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## Éditorial

### **Un panorama riche et diversifié des sciences humaines et sociales**

Le présent numéro de *Germivoire* vous propose une nouvelle fois un voyage intellectuel à travers les méandres de la recherche en sciences humaines et sociales. Notre table des matières, aussi riche que variée, témoigne de la vitalité de ces disciplines et de leur capacité à interroger notre monde en constante évolution.

Des littératures anglaise et française aux enjeux géopolitiques en passant par les questions d'identité, de mémoire et de trauma, les contributions réunies dans ce numéro offrent un panorama complet des préoccupations actuelles des chercheurs.

Les études littéraires occupent une place de choix dans ce volume. De l'analyse des personnages de Tom Stoppard à l'exploration des enjeux identitaires dans les œuvres postcoloniales, les auteurs nous invitent à une réflexion approfondie sur les mécanismes de la représentation et les enjeux de la construction identitaire.

Les sciences sociales ne sont pas en reste. Les articles consacrés à l'histoire, à la géographie et aux sciences politiques nous permettent de mieux comprendre les dynamiques sociales, les mutations des sociétés et les défis auxquels elles sont confrontées.

Enfin, les sciences humaines et sociales ne sauraient se passer d'une réflexion sur les enjeux contemporains. Les articles consacrés à l'intelligence artificielle, à la mondialisation et aux changements climatiques témoignent de l'engagement des chercheurs à apporter leur expertise aux grands débats de notre temps.

Nous espérons que cette nouvelle livraison de *Germivoire* vous donnera l'occasion de découvrir de nouvelles perspectives et de nourrir votre curiosité intellectuelle.

**La rédaction (I.A.)**

# **The Mystery of Human Being in Tom Stoppard's *Jumpers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* and *The Caretaker***

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## **Abstract:**

In this study, we examine, from an existentialist and postmodern perspective, the question of the human being in *Jumpers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* by Tom Stoppard and *The Birthday Party, The Caretaker* by Harold Pinter. Two major playwrights of contemporary British literature, Pinter and Stoppard constantly raise the question of human identity in a context of epistemological crisis which affects practically all areas of life. Using very comparable dramatic approaches, they expose the inscrutable character of the individual. In Pinter's dramatic universe marked by an atmosphere of diffuse threat, the characters make identity ambiguity a weapon of war or defense. They speak and act so as not to reveal themselves, to hide their identities and intentions. They are thus mysteries both for the spectator and for those with whom they interact. Like Pinter's characters, those who populate Stoppard's plays are disconcertingly complex. They have such multiple and contradictory facets that it is almost impossible to give them a definitive identity. It is not surprising that the attempt of the philosophical characters in *Jumpers* to unravel the mystery of the female characters is a failure, just as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern fail to understand Hamlet's attitude or answer the question of who they are themselves. In both dramatic universe, the mystery of man is further highlighted by the unpredictable actions of the characters whose motives remain just as mysterious.

**Keywords:** Human being, identity, mystery, Pinter, Stoppard

## **Résumé :**

Dans cette étude, nous examinons, dans une perspective existentialiste et postmoderne, la question de l'être humain dans *Jumpers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* de Tom Stoppard et *The Birthday Party, The Caretaker* de Harold Pinter. Deux dramaturges majeurs de la littérature britannique contemporaine, Pinter et Stoppard posent constamment la question de l'identité humaine dans un contexte de crise épistémologique qui touche pratiquement tous les domaines de la vie. A l'aide d'approches dramatiques fort comparables, ils mettent à nu le caractère impénétrable de l'individu. Dans l'univers dramatique de Pinter marqué par une atmosphère de menace diffuse, les personnages font de l'ambiguïté identitaire une arme de guerre ou de défense. Ils parlent et agissent pour ne pas se dévoiler, pour cacher leurs identités et intentions. Ils sont ainsi des mystères aussi bien pour le spectateur que pour ceux avec qui ils interagissent. Comme les personnages de Pinter, ceux qui peuplent les pièces de Stoppard sont d'une complexité déconcertante. Ils présentent des facettes tellement multiples et contradictoires qu'il est quasiment impossible de leur coller une identité définitive. Rien d'étonnant que la tentative des personnages philosophes dans *Jumpers* de percer le mystère des personnages féminins soit un échec, tout comme Rosencrantz et Guildenstern ne parviennent ni à comprendre l'attitude de Hamlet ni à répondre à la question de savoir qui ils sont eux-mêmes. Chez les deux dramaturges le mystère de l'homme est davantage mis en relief par les actions imprévisibles des personnages dont les mobiles restent tout autant mystérieux.

**Mots-clés :** être humain, identité, mystère, Pinter, Stoppard

## Introduction

One of the questions that has fuelled the philosophical debate and literary production of our time is that of the human being himself. The suspicion cast on man by Freud's psychoanalytical theory and the atrocities of the two world wars, among others, have brought the intricate question of human nature and identity back into the spotlight. Man does not seem, in fact, to be what he claims to be.

Christian existentialists such as Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) and Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973), as well as atheist existentialists such as Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), and Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), agree that human identity is not pre-established, since existence precedes essence. A being condemned to freedom, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself; he is the sum of his actions. Following in the footsteps of the existentialists, postmodern thinkers believe that any attempt to define man can only be fruitless. The individual, in their view, is elusive, given the plurality and complexity of identity referents that offer an infinite possibility of freely constructing one's personality in a world that is both cosmopolitan and heterogeneous. The identity question we raise in this work is to be understood within this postmodern and existentialist perspectives that are respectively expressed in Lyotard's *La condition postmoderne* (1979) and Sartre's *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* (1946).

The idea that man's nature is indefinable has found an echo in contemporary literature, particularly in the field of theatre, which is par excellence the art of representation. No one has staged the complex dimension of the individual better than the British playwrights Harold Pinter (1930-2008) and Tom Stoppard (1937: 87 years old). This article attempts to examine, from an existentialist and postmodern perspective, the indecipherable nature of the human being in Pinter's *The Birthday Party* and *The Caretaker* and in Stoppard's *Jumpers*, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. We will be looking mainly at how the two playwrights use specific dramatic devices (characterisation) to highlight the mysterious nature of the individual in a world where reality is more elusive than ever. After analysing the identity of the characters as they are presented to us in the two dramatic universes, we will attempt to show the inexplicable nature of their actions underpinned by rather elusive motives.

### 1. The vague identity of Pinter's characters

Let us begin this section by this anecdote of Pinter's witty and bitter response to a woman who asked him to enlighten her about the obscure people in the *Birthday Party*:

**Woman:** Dear Sir, I would be obliged if you could kindly explain to me the meaning of your play, *The Birthday Party*. These are the points which I do not understand: 1/ who are the two men? 2/ where did Stanley come from? 3/ were they all supposed to be normal? You will appreciate that without the answers to my question I cannot fully understand your play.

Here is Pinter's answer:

Dear Madam, I would be obliged if you would kindly explain to me the meaning of your letter. These are the points I do not understand. 1/ who are you? 2/ where do you come from? 3/ are you supposed to be normal? You will appreciate that without the answers to your questions I cannot fully understand your letter. (quoted by Cahn 1)

Beckett had a rather similar reaction. Asked by Alan Schneider who or what does "Godot" meant, he answered; "if I knew I would have said so in the play" (quoted by Worton 67). The too vague nature of the identity of the characters in these plays justifies the desire of the spectator, who is not accustomed to this scenario, to know more about them. Let us take a look, for example, at how Pinter reveals his dramatic creatures to us.

In the *Birthday Party*, the couple Meg – Petey hold centre stage. Their discussions reveal that they have accommodated a man called Stanley. Shortly after, we learn that Petey and Meg are to welcome two other gentlemen who asked to be put up for a couple of nights. The two guests have just arrived. Nothing is known about them nor about Stanley until the three of them come to meet under a tense atmosphere. This meeting does not however provide us with clear social identifications. It simply offers an opportunity to the two unknown people to indulge in a verbal game that betrays their conflicting relation with Stanley. Goldberg and McCann have come for Stanley.

*The Caretaker* is about the story of Davies, a tramp who has been rescued from a fight in a café and brought in by Aston in a place where the latter lives with his brother, Mick. As soon as Davies makes himself at home, he starts a long narration of his supposed past and fights tooth and nail to carve out a niche in the place.

This is briefly the way in which Pinter's characters are presented. The plays leave unanswered questions about the real identity of characters. Stanley, Goldberg, and McCann in *The Birthday Party* and Davies in *The Caretaker* are those who catch more the attention of the spectator. They are mainly remarkable for their egocentric declarations. They say much about themselves and nothing of what they say is proven. How can we know whether their utterances are true or not? This is the major question that underlies Pinter's plays. But in this immense confusion, Pinter comes to our rescue. He declares: "The desire for verification on the part of us, with regard to

our own experience and the experience of others, is understandable but cannot always be satisfied” (1983:11).

In the traditional or conventional theatre, the authors present characters who seem to be familiar to himself and to the audience. The proponents of the Absurd Drama, of which Pinter and Stoppard are often associated, flout this tendency. They hold the idea that the world about which they write is not as coherent and intelligible as implied by the conventional narrative and dramatic techniques. They write according to their own sensibilities and feelings to better express the postmodern man’s feeling of loss in the face of an undecipherable world. It comes then as no surprise that playwrights like Beckett, Pinter, and Stoppard are reluctant to answer any question about the identity of their characters. As part and parcel of the human species caught in a world of uncertainty, the artist cannot be expected to tell all about the people who inhabit his plays. His work is not intended to give an explanatory account of the world. Instead, it is a reflection of this very uncertainty of which man seems to be the perfect model. Pinter pictures how difficult it is to grasp his ambiguous personages and the human being in general:

Between my lack of biographical data about them and the ambiguity of what they say lies a territory which is not only worthy of exploration but which it is compulsory to explore. You and I, the characters which grow on a page, most of the time we’re unexpressive, giving little away, unreliable, elusive, evasive, obstructive, unwilling (1983:13-14).

From this moment it becomes plain that characters’ declarations are not altogether reflective of their personality. They cannot be pinned down from what they say of themselves. A more cautious approach is then needed for the study of characters. In this regard, the systemic analysis advocated by Anne Ubersfeld in *Lire le théâtre I & II* (1996) and Martin Esslin in *The Field of Drama* (1968) proves to be most helpful. They observe that the critic should not base his analysis on characters’ disclosures, but rather see how the distinctive features of characters, the situation in which they speak and their relations with one another can help shed light on their personality.

## **2. The hidden game behind the hidden identity of Pinter’s characters**

Following the character analysis strategy proposed by Ubersfeld and Esslin, knowledge of the communication situation or the context in which the characters develop is essential to get an idea of their personality. Pinter’s plays generally describe a world of uncertainty, where man often represents a threat to his fellow being. It is within this framework of latent social conflicts that the meaning of characters’ words can be best understood. Indeed, the general tendency is that those who manage to keep their identity and innermost feelings secret are likely to have

the upper hand over those who show a sign of weakness or who disclose the least reality about themselves. “To enter into someone’s life”, Pinter declares, “is too frightening. To disclose to others the poverty within us is too fearsome a possibility” (1983: 15). In the face of this reality, the only solution is to keep oneself to oneself and be unfathomable as possible. Elusiveness is then quite normal as it is a guarantee of security. The pauses, dashes, dots, repetitions, in a word the disjointed language which is commonly found in the plays is symptomatic of this desire to be unapproachable. Whenever a character senses that he may be revealing something about him that must be kept unknown for security reasons, he resorts to this ambiguity. A case in point is Davies. Asked about his place of birth, he changes on the spot into an amnesic man:

Aston: Where were you born?

Davies: I was... uh ...oh, it’s a bit hard, to set your mind back...see what I mean...going back...a good way...lose a bit of track, like ...you know... (25).

In the same way, characters may use a coherent language with the apparent intention of disclosing something about themselves, but which is basically intended to hide a truth about their real personality. “Language, under these conditions, is a highly ambiguous business. So often below the word spoken, is the thing known and unspoken” (Pinter 1983: 15). This reality is observable in the following scene from *The Birthday Party*. Faced with the threatening guests who have come to take him away, Stanley claims to be a former pianist now turned into a business man. He insists that his being at Petey’s comes within the framework of his “little private business” which he says he is about to give up and go back home: “You never get used to living in someone else’s house” (50), he says. It would not be advisable to believe whatever Stanley says of himself. His utterances are understood to be more an attempt to foil the enemies’ plan than a real declaration of intentions. This is all the truer as he is seen later trying to drive Goldberg and McCann away, instead of leaving as he claimed. The following rebuke administered to the undesirable visitors discloses something about him that literarily contradicts his earlier statement according to which he is on temporary business: “I run the house. I’m afraid you and your friend will have to find other accommodation, to me you are nothing but a dirty joke (54-55).

Davies claims to be a man of uncompromising principles. In his own words, he repudiated his wife a few weeks after their wedding because she was dirty. He says to have eaten his dinner off the best places. He allows nobody to take any liberties with him. He has forgotten in Sidcup the papers which prove who he is. It is open to question whether Davies is the man he claims to be. His capacity of alternating ambiguity and articulation leads Mick to consider him a liar: “I can take nothing you say at face value. Every word you speak is open to any number of

different interpretations. Most of what you say is lies” (73). Whether Davies is a liar or not is not our concern, for it is unverifiable. However, his pompous comments on his would-be honourable past life are intended to assure his hosts that he is of good moral character, which, he thinks, is a necessary condition for him to be accepted in the place that gives him security. His entire behaviour expressively betrays his intention before he openly confesses it in a pathetic tone. “What shall I do? (77), “where am I going to go? (78)?, he complains when Mick, against all expectation, decides that he should be kicked out.

By refusing to state their genuine identity, Stanley and Davies do nothing but conform to the rule of ‘hide and seek game’ in which Pinter’s characters are usually engaged. The same is true of Goldberg and McCann. The sole piece of information we are graced about them, which is still to be verified, is that they have received from a nameless organization the order to take Stanley away. They are bending all their efforts towards accomplishing this mission. Any other comment on their identity is groundless. It is in this sense that the audience is inclined to laugh at Meg’s allegations that Goldberg and McCann are maybe Stanley’s old friends: “Do you think they know each other? I think they are old friends. Stanley had a lot of friends (78).

Another significant point is that Meg and Petey are ignorant of the tension that prevails between Stanley and the guests. Through this fact, Pinter demonstrates the degree to which a character can remain mysterious, not only to the audience, but to his fellow characters. The two accomplices have succeeded in keeping Meg ignorant of the real purpose of their visit. Petey is presented with a *fait accompli*. He gets to know about the guests’ intention only too late.

There is a great deal of genius in the way Pinter has his characters gradually emerge from obscurity. He forces somehow his audience to watch them closely, from their coming onto the stage up to their last movements. Pinter seizes this right moment when everything is seen and heard to ask one of the most disconcerting and penetrating questions about human being:

The point is, who are you? Not why or how, not even what. I can see what, perhaps clearly enough. But who are you? [...] What are you, or appear to be to me, or appear to be to you, changes so horrifyingly, I certainly can’t keep up with it and I’m damn sure you can’t either (1987: XIX)

Pinter’s last words sound like an invitation meant for all human being to admit the evasiveness of their nature. The systemic analysis suggested by Ubersfeld and Esslin can only help critics and spectators to have an insight into characters’ intentions, but does not help uncover their hidden identity. It also demonstrates how human behaviour comes to betray the most private feelings that people try to conceal through language. Man is a mystery. Such is the picture of the human reality that Pinter strives to paint.

### 3. Stoppard's characters: intellectual puzzles

Stoppard employs an identical dramatic procedure to voice the same concern as Pinter, the uncertainty of life. His characters have a great deal of common with Pinter's. They are presented with such an ambiguity that there is little chance to pinpoint their identity. Those who people *Jumpers* for instance are like riddles that cannot be solved. The play opens with a celebration of the Radical Liberal Party's victory on the occasion of which we are successively introduced to Archie, the master of ceremonies, Dotty, the 'much-missed, much-loved star of the musical stage', a secretary, quietly settled and taking off some clothing, George Moore, a rather eccentric person who rings the police up to complain about the disturbance that the celebration causes him, but who wants to remain anonymous and assumes that his name is Wittgenstein, a troupe of 'incredible' jumpers which enters jumping, tumbling, somersaulting. The acrobatic movements performed by these jumpers herald the intellectual acrobatics in which the spectator will indulge in an attempt to unravel the hardly knowable characters.

The complexity of characters is the keynote of Stoppard's plays. However, it is to be remembered that the emphasis is more on the intellectual complexity than on the social one. In other words, characters in *Jumpers* are particularly noted for their concern with philosophical issues which determine more or less their personality. Gabrielle Scott Robinson makes the point that characters are "vehicles for the ideas, personifying argument and counterargument, they are intellectually rather than psychologically complex" (qtd by Bareham 51).

Archie, the Vice-Chancellor, who believes that values are relative and that truth is hardly verifiable, is the very embodiment of these ideas he conveys. The duality between truth and untruth is made overt through his character. He makes claim to being a man with multiple professional qualifications, which is unverifiable: "I'm a doctor of medicine, philosophy, literature and law, with diplomas in psychological medicine and PT including gym" (52). "He is a bit of everything" (38), George Moore declares. His claiming to be a doctor of medicine makes it plausible that he might be curing Dotty, just as it can indicate the contrary. It could be just a pretext for having relations with George's wife. In any case he has been very successful in proving to George Moore that truth is unverifiable. For the latter, despite his insistence that truth can be demonstrated, has never found out the real nature of the relation between Archie and his own wife, Dotty. The complexity of Archie's professional qualifications is only equaled by the complexity of the group of jumpers under his leadership.

**Bones:** who are these acrobats?

**George:** Logical positivists, mainly, with a linguistic analyst or two, a couple of Benthamite Utilitarians ... Lapsed Kantian and empiricists generally ... and of course the usual Behaviourists ... a mixture of the more philosophical members of the gymnastics team and the more gymnastic members of the philosophy School. (41)

The terms gymnastics and philosophy, which are respectively reminiscent of the complexity of movements and the subtlety of questions, are interwoven here to suggest the complexity and elusiveness of jumpers and by association all characters. Archie, who is both 'a first-rate gymnast' and a philosopher, is, as George Moore admits, the epitome of the 'close association between philosophy and gymnastics' (41). George Moore also crystallizes, in a different way, this combination between philosophy and gymnastics. All the philosophy he tries to expound in the course of the play is made up of a mass of conundrums which reflects best his elusiveness. The outstanding characteristic of George Moore is his everlasting concern with the questions of God and moral values. He is so absorbed in his confusing philosophy that he has no other preoccupations. In withdrawing from contact with the rest of the society with which he is in conflict over the question of moral behaviour, and reducing all his life to philosophy, George Moore utterly overlooks his social side. He does not identify with the world he lives in; and his philosophy is unconnected with the reality of that world. "you're living in dreamland" (22), Dotty mocks him. His identity has a sense only if taken to mean his intellectual side. And since intellectually George Moore cannot be grasped, his identity, too, remains a whole mystery. He recognizes his elusive nature in these terms: "there is more in me than meets the microscope" (58).

Like Archie Jumper and George Moore, the late professor McFee Duncan is also noted for his enigma. Former holder of the chair of logic of the university, McFee was a prominent figure of logical positivism. His death opens up revelations concerning his personality. According to the evidence given by Crouch, the caretaker of the university and close friend of McFee, the latter was deeply affected by the "altruistic behaviour of Captain Oates who on an expedition to the South Pole led by another Scott in 1912 sacrificed his life to give his companion a chance of survival". McFee turned away from his position of logical positivist and decided to become a monk as a result of his being touched by his past altruism. "It was the astronauts fighting on the moon that finally turned him, Sir. Henry, he said to me, I am giving philosophical respectability to a new pragmatism in public life, of which there have been many disturbing examples both here and, on the moon," (70), reports Crouch. His shift from atheism to belief is abrupt and poses a threat to Archie who stands a chance of being deprived of and challenged by one of the

most brilliant professors. This is one of the reasons why Archie is believed to be the murderer of McFee.

In the same vein, this shift from one extreme to another (an atheist who becomes a believer) can be regarded as the expression of the unpredictable nature of the human being. Man is not constant in his behaviour and inmost convictions. He may any time change his mind, regardless of the trends that have moulded his personality. It is no accident that Archie refers to the late professor as Saint Paul. One can recall that Saint Paul, whose name is today associated with Christianity, used to be an ardent detractor of the teaching of Jesus before becoming unexpectedly converted to Christianity.

Crouch continues to inform that the late professor, who had already been married, was the lover of George Moore's secretary. But he had to put an end to the relation as he was about to go into the monastery. This was not to please the secretary who is also suspected of conniving with Archie to kill McFee. There is a striking parallel between the hidden face of the professor and his mysterious death. The truth about his personality as well as the truth about his death are not totally elicited.

Dotty is another character who has been affected by the landing on the moon from which she drew inspiration to maintain a career as a musical-comedy actress. Her radiant career is cut short after men land on the moon and spoil its romance. It is no coincidence that her attempt, during the ceremony, to try her once beautiful voice with 'Shrine on Harvest moon song' results in failure. Her odd demeanour results from her being psychologically traumatized by this human act which has emptied her of her emotive power. She explains: "they thought it was overwork or alcohol, but it was just those little grey men in goldfish bowls, clumping about in their lead boats on the television news; it was very interesting, but certainly spoiled that Juney old moon" (30).

It is a traumatized Dotty who is presented to the spectator. G. B. Crump observes that she "spends most of the play in the bedroom, a place of sleep, sexual intercourse and luncheon trays" (qtd by Bareham 23). This description is largely evocative of the ambiguous nature of Dotty. Literally, the bedroom functions as a place which keeps the people and objects that are in it from the view of the audience. Symbolically, it serves as an ideal environment for the author to highlight the ambiguity which characterizes Dotty. It is not possible to fully grasp Dotty without having a clear idea of her doings in the room where she welcomes Archie then

Inspector Bones. What takes place in this close space Dotty becomes identified with is beyond our knowledge; therefore, her real personality is not all the same accessible.

George Moore's secretary's attitude is reminiscent of Dotty's. Conspicuous by her total silence for the whole play, she is sometimes extravagant in her behaviour. Like Dotty, she happens to take off her clothes and be naked right in the middle of the play. This unusual image she offers conveys a sense of ambiguousness. For Crump, it is to be considered another puzzling aspect of the human being:

Dorothy, along with the secretary, also forms part of the puzzling reality that the men strive to interpret. Both women play scenes in the nude; a metaphor for the *ding an sich*, this physical exposure hides more than it reveals. Stoppard invests the women with enigma which, like the world, defies male ratiocination (quoted by Bareham 24).

Both Moore's wife and his secretary are at the image of the difficult questions that Moore and his colleagues grapple with. Like their male peers, they escape any possibility of being pigeonholed. It is therefore the identity of the human being in general that is elusive. Just as it is difficult to know a person, it is almost impossible to know oneself. The atypical duo at the centre of Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* are a case in point.

Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* casts two individuals, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, with whom every Shakespearean spectator is quite familiar. Actually, they are two minor characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* invested by King Claudius to try to see why their childhood friend, prince Hamlet, behaves as he does. In his play, which takes its inspiration from *Hamlet*, Stoppard brings these two minor Shakespearean characters to the fore by emphasising their state of confusion. Indeed, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are enmeshed in a world which denies them identity. Among other things, they are engaged in a quest of identity as opposed to the great majority of Pinter's characters who choose to remain enigmatic. As stated above, the spectator may already know from *Hamlet* the story of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The latter, who have certainly never come across this famous play, are completely in the dark. They are mystery to nobody but to themselves. Upset to learn that the letter they carry with them commands their death, Guildenstern gives his indignation free rein.

**Guild:** But why? Was it all for this? Who are we that so much should converge on our little deaths? (*In anguish to the PLAYER.*) who are we?

**Player:** you are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. That's enough. (93.)

This response has a double implication. First, the player who is apparently aware of what is going to happen to the bewildered couple ironically refers them to Shakespeare's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the role of which they unlikely play. Accordingly, they don't need to bother

too much about their situation, but just follow instructions irremediably leading them to death. “In our experience, most things end in death” (93), argues the player to probably allude to the tragic end of the still questioning couple. The second implication is that no matter what they can say and do, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will never know more than what they are allowed to, that is they are simply called Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. And that’s all. In William E. Gruber’s opinion “Guil’s fate is never to know who he is” (qtd by Bareham 88). This comic situation in which the two courtiers are swallowed up is one of the most compelling aspects of *Ros and Guil*. Indeed, the spectator derives a pleasure from the bewilderment of these two little men, the very source of which he may know from his reading of the original play by Shakespeare. Stoppard even confesses that the objective of the play was to ‘entertain a roomful of people with the situation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’: “The chief interest and objective was to exploit a situation which seemed to me to have enormous dramatic and comic potential – of these two guys who in Shakespeare’s context don’t really know what they are doing” (qtd by Bareham 66). Besides, Stoppard revisits the crucial question of Hamlet’s mystery which the royal court, along with the audience, is much troubled about. Hamlet is actually a typical example of the elusive being. If it is true that his social origin is clearly established unlike Pinter’s dramatic creatures, there is no doubt, however, that Hamlet remains entirely inscrutable for the society against which he has risen up in rebellion. Still, his contradictions, procrastination and eccentric behaviour measured against the profoundness of his thought, give the image of a man to whom it is difficult to attach the label of sanity or insanity. In addition to the mystery surrounding his identity, the man who unfolds in the dramatic work of Pinter and Stoppard is also distinguished by the strange nature of his actions.

#### **4. The unintelligibility of human action in the plays of the corpus**

As a general rule, Pinter’s and Stoppard’s plays leave their audience astonished in view of the human actions they depict. It is difficult indeed to grasp the mobiles that underlie characters’ actions, as if something mysterious made them act without their knowing why. The ‘two little guys’ who hold the spotlight in *Ros and Guil*, for example, distinguish themselves by the unconsidered ‘activities’ they go about. We know what make them act, but we don’t know why they entirely submit to the will of the royal couple whose motives they know nothing about, and from whom they are under orders. Given that they are refused clear explanations, there is no reason why they should carry out instructions.

Acting upon order has certainly become so automatic with them that they must fail to realize that as human beings, they have full discretion to act or not. They turn a blind eye to their

possibility of choosing and rely on others for this. In so doing, they demonstrate what existentialists call bad faith, a refusal to choose and to accept responsibility for being condemned to total freedom. That is why Gruber does not want them to be called 'powerless victims', as they are often labelled. For him, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern simply choose to evade responsibility. Guildenstern expressing regret at not being able to 'say no' right from the beginning proves Gruber right: "there must have been a moment; at the beginning, where we could have said – no. But somehow, we missed it" (95). Guildenstern sorrowfully recognizes that, in one way or another, they have a responsibility in their own predicament. Now that is too late to decide, they must endure the burden that goes with having to compromise one's freedom. "We have travelled too far, and our momentum has taken over; we move idly towards eternity, without possibility of reprieve or hope of explanation" (91), Guildenstern laments their helplessness. In a word, one possible explanation for Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's curious actions is that they have made the wrong choice by accepting "to be taken in hand and led, like a child again". For Guildenstern, "it is like being given a prize, an extra prize for being good or a compensation for never having one" (30). In saying this, Guildenstern did not certainly know that such a prize was poisonous. "Like other tragic protagonists before them, Ros and Guil must choose and they choose in error" (qtd by Bareham 92), argues Gruber who specifies, however, that the opportunity for them to choose does come at the very moment when they discover that their mission is to betray Hamlet.

Yet, seen from another perspective. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not totally reprehensible and the question of their freedom should not be taken further still. For "one is reluctant to condemn them for being confused by a script which they had not read" (Bareham 88). This remark leads us to Shakespeare's script, in order to mention over again the tricky question of human action which is at the core of the play. Shakespeare relates the crisis brought about by the king's sacrilege and its ramifications. He also dwells on the hero's perplexity and endless questionings about the troubling human actions.

Hamlet has never found out the basic reasons which drives man to commit certain act; just as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not know either the full implication of their actions. "The context of men's action", according to Gruber, "remains forever a mystery. It was a mystery for Hamlet, it is a mystery for Ros and Guil, it is a mystery for us" (qtd by Bareham 87). Shakespeare's play mainly explores the enigmatic character of human action and the extent to which it can escalate. Stoppard's emphasizes the imprudence and the comic effect of the being as he carries out actions whose full significance escapes him.

We find in Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* the same patterns of behaviour. Ben and Gus put themselves at the disposal of an unknown organization which puts in most extravagant orders (menus) for them to carry out: 'macaroni pastisio. Ormitha one Bamboo shoots, water chestnuts and chicken'. In contrast to *Ros and Guil* where the people who condition the movements of the two courtiers are known, *The Dumb Waiter* offers no hint of the nature and function of this organization which communicates with its two employees through a dumb waiter notifying them the order they are asked to execute.

Three principal elements are combined to heighten the spectator's feeling of amazement in front of this spectacle. They are the mysterious nature of the organization, its capricious and strange orders and Ben's and Gus's determination to give the organization complete satisfaction. The oddity of human action is taken here too far. We have difficulty coming to terms with this image of two men who fight hard to meet the whimsical needs of a ghostly-like organization.

Like Rosencrantz and his companion, these two gentlemen become aware of the danger and strangeness of their actions only when it is nearly too late to change the course of things. Reduced to destitution after having sent up all their stock of food and water, they can do nothing else but regret their carelessness:

**Gus:** What are we supposed to drink?

(...)

I'm thirsty too. I'm starving. And he wants a cup of tea. That beats the band, that does.

(...)

we send him up all we've got and he's not satisfied. No, honest, it's enough to make the cat laugh. **Why did you send him up all that stuff (thoughtfully.) why did I send it up? (p. 157.)** the bold type is my modification)

This is the very question that was worth asking from the beginning. Gus is first eager to disclaim his responsibility and shift the blame for their careless actions to his companion, but after much thought, admits that he, too, has a share in the matter. Their realization that they are suck dry should give them a rough idea of the ill omen that their acts bode. But Ben and Gus are decided about fulfilling their mission just as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern continue their way despite their realization that their childhood friend, Hamlet, whom they bring to England, is to be executed there.

We learn subsequently that what these companions have been doing so far is only the tip of the iceberg. Ben and Gus are indeed hired killers. They are armed with revolvers and asked to wait for orders to shoot. There is no knowing who is to be fired nor why he should be killed. What

follows reveals that Gus is the probable victim. As he moves out to have a glass of water, the authority sends a message ordering Ben to kill the first person to enter the room. Ben is all set to take action:

*The door right opens sharply, Ben turns, his revolver levelled at the door.*

*Gus stumbles in.*

*(...)*

*he raises his head and looks at Ben.*

*A long silence.*

*They stare at each other (165).*

This image is far more stupefying than any other one in the play. It is no longer the audience which is only left perplexed. Ben and Gus - who up to now show no real sign of uneasiness notwithstanding the uncertainty of the game they are caught in - cannot this time get over the incident. They observe a long silence and stare at each other as if to wonder why they had to give in to the whims of an unknown authority. Whether Ben will be able to consciously shoot his companion to death is open to question. In any case, they are both beaten at their own game. Their fate is almost similar to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's. Hoping to put an end to somebody else's life, they find themselves in a situation where it is their very life which is under threat. Such an image can but arouse multifarious feelings ranging from perplexity, indignation and absurdity. It also provides the spectator with a great sense of humour. Pinter has demonstrated then how far human action can defy reason. We will never know why Ben and Gus, as social beings endowed with reason, come to be so obedient to a mysterious authority. All this reinforces Foucault's idea of the death of man, which refers to the loss of subjectivity and the dependence of consciousness on political, social, economic and mental factors that transcend the individual.

Many other actions whose motives are not plainly well defined, are featured in the plays. The festive air which marks the opening of *Jumpers*, for instance, abruptly ends in disaster with the strange death of professor McFee. The reason why McFee is savagely killed is quite elusive. Confronted with the inquiries conducted by inspector Bones, Archie maintains that "anybody could have fired the shot, and anybody could have had a reason for doing so" (p.54). When Inspector Bones asks him what his motives might be in case he is the murderer, he answers: "who knows? Perhaps McFee, my faithful protégé, had secretly turned against me, gone off the rails and decided that he was St Paul to Moore's messiah" (54).

The conclusion which one can draw from Archie's imprecise reply is that even if he proved to be the murderer, he will never be able to explain the motives that propel him to shoot McFee. This would mean that man can only know the results of his actions, but is in no position to account for their deep-rooted causes. We remember the image of this strange man who stabbed Samuel Beckett in the streets in Paris, "When he got out of hospital, Beckett visited his assailant in prison. He asked him the motive for his gesture, and the latter replied: "je ne sais pas monsieur". This answer should be considered in all its value, no matter how laconic and vague it is. Far from being an avoidance of responsibility, the utterances of this aggressor are to be understood as a plain acknowledgement of his inability to comprehend the true cause which underlies his gesture.

Similar gestures are perpetrated throughout Pinter's plays. People are in perpetual conflict with one another without explicit reasons. They evolve in an environment pervaded by a climate of suspicion and uncertainty where the unknown is always viewed as an invader and a threat to the people who are quietly settled in their close spaces. The least contact between these people and the unknown turns out badly. Pinter seems to introduce his audience in the imaginary society described by Hobbes and which is marked by continuous conflicts.

In *The Caretaker*, the unknown is Davies. Welcomed by Aston who strives to make his stay comfortable, Davies shows ingratitude towards his host. He ingratiates himself with Mick, Aston's brother, on learning that he is the owner of the place. Informed that Aston is a diminished man who suffers from hallucinations, Davies uses whatever means to debase him and even threatens to kill him. That Davies's odd behaviour is dictated by his determination to be definitively accepted in Mick's place, is without doubt. But it wouldn't be completely wrong to believe that he is motivated by instincts over which he has no control. He is instinctively pushed to exploit the weakness of his fellow being with no regard to social norms. Cahn distinguishes two levels around which conflicts revolve. The first is the conscious one in which characters fight for territorial claims. The second level "is hidden: it is one in which characters function instinctively, propelled by biological forces of which they may not be aware" (5).

Undefined threat, unexplained violence and unexpected shifts are the central issues recurrent in Pinter's plays. *The Birthday Party* is chiefly remarkable for its combination of these three phenomena. The threat is represented by the duo of guests, Goldberg and McCann. The one who feels threatened is Stanley over whom they exercise a terrible verbal violence. Goldberg and his acolyte reduce him to a dead duck' before taking him away in a big car to an unknown place in order to "make a man and a woman of him" (93).

The spectator cannot help but be surprised by these acts whose motives remain mysterious. First, how comes that among the three people who live in the house only Stanley is upset by the news announcing the probable arrival of two men? Second, did Stanley ever defect from an organization, as his torturers make it known, and for which he must be punished? And finally, is it true that Goldberg and McCann are actually sent by an organization to reshape Stanley?

The answer to these questions requires us to have a clear idea of these people's past. They are unanswerable, given that nothing is known of these characters' past. Nonetheless, we should not lose sight of the fact that characters are not totally conscious of the impulses that propel them into action. Goldberg and McCann may not know more than the audience about the basic reasons for their hostile attitude towards Stanley. Freud has already shown that human action can be motivated by contradictory and complex reasons of which man may not be aware. It is in this perspective that Esslin asserts that "there is the problem of the possibility of ever knowing the real motivation behind the actions of human beings who are complex and whose psychological make-up is contradictory and unverifiable" (qtd by Cahn 2).

Pinter refers us to the complexity of human nature. We cannot sometimes account for our own actions, which should lead us to admit our incapability of grasping other people's gestures. Almansí and Handerson are convinced that "to search for psychological plausibility, behavioural congruity, confessional eloquence or epistemological clarification in his plays [Pinter's] is, most of the time, a vain enterprise" (ibid).

Central to Pinter's and Stoppard's concern is the question of the evasiveness and unpredictability of human actions. Because of his tendency to provide explanations for all that he can see in a play, the audience cannot often come to terms with the apparently illogic and unexplained actions in Pinter's and Stoppard's plays. As a result of their inability to comprehend these actions, some consider such plays as being empty of meaning. To these people, the dramatists explain that man's actions are not always governed by a clear logic as the conventional theatre has been prone to indicate. The acceptance of this reality already demonstrated by Freud is tantamount to admitting that man is capable of any actions.

In *Jumpers*, for instance, the Radical Liberal Party comes to power and brings radical and strange changes. The university chapel becomes a gymnasium where professors learn to jump; the agnostic party's spokesman for agriculture, Sam Clegthorpe, is appointed as Archbishop of Canterbury and plans to rationalize the church. In addition, one of the professors is killed and stuffed in a plastic bag. Confronted with all these bizarre things which are getting out of

proportion, George Moore advocates the return to moral values and idealizes the function of reason in this irrational world: "the irrational, the emotional, whimsical ... these are the stamp of humanity which makes of reason a civilizing force" (31). Yet the man who philosophizes so later kills his hare and tortoise in a way that he has difficulty understanding. He accidentally shoots his hare with an arrow and crushes his tortoise underfoot. This incident is indicative of his incapacity to account for the full meaning of human action.

In Pinter's *A Slight Ache*, Flora leaves her husband, Edward, for an old matchseller who stands motionlessly and silently beside their flat. Despite Edward's tremendous efforts to have him speak, the old man utters no word. Eventually, and much to our surprise, Flora takes the tray of matchbox from the old man's hands, hands it to Edward and decides to live together with the mysterious old man as husband and wife. Edward becomes the matchseller and the matchseller becomes Flora's husband.

Flora's act has certainly a logic, but which is unknown to us and maybe to herself. Once more, everything in this world is not coherent and logic. "In a universe whose laws are arbitrary, anything is possible; one's tongue might turn into a centipede" (Jenkins 74), argues Antony Jenkins. The reality is that, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, we catch ourselves 'applying the techniques of logic' with the view of explaining the unexplainable. Even the little questioning Guildenstern finally rises to a certain level of understanding towards the end of their dreadful experiences. "Don't apply logic" (83), he advises Rosencrantz. He understands that he can understand nothing about their situation. He is ready to accept most extraordinary things without being the least amazed or shocked: "I've lost all capacity for disbelief. I'm not sure that I could even rise to a little scepticism (75). As much as the world is a mystery to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, human actions are a mystery to the spectator. The Pinter character is at the image of the bewildering world which Stoppard's two unimportant people try to understand in vain.

## **Conclusion**

Pinter and Stoppard, in the plays examined in this work, reveal the full complexity of the human being. Pinter presents people who seem to emerge from nothing. The vagueness of their identities, the ambiguity of their relationships and their unverifiable statements fuel the spectator's curiosity and force him to be attentive to their every gesture and word. The awareness of the atmosphere of diffuse threat that results from this close observation of the characters also allows the viewer to realise that identity ambiguity is a survival strategy and a

means of achieving one's ends in a totally uncertain world. Since to speak is to conceal one's identity and intentions, trying to pin a definitive identity on the characters becomes pointless because it is impossible, just as it is almost utopian in real life to know people and even to know oneself.

Stoppard uses a dramatic approach comparable to that of Pinter. His characters, precisely in *Jumpers*, elude any attempt at identification. They are multi-faceted and as complex as the metaphysical questions that preoccupy them. Human identity is also the subject of speculation among Stoppard's characters. In *Jumpers*, Moore and Archie use philosophy to unravel the mystery of female characters, to no avail. Similarly, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Stoppard's play of the same name fail to demystify Hamlet. This shows the mystery that man constitutes, an unpredictable being whose actions are underpinned by unknown motives, as we have seen in the dramatic works under study. Man is a mystery to others and to himself, his actions cannot always be predicted, as they are mostly motivated by contradictory and elusive factors. Such is the conclusion that can be drawn from this study. Stoppard and Pinter has brought to the stage, in an innovative dramatic approach, a conception of man that is widely shared in our contemporary postmodern age.

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