# JEWISH INFLUENCES

# IN THE PLAYS OF HAROLD PINTER

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A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English

Presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of Master of Arts at

Concordia University
Montréal, P.Q., Canada

September, 1981

TO JEAN

in loving memory

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Professor Roslyn Belkin, for superb teaching and, above all, for her firm but diplomatic handling of an old reprobate;

To my friend Howard Stein, who helped keep the flame alive over many years with his passionate love of theatre;

To my wife, Margie, for her encouragement and staying power which made the difference;

To my children, Jody, Jill and Dan, with their ever ready books; and

To Mildred Solomon, who put this thesis into presentable shape, a major task.

P. S. G.

## Abstract

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This thesis demonstrates the impact on his plays of Harold Pinter's background as a Jew who grew up in the East End of London.

First, the tenuous nature of life in the East End for the Jews who lived there, with all its economic and racial turmoil, is established. The view of this thesis, that Pinter's early life has had great impact on his works, is then explored from the point of view of the presence in his plays of the twentieth century offspring of traditional Jewish archetypes, such as the schlemihl (the born loser, the victim), the schlimazl (the unlucky one who brings misfortune on self and others), and the schnorrer (the professional beggar). In addition, the effects of this Jewishness in terms of the angers, fears, and guilt that are to be found in Pinter's plays are scrutinized. Finally, the thesis traces the autobiographical reflections of Pinter in some of the characters and situations in his plays. These aspects of the works of Pinter have been all but ignored by the critics.

In particular, The Birthday Party, A Slight Ache, and The Homecoming are examined. In "Party," my view is that Stanley, who in some ways is a reflection of Pinter, is a would-be artist who is suffering the trauma of guilt and dislocation of a Jew trying to evade his Jewish upbringing. In "Ache," Pinter presents an ironic view of the British upper middle-class, personified by two of the play's main protagonists. The thesis explores their struggle against the encroachment of aliens (immigrants, primarily Jews) on their traditional way of life. "Homecoming" presents the power struggles within a low level Jewish family in the East End of London. It is replete with a gallery of Jewish archetypes.

The thesis demonstrates, in these three plays, that the Jewish influences are extremely evident in spite of Pinter's clear attempts to universalize his themes and most of his characters. It is asserted that examining Pinter's plays from these points of view helps to provide increased insight into and illumination of his works.

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"(The East End of London) . . . It's my Jerusalem. No Jew ever leaves it . . . completely, he takes a bit of it with him . . . (wherever he goes)."

Avron Stencl,
British-Yiddish poet

# Introduction

## A VIOLENT BEGINNING

In their book Harold Pinter, Baker and Tabachnick make the point that although Pinter is "at bottom fascinated by the concrete world of his personal history . . . this patently obvious fact has not been given the attention it deserves by other critics."[1] In The Peopled Wound, Martin Esslin, too, refers to this aspect of the playwright's work: "Pinter's . . . existential fear is never a philosophical abstraction. It is . . . based on the experiences of a Jewish boy in East End of London, of a Jew in the Europe of Hitler."[2] In the same tenor, Barry Supple, a boyhood friend of Pinter, refers to Pinter's plays as ". . . a great echo chamber in which the only sources of

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[1] William Baker and Stephen Ely Tabachnick, Harold Pinter (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1973), p. 4. They attribute this view to Barry Supple and concur in it.

[2] Martin Esslin, The Peopled Wound: The Work of Harold Pinter (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 28. Esslin adds that "Pinter, essentially, remain on the firm ground of everyday reality" (p. 29).

sound are the prosaic data of the dramatist's life history . . ."[1]

Although many other writers refer to Pinter as a Jewish boy growing up in the East End of London, few commentators have explored, in any depth, the profound influence this background has had on his work. Despite the fact that Pinter does not write explicitly on Jewish themes, his plays abound in folkloric and cultural references and allusions; these are clearly Jewish in character. Although much mention has been made of the Jewish characteristics of Goldberg in The Birthday Party, to my knowledge no critics, except for Baker and Tabachnick, have noticed the presence of such Jewish types as the schlimazl, the schlemihl, and the schnorrer in The Homecoming and other plays. Nor have commentators made the connection between the wasp in A Slight Ache and the ironic way in which the term is used by people who are excluded from that societal group which, in addition to being white, is also Anglo-Saxon and Protestant.

For these reasons, I contend that Pinter's plays cannot be fully understood without reference to his background.

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[1] Barry Supple, "Pinter's Homecoming," Jewish Chronicle, June 25, 1965, pp. 7, 31.

Thus, this thesis will explore Jewish influences in the following Pinter plays: The Birthday Party, A Slight Ache, and The Homecoming.

Pinter's Background

The situation in which Harold Pinter now finds himself is not too different from that of other successful contemporary Jewish writers who have emerged from roughly similar circumstances. Since adult pre-eminence rarely obliterates, totally, the insecurities and malaise of the early years, the works of all these writers are, in some ways, affected by their past. Pinter expresses his residual feelings differently from such writers as Wesker, for example. Pinter's concern with his past is expressed more indirectly. Nevertheless, his Jewishness is evident in almost all of his plays. Furthermore, many puzzling aspects of Pinter tend to become clear when one examines his plays as the products of a son of a Jewish ladies' tailor with all the social and economic turmoil that surrounded Jewish families in the East End of London, from the turn of the century right through the period after the end of World War II.

Racial Turmoil

That the East End of London had its share of racial unrest is a matter of historical record. The Jews are not the only immigrants to England who have faced open and often violent discrimination. This, too, is a matter of record and stretches through the various waves of immigrants over the centuries. However, for Pinter and his fellow Jews, in addition to local unrest, the horrors of Nazi Germany and their consequences had an incalculable impact.

Harold Pinter's parents lived and worked with those East End Jews who were exposed to the blight of racial turmoil. In Chaim Bermont's Point of Arrival, A Study of London's East End, the harrowing history of this anti-Semitism is recounted. Starting at the end of the nineteenth century and extending through the 1920's, the heavy flow of Jews fleeing Russian pogroms encountered "strong anti-Semitism and even hysteria when they arrived in England and settled primarily in London's East End. At the turn of the century, an anti-alien group calling itself the British Brothers' League was founded . . . and it quickly attained a membership of forty-five thousand."[1] Its leadership included prominent

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[1] Chaim Bermont, Point of Arrival, A Study of London's East End (London: Eyre & Methuen, 1975), p. 141.

businessmen, Tory Members of Parliament, London aldermen, and writers like Marie Corelli, a popular novelist of the day. In a letter read to a large assembly in the East End, Corelli expressed the sentiments of her fellows thus:

> There is indeed something grossly unjust in an arrangement which permits useless, incapacitated or meddlesome sections of humanity to be expelled as miserable undesirables from their own countries and landed on our shores. Our first duty is to ourselves and for maintaining our position with honour. British work, British wages and British homes should be amongst the first considerations of a British government.[1]

The British Brothers' League never used the work "Jew."[2] The euphemism was "alien." Another example typical of the rhetoric of this highly vocal and visible group was a speech by Arnold White, a Tory M.P., which rang with phrases such as: "This England. It is not the backyard of Europe. It is not the garbage receptacle of Austria and Russia."[3] Even more scurrilous was the speech of another Tory Parliamentarian, Henry Norman, which was greeted with cries of "Shame!" and "Wipe them out!" and "Who is destroying Sunday?" answered by cries

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[1] Quoted in Bermont, Point of Arrival, p. 5.

[2] The first meeting of the League was held in 1901.

[3] Quoted in Bermont, Point of Arrival, p. 142. These were the areas from which most of the Jewish immigrants came to England.

of "The Jews!" "Who is debasing our national life? Who is corrupting our morals?" again answered by "The Jews! The Jews!"[1] This agitation was accompanied by vicious riots and was widely reported in the press. It was in this atmosphere that Pinter's parents lived.

The Moseley Fascists

When Pinter himself was growing up, the aura of hate in London's East End, if anything, was even worse, fanned by the British Union of Fascists which had been organized by Oswald Moseley.

> For the Jews of East End London, it became a source of considerable concern. . . .The British Union of Fascists held marches through the heart of the Jewish area, chanting, "the Yids, the Yids, we've got to get rid of the Yids" - which could have had only one purpose, provocation--and they succeeded. . . .The elderly and the old, cowed by memories of persecution and oppression, rushed to put up their shutters every time they heard the word Jew shouted in the streets . . . the gymnasia of the Jewish youth clubs were given over to massively-attended classes in wrestling and boxing.[2] . . .Almost every Fascist meeting was the occasion of tussles and fights which were widely reported in the press. . . .The crowds grew larger and larger

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[1] See Bermont, Point of Arrival, p. 142.

[2] By his own account, Pinter was a member of one of these Jewish organizations, as he reveals in an interview with Lawrence Bensky, "Harold Pinter: An Interview," Paris Review, Vol. X, No. 39 (1966), pp. 13-37.

> still and Moseley gave increasing attention to the Jewish question, . . . he /Moseley/ declared at an Albert Hall Rally in 1936, "Today, in any audience in Britain, the strongest passion that can be aroused, is the passion against the corruption of Jewish power." This /anti-Semitism/ may not have been true of Britain as a whole, but it was true of the East End.[1]

One typical incident in the late 1930's, when Pinter was about ten, is described by an eyewitness:

> Terrorism, the like of which had never been witnessed in the East End broke out when a band of hooligans /began/ smashing, looting and pillaging the windows of Jewish shopkeepers. . . Not one shop bearing an English name was molested . . . .On the main road, a man was hurled bodily through a window and a seven year old girl was thrown after him. . . .East End Jews . . . felt that the police, and indeed the police magistrates, had more than a sneaking sympathy for their attackers.[2]

Even after war erupted in 1939 and throughout the conflict, anti-Semitism remained close to the surface in the East End. Because of this area's adjacency to the docks, its plethora of warehouses and factories, and the great concentration of people, the East End suffered heavily from the German Blitz. In a series of radio broadcasts Lord Haw Haw, William Joyce, one of Moseley's lieutenants, repeatedly

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[1] Bermont, Point of Arrival, p. 232.

[2] Ibid., p. 235.

accused the Jews of causing panic. So widespread was this calumny that it became the subject of a government inquiry. This virulently anti-Semitic propaganda was then refuted but left its scars.

Crime and Culture

This was but one aspect of the world in which Pinter grew up. In addition, the East End was an area of poverty that reverberated to major and petty crimes of all descriptions, from prostitution, gambling, through drug-trading. Some of the district's best known inhabitants were recognized criminals:

> Over the years, however, it (the East End of London) also produced great figures in the world of arts of literature, medicine and social reform, and men and women, many of whom were not Jews . . . found the East End slums conducive to practical experimentation: Canon Barnett with his . . . University Settlement (a model for developmental replicas around the world); Ann Begant and the Pankhursts, leading advocates for women's rights, who recruited their rank and file militants in (the East End); Rudolph Rocker, gentile leader of a Yiddish Libertarian group, who, in the Jubilee Street Anarchist Club, helped to expose thousands of Russo-Polish Jewish

> immigrants to Western culture and therby ensured the flowering of diverse talents which might have been lost.[1]

Obviously, to attribute anti-Semitism to the whole or to anything but a minority of the British peoples is both fallacious and foolish. In London's East End, however, the levels of hate were so high and were manifested so openly that their effects on the Jews of the area were not only corrosive but must have left lasting scars.[2] Moreover, they forced Jews to turn inward to a considerable extent, to nurture and treasure their own resources and culture, even as they tried to become more attuned to the prevailing fact of British life, art, and values. In common with Jews everywhere who are surrounded by hostility, the knowledge of their Jewishness was stamped into the deepest recesses of their being. Jewish societies and social clubs were humming centers of activity for these people and included a number of Yiddish drama groups who, incidentally, found in their gentile counterparts a considerable heritage of anti-Semitism

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[1] William J. Fishman, The Streets of London (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1979), p. 15.

[2] "The events of the late 1930's left an indelible impression on the minds of those who were part of them and have become part of the East End Jewish folk memory." Baker and Tabachnick, Harold Pinter, p. 8.

in the disparaging stereotypes of the popular English stage.[1]

The Literary Product

The naturalistic dialogue, particularly in Pinter's early plays, is derived from the speech of ordinary people who lived in the London of Pinter's formative years. The characters in many of his plays are inhabitants of this region. The elements of menace and of the closed, safe space reflect, to a large extent, the environment of fear and uncertainty of the Jew. It is hard to overstate the impact on the psyche of a sensitive youngster brought up in London's East End with its ghetto-like enclosures of hostility and poverty. Echoes of these experiences are shared by many of his characters in almost all of his plays, both early and late. Certain personality and character traits echoing this background are common to many of Pinter's people, both from the lower and upper socioeconomic strata.

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1 "Into farce, comic opera, burlesque, musical comedy, pantomime and the most non-descript form of stage-piece, the Jew has been dragged for outrageous comic effect, while the word 'Jew' has been a popular synonym for rascal and cheat from the earliest times in dramatic literature." M. J. Landa, The Jew in Drama (New York: KTAV Publishing House Inc., 1969), p. 44.

Pinter himself has not commented to any great extent on the cultural aspects of his youth. He has specifically mentioned the impect on his life of the bombings and destruction of war, the holocaust, and the anti-Semitic terrorism of British Fascists right on his own doorstep. He has referred to his membership in Jewish cultural organizations and his support of Israel. There can surely be little doubt that Pinter carries with him the emotional traces of his Jewish upbringing.[1] It is probably no less an influence than the Irishness of Joyce, a favoured author starting in his youth.[2]

The importance of Pinter's Jewishness to his works is further underlined by Barry Supple:

> . . . a contemporary and school friend of Pinter, /he/ wrote in a review of The Homecoming that the drama "exemplifies the forces which give impetus and direction to Pinter's writing as a whole. For at bottom, he is fascinated by the concrete world of his personal history." And the same writer gives the reason that such a patently obvious fact about Pinter's work has not been given the attention it deserves by other critics, namely that Pinter remains extremely reticent about his past and this

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[1] "If you ever forget you're a Jew, a gentile will remind you." From a story by Bernard Malamud.

[2] See Baker and Tabachnick, pp. 13-14.

> reticence has helped to develop the "Pinter cult." The quality of Pinter's writing encourages symbolic universalist interpretations, but this writing emanates from his specific circumstances. Supple points out that . . . "in The Homecoming, for example, Pinter purposefully distorts . . . his theme by the fantastic projection of a 'rational' action and by a presumably conscious attempt to provide universal significance through the suppression of any explicit reference to the family's Jewishness."[1]

Baker and Tabachnick point out that Martin Esslin's The Peopled Wound derives its title from an early Pinter essay in which he observes that "Shakespeare writes of the open wound." However, "Esslin has refused" to explore this open wound in terms of Pinter's life experiences as a Jew. From my point of view, a whole area of Pinter characters and their relationship to the traditional schlimazl and schlemihl and other prototypes of Jewish folklore and literature have been left virtually unexplored.[2] These figures are surely not unrelated to the anti-heroes of other contemporary Jewish writers.

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[1] Baker and Tabachnick, p. 3.

[2] "Psychoanalysis," wrote Theodore Reik, "would characterize the schlemihl as a masochistic character who has a strong unconscious will to fail and spoil his chances." Quoted in Ruth Wisse, The Schlemiel as Modern Hero (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 68.

The Shtetl Relived

The Jewish neighbourhoods of Pinter's East End London, no less than the East Side of New York, or even Montreal, shared many similar cultural influences. Pinter grew up in the very heart of a large Jewish population, mainly refugees from the great Russian pogroms of 1905 but swelled by newer arrivals after the First World War and later by victims of Hitler, "battling for a foothold and a livelihood."[1] They brought with them to the United States, Canada, and England their common language of Yiddish, as well as the culture of the ghettos of mid-Europe. In terms of characters, theirs is the world of ". . . typological fools among whom are the nar, tam, yold, tipesh, bulvan, shoyte, peysi, shmendrik, kneri, lemmel, slumenge, lekish, to name but a small assortment."[2] The view proposed by Ruth Wisse in her book The

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[1] Baker and Tabachnick, p. 4.

[2] Wisse, The Schlemiel, p. 13. (See Glossary of Yiddish Terms at the end of this thesis.)

Schlemiel as Modern Hero is that ". . . strangely enough, the schlemiel (and, presumably, all his fellow typological fools) has survived even the holocaust (and) . . . is alive and doing well."[1] Wherever Jewish immigrants have settled, the influences are there and more than just traces are to be found in many of Pinter's people. Thus, Baker and Tabachnick refer to Davies in The Caretaker as "the king of the schnorrers (beggars) dominating Pinter's gallery of 'nowhere men' and women."[2] "The destruction of European Jewry during World War II, the systematic slaughter of millions of people and the annihilation of thousands of communities has necessarily changed our attitude toward . . . "[3] Yiddish typological characters. But they do survive. In Pinter, they are not the pure offspring but rather somewhat assimilated relatives, or even goyish (non-Jewish) versions who, nevertheless, echo many of the traits of their antecedents.

The predominant typological characters to be found in Pinter are the schlimazl (foolish victim of misfortunes),

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[1] Wisse, The Schlemiel, p. 11.

[2] Baker and Tabachnick, Harold Pinter, p. 70.

[3] Wisse, The Schlemiel, p. 85.

the schlemihl (perpetrator and often victim of misfortune, self-inflicted), the schnorrer (professional beggar), the boke (lots of muscle, little brain), the drayer, distorter, manipulator, often with criminal intent), and the chaim yankel (nonentity).[1] The cast of unfortunates, of inept bunglers whose very nature guarantees misfortune, stretches through many of Pinter's plays, from Stanley in The Birthday Party, Edward in A Slight Ache, Davies in The Caretaker, Spooner in No Man's Land to Sam in The Homecoming. They share a common character flaw and it is obvious, very shortly after the plays open, that their personalities and behaviour doom them to lonely lives of failure.

In play after play, Pinter's characters suffer disasters which derive from their personality flaws, the misfortunes of the schlimazl/schlemihl syndrome. In his weakness, his ineptness, his pathetic performance in the face of McCann and Goldberg, Stanley in The Birthday Party reveals himself as just such a figure. He is a prize schlemihl. Many of

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[1] Wisse, The Schlemiel, p. 15. ". . . folk usage has introduced a distinction between the schlemiel and the schlimazl, summarized in the rule of thumb that says, the schlemiel is the one who spills the soup; the schlimazl is the one into whose lap it falls."

Pinter's people do not suffer misfortunes but, nevertheless, share similar predispositions in their behaviour patterns and their personalities. These include the predators like Goldberg and McCann.

In exploring Jewish aspects in Pinter, this thesis will examine three Pinter plays: The Birthday Party, which echoes with details of the neighbourhood in which Pinter grew up and which abounds in references to Anglo-Jewish life; A Slight Ache, Pinter's first foray into obviously non-Jewish aspects of British society and which, I believe, has certain rather bitter autobiographical overtones, particularly in Pinter's portrayal of a pure-bred, British schlemihl; and The Homecoming, which revolves around a Jewish family from the lower strata of London's East End.

Throughout these plays Pinter ". . . concerns himself with the outsider, and the relationship of the individual to the group."[1] This stems from his sensitivity as the Jew, the stranger seeking to find a place in the wider society by which he is surrounded. This sensitivity starts with a particularized focus but goes beyond Jews and encompasses all outsiders. It is, in a sense, the common heritage of our twentieth century and the threatening nature of the world in which we live.

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[1] Baker and Tabachnick, p. 5.

## Chapter I

## JEWISH ELEMENTS IN THE BIRTHDAY PARTY: MORE THAN GEFILTE FISH AND ROLL MOP HERRING

Nowhere is Pinter's preoccupation, conscious or unconscious, with his Jewishness more evident than in The Birthday Party. Not only does Goldberg, one of the few overtly Jewish characters in Pinter, reflect many of Pinter's deep feelings about his past, but so does Stanley, the central character of the play. Even more important, the main action of the play, the seeking out, the brutalization and the destruction of a man by an "organization" is not an uncommon Jewish experience.

As Pinter himself suggested in an interview with John Sherwood:

> This man is hidden away in a seaside boarding house . . . then two people arrive out of nowhere, and I don't consider this an unnatural happening. I don't think it is all that surrealistic and curious because surely this thing, of people arriving at the door, has been happening in Europe in the last twenty years, the last two to three hundred.[1]

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[1] Interview with John Sherwood, BBC European Service, March 3, 1960. Quoted from Esslin, The Peopled Wound, p. 28.

Commenting on this interview which took place shortly after The Birthday Party was published, Martin Esslin observes: "It is, ultimately, based on the experiences . . . of a Jew in the Europe of Hitler."[1] However, right on his own doorstep Pinter experienced his own encounters with Fascist groups, which further reinforced the feelings of imminent attack which haunt so many of his characters:

> . . . after the war . . . in the East End, when the Fascists were coming back to life in England. I got into quite a few fights down there. If you looked remotely like a Jew you might be in trouble. Also, I went to a Jewish club, by an old railway arch, and there were quite a lot of people waiting with broken bottles in a particular alley we used to walk through. . . . There was a good deal of violence there, in those days.[2]

In writing The Birthday Party, Pinter has universalized the central situation so that the particular organization which Goldberg and McCann represent is not specified. Thus, the audience can imagine that organization which seems most fearful to them (for example, the Mafia or the Black and Tan).

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[1] Martin Esslin, The Peopled Wound: The Work of Harold Pinter (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 28.

[2] Lawrence M. Bensky, "Harold Pinter: An Interview," Paris Review, Vol. 10, No. 39 (1966), pp. 30-31.

However, it is clear that the organization to which Pinter alludes in the interview with Sherwood is the Nazis, or any other regime which has persecuted Jews over "the last two to three hundred" years. And indeed, many elements in the play echo the Jewish experience. For example, the cross-examinations which are meant, not to elicit information, but to terrorize the victims are familiar, as are the sadism of the persecutors, Goldberg and McCann, and the terror and anxiety of the victim. Familiar, too, is the refusal by those around the victim to see evil. In The Birthday Party, Meg, Lulu, and even Petey refuse to believe that Stanley is really in danger:

Stanley: They're coming in a van!

Meg: Who?

Stanley: And do you know what they've got in that van?

Meg: What?

Stanley: They've got a wheelbarrow in that van.

Meg: (breathlessly) They haven't.

Stanley: Oh yes they have.

Meg: You're a liar.

Stanley: A big wheelbarrow. And when the van stops they wheel it out, and they wheel it up the garden path, and then they knock at the front door.

Meg: They don't.

Stanley: They're looking for someone.

Meg: They're not.

Stanley: They're looking for someone. A certain person.

Meg: (hoarsely) No, they're not!

Stanley: Shall I tell you who they're looking for?

Meg: No!

Stanley: You don't want me to tell you?

Meg: You're a liar.[1]

In a sense, Stanley is the archetype of the Jew as victim and in Pinter's portrayal of this situation, Goldberg becomes the instrument of the oppressors. As Baker and Tabachnick observed:

> Stanley is the victim of a kind of scapegoat persecution, and Goldberg's relationship to him is that of a Jewish kapo in a concentration camp to a Jewish prisoner. Stanley, who is all too ready to believe it, is taught that he should never have been born.[2]

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[1] Harold Pinter, The Birthday Party and The Room (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1961), p. 24. All subsequent references to The Birthday Party will appear parenthetically within my text.

[2] William Baker and Stephen Ely Tabachnick, Harold Pinter (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1973), p. 60. . . . /

With Goldberg, Pinter has created a totally unsavoury character. He is a shifty, ever-changing chameleon of Yiddish archetypes. He switches his external guises from the charm of the goneff (con man) to such other masks as geveer (showy, rich man), with a string of advice on how to succeed. To this he adds the loving Jewish father or son and the erlicher (serious, devout, faithful religionist), serving his fellow Jews and their beliefs with hypocritical earnestness. Behind the masks Goldberg also reveals, fleetingly, signs of his own feelings of a certain vulnerability, of guilt and uncertainty. This is particularly evident when he speaks at one point about his father's death. Here we have a major source of Goldberg's feelings of guilt. We sense the conflict between his cruel work, his tendencies to assimilation, and his father's dying directive to be a mensch (a humane person, a good Jew): ". . . Forgive Benny, he said, live and let live . . . Do your duty and keep your (religious) observations. . ." (p. 81).

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[2] (cont'd). . . (The "kapo" refers to a concentration camp prisoner who acted as "trustee" or even informer on fellow inmates, in the hope of gaining special considerations from the Nazi guards.)

Stanley is a schlemihl-like character, a predestined victim, awkwardly stumbling through life. In a distorted, nightmarish way, can Stanley Webber be echoing Harold Pinter in his early struggles to "make it" as an actor and to escape from the confines of his lower middle-class Jewish background into the artistic world?[1]

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[1] His own familial pressures could not have been inconsiderable as Pinter turned from their values and views of success to the life of a penniless, itinerant actor. Widespread biographical information indicates that he had to rely on such menial jobs as janitor, bouncer, and doorman to survive; he married a shiksa (a non-Jewish woman) from this same milieu; he toured the secondary towns of Eire, playing in concert halls and church basements with the very poor pay of a secondary touring company. What sort of life was this for an all-round, golden boychik who had won success in literary and debating societies in school, who was appointed school prefect, and who had even won cricket and football colours? Beyond family pressures, for Pinter himself there must also have been bitter memories of his period of street-wanderings, as he hid from all, for a period of time, the fact that he had left the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, feigning a nervous breakdown to cover his failure. The failed or imagined artist, Stanley, seems to be living a similar nightmare.

Against this background we have Goldberg in his grotesque role as the representative of Pinter's Jewish superego. Goldberg, with his twisted litany of the precepts of proper behaviour, pursues Stanley to bring him back to "Monty," that is, to the proper life to which Pinter was born, and to make him into a mensch (a responsible, sensible adult). The Birthday Party, from this point of view, is Pinter's bitter portrayal of a would-be bar mitzvah, the ritual which signals the attainment of full manhood and adult membership in the Jewish community.

Pinter's depiction of Goldberg is not without the elements of self-ridicule and self-destruction common to many members of minority groups. It is that of the hypocrite who speaks in sweet and reasonable terms and whose actions are diametrically opposite to all he says. There is evidence that, at times, he attempts to pass as a white Jew, a happy member of the majority society in which he lives. Like Pinter, he has a number of names but he reacts with violence when McCann uses his Yiddish name, "Simey." The extreme manner in which Goldberg reacts is interesting because the name is first mentioned by Goldberg himself as that used by

his dead wife in addressing him. As the diminutive of a Yiddish name, it therefore implies an encroachment on forbidden territory by the outsider, the goy (the gentile) McCann, which Goldberg obviously cannot tolerate. His reaction is a flash of great anger and a dire warning that is accompanied by the only open, physical violence displayed by Goldberg in the play: "Goldberg (murderously): Don't call me that! (He seizes McCann by the throat.) NEVER CALL ME THAT!" (p. 79).

Goldberg's exaggerated reaction to what is, after all, a mild transgression, demonstrates Pinter's innate understanding of the emotions which can trigger this kind of response, an understanding that comes from being a member of a minority group that lives in a hostile environment.

A secret sense of guilt seems to echo throughout the play. Perhaps it derives from Pinter's own past, his attempts to escape from the lower middle-class life of the Jew, and his failure to accept its definitions of responsible behaviour. We find this sense of guilt in Stanley, Goldberg, McCann and, at the close of the play, in Petey as he makes an inept attempt to help Stanley. This free-floating sense of guilt creeps like a mist into every part of the play. It even touches Lulu, after her "night" with Goldberg.

Only Meg, with her fey fantasies, escapes. In some ways, guilt is part of the heritage of Jews who survive when so many have perished. It is also an aspect of life for those Jews who seek, through conversion or other means, to escape from the burdens of being Jewish in a non-Jewish environment. The most virulent anti-Semites are often Jews themselves. This is not a phenomenon unknown to other minorities.

At the same time, Pinter is sensitive to some of the ironies visited upon Jews by some of their "best friends," as in this comic interchange:

> McCann: You've always been a true Christian!
>
> Goldberg: In a way.
>
> McCann: No, I just thought I'd tell you that I appreciated it.
>
> Goldberg: It's unnecessary to recapitulate.
>
> McCann: You're right there.
>
> Goldberg: Quite unnecessary. (p. 31)

In Act II, as Goldberg and McCann question Stanley, we find the latter using the ultimate epithet, "Judas," labelling Jews as "Christ killers."

Goldberg's role as a heavy is frequently relieved by very funny lines and comic business. Very often this is explicitly Jewish humour. A good example of this occurs in

Act II when he tries to establish his own background of impeccable respectability. "We knew the meaning of respect . . . I'd tip my hat to the toddlers. I'd give a helping hand to a couple of stray dogs" (p. 46). As in so much of Jewish humour, it carries with it a bitter undertone, a self-deprecation, reflecting the phobic cloak that hangs in the cupboard of many Jews. It contains a comedic replay of fears that are the distinguishing trait of numerous Jewish writers, comedians, and Yiddish folklore. Typical of this kind of humour is the joke about the old Jew who steps out of his house to find people running in panic down the street. He manages to stop a passerby to ask what is going on and learns that a lion has escaped from the zoo. He immediately asks, "Is that good for the Jews or bad?"

It is interesting that when Stanley first encounters McCann and tries to talk to him, Stanley refers to Fuller's teashop. "I used to take my tea there" (p. 42). He also refers to Boots Library. Later, Goldberg in his inimical pose as a benign member of society, talks of ". . . tea in Fuller's, a library book from Boots . . ." (p. 59). There is no way to ascertain if they have known each other in the past or simply shared common experiences in similar (Jewish?) neighbourhoods.

Another aspect of this scene that is noteworthy is that throughout the questioning, McCann keeps referring to matters with Irish and Christian overtones. "Why did you betray us?" (p. 51); "That's a Black and Tan fact" (p. 51); "You betrayed the organization" (p. 51); "She was waiting at the church" (p. 53); "What about Ireland?" (p. 54); "You're a traitor to the cloth" (p. 54); "The Albigensenist heresy" (p. 54); "You betrayed our land" (p. 55); and "Right, Judas" (p. 55). Goldberg, on the other hand, uses references that are more ambiguous. He resorts to a flow of philosophical mumbo jumbo: ". . . It's only necessarily necessary! We admit possibility only after we grant necessity . . ." (p. 53). However, when McCann accuses Stanley of betraying "our land," Goldberg immediately interjects, "You betray our breed." While McCann uses the past tense, Goldberg uses the present, intimating that the betrayal is still going on and, in the light of his Jewishness, his reference to "our breed" can surely mean a betrayal of Jews. However, Goldberg's references to betrayal and guilt of some sort are by no means clear and the exact nature of the betrayed party or group is disguised by Pinter in layers of non-sequiters, from accusations of killing "your wife," to leaving the fiancée "waiting at the church," to two particularly

significant questions from Goldberg: "Webber! Why did you change your name?" (p. 53);[1] and a second question touching on abandonment of religion: "Do you recognize an external force, responsible for you, suffering for you? . . . When did you last pray?" (p. 53). This suggests not some mysterious group of terrorists or gangsters, but religion. It follows Goldberg's questions on name change and "You stink of sin." While Pinter has allowed McCann's questions clearly to touch on both his Irish heritage and his Christian background, he has cloaked Goldberg's references in mystery, suggesting Pinter's desire to avoid open or direct reference to Jews and Jewishness.

The question remains unanswered. Who are they? Goldberg talks of a past that is gone, of his wife and sons who are dead. He does not know what happened to them. Goldberg is himself, in this way, not unlike many Jews who survived the holocaust but who have lost their families and are unable to learn or to understand what has happened to them. He is a man of many faces and names. What is his true identity? Is he a defrocked priest with a mysterious history? Goldberg talks of their old days together. Did they ever really occur? McCann does not even

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[1] This is interesting in view of Pinter's own experiments with different names (Pinta, David Baron).

seem to know exactly what name to use for his "partner." In fact, both seem to have a variety of names. Are they really gangsters or enforcers? At times, they seem to be very squeamish, almost embarrassed by their efforts. Their menace, when looked at realistically, consists of comic routines of questioning and tearing newspaper into strips. Even Goldberg refers to this activity as ". . . childish. It's pointless" (p. 78). Goldberg, himself, at one point breaks down into babbling (pp. 80-81) and he frightens himself. The threatening guise of Goldberg at times deteriorates to comic levels with his chest expander and other <u>shtick</u> (tricks, mannerisms).

Shortly after the two guests arrive, Stanley keeps insisting that Meg tell him their names. After considerable prodding, Meg finally remembers: "Gold . . . Goldberg." The name seems to have special significance for Stanley because he suddenly turns silent and seems unable to arouse himself. In all of Pinter's plays to date, Goldberg is the only character with a name that is unquestionably Jewish. Is it the Jewishness of the name that silences Stanley, or is it the specific name "Goldberg"? We cannot be sure. However, when Meg stumbles trying to remember the name and, at first says "Gold," Stanley does not fill in the rest which we

would expect if he knew the name, but continues to prod Meg to remember the full name. Therefore, it seems that it is not the specific name that stuns Stanley but that it is the obvious fact that "Goldberg" is a Jewish name:

Meg: . . . Do you know them?

Stanley: How do I know if I know them until I know their names?

Meg: Well . . . he told me, I remember.

Stanley: Well?

She thinks.

Meg: Gold - something.

Stanley: Goldsomething.

Meg: Yes. Gold . . .

Stanley: Yes?

Meg: Goldberg.

Stanley: Goldberg?

Meg: That's right . . . (p. 37)

The Birthday Party also echoes many of the terrifying occurrences in the Europe of Nazi Germany. There is the "safe" hide-out with its recurrent and ever present fear of discovery. The knock on the door sounds and an SS officer and his aide enter. They interrogate their suspect who attempts to ingratiate himself and, through various ruses, unsuccessfully tries to deny his identity, to claim another.

Is Stanley being brought back to his Jewish identity by Goldberg and his helper? While Pinter underscores Goldberg's Jewishness, it is surely significant that it is only when he talks to Stanley that he extends Jewish greetings: "Mazeltov! And may we meet only at Simchas!" (p. 59). This indicates that Stanley, too, is Jewish or that Goldberg believes this is the case.

Stanley's destruction or capture issues from a brutal external world. His tormentors are all too ordinary and bumbling as they proceed with their task. Stanley himself is a strange figure. There is nothing very attractive about him. He is a shadowy figure who displays little willpower. He is unshaved, unwashed, and apparently afraid to go out. He is petulant, almost childishly so, to Meg and Lulu. There is an air of defeat about him, the ineffectual behaviour of the schlemihl (the unfortunate, inept one). When trapped, he at first tries to escape by fawning on McCann in such a transparent manner as to guarantee failure.

As The Birthday Party progresses, Goldberg plays a cross between the role of a gentle East End Jew and a middle-aged roué with Lulu, while McCann, always the Irishman, carries on with Meg. Pinter has given this scene an operatic-like structure, with the dialogue of each duo

playing contrapuntally to the other. Goldberg says "Gesundheit," refers to his wife's pet Jewish name for him, "Simey," and the joys of Jewish delicatessen like roll mop herring and pickled cucumber, while McCann drops references to Carrikmacross. The alcohol is beginning to take effect and Goldberg calls for a song from McCann and Lulu exclaims, "A love song!" However, instead McCann begins to sing of the "bold Fenian men." Lulu continues to pursue her "love motif" with Goldberg: "You're the dead image of the first man I ever loved" (p. 64). The operatic-like sequence continues to build as they decide to play a game of blind man's buff. This, of course, is a repeated Pinter metaphor of loss of sight meaning death and culminates with Stanley as the central figure and victim.

The comic sequence of seemingly harmless interplay is set against the pitiful figure of a silent Stanley. It is almost like a scene with the guards in a Nazi death camp. The victim facing destruction is surrounded by tormentors and executioners who play out their normal lives, laughing

and amusing themselves in a prosaic pattern of everyday living.

A deceptive peace and quiet reigns as the curtain rises on Act III. The breakfast scene of Act I is repeated, with Petey sitting reading his paper. But there is no breakfast and, in spite of Meg's concern, there is no "Stanny." There is now a big, black car parked out front. Meg reports that she tried to take a cup of tea to Stanley but McCann and Goldberg were "talking" to him.

Goldberg enters. He exudes his usual goneff (con man) charm and reassurance as he chatters on. Pinter, though, cannot resist throwing in a touch of ambiguous menace and as Goldberg talks about the "big" car, he adds, ". . .(ruminatively) and the boot. A beautiful boot. There's just room . . . for the right amount" (p. 73).

It is ironic that Pinter allows references to his own past to be mouthed by a threatening character, a turncoat Jew like Goldberg. This underlines the distortions of Jewish life that are reflected in Pinter's writing. He has a tendency to stereotype, in a rather negative manner, certain aspects of Anglo-Jewish life. For example, "When we meet Stanley in Act I, we find him suffering from a Portnoy's complaint as severe as that presented in the works of

American-Jewish writers such as Philip Roth and Saul Bellow . . ."[1]

Goldberg's continuing reminiscences about his family and the Jewish customs and food are obviously authentic. These run a wide gamut: He refers to his mother's serving of the traditional gefilte fish on erev Shabess (Friday nights); he mentions his father's admonition to avoid schnorrers (shtetl beggars). Another example is Goldberg's use of such terms as mazel tov (good-luck, congratulations) and simchas (celebrations). The Jewish intonations and rhythms which periodically appear in Goldberg's speeches, like those of Max and Sam in The Homecoming, are clearly set out by Pinter. They are a tribute to Pinter's celebrated ability to parody authentic speech patterns and they serve to underline the Jewishness of these characters.

Elements of Goldberg's unsavoury, caricature-like behaviour are particularly evident in his oily bonhommie and his hypocritical homilies on the rights and wrongs of proper behaviour, even as he proceeds to hound Stanley into

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[1] Baker and Tabachnick, Harold Pinter, p. 58.

submission. For his part, Stanley, as observed, seems "all too ready" to be victimized.

As Act III opens, Stanley is upstairs in his room, apparently destroyed by the horrible procedures visited on him by McCann and Goldberg. Even these two seem to have been repelled by the whole process. Neither wants to go back upstairs to bring Stanley down.

Goldberg reveals his malaise in a long speech that rambles on and on in a seemingly endless torrent of words. It is the kind of verbal diarrhea that Pinter uses to indicate the difficulties of ordered communication and an understanding by a character of what motivates his behaviour. The speech itself, in spite of its seemingly aimless nature and string of clichés, reveals Goldberg's inner struggles with his family background and the morality of his Jewish upbringing. He talks in a distorted manner--of his father's death, of the precepts of a good Jewish upbringing, of the strength of families ties, and of the Jew's obligations to uphold the laws of Moses.

In this speech there are references to learning, a near stereotypical Jewish pre-occupation:

> What do you think, I'm a self-made man? No, I sat where I was told to sit. I kept my eyes on the ball. School? Don't talk to me about school. Top in all subjects. (p. 80)

Humourously, into these protestations is thrown the sly comment of the drayer (the finagler): "Never write down a thing" (p. 80). Suddenly, Goldberg finds himself face-to-face with a lack of meaning in his life:

> Because I believe that the world ... (Vacant) ... Because I believe that the world ... (Desperate) ... BECAUSE I BELIEVE THAT THE WORLD ... (Lost) ... He sits in chair. (p. 80)

Goldberg then reverts to his own Jewish background, as if looking for safe ground, and McCann kneels in front of the table in an attitude of obeisance before a high priest. Goldberg introduces a new and very Jewish name for himself:

> My father said to me, Benny, Benny, he said, come here. He was dying. I knelt down. By him day and night. Who else was there? Forgive, Benny, he said, live and let live. Yes, Dad. Go home to your wife. I will, Dad. Keep an eye open for low lives, for schnorrers, for layabouts. He didn't mention names. I lost my life in the service of others, he said. I'm not ashamed. Do your duty and keep your observations. (p. 81)

There is Pinter humour in this scene when the dying father is reported as saying:

> "Always bid good morning to the neighbours."

This is followed by:

> "Never forget your family, for they are the rock, the constitution and the core!" (p. 81)

The effect is both to underline Pinter's satire of Goldberg's middle-class Jewishness and its possible

relationship to his mission with Stanley. At the same time this speech emphasizes the combination of comedy and mystery in Goldberg's behaviour.

The comedy is further heightened in the wheezing scene which follows and in which Goldberg suddenly fails to recognize himself:

> . . . (He emits a high-pitched wheeze-whine. He looks around.)
>
> What was that?
>
> McCann: What?
>
> Goldberg: I heard something.
>
> McCann: That was you.
>
> Goldberg: Me?
>
> McCann: Sure.
>
> Goldberg: (interested) What you heard it too?
>
> (p. 81)

This is reminiscent of an old Yiddish joke: "Look at me. I'm ninety years old and I'm fit as a fiddle. Knock on wood! (Pause) Hullo! Hullo! Who's there?"

Anyone familiar with popular Anglo-Yiddish theatre will recognize Goldberg's comic variations on the tenets of a successful life. The cadence, the thoughts, all echo the platitudes of the alrightnik (the boastful, successful man) who is so ready to dispense free advice to anyone who will

listen:

> And that's why I've reached my position, McCann. Because I've always been fit as a fiddle. My motto, Work hard and play hard. Not a day's illness. (pp. 80-81)

Humour is never far off when Goldberg is on stage, and neither are the little Yiddish expressions. The final scene with Lulu in Act III is replete with both:

> Goldberg: Lulu, schmulu, let byegones be byegones, do me a turn . . .
>
> Lulu: You made use of me by cunning when my defences were down.
>
> Goldberg: Who took them down?
>
> Lulu: . . . You took advantage of me when I was overwrought. I wouldn't again, not even for a Sultan.
>
> Goldberg: One night doesn't make a harem.
>
> Lulu: You didn't appreciate me for myself. You took all those liberties only to satisfy your appetite.
>
> Goldberg: Now you're giving me indigestion.
>
> (p. 84)

The humour echoes the world of the Yiddish Music Hall. When McCann and Goldberg put on their two-man act, the humour remains but it becomes somewhat more foreboding. This is the case in the last little show as they talk to "Stanley (who) shows no reaction."

Stanley is brought downstairs by McCann. He is dressed in a sober, formal style for a special occasion, perhaps even a funeral. McCann and Goldberg then attempt "to woo him, gently and with relish" (p. 86). They do so, in tandem, using a series of stacatto sentences. It very clearly echoes a comic routine and the Anglo-Jewish cadences in some of Goldberg's lines are unmistakable: "Between you and me, Stanley, it's about time you had a new pair of glasses" (p. 86).

The process is divided into three parts. The first is devoted to Stanley's shortcomings: "You can't see straight . . . You need a long convalescence. . . . You're a dead duck" (p. 86). The second part is a catalogue of what they will do for him: "But we can save you . . . From now on we'll be the hub of your wheel . . . We'll watch over you . . ." (p. 87). The third part of their "wooing" is devoted to the results of their ministrations: "You'll be re-oriented . . . You'll be rich . . . You'll be a mensch . . . You'll own yachts . . ."(p. 88). The episode ends on a comic note. They each repeat the word "animals" and they then turn to ask Stanley for his opinion. But he has been robbed of speech and can only respond with meaningless sound. At this point, McCann suddenly refers to Stanley as "Mr.

Webber" and "sir," as if Stanley has already attained some sort of superior status even as he has been reduced to helplessness.

There is little amusing in Stanley's final moments, before he is led off. He has lost the power of speech and can only make inarticulate, animal-like noises. It is almost as if he is once again an infant.

Petey, always sympathetic but weak, makes a mild gesture to help Stanley, but quickly retreats when Goldberg and McCann offer to take him along for the ride. In counterpoint to the sad demise of Stanley, the play ends with the fey words of a hung-over Meg:

> Meg: I was the belle of the ball.
>
> Petey: Were you?
>
> Meg: Oh yes, They all said I was.
>
> Petey: I bet you were, too.
>
> Meg: Oh, it's true I was. (Pause)
> I know I was.
>
> Curtain (p. 91)

In many ways, The Birthday Party can be interpreted as a dream, the nightmare of a young Jew trying to escape into the goyish (gentile) world that in his childhood probably echoed with strangeness and even menace. Significantly, the

chief agent charged with bringing him back to the world of his family is another Jew. In a sense, the play is the culmination of manhunt. It is a distorted kaleidescope of past memories and present realities, full of banter and over-ripe sentimentality. Peopled by banal characters who participate in the terrifying subjugation of a man, The Birthday Party is the story of the end of an artist's career before it has really begun. I am sure it is. Pause. At least, I think it is. Pause. Or is it?

## Chapter II

## A SLIGHT ACHE:

## A WASP IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN

A Slight Ache is Pinter's first work to venture beyond the working class world. With this play, he leaps from the tough slums of London to the genteel (and gentile) world of the English countryside--a milieu that could seem, to a Jew of Pinter's background, a Garden of Eden. In this seemingly ideal world, the ever present Pinter threat hinges on sexual rather than physical survival.

In leaving the world in which he was brought up, Pinter has moved into a foreign setting, the English country garden and the English country home. The environment, the people, and their language are light years away from the crowded, noisy streets and marginal lives of those who inhabit England's ancient, urban slums.[1]

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[1] One cannot help but wonder what influence Pinter's unhappy experiences as a child evacuee to the English countryside from London, during the war, had on this play and its characters. It was a relatively short stay and Pinter was returned to the bomb-ravaged East End, later to go into a rural area closer to the devastated city, this time with his mother.

With humour that verges on the savage, Pinter lampoons the two characters who represent upper middle-class Britons. Flora and Edward are presented as bumbling, empty people whose "space," their home and garden, is, in a sense, just as closed-in as the rooms of Pinter's first plays:". . . the room is extended to include the garden."[1] In contrast to other Pinter characters, the struggles of Flora and Edward for survival are based more on boredom and ennui than on the more naked and brutal forces that loom over a character such as Rose in The Room. As in Pinter's early plays, there is the familiar menace. In A Slight Ache, the threat stands outside the garden gate, in the mysterious guise of a match-seller. It is no accident that he is named Barnabas after a figure in the New Testament, a Jew converted to Christianity.[2] By the end of the play, Barnabas, the Jew turned Christian, has displaced the "Aryan," Edward.

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[1] Arnold P. Hinchliffe, Harold Pinter (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967), p. 91.

[2] Barnabas' original name was Joseph of Cyprus. He was a friend of Saul of Tarshis who was renamed Paul after his conversion. Both, incidentally, became proselytizers for their new religion.

Edward is a pompous and pathetic portrait of the Englishman who, supposedly, reigns supreme in his own home which, in the English tradition, is his "castle"; except that he is being undermined on the inside by his wife and threatened on the outside by a foreign force. His problems proceed in main from his advancing age: failing sexual powers, loss of memory, and vague dreams of past glories. To this, or as a result of all this, we must add Edward's strong tendency to paranoia. He seems to be a retired businessman turned would-be writer, scientist, historian cum philosopher. Pinter is, to say the least, ironic in his presentation of this honourable member of the British middle-class.

There is, in Edward's speeches, the suggestion of a happier past, a braver time in his life. Aside from his references to his prowess at sports, as he tries to reassert his manhood, he mentions "a three-masted schooner" on no less than three occasions. He talks of the sea and wandering along the cliffs looking out to sea. "The cliff, The sea, The three-masted schooner."[1] It is almost as if he is

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[1] Harold Pinter, A Slight Ache and Other Plays (1961; rpt. London: Eyre & Methuen, 1973), p. 39. All subsequent references to A Slight Ache will appear parenthetically in my text.

referring to a romantic past, when he could repulse invaders, as in those brave days of the Elizabethan period, when the English turned back the Spanish Armada:

> I could stand on the hill and look through my telescope at the sea. And follow the path of the three-masted schooner, feeling fit, well aware of my sinews, their suppleness, my arms lifted holding the telescope, steady, easily, no trembling, my aim was perfect. . . . (p. 35)

Pinter adds satire to the proceedings by the comic viciousness of Edward's attack and execution of the wasp, in the twisted context of an almost dream-like stream of words:

> . . . I could pour hot water down the spoon-hole, yes, easily, no difficulty, my grasp firm, my command established, my life was accounted for . . . my progress was fluent, after my long struggling against all kinds of usurpers, disreputables, lists, literally lists of people anxious to do me down. . . . (pp. 35-36)

There is in this and other parts of his long soliloquy, paranoic descriptions of his struggles against those masses of people (of immigrants?) who seek to displace him.

There are more than vague sexual overtones in Edward's allusions to the telescope, the three-masted schooner, the wasp in the honey jar, and, of course, pouring water down the hole. In fact, in all of this, the sexual implications

are very clear. However, in almost every respect, Edward's manner and behaviour are less than vital and virile. In fact, he is rather mousey, except for some comic moments of bravado in front of his wife and in the safety of his "castle." This is quickly deflated by the silent presence of the matchseller, when the latter is finally brought into the house. It is interesting that in his "weakness" Edward must depend on Flora to bring the matchseller into the house. After making bold remarks about the matchseller to Flora, Edward is reduced to mealy-mouthed behaviour when faced by the stranger.

The intrusion of the "alien," the stranger, has blighted the landscape for him, taken away his pleasure in strolling out: "It used to give me pleasure, such pleasure to stroll along . . . out through the back gate. . . . That pleasure is now denied me. It's my own house, isn't it? It's my own gate." (pp. 15-16)[1]

The matchseller is a vague, undefined figure. He is referred to in sexual terms as a bullock which, in fact,

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[1] This is a paraphrasing of the views of the ultra-nationalist British Brother's League. "Our first duty is to . . . maintaining our position with honour. British work . . . British homes . . . (etc.)." Chaim Bermont, Point of Arrival, A Study of London's East End (London: Eyre & Methuen, 1975), p. 142.

is a castrated bull. There is little that can be said about him except for the views of his host and hostess. He never speaks. We do not see his face but only the outline of his figure. Originally written as a radio play, in that form the audience could not be sure that he was anything but a figment of Edward's and Flora's imaginations. It may very well be the familiar "folly-à-deux," the unverifiable aspect of so many Pinter works.

Flora is portrayed as unceasingly cheerful and positive though she is a full party to the wasp killing. Edward's only expression of joy is after he has killed the wasp: "Ah it's a good day."

In attempting to assume his role of masculine superiority, Edward continually issues orders, sometimes to cover his own fears:

| | |
|---|---|
| Edward: | Cover the pot. . . . Don't move. Keep still. What are you doing? |
| Flora: | Covering the pot. |
| Edward: | Don't move. Leave it. Keep still. (Pause) Give me the 'Telegraph'. |
| Flora: | It's going in the pot. |
| Edward: | Give me the lid. |
| Flora: | It's in. |
| Edward: | Give me the lid. |

Flora: I'll do it.

Edward: Give it to me. Now . . . (p. 11).

The very awareness of the presence of the matchseller produces in Edward a deflation which Pinter indicates in the script with his direction "tonelessly." Edward seems to withdraw and the first scene ends with his declaration that, of course, the matchseller is " . . . harmless. How could he be other than harmless?" (p. 16).

In her own subtle way, Flora reinforces Edward's obvious fears: "Good Lord, what's that? Is that a bullock let loose? No. It's the matchseller . . . He looks bigger. Have you been watching him? He looks . . . like a bullock" (p. 17). Following this dialogue, Edward refuses to go out into the garden, and tries to hide his fears. Flora pursues her game of undermining Edward by patting him and calling him, "Oh, Weddie. Beddy-Weddie." She then introduces the symbol of weakness, his weakness: "Your eyes are bloodshot" (p. 18). She continues to focus attention on the matchseller which seems to produce more acute pain in Edward's eyes. This is a direct attack on Edward's sexual and physical survival. As Esslin points out, ". . . a slight ache in his (Edward's) eyes . . . the image of blindness-- as in <u>The Room</u> and <u>The Birthday Party</u>-- . . . seems to be

equated with sexual inadequacy and death."[1]

But again, Edward tries to regain his masculine strengths by ordering Flora to bring the stranger in and his habit of issuing orders continues:

| | |
|---|---|
| Edward: | Call him in. |
| Flora: | Me? |
| Edward: | Go out and call him in. |
| Flora: | Are you serious? (Pause) Edward, I could call the police. Or even the vicar. |
| Edward: | Go and get him. (pp. 19-20) |

A little later, after Flora has brought the mysterious figure into the garden, Edward pursues his dominant, male role:

| | |
|---|---|
| Flora: | Edward . . . are you sure it's wise to bother about all this? |
| Edward: | Tell him to come in. |
| Flora: | I . . . |
| Edward: | Now. |

There is little progress by Edward in getting to know the strange visitor. Flora volunteers to get to the bottom of the matter:

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[1] Martin Esslin, The Peopled Wound: The Work of Harold Pinter (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 88.

Edward: . . . you're a woman, you know nothing . . .

Flora: . . . I'll speak to him . . . I'll find out about him . . . I promise you . . . I shall . . . get to the bottom of it.

Edward: You? It's laughable.

Flora: You'll see--he won't bargain for me. I'll surprise him. (p. 29)

Edward, however, seems to distrust his companion and is suspicious: "(hissing) what are you plotting? . . . What are you plotting?" (pp. 29-30). However, Flora knows how to deal with her mate, and reverts to the cliché role of the scheming female: " . . . you should trust your wife more, Edward. You should trust her judgment, and have a greater insight into her capabilities. A woman . . . a woman will often succeed, you know, where a man must invariably fail" (p. 30).

Clearly, Pinter has allowed both of them to follow their traditional male and female stereotypical behaviour. Edward is always issuing orders, demanding to be obeyed to cover his vulnerability. Flora slyly uses guile to achieve her own ends. In this case, it is the demise of Edward and his replacement with a more active sexual partner. For under Flora's gentle, affected manner is a sexually vibrant woman who is unsatisfied by her partner.

The presence of the matchseller at the gate is the catalyst for the struggle. Esslin and others have referred to the intruder as the "angel of death."[1] This is certainly a convenient and often-used literary image. However, taking a somewhat different tack and relying on Pinter's own experience for clues, or as the starting point, A Slight Ache can be analyzed in considerably more prosaic terms. A struggling actor/writer, who also happens to be a Jew from the poor, immigrant neighbourhood of a huge city, encounters the hothouse world of upper middle-class England, with its peculiar politesse and mores, set in its splendid country estates. As he touches its fringes, he finds himself impaled periodically on sharp shafts of snobbery. He reacts with resentment. He sees the obvious artificialities, the insensitivity, and inappropriateness of the attitudes and behaviour of many members of this group and, yet, finds aspects of it very attractive. He thinks of himself as an awkward stranger at the gate, particularly in view of his Jewishness. He is without the appropriate attire and pedigree, waiting and hoping to be invited into the splendors of this world. His easiest methods of access are his own

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[1] Esslin, The Peopled Wound, p. 91.

dark, good looks, his youth and sex appeal. In the play, Pinter distorts all of this into a grotesque version of St. George and the dragon. Barnabas, the matchseller, swathed in his balaclava and layers of nondescript clothes, becomes the gallant knight, albeit something less than a shining version of same, with his layers of caked dirt. The dragon, in dream terms, in a reversal of roles, is the upper-class Englishman, the effete graduate of the Public-School system whose big demonstration of his bravery is his sneaky killing of an insect. He argues comically whether the wasp bites or stings. Because Edward loses his sexual strength, he cannot defend his "castle" against the mysterious, dirty stranger who at first seems only "jelly" but who turns into all too solid flesh, with sexual apparatus to match. In fact, Edward's perception of the matchseller has much in common with the way in which many upper-class Englishmen perceive Jews.

Flora is part of the English garden, the flower ready to be picked. Edward evokes the image of the lisping, Edwardian gentleman, the pseudo-intellectual of a period play of manners. The matchseller represents that vague, dirty outside world that only becomes palpable, and in that

sense real, when it intrudes into his world.[1] Or, he may be the symbol of those vague masses of tradespeople or Jewish peddlers who tramped England's back country roads through all weathers, carrying their "unsavoury" wares with them in their search for parnossa (livelihood).

The satire opens on an institution that is fitting to this special middle-class world, the English breakfast table, with great focus on a very suitable centerpiece for this meal--the marmalade jar. In Pinter's bitter distortion, it becomes the weapon for the sneak attack and the ignominious death of a wasp. (A Pinter pun?) This is a comic but vicious preview of the coming demise of Edward. (Another wasp?) Their preoccupations, their language and actions all satirize the couple who occupy center stage. In a sense, Edward can be seen as a British version of the traditional Yiddish schlemihl. This is best illustrated in his inability to talk and behave beyond the surface politeness

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[1] It is not unlike the lack of individuality attributed by the British or the French, or any colonialists, in their enclaves, to the indigenous populations, until they lose control and the colonized people begin to assert themselves. The colonized people then become individuals with names and faces. Thus, the vague form of the matchseller becomes more real and even gains a name, given to him by Flora.

of his class in his encounter with Barnabas. Thus, in his intended cross-examination of the matchseller, Edward rambles on and on, in his socially correct manner without being able to come to the point, to the real questions for which he is seeking answers.

> . . . That's right. Mind how you go. That's . . . it. Now, make yourself comfortable. Thought you might like some refreshment, on a day like this. Sit down, old man. What will you have? Sherry? Or what about a double scotch? Eh?
>
> (Pause)
>
> I entertain the villagers annually, as a matter of fact. I'm not the squire, but they look upon me with some regard. Don't believe we've got a squire here any more, actually. Don't know what became of him. Nice old man he was. Great chess-player, as I remember. Three daughters. The pride of the county. Flaming red hair. Alice was the eldest. Sit yourself down, old chap. Eunice I think was number two. The youngest one was the best of the bunch. Sally. No, no, wait a minute, no, it wasn't Sally, it was...Fanny. Fanny. A flower. You must be a stranger here. Unless you lived here once, went on a long voyage and have lately returned. Do you know the district? (p. 22)

Edward's torrent of words aimed at his guest is to cover his own anxieties. It represents, of course, standard Pinter practice and the clichés start to fly thicker with the non-response of Barnabas and the growing desperation of Edward. The invitation to enter the house is Edward's idea and is intended by Edward as a means of

relieving himself of his fears. However, in the face of "silence, his crisp English middle-class reticence breaks down into an orgy of confession and self-examination that from the beginning is concerned with the basic question: Who or what is the matchseller?"[1]

Edward obviously has little understanding of his visitor who, so far as he is concerned, might be a visitor from another land. Barnabas is a foreigner to Edward. In fact, the matchseller is truly a stranger who behaves totally inappropriately. Barnabas can be regarded as Pinter's distorted symbol of the foreigners who flocked to Britain before and after World War II, masses of immigrants who rudely and energetically pushed aside the "Edwards" to make room for themselves. While standing at the gate, waiting to be admitted and seeking room in which to grow, they are, in the eyes of the British-born, faceless, smelly intruders with apparently no sense of where to go to earn a living but persisting in their determination to stay. They do not respond or talk because they do not speak English. Many of these immigrants were Jews who fled or survived Hitler. For those who were "in place," who were British,

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[1] Hinchliffe, Harold Pinter, p. 70.

they were "the displacers." From another view, these Jews were "the displaced ones."

That the wasp's demise and Edward's are connected can be seen in the juxtaposition of the first allusion to the wasp's forthcoming death and the first signs of Edward's eye trouble, his ultimately fatal condition:

Flora: What a horrible death.

Edward: On the contrary.

(Pause)

Flora: Have you got something in your eye?

Edward: No. Why do you ask?

Flora: You keep clenching them, blinking them.

Edward: I have a slight ache in them. (p. 12)

Later, in the process of killing the wasp, Edward refers to "blinding him" (p. 14).

As the threat to Edward (imagined or real) from the matchseller mounts, the pain in his eyes becomes acute:

Flora: You're frightened of him.

Edward: I'm not.

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

Edward: I am not!

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

Edward: Aah my eyes. (p. 18)

Flora, in contrast to Edward, has energy and vitality. She still displays the sensuality that is revealed as she recounts her youthful story about the poacher, with its sexual overtones. From this point of view the satire, which is withering, is recounted with devastating humour by one who can be perceived himself as a stranger at the gate, trying to sell his own damp matches which, at the outset, ignited very few audiences. Flora sees beyond the intruder's strange garb and the dirt and recognizes the potential for a more active and exciting partner in sex. As Ronald Hayman wrote, "Pinter has (little) sympathy for her and uses her . . . to indulge his predilection for spotting the tart in the lady."[1]

A bath, some soap and scrubbing for Barnabas and Edward's "slight eye pain" turns out to be fatal. It is the passing of a British schlemihl, that certain Edwardian-type gentleman who loses the battle for dominance and, therefore, survival because of his inability to understand and adapt to

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[1] Ronald Hayman, "Landscape Without Pictures: Pinter, Beckett, and Radio," London Magazine, VIII, 4 (July 1968), 72-77.

the demands of a more competitive world, the more open and mobile society of post-war Britain. Thus, the displaced Jew, the immigrant, displaces the staid British gentleman.

A Slight Ache ". . . is a play for which Pinter has a great affection."[1] Like other Pinter plays, it has about it a dream-like quality that sets Edward's demise in the incongruous setting of a garden at the height of an idealized summer. So much of what transpires is twisted and turned to signify the opposite of what seems to be occurring. Thus, as the play opens, Edward has no idea of what the garden encompasses. He uses the wrong names for the plants and shrubs. Yet, Flora declares, "You know perfectly well what grows in your garden" (p. 10). However, as in a nightmare, Edward loses his ability to identify the plants correctly. At one point he says, "It's very treacherous weather . . ." (p. 10). Flora, however, points out that not only is it the "height of summer," but that it is a "beautiful day." Edward talks of the past nostalgically, when there were no threats from "aliens," when everything "was clear, so clearly defined . . ." as opposed to the modern world, with its lack of definition and its uncertainty.

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[1] Hinchliffe, Harold Pinter, p. 68.

During the course of the play we witness a complete reversal of the world which this couple has known. For example, the description of the matchseller as a "bullock" seems to be in terms of his sexuality, and yet a bullock, as noted, is a castrated bull. As the play ends, this hideous creature turns into Flora's love object. While in a sense it is this grubby stranger at the gate who does him in (again the distortion), it is Flora, his loving partner, his "nearest and dearest" (p. 36), who is ultimately the real culprit in his destruction. The nightmare belongs primarily to Edward. This is illustrated by the way in which the world has changed from Edward's perspective. "I don't remember seeing any wasps at all, all summer until now" (p. 14). The advent of the wasp is the beginning of his destruction. In killing the wasp, Edward refers to "blinding him" (p. 14) and this precedes his own eye-ache and "death."

These incidents which have been planted by Pinter throughout the play seem to indicate a whole series of reversals that are associated with dream sequences. While there is bickering between Flora and Edward and an underlying tension and hostility, the savagery of the demise of the wasp, in which both partners participate, is out of

context with the setting and their middle-class manners.

It is almost as if Pinter reveals in this play a savagery of his own, a deep anger, and the butt of his emotions, a form of revenge by the Jew from East End London, are these two stereotypes of upper middle-class Englishmen. Both are depicted by Pinter with little sympathy, from Flora's disparaging references to Edward's lack of sexual virility, to her own sly approach to the seduction of the matchseller. It starts with her strange story of her rape by the representative of the working class, the vaguely-depicted poacher. In the matchseller we have another potential "poacher" to appease Flora's hunger for something other than the dried-up, middle-class reserve of her lawfully-wedded partner.

Esslin notes that in A Slight Ache, as in his previous plays, the imagery remains the same: ". . . the intruder waiting outside, whose coming ends in . . . expulsion and destruction. . . ."[1] In this instance, Pinter seems to have assigned the role of the intruder to the Jew. Ironically, however, the Jew is Barnabas, a convert to Christianity and a "newborn wasp" replaces the "traditional wasp" in the Garden of Eden.

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[1] Esslin, The Peopled Wound, p. 91.

## Chapter III

## A JEWISH FAMILY COMPLETE WITH YIDDISHE MAMME: THE HOMECOMING

With the exception of Baker and Tabachnick's Harold Pinter and Pinter's contemporary and school-mate Barry Supple, few critics of The Homecoming have noted that the play offers a specific portrait of an East End London, Jewish family with criminal connections. (Indeed, The Homecoming has more than a few parallels with the petty criminal family of Richler's Duddy Kravitz.) Moreover, the extent of the Jewishness of the characters in The Homecoming can be revealed in the many ways in which they conform to such traditional Jewish types as the schlemihl (the unfortunate one) Teddy, the chaim yankel (the non-entity) Sam, the grobyan (the gross one) Max, the boke (the muscle man) Joe, and the drayer (the finagler) Lenny. As well, the portraits of Jessie and Ruth are, clearly, ironic versions of the Yiddishe mamme: both women are quite the opposite of the type. It should be noted that none of the characters are pure-bred versions of any single archetype but are composites of a number of prototypes. In addition, it is

obvious that the tough influences of criminal East End London are ever present.

In his reflections on the Anglo-Jewish world of his youth and the unflattering portraits of his fellow Jews, Pinter is not unlike Philip Roth or, for that matter, Mordechai Richler, who dwell on aspects of American-Jewish communities. However, the differences are important. Pinter's characters in The Homecoming are not the near mirror-images used by so many of the current crop of American-Jewish writers. James Hollis underlines this when he comments: "The arena of the play may be social, the relationships psychological, but the deepest currents in the play are archetypal."[1]

In referring to Pinter's The Homecoming, Barry Supple stresses that Pinter ". . . is fascinated by the concrete world of his personal history." He goes on to describe Pinter's play as

> . . . a great echo chamber in which the only sources of sound are the prosaic data of the dramatist's life history and that in that chamber, nearly all the sounds are magnified and distorted into bizarre and sometimes

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[1] James R. Hollis, Harold Pinter, The Poetics of Silence (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970), p. 109.

> shocking combinations . . . The Homecoming represents at once his return and his starting point.[1]

Pinter fashioned his play out of the turbulent world of East End London with its admixture of anti-Semitism, criminal influences, and economic pressures. In addition, there was the factor of Jewish traditions being subjected to the pressures and distortions of an alien culture. Undoubtedly, many young Jews felt limited and suffocated by their home environments and sought to move more freely into the wider world. They found many different paths to follow. Thus, in his "echo chamber," Pinter has Teddy, a "nice" Jewish professor of philosophy, marry a shiksa (a gentile woman) who is a whore, latent or active. And Jessie, the Jewish mother of the brood, has another son who, more "naturally," turns to the business of pimping.

There are, of course, no definitive explanations for the many surprising and curious characters in the play. When we examine The Homecoming from the view of Jewish archetypes and folk stereotypes, Teddy, like his Uncle Sam, is in many ways a victim and his behaviour is not unrelated

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[1] Barry Supple, "Pinter's Homecoming," Jewish Chronicle, June 25, 1965, p. 23.

to that of the schlemihl. In fact, all of the males of this family are rather pitiful. Max, who some critics have identified with Lear and his fading powers in old age, can be viewed more as a bloozer (a blow-hard), who was emasculated many years earlier by his wife and cuckolded by the bully, Mac, his "best" friend. Max, in this "bizarre and sometimes shocking" family, takes on the role of Jessie as housekeeper and cook. As a young man, Max was little more than a verbal bully who paraded behind Mac, his tough shaygets (gentile boy) pal, enjoying the reflected, infamous reputation of a tough guy. His only real violence was performed on the carcasses of dead animals, at the service of the ladies in his butcher shop. A petty racetrack tout with pretensions of glory, Max also exhibits many traits associated with the schlemihl. In fact, as a young man, Max, in the Jewish world of the shtetl, would have been regarded as a shaygets (in the case of a Jew: noisy, uneducated, cock-of-the-walk).

Though the raucous world of East End London is reflected in Max's bouts of verbal violence, "Max and Sam belong to . . . (the) . . . Yiddish world."[1] They are the direct

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[1] William Baker and Stephen Ely Tabachnick, Harold Pinter (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1973), p. 120.

products of the shtetl tradition and Max's noisy abuse is not unrelated to a certain aspect of middle-European, Jewish behaviour. The notion of physical violence was generally abhorrent to the shtetl Jew. Words, often carried to ridiculous extremes, were substituted. Heavy-handed, corporal punishment of children by parents was deplored as goyish (gentile). Instead, the father or mother would, when provoked, resort to the most violent imprecations which, like most tirades, displace more decibels than anything else. Many a shtetl or immigrant home has echoed to the cries of a loving mother berating an errant child, "Zoll deir nor arrupe fallen die hent!" or "Oy gei mir in der erd, shoyne!" ("Your hands should fall off!" or "You should go to hell, already!"). Max, now the housekeeper, resorts to an almost unending stream of invective that seems related to this tradition, albeit with very strong influences from the tough world of London slums.

Pinter's marvelous ear has picked up the cadence and sentence structure of native Yiddish speakers who have learned to speak English as a second language. This is obvious in Max's speeches throughout the play which echo with that flavour. For example, the rhythm and structure of a line by Max, like: "You know what I'm saying? I want

you both to know that you have my blessings."[1] The opening segment is put in the form of a question which is answered. It is a literal translation of the same sentence in Yiddish. Or Max's comment, "Anyway you did it . . . so why don't we let bygones be bygones?" (p. 49). Here we have the beginning of the sentence with "anyway" and then followed by the interrogative, starting with "so" and ending with "let bygones be bygones." All of this very faithfully bears the stamp of the Anglo-Jewish speaker.[2]

Sam, the taxidriver who claims the title of "chauffeur," is very like a figure out of the popular, serialized stories or "romans" which were at one time to be found in most Yiddish newspapers.[3] He is the unmarried child of these stories who, if male, remains single to be able to contribute to the support of the family; if female, stays home to look after the cooking, cleaning, and the younger children. They

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[1] Harold Pinter, The Homecoming (1965; rpt. London: Methuen, 1970), p. 49. All subsequent references to The Homecoming will appear parenthetically within my text.

[2] Goldberg, in The Birthday Party, uses the same expression at one point: "Lulu, schmulu, let bygones be bygones."

[3] Among others, Sholem Aleichem and Isaac Bashevis Singer wrote these stories.

were generally characterized in these stories as gentle and self-sacrificing, unappreciated by the family. One day, as the plot usually depicts them, they wake up to find themselves without identity or place of their own and dependent on the grudging goodwill of those they have served and the "tragedy" may be pursued even further as they are thrust, defenceless, out into the world. Sam is such a figure. He is a chaim yankel (nonentity, nobody, somebody whose name you cannot remember). Now an outcast in his own family home, Sam's sense of personal worth comes from the passengers he has driven and their praise of his abilities as a discreet "chauffeur." Predictably, his tales of his work and his passengers do little to earn him anything but ridicule at home. He does not seem too bright, continually exposing himself to the jibes of his brother. A sad figure who never really seems to have grown up to grasp the realities of his world, he is a born loser: a schlemihl. Within the family circle, Teddy seems to share some of his vulnerability. Neither is "street smart"; therefore, they are easily manipulated and rather despised and looked down upon by the rest of the family. There is the odour of victim about them.

Lenny, on the other hand, is a blue ribbon member of the tribe. His father's son, he, too, is a grobyan (a gross

type), only a more refined version. His behaviour is overlaid with a thin veneer of goneff (con man) charm and, above all, the cunning of the drayer (the finagler, the manipulator). He has a great deal in common with Goldberg of The Birthday Party. He is the bully who, however, confines his aggression to those weaker than himself, particularly women, young and old. He affects a certain gentility in his language and demeanour and tries to use this on Ruth. But he finds her more than his match, as do old Max and Joe. Opportunistic and cunning, Lenny lives on the fringes of society, seeking ways to survive. He is a stereotype of the amoral but rather ineffectual villain. He is the informer of pulp detective stories and the turncoat Jew of popular Yiddish fiction.

Joe is easily recognizable as the stereotype of the boke (all muscle, clumsy in behaviour, with little brain and easily manipulated). He fits into the world of his father and brother. He follows the latter about through various sexual escapades, perhaps supplying the muscle Lenny does not have. He is a would-be boxer but obviously he is not very good at it. ". . . your only trouble as a boxer. You don't know how to defend yourself and you don't know how to attack" (p. 17). Joe seems destined to a marginal

existence, even within his family. Will he ultimately suffer, in some way, the same fate as Sam?

In Teddy, we have the Jew as outsider. From many points of view, he is very difficult to understand. Why, if Teddy was intent on escaping from the world of his family, even emigrating to America, would he marry a woman of the demi-monde? Or was he deceived and is he really home to rid himself of her? Yet, they have three children and, therefore, must have shared a great deal. Why did it take him so long to discover Ruth's identity when it is so apparent to others? At the same time, before he suggests that Ruth stay with his family, Teddy makes an effort to extricate her and go back home with him to their children. "She's not well, and we've got to get home to the children. . . . The best thing for her is to come home with me, Dad. We're married, you know" (pp. 69-70). There is a weak and whining quality to this speech. Teddy packs their bags, gets her coat and tries to get her to leave, but his actions are ineffectual, as are all his dealings with his family. The closest he comes to "facing up" to his family is defiantly to eat a a cheese roll Lenny has prepared for himself and there follows a rather comic confrontation:

Lenny: . . . Where's my cheese-roll?
Pause.
Someone's taken my cheese-roll. I left it there. (To Sam) You been thieving?

Teddy: I took your cheese-roll, Lenny.
Silence.
SAM looks at them, picks up his hat and goes out of the front door.
Silence.

Lenny: You took my cheese roll?

Teddy: Yes.

Lenny: I made that roll myself, I cut it and put the butter on. I sliced a piece of cheese and put it in between. I put it on a plate and I put it in the sideboard. I did all that before I went out. Now I come back and you've eaten it.

Teddy: Well, what are you going to do about it?

Lenny: I'm waiting for you to apologize.

Teddy: But I took it deliberately, Lenny.

Lenny: You mean you didn't stumble on it by mistake?

Teddy: No, I saw you put it there. I was hungry, so I ate it.

Pause.

Lenny: Barefaced audacity.

Pause.

What led you to be so . . . vindictive against your own brother? I'm bowled over.

(pp. 63-64)

Esslin has advanced the notion that Teddy and Ruth have an unhappy marriage and that their trip to Europe is a last and unsuccessful attempt to patch it up.[1] There is some evidence of this in the play and it is a possible explanation. Nevertheless, it is difficult to accept that Teddy is a willing ally of his family in turning the mother of his three children into a prostitute. Perhaps, at heart, he remains after all a full member of the family. This, too, is possible but it does not seem too credible. It must, of course, be remembered that the realism, as pointed out by almost all critics of Pinter, must not be taken too literally. At the same time, the actions and behaviour of Pinter characters are usually logical. Teddy does not project real strength of character, nor does he behave as a man of action. His personality can, in one sense, be regarded as that of a nebish (an innocuous, ineffectual person). However, that descriptive term probably applies equally to Sam, or even Joey. If we examine Pinter's depiction of Teddy as a scholar, and in particular as a student of philosophy, and turn to the archetypes or stereotypes of the shtetl, we find

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[1] Martin Esslin, The Peopled Wound: The Work of Harold Pinter (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 160.

that the counterpart is the Talmudic scholar. This is a man, in the popular annals of fable and fiction, who is so immersed in his studies of religion that he finds it difficult to communicate with ordinary mortals and is incapable of dealing with mundane matters of everyday life. "Teddy: You wouldn't understand my works. You wouldn't have the faintest idea of what they were about . . . You'd be lost. It's nothing to do with the question of intelligence. It's a way of being able to look at the world" (p. 61).

Traditionally, the Talmudic scholar's wife must deal with the practical aspects of home and family. It is she who must see that the grocer and the butcher and the baker are paid, that the children have shoes, and so on. The Jewish scholar is traditionally depicted as a person who inhabits the lofty world of the soul and is totally immersed in the Talmud with its philosophical conundrums. Obviously, such a man cannot waste his time on the mundane. He is described as a man with two left hands and ten thumbs. He does not deal with the minor challenges of practical life. Teddy, the professor of philosophy, may very well have at least one foot in this ethereal world. He is defeated by his inability to contend with the all-too-earthy qualities of both Ruth and his family. His ineptitude is revealed in

his attempts to convince Ruth to leave with him. Her rebelliousness and his inability to cope with her become very clear in the very opening minutes of their entrance on stage. No matter what Teddy suggests, Ruth seems to have a contrary view. Finally, he tries to get her to retire but she cannot be moved as she decides to go out and get "a breath of air."

Ruth: I think I'll have a breath of air.

Teddy: Air?

Pause.

What do you mean?

Ruth: (standing) Just a stroll.

Teddy: At this time of night? But we've only just got here. We've got to go to bed.

Ruth: I just feel like some air.

Teddy: But I'm going to bed.

Ruth: That's all right.

Teddy: But what am I going to do?

Pause.

The last thing I want is a breath of air. Why do you want a breath of air?

Ruth: I just do.

Teddy: But it's late.

Ruth: I won't go far. I'll come back.

Pause.

Teddy: I'll wait up for you.

Ruth: Why? (pp. 23-24)

Teddy retreats to the bedroom and Ruth does as she wishes. This is not merely a mild difference of opinion about a trivial matter. It seems part of an ongoing struggle for power with Ruth, who seems tired of his ineptness and way of life. Teddy's defeat and weakness is underlined as he lamely says, "I'll wait up for you" and Ruth utters the destructive "Why?" Throughout this short exchange there is a sad quality to Teddy's words, from "But what am I going to do?" to "But it's late."

Teddy's vague grasp of the realities of his everyday life are displayed early in Act I as he and Ruth return to his father's home. Prior to their entrance, we have been introduced to the father and his verbal violence. Max's distasteful personal traits reflect a life-long history of hastiness:

> Max: I used to knock about with a man called MacGregor . . . We were two of the worst hated men in the West End of London. I tell you, I still got the scars. We'd walk into a place, the whole room'd stand up, they'd make way to let us pass. You never heard such silence. (p. 81)

Reality or fantasy, this stereotype tough-guy behaviour and language reflect Max's ideal and are present even when talking of his deceased wife: "Even though it made me sick just to look at her rotten, stinking face, she wasn't such a bad bitch" (p. 9).

This portrait of something less than the ideal Dad is reinforced by Max's abusive comments to Lenny: "Listen I'll chop your spine off . . ." (p. 9); or his loving words to his younger brother, Sam:

> As soon as you stop paying your way here, I mean when you're too old to pay your way, you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to give you the boot . . . I mean, bring in the money and I'll put up with you. But when the firm gets rid of you - you can flake off. (p. 19)

Teddy seems to inhabit a different planet as he shows Ruth about the family room. He does so with a nostalgia that verges on tenderness. It is the behavior of the <u>luftmensch</u> (a person with his head in the clouds, impractical but optimistic):

> That's my father's chair . . . (smiling). Yes, that's it . . . Nothing's changed. Still the same . . . he'll get a surprise in the morning, won't he? The old man. I think, you'll like him, very much. Honestly . . . They're very warm people . . . Very warm. They're my family . . . we have to be up early, see Dad. (pp. 20-23)

While there is an element of "Methinks, the . . . (man) doth protest too much!" in this speech, if Pinter had not presented the picture of this repulsively ugly, old man and his sons prior to Teddy's speeches, we would surely have expected to discover a benign and warm father greeting his eldest son after an absence of six years. Teddy's anticipation of a happy family reunion reflects the words of a man out of touch with reality. His first family encounter is with Lenny. Unable to sleep, he comes downstairs. Teddy is alone as Ruth has gone out for her walk.

The exchange of greetings, Lenny's welcoming home speech to his older brother, is perfunctory. "Hullo, Lenny." "Hullo, Teddy" (p. 25). Neither brother lacks for intellect or verbal skills, as revealed in later speeches.[1] Yet, Lenny displays no curiosity or interest in the reasons for Teddy's return home or about his life in America. Answering Teddy's query "How are you?" Lenny merely complains of sleeplessness. After a little further casual talk, Lenny goes to bed.

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[1] "The most ordinary Yiddish conversation is full of the grandest . . . allusions. . . . This manner of living on terms of familiarity with greatness . . . (in spite of) the poverty and powerlessness of the Chosen . . . (reflects) the ghetto's sense of the ridiculous." Saul Bellow, "Laughter in the Ghetto," Saturday Review of Literature, May 30, 1953.

The following morning, dear old Dad's greetings are, if anything, even more grobe (vulgar), more violent. Max embarks on a tirade aimed at his son's wife, ". . . dirty tart . . . smelly scrubber . . . stinking pox-ridden slut . . . filthy scrubber . . . whore . . . slop bucket . . . that disease" (pp. 41-42). The best that Teddy, in his ineptness, can muster against this onslaught is a mild protest: "Stop it! What are you talking about? . . . She's my wife! We're married!" (p. 42).

There is little assertiveness or self-respect in Teddy's response. It is so mild that he almost seems detached from it all. Shortly after Max's tirade, the old man undergoes a complete about-face: "Teddy, why don't we have a nice cuddle and kiss, eh? Like the old days? What about a nice cuddle and kiss, eh?" Teddy, the schlemihl, responds with warmth, "Come on, then" (p. 43).

This entire scene is extraordinary and fascinating. It has been explained in a number of different ways. Baker and Tabachnick (as does Esslin) suggest that Ruth, as in the Bible, was not Jewish and that Max's rejection of her stems from his opposition to his son marrying a shiksa (gentile woman).

In his monograph Harold Pinter, Arnold Hinchliffe

suggests that the "sentimental, strained emotionalism of this scene could perhaps be explained, as could the atmosphere, say, in Peter Shaffer's Five Finger Exercise, if the family were Jewish, but it is nowhere suggested that they are."[1] Earlier in his monograph, Hinchliffe concedes that "Mr. Pinter, a Jew, uses Jews in his later plays."[2] At the same time, he regards Pinter purely as a British dramatist, presumably untainted by any ethnic shadows. "Of all the British dramatists who have emerged to produce this sense of . . . British theatre . . . in the tradition of Kyd, Marlowe, Greene and Shakespeare, Harold Pinter to me is the most significant."[3]

There is evidence that the subjects of intermarriage and leaving the "faith" may have preoccupied Pinter to a considerable extent, both in The Birthday Party and in The Homecoming. While Max displays a predisposition to exaggeration throughout the latter play, there seems to me to be

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[1] Arnold Hinchliffe, Harold Pinter (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967), p. 148.

[2] Ibid., p. 47.

[3] Ibid., Preface. There is a suggestion of clumsy insensitivity to this in view of the treatment of Jews by these playwrights.

a particularly distorted emotionality in the "greeting scene." It is the same with Goldberg in The Birthday Party when he goes about his task of making Stanley into a mensch (a complete Jewish person). In all of this, considering Pinter's own marriages and the writings of certain other contemporary Jewish writers, it seems fair enough to suggest that he may have his own problems of identity and, perhaps, an underlying anger which manifests itself in the behaviour of characters that are, either manifestly or apparently, Jewish. Max and Goldberg are the most obvious examples. Certainly, there are enough contemporary writers who have struggled with their backgrounds as members of oppressed or minority groups.

As the play progresses, Ruth becomes more and more integrated into the world of her in-laws and further removed from Teddy. In Pinter's grotesque distortion, Ruth replaces Jessie as both whore and Jewish mother. When Max suddenly does an about-face and accepts Ruth into the family, he refers to Jessie in a manner that parodies the traditional eulogy that is intoned at the funeral of a Yiddishe Mamme:[1] ". . . a woman . . . with a will of iron,

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[1] Proverbs XXXI: 10-31. "A woman of worth . . . etc."

a heart of gold and a mind . . ." (p. 46).

Later in the play, however, Sam tells his story, kept secret for many years, that reveals that Jessie's behaviour was anything but that of the exemplary Jewish mother: "MacGregor had Jessie in the back of my cab as I drove them" (p. 78). Sam resorts to this in an apparent attempt to help Teddy, with whom he feels a close bond: "You know, you were always my favourite of the lads. Always" (p. 62). But Sam seems more upset by this revelation than the rest of his family and he faints. The others ignore the episode, except for Max and his brutal "He's not even dead!" Max then adds, "(Sam) has a diseased imagination" (p. 78). This closes the incident and Sam's attempt to help Teddy. Ruth moves to take up her position with the family, replacing Jessie and becoming the central figure in the family.

Baker and Tabachnick have stated that "The Homecoming represents Pinter's attempt to shed the nightmare of Hackney, to exorcise it from his system by definitively commenting on its most important and powerful institution, the family."[1] In contemporary, fictional versions of the Jewish family, as portrayed by their sons, the dominant, indeed domineering

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[1] Baker and Tabachnick, Harold Pinter, pp. 123-24.

role of the mother, shows her to be the direct descendent of the ancient tradition of the woman as queen of the household.[1] There is little need here to further emphasize how unflattering many of these portraits have been. Jessie and Ruth are Pinter's contributions to this gallery, a part of his exorcism, no doubt.

Ruth moves from the role of an outsider to the centre of the family. She leaves Teddy in retreat while Sam collapses into a supine state and Joey vainly seeks to attain her ultimate favour. "Max, the tough dicatorial figure of a father dreaming of Judaic morality has given way to a crippled old man lying on the floor pleading for a shiksa's kiss."[2]

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[1] It may seem a little far-fetched to attempt to equate Ruth and Jessie in their dominance of this family with the traditional role of the Jewish mother. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the female, in the ancient tradition of Judaism, had no recognized role in external religious institutions and rituals. In the home, however, she was queen. Her blessing of the Friday night candles has been through the ages the symbolic recognition of her dominant role within the family. (The Sabbath is recognized among Jews as the most holy of all days and the candle ritual launches this festivity every week, a constant reminder of the importance of the Jewish mother within the family.) Thus, in a sense, Jewish traditional life is a matriarchical one with the mother at the heart of all family life and the family as the dominant institution in the culture.

[2] Barry Supple, "Pinter's Homecoming," Jewish Chronicle, June 25, 1965, p. 31.

It is only Lenny who is left in doubt. Though in their bargaining she sets very demanding and exact terms, he accedes to them. She has conquered the family, replacing Jessie as queen of the household. In The Room, The Dumb Waiter, The Birthday Party and The Caretaker, Ruby Cohn points out that each "ends in the virtual annihilation of an individual."[1] In The Homecoming, we have the virtual conquest of a whole family by an individual.

The Homecoming obviously transcends its ethnic origins. It is a strange and, at times, almost incomprehensible view of the distorted and violent demi-monde of a huge contemporary city. It is certainly valid to find in it, as in almost all of Pinter's plays, the underlying theme of "the precariousness of man's existential security." In The Homecoming the family usurps Ruth who, in turn, usurps the family, leaving Teddy out in the cold.

Barry Supple contends that in Pinter's "attempt to provide universal significance /he does so/ through /a suppression of any explicit reference to the family's Jewishness."[2]

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[1] Ruby Cohn, "The World of Harold Pinter," Tulane Drama Review, VI (March 1962), 55-68.

[2] Supple, "Pinter's Homecoming," p. 31.

Nevertheless, underneath it all are the echoes of a low level, Jewish family, the tone of the proste balagoolas (uncultured, uneducated workers). In my view, The Homecoming could only have been written by a Jew with a home background of Yiddishkeit (Jewishness) and the flavour of this is deeply embedded in the characters Pinter has created in this play.

## CONCLUSION

"Edmund Wilson has suggested that inside every writer, making him write, is the irritation of a wound that can't be healed. An examination of that wound can illuminate a writer's work."[1] Simply stated, this thesis demonstrates that Harold Pinter's unhealed "wound" is his background as a Jew brought up in London's East End under the shadow of considerable anti-Semitism and economic uncertainty. It is an aspect of Pinter's work that has been ignored by all but a handful of critics and explored in depth by even fewer commentators on his works.

To illustrate this thesis I have examined the environment in which the Pinter family lived and brought up their son. I have explored three of his plays to illustrate my thesis of the Jewish influences on his works, with particular emphasis on the prevalence of Jewish archetypes.

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[1] William Baker and Stephen Ely Tabachnick, Harold Pinter (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1973), p. 4. They rely on Edmund Wilson's views, as set out in his book The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature.

I hasten to add that I do not contend that all that glitters in Pinter's works is his Jewishness. There is, obviously, a richness in substance that goes beyond his ethnic origins. However, I believe that I have established that to ignore Pinter's Jewishness is to overlook a vital aspect of his work and a fuller understanding of his plays.

In The Birthday Party, Pinter returns to his childhood neighbourhood through the person of Goldberg. The particular aspect of the "wound" which Pinter explores in this play is his haunted view of the Jewish life of his youth as hypocritical and stifling. Pinter does this by making Goldberg, that most unsavoury character, the representative of Jewish Society. Goldberg, in all his repulsiveness, is the only explicitly Jewish character in all of Pinter's plays to date.

In The Birthday Party, this thesis explores Pinter's use of the archetype of the schlemihl (the born loser, the victim) in his portrayal of Stanley, and a combination of types, all negative, in the case of Goldberg. The thesis suggests that the play can be regarded as a nightmarish account of a would-be artist's inability to escape his Jewish background. This background stalks him in the unlikely guise of McCann and Goldberg, a comic hall twin act,

which ultimately turns out to be deadly effective, as far as Stanley is concerned. The thesis traces Pinter's autobiographical overtones in Stanley. The Birthday Party is presented as a distortion of the religious ceremony called the Bar Mitzvah, the ritual that launches a thirteen-year-old Jewish male into responsible, adult membership in his religion.

In A Slight Ache, the underlying theme suggested is the clash between the British middle-class establishment and the outsiders who, I believe, are Jews and other aliens who immigrated to England. The struggle is one of Pinter's favourite themes--the displacement of a person by an intruder. In an ironic vein, Pinter has an ineffectual, silent matchseller displace an honourable member of the British middle-class. Pinter portrays Edward and Flora, the two establishment figures, in bitterly satirical terms. Edward, in particular, is made into a bumbling and, ultimately, pathetic loser. He is portrayed as a British version of the schlemihl (the inept victim). Flora, who is presented as sexually deprived, then brings the matchseller into the fold as her partner. In this strange reversal of roles, Pinter builds the irony. Flora names the matchseller "Barnabas" and this name, out of the New Testament, is of a Jewish

convert to Christianity who was a proselytizer for his new religion. Going even further, Pinter allows Edward and Flora to refer to the matchseller as a bullock, implying a big sexual creature. A bullock, however, is a castrated bull.

Underlying all these strange reversals in A Slight Ache may very well be Pinter's own anger and bitterness which are directed against the rigid barriers surrounding the British upper middle-classes and their codes of behaviour. In particular, this takes the form of Pinter's use of the destruction of a wasp at the hands of Edward and Flora in their "Garden of Eden," as the precursor of Edward's own demise, the death of another wasp. The possible autobiographical overtones in this play may relate back to Pinter's unhappy childhood experience as an evacuee to the English countryside from London during the war. Or they may relate to his hunger as a young adult to be accepted into the wider areas of British society beyond the pale of Jewish, East End London.

In The Homecoming, Pinter introduces a somewhat camouflaged Jewish family from the semi-criminal world of London's East End. He avoids clearly designating the family as Jewish. However, there are a number of clues to its

ethnic identity. For example, beyond the names, there are the clear Anglo-Jewish intonations and rhythms in the speeches of Max and Sam. In some of the speeches there are echoes of Jewish life: one such speech is Max's intonation, in a vile distortion, of a traditional eulogy usually delivered at the funeral of a deceased Yiddishe Mamme, which Max uses in reference to his deceased wife.

Pinter's avoidance of clearly designated Jewish characters and situations derives from his aim of achieving a more universal theatre than that of an Arnold Wesker. The latter has established himself through his works as unmistakably a Jewish playwright. This is a designation which Pinter has successfully avoided.

Thus, while The Homecoming carries many clues as to the Jewishness of the family, there remains a certain ambiguity surrounding this matter. Nevertheless, the characters seem to be a walking gallery of Jewish archetypes from Max as the bloozer (the blowhard), to his brother Sam as a chaim yankel (a nonentity), to the three sons who range from Teddy as the schlemihl (the inept victim) cum Talmudic scholar with his inability to deal with the mundane, to Joe the boke (the brainless muscleman) and Lenny the drayer (the finagler with criminal overtones). Ruth is the shiksa (the gentile woman), at first probably rejected by Max for her non-Jewishness.

In many of his plays, in the view of this thesis, Harold Pinter seems to display a certain bitterness, or even guilt and self-hate. It is a trait that is not unrelated to the experiences of other minority groups or to such American Jewish writers as Philip Roth and Saul Bellow.

To follow the Jewish "clues" in these three plays, and in others, is revealing. For to do so is to discover a somewhat less ambiguous and mysterious Pinter. It provides an added and, I believe, interesting illumination of many of his works.

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## GLOSSARY OF YIDDISH TERMS

In preparing this glossary, I have borrowed freely from Leo Rosten's The Joys of Yiddish.[1] I have, however, added my own interpretations and feelings. For popular Yiddish is as much feeling as it is lexicography. My familiarity with the language comes from my Yiddish-speaking family. We lived in the East End of Montreal in primarily immigrant, Jewish neighbourhoods.

The free translations that I have rendered result from the difficulties of a language and customs that vary considerably, depending on the area of Europe from which the family came. (My own came from shtetls in the Odessa area of Russia.) To this must be added the freedom with which vulgar Yiddish, as spoken by my family and those around us, was used by highly individualistic speakers. As for the English spelling which varies widely, this is a matter of trying to transliterate Yiddish into a foreign language with a different alphabet.

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[1] Leo Rosten, The Joys of Yiddish (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968).

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| alrightnik . . . . | a person who seems to have been successful, who has done "alright" and shows it by boasting. |
| Bar Mitzvah . . . | the religious ceremony in which a thirteen-year-old reaches the status and assumes the duties of a man, with responsibilities of a full adult. |
| bloozer . . . . . | a big talker, full of pretensions, of boasting; a person who likes to hear the sound of his own voice, usually noisy and empty. |
| boke . . . . . | a big, muscular man, slow-witted, and easy to influence. |
| boychik . . . . . | affectionate and admiring diminutive of "boy." |
| bulvan . . . . . | a thick-headed, gross, insensitive man. |
| chaim yankel . . . | a nonentity, a nobody, whose name is never remembered. |
| drayer . . . . . | a distorter of words and events to suit his own nefarious purposes; the finagler; the manipulator, often with criminal intent. |
| fonfer . . . . . | a double-talker, boaster, full of bravado, talks through his "nose." |
| gefilte fish . . . | fish patties or loaf, traditionally served at the Sabbath meal. |
| geveer . . . . . | successful and wealthy man who plays a grand role in the community. |
| gonef . . . . . | thief, crook; a shady character. |
| goy . . . . . | a gentile; also used for a Jew who is dull, insensitive, or heartless. |

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| grobyan . . . . . | a coarse, vulgar person, ill-mannered, ignorant, and insensitive. |
| kuni lemmel . . . | a yokel and simpleton. |
| lemmele . . . . . | an innocent lamb, unprotesting, easily led to the slaughter. |
| luftmensch . . . . | a person out of touch with earthly reality; has head in the clouds. |
| mensch . . . . . | a down-to-earth human being; an upright and honourable adult; someone to admire and emulate. |
| nebbish . . . . . | an innocuous, ineffectual, hapless unfortunate; has been called the first cousin to a schlemihl. |
| parnossa . . . . . | livelihood; financial well-being. |
| proste balagoola . | a coarse, uneducated labourer; also an ordinary working person (without derision). |
| rachmoness . . . . | pity, compassion; a concept of feeling for others; a devout attribute. |
| schlemihl . . . . | a foolish person, constantly mishandling situations to his own detriment and often to those around him; a laugh-provoking victim, uncomplaining and submissive (he does it all to himself). |
| schlimazl . . . . | a continuing victim of misfortune; a chronically unlucky person; someone for whom nothing seems to go right or turn out well. He is a born loser without a sense of perspective about himself or his actions; he invites disaster which often also falls on those near him. |

schmorrer . . . . a beggar, a panhandler who is a professional at his work (he believes he has a right to handouts); a fixture of the shtetl.

shaygetz . . . . . a Gentile boy; also used for a young Jew who behaves in an unseemly, gross manner, not modest or obedient.

shtetl . . . . . a little city, small town or village that housed a Jewish community in eastern Europe. Jews lived in virtual isolation in the shtetl with Yiddish as the main spoken and written language. Hebrew was the sacred language of religion. The Jews of the shtetl were, for the most part, poor tradespeople. They were fundamentalist in their religious beliefs, rather superstitious and very resistant to change and outside influence. In the Russian Empire the status of Jews was very precarious. They were forced to live in designated areas, forbidden to own land and almost totally barred from universities. Isolated from the wider communities of non-Jews, the shtetl and its inhabitants were subjected to the whims of local government officials, frequently the target of arbitrary physical abuse and pogroms (organized, murderous, mass attacks). The Jews of the shtetl developed a rich culture of their own with a special brand of ironic humour, an original gallery of human types and unique codes of behaviour. The shtetls were wiped out in World War II, as were the vast majority of their inhabitants.

shtick . . . . . tricks; mannerisms.