is also the moment when Aston’s power as an individual is usurped by the authority of the institution. In a poignant moment Aston recalls “I could see quite clearly what they did to the others.” The audience knows that this is the last thing Aston will ever see clearly, and that he will soon join “the others.”

The tragedy of Kafka and Pinter’s depiction of power lies in the unexpected way people and environments can destroy a character’s life. Kafka and Pinter’s depiction of the absurd ways authority asserts itself—whether barging into a character’s home with false accusations or manipulating a character’s mind under the pretense of “treatment”—resonates within the reader

and the audience because the strangeness of a situation is presented in such a way that the reality of it seems undeniable. Pinter's characters engage in dialogue that might in another context seem harmless, and yet the unexpected level of intensity in the interaction between the characters creates an environment of menace where characters can be manipulated by the language and actions of others. Kafka builds the description of seemingly normal environments until they become sinister constructions of authority. In "A Country Doctor," for example, even a quaint community in the country becomes, in the hands of Kafka, a site of subjugation for the doctor sent to treat the sick boy within:

And so they came, the family and the village elders, and stripped my clothes off me; a school choir with the teacher at the head of it stood before the house and sang these words to an utterly simple tune:

Strip his clothes off, then he'll heal us,

If he doesn't, kill him dead!

Only a doctor, only a doctor.

Then my clothes were off and I looked at the people quietly, my fingers in my beard and my head cocked to one side. (Stories 142).

The song of the young choir haunts the scene, and speaks once again to how power can assert itself over characters in unexpected places in the works of Kafka and Pinter.

IV. Memory: Seeing What's Not There

All of Kafka and Pinter's characters are inevitably lost in the system from the moment they first interact with it. One might say that this interaction begins at birth, for, as we have seen, the systems of power permeate every aspect of the home and the community. However, in the works of Kafka and Pinter, there is little in the way of a specific past for the characters; they are, as it seems, "birthed" into the absurdity of their present condition. Thus, memory, specifically the recollection of a past life, becomes a way for characters to attempt to find an existence untainted by the menace of the present. Kafka and Pinter use the memory of their characters, however, to show that a character's past condition is just as unstable as his present.

In "The Judgment," Kafka begins with a conventional description of Georg writing to his friend, who now lives in Russia. Much of "The Judgment" is actually a discussion of the past; a past, however, that Georg constructs based around his friend in Russia. Georg seems more concerned with how his present letters will affect his friend's remembrance of the past than the actuality of the past. The narrative, in fact, provides much information on the details of the friend's history, more so than is ever described about Georg. The friend, who leaves home to live in Russia and start a business, seems to possess a more independent life than Georg, who lives with his father, confined to a small existence and tethered to the local shop. Though Georg thinks pityingly about his friend, "his skin growing so yellow as to indicate some latent disease," and "resigning himself to becoming a permanent bachelor," it seems Georg's concern might mask the jealousy he feels toward his friend for escaping the confinements of their hometown. There is subtle animosity when Georg thinks of how "it [has been] more than three years since [his friend's] last visit, and for this he offered the lame excuse that the political situation in Russia was too uncertain...[and yet] it allowed hundreds of thousand of Russians to travel

peacefully abroad” (51). As the narrative stands at this point, the reader knows very little about Georg’s past other than that “two years ago his mother had died, since when he and his father had shared the household together, and his friend had...expressed his sympathy...so dryly that the grief caused by such an event, one had to conclude, could not be realized in a distant country” (Stories 51). Georg is the one who seems broken by his present predicament, not his friend, and yet Georg ignores his fractured familial situation and believes himself to be in better circumstances than his friend because that latter’s finances are “microscopic by comparison with the range of Georg’s present operations” (52). Georg’s focus on the financial aspect of his life is self-deceptive because it not only ignores his present condition, but it belies the real happiness that Georg seems to see in the past. Georg supposedly wants nothing more than “to leave undisturbed the idea of the home town which his friend must have built up to his own content during the long interval” (52). If the reader recognizes the jealousy of Georg’s attitude toward his friend, then it can be inferred that what Georg is really doing is presenting an idyllic description to his friend of his and Georg’s hometown in order to prove to his friend how Georg’s present condition is equally as joyous as the past he remembers. At the end of the story, however, Georg’s distorted view of his past is presented in the midst of a tragic present and illustrates the instability and unreliability of Georg’s memory.

In the final enigmatic scene of “The Judgment,” Kafka creates a seething accusatory tone in the father that enhances the sense of dread and disintegration that permeates the story: ““So now you know what else there was in the world besides yourself, till now you’ve known only about yourself! An innocent child, yes, that you were, truly, but still more truly have you been a devilish human being!—And therefore take note: I sentence you now to death by drowning!”” (63).

Georg's father's final statements to his son are shocking in their intensity and ambiguity. Kafka, having presented a seemingly conventional narrative structure, dismantles the expectations of the reader. Until the final paragraph, the relationship between Georg and his father has been tinged with subtle hints at an underlying explosiveness. Once his father articulates his final judgment on Georg, the narrative is released from the confines of their home and carries Georg, filled now with unimpeded motion, to his death. Georg's acrobatic jump over the rail of the bridge becomes a morbid parallel to his actions as a youth, when he had been a "distinguished gymnast...to his parent's pride" (63). By conjuring Georg's youth in this peculiar and unexpected way, Kafka reinforces the questionable aspects of Georg's perception of the past, and implies that Georg's relationship with his parents was just as unstable then as it is now. Georg's father's revelation of his son's self-deception and betrayal has undermined any attempt Georg tries to make to redeem his lost sense of authority and understanding of his environment. Georg's last words, "Dear parents, I have always loved you, all the same," are heard by no one; his judgment has lost any real meaning, because he no longer has a believable past or a secure present. The emptiness and instability of Georg's existence is reflected in the last line, as the sound of his death is drowned out by "an unending stream of traffic" (63), his choked gasps giving way to the roar of the vehicles.

The traffic going over the bridge might also be symbolic of the "unending stream" of memory. Even in a suicide sentenced by his father, Georg remembers something that causes him to speak his final intimate words. Whether the memory is real or not, Georg has believed in it for that moment, though ultimately it is not enough to sustain him from the actuality of his instability. When discussing memory, and the concept of reality and unreality, Pinter said:

Apart from any other consideration, we are faced with the immense difficulty, if not the impossibility, of verifying the past. I don't mean merely years ago, but yesterday, this morning. What took place, what was the nature of what took place, what happened? If one can speak of the difficulty of knowing what in fact took place yesterday, one can I think treat the present in the same way. What's happening now? We won't know until tomorrow or in six month's time, and we won't know then, we'll have forgotten, or our imagination will have attributed quite false characteristics to today. A moment is sucked away and distorted, often even at the time of its birth. (Works 11)

The "false characteristics" many of Pinter's characters attribute to their past stem, like the memories of Kafka's characters, from an inability—or unwillingness in the case of Georg—to see the turmoil inherent in their condition. The past is recalled as a way to escape from the iniquities of the present; however, the reader and audience are aware of how the memories of characters are self-deceptive recollections of what we know is truly an unstable existence. Inevitably the underlying turmoil of a character's past seeps through to the present, whether in the stark parallels between the two or in the way a character's image of the past falters when faced with articulating the purpose of his or her existence.

In The Birthday Party, the reenactment of familial relationships threatens everyone involved. Early on in the play, underlying Stanley's romanticized monologue about his past life is the turmoil caused by the absence of Stanley's father:

I had a unique touch. Absolutely unique. [The concert audience] came up to me and said they were grateful. Champagne we had that night, the lot. (*Pause.*) My father nearly came down to hear me. Well, I dropped him a card anyway. But I don't think he could make it. No, I—I lost the address, that was it. (*Pause.*) (34)

The absence of Stanley's father must be reworked and given false characteristics in order to coincide with the image Stanley desires to believe: that his father never got the card in the first place; that he would have come had not Stanley "lost the address." After the arrival of Goldberg and McCann to the lodging house, Meg recalls how, at Stanley's concert, "his father gave him champagne" (43). Meg's false recollection of Stanley's story not only reinforces Pinter's idea that memory can be distorted "even at the time of its birth," but it shows the human desire to see the past as a utopian world, untainted by the turmoil of the present, and yet holding some possibility of recovery. McCann's recital of "Come Back Paddy Reilly" reinforces this idea, with McCann singing, "Oh, the Garden of Eden has vanished, they say, /But I know the lie of it still" (75). The irony of these lines is that right before McCann is asked to sing, the household is consumed by thoughts of the past; this romanticism is broken, at least to the audience, however, by Lulu's statement at the end of McCann's song when she says to Goldberg, "You're the dead image of the first man I ever loved." Immediately Pinter brings the audience back to the reality of these characters' lives; for, in recognizing the parallels between Goldberg—a bureaucratic figure of misogyny, domination, and suppression—and Lulu's supposed image of innocent first love, the audience is aware of the unreliability of memory and the non-existence of the proverbial Eden.

Billington writes in his penultimate sentence to his biography of Pinter that "...Pinter's dramatic world...[attempts] to alleviate the fears and anxieties of the present through the memory of a past and now-unattainable happiness" (390). Though the characters *attempt* to alleviate their insecurities they are unable to do so not only because the past is "now-unattainable," but because it was always corrupt in the first place. Goldberg is an overt representation of this corruption of memory. Throughout the play, Goldberg delves into

monologues on the “golden days” of his past. He frequently reminisces about his mother and Uncle Benny. Goldberg’s reminiscences sound similar to those of Edward in A Slight Ache. However, whereas Edward’s monologue to the Matchseller is filled with a tension and desperation as Edward comes to realize how empty his memories are, Goldberg delights throughout the play in educating his peers on the nuances of his joyous youth:

GOLDBERG There’s no comparison. Up the streets, into my gate, inside the door, home. “Simey!” my old mum used to shout, “quick before it gets cold.” And there on the table what would I see? The nicest piece of gefilte fish you could wish to find on a plate.

McCANN I thought your name was Nat.

GOLDBERG She called me Simey.

PETEY Yes, we all remember our childhood.

GOLDBERG Too true. Eh, Mr. Webber, what do you say? Childhood. Hot water bottles. Hot milk. Pancakes. Soap suds. What a life. (55-56)

Goldberg’s seemingly idyllic past is antithetical to the ruthless position in which the audience finds him in the present. There is a contradiction with the trajectory that his upbringing would seem to hold for him. Goldberg’s past identity as “Simey” is alluded to again when Goldberg tells Lulu, who becomes Goldberg’s lover for a night, about his former wife. Goldberg appears fond of his former alias throughout most of the play; however, the unseen turmoil of his past begins to surface by the end of the play, when the stress over what to do with Stanley threatens to break Goldberg’s heretofore confident disposition. When McCann tries to get his attention by referring to him as Simey, Goldberg becomes enraged:

GOLDBERG (*murderously*) Don't call me that! (*He seizes McCann by the throat.*)

NEVER CALL ME THAT! (91)

Goldberg is no longer enchanted by the name of his youth, and it unnerves him in his time of desperation. As he settles down, Goldberg reverts back to his past in order to once again educate McCann on the way to live a good life:

[...] 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. (92)

“The line” Goldberg feels so strongly about following turns out to be empty of any meaning; it leads him nowhere. As he tries to articulate the purpose for following the rules of society, as it were, Goldberg becomes incapable of finding any:

[...] And you'll find that what I say is true. Because I believe that the world...(vacant)...Because I believe that the world...(desperate)...BECAUSE I BELIEVE THAT THE WORLD...(lost)... (92)

In this moment Goldberg's self-deception is evident, and his previous romanticized notion of the past is dismantled. However, Goldberg is unable to accept this dismantling, and reconstructs an image of posterity to ameliorate his broken sense of stability:

[...] Never, never forget your family, for they are the rock, the constitution and the core! [...] I knelt. [...] And I knew the word I had to remember—Respect! [...] who came before your father? His father. And who came before him? Before him?...(*vacant--- triumphant*) (93)

Goldberg's “triumph” is in finding a way around the emptiness of his life. He is not doomed, like Edward, to fall victim to his own self-realization; he merely exists in the constant circularity

of distorted perception that so often makes up the absurd world, past and present, of Pinter's plays.

The final scene of The Birthday Party reiterates the circularity of Pinter's absurd world. After Stanley is taken away to an unknown fate by McCann and Goldberg, Petey again sits at the kitchen table, alone. Meg, oblivious to Stanley's extrication, joyously ponders the party of the previous night:

MEG (*cont.*) It was a lovely party. I haven't laughed so much for years. We had dancing and singing. And games. You should have been there.

PETEY It was good, eh?

Pause.

MEG I was the belle of the ball.

PETEY Were you?

MEG Oh yes. They all said I was.

PETEY I bet you were, too.

MEG Oh, it's true. I was.

Pause.

MEG I know I was.

Curtain

The play ends on another false representation of the past. Meg cannot see the underlying turmoil of the night before, or chooses to ignore it in place of a romantic vision that is wholly untainted by the external forces at play. In Pinter's plays, characters who maintain a false perception of the past, such as Goldberg and Meg, are able to maintain some form of stability within their environment, while characters that cannot reconcile with their distorted recollections of their

past, such as Edward and Stanley, find themselves in a constant battle with their surroundings, and must choose to either continue on indefinitely in their struggle for stability, or succumb to death, allowing them the only available escape from their absurd predicament.

Similarly, in “In the Penal Colony,” Kafka uses the plight of the officer to illustrate how the realization of disillusionment with one’s past can irrevocably disrupt the stability of the present. As the officer explains to the explorer how men are punished using a death machine, an “apparatus,” he continuously evokes the image of the former Commandant. Not only is the former Commandant the inventor of the apparatus, but the officer creates an image of the Commandant that places him as a prophetic leader among men, and uses language that holds a spiritual, cult-like tone:

We who were his friends knew even before he died that the organization of the colony was so perfect that his successor, even with a thousand new schemes in his head, would find it impossible to alter anything, at least for many years to come. And our prophecy has come true; the new Commandant has had to acknowledge its truth. A pity you never met the old Commandant! (Stories 193)

The officer believes strongly in the functions of punishment upheld by the former Commandant; he sees a certain righteousness and dignity in the way the sentences of condemned men used to take place. Now, however, like the apparatus, which is becoming “badly worn,” the officer believes that the moral rectitude of the past is quickly crumbling under the supervision of the new Commandant. In the officer’s mind the position of Commandant is no longer upheld how it should be. The officer becomes angry explaining this to the explorer: ““Forgive me if my explanations seem rather incoherent [...] You see, the Commandant always used to do the explaining; but the new Commandant shirks this duty; yet that such an important visitor’—[...]

He was just on the point of using strong language but checked himself [...]” (196). The officer has invested all his belief in the infallibility of the former Commandant; indeed, he recognizes him as “soldier, judge, mechanic, chemist and draughtsman.” There is a religiously authoritarian subtext to the officer’s view of punishment, and Kafka uses this notion of religious piety and submission to elucidate the officer’s own faltering perception of the past. In order to be punished, a prisoner has had to have broken a “commandment.” The officer tells the explorer that the prisoner has not followed the commandment “honor thy superiors” (197). The irony is that the officer seems eager to deceive the new Commandant—his superior—in order to continue the ways of the past.

What happens to the officer in “In the Penal Colony” once he has recognized the distorted perception of his past might be called a reverse enlightenment; that is, the officer is forced into a realization of the unrighteousness and broken aspects of his leader’s system, and chooses to end his life rather than continue on as an unjust man. Before committing himself to the apparatus, the officer explains to the explorer the process of enlightenment experienced by the condemned men during the “sixth hour” of punishment, and how “enlightenment comes to the most dull-witted. It begins around the eyes” (204). The officer revels in the beauty of the enlightenment the apparatus offers, and, later, begins again to articulate his distorted perception of a wholly just and meaningful past: “How we all absorbed the look of transfiguration on the face of the sufferer, how we bathed our cheeks in the radiance of that justice, achieved at last and fading so quickly! What times these were, my comrade!” (209). Kafka beautifully controls the sense of assuredness and righteousness felt by the officer about the way he carries out his duty. The officer’s arrogance does not seem to be ignorance, and there is a sense that the officer is in control of this method of punishment, and is not willing to allow anyone to hinder his mission to

carry out the system installed by the old Commandant. When the stability of the officer's condition, and his unwavering determination and trust in the apparatus as a means to justice, is shattered by the explorer's decision to tell the new Commandant of his disapproval of the system of punishment, the reader is shocked by the actions of the officer. However, in viewing the self-inflicted death sentence of the officer in the context of Kafka's other stories, such as "The Judgment," the reader can recognize how a character's revelation of the absurdity of his life leads to an equally absurd death. However, whereas the shock of Georg's actions is exacerbated by the enigmatic and out-of-place memory recalling a fond moment from Georg's youth, the officer places himself in the apparatus after he recognizes the false characteristics he has attributed to his past. In perverse irony, Kafka allows the reader to see the officer's eyes in death; what the officer so proudly pronounced as the purpose, beyond punishment, of the apparatus, that of enlightenment, is never given to the man himself:

And here, almost against his will, he had to look at the face of the corpse. It was as it had been in life; no sign was visible of the promised redemption; what the others had found in the machine the officer had not found; the lips were firmly pressed together, the eyes were open, with the same expression as in life, the look was calm and convinced, through the forehead went the point of the great iron spike. (225)

Through Kafka and Pinter's representation of the past, the reader and the audience recognize the lack of a substantial and meaningful existence for the characters; there will never be, nor has there ever been, a life outside the absurdity of their present condition. Nostalgia withers under much scrutiny. While some characters continue to falsely imagine a past unmarred by the turmoil of the present, Kafka and Pinter seem to suggest that there will inevitably be a moment of painful realization for these characters, because the fragility of the

human condition cannot hold onto such self-deceptions forever. However, characters such as Goldberg and Georg, who are intent on holding onto a false image of the past, may continue on with their distorted memories until their literal deaths. Ironically, it is these characters who suffer the most; they are the ones who will never be able to appreciate the truth found in human suffering, because they continue to ignore it.

V. ...Esque

The reader and the audience, as well as those characters who come to recognize their unstable and absurd predicament, no matter how bleak or unforgiving, follow in the vein of Kafka's consciousness when wrote: "You can hold yourself back from the sufferings of the world, that is something you are free to do and it accords with your nature, but perhaps this very holding back is the one suffering you could avoid" (Journals 34). Kafka and Pinter never hold back the in way they depict the absurd sufferings of the world in their fiction. Their writings continue to register with readers and audiences because they unflinchingly delve into the anxiety and paranoia of the human condition with the purpose of making art reflect the actuality of experience.

By dismantling our accepted ideas about how we interact, Kafka and Pinter force us to recognize the instability of our own condition. In the mentally broken Stanley we see our own struggle for individuality; Joseph K.'s battle with the High Court is the never-ending process from youth until death of answering to some form of higher authority whose rules seem illogical and yet we inevitably follow; in the destruction of Aston's unique visions is the obliteration of our creative essence; the harrows of the Penal Colony's apparatus is a cruel punishment we never deserved and from which we never learned. Kafka and Pinter's works make us viscerally aware of our own unstable existence, and how the external forces that attempt to distort our perception of the world never cease. However, I believe that Kafka and Pinter's depiction of the absurd also allows for there to be an opening for resistance within this instability.

Pinter said that one of the most important lines he ever wrote is when Petey yells at Stanley "Don't let them tell you what to do!" as the latter is being taken away by Goldberg and

McCann. In the very nature of Kafka and Pinter's writing there is resistance: resistance to the conventions of literature as well as resistance to the society that holds arbitrary expectations for human action and interaction. If there can be said to be heroes for the Kafkaesque and Pinteresque, then, they are those people that do not hold back and instead absorb the intensity of everyday life, with its uncertain and unexpected changes, and recognize that, though human suffering will not end, there is some individual power that comes from attempting to resist the oppression and distortion of the world around them. In The Trial, Joseph K. realizes that there is no hope for his acquittal and yet he continues to delve into the mystery of the Court. In the end he is destroyed by the powers of the Court, but by refusing to stand stagnant and let the forces around him control his destiny he becomes a martyr for the Kafkaesque. Pinter's characters, on the other hand, seem to be trapped by such confusing and discombobulating circumstances that their ability to resist them is broken, and the suffering becomes too overwhelming to face.

In The Birthday Party, Stanley goes insane due to the absurd language of McCann and Goldberg and the increasing darkness and manipulation of his surroundings. Unlike in Joseph K.'s environment, there are no avenues which Stanley can take to explore the accusations against him. The structure of Pinter's plays implies the complete submersion into the absurd that his characters experience. Whereas Kafka uses logical sentence structure, consistent with the Modernism of the early twentieth century, to describe the absurd conditions in which his characters exist, Pinter presents characters whose illogical and desperate dialogue reflects the disrupting experience of living in a Post-modern world. This is not to say that there is no point of resistance in the Pinteresque; Pinter's plays seem to suggest, however, that it has yet to be found.

With the bleak and unforgiving worlds of Kafka and Pinter's works, ones that seem to hold no hope for escape from the anxiety of the modern predicament, why do audiences and readers keep coming back? What is it about the uncomfortable and distorted environments of these writers' texts that we find some pleasure in, that, though we are unnerved and sometimes horrified, we seek them out to absorb their strangeness? It might well be the desire to read or see the instability of our own lives told with a force that makes our seemingly purposeless existence hold some artistic value. We recognize our own pain in Kafka's stories and Pinter's plays, which haunts us, but we also recognize the specific pain of the characters, which soothes us because they are *not* us. Because of the dream-like aspects of Kafka and Pinter's works, the reader and the audience are able to feel the discomfort and insecurity of everyday life while continuing to accept previously unaccepted possibilities of human action and interaction. However, by depicting in an absurd manner the actuality of the power that tries to break us, the distortion that attempts to weaken us, and a false idea of the past that seems to curse us, Kafka and Pinter provide the reader and the audience a better way of understanding the instability in their own lives.

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