

## Reading of Harold Pinter's *The birthday party*

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### Abstract

Harold Pinter's dissection of the human condition is artfully embodied in his plays. His ability to bring on stage controversial issues as identity, absurdity of human actions and chaos of life along with the implementation of new theatrical techniques distinguish him from his contemporaries. The present paper seeks to delve into and analyze one of Pinter's twentieth century leading plays, *The Birth Day Party*.

**Keywords:** pinter, twentieth century, drama, absurd, themes, techniques

### 1. Introduction

Twentieth century drama encapsulates a period of profound change in the theatrical heritage of the Western theatre. Many traditionally founded rules of theatrical representation were challenged and brought under criticism. It was necessary to bring reviving winds upon the conventional theatrical tradition and introduce change and development needed for theatre to keep up with the invasion of other new artistic forms such as cinema and TV. Indeed, dramatists were motivated to try new paths to interact with and represent society. In fact, the collapse of the late 19th century prevailing complacency, the loss of faith in humanism's creed and the calamities of world war I/II provided new areas to explore. Interestingly, the emergence of the theatre of the absurd marked a significant shift in theatrical tradition. Spearheaded by the Irish Samuel Beckett, the French Eugène Ionesco and the British dramatist Harold Pinter, the theatre of the absurd shook the conventional perception through introducing "revolutionary" touches in terms of language, themes and techniques.

Harold Pinter is one of the most influential modern British dramatists. His long and prolific writing career left an indelible mark on the world's literature. Among Pinter's famous works there are *The Homecoming* (1964), *Betrayal* (1978) and *The Birth Day Party* (1957). Indeed, being one of his early plays, *The Birth Day Party* opened fame horizons to Pinter and launched him into a successful and prosperous career. For that reason, this paper is devoted to the analysis and interpretation of this play and how it distinguishes itself as a piece of work of the twentieth century drama.

### Discussion

Written in 1957, *The Birth Day Party* is one of Pinter's well-known and most-frequently acted pieces of theatre. In its early performances, it was hostilely received by the audience only to win recognition and appreciation in later performances. Its highly challenging style and interpretation make it uneasy for critics to identify it under a specific genre. Yet, Martin Esslin (1961) classifies it under the tradition of the theatre of the absurd and Irving Wardle sees it from a "comedy of menace" angle. In fact, Pinter hides

valuable interpretations below the surface structure of Stanley's story. The story of Stanley in Meg and Petey's boarding house encapsulates Pinter's conceptualizations of identity problem, absurdity of human actions and chaos and confusion in life.

Pinter embroiders several themes in his *The Birthday Party* to present a unique perception and representation of various aspects of life. Through his characters, Pinter deals with chaos and confusion as major key elements of "the absurdist theatre". He skillfully interweaves chaos and confusion through vague and ambiguous lives and pasts of his characters. Stanley's mysterious and anonymous past remains ambiguous and shelled till the end of the play. Act I reveals Stanley's inability to account for his own past's particularities to Meg. Another instance of confusion is unraveled in Goldberg's names and past and how they are wrapped up in delusion and mystery. Moreover, Meg is drawn into a false nostalgia; she tries to persuade herself of things about her life that are apparently untrue. Hence, these types of confusions soak the events into total chaos. Obviously, the arrival of Goldberg and McCann turn the apparent simplicity of the boarding house into complete chaos. Significantly, *The Birthday Party's* truth is folded in chaos and confusion and the audiences are asked to make order out of the chaotic and confusing events.

Probing into the play, one can clearly identify Pinter's reliance on nostalgia as a major theme to establish a confusing relation between the past and present. Particularly, Goldberg is often nostalgic referring to his own past and how men used to respect women during "good old days". Seemingly, Goldberg's invocation is used to comment on Stanley's inappropriate behavior towards Lulu, yet it turns out to be a delusion that collapses down when Goldberg himself assaults Lulu and remains unable to live up to that past. Further, other characters exhibit great passion for nostalgia. Lulu and Meg speak differently of their childhoods. Meg recalls being abandoned and Lulu tells of her cheerful memories. Likewise, the characters' longing to the past is manifested in playing blind man's bluff because it makes them nostalgic. The play suggests a pleasant sense of nostalgia, but with insidious complexities. Pinter brings violence under spot light as an inherent trait of human nature. He traps his characters into either physical or

emotional violent instances. Most of male characters are inclined to exercise violence especially against women. Stanley is mean to Meg and not only intimidates her verbally, but he also plans to assault Lulu. Indeed, the tense and violence-haunted atmosphere prevails in the play and culminates in Goldberg rape of Lulu. Further, Stanley's vicious and cruel treatment of Meg is contrasted with his coward encounter with Goldberg and McCann. Truly enough, Goldberg and McCann are unrestrainedly violent; no matter how they try to remain calm and demonstrate civility, they finally end up committing violent acts and Stanley's nervous breakdown is an outcome of their tortures.

Linked to violence, the theme of sex seems to shroud and tie the whole play in tense lusty relationships. Stanley's relationship with Meg reveals possible sexual interest between the two that even frees Stanley to treat her cruelly. Stanley's inappropriate and ugly treatment of Meg is reflected in Goldberg's address to him as "mother defiler" and "a lecher". On the other hand, Lulu is initially attracted to Stanley but shifts her interest to Goldberg in act II. She innocently becomes a prey to men's sexual assaults. Unexpectedly, she is upset to know about Goldberg's departure. Pinter's discussion of sex is meant to acknowledge it as an essential aspect of life, and yet he does not make it a true and successful experience among the characters.

Language is another theme of the play that deserves close scrutiny. At the first glance, the play's dialogue seems constantly interrupted by significance moments of silence and pause. Indeed, Pinter artfully crafts his harmonious use of language to reveal much in least possible number of words and utterances. In practice, characters juggle words in a "deeper structure" only to leave the audience interact and interpret the real communication that happens beneath language. In fact, characters employ language differently. Stanley expresses his self-discomfort and guilt through insulting Meg. Goldberg is a skillful orator; he manipulates language to control the flow of communication, to avoid others questions and to contemplate about the past. In her speeches, Meg repeats herself many times and asks the same questions in a desperate attempt to gain attention. Apparently, her words are only the tip of the iceberg that hides a state of insecurity and neurosis. Essentially, language in the play is a misleading tool Pinter uses to impart his message.

But then, Pinter's heavily reliance on pauses and silences to tell the story is one of his favorite techniques that distinguish his plays. Petter Hall identifies three expressive techniques Pinter uses to pull the strings of his play together. Firstly, the three dots (...) represent a moment /point of pressure and a search for a word. The character is usually unable to express themselves. Secondly, pause signifies a lack of speech which implicitly becomes a form of communication of a potential threat or a moment of tension. Thirdly, silence reveals an extreme crisis instant and a moment of deep contemplation form which the character comes out changed. This change is generally unpredictable and greatly dramatic.

### Conclusion

Since its first performance, *The Birth Day Party* has been a controversial piece of theatre. Its unique form and content make it one of the finest representatives of the absurd

theatre. Indeed, it entails well-readers to be able to decipher its craftily interwoven messages, themes and techniques. The play attempts to reflect the confusing and ambiguous reality of human life. It provides the audience with a genuine experience to delve into and identify whatever traumatic and fragmented instances on stage. *The Birth Day Party* presents a well-constructed puzzle that juggles major issues such as identity, belonging, difficulty of social integration and the absurdity of the individual's life. The present account of *The Birth Day Party* is only an attempt to crack Pinter's shell of genius; further readings are invited to uncover other aspects of this special work.

### References

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