

**Florentina ANGHEL**

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**Exploring Contemporary British and American Drama**  
*Students' Book*



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**Editura UNIVERSITARIA**  
**Craiova, 2015**

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**Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale a României**  
**ANGHEL, FLORENTINA**

**Exploring contemporary British and American  
drama** / Florentina Anghel. - Craiova : Universitaria,  
2015

Conține bibliografie

ISBN 978-606-14-0956-3

82.09

## Introduction

The naturalistic and realistic theatre with “linear depictions of life on stage” (Lane 2) which offered limited freedom for performance was abandoned. With Samuel Beckett’s plays which marked a turning point in drama writers started to experiment innovative and exciting devices by crossing the limits of the setting, language, action and characters. Beckett’s common people still populate contemporary drama in harmony with a generally stylized and more suggestive setting. The scarcity of objects on the stage increased their communicative power: less on the stage, more from the audience which is often as engaged in the performance as the readers are engaged in the process of reading. Contemporary drama folds favourably around the expectations and needs of the present generation due to its brevity, density, tension, rhythm and versatility, tackling various themes and addressing different levels of audience.

Both theatre, which is “a place for viewing” according to the Greek *theatron*, and drama, coming from the Greek *dran* meaning “to do” (David Lane 5-7), imply a step further from the literary text of the play. Plays are often analysed only at the first level, that of the literary text in written form, a kind of analysis that is required in this book, and provide readers with ‘limited’ information, considering that the text is the material for the stage where the final product of the creative process comes to life. The reading of a play is a means to activate the readers’ imagination as they have to fill in the gaps and the setting, to *see* the “performance potential”.

According to Lane, “reading and analysing text for performance is a creative process that can be honed and practiced” or “a translation of material from page to stage.”(Lane 6) The entire experience with drama is a two-fold process composed of the reception of the written text and of its performance.

Contemporary drama provides topical situations and problems, also covering a wide range of themes. Although British playwrights like Harold Pinter in *One for the Road*, Martin McDonagh in *The Pillowman* and Caryl Churchill in *A Number* did not explicitly set the action of their plays within a definite cultural context, at least the European audiences familiar with specific aspects of the environments the authors built can make associations with real spaces and resonate with these plays. Such indefinite spaces allow more associations and elicit the interest of a larger number of readers and theatre-goers. The selected American playwrights, Sam Shepard, August Wilson and Quiara Alegria Hudes, are very precise in the outlining of the context, their plays echoing mainly American social, racial and economic problems some of which can be, however, easily paralleled to similar ones in other countries.

The nucleus of most of the selected plays is the family explored from within and displaying inner tensions and conflicts which emerged from the interaction with outer elements. Consequently, the power in a totalitarian state interferes with Victor’s family life in *One for the Road*, women’s emancipation and cloning lead to changes in traditional families, racism and slavery cause conflicts and disagreements in Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson*, while war, drugs and the Internet bring

‘dissonance’ in contemporary families as Hudes shows. Sam Shepard’s play interlaces the American family at the end of the twentieth-century with myths and legends from other cultural contexts tracing a common axis of the family and its inner problems.

The present book aims at familiarizing students with British and American contemporary writings, with innovative devices used in drama and with the new and topical themes which are closer to their realities and help them understand their own context. Structured into two parts, it is an invitation to explore several fragments from each play.





## **Harold Pinter**

### ***One for the Road***

Harold Pinter (1930-2008) consistently built a world of uncertainty and terror, reversing the symbols of comfort and protection, like home, room and silence.

Born in London, Pinter was the son of Portuguese Jews whose initial name da Pinta was changed for their own protection. Harold Pinter attended the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London, from which he withdrew, refused the National Service being consequently fined, and attended the Central School of Speech and Drama. His plays encompass the echoes of his life, the social and cultural context, his studies and experience on the stage as an actor. Pinter creates the comedy of menace, turns words into weapons, and carefully ensures a plane of well coordinated subtexts, exploiting hidden fears. The ever-growing tension is built on the characters' awareness of the ever-present menace within themselves and common and familiar situations and social groups. His unique style is termed "Pinteresque". Pinter thus reinvents relations, symbols, contexts and the purpose of language: the guest becomes the host, words become weapons, silence acquires meaning, and rooms are the places where lives and ideas intersect and menace is built. His theatre evolves from the metaphoric rendering of power and abuse to the realistic one.

He started his career as a playwright with *The Room* (1957), and continued with *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter* (both in 1957), followed by *The Caretaker* (1959) and *The Homecoming* (1964). A

second period is associated with *Landscape* (1967) and *Silence* (1968) and he eventually focused more on politics in *One for the Road* (1984), *Mountain Language* (1988) and *The New World Order* (1991). Pinter received The Nobel Prize in Literature in 2005.

#### *Summary:*

Victor, Gila and their son, Nicky, are interrogated individually by Nicolas, the representative of an authoritarian regime, for an unnamed offense. Nicolas tortures them psychically, after they have obviously been through physical torture. Victor is told that his wife will be sent home later, but his son seems to have been already killed from Nicolas' use of the past tense: "Your son. I wouldn't worry about him. He *was* a little prick" (Pinter 1663).

*Setting:* A room in a house during a day. Other rooms in the same building and Victor's house are mentioned. The larger context is a totalitarian state.

*Themes:* the abuse of power; physical pain and violence; psychic torture; manipulation.

### **Power and religion**

#### **NICOLAS**

...

You may have noticed I'm the chatty type. You probably think I'm part of a predictable, formal, long-established pattern; i.e., I chat away, friendly, insouciant, I open the batting, as it were, in a light-