International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)
Volume 12, Issue 9, September 2024, PP 16-24
ISSN 2347-3126 (Print) & ISSN 2347-3134 (Online)
https://doi.org/10.20431/2347-3134.1209003
www.arcjournals.org

Existential Fear, Power Dynamics and Quest of Identity in Pinter's Plays

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Abstract: *This work focuses on the themes of existential fear, the struggle for domination and the quest for identity that underlie Pinter's dramatic work. Using an existentialist approach, we seek to analyse how these three key issues operate in conjunction in Pinter's plays. It emerges from the analysis that Pinter's characters, in their cloistered private spaces, are gripped by existential fear. They are afraid of being invaded by an intruder and of being pushed out of their familiar spaces, which are also a guarantee of security and identity in a world where everything is spiraling out of control. One of the characters' strategies when faced with the risk of being dispossessed of their space of identity and security is to try to assert themselves in front of the people with whom they share the enclosed space. The more serious the threat, the more explicit the desire for domination. In this sense, asserting one's identity is a sign of powerlessness. It is a desperate attempt to cope with the existential forces that inevitably plunge the individual into the nothingness of existence. Moreover, in Pinter's plays, identity is seen as the ability of man to control not only his private space, but also and above all the other, the partner in that space. It is this reality that justifies the veiled attempt at domination that couples engage in. This struggle for domination thus takes the form of a subtle game played out on different terrains including that of knowledge (knowing the truth) in The Collection and the capacity of the partner to endure the game of a faked unfaithfulness in The Lover. This game of domination is often to the advantage of the weakest who, thanks to this subterfuge, succeed in upsetting and reversing the balance of power, thus reaffirming their identity and security.*

Keywords: *Pinter, Existential fear, Power dynamics, Identity quest, Security*

1. INTRODUCTION

The general uncertainty that marked the 20th century, a period of crises of all kinds, not least the crisis of meaning, has been widely echoed in contemporary Western literature, particularly the so-called postmodern literature. The English playwright Harold Pinter (1930-2008), winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2005, is one of the most prominent figures of this literature that attempts to express the chaos of the world. A renowned playwright, his plays are known for being ambiguous. The spectator is often puzzled by the unexplained gestures that usually conclude Pinter's plays. They also feature characters who, while hiding behind the banality of their words a deep existential fear, are engaged in a tireless quest for identity.

Unlike anguish, which has no object as such, fear is the feeling of dread we experience when faced with something. We are afraid of something, "that is to say, of some being that appears here or there and threatens us in one way or another" (Cabestan 3). Pinter's characters, in the depths of their rooms or houses, are afraid of the outside world. However, the object of their fear is imprecise. The spectator does not know a priori in what way the outside world constitutes a threat to them. The phrase "existential fear", used in this work, refers tothis diffuse fear. This form of fear that paralyses Pinter's characters also accounts for the dynamic of power relations within the enclosed family space. Moreover, this struggle for domination can be interpreted as an identity quest in a world where everything is beyond human control. From an existentialist perspective, this work attempts to link the diffuse fear of the characters, the dynamics of power and the quest for identity in some of Pinter's plays such as *The Birthday Party*, *A Slight Ache*, *The Lover*, and *The Collection*. We will begin by emphasizing the existentialist nature of the fear of Pinter's characters. We will then see how they

resort to self-assertion as a defence strategy against the feeling of fear. Finally, we will examine the quest for identity hidden behind the subtle game of domination played by couples in the intimacy of their living space.

2. EXISTENTIAL FEAR

In his very first play, *The Room*, Pinter announces what will become one of the fundamental characteristics of his dramatic work: the private interior space. Indeed, as the title of the play suggests, the action takes place in a room. It is in this confined space, or that of a house, that the characters in his forthcoming plays will, for the most part, evolve. An overview of the stage directions that introduce each of his plays provides proof of this:

> « *A room in a large house* » (*The Room*, p.101); « *the living- room of a house in a seaside town* » (*The BP*, p.19); "*a room. A window in the back wall…*" (*The CT*, p.16); "*a basement room. Two beds, flat against the back wall*" (*The DW*, p.129); "*a room in Len's house*" (*The Dwarfs*, p91); "*stage left, Harry's house in Belgravia […] Stage right, James' flat in Chelsea*." (*The Col*, p.120); "*a country house, with two chairs and a table laid for breakfast at the centre of the stage*" (*A SA*, p.169); "*living-room right, with small hall and front door up centre*" (*The Lover*, p.161); "*interior. Bedroom. Evening. The bedroom of a terraced house in South London*" (*NS*, p199); "*the kitchen of Mrs Stokes' small house in the south of London*" (A *NO*, p.203).

Within their space of refuge, the characters remain consumed by a perpetual fear of the world outside. Pinter's own analysis of Rose in *The Room* is a case in point:

> This old woman is living in a room which, she is convinced, is the best in the house, and she refuses to know anything about the basement downstairs. She says it's damp and nasty, and the world outside is clod and icy, and that in her warm and comfortable room her security is complete. But, of course, it isn't (qted by Esslin 28).

When Kennet Tynan asked Pinter what his characters are afraid of, he replied:

> Obviously, they are scared of what is outside the room. Outside the room is a world bearing down upon them, which is frightening. … We are all in this, all in a room, and outside is a world … which is most inexplicable and frightening, curious and alarming. (qted by Esslin 28)

The characters are therefore afraid of the outside world, which, for Pinter, is terrifying. In *The Room*, Rose suggests that she is afraid of the wind, the darkness and the cold outside: "It's very cold out, I can tell you. It's murder" (101). This is how she warns Bert, who is getting ready to go out. These same words are echoed later by Mrs Sands, who bursts into Rose's room with her husband: "It's murder out" (111). Similarly, Davies, in *The Caretaker*, is paralysed by the fear of going out to Sidcup to collect his identity papers. He feels that the climate outside is hostile: 'I'll be down there any day, I tell you. I was going down today, but I'm...I'm waiting for the weather to break" (51).

In short, the object of Pinter's characters' fear is relatively well known. However, it is curious to note that this fear is aroused by facts that are completely ordinary and natural. According to Esslin (28-29), this real fear, the object of which is concrete and ordinary, as opposed to fear without a visible, known object, forms the fabric of Pinter's theatre: "Man's existential fear, not as an abstraction, not as a surreal phantasmagoria, but as something real, ordinary, and acceptable as an everyday occurrence - here we have the core of Pinter's work as a dramatist". The continual state of suspicion in which Pinter's characters live, and the real absence of any visible danger capable of affecting their physical lives, allow us to maintain that the fear that undermines them is existential in nature. It is the expression or the consequence of their acute awareness of the precariousness of their existential condition in an incomprehensible universe. In this vein, Esslin (46) writes:

> The real menace which lies behind the struggles for expression and communication, behind the closed doors which might swing open to reveal a frightening intruder, behind the sinister gunmen and terrorists, behind the violence, the menace behind all these menacing images is the opaqueness, the uncertainty, and precariousness of the human condition itself.

The things in front of which Pinter's characters tremble are ordinary only to the spectator. For them, they are unknown, strange and threatening because they are foreign to their small worlds. They tremble with fear at the idea that they might be invaded, in their place of refuge, by the unknown.

Killinger (10) points out: "Practically every play in the absurd genre is one in which man, the human thing, is tyrannized by non-man, by the intractable universe in which he has tried to carve out a little room for living". Faced with this existential fear, the characters develop survival strategies, the most important of which is the attempt to assert oneself and dominate one's partner.

3. ASSERTING ONE'S POWER AND IDENTITY TO OVERCOME ONE'S FEAR

At first sight, it might seem paradoxical that people consumed by existential fear should be inclined to subject their fellow human beings to domination. Yet, this is what we witness with Pinter's characters in their private space. In the absence of any stated reasons for this propensity to express authority, many critics have not hesitated to put it down simply to arbitrariness. However, following Pinter's insistence that his characters do not act arbitrarily, but for deep-seated reasons, Gale takes issue with such an allegation:

> The end result of the actions in a Pinter play may appear to be absurd, but a careful tracing of the movement of the play will prove a steady line of cause and effect, as each event is determined by the nature of the characters participating and the situation which immediately preceded it. And whatever transpires prepares for future events. (Qted by Cahn 9)

According to Gale's assertion, the reaction of Pinter's characters obeys a relationship of cause and effect. It is due to the combination of a certain number of parameters (the nature of the character and the situation that precedes the action in which he is involved) that must necessarily be taken into account in order to grasp the reason and the meaning. The desire for domination, clearly expressed by certain characters, is part of these reactions, which appear to be arbitrary but which, on closer examination, have a solid foundation. Echoing Gale, Cahn (5) rejects the argument of arbitrariness and invokes the existential situation of the characters who populate Pinter's dramatic universe to justify the authoritarian tendencies of some of them:

> In a world where meaning is uncertain, where objects and territory are all that are definable, where language is a vehicle for protection rather than communication, where doubt in many forms is ever present, supremacy over other people guarantees a measure of knowledge and identity. When characters are secure in their authority, when they control others, when they are confident that their own status is certain, then they are spared some of the anguish intrinsic to Pinter's dramatic world

Cahn's reflection shows that there is no paradox between the expression of supremacy and the characters' preoccupation with identity and security. On the contrary, this propensity for domination is part of the dynamic of the quest for identity and security in which Pinter's characters are tirelessly engaged. In this context of general uncertainty, where everything is beyond man's control, the quest for identity and security takes the form of a quest for knowledge, control and, in short, power. As Cahn reminds us, the only thing that is definable, comprehensible and over which the character is able to exercise control is the enclosed territory and, by extension, the objects in that space. However, Pinter's characters have no absolute power over their private spaces that are exposed to invasion by unknown people. To ensure a sense of security and identity, they instinctively turn to their fellow human beings with whom they share this space, in an attempt to subject them to their domination.

This desire for domination becomes urgent and explicit when the character is directly faced with the threat of losing control of his territory. Among those who show an explicit desire to dominate are Ben in *The Dumbwaiter*, Stanley in *The Birthday Party* and Edward in *A Slight Ache.* The explicitly authoritarian attitude of these three characters is by no means accidental. More than those over whom they wield power, Ben, Stanley and Edward are tormented by existential fear. They are directly exposed to the risk of losing their security and their identity. So, in a fit of desperation, they try to reassert their shattered identities. In this case, reaffirming their identity means systematically or openly imposing themselves on their partner to get them to recognise their supremacy or superiority. It also means that the authoritarian behaviour of these characters is, ultimately, nothing more than a reaction of panic or a disguised expression of deep fear.

It is in this sense that we must understand the rapid change in Stanley's behaviour towards Meg. Whereas up to this point he has been quite sympathetic towards his benefactress, Stanley suddenly becomes aggressive towards her:

Stanley. Where's my tea?

Meg. I took it away. You didn't want it. Stanley. What do you mean, you took it away? Meg. I took it away.

Stanley. What did you take it away for?

Meg. You didn't want it!

Stanley. Who said I didn't want it?

Meg. You did!

Stanley. Who gave you the right to take away my tea?

Meg. You wouldn't drink it.

Stanley stares at her.

Stanley. (quietly). Who do you think you're talking to? (p.31)

Stanley's violent and disproportionate reaction to Meg, whom he reproaches for having only brought the cup of tea while he has not yet helped himself, is surprising enough. On closer examination, however, it becomes clear that there is more to this verbal abuse than the trivial matter of the tea. The Stanley who speaks is seriously shaken by the news that Meg has just told him about the visit of two strangers. Convinced that this visit has no other purpose than to extract him from the house in which he has taken refuge, Stanley lives under the threat of losing his identity and the security that his place of refuge guarantees him. This bitter reality gives rise to a feeling of frustration, revolt and despair. This justifies the harsh tone in which he speaks to Meg.

What is more, the violence with which Stanley addresses Meg shows a clear desire on his part to reassert his authority, his power, in short his identity. He cannot help but express this openly: "Who do you think you are talking to", before continuing in a more authoritarian tone than ever: "Come here [...] come over here [...] tell me, Mrs Boles, when you address yourself to me, do you ever ask yourself who exactly you are talking to? Eh?" (31). Far from being an expression of Stanley's real power over Meg, this self-assertion conveys the desperation of Meg's lodger. His words are intended less to intimidate Meg than to reassure himself that his identity has remained intact despite the threat.

Through this assertiveness he shows towards Meg, Stanley is also trying to adapt, in anticipation, his behaviour to what will happen to him once he comes face to face with the two men. As a result, the nature of his collaboration with Meg changes. He stops playing the spoilt child in front of her. From now on, he wants Meg to witness his identity, his power. He does everything he can to get her to recognise and admit to the power he wants to embody at all costs. This is reflected in the fact that he immediately tells her about his past as an internationally renowned pianist: "I've played the piano all over the world" (32).

This is exactly the attitude Stanley will later adopt towards his two enemies. He tries to impose himself on them by making them believe that he was not just anyone. It does not take long for the two men to psychologically destabilise him. Knowing that he is completely destroyed, and in a desperate last-ditch attempt to reassert himself, he tries to rape young Lulu, having previously strangled Meg, thus moving from verbal to physical violence. The greater the despair, the more urgent the desire to assert oneself.

This can also be seen in Edward in *A Slight Ache*. His situation and attitude are in many ways reminiscent of those of Stanley. In an immediate attempt to reassert his power, which the strange unknow old man beside his house, directly denies him, he attacks Flora, saying: "Get out. Leave me alone" (178). The tone in which he speaks to his wife is so harsh and unusual that the latter points out that he has never spoken to her in such a stern manner in his life: 'Really Edward. You've never spoken to me like that in all your life" (178). Unlike Meg, who is unable to grasp the reason for Stanley's rapid change towards her, Flora is quick to correlate Edward's unexpected reaction with the old man's fearful presence:

Flora: You're frightened of a poor old man. Why?

Edward: I am not!

Flora: He's a poor, harmless old man. (178)

Flora finds it belittling that Edward panics in front of a poor old man, questioning his power. Faced with such a state of affairs, Edward feels the need to assert himself more to prove to her that he remains in control of the situation. This explains his more authoritarian way of speaking, as expressed in the imperative mode he uses: "Call him in [...] Go and get him in" (180). By remaining domineering, he seems to forget that Flora understands his authoritarian attitude as a veiled expression of the fear and weakness he shows in front of the old matchseller. That is why, instead of being intimidated, she takes pity on him and tries to reassure him: "There's no point in upsetting yourself like this. He's an old man, weak in the head ... that's all" (193). More than a simple fear, Edward is, in his wife's opinion, completely overwhelmed. His awareness that Flora finds him increasingly weak leads him to become more assertive towards her. While denying that he is intimidated by the old man, he tries to belittle Flora and, in desperation, argues that she knows nothing because she is a woman: "Why should he frighten me? No, you're a woman, you know nothing" (189). Edward tries, hopelessly, to regain the upper hand over Flora. His power is thus doubly denied; first by the mysterious old man before whom he trembles, and then by Flora, who finds his reactions childish.

The inability to break through the mysterious old man, combined with his failure to impose himself on Flora, have had the major effect of creating a real sense of frustration and revolt in Edward; hence the physical violence he finally attempts to inflict on Flora, whose arms he violently seizes. Flora's counter-attack, still convinced that Edward's reaction is the result of panic, is commensurate with the violence he inflicts on her. A woman," she tells him, «will often succeed, you know, where a man must invariably fail" (190). These words are instructive of Edward's inability to restore his seriously shaken power and, by extension, his security and identity.

Ben, in *The Dumb Waiter*, has the same concern and reaction as Edward and Stanley. He gets worked up over nothing. When, for example, Gus ventures to point out the lexical incorrectness of an expression he has used, he becomes angry and threatens him. Language being "the extreme point of subjectivity" and therefore of arbitrariness, it is surprising that certain characters try to impose their own understanding of words. Such an attitude undoubtedly betrays a clear desire to establish dominance over their fellow human beings. Esslin (73) declares: "The dispute about language is here quite manifestly a dispute about authority, a fight for dominance ". This thought is corroborated by Ben, who, in an imposing tone, as the stage directions make clear, says to Gus: "If I say go and light the kettle I mean go and light the kettle" (141). He thus imposes his point of view and puts a definitive end to the debate on the meaning of words, in the name of the privilege conferred on him by the status of superior or dean; a status he likes to remind Gus of in case he forgets it:

Ben. Who's the senior partner here, me or you ?

Gus. You.

Ben. I'm only looking after your interests, Gus. You've got to learn, mate.

Gus. Yes, but I've never heard-

Ben (*vehemently*). Nobody says light the gas! what does the gas light? (142)

While Ben's desire to dominate is unambiguous, it must be said that it is a reaction to the fear he feels and the threat he faces of seeing the foundations of his identity crumble. In fact, Ben's rigid reaction comes just after a unique event has occurred in front of him, one that places a limit on his ability to understand. It involves an envelope containing matches that slip into the strange space where he and Gus find themselves. In addition to the frustration caused by his inability to provide a rational explanation for what is happening, there is the fear of being invaded by frightening things inside the space where he and his companion seem to be held hostage. As Gus continues to worry and ask Ben endless questions, Ben instinctively tries to transcend his denied power of control by exerting another power over Gus. The conflict for dominance is not always explicit. It often appears so subtly that the viewer may not even realise it.

4. THE GAME OF DOMINATION AND IDENTITY QUEST

Behind the ordinary gestures and words of Pinter's characters lies a real quest for identity. This quest very often takes the form of a game between couples living under the same roof. The immediate aim of the game is to get the better of the other player and assert one's dominance. This hidden struggle for domination is stressed in Pinter's *The Collection*. The game in this play starts with a story Stella

told her husband, James Horne, that a certain Bill Lloyd, also a young designer, slept with her at an exhibition of the season's collection held in Leeds. Is the story true, or did Stella make it up? In any case, what follows makes it clear that the spectator cannot answer this question. James goes to see Bill to ask him about the case. Bill does not play straight with him. He first denies the whole affair ("I was nowhere near Leeds last week, old chap. Nowhere near your wife" 131), before admitting it indirectly: ("I didn't know she was married. She never told me. Never said a word. But nothing of that happened, I can assure you" (136). James is not out of the woods yet, since Bill doesn't tell him anything clear.

Just as much as James, Harry Cahn, who is Bill's guardian and who can't stand James's relentless pursuit of his protégé, with whom he (Harry) seems to have an unnatural relationship, wants to know the whole truth about the affair. When he asks Bill to tell him who this man (James) is who has come to see him, Bill dodges the question and leaves him in the dark:

> Harry. […] Who is this man and what does he want?
>
> *Pause. Bill rises.*
>
> Bill. Will you excuse me? I really think it's about time I was dressed, don't you. (140)

It is clear that Bill has no desire to enlighten Harry about the truth of this story. Harry has gone to see Stella, who tells him that the story is the brainchild of her overworked husband: "My husband has suddenly dreamed up such a fantastic story, for no reason at all (148). Yet, just before Harry arrives at James's, who has also gone back to Harry's to see Bill, Stella confirms to her husband that she has met Bill and slept with him. Harry returns and tells James, who has just hurt Bill with a knife, that his wife has confessed to making up the story, that nothing happened between her and Bill. James concludes, along with Harry, that Stella is overworked and the story should be forgotten. James apologises for the trouble he has caused Bill and offers him his hand in reconciliation. Unexpectedly, Bill, who a moment earlier agreed with James and Harry that he had never seen Stella, suddenly backs down, kicking up all the dust of uncertainty that had begun to settle:

> Bill. I'll … tell you … the truth. […]
>
> I never touched her … we sat … in the lounge, on a sofa … for two hours … talked … we talked about it … we didn't … move from the lounge … never went to her room … justtalked
>
> … about what we would do … if we did get to her room … two hours … we never touched … we just talked about it…
>
> *Long silence* (156-157).

James returns home and desperately asks Stella if what Bill has just said is true, that they were just sitting and talking about sex without actually doing it. Stella neither confirms nor denies what her husband has just said, preferring to wall herself up in a disconcerting silence, leaving James no chance of escaping the wave of uncertainty in which she has kept him from the start.

What is at stake in this rape case, which remains as mysterious as ever for Harry and James as it is for the viewer, is the truth. Harry and James are determined to find out the truth, but Stella and Bill are the only ones who have it. Only they can say exactly what happened between them in Leeds. However, we see that they take great pleasure in mocking their respective partners' desire to know the real story. In a remarkable analysis, Cahn (32) elucidates the true meaning of this game of ping-pong to which Stella and Bill reduce their collaborators:

> Indeed, the characters who could shed light, Bill and Stella, constantly mock those who seek it, Harry and James. What gives this mockery an extra sting is that Harry and James, the economically stronger and therefore ostensibly dominant members of their respective relationships, are weakened psychologically by the desperation to know. By withholding knowledge, or by presenting it so obtusely that details blur beyond clarification, Bill and Stella retain their own, ultimately more important, strength

At the heart of Stella and Bill's attitude is a determination to counter the power that James and Harry wield over them. To Harry's economic and social power over his employee and subordinate, Bill, and to James's social power over Stella, conferred by his marital status, Bill and Stella oppose the power conferred on them by the privilege of holding the truth. From now on, the struggle for domination

takes place on another terrain. It is the field of knowledge that they control, unlike their partners whose powers are quickly counterbalanced and blunted. Truth is therefore an effective weapon in the struggle for domination. Cahn (32) writes: "In Pinter's plays, though, truth can be revealed, but characters often withhold or ignore it to gain a psychological edge that changes perception and becomes a weapon in the struggle for power". Bill knows perfectly well that holding the truth is real power, whereas ignoring it is a deep wound, a handicap, a weakness. He tells James: "Surely the wound heals when you know the truth, doesn't it? I mean, when the truth is verified? I would have thought it" (151). These confessions testify to the lucid awareness with which Bill and Stella use the knowledge of the truth as a weapon to wound and psychologically cripple those against whom they have engaged, with their faces hidden, in a veritable battle for domination.

It is important to remember that the ultimate aim of this attempt at domination remains the consolidation of one's security and identity: In fact, being not able to find "security neither in their surroundings nor in an understanding relationship with other" (Fayadh 216), the characters shift the battle for identity and security to another arena, that of knowledge. Consequently, "knowledge becomes a weapon in the struggle for dominance and control, providing the victor with identity and security and leaving the vanquished with neither" (Cahn 32). In this case, it is Bill and Stella who have the upper hand over Harry and James respectively. It is they who consolidate their identity and security, while the latter sink irreversibly into the abyss of uncertainty, or even nothingness. The struggle for dominance between these characters is unbalanced from the outset, as Harry and James are completely helpless in the face of their adversaries, who have led them into a field that is entirely to their disadvantage.

In *The Lover*, the subtlety of the will to dominate is even more pronounced. The two protagonists of the play, Richard and his wife Sarah, are engaged in a power struggle that is fully but discreetly expressed through what might be called the game of "self-interested disinterest". As in *The Collection*, the story of infidelity, with its corollary of jealousy, is at the heart of the game. It is, however, a false infidelity. Unlike the one in *The Collection*, where we don't know whether it actually happened or not, this one is pure fantasy.

Although we are initially taken aback by Richard's strange words as he prepares to go to work and asks his wife if her lover is coming this afternoon, we soon realise that this lover is none other than Richard himself. Each of the two protagonists is double-hatted. Sarah is both the wife and lover of Richard, who is her husband and lover at the same time. Sarah keeps the same name in all cases, while Richard is called Max by Sarah (the mistress) when she is dressed as his lover.

The spirit of the couple's fantasy game is simple, but its objective is complex. In fact, it's not easy to grasp right away the true meaning behind the incomprehensible, almost childish attitude of the two lovebirds. Critics' opinions differ. For some, Sarah and Richard are using subterfuge to consolidate and add vitality to their union which, after ten years, has had to endure the wear and tear of time. Others see it as another way for the couple to satisfy, at least in the imagination, an instinct that society would only allow to express itself through sublimation. Although it would be imprudent to question the validity of these explanations, Victor Cahn's seems to us the most obvious. For this critic, gambling is no more and no less than the expression of a clear desire for domination, underpinned by an imperative to establish identity and security:

> The two [Richard and Sarah] are locked in a perpetual struggle for dominance within the social structure of marriage, and the game itself is a mechanism for equilibrium. As long as the two struggle, as long as no resolution is achieved, both can fulfil desires and retreat into the security and identity that they fabricate. Thus resolution is not only impossible, but undesirable, for if either is in charge, then the either is dissatisfied. Even if equality is achieved temporally, Richard is frustrated and must exert his own will. Consequently the game and the struggle are permanent (Cahn 52)

A close reading of the play seems to prove Cahn right. Richard is trying to gauge Sarah's degree of attachment and consideration for him, and hence the power he would have over her in the context of their marriage. Cahn (52) underlines this: "He [Richard] needs to be in command of the marriage, to have power over his wife". To do this, he plays the game ofthe game of "self-interested disinterest" which consists in pretending that she is of no interest to him, in the hope, of course, of getting her to

confess her inability to do without him. Nevertheless, Sarah, who seems to understand her husband's game, doesn't let herself fall into the trap. She accepts his disinterestedness, puts up with the idea that he might even find a "mistress", but in return she also takes the pleasure of 'betraying' him with 'another man' to keep things in balance. Richard seems to accept; hence the game of infidelity.

Richard's determination to get Sarah to confess her attachment to him indirectly and to disown her "lover" comes up against her non-malleability, however. For example, no matter how much he praises the life he leads with his "lover", Sarah makes him understand that it is absolutely nothing compared to the beautiful moments she spends with her "lover". In fact, she adapts perfectly to the game. That's why she shows no sign of jealousy, despite Richard's provocations. In her opinion, there is no need to be upset, because everything is balanced: "Things are beautifully balanced, Richard" (173). This balance is not to Richard's liking, however, and his only wish is to get Sarah to keep a low profile in front of him, to give up any idea of having "another man" in her life, in short, to recognise his power alone. This is why, both in his role as husband and lover, he becomes increasingly authoritarian and aggressive towards his wife. An attitude that Cahn understands as a way of trying to reassert the power he finds difficult to express in their complex game.

Richard ends up getting caught up in his own game. He admits that he can no longer endure the situation: "Do you think it's pleasant to know that your wife is unfaithful to you two or three times a week, with great regularity? " (190) […] "It's unbearable. It has become unbearable. I'm no longer disposed to put up with it" (191). He therefore wants to put an end to the game. However, in a burst of pride, faced with a reinvigorated Sarah who challenges him at the end of the play by offering to continue the game, he decides to put the clothes of lover on again. Although Richard is put in a bad position, he has not definitively lost the fight between him and Sarah. They are both engaged in a permanent struggle since they can no longer stop playing the game of lover, as at least the end of the play suggests. The quest for security and identity, which underlies the desire to dominate, master and control others, is no less perpetual.

In *The Collection* and in *The Lover*, we have seen the very refined way in which the struggle for power, for control, is carried out by people concerned with preserving their security and their identity in a context where everything escapes the control of their reason. Just as women, in the first plays, use their social status to keep men close to them and free themselves from the weight of solitude, so married life, precisely love, also constitutes, in *The Collection* and in *The Lover*, the terrain on which the characters discreetly fight to establish domination.

5. Conclusion

The closed space in Pinter's plays has a precious significance for characters. It is a place of refuge, a guarantee of security and identity in the face of a world where everything is uncertain. However, refuge in the inner world does not guarantee the expected security and identity. Pinter's characters do not always feel safe in their private space. They expect at any moment an invasion by external forces capable of dragging them out of their refuge and into the nothingness of existence where they cease to be. This existential fear gives rise to a need in the threatened character to reassert his power and identity in the face of his partner. In other words, the attempt to dominate and assert authority is paradoxically an expression of weakness. This is all the more obvious because those who engage in this struggle, like Stanley in *The Birthday Party* and Edward in *A Slight Ache*, end up being reduced to nothing by the threatening forces of the external world. There is another form of power struggle in Pinter's plays, always based on the assertion of identity and the guarantee of security. This is the power struggle between the partners in their intimate space. This attempt at domination, unlike the first form, is very subtle. It is expressed through games played on different terrains, such as that of knowledge (knowledge of the truth) in *The Collection* and that of a person's ability to accept their partner's imaginary infidelity in *The Lover*. This strategy of domination is frequently advantageous for weaker partners, who, through this subterfuge, are able to upset and reverse the balance of power, thereby reaffirming their identity and security.

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The Dumb Waiter

The Birthday party

The Room.

A Slight Ache

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The Collection

The Lover

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Citation: *Maurice Gning. "Existential Fear, Power Dynamics and Quest of Identity in Pinter's Plays" International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL), vol 12, no. 09, 2024, pp. 16-24. DOI: https://doi.org/10.20431/2347-3134.1209003.*