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Harold Pinter: *A Night Out*

A Study in the Political Connotations

And the Abuse of Power

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Introduction

Harold Pinter's *A Night Out*¹ is a significant but rarely produced piece of drama. Therefore, there is very little criticism to support or contradict my argument. The reason why I chose to do my essay on this particular play is to open doors for academic research and to try and make it an equal to its sister plays. I will raise questions and topics to prove the play is worth the readers' time and effort and that *A Night Out* is a sharp piece of political theatre. Although at first glance it is a simple enough story, a straightforward tale of the nasty consequences of motherly love when it is pushed to the limit, on deeper inspection, a more far reaching and complex analysis of the abuse of power can be observed. The play offers a variety of themes, including: interpersonal power struggles, failed attempts at communication, antagonistic relationships, the threat of impending or past violence, the struggle for survival or identity, domination and submission, politics, lies and verbal, physical, psychological and sexual abuse. The prevailing theme in the play is the abuse of power: powerful parties oppressing weaker ones, and the results of the oppressed party looking for a vent in someone even weaker than themselves.

In his essay "Harold Pinter's Happy Families," the critic R. F. Storch claims that: "*A Night Out* is a dull play [...] because the theme is out in the open" (706). On the contrary, I think it is an interesting play with a hidden agenda of deep political significance that can be paralleled to contemporary political situations. My argument is that the dominating mother may be seen as representing a dominating world power such as the USA, and Albert, the protagonist, represents a subjugated land. The mother along with other prime characters use their power to abuse Albert in a way which can be paralleled to how the USA administers its foreign policy. In this essay I will

¹ A play in 3 acts, written in 1959. It was originally intended for television; however, it was first performed on the BBC Radio Third Program in March 1960 to be later televised by ABC Armchair Theatre in April, where it had a record audience of between 15 and 18 million viewers. The play was first published by Methuen & Co. in 1961 (Duguid, pars.1-2).

discuss the various ways in which power is abused in the play: verbal abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse and psychological abuse, and follow the chain reaction which arises in Albert as a result of the continuous oppression. This will mainly be proved by making parallels to Harold Pinter's deeply political Nobel Lecture entitled *Art, Truth & Politics*.

Verbal Abuse

Verbal abuse is the most dominant form of abuse in *A Night Out* and can be witnessed throughout the play. The characters use language mostly for attack rather than for communication. Peter Hall in his essay "Directing Harold Pinter's Plays" argues that in the world of Pinter, words are either used as weapons for the characters to discomfort or destroy each other, or as a shield for their feelings (par. 18). The Swedish Academy states in their published "Bio-bibliographical Notes" that Pinter's plays have: "Domination and submission hidden in the most mundane of conversations" (par. 4).

Mrs. Stokes, the protagonist's mother, asserts her power in the house by her constant monologuing and nagging about her son's appearance, behavior, activities and his future. Their relationship is obviously strained. This can be demonstrated in the first scene of Act I where Albert Stokes, who is 28 years of age, is getting ready to go out to the Firm's party. As his mother enters the kitchen, his mood changes from bad to worse as she demands him, in a monologuing manner, to tell her where he is going although he claims to have already told her. She displays her surprise at seeing him dressed up in his "best trousers" and "cleaning his shoes" as if he is going "...to the Ritz," which is an absurd suggestion and clearly beyond the realms of possibility because the Ritz is a very fancy and expensive hotel and not intended for the likes of Albert. Albert knows his mother well and he is fed up with her technique of acting absentminded and naïve. He becomes defensive, argumentative and slightly violent. This is where, at the very

beginning of the play, a glimpse of Mrs. Stokes' strategy is presented. She turns her hypotheses of Albert's plans into facts as she goes on talking, uttering things that hurt her son's feelings and asking him to admit that he is going out to get drunk and "mess about with girls" (335) which he has no intention of doing. He tells her: "You know I'm going out. I told you I was going out. I told you last week. I told you this morning" (333). This can be further probed by analyzing another technique that Mrs. Stokes uses to affirm her power over Albert verbally. A typical Pinteresque moment² sends him into a fury as the mother gives incoherent replies to his inquiries about his missing tie. She replies "[*gently*]": "Well, your dinner'll be ready soon [...] Lay the table, there's a good boy" (332). He asks her again, and she answers: "You've got five minutes. Go down to the cellar, Albert, get a bulb and put it in Grandma's room" (332). The failure of communication causes Albert to grow impatient at his mother's stubbornness and apparently pretended inattentiveness.

Another example relating to Mrs. Stokes is her ability to quickly adapt her strategy when Albert displays his growing anger at her previously mentioned methods of affirming her power. The mother may be seen as representing a country which changes its policies to keep the public from displaying their rage and affirming their rights. Her approach is to cleverly sit with arms crossed and indulge in self-pity and misery at the realization that he is actually going out and leaving her. She guilt-trips him by saying: "I didn't tell you what I made for you, did I? I made it specially. I made Shepherd's pie tonight" (340) and that they were meant to be playing a game of cards, just like every Friday. Apparently, her strategy works, and Albert makes an emotional about-turn, putting a hand reassuringly on her shoulder and telling her that he does not want to go to the party and that he'd rather stay at home with her.

² A 'Pinteresque' moment, according to Pinter scholar-biographer Michael Billington is, "[...] fraught with menace in which common speech camouflages a ferocious battle for territory" (14).

Mrs. Stokes' methods illustrate how malleable Albert is. For example, when he finally has the courage to leave, she calls him back and sits him at the table. She controls him by probing him and making him feel bad and disinclined to get engaged in any activities outside the house. Her approach changes as she extends her hand to his and acts motherly and worried, while his violence disappears as he sits on the edge of his chair, eyes to the floor, behaving like a little boy who has done something wrong. Albert's manner is transformed to awkwardness and this demonstrates that Mrs. Stokes' schemes are working. She investigates further by starting a serious discussion, asking him: "You're not leading an unclean life, are you? ... You're not messing about with girls tonight, are you?" (335). Albert is shocked and disgusted. He assures her that he does not know any girls, that he does not like any of them anyway and says she should stop being "so ridiculous" (335). This scene reminds us of the interrogation of a criminal. This is how their relationship works. She is the police and he is the prisoner. This will be further discussed later in the essay.

Mrs. Stokes uses her didactic approach to instill in Albert her own perspective on the world. For instance, she says going to the "West End bars" and meeting girls is evil (336). Her reasons for doing so are selfish; she knows that if he would start having friends, he would realize that life can be better and it will lead him to establish his own identity and ultimately leave her. The mother's repetitive technique at the very end of the play can be paralleled to the following view expressed in Pinter's Nobel Lecture as to what a salesman or an American president would do. He says:

Listen to all American presidents on television say the words, "the American people", as in the sentence, "I say to the American people it is time to pray and to defend the rights of the American people and I ask the American people to trust their president in the action

he is about to take on behalf of the American people.” [...] It's a scintillating stratagem. Language is actually employed to keep thought at bay. The words “the American people” provide a truly voluptuous cushion of reassurance. You do not need to think. Just lie back on the cushion. The cushion may be suffocating your intelligence and your critical faculties but it's very comfortable. (7)

The mother's change in tactics from manipulating Albert to frankly laying the cards on the table can also be paralleled to Pinter's Lecture. In Act I scene v she says exactly what she wants and makes him do what she wishes, which is to go away on a holiday where she can have him all to herself. Pinter says in his Lecture:

The United States no longer bothers about low intensity conflict. It no longer sees any point in being reticent or even devious. It puts its cards on the table without fear or favour. [...] Its official declared policy is now defined as 'full spectrum dominance'. [It] means control of land, sea, air and space and all attendant resources. (7)

Gidney is another character who verbally abuses Albert. He is an under-manager and a bully in need of a subject upon which to affirm his power within the firm. Gidney demeans Albert in the party scene, Act II, scene i, by saying: “You're a mother's boy, that's what you are. That's your trouble” (358). An important point to mention here is that the public has knowledge of the issue of Albert and his mother's relationship. To further prove this, a colleague named Kedge says “I bet his Mum's is combing his hair for him, eh? [*He chuckles*]” (341). Another example is Gidney seizing the opportunity to humiliate Albert publicly after an office girl called Eileen is indecently touched by an unknown culprit. She and the rest of the crowd blame Albert

while Gidney takes the matter in hand, and chases Albert around, throwing remarks at him like, “I was telling you, Albert, that if you’re going to behave like a boy of ten in mixed company-” (357). Gidney takes the role of Albert’s father as he scolds him in front of his colleagues and threatens to discipline him.

Another character, a girl who is a prostitute, demeans Albert verbally as well. In Act III, scene i, she picks him up off the midnight streets and brings him back to an apartment. She insults and belittles him, telling him: “There’s something childish in your face, almost retarded” (369) and going as far as saying: “Don’t know why you had to pick on me [...] really rather forward of you. I am a respectable mother [...] with a child at boarding school. You could not call me anything else” (369).

As a result of this abuse, Albert needs to assert his own power on someone. The oppressed protagonist finds the girl an easy target and unleashes his rage on her verbally. He threatens to inflict violence upon her and shouts orders like: “Shut up. Sit down [...] Don’t scream. I’m warning you [...] Be quiet. I told you to be quiet. Now you be quiet [...] DON’T MUCK ME ABOUT!” (370) and shouts “[*viciously*]”: “Who do you think you are? You talk too much, you never stop talking. Just because you’re a woman you think you can get away with that. You’ve made a mistake, this time. You’ve picked the wrong man” (370). Albert finally expresses his dire need of being in control, ordering the girl: “Walk over there, to the wall. Go on! Get over there. Do as you’re told. Do as I’m telling you. I’m giving the orders here” (372). He also exposes her lies by breaking the photograph of “the daughter” which is really her, saying: “That’s not your daughter. It’s you! You’re just a fake, you’re all lies!” (372).

Physical and Sexual Abuse

Physical and sexual abuse are displayed in the play as a means to affirm power. Gidney can be taken as a perfect model. For example, in the party scene, he ridicules Albert sexually by sending an office girl, Joyce, who in her turn brings Eileen with her, to entrap and harass Albert. Gidney also abuses him physically by picking a fight with him after the pinching incident with Eileen occurs. Gidney obviously relishes in this abuse, and this can be paralleled to the following view expressed in Pinter's Nobel Lecture: "One sometimes forgets that torturers become easily bored. They need a bit of a laugh to keep their spirits up. This has been confirmed, of course, by the events at Abu Ghraib in Baghdad" (3). Thus, Gidney can be compared in behavior to the American soldiers who sexually harassed their prisoners.

Power struggles arise because Albert needs to defend himself against the antagonistic assaults by Gidney and his mother. For example, he casts the first blow in the fight which Gidney initiates. This is an important turn away from the psychological inferiority that Albert suffers from. Another example is when he raises the clock to strike his mother in Act II, scene ii after the continuous hectoring she lashes on him. A final example of Albert inflicting physical abuse happens in Act III, scene ii. The girl's unremitting blabbing triggers the same response in Albert and he decides he has to stop her as well. He also terrorizes her with a clock, physically pushing and pulling her hair and treating her like a slave. Here are many attempts by Albert to gain more and more power, and the methods he uses are violence, threats of violence, asserting his newfound ability to break rules, and ordering the girl around. He assertively drops his cigarette ash on the carpet after being told not to. He keeps threatening her by counting the ways he can inflict pain upon her. He then begins ordering her about, in a cruel role-play where he is the dominant and she is the submissive.

Psychological Abuse

Verbal, physical and sexual abuse all contribute to psychological abuse. However, there are incidents in the play that display psychological abuse without other forms of abuse. It can be highlighted in Act I, scene i, as Albert dresses to go to the firm's party. Although he is not particularly interested in going, he tries to look good, with a slight hope of having a nice time and a real night out away from the dictatorship and confinement of his mother. The fact that he is wearing his best trousers, polishing his shoes and struggling with his unruly hair denotes that he wants to be accepted in society and is eager to find a life outside the house. This is ironic and due to the cruel fact that he is aware that he cannot possibly do that, based on the way his mother is and how she has taught him to perceive the world. This is displayed in Albert's attitude and reactions, his self-resentment and how his irritation, self-loathing and cowardice get the best of him. It can even be concluded that this is the first time Albert goes out to a social gathering.

Another example, in the same scene, is when a Pinter pause³ occurs. The aim of the pause is to allow the audience to read between the lines and observe the contentment in Mrs. Stokes' eyes, the fire of victory, and the miserable surrender in Albert's face, standing behind her:

ALBERT [*with his arms around her*]: I won't be late. I don't want to go [to the party]. I'd

much rather stay with you.

MOTHER: Would you?

³ Peter Hall, who has staged more Pinter plays than any other director, describes the Pinter pause as follows: "If an actor observes a Pinter pause without deciding why it is there and what hidden process is going on inside him, then the result can be a pretentious moment that leads to the wrong kind of laughter. Pinter's pauses have become, journalistically, his trademark, and it is easy to denigrate them, even to think that they are meaningless--to think that the characters have nothing to say because they say nothing. This is never true [...] the unsaid in Pinter is as important as the said; and is frequently as eloquent. But by the use [...] of pauses, he gives a precise form to the seemingly ordinary, and an emotional power to the mundane. It is a very expressive form of dramatic speech.[...] The unsaid becomes sometimes more terrifying and more eloquent than the said" (4).

ALBERT: You know I would. Who wants to go to [...] the party?

MOTHER: We were going to have our game of cards.

ALBERT: Well, we can't have our game of cards.

[Pause.]

Albert is aware that his mother controls him. She does not want him to establish an independent identity and a social life away from her. Another incident in the same scene is when Mrs. Stokes helps to dress her 28 year old son. She brushes his jacket, saying: "Turn around. No, stand still. You can't go out and disgrace me, Albert. If you've got to go out you've got to look nice [...]" [*She dusts his jacket with her hands and straightens his tie*] (340). She also tells him: "[...] you mustn't let me down, you know. You've got to be properly dressed. Your father was always properly dressed. You'd never see him out without a handkerchief in his breast pocket. He always looked like a gentleman" (341).

Another example begins in Act I, scene i and continues in Act II, scene ii. Mrs. Stokes plays mind games on her son, psychologically confusing him by firstly, in Act I, instructing him not to "mess about with girls":

MOTHER: You're not leading an unclean life, are you?

ALBERT: What are you talking about?

MOTHER: You're not messing about with girls, are you? You're not going to go messing about with girls tonight?

ALBERT: Don't be so ridiculous.

MOTHER: Answer me, Albert. I'm your mother.

ALBERT: I don't know any girls.

MOTHER: If you're going to the firm's party, there'll be girls there, won't there? Girls from the office?"

ALBERT: I don't like them, any of them.

MOTHER: Promise?

ALBERT: Promise what?

MOTHER: That...that you won't upset your father.

ALBERT: My father? How can I upset my father? You're always talking about upsetting people who are dead!

[...]

He is dead!

MOTHER: He's not! He's living! [*Touching her breast.*] In here! And this is his house!

[*Pause.*] (335)

Mrs. Stokes is clever enough to play the role of the good cop, shifting the instructions which Albert has to follow from her to her dead husband. Furthermore, in Act II she contradictorily asks him to bring a nice girl home: "I wouldn't mind if you found a *really* [emphasis added] nice girl home and introduced her to your mother [...] I'd know you were sincere, if she was a really nice girl" (360). These mind games instruct Albert's brain to believe in a number of facts; firstly: girls are bad, whether from pubs or working at the firm, and secondly: having a social life by going out to pubs or firm parties is unacceptable. How would Albert, after this lecture, be able to find a "really nice girl" to bring home? Mrs. Stokes prevents him from having an independent life, friends or girlfriends, by making rules of what he cannot do, and yet, cleverly, makes him believe that he can have a girl, but in the end, she must approve of her. In my opinion, he takes his mother's words seriously, which influence his behavior in the party scene. For example, in the

incident when Gidney sends Joyce and Eileen to inflict sexual pressure upon Albert, the mother's psychological abuse seems to still be working in the background of his mind. Albert's reactions to girls and sexual innuendos may be analyzed in two ways. Firstly, it is obvious that he is not used to these kinds of intense situations and cannot control himself. His behavior is awkward, he is embarrassed and shocked and one might even go as far as to say that he is disgusted. The second interpretation, in my opinion, is that his mother's strong words about girls hover above him as he discovers that she was right, and that girls are evil. Maybe, he wants to satisfy his mother by not "messing about with girls" and finding a "really nice girl," although in his heart he knows it is impossible to do due to the constrictions his mother established. It can be said that Albert does not "mess about with girls," but it is the girls who mess about with him.

Psychological abuse can be inflicted by a group of people on the subject. For example, Albert is ignored at the party scene as if he is transparent, until Gidney needs to use Albert for a laugh and a prank, because Albert "just irritates" (352) him and so he sends Joyce over to him for sexual harassment. Another example in the same scene is after Eileen is indecently touched and everybody looks aghast at Albert, building up against him, casting dirty looks and nasty whispers. The abuse cuts deep in Albert's emotional and rational state as he defends what is left of his dignity. He tries to be brave, fighting the tears in his eyes, his body shaking as his pariah status is brought under the spotlight.

As a final example, in Act II, scene ii, after coming back from the party, Mrs. Stokes again guesses what no good he has been up to: "What's the matter, are you drunk? Where did you go, to one of those pubs in the West End? You'll get into serious trouble, my boy, if you frequent those places, I'm warning you" (360). Albert does not bother to correct her and share with his mother the ordeal he has been through. He keeps quiet and stares into space allowing her to keep pouring abuse upon him as he feels victimized and wronged.

Albert Stokes in the Role of Power

Mrs. Stokes has molded Albert's character throughout 28 years to be a 'mother's boy'. She is a possessive and domineering mother, controlling her son's life so that he is always in the house, only going out to work. She does not want to accept that her husband and Grandma are dead. Their ghosts lurk in the shadows around the house, still alive in the mother's restless and ceaseless monologuing. Her greatest fear is that Albert will leave her just like her husband and Grandma did, meanwhile unknowingly doing all she can to drive him away.

Albert's self-confidence has the ups and downs of a rollercoaster. He is mostly overwhelmed with insecurity and a sense of inferiority. This is revealed in a series of similar situations in every scene of every act. Pinter may want to emphasize Albert's sense of worthlessness and his lack of determination in facing oppression and gaining his independence. However, Albert is not always weak when faced with other characters' verbal, physical, sexual or psychological attacks on him. It might take him a while to gather courage to stand up for his rights, but when he does, his dangerous potential is exposed. This can be highlighted in the following events of the play: firstly, as Albert hears what he really is when Gidney says out loud: "You're a mother's boy, that's what you are. That's your trouble" (358). Albert tries to put a stop to it by physically fighting Gidney.

Secondly, in Act II, scene ii, as Mrs. Stokes complains and comments on Albert's dishevelled appearance and guesses what no good he has been up to after coming back from the party. He is broken and infuriated even though he has another front to fight on against his mother. However, he chooses the coward's way out and although the spectator would expect Albert to confront his mother after having the gates of his violent rage opened, this does not happen. It is one thing to rebel against minor negative forces in his life, like Gidney and girls, but his mother

is a superpower, and he is not yet ready to go on strike or unleash a vast revolution. For this reason, Albert behaves like his usual childish self in front of his mother; hands in pockets, eyes to the floor, empty stare. Yet with every word the mother utters, the fuse burns shorter and his impatience ticks like a bomb ready to explode. Albert seems to be gathering courage, collecting himself, trying to do something to stop her from hurting his already scarred ego. Yet, every time he seems to have grasped courage, something inside him dies, and he is left once again empty, cowering and admitting defeat. How Albert seems to search for power and loses it instantly can be paralleled with the view expressed in Pinter's Nobel Lecture: "Sometimes you feel you have the truth of a moment in your hand, then it slips through your fingers and is lost" (1). This cycle goes on for the whole of the mother's tirade. In the end, however, Albert finally snaps as he listens to his mother's increasing humiliation of him. And so, he does find that truth of self-worth, and grabs a clock aiming to strike his mother. He wants to shut her up, maybe shut her up for good.

Thirdly, by Act III, scene i, Albert has the need to eliminate those who keep stepping over him and silencing him. He has taken a stand against Gidney, silenced his mother and is about to do the same with the girl. His rage against the girl is triggered by a number of actions. His encounter with the girl is of great importance, since this scene exemplifies Albert as an individual, away from his mother and people at work who know about the nature of his relationship with her.

He meets the girl two hours after he struck his mother with the clock. However, the girl's first impression of him is that he is easy and fun to mock. As mentioned before, she calls him "childish" and "retarded" but he does not react to her name-calling and acts childishly and retarded by sitting nervously with a big fake smile as if he is hiding something. Why does Albert not stand up against her insults? Albert has finally taken action against the years of slavery. His

new identity is still in process but when the girl takes him from the streets back to her apartment he does not fight her off. He follows her just as he had followed others orders all his life. He probably does not know what he is getting himself into. The spectator certainly does not get the impression that he goes there for sex. Although the expectance of Albert asserting himself is at hand, now that he has gone this far, it seems he always needs some time to regroup and gain his confidence. What goes on in his head is a bit of a mystery. He is surely proud of himself after the two unexpected climaxes with Gidney and more importantly his mother. Yet he lets the girl, who is a prostitute, belittle him and treat him as an inferior.

Albert acts politely and civilly with the girl as she pretends to show interest in him. The unexpected attention which Albert is getting from another person than his mother excites him as he tries to enjoy his false moment in the sun. However, the reason the girl shows interest in him by asking personal questions about his job and whereabouts “tonight,” is because it is a technique she has to use in order to make him at ease and get the business transaction over and done with. Yet Albert sees right through her pretence and the lies she tells about her life and he responds by lying to her about his own life in a sort of playing along with her lies. His eagerness to be part of a conversation, be it based on truth or fabrication, shows his lack and want of social relations. What lights the first flame of irritation in Albert is that he is excluded from the dialogue in a matter of minutes as the girl is not really interested in what he has to say. In his mind, he is seeing the girl turn into his mother more and more. Her endless chatting reminds him of his mother’s constant monologuing as he sits, plotting to grab a clock off the mantelpiece. It is interesting to see how his mind works; he is more fascinated by the clock than by the girl who is offering him sex. While she is rambling, he is fixated on the clock and comments on its big size. The more the girl talks, the more Albert feels suffocated and compelled to stop her prattle. Again, something snaps inside of him and he grabs the clock and starts terrorizing the girl who struggles

in horror. With the same instrument with which he threatened to strike his mother earlier that evening, he now threatens the girl.

In the play, the stage direction says, “[*erratically, trembling, but with quiet command*]”. This is Albert, finally breaking out of the shackles of inferiority and cowardice. His voice is finally heard, the volcano finally erupting, shouting to the woman to shut up and follow his orders. Albert is playing a new role; a self-confident, strong and abusive man who has had enough. It might be easier for him to play the part of the bully in front of this total stranger because he is anonymous to her. He treats her like he has been treated by others, and ironically he likes it and does not seem to feel sorry for her at all, even though he knows that she is in his shoes now. I believe that this reflects how Albert does not pity himself. It is worse; he hates himself and who he is and thinks that he deserves to be treated badly, to be ignored and used.

All Albert’s experiences of women are “dead weight around [his] neck” (371). He has become a misogynist. He states to the girl, “Just because you are a woman you think you can get away with it” (370) and continues, “You haven’t got any breeding. She hadn’t either. And what about those girls tonight? Same kind...” (371). He enjoys having control over the girl and telling her what to do. After all these years of being downtrodden, she is now in his shoes. After all these years of being under the thumb of his mother, all women have to pay the price and the girl is the unlucky one to be in his way when the dam bursts.

Finally, Albert gets everything off his chest, articulating his feelings for the first time and answering back to everyone who has insulted him or used him that evening. In a short but passionately violent speech, he finds a riposte for Gidney’s arrogance, the girls at the party who humiliated him, his mother’s constant haranguing and to the girl herself:

You're all the same, you see, you're all the same, you're just a dead weight round my neck. What makes you think [...] you can tell me [...] yes, it's the same as the business about the light in Grandma's room. Always something. Always something. [To her.] My ash? I'll put it where I like! You see this clock? Watch your step [...] I've had- I've had- I've had- just about enough. Get it? [...] You haven't got any breeding. She didn't either. And what about those girls tonight? Same kind. And that one. I didn't touch her! [...] I've got as many qualifications as the next man. Let's get that quite straight and I got the answer to her, I got the answer to her, you see, tonight I... I finished the conversation... I finished it... I finished her [...] With this clock [Trembling.] One...crack...with...this...clock...finished! (371,372)

To demonstrate his new powers he orders her to bring him his shoes. A sense of accomplishment is observed on Albert's face. Even though he didn't have sex with the girl, he did lose his virgin innocence, and he got exactly what he needed, an outlet for his pent-up aggression.

By the last scene of the last act, Albert is a new man. He has come a long way in finding himself and expressing his identity without the fear of being overthrown. This is demonstrated as he returns home and enters his mother's kitchen as if it was his castle, triumphantly and with unprecedented self-confidence and a sense of superiority. He takes off his jacket and tie in a manner reminding us of a snake shedding its skin, throwing them on the floor as a final slap in the face to his mother. This symbolizes Albert's rejection of his old self and the welcome of the new empowered identity. However, the drama is full of surprises and turnabouts. Two things happen which were not expected at all. Firstly, Mrs. Stokes enters the kitchen. The spectator is shocked because the plot has led him to believe that she is dead, since Albert seemed to strike her lifeless with the clock. However, she is alive and well and ready to pester him some more.

Secondly, and unbelievably, Albert's inflated ego suddenly shrivels and disappears as soon as she appears. It is anticipated that after the extensive release of years of accumulated frustration and oppression, Albert would be in a new place where he is in control, and not the one controlled. It is hoped that after the scene with the girl and especially after he raised the clock to hit his mother, he would treat her radically differently. Yet, unfortunately, he is his typical subdued self again, passive, tongue-tied and reluctant to stop her.

It is obvious that Mrs. Stokes is deeply shocked at Albert's earlier outburst as she tries to mend this rip in the fabric of their life. She changes her tactics from reproachfulness to soothing, but the final lines of the play expose the fact that she is now uncertain; he has in fact destroyed the security which she has established. She says to him, in a warm and a-matter-of-fact tone:

Listen, Albert, I'll tell you what I am going to do. I am going to forget it. You see? I am going to forget all about it. We'll have your holiday in a fortnight. We can go away.[*she strokes his hand*] It's not as if you're a bad boy...You're a good boy...I know you are...It's not as if you're really bad, Albert, you're not...You're not bad, you're good...You're not a bad boy, Albert, I know you're not...[*pause*] You're good, you're not bad, you're a good boy...I know you are...You are, aren't you? (375)

Even though Albert tried to release himself from her bonds, he only succeeded in giving her time to regroup and strengthen her lines of defense. The mother's placation and apparent indestructibility at the end of the play suggest that nothing that Albert can do will ever break her will.

What happens to Albert Stokes? Why does his character not change at the end of the play? Was the whole "night out" useless, or did he learn something? Is his violent and long awaited eruption just to quench his thirst for control? The play has an ambiguous ending and is open for interpretation. However, my opinion is that Albert will never change. He will always

remain his mother's boy and the experience of personal power and the ability to abuse did not convince him that he can overthrow his mother. But in the social dimension, I believe that he will be treated with care and respect from his work colleagues after his display of frustration and rage at the party scene. For Albert did stand up to Gidney the bully, while Seeley, a stronger character, could not. All Seeley could muster against Gidney were some verbal attacks, but none of the power that Albert had the courage to express.

Politics: Truth and Lies

Pinter's main political preoccupation is with the interference of superpowers such as the USA in conflicts outside of their home territory. This can be seen in the play in how Mrs. Stokes keeps interfering with Albert's life much like the USA does with its foreign policy. Her insistence on the evils of the outside world, girls, is a reminder of the USA's constant insistence of the evils of communism, which justifies, in their view, its involvement in conflicts outside its jurisdiction. Just like the USA considers itself to be the policeman of the world, Mrs. Stokes believes she is her son's constant guardian, to protect him from evil, thus preventing Albert from creating his own independence and life. She wants to keep Albert in ignorance to protect him from real life, the truth. Echoes of this are expressed in Pinter's Lecture, where he says: "[Politicians] are interested not in truth but in power and in the maintenance of that power. To maintain that power it is essential that people remain in ignorance, that they live in ignorance of the truth, even the truth of their own lives. What surrounds us therefore is a vast tapestry of lies, upon which we feed" (3). Accordingly, I see Mrs. Stokes as a politician, and a good one.

The play shows many signs of itself being a "tapestry of lies." In scene I, Mrs. Stokes pretends that she does not know that Albert is going out. The stage directions inform that she is "[bewildered]" and acts with "[shocked surprise]" (334). She also acts as if she does not know

where Albert's tie is, although it is suspected that she does, thus keeping control over the situation to prevent Albert from leaving her. Mrs. Stokes' continuous pretence that the grandmother and her husband are still alive can be seen as a rather sad example of a lie. When Albert tells her to stop calling a room "Grandma's room" because she has been dead for ten years, Mrs. Stokes is insulted and tells him that that is no way to speak about her. She also keeps talking about her husband as if he were alive; she says, "[...] He is living. [*Touching her breast*] In here. And in this house" (335).

Another example is when meeting his colleagues Kedge and Seeley on his way to the party, Albert lies that he has a headache, although in fact he is just scared of going out and wants to get back home to his mother. Kedge asks Albert about his mother and enquires about the situation with Gidney. Albert, without addressing the issues, lies about both of them by denying that there is a problem.

The function of feeding the "tapestry of lies" is to strengthen the characters' position in other people's eye, therefore, lies are scattered everywhere throughout the play. Gidney brags about his qualifications, boasting to everyone in the party: "With my qualifications I could go anywhere. I could go anywhere and be anything. I could turn professional cricketer any day I wanted to, if I wanted to [...] these people who talk about qualification. Just makes me laugh, that's all" (350). The girl says the same thing to Albert, "People have told me, the most distinguished people, that I could go anywhere [...] [I] could be anything" (366). And finally, Albert does the same as he shouts during his terrorization of the girl, "I've got as many qualifications as the next man. Let's get that quite...straight" (371). This is an obvious attempt to reestablish himself after the earlier blows to his confidence.

There are so many lies in Act III, scene ii, that it is impossible to tell the lies from reality. The girl and Albert are strangers to each other thus do not need to tell the truth; they have the

luxury of pretending and lying. They both weave a tapestry, embroidering their lives, each pretending a more successful life for themselves. Albert does it because he has nothing interesting to say about his life and because he needs to strengthen his image in front of the girl. Thus, he lies and tries to make his life sound more exciting. He fabricates an obscure profession, assistant film director, in order to gain some kind of status. However he is surprised to find that the girl has had some experience in the field, although we suspect this is also a lie when she does not respond convincingly when further probed. For the girl, it is a way to make herself more sexually available to Albert because she presents herself as having been a ‘continuity girl’, the lowest rank in the film industry and one of the only positions filled by women, and according to her, continuity girls are “very loose” (367). Her eyes often dart towards the bed as she speaks, however, Albert does not appear to respond to her sexual advances. The girl is a prostitute, although she does her best to contradict this fact by claiming that she cannot bear swearwords, and who wants to move from the neighborhood because it is “[...] full of people with no class at all” (366). She also claims that she is quite well educated and has a father who was a military man. She is living in a dream, making excuses for her immoral behavior by saying that it’s normal and “fantastic” that respectable wives can entertain other gentlemen. She tells Albert bluntly, “All I do, I just entertain a few gentlemen [...] What girl doesn’t?” (369).

But above all, it is of greatest significance that Albert pretends that he killed his mother, and he brags about it to the girl obviously seeming to enjoy it. For the whole of the scene, he lives in the illusion of his mother being “finished.” He tells the girl, in a warning tone: “I’ve had—I’ve had—I’ve had – just about enough. Get it?... You know what I did? [...] I got the answer to her. I got the answer to her, you see, tonight... I finished the conversation... I finished it... I finished her... [...] With this clock. One...crack...with...this...clock...finished. Of course, I loved her, really” (371-372).

I believe that Albert has long been teetering on the edge of matricide. And although the mother is physically present on the stage at the end of the play, it can be imagined that this is only her ghost and she has become just like the other dead family members, posthumously lurking around. This could be supported by the fact that Albert hardly reacts to her comments. Nevertheless, the stage direction informs us that “[*His body freezes. His gaze comes down. His legs slowly come together...*]” (374) thus dismissing the notion of her being an apparition.

Other examples that feed “the tapestry” are when Mrs. Stokes falsely accuses Albert of telling lies about going to the firm’s party and when Eileen blames Albert for pinching her; which is a false accusation that causes the unfolding of the rest of the play.

In the end this is all typical in Pinter’s plays, issues fly by each other without being discussed properly, and lies are told to avoid bringing up these issues. This is in a sense what makes Pinter brilliant, because he represents so closely how real patterns of speech and social interactions take place. That is why the reader marvels at the language, because it feels real; unlike many other plays where the language seems contrived and fake.

Conclusion

In the light of Harold Pinter’s Nobel Prize and the political dynamite of his speech, where he demonstrates clearly the USA’s abuses of power in various parts of the world and which I see in so many ways mirroring the themes of *A Night Out*, it is an outcry that a play of this significance gets consigned to the dusty bottom shelf of literary criticism; especially given the situation in the world today as far as the USA’s war on “terrorism” is concerned. For me the blatant overuse of power that we continue to see in the creation of USA-dependant ‘democracies’ such as Iraq and Afghanistan, can already be observed spiraling into an ever increasing cycle of violence as they struggle for their independence, in a way which reflects what Pinter presents in his study of

Albert Stokes' quest for liberation in *A Night Out*. The USA's claims that they are establishing democracy in Iraq can be of little comfort to the tens of thousands of civilians maimed by the countless car-bombings which we hear about daily in the news. Pinter's *A Night Out* perhaps gives us an insight into the psychological motivation behind the acts of the bombers themselves.

I firmly believe that *A Night Out* is a rich play, pregnant with various interpretations, both social and political, that allow the reader and the spectator to come to their own conclusions about the meaning and morality of the events that take place on stage. The end of the play leaves the audience with a perplexing feeling that this is not the end of the power struggles and violence. Why the play has not gained more attention is also perplexing. I hope that this attempt in reviving the drama will raise more interest and some genuine attempts to analyze it further.

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