

A Lacanian Study of Harold Pinter's *A Night Out*

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Abstract

The present study examines Harold Pinter's *A Night Out* (1959) using Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical model. This study applies Lacanian theories of psychoanalysis including the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real providing an alternative understanding of Pinter's play. Suggested by Lacan, humans go through certain orders forming identity in the early years of life. Acquiring the language and developing psychological aspects of personality for an infant are similar to the mental struggles the characters in Pinter's plays experience. The purpose of this study is to fill the gap of the previous studies by offering a psychoanalytical connection between Lacan and Pinter. The findings of this study will show that Albert in this play is stuck in the stages of development proposed by Lacan. He cannot go through the Imaginary and the Symbolic successfully as a result he is left alone, isolated and alienated. Reading Lacan, we learn that we spend all our life looking for our *objet petit a* and trying to satisfy our desires. Albert's unfamiliar

experiences will become clear when we accompany him on his psychological journey.

Keywords: psychoanalysis, Lacan, the Imaginary, the Symbolic, the Real, Harold Pinter, *A Night Out*.

Introduction

A Night Out is the story of an oppressed son in an Oedipal relationship with his mother. Since his father died, Albert, a 28-year-old single man, lives with his possessive mother. The dependent and repressed Albert makes an attempt to have an independent self and goes out of his mother's house and attends an office party on a night.

What we see on the surface is a mature man who has a job and makes a living but deep inside he is a child who has not passed the Imaginary Order to reach the Symbolic Order. He is a child who is captured between the Imaginary Order and the Symbolic Order. Albert who feels alienated and insecure, cannot communicate with his colleagues and is incapable of having a relationship with women. He is uncertain of his abilities and he is in search of his lost object of desire. During his journey on a night out he undergoes psychological fears and is troubled by his developmental disorders.

Pinter accentuates Albert's psychological difficulties. He presents us with physically mature characters who are mentally underdeveloped. Lacan believes that the subject's status as a normal or abnormal person is the result of his first mutual relationship with his mother and how the Oedipal relationship is resolved with the appearance of the father. Lacan

associates the Father figure with child's entry into language.

Albert's Imaginary Order

Lacan believes that when the baby is born, it feels itself as part of the mother since she is the source of sustenance and she can satisfy the baby's need. The baby is inseparable from the mother and it does not have an independent self. It feels as if it is fragmented and not unified. At the beginning of *A Night Out*, we notice the portrayal of the mother and a child who is going through the earliest Lacanian stage of development. Albert, who is a mature man, is still dependent on his mother for preparing his clothes, making him dinner and giving him the permission to go out.

Albert's mother treats his son like a child who needs food and caring. She encourages him to "lay the table" and talks to him childishly: "there's a good boy" (204). Since the primary needs of a child are rooted in the Imaginary Order and it is important for the mother, she insists on him having dinner. She repeatedly mentioned: "your dinner will be ready soon", "I'll have your dinner on the table", "what about your dinner" (204-207). However, the mother's interpreting her child's need for food is different from what he demands. Albert's needs are not his primary ones since he is a mature man. Thus, his needs shifts to having demands. It is the demand for the Other's unconditional love. The mother is not perfect for the child's demands. Therefore, the child's satisfaction of demand can never happen and remains unsatisfied.

The over protective mother prevents Albert from social self-growth. She, who makes his clothes ready, presses his tie, makes him meal and mothers him like a child does not let Albert to be independent. She has a control over his job, his free time and his private life.

Albert's Mirror Stage

The Imaginary Order is the world of images and perceptions: "This is the world, the register, of images, conscious or

unconscious, perceived or imagined. It is the pre-linguistic, pre-Oedipal domain in which the specular image traps the subject in an illusory ideal of completeness" (Sarup 66). Little by little the child's sense of wholeness displaces its idea of a fragmented body. This is an imaginary identification which happens through the mirror stage. This can be seen at the first scene of the play as Albert is standing in front of a mirror. He is combing his hair and getting ready to go out.

It seems as if a child sees himself in front of a mirror and sees its own reflection and draws distinction between the self and the Other (the mother). The child, for the first time, becomes aware of his own separated body and experiences pleasure. Simultaneously, he develops his awareness of his surroundings and the world so as to distinguish himself from the external world. The ego is produced as a result of identification with another object, a mirror, and the child creates the ideal 'I'. As the ideal-ego represents, Albert looks at himself and he is satisfied with what he sees. He experiences the illusion of a wholeness just as the infant in the mirror stage imagines.

This is the start of the formation of one's subjectivity and the distinction of the self from the Other, as Lacan argues. Albert who sees his own reflection in the mirror is on the threshold of the transition from the Imaginary Order to the Symbolic Order. Thus, he tries to detach himself from his mother and have an independent self by making a good appearance and going to a social gathering.

Albert's attending an office party is an attempt to near the external reality breaking free from the secure house of his mother to have an individual identity. It is like a child's discovery of himself as a separate being in search for an identity. When he goes to his waiting friends, Kedge and Seeley, he thinks to himself that maybe it was better for him to stay home with his mother. He tells his friends: "Wait a minute, I ... I don't think I feel like going, actually" (214). He does not

feel comfortable. He feels edgy and insecure with them especially when Kedge asks about his mother. Albert is not sure whether to go with his friends or go back home to his mother. Since he is scared of the external world he lies about having a headache to make an excuse to get back home. Thus, going back to the Imaginary Order and reuniting with the mother cannot happen. However, he finds it inevitable to go to the party with his friends.

At the office party, we see the depiction of a shy and silent Albert who is gloomy as his colleagues assert. He is unwilling to strike up a conversation with girls. The wicked Gidney manipulates Joyce to tease Albert by playing on his timidity and insecurities when there are girls around and plans to see his reaction in front of others. Although he was prepared for the party, Albert is unable to deal with the social engagement of the office party. When Joyce asks him about his mother he tries to ignore and evade by giving him a short answer.

Meanwhile, when Mr. King's toasts to Mr. Ryan, one of the girls screams and says that Albert touches her and everyone stares at him. Albert, who does not know how to get along with girls, finds himself falsely accused and the situation becomes uncomfortable for him. He cannot defend himself and decides to leave the party.

Albert cannot succeed in giving a good account of himself at the party as he and his mother wish. He cannot form his subjectivity based on what he planned due to the Lacanian fact that formation of the ego is based on an illusion because the picture in the mirror is not real. Therefore, alienation occurs as he misrecognizes himself from what he feels as a whole in contrast to what he prepares to appear in eyes of others. Albert feels alienated like a modern man who finds himself alone and incapable of taking action.

The Prostitute as the other

After the child separates from the mother and recognizes himself in the mirror, he perceives the idea of 'I' and the other. He obtains the idea of who he is through the eyes of the other, as Lacan argues. In order to form his identity, he needs this other since the other is the reflection of the ego. The prostitute acts as the other for Albert. When Albert talks to the prostitute about his fake film-making career, she refers to his infantile look as she said: "You interest me. I'm a bit of a psychologist, you know. You're very young to be—what you said you were. There's something childish in your face, almost retarded" (241). It is how Albert's image is reflected in a woman's eyes. It is as if Albert's childish aspect mirrors back to him.

Albert's Symbolic Order

For an entry into the Symbolic Order of development, one has to separate from the mother and makes his own identity which marks the beginning of socialization. Albert is wearing his best trousers, his polished shoes and a tie indicate that he tries to follow the etiquette and rules of the society in order to be accepted. We can say that this is his first time of joining a social gathering. He is like a child who is doomed to be separated from his mother to enter society like anyone else. Although he is reluctant, Albert said that he has to go because "everyone else is going" (260). Therefore, he feels the lack of the mother as the result of separation. In order to fill the loss or lack he has to learn the language. Learning language coincides with entering the Symbolic Order which is the world of predefined social rules and gender differences.

A child who cannot accomplish the Symbolic Order, which is the realm of language and social rules, cannot communicate properly. At the end of Act II, we see Albert cannot use language properly to justify himself. Gidney, who already has an indecent behavior toward Albert, taunting him about his "bloody awful game of football", his "breeding", and finally starts to pick at him for

insulting a lady. He points his finger at him while he tries to break away. Gidney humiliates him and said: "You're a mother's boy. That's what you are. That's your trouble. You're a mother's boy" (230). However, Albert cannot use the language to defend himself verbally and cannot bear Gidney's behavior therefore he becomes physical. Elizabeth Sakellaridou says: "When Albert goes to his firm's party he is unfortunate enough to pay for the indecent behaviour of a dirty old man and fall victim to the schemes of some evil-minded colleagues who are irritated by his lack of 'machismo'" (53). Albert cannot behave according to what society expects. He cannot be a brave man and flirts with the girls.

Having a nagging mother who does not pay attention to his son is what makes Albert unable to express his desires. By trying to take a flight from his house, he is stuck with a prostitute who rambles on to finish her work and does not care about Albert's feelings. They prevent him from developing his linguistic skills. He is always weak vis-a-vis other characters who attack him verbally.

Albert's Separation and His *objet petit a*

Albert who struggles to have a night out is on the edge of entering the Symbolic Order. This entering comes with the cost of an experience of separation from the mother. The separation results in a lack, because there is no feeling of security and the wholeness that the infant use to have in the pre-verbal stage of the Imaginary. Albert who decides to separate from his mother in order to enter the society feels a lack that his mother should not appear with him in public and he should try to fill her absence. In a moment, Albert has the thought of staying with her as he says: "I'd much rather stay with you" (206).

He gives himself a chance to experience a social gathering in which he could find someone to be with as his *objet petit a* but he fails. Albert is single and there is no girl in his life. In Act III, we observe that he cannot communicate well with the

prostitute. He cannot begin a conversation with her and he answers her questions briefly. Although the reason of such behavior can be his mother who prevents him from having a girlfriend, instead he has the responsibility of taking care of his mother.

Albert is seeking his lost object of desire and tries to find a substitution and the union that he lost. He seeks a prostitute for comfort and hopes that maybe she can satisfy his desires but he realizes that she treats him like a child. It seems that the girl has a lot in common with his tiresome mother. Her babbling without paying any attention to Albert ruins the opportunity to speak his desires. She begins to order from the moment they enter her apartment, telling him to do this and do that. Albert's resentment of such behavior can be observed in Act III:

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 ... [*He begins to move about the room, at one point half crouching, at another standing upright, as if exercising his body.*] ... What makes you think you can ... tell me ... yes ... It's the same as this 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. Just watch your step. (243)

Albert cannot cope with the suffocating situation anymore. He cannot bear her behavior and finds himself alone and unsuccessful to fill his lack and leaves there.

Name-of-the-Father

The initiation of the child's socialization coincides with the introduction of the child to language and his entrance to the Symbolic Order. The social world with its regulations and prohibitions associates with the central figure of the Father. Homer states that "the 'Name-of-the-Father' is a signifier that breaks the

mother/child couple and introduces the child into the symbolic order of desire and lack" (51). Although the father is absent in the play, his presence can be sensed through the mother's speech. She reminds Albert of the presence of the father most of the time. In act one, after Albert came back home late, she makes him remember the father's authoritative role: "Do you know what the time is? I fell asleep, right here at this table, waiting for you. I don't know what your father would say. Coming in this time of night. It's after twelve o'clock" (231-232).

Another time his mother emphasizes that this is the house of the father: "He's living! [*Touching her breast.*] In here! And this is his house!" (207). By mentioning the father, Albert is reminded that there is a supreme law which is the Name-of-the-Father or Law of the Father as Lacan suggests. He should obey the laws because he is the one who is in power and he is the one who owns the mother. The child has to submit and he should deny his desire for the mother. In fact the Name-of-the-Father takes the place of his desire for the mother. Thus, the first libidinal desire of the child is suppressed by the Name-of-the-Father.

The Symbolic Father, for Albert, is Mr. King at the office that has his eyes on him, as his mother mentioned, hinders him from messing around with girls at work. Another important thing to notice is the presence of the father which is hidden in the name of Albert's mother that is named "Mrs. Stokes". The play does not give us her first name.

Albert's Trauma of the Real

Trauma of the Real is a psychical event. Thus, it is not certainly occurs to a person in reality. Psychic trauma happens when one face an external stimulus and does not know what it is and how to control it. Then it results in psychological wound that appear again later in life (Homer 83). An example of such is reflected in Act III scene II, in the prostitute's room. Albert becomes furious of her critical behavior. Her treatment reminds him of his

authoritative mother and the girls at the party who mock him. There is a 'clock' on the mantelshelf in her room that gets the attention of Albert. The 'clock' works as an 'external stimulus' for him which reminds him of his struggle with his mother. This memory reminds him of his inability to cope with the girls and his sexual inadequacy with the prostitute therefore he cannot control his excitement and loses control. He is not mature when it comes to sexuality due to his mother's upbringing.

Martin Esslin emphasizes Albert's impotency thus: "The girls who tease him during the party can thus be seen as further embodiments of the first challenge, painful reminders of Albert's sexual inadequacy" (94). His perpetual insufficiency causes him to object to the prostitute. He threatens the girl with clock: "I'm just telling you, that's all. [*Breathlessly.*] You haven't got any breeding. She hadn'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. . . .With this clock! [*Trembling.*] One ... crack ... with ... this ... clock ... finished!" (244). Trauma of the real occurs when one talks his pain, as Lacan argues. Albert's suppressed feeling of what happened to him at the party and his constant nagging mother bursts into objection when he was put in the similar irritable situation.

Albert's the Real

Albert seems to be in search of the Real, a world of unity and completeness with no sense of lack. Such a world does not exist. That is why he is lost and cannot settle. He is tired of his endless search and he goes back home after his wild night out. In the last scene of the play, after Albert comes home from his night out, he says nothing and he remains quiet. It seems as a parallel of the Real where there is no language. It is a realm in which there is neither loss nor lack. It is a realm of fullness. Since the Real is beyond our meaning-making system, it cannot be presented in language.

Albert's peaceful manner can be observed as he comes home with a smile on his face and "*saunters across the hall into the kitchen, takes off his jacket and throws it across the room. . . . He sits heavily, loosely, in a chair, his legs stretched out. Stretching his arms, he yawns luxuriously, scratches his head with both hands and stares ruminatively at the ceiling. . .*" (246). Then as he heard his mother's voice calling him, his reaction changes as: "*His body freezes. His gaze comes down. His legs slowly come together. He looks in front of him*" (246). Albert becomes submissive in the presence of his mother again. The mother's admonishes ends in forgiveness and begins to comfort him. Albert remains silent and gives up his unending search.

Conclusion

Albert suffers from psychological issues which makes him seem as an abnormal character. The absurdity of his actions can be interpreted on the basis of Lacanian theories. He is under the internal pressure of psychological desires. He cannot voice his desires, he fails through the process of enculturation, he cannot pass the stages of development properly and he moves backward. He is incapable of adjusting himself in psychological Orders of human development. Consequently, he has a dependent, infantile, isolated, alienated and incomplete personality. Pinter helps us to understand the conflict of people in real life and he depicts them in his plays by creating similar conflicts among the characters.

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