

## Harold Pinter: Traumatic Neuroses and Nervous Shock in *Ashes to Ashes*

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### Abstract

The main purpose of this article is to present the hidden features of Post Traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD) in one of the major works of Harold Pinter, English playwright and 2005 Nobel Prize winner for literature. The selected play is *Ashes to Ashes* which was written in 1996. This play has been analyzed from the perspective of Trauma Theory which refers back to the Freudian psychoanalysis in second half of the nineteenth century where the effects of trauma depicted the trembling shocks of a mental and physical wound on the memory. In the 1860s, Sigmund Freud coined the terms Traumatic Neuroses and Nervous Shock as a reaction to the hysteric and trance states of those people who suffered from a mentally wounded psyche in deathly violent conditions. To prove our contention, we choose the main motifs of traumatic neurosis such as Hysteria, Trance states, Violent mood swings, Amnesias, Partial paralysis of the body, Anxiety and physical pain, Shell shock, Blocking of memory, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

**Key words:** Harold Pinter; *Ashes to Ashes*; Mental wound; Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); Trauma theory

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### INTRODUCTION

Harold Pinter is mainly celebrated for his dramatic genius and political vigilant who flourished in 2005 and gained the most prestigious award of the globe for Literature. One of the main motifs of Pinter's plays is physical and mental intrusion among his characters. In the course of his writing, he depicts wounded characters that are under the pressure of an outside wounding intrusion, either physically embodied in an outside comer or mentally rendered as a deadly treat deepen in past memories. *Ashes to Ashes* is the main play in this case.

Trauma is generally defined as "a wound, or external bodily injury" and specifically has been rendered as "Physical piercing and wounding; morbid nervous conditions; mental distress; traumatic neuroses; nervous shock; death anxiety; and diseases of memory" (Waugh, 2006, p.498). Lenore Terr also defines trauma as a severe, emotional, and external storm when he says, "psychic trauma occurs when a sudden, unexpected, overwhelming intense emotional blow or a series of blows assaults the person from outside" (Terr, 1990, p.8). These various elements of trauma are evident in the play which makes the appropriation of the theory useful.

Traumatic neurosis and nervous shock were coined by Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer in 1860s and embrace the mental disorders such as Hysteria, Trance states, Violent mood swings, Amnesias, Partial paralysis of the body, Anxiety and physical pain, Shell shock, Blocking of memory, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Shell shock is a new form of psychical wounding which appeared after the First World War (1914-1918) among the soldiers who suffered from a mental disorder caused by trench conditions. Blocking memory was also a reaction to deathly violence.

Trauma Theory, however, began to develop only in the late nineteenth century; it can traced back to efforts by medical doctors in France and Central Europe, most notably Jean-Martin Charcot, Pierre Janet, Sigmund Freud, and Joseph Breuer, to understand extreme psychic disturbances (at the time usually diagnosed as 'hysteria') of their (mainly female) patients. Trauma theory is of interest to narrative theorists because trauma has been perceived as an aberration of memory which affects the individual's ability to recount events in an ordinary fashion to create a narrative of personal experience... In 1980 the American Psychiatric Association included a diagnosis of 'Post traumatic Stress Disorder' (PTSD) in the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM-III) to amnesia, dissociation, dysphoria, flashbacks, hallucinations, hyper arousal, intrusion, nightmares, numbing, social withdrawal, and social preoccupation in response to horrific events like natural disasters, combat, rape, and torture (Herman, Jahn, & Ryan, 2005, p.615).

The most important features of trauma are applied in a literary work through violent repetitious images. These features could be narrowed down to "darkness in the form of nightmares, to dark colors as a depiction of distorted horrors, to catharsis and mourning in shape of guilt and sorrow, to traumatic experiences through wars and violent conditions, to gradual loss in memory and psychic strength, to mysterious frenzy and anger, to somnambulistic and midnight trances, to surrealistic and fragmented dreams, to post-traumatic mental depression, to existential dread and trepidation, to witnessing physic pain, to haunted rooms and locations, to imperfect echoes of horror, and to repressed pasts and nightmare figures" (Dawson 2012).

Allen Prosser (2005), in an academic attempt to depict the features of traumatic shocks in works of Pinter, focuses on the first and unfinished novel of Pinter "*The Dwarf*" and three plays "*The Room*, *The Slight Ache*, and *The Homecoming*". In his introduction, Prosser defines the trauma through the definition of Cathy Caruth's book (1996) *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* as a response to anguish events in the shape of recurring flashbacks, nightmares, or other dreary sensations.

In its general definition, trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, or other repetitive phenomena. Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness. The repetitions of the traumatic event—which remain unavailable to consciousness but intrude repeatedly on sight—thus suggest a larger relation to the event that extends

beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known, and is inextricably tied up with the belatedness and incomprehensibility that remain at the heart of this repetitive seeing (Caruth, 1996).

## DISCUSSION

The play, *Ashes to Ashes*, was first produced at the Royal Court Theatre, London, on 12 September 1996. The main characters are a married couple named Devlin and Rebecca who are both in their forties. The setting is a ground floor room with a large window at a house in the country side. It is the eerie and dreadful image of things passed to Rebecca who is narrating appalling dreams and memoirs of herself with her previous lover, the best friend of her to whom she says, "I had given my heart to" (Pinter, 1996, p.53). The play starts with a wicked image of her ex-lover standing on her head, pushing her throat, and showing his clenched fist to her saying "kiss my fist". This image happens again in the end of the play when, in this time, Devlin "stands over" Rebecca, clinching his fist, pressing her throat, and asking her to kiss his fist (p.73). Devlin asks her several questions to compel her defining her ex-lover better. He justifies his treating inspection as "illegitimate" and urges Rebecca to response his questions thoroughly because he defines himself as a person "in the Dark" who needs "light" (p.11). Rebecca then visualizes a bad memory of his ex-lover whose job was a guide and "did work for a travel agency. He used to go to the local railway station and walk down the platform and tear all the babies from the arm of their screaming mothers" (p.27). The same image is repeated to Rebecca when she recalls the moment taken to the train station while her baby was in her "left arm", wrapping it in her "shawl" and taking its "bundle" in hand. Once the baby cries, the man calls him to come back and take her baby while she is screaming and gives "him the bundle" (p.81). There is also a set of speeches on God that Devlin asks Rebecca to be "careful" when she talks about God because he believes a world without God is just "like a Vacuum" and there would be "absolute silence" (p.39). The final images that Rebecca recalls are "mental elephantiasis", "a frozen city", her sister "Kim and her two kids", and "a very tall building in the middle of the town" where she sees from its window a man and a little boy carrying over-sized suitcases", who are "followed by a woman wrapping a baby in her arms" (pp.53-73). The final scene is ended with a sigh and echo that Rebecca says, "I don't have a baby, I don't know of any baby. (Long silence.)" (pp.83-84).

The play starts with an image in which Devlin is standing and Rebecca is sitting. Then the first word is *Silence*, which means complete crisis. As Sir Peter Hall asserts, Pinter's technique is using Dot, Pause, and Silence and each of them signifies something important: "the three dots: which are hesitation; pause which is an emotional stoppage and transition; and silences which are completely crisis" (Viniker, 2012).

(Delvin standing with drink. Rebecca sitting. Silence.)

This SILENCE in the beginning means that there is a crisis and calamity from the onset. Devlin and Rebecca have been already talking about an unpleasant memory and now we as the audience enter to their world. Rebecca says:

Well. . . for example. . . he would stand over me and clench his fist. And then he'd put his other hand on my neck and grip it and bring my head towards him. His fist ... grazed my mouth. And he'd say, "Kiss my fist."

The play's title, *Ashes to Ashes*, is the first clue and a hidden reference to the dreadful memories of Rebecca as the main protagonist, and explicitly the narrator, of the play. Her memories are stored like the layers of dust and ashes together in the course of her past horrible life. The setting of the play, in the first lines, visualizes a gloomy atmosphere that resembles the dark psyche of Rebecca. It is a room in an *isolated* country house drenched in "early evening" wherein "the room darkens" and is "dimly defined" so that even the lamplight cannot "illuminate" it.

A house in the country  
Ground floor room. A large window.  
Garden beyond.  
Two armchairs. Two lamps.  
Early evening. Summer.  
The room darkens during the course of the play.  
The lamplight Intensifies.  
By the end of the play the room and the garden  
beyond are only dimly defined.  
The lamplight has become very bright but does not  
illuminate the room.

In *Ashes to Ashes* also there exists a room in which Rebecca and Devlin are recalling the past events. This room, just like other rooms of Pinter's plays has an intruder who is not a person but a dreadful event: Holocaust (Plunka 2009: 320). Just like Rose in the first play of Pinter, *The Room*, who is living under the parasol of hopelessness and is afraid of losing her cozy room and peaceful condition when two intruders Mr. and Mrs. Sand entered, Rebecca in *Ashes to Ashes* is similarly afraid of Holocaust event to be repeated "again and again" in the course of History and shatters the peaceful condition of living.

**REBECCA**  
I don't think we can start again. We started ... a long time ago.  
We started. We can't start again. We can end again.

**DEVLIN**  
But we've never ended.

**REBECCA**  
Oh, we have. Again and again and again. And we can end again.  
And again and again. And again.

This kind of setting makes the reader to recall the grotesque and bizarre condition in which Rebecca has lived in. The main verbs of the play are in past form and

depict what has happened to Rebecca as ashes to the ashes and pasts to the pasts. She recalls her previous lover as a villain who "would stand [over her] and clench his fist" to hit Rebecca and would ask her "to kiss [his] fist".

**REBECCA**

Well. . . for example. . . he would stand over me and clench his fist. And then he'd put his other hand on my neck and grip it and bring my head towards him. His fist ... grazed my mouth. And he'd say, "Kiss my fist."

These are the first tokens of traumatic disorder in Rebecca's speech. She recalls these images as mental wounds in her psychic memories and reminiscences these wounds as horrible scars that were stricken to deep ashes of her injured conscience and made her nowhere to escape, but to obey. These images stand as a Trance State—detachment from physical surrounding—which keeps Rebecca apart from her physical surrounding and enters her into the world of daydreaming and contemplation of dreadful images that she must obey. She confirms this obedience when Devlin asks "and did you?" and she says "oh, yes".

**DEVLIN**

And did you?

**REBECCA**

Oh yes. I kissed his fist. The knuckles. And then he'd open his hand and give me the palm of his hand . . . to kiss... which I kissed.

These lines are traumatic flashbacks to the violent events that were dictated to Rebecca. She was under the authority of a dictator who was a physical and vital threat to Rebecca and "put pressure" on "her throat". She recalls this villain as a "fuckpig" who even intended to rape her and also calls Delvin with the same title who bombards her with the torrent of questions. This stands as a Violent Mood Swings—sudden change followed by angry outburst and hostile behavior—which urges Rebecca to show her hatred and abhorrence by shouting Devlin and calling him a fuckpig:

**REBECCA**

He put a little. . . pressure ... on my throat, yes. So that my head started to go back, gently but truly.

**DEVLIN**

And your body? Where did your body go?

**REBECCA**

My body went back, slowly but truly.

**DEVLIN**

So your legs were opening?

**REBECCA**

Yes.

Pause,

**DEVLIN**

Your legs were opening?

**REBECCA**

Yes.

(Silence.)

**DEVLIN**

Do you feel you're being hypnotized?

**REBECCA**

When?

**DEVLIN**

Now.

**REBECCA**

No.

**DEVLIN**

Really?

**REBECCA**

No.

**DEVLIN**

Why not?

**REBECCA**

Who by?

**DEVLIN**

By me.

**REBECCA**

You?

**DEVLIN**

What do you think?

**REBECCA**

I think you're a fuckpig.

In this scene, Rebecca is introducing a dreadful memory of her past times that she has already experienced. She visualizes her lover [who seems to be her torturer] as a man standing over her with clenched fist and instructing her to kiss his fist. Here we see three DOTS (...) and the word PAUSE which signifies hesitation and emotional transition respectively. It means that the crisis of Rebecca has been so severe that even now she trembles from that fears and terrors of that dreadful memory; consequently she has emotional stoppage and hesitation in her speech. It is a sort of Hysteria—uncontrollable emotions—which shapes the fear of Rebecca and makes her to depict her feeling of fear in an irrepressible way.

**REBECCA**

Well, I'm just terribly' upset.

(Pause.)

I'm just incredibly upset.

(Pause.)

Don't you want to know why? Well, I'm going to tell you anyway. If I can't tell you who can I tell? Well, I'll tell you anyway. It just hit me so hard. You see ... as the siren faded away in my ears I knew it was becoming louder and louder for somebody else.

She remembered her lover who was a travel guide and worked in the railway station. She recalls man's job malicious who was taking the babies by force from their screaming mothers in the station. She is "terribly upset" and recalls these memories in panic. It stands as an anxiety in Rebecca's mind which makes her anxious as far as she drowns in her dreams.

**REBECCA**

He did work for a travel agency. He was a guide. He used to go to the local railway and walk down the platform and tear all the babies from the arms of their screaming mothers  
(Pause.)

**DEVLIN**

Did he?

(Silence.)

**REBECCA**

By the way, I'm terribly upset.

*Ashes to Ashes* is our recollection of Holocaust [Shoah in Hebrew Language] memories and "trauma of atrocity" which are deeply carved in our minds (Plunka, 2009, p.318). Pinter attempts to narrate the dreadful memories of holocaust through the main character of this play, Rebecca. She is an embodiment of our collective unconscious when we recollect the horrified scenes and genocide atrocities of Nazi regime during the Second World War and within the concentration camps. Rebecca has not experienced the war scenes and has never been present during war time, but it is Pinter who selects this character, as a fictional persona and vividly as an embodiment of our memories, to recount the cruelties of war time.

**REBECCA**

I have no such authority. Nothing has ever happened to me. Nothing has ever happened to any of my friends. I have never suffered. Nor have my friends (p.41).

Sunday Times Review defined *Ashes to Ashes* as the most thrilling works of Pinter. It says, "This dark, elegiac play studded with brutally and swaggeringly funny jokes, is one of Pinter's most haunting works" (Pinter, 1981, Rear Back).

Through *Ashes to Ashes*, Pinter has depicted a "Middle Way" between his political writing and "conventional narrative drama":

Pinter has noted in 1989 that he is attempt in his Political plays to find a "middle way" between agit-prop, a political form he has deplored, and more conventional narrative modes of drama (Gussow, p.92).

The adoption of a "middle way" should not be surprising given that Pinter has distanced himself from both the dominant styles of late modern drama, Absurdism and realism. The clearest example of this "middle way" is *Ashes to Ashes* (1996).

Pinter's most recent play and the culmination of his political theatre, in which commentary about public matters is generated through the portrayal of a personal relationship in a private domestic setting (Grimes, 1999, p.9)

It is also noticeable that Pinter himself has experienced these brutalities in the course of his life and these scars are deeply forged in his mind. He defines the play in this way:

*Ashes to Ashes* is about two characters, a man and a woman, Devlin and Rebecca. From my point of view, the woman is simply haunted by the world that she's been born into, by all the atrocities that have happened. In fact they seem to have become part of her own experience, although in my view she hasn't actually experienced them herself. That's the whole point of the play. I have myself been haunted by these images for many years, and I'm sure I'm not alone in that. I was brought up in the Second World War. I was about fifteen when the war ended;



I could listen and hear and add two and two, so these images of horror and man's inhumanity to man were very strong in my mind as a young man. They've been with me all my life, really. You can't avoid them, because they're around you simply all the time. That is the point about *Ashes to Ashes*. I think Rebecca inhabits that (Pinter, 1998, p.80).

The art of Pinter, as Batty asserts (2005, p.30), is to explore the personal experiences of characters and to highlight their responses to those experiences. *Ashes to Ashes* is a significant manifestation of brutal deeds by Nazi regime in Second World War. It is about the enormous guiltless bodies that were massacred by a hit man called Hitler who imposed the most dreadful anxieties and physical wounds to the mankind, Pinter says:

It is about the images of Nazi Germany; I don't think anyone can ever get that out of their mind. The Holocaust is probably the worst thing that ever happened, because it was so calculated, deliberate and precise, and so fully documented by the people who actually did it. Their view of it is very significant. They counted how many people they were murdering every day, and they looked upon it, I take it, like a car delivery service. How many cars can you make in one day, how many people can you kill in one day? (Pinter, 1998, p.80).

Rebecca in *Ashes to Ashes* narrates the power brutality so that she is even now frightened even to recall them to Devlin. She reveals her fear and insecurity through the siren she heard in the railway station. She fears this sound because she thinks there is a dreadful act after that and someone will come again to tear off the babies from their screaming mothers. She says:

**DEVLIN**

You mean that it's always being heard by somebody, somewhere? Is that what you're saying?

**REBECCA**

Yes. Always. Forever.

**DEVLIN**

Does that make you feel secure?

**REBECCA**

No! It makes me feel insecure, terribly insecure.

Then Devlin, just like an indifferent dictator who is indifferent to the horrible realities of brutal system, intends to deviate the case and assures her that there is also Police siren that will be a token of security and there is no need to be fear of outside. He affirms that if any problem happens, the cops will come and save her:

**DEVLIN**

Sure. They're very busy people, the police. There's so much for them to do. They've got so much to take care of, to keep their eye on. They keep getting signals, mostly in code. There isn't one minute of the day when they're not charging around one corner or another in the world, in their police cars, ringing their sirens. So you can take comfort from that, at least. Can't you? You'll never be lonely again. You'll never be without a police siren. I promise you.

The final scene is ended with a sigh and echo that Rebecca says, "I don't have a baby, I don't know of any baby. Long silence" (pp.83-84). This scene stands as a sort of Blocking memory and Shell shock which suffers Rebecca from a mental disorder caused by a horrible condition; that is, a reaction to deathly violence.

*Ashes to Ashes*, as already mentioned by Pinter (1998, p.80), is "about the images of Nazi Germany". Hitler was a totalitarian leader whose followers in National Socialistic party called him "Führer" which is a German word and means "Guide" in English. In One part of the play, Rebecca defined her tyrannical lover as a Travel Guide who was working in a travel agency. She recalled that in their visit to a factory, which resembled as a concentration camp in which the prisoners were condemned to do compulsory labor, all the workers raised their hats as a token of respect for him and believed in him as a man of "purity" and conviction".

**REBECCA**

I think it had something to do with a travel agency. I think he was some kind of courier. No. No. He wasn't. That was only a part-time job. I mean that was only part of the job in the agency. He was quite high up, you see. He had a lot of responsibilities. (Pause.)

**DEVLIN**

What sort of agency?

**REBECCA**

A travel agency.

**DEVLIN**

What sort of travel agency?

**REBECCA**

He told me afterwards it was because they had such great respect for him.

**DEVLIN**

Why?

**REBECCA**

Because he ran a really tight ship, he said. They had total faith in him. The respected his ... Purity, his ... conviction. They would follow him over a cliff and into a sea, if he asked them, he said. And sing in a chorus, as long as he led them. They were in fact very musical, he said.

Rebecca evoked that the workers respected her former lover because he was a man of conviction and consequently, this scene, recalls the followers of Hitler who appreciated their totalitarian leader as a man of purity and conviction.

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## CONCLUSION

The theme of *Ashes to Ashes* is atrocities solidified in mind of a woman called Rebecca. Rebecca lives in the dreadful hallucinations of her past memories. The point in this play is that all the images to Rebecca are realistic images that have also been happened to Pinter as well and are a part of Pinter's own psyche. What Rebecca recalls is a dreadful image that has always prevailed in modern societies. Rebecca is totally shattered under the atrocities of threatening pressures from her old and present lovers

and recollects these traumatic nightmares as a mental wound forever.

Consequently, mental injuries, as happened to Rebecca, will be the tokens of brutal and dreadful images that may have happened to a lot of people round the world; those who actually experience the ferocious cruelties of an outsider either in a local devastating quarrel or in a nearby regional war. These scars remain as wounds in the mental psyche of the target victims who will live with these abrasions forever and exchange these haunting images with the young generation of our present time.

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