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HAROLD PINTER'S TEA PARTY AS A TELEVISION PLAY

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Abstract

Harold Pinter was a prominent writer, actor and director of his plays. He also was a pivotal force in theater, radio, and television media during the later half of the twentieth century. Pinter also used the same media for different purposes or in other words he tended to present the reality of life by maintaining different approaches and techniques. He followed the naturalistic technique to delineate the reality of life. In his plays, Pinter has dealt with the problem of verification of reality, change of identity, deteriorating friendly relations, violence, menace, sex, maneuverings, gender bias and struggle for power etc. He employs the non-communication technique for the effective presentation of reality. He uses pauses, silences, and absence to create media effect. Pinter has experimented with his dramaturgy and for suiting his purpose, he has used different dramatic mediums. His television plays are remarkable for their claustrophobic atmosphere and extreme mobility of camera which is not possible on a traditional stage. In the present paper I have attempted to analyze *Tea Party* as a television play.

Keywords: feminine, maneuverings, claustrophobic, nervous breakdown, menace

INTRODUCTION

In the introductory speech, "Writing for myself" in *Complete Works Two*, Pinter himself comments about TV, radio and stage which I find relevant here:

Writing for television? I do not make any distinction between kinds of writing, but Television lends itself to quick cutting from scene to scene and nowadays I see it more and more in terms of pictures...Of course, the words go with the pictures, but on television, ultimately, the words are of less importance than they are on the stage.¹

Pinter's television plays including *Tea Party*, *The Collection*, *The Homecoming*, *A Night out*, *Night School*, and *The Lover* attracted huge audiences which could not be possible in a theater in his lifetime. People could watch the television performance of his plays at their own comfort, in the privacy of their bedrooms; they could enjoy even greater privacy to watch the intimate scenes, which would be uneasy in public space.

Harold Pinter's television play - *Tea Party* is remarkable for flexibility, mobility, enclosed settings, limited characters and claustrophobic atmosphere. The play is suited to present extreme

mobility of the camera which is not possible on a traditional stage.

Thematically the dramatist highlights explicitly sex as a subject with feminine maneuvering and verification of truth as well as change of identity. The play highlights the nervous breakdown of the protagonist which results from his inner insecurity emerging from his inner conflict and fear of failure in his life. Television- an audio visual medium is highly effective medium for the presentation of themes like sex and minute complexities of feminine maneuvering, the realistic presentation of which is very difficult on stage or in radio medium. Pinter's television plays suggest a viable possibility for further experimentation and dramatization of such complex themes and help in experimenting with form and the camera's range of possibilities.

TEA PARTY AS A TELEVISION PLAY

Tea Party was commissioned by sixteen member countries of the European Broadcasting Union, to be televised by all of them under the designation "The largest Theater in the World". It was first presented by B. B. C. Television on 25 March, 1965. A stage version of the play in double bill with *The Basement* opened at The Duchess Theater, London, on 17 September, 1970.

The play dramatizes the nervous breakdown and predicament of the protagonist Disson resulted due to his psychic fears of success and social respectability from an eminent height of success in all fields including his profession as well as his personal life. The play presents the picture of a man who superficially gets threatened by outside forces. Like Edward in *A Slight Ache*, the play focuses on the menace from within which destroys the protagonist. The plot of the play is simple but it often deviates from Proceeding in a straight direction and jumps around the scenes full of insignificant repetitions and presents obscurity and an element of the absurd. Commenting on the plot of the play Pinter calls it "The story of a businessman's reaction to his new secretary and the effects she has on him. He hires her on the day before his marriage."²

The visual aspect predominates rather than the verbal aspect in the play, The juxtaposition of interspersed scenes in jumbled order does not allow the plot to develop in straight direction hence it becomes a surrealist presentation hearkening back to *The Dwarfs*.

The major events around which the action revolves include conducting of an interview for the job, marriage reception, the protagonist's relationship with his secretary in office which includes seductive and sensual behavior with his secretary, honeymoon episode with Disson and his wife in an Italian sumptuous hotel room, his eye trouble, the protagonist at game, displaying to his sons in a workshop how to concentrate on physical energies to do something useful and then the final scene which, includes the tea party in his office (to celebrate his marriage anniversary) including his nervous breakdown. Thus the play highlights office activities, ceremonial as well as domestic activities which are naturalistic but tend to become surrealist and absurd.

In order to get a detailed thematic concern of the play, the detailed analysis of plot outline summary of the play is as follows:

At the start of the play Mr. Disson the protagonist has been introduced at the peak of his materialistic success. Disson is successful in the fields of his endeavor - business, friendship, marital life, as a father and as a son. But as the play ends we find that Disson's very success defeats him. His hamartia is his fear of success like an Aristotelian tragic hero. Disson's success leads him to his failure. As the play starts we find that Mr. Disson is a well-to-do business tycoon, the most advanced sanitary engineer in England, manufacturing the lavatory, bidets, cantilever units, hidden cisterns and foot pedals. He is not only a success in the field of his business but also in other areas of his endeavor including his love making and table tennis. It is his very success that makes him vulnerable to failure.

The fear of future failure leads to his nervous breakdown.

The play begins with the employer Mr. Disson's conducting an interview of a girl named Wendy Dodd for the post of his personal secretary in his own office. Thus the setting of the play is naturalistic with the fixtures arranged around the wall which are indicative of his business that Mr. Disson is a manufacturer of "Sanitary Wares" and Bathroom Supplies. The setting of the play is naturalistic:

An electric lift rising to the top floor of an office block. Wendy stands in it. The lift comes to rest in a broad carpeted corridor. The interior of an office suite, it is well appointed silent. The walls are papered with Japanese silk. Along the walls in alcoves are set, at various intervals, a selection of individually designed wash basins, water closets and bidet,³

Mr. Disson, while conducting the interview of Wendy Dodd, consults credentials and references in her application and finds her possessing an excellent" academic record and good experience, "they seem to be excellent. You've had a bit of experience".⁴

After being fully convinced Disson considers her two attributes- active and inquiring intelligence and a pleasing demeanor essential for the post and appoints her with immediate effect and assigns her for checking certain arrangements. After appointing Wendy as his personal secretary, Disson announces to her that he is getting married the next day.

Thus, on the eve of his second marriage to a well to do woman Diana, Disson appointed Wendy as his secretary. His announcement of his remarriage is an attempt towards social respectability.

The action further develops and focuses on Disson's Wedding ceremony in which his parents, his twin sons by his previous marriage,

Diana and her brother Willy participate. Disson gets distressed as his oldest and best friend Peter Disley who was about to speak the wedding speech of the bridegroom owing to gastric flu could not participate in the marriage ceremony. On behalf of his friend Disley, Willy offers to deliver the bridegroom's wedding speech. Disley's absence is

crucial. It makes the point clear that like Machiavelli Disson believes in ends not in means. For Disson it is not the best man who is important but what is important is the best speech.

Disson, Oh, the best man's not important; you can always get a best man all he's got to do is stand there; it's the speech that's important, the speech in the honor of the groom. Who's going to make the speech?⁵

The wedding reception takes place in a private room at an exclusive restaurant. Willy makes two humorous speeches. First, his eulogies for sister Diana (the bride) and then he re praises her at length in the Wedding speech made in honor of the bridegroom. On the basis of the wedding speeches, Disson appoints Willy as second in command in his and joining the office, which Willy readily accepts. Disson's marriage with Diana and Willy's appointment in his office having Diana as his personal secretary mark the start of Disson's downfall as they cause him to begin to doubt his suitability for marriage. In a honeymoon scene Disson with his wife (Diana) in a bedroom in an Italian sumptuous hotel room asks her if she ever had been happier. She replies "Never" He further insists and Diana reaffirms his contention. This incident indicates both his success as well as his insecurity because she is happy and still he remains unconvinced that he is the best. He doubts his status.

Disson. Are you happy ?

Diana: Yes.

Disson Very happy ?

Diana: Yes.

Disson. Have you ever been happier ? With any other man

Diana. Never.

Pause

Disson. I make you happy, don't I? Happier than you've ever been...with any other man.⁶

Further, the scene shifts to Willy's office. Disson indicates the place of work and explains about their official communication through

intercom, he focuses that they would not be available frequently but would maintain rare personal contact and whenever Willy would meet him in the office, he would meet by appointment.

The scene closes with Disson's observation that his second in command needs a secretary, and Willy suggests that his own sister would be perfect. Like her husband, who functions essentially rather than logically in spite of his protestations to the country? Diana wants to work not for the reasons of efficiency but because of her emotions - she wants to be near Disson, an interesting reason, considering the speech he has just made which has obviously made no impression on her brother). The play focuses on Disson's relationship with Wendy at three places. First at the start while conducting her interview the scene turns into a seductive display. Secondly in his office When Disson dictates a letter to her, the scene turns into a seductive display and Disson notices her wriggling. He attributes this to the hardness of her chair. Wendy undergoes several contortions and postures while Disson watches her before she settles on his desk. Thirdly at his office Disson's behavior with Wendy becomes sensual when he complains eye trouble and asks her to tie her chiffon scarf, which will evolve into a fetish, around his head. After putting on the scarf, Wendy makes a business call for Disson. During conversation, Disson touches her body, though she moves under his touch, she does not withdraw beyond his reach. Willy calls over the intercom and contacts Disson for borrowing Wendy's services for a few minutes because Diana had left for home due to being unwell. Wendy disappears into the adjoining office. Disson hears "giggles, hissing, gurgles, squeals". He goes to the door, squats and tries to see through the keyhole. But he fails to see so he puts his ear on the door. With his squatting by the door, it opens and Diana stands Over him and asks, "What game is this? " Disson immediately becomes defensive, alternatively tries to excuse his actions by claiming to be looking for a dropped pencil and assumes a threatening stance. "How dare you speak to me like that? I'll knock your teeth out".⁷

At the close of the scene he inanely and ironically wants to confirm the reason of everybody's being excited. The following scene

graphically presents Disson's increasing preoccupation with Wendy's body as his imagination enlarges her buttocks so enormously that his hands go up to keep them at bay. To release the tension Disson knocks a lighter from the desk and invites Wendy to play soccer with him. He grabs Wendy's arm only to have her call "That's a foul! Although she wants to continue the game, he sinks to the floor.

In yet another scene at the office Disson touches Wendy's chair while waiting for her to come in, then sits in it. When she enters, she claims that she has been hurt because he did not notice her new dress. She expresses her narcissism:

Wendy walks to her desk....

I'm hurt.

Disson: Why?

I've put on my new dress. He turns, looks at her.

Disson. When did you put it on?

Wendy. This morning.

Pause. Disson. Where ?

Wendy. In my flat.

He stands looking at her.

Do you like it?

Disson Yes. Very nice.⁸

The above scene indicates the possibility of beginning an inferiority complex towards his wife Diana driving him to lust after Wendy.

A brief analysis of Disson's exchange with his wife would be helpful in establishing the theme of social acceptability and the depth of their connubial bliss. In the honeymoon episode Disson's insecurity and fears of inferiority is reflected before his wife. At home, a little later Disson and his wife's bedroom talk exposes Disson's subdued and formal attitude. He is more interested in reading the Life of Napoleon. (an interesting historically parallel success story) rather than his wife. Even after Diana reminds him about their first marriage anniversary, about which he announces to give a little tea party

to celebrate his wedding anniversary at the office and would invite his parents for the tea party.

Disson's downfall from eminent height is evident in his games also. At his home in the games room Disson and Willy play table tennis. Disson Performs skillfully and his sons appreciate his winning points. Later on, on one of Willy's serves, Disson assumes two balls to have been put into play and he misses the shot. Willy denies and the twins confirm it. Disson visits an ophthalmologist Mr. Disley for examination of his eyes. But Dissiey assures him that his eyes are perfect. Disson even points out a small brown stain, a distinguishing mark on the doctor's cheek which no one has noticed before it and which confirms that he has perfect eyesight.

Disson is not ready to be convinced that his eye-sight is excellent.

He finds that it has recently become unreliable, "It's become unreliable. It's become erratic"⁹. Yet another proof of his visual deficiency is repeated when Disson experiences difficulty in tying his tie correctly. - "I only deal with eyes, old chap. . . Why don't you go to someone else ? . . . Nothing worrying you, is there?"¹⁰ Finally Disley implies that his trouble is not physical, it is mental consequently the doctor gets annoyed and refuses to communicate with him further.

The scenes in which Disson and Wendy figure graphically show Disson's increasing preoccupation with Wendy's body. He also invites her to play soccer with him, and urges her to get the "ball" away from him. He grabs her arm just to have her call, "That's a foul ! ``When Wendy wants to continue the game he sinks to the floor. This means that Disson is not seriously interested in the game but he is preoccupied with lust for her.

In a scene when Disson and Wendy are discussing business correspondence, he suddenly experiences momentarily blindness and the television screen goes black Wendy tells him that his eyes open and thinks and thinks that he is playing another game:

Disson. You mean my eyes are open?....Is this you ? This I feel?

Wendy. Yes.

Disson. What, all this I can feel?

Wendy. You're playing one of your games, Mr. Disson.

You're being naughty again.

Vision back.

Disson looks at her.

You shy old thing.¹¹

The conflict between Disson's increasing interest in his personal secretary i.e. life of lust and disinterestedness with his wife indicate that lust over power Disson instead of social respectability. From a psychological view point due to the lust dominated by basic instincts, man forgets his higher concerns of life. This idea is very much apparent in Disson's relationship with his wife and children. He tries to avoid the situation to be close to his wife. When his wife reminds him about their marriage anniversary Disson simply announces to organize a little tea party

Throughout the play we do not find anywhere the mention in which Disson feels the need to take care of his wife and ensure her comforts. As a husband he never mentions his duties to his wife. But we find him to be concerned for the comforts and needs of his secretary.

Disson at his desk, writing, Wendy walks to the cabinet, examines a file. Silence.

Disson. What kind of flat do you have, Wendy?

Wendy Quite a small one, Mr. Disson. Quite Pleasant.¹²

The worst situation arises when Disson's accusations grow wilder in the next scene as he begins to suspect the relationship of his wife and verify the past of Diana and Willy and ask them to tell him about the place where they were born. Disson asks them to tell him — the place where they were born, where they played at being brother and sister. The climax reaches a state of paranoia as Disson not only distrusts his brother-in-law with his secretary but also questions the actions of his wife

and her brother. Willy tells him that they were not playing brother and sister. Diana stops Disson from further drinking and he transcends the limits and recalls how much he used to drink. "I used to down eleven or nine pints a night ! . . . Every night of the stinking week ! Me and the boys !"¹³

He questions her as to why she married him. After Diana's departure Willy and Disson have a violent discussion which is full of verbal violence and threats. Willy has private words with Disson and suggests that he has developed a mental problem and repeats Disson's concern, "Is there anything on your mind ?"¹⁴ to this question Disson denies having any mental problem and asks Willy if He would like to be his partner, "to share full responsibility". The difference between the couple's earlier life enhances his uneasiness and psychic problem.

Disson's ever increasing nervous breakdown is evident in the ping pong scene a second time. In the first ping pong game with Willy, Disson was confident and decisive but in the second game he gets desperate and feels uneasy and performs with difficulty. In second game also he has trouble with his eyes. In earlier game Disson could counter Willy but in the second game Willy forces his forehead and Disson loses his sight for a moment. It is severe and worse than seeing two balls in place the last game. In order to focus on Disson's irritation and his actions related to his sons who also doubt his abilities is remarkable in a workshop in which Disson demonstrates for them "how to do something useful".

Disson. What are you doing ?

Tom. I'm holding this piece of wood.

Disson. Well stop it. I've finished chopping. Look at the point now.

John, If you put some lead in there you could make a pencil out of it.

Disson. They think you're very witty at your school, do they ?

John. Well, some do and some don't, actually. Dad.¹⁵

Disson commits a mistake in marking a section of wood, for which he blames the boy for this fault but does not realize his own fault.

The Next focus of the play in the later part is on the tea party. The arrival of guests included Disson's parents. From their discussion and conversation with their son the parents serve as a reminder that Disson turned out to be an extremely successful businessman. His parents are surprised to see the expensive furnishings and interior decorations of his house. Subsequently, Disson's height of success is apparent in his office in a non successful situation Wendy ties the chiffon around his head as per his directions. Disson repeatedly complains it "stinks" and tears it off. She leans forward to fix the scarf, and as she does so, he touches her, but she stops him, saying, "No - you mustn't touch me, if you're not wearing your chiffon."¹⁹

In the following scene Disson replaces Wendy. He ties a bandage around Disson's head. In this scene Disson remains unmoved. He does not apply blind fold as in a game or in the play earlier. Willy confirms the covering being tight knots and straight. The tea party follows in which Disson is bandaged and other characters in separate small groups represent the development of the tea party activities.

A buffet table has been set out. Two ELDERLY LADIES serve tea, sandwiches, bridge rolls, buns and cake. The gathering is grouped around the table in silence grouped around the table in silence. DISLEY whispers to them.

Disley. His eyes are a little strained, that's all. Just resting them.

Don't mention it. It'll embarrass him. It's quite alright.

They all take their tea, choose edibles and relax.¹⁶

Thus the audience can see in T.V. performance that Disson can only hear. The conversations in the tea party are trite and innocent, the events follow a more sinister cast when Willy smilingly places a ping-pong ball in Disson's hand.

Whether this is real or imaginary is difficult to figure out. The final sequence can be attributed to Disson's imagination as a fantasized vision of his sexual inadequacy. Diana and Wendy are seen giggling silently hoisted on the desk where they lie head to toe while Willy caresses the face first of one and then of the other. Disson falls and collapses in the chair/ Willy and Disley try to lift him but they fail to loosen him from the chair.

Thus Disley removes the bandage and turns the chair upright Disson remains seated in it. Diana tries a lot to get him to recognize her. But Disson sits impassively in a catatonic state. The play ends with the close-up of Disson's eyes gazing straight ahead.

Disson's face in close-up.

Disson's eyes open.¹⁷

Like Stanley Webber in *The Birthday Party* and Edward in *A slight Ache*, Disson suffers a mental nervous breakdown. Nervous breakdown is an acceptable solution to an intolerable problem. Like *A slight Ache* Disson's collapse is because of his inner fears. It is internal rather than external. The very success of Disson has led him to fear failure.

In this regard Steven H. Gale in his book *Butter's Going up* comments on the tragic flaw of the protagonist, "In order to be a success, one must be unafraid to risk failure. (the "nothing ventured, nothing gained" aphorism)."¹⁸

Steven H. Gale further observes.

Tea Party is the picture of a man who is only superficially threatened by outside forces, it is the menace from within which destroys him, just as surely as it destroyed Edward in *A slight Ache*, Pinter depicts Robert Disson as a man successful in all fields of endeavor; he is a good businessman, friend, husband, father, and son. And it is very success which defeats him, somewhat like an Aristotelian tragic hero, though perhaps he is more akin to Joe in Arthur Miller's *All my Sons* because he does not have sufficient stature to make his fall meaningful in Aristotelian terms.

One factor of Disson's breakdown is his being vulnerable to his triumphs. In the play when he refers to Willy about himself as a self made man, his

remembrances of his past as a boy and his parents' appearance obviously focus on his height of success.

The second factor of his breakdown may be the outcome of his inner tension between his id and superego, His desire for social acknowledgement on the one hand and his lust on the other hand created tension and led to his nervous breakdown. He finds the gratification of his physical pleasures in his secretary Wendy and social respectability in

Diana. But he fails to maintain a balance between the two.

Steven H. Gale observes -

The pretension after social position in spite of the knights bridge office and the elegant home in St. John's Wood, which are both "designed with taste", leads Disson to recognize that the gap between his background and his goals cannot be bridged by money alone. Feelings of social inadequacy become expressed as sexual inadequacy and the loss of other skills. As with Edward, who possibly married the squire's daughter to improve his position, the deterioration of his physical body precludes the defeat of his pretensions (with perhaps oedipal overtones). We are again reminded of Henry Woolf's revelation of the dramatist's lifelong deficiency in eyesight and that problems with sight plague Pinter characters from Rose's final blindness, Stan's need for glasses, and Edward's ache to Disson's extreme case, all of which signify guilt or an inability to see the world as it really is and symbolize a failure to come to grips with reality.

CONCLUSION

Thus the *Tea Party* is an effective presentation in the television medium. The presentation of the theme of sexual infidelity which is considered a taboo in certain societies for social acknowledgement is very difficult to present on stage. The dramatist has effectively and economically has succeeded in presenting office activities, its corridors, lifts etc. in audio visual medium. Pinter has focused on the depiction of professional life in relation to feminine status; in professional sphere too women are not secure. Pinter's presentation of Wendy and Disson's relationship is very much apparent in the

professional sphere. Women are not free from harassment, exploitation and willingly they succumb to the lust of their boss. Thus the present play provides the possibility of the dramatization of the complex issues and harsh facts of life.

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