

THE TREATMENT OF VIOLENCE IN MARTIN AMIS' MONEY AND PINTERS' THE CARETAKER

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Abstract

Towards the end of 1960s there was a huge hippie movement which was marked as Turbulent Decade. In Britain the labor party gained power in 1964, in France the protests in 1968 forced President Charles de Gaulle to leave the country. For some people in Europe, May 1968 meant the end of traditional collective action and the beginning of a new era to be dominated mainly by different social movement emerging at that time throughout the world (Brinkley, 1997; Erlanger, 2008). Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker* (1960) and Martin Amis' *Money: The Suicide Note* (1984) are embedded with violence and mistreatment among the main characters. With an attempt to reflect social dimensions of the society of that time, both novels deal with violence between very close people who have family or very close friendship ties. *The Caretaker* is the play in which people are portrayed as living on the edge, and are ready to accept any possibility presented in order to fulfill their individual psychological needs. *The Money* is a novel about John Self, a film director, a man who makes deals, spends a lot of money, abuses alcohol, tobacco, pills, pornography, and as a result he is portrayed as extremely violent. This paper attempts to analyze the question of violence that is presented and described in these two works. More importantly, this paper uses socio-psychological approaches and the historical context in analyzing violence in these two works. An analysis of absurd and satirist worlds presented by Pinter and Amis is especially valuable because of their relevance for describing and tackling present-day violence in our societies.

Keywords: Violence; Suicide; Abuse; *The Caretaker*; *Money* and John Self.

The background of Pinter's *The Caretaker* (1960) clearly presents the circumstances within which this play had originated and why he was excessively using language of violence in his play. Actually, Pinter's early plays were not popular; they were rejected on the ground of being indistinct and without clear meaning. Michael Codron, decided to present Pinter's second play, *The Birthday Party*, at the Lyric Hammersmith in 1958. The result was one of the most famous disasters in post-war British theatre. The play was roundly dismissed by the daily critics and taken off at the end of the week. Pinter's only consolation was that Harold Hobson in *The Sunday Times* wrote a glowing encomium claiming that Pinter possessed "the most original, disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London" (Billington, 2008). The obvious character and the brevity of scenes in which language manipulation was often linked to the state of violence and mental torture characterized Pinter's early plays. Then, apparent illogicality and confusion also characterized his first plays (Pinter, 1965: p. 28). His early writing was considered as illogical, because there was no clear development of narration through his plays. Within such background and particular social circumstances, Pinter's characters were often confused and misunderstood. For instance, in the *Caretaker*, his main scenes and characters are portrayed in a single room whereby strangers are invited and at the same time, are portrayed as invading somebody's private space. These strangers in Pinter's plays are presented as being invited, perfectly acceptable and without visible signs of violence (Pinter, 1965: pp. 6, 7, 8). However, whatever comes from outside is dangerous according to common beliefs, therefore people inside are not aware of it and they let others inside without questions, being later caught unaware.¹

Due to the style and structure of his plays, Pinter's *The Caretaker* became associated with the Theater of the Absurd. The Theater of the Absurd emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s as a reaction to chaos and social turmoil (Bigsby, 365; Metz, 2001; Esslin 1961). In the Theater of the Absurd, language is used in a manner that heightens the audiences' awareness of the language itself. There is apparent lack of plot and action and there is always a notion that something will happen, but it never does. This particular work expresses the belief that, in a godless universe, human existence has no meaning or purpose and all communication between the main actors apparently break down. According to Coe (1975) the Theater of the Absurd is a designation for particular plays of absurdist fiction, written by a number of primarily European playwrights in the late 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, as well as to the style of theatre, which has evolved from their work. Logical construction and argument gives way to irrational and illogical speech and to its ultimate conclusion, silence. Therefore, Plays of Absurd proposed that the language used in these plays

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is completely paralyzed in the modern world, hence it often fails to transmit meaning between the speaker and the listeners (Gale, 2002 p. 3). Harold Pinter's plays are specific for their cruelty and violence. For example In the Room there is the scene in which a blind innocent man is brutally bitten. In the Birthday Party as well the scene of abduction is very violent and spread terror around (Gale, 2002 p. 2).

The Caretaker presents the main themes, actors and characters of the world in 1950, especially that of England. The Caretaker as a play, even though confusing at the first glance, appears to be very simple. For instance, Aston, Mick and Davies as the main characters represent their own isolation from the outside world with a sense of intensity. The isolation of the main characters is both forced upon them and purposefully accepted. The characters do not allow themselves to form good relationship with others due to their particular personality in which they cannot accept friendships. Such multiple character presentations are clearly illustrated in the play: being accused of making noise during the sleep Davis defends himself "I tell you what, maybe it were them Blacks." This shows that he doesn't trust people and then Aston informs Davies that he is going out, but invites him to stay if he likes, indicating that he trusts him, something unexpected by Davies; for, as soon as Aston does leave the room, Davies begins rummaging through Aston's "stuff." This also shows that he is not a person on whom you can rely or trust (Pinter, 1960, pp. 21). Here, it is obvious that beneath the nonsense and irregularity in sequences humor of Absurdist Theater lurks an element of cruelty often revealed in dialogue between characters but manifested in acts of violence as well (Gale, 2002 p. 2).

From the very beginning of the play, the realistic details of everyday life and occurrences were emphasized. Aston lives in an apartment room, which is owned by his brother Mick. Though they are brothers, there is no proper communication among them, the reason being that Aston is handicapped in a way and Mick too occupied with his business. Aston lives the life of mentally retarded human being because of the electric shock treatment given to him (Pinter, 1960 p. 64.) The very isolated condition of Aston suggests the critical existence of a man in the modern world, who may live the life as mentally retarded person like Aston. Aston not only rescues Davies but also helps him by providing him with tobacco, a pair of shoes, bed and above all allowing him to share a room with him. Aston's activities of helping Davies express Aston's need for companionship. He expects Davies to stay with him. Aston realizes his isolation and when he gets the opportunity to end it, he tries to cherish it. Davies is also badly in a need of companionship (Pinter, 1960, pp. 34). The realistic details of everyday life and a complexity of the relationship are presented in Pinter's play.

Throughout the play, there are numerous instances of violence and aggression among

the main proponents. These hints of violence and brutality might be connected to a Pinter's perception of the world as insecure, not only presented by his play characters, but also in the real world. For instance, the fate of Mr. Davis as presented in the play can be compared to current world situation characterized by bloodshed, destruction, insecurity, and violence. In essence, there is no security and safety in relation to any aspect of the everyday life, which is the major answer to the question why Pinter was emphasizing writing about violence in his plays. Different predicaments and problems are associated with each actor in the play, in such a way that all of them have some kind of a dilemma invisible at the first sight, but visible deeply from within. With the progression of the play the signs of violent traits become more and more visible. Among the signs of the violence is the monologue by Aston:

One day they took me to a hospital, right outside London. They... got me there. I didn't want to go. Anyway... I tried to get out, quit a few times. But... it wasn't very easy. They asked me questions, in there. Got me in and asked me all sort of questions. Well I told them... when they wanted to know... what my thoughts were. Hmmnn. Then one day... this man... doctor, I suppose... had one... he was quite a man of distinction... although I wasn't sure about that. He called me in. He said they'd concluded their examination. That's what he said. He said... he just said that, you see. You've got this thing... this thing. That's your complaint. And we've decided, he said, that in your interest there's only one course we can take. He said... but I can't remember... how he put it... he said, we're going to do something to your brain. He said... if we don't you are going to stay here for the rest of your life, but if we do you stand a chance (Pinter 1960 p. 64).

This monologue, about Aston and an institution, is both very convincing and terrifying. However, it is necessary to indicate that Aston's perception and experience have two sides of the truth. His story indicates that he was victimized in that institution, but throughout the play Aston is seen as mentally disabled and handicapped anyway. Nevertheless it is noticeable, especially at the end of the play, that Aston actually made Davis to believe that he had mental problems. For instance, this has been proven through Devises' behavior when he sided with Mick in order to deceive Aston and kick him out of his own home. Therefore, it is possible to assume this situation as a kind of a game between two brothers, in which they select suitable victims from the street in order to exercise a sadistic fantasy of power. According to Inan (2005) the elder brother's account of his brain-operation is highly detailed and circumstantial. However, is it true? If it is true, why there is no Pinter's writing about how serious social play denounce the cruelty prevalent in mental hospitals? In addition, if it isn't true, why does it take the crucial place in the text – the climax of Act Two? Actually, the situation as such has mul-

tiple interpretations. One of those interpretations is an improvised attempt by two brothers to haul innocent people into the confines of their home and indulgence into all kinds of abuses over the new comer. However, this is purposefully committed for the sake of reducing everything to a play and an absurd situation. There is also an expression of a physical violence from Mick's side towards Davis, the old tramp. His behavior towards his own brother is not at a high level either. He is portrayed wearing leather jacket, which could be perceived as a sign of a people who are violent and unpredictable. Mick's first act on Davis, on their first encounter is to take him unaware and force him to the floor before subjecting him to interrogation (Rogers, 1987). The following citation from the book, illustrates his violent behavior:

MICK slides across the room. DAVIS half turns, MICK seizes his arm and forces it up his back. Davis screams. Uuuuuuu-hhh! Uuuuuuuuhhh! What! What! What! Uuuuuuuuhh! Mick swiftly forces him to the floor, with DAVIS struggling, grimacing, whimpering and staring. MICK holds his arm, puts his other hand to his lips, than puts his hand to DAVIES lips. DAVIS quietens. MICK lets him go. DAVIS writhes. MICK hold out a warning finger. He then squats down to regard Davis. He regards him, then stands looking down on him. DAVIS massages his arm, watching MICK. MICK turns slowly to look at the room... (Pinter, p. 28-29).

Mick is violent, erratic, and unpredictable. He cannot take behavior of his brother anymore, so he might be thinking of setting him the trap by siding with the old tramp. It seems here that Mick wants to create tensions and reveals his true nature. For instance, this can be noticed when he smashes figure of Buda, which was placed in the room (Pinter, 1960, p. 83). The Buddha is one of the main props used by Pinter. The Buddha stands for enlightenment, peace and compassion. In the play it was almost symbolic of the character of Aston. The crack in the statue of The Buddha recalls the smashing of the statue by Mick, who cannot control himself and reflects it on the statue. A crack in The Buddha symbolizes a crack in the belief of Aston on the idealities of peace and compassion. Unable to connect with Davies and betrayed by him, he no longer rely on peoples sincerity and compassion and is deeply disappointed.

Throughout the play, Mick is expressing signs of violence towards Davis without much reason for that kind of a behavior. His brother Aston also has small rationality in his actions. He is very shallow, unable to express himself and to communicate. However, Mick's violent behavior towards his brother can be associated with Mick's inability to face his brother's problems (Pinter, 1960, p. 35). Socialization with other people and inability to cooperate among each other is another theme in this play, which might be the reason for violent behavior among the main actors. At the very end, it appears that the brothers are turning Davies, an old homeless man, out of what may be his last chance for shelter, mainly because of his (and their)

inabilities to adjust socially to one another, or their respective ante-social qualities.

The aspect of physical, mental, psychological, and verbal violence was highly expressed throughout the play. The psychological violence might influence all aspects of people's lives. According to Burman, Margolin and John (1993) psychological violence may be characterized as carrying an implied threat of physical violence, or attempt to intimidate or control the other person. Whether this distinction between psychological violence and emotional abuse is real or arbitrary, the fact remains that, in a rudimentary way, these distinctions are an attempt to begin to differentiate the concept of psychological violence (Burman, Margolin and John, 1993). Psychologists agree that there are three main divisions of violence, psychological, sexual and physical (Sokin, 1985; Stoudeur and Still, 1989; Duton, 1988). In the reference to the above play it is obvious that there is an act of deviant behavior among the main actors in the play.

With regards to Martin Amis's *Money - the Suicide Note* it is important to consider main circumstances that played significant role in scope and style of a novel. In the 1960s the United States underwent drastic social and political changes. There were marches and protests, under the leadership of Martin Luther King, to eliminate racial discrimination as well as the protests against the Vietnam War. A drastic development of sub-cultures significantly influenced and shaped areas of art and entertainment. Towards the end of 1960s there was a huge hippie movement which was marked as Turbulent Decade. In Britain the labor party gained power in 1964, in France the protests in 1968 forced president Charles de Gaulle to leave the country. For some people in Europe, May 1968 meant the end of traditional collective action and the beginning of a new era to be dominated mainly by different social movement emerging at that time throughout the world (Brinkley, 1997; Erlanger, 2008). Therefore, all these controversies and changes influenced a number of writers during that time, including Martin Amis.

In *Money - the Suicide Note* the narrator of the novel is John Self; the symbolism of the name is more than obvious. He is 35 years-old British TV commercial producer. The novel starts with a suicide note, which is a post modernism trick to make story more interesting and intriguing. Usually most of literary works are based on a simple story, a person or as in this case on an intriguing note (Amis, 1984, section 1 pp. 5-23).

To Antonia

This is a suicide note. By the time you lay it aside (and you should always read these things slowly, on the lookout for clues or giveaways), John Self will no longer exist. Or at any rate that's the idea. You never can tell, though, with suicide notes, can you? In the planetary aggregate of all life, there are

many more suicide notes than there are suicides. They're like poems in that respect, suicide notes: nearly everyone tries their hand at them some time, with or without the talent. We all write them in our heads. Usually the note is the thing. You complete it, and then resume your time travel. It is the note and not the life that is cancelled out. Or the other way round. Or death. You never can tell, though, can you, with suicide notes. To whom is the note addressed? To Martina, to Fielding, to Vera, to Alec, to Selina, to Barry — to John Self? No. It is meant for you out there, the dear, the gentle. M. A. London, September 1981. (Amis, 1984, section 1 p. 1).

However, in this work a suicide note was perfectly presented as an introduction to a novel, which provides to the readers hints about what is to follow in the novel. Besides, a suicide note sets psychological, economic, social, and literary contexts of a novel.

Money's plot is very complicated and far from simple. An English director of Campy Television commercials, John Self has been hired by an American producer, Fielding Goodney, to direct a screenplay, alternately titled, Good Money and Bad Money. Rennison (2005) points out that John Self, a protagonist, is, willing to sell what remains of his soul, in exchange for receiving all the immediate gratifications that consumer culture offers, and that is excess. Excess is what this culture offers, if one has money to pay for it, and excess- whether for booze, drugs, sex or food- is what Self craves (p. 8-9). The movie, Self is about to produce, is doomed to failure, part of an elaborate scheme to trick Self out of his money. In the course of the novel, Self hesitates between extremes of self-indulgence and self-improvement (Amis, 1960). He craves autonomy, yet laments his apparent lack of free will; he acknowledges his actions in the role of victimizer but fears, correctly, that he is the victim of some powerful malevolent force; and in the end, despite his numerous attempts at improvement, events collude to frustrate him, and the book culminates in a whirlwind of deceit and painful recognition (Keuluks, 1984). Carlos Silva (2004) for example, argues that Money "combines a complex web of post-modern tricks and narrative devices with an accurate depiction of the 1980s and its materialist philosophy of self development through material success" (p. 88-9).

The story itself contains a number of complex ideas. Amis' novel creates suspense and thrills readers to expect a surprise in almost every line. John Self is in a way of attempting to use everything to satisfy his appetites. He is a bit bulky, enjoys consuming everything; food, drink, and heroin (Amis, 1960, p. 24). He is obsessed with pornography and finds real pleasure in it; however, he does not finish any of his movies. This means that he is dedicated to instant pleasure and uses films for another past time. Representation of pornography in the novel is a kind of frame of early predic-

ament and representation of pornography and its support for modern way of life. This notion is also product of globalization, which sheltered the whole world. Here pornography, sex, and violence are being gradually introduced as acceptable social norms. There has been a worldwide revolution in the perception of moral values in recent years, involving profound changes in the way people think and act. The communications media have played and continue to play a major role in this process of individual and social change as they introduce and reflect new attitudes and lifestyles.

Despite many charges of sexism, Amis has always asserted that he does not consider *Money* to be a misogynist or even a sexist novel. Once he simply stated: "I was a feminist when I wrote *Money*, which I think is too programmatic a feminist book, although of course it was criticized as sexist at the time" (Radio interview by James Noughty, 2001). On some other occasions, he has called himself one of the declaratively feminist writers of his generation. However, the description of John Self's character as loose, greedy, with low self esteem, afraid of everything and at times very violent and unpredictable neglects the justification of Amis' claims. *Money* is definitely an aggressive text, which readers with tender sensibilities should probably avoid; underneath John Self's sexist surface, however, the novel's theme is declaratively full of pornography, bad language and overly programmatic (Amis, 1960, p. 4).

Regardless of how much money he has, Self is denied the advantage of intellect, reason, and logic. In this respect, he suffers from the "terror of ignorance." Even though he holds a respectable position of producer, he seems not very clever. Cultural modification will forever evade Self because such things come only from understanding unselfish impulses within society. Self never allows the reader to become comfortable; he accomplishes this by rapidly shifts in style. Consider the scene in which he attempts to rape his girlfriend in very inconsiderate and violent way, Selina Street. Here is the extract from the book in a very straightforward, matter-of-fact manner:

So then I tried to rape her. In all honesty I have to confess that it wasn't a very distinguished effort. I'm new at this and generally out of shape. For instance, I wasted a lot of time attempting to control her hands. Obviously the proper way to rape girls is to get the leg question sorted out and take the odd slap in the face as part of the deal. Here's another tip: undress before the action starts. It was while I had Selina's forearms in my right hand and the belt-clasp in my left that she caught me a good one with the bony fist of her knee. I took it right in the join of my splayed and aching tackle. Whew, that was a good one, I thought, as my back hit the deck. Arched and winded, I lay there with the lampshade in my face. I felt I was slowly turning green from the toes up. Then at last I crawled next door like a knackered alligator and roared for many

moons into the wind tunnel of the can (Amis, 1960, p. 84).

Self acts more as a narrator than as a rapist. He criticizes his own effort and tries to explain “the proper way to rape girls.” After he fails, the language becomes more eloquent as Self apologizes to Selina, until she forgives him and, repentant, Self “lay there with the breathing bundle in my arms, and sadly listened to the subsidence of her sighs (Amis, 1960, p. 84). The reader is lulled to sleep by the alliterative rhythm and Self’s moral repentance. There is a blank line, and then the following single sentence paragraph is uttered: “Then I tried to rape her again.” By following this unforgivable, unforgettable sentence with a long paragraph of narration, one can speak into the true nature of John Self. Therefore, Self in his own right tries to fulfill all his lasts no matter what are the consequences. In his attempt to rape his girlfriend, he goes even further in his sadistic and violent manner in order to satisfy his animal instinct (Amis, 1960, p. 89). His attitude towards female characters is illustrated with the text full of conflicting messages. He portrays women as sexually vulnerable and passive on one hand, but in some instances, they are portrayed as having position that is more modern. The intellectual shortcomings of Self are numerous. For example, when he was confronted with the dancer in the bar, who was supposedly studying English language, he could not answer a very simple question. ‘I mean are they mainstream novels and stories or thrillers or sci-fi or something like that?’ ‘What’s mainstream?’ She smiled appraisingly and said, ‘That’s a good question . . . I’m fucking my way through college? English Literature, at NYTE? You write novels? That’s what you do? What did you say your name was?’ (Amis, 1960 p.3). This is an indication of his intellectual and physical problems. For example, He prefers not to read, because it hurts his eyes, and given the choice between the pain and not reading he chooses not to read. The intellectual humiliation is an act of violence from the writers’ side that he inflicts on Self. This can clearly be seen from the description of Self’s physical disorders and use of animal imagery. He is most often described as having problems with tooth decay and his gums are traumatized. His hair is very thin and he loses it in some places. He is also fat and heavy. Furthermore, he hears strange sounds and all of the time he has attack of amnesia. He is dreaming of a major overhaul and that he should perform a surgery in order to fix himself. “I need my whole body drilled down and repaired, replaced. I need my body capped is what I need. I’m going to do it, too, the minute I hit the money” (Amis, 1960, p. 103).

Humiliation and violence on Self is further inflicted through the animal images associated with Self. When he is frightened, Self’s face is like the face of a fat snake (Amis, p. 106). When he wakes up in the morning he feels like a cat run over (Amis, 1960, p. 5). The most captivating feature in the novel is the fact connected to the self treatment of himself and his own body. He gorges himself on junk food and alcohol, is prone to casual violence and pornographic fantasies. This is directly

connected to the authors' treatment and satirization of the social system and of the consumerism of the Western society that made Self what he is (Diedric, 1995).

Since 1950s, torture and violence become major issues worldwide and as a result, Pinter's earliest dramas were entirely based on increasing interest in depicting torture and campaign against it in profound literary way (Luckhurst, 2005). He examined the theme of violence and torture explicitly in his plays and even in some of his plays which do not represent torture and violence Pinter stubbornly relates his writing to the role of cruelty and power on familial and erotic relationships.

Some of his plays with the above mentioned themes are: *The Homecoming* (1965), *Landscape* (1969) and *Betrayal* (1978). There have been claims that writers were influenced by the circumstances and conditions that were shaping human society. In this regard, Pinter argued, "violence has always been in my plays; from the very beginning... We are brought up every day of our lives in the world of violence." Therefore, by declaring violence as a part of human life Pinter skillfully put it in literary and psychosocial contexts. Harold Pinter was called "the most influential and imitated dramatist of his generation" and "one of the few modern playwrights whose name instantly evoke a sensibility" (1) by the *New York Times*. Pinter had remarkable carrier and left mark in the British drama as the most important dramatist because his skill in language and pattern is very poetic. His provocative insights into human's being place in the universe provokes one to deeply re-think the role of a man in today's society. These characteristics portray him the most profound writer of this time.

Martin Amis also wrote about violence in his novels, but he used different perspective. He produced many novels on violence. However, in his novel *Money- the Suicide Note* violence was expressed in different way. In this novel violence is not directed, for the most part, towards the people but it is rather internal and personal. For instance, internal and personal violence Self illustrated in the consumption of food, alcohol and drug. Amis was very successful in criticizing excesses of young people and contemporary society. Amis in his writings revels in catastrophe and obscenity. He enters into the violent happenings in the streets of his own town and decides to write about it in his novels. His vision of England, oftentimes very critical, is incorporated into his writing; he covers all the major topics, from black culture to high culture.

Martin Amis and Harold Pinter are two authors who wrote their novels being influenced by the circumstances in the world and around them. In their novels a profound reflection on the vices in the society are interwoven and presented to the readers. Both of them use violence in their writings in order to protest against discrimination and injustice in the society. They both quest for the novelty and they

draw readers deeply into their writing and let reader decide, evaluate and judge for themselves conditions in which people waste or purposefully use their time.

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