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Pinter's *The Birthday Party*: Not Absurdity, Nor Menace, but the Portrait of the Human Predicament

Abstract

The paper attempts to explore the complicated world of Harold Pinter in which nothing can be presumed as definite. Though his major plays are closely associated with the terms 'the Theatre of the Absurd' and 'Comedy of Menace', this paper analyses *The Birthday Party* to show that it primarily reflects existentialist issues and therefore focuses on the essential human predicament in a world of absurdity and hostility where man's destiny is determined by a system representing an unidentified force or power. Man, helpless and isolated, drags out his existence, and wriggles round for survival. A bogymen or henchman will come one day not to redeem his suffering, but to annihilate his identity and existence. Haunted, he is jarred in every bone. In *The Birthday Party*, through the annihilation of Stanley's individuality Pinter shows this vulnerable, rather fluid state of human existence. Stanley is depersonalised in the play because he stands accused of betraying an unknown organisation. The paper shows that Pinter's characters are unique in terms of their predicament in a brutal world of non-existence. Finally, the paper points out that Pinter in *The Birthday Party* is more concerned with the existential dilemmas of human predicament and survival than with absurdist philosophical issues.

Introduction

Pinter's major dramas often involve strong conflicts among characters who are haunted by their own remembered versions of the past and fight for verbal and territorial dominance. Thematically ambiguous, they raise a number of complex issues and convey certain concerns for individual human identity relating to loneliness, failure and personal inadequacy, and reveal a man's helplessness in the face of social or political forces. The characters of Pinter's plays display all our basic needs and utmost desires to survive in a hostile world. They are threatened and menaced by the power of language, and vicissitudes of their own memories. "Violence is a strong presence in Pinter's works, sometimes an undercurrent, sometimes open, but ever-present. The plays have been

described as *wilfully mystifying* and *a succession of riddles*; it is as well to remember that they are also often marvellous theatre" (Stephen 328).

In Pinter's plays the predicament of the human being is elaborated in terms of conflicts, power play through language, upholding human dignity and identity against the inexorable forces of depersonalisation. Some of his characters hold onto illusions based on their very urge to exist and live in a cruel world. Often, they are seen to suffer from existential dilemmas; for instance, Davies in *The Caretaker* "is constantly defined in terms of possessions and objects which cumulatively, expose the limits of his existence: a good pair of shoes, a warm shirt, a knife to cut his bread and a clock ('then I stand a bit of a chance')" (Naismith 103). The most general feature of Pinter's characters is that they are devoid of any definite identity. Almost nothing is said about their past; they even suffer from the horror of existential reality. When the torrents of questions are thrown upon Stanley by two undefined agents (outsiders) in the play *The Birthday Party*, Stanley is reduced to a non-existential state of identity crisis:

MCCANN: Who are you, Webber?

GOLDBERG: What makes you think you exist? (62)

Though Pinter many times declared that he had no theme or vision in his mind while writing plays (Stephen 328), he and his works are frequently associated with some dominant movements and philosophy of his time. The term 'the Theatre of the Absurd' has been applied to Pinter's works by a prominent drama critic Martin Esslin who coined the term and presented Harold Pinter along with other four playwrights as Absurdist in the second edition of his book *The Theatre of the Absurd*. He saw the work of these playwrights as articulating Albert Camus' philosophy that life is inherently without meaning (23).

Another term often linked with Pinter's plays is 'Comedy of Menace'. The idea is actually derived from Pinter's own comment about his plays. Once asked what his plays were about, Pinter lobbed back a phrase 'the weasel under the cocktail cabinet'. Later, in "On Being Awarded he regretted saying this and admitted,

'This was a great mistake. Over the years I have seen that remark quoted in a number of learned columns. It has now seemingly acquired a profound significance, and is seen to be a highly relevant and meaningful observation about my own work. But for me the remark meant precisely nothing' (Pinter, 39).

Despite Pinter's protestations, some critics still consider this remark an important clue to interpret his works. Moreover, none can deny the influence of existentialist theory (mainly Camus') on Pinter's plays; Pinter

even acknowledged the influence of Franz Kafka on his works (Naismith 38). In *The Birthday Party* Pinter, indeed, makes bitter comments on the human condition. The play ends 'in the virtual annihilation of an individual' (Cohn 25) and shows a man's desperate struggle for existence.

According to Cuddon the Theatre of the Absurd is "a term applied to many of the works of a group of dramatists who were active in the 1950s: Adamov, Beckett, Genet, Ionesco and Pinter" (967). In his discussion of the Theatre of the Absurd Abrams mentions Pinter as exhibiting an absurdist mode (2). The movement that led to the Theatre of the Absurd "emerged in France after the horrors of World War II, as a rebellion against essential beliefs and values of traditional culture and traditional literature" (Abrams 1). After the 1940s, men of letters such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus viewed "a human being as an isolated existence who is cast into an alien universe" which possesses "no inherent truth, value, or meaning". They represented human life—"in its fruitless search for purpose and meaning, as it moves from the nothingness whence it came toward the nothingness where it must end—as an existence which is both anguished and absurd" (ibid 1). As Camus said in *The Myth of Sisyphus*,

In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile... This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity (qtd. in Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd* 23).

To define absurdity, Camus, here, stresses the hostile nature of the universe where a man, isolated and cut off from his sense of existence, is forced to go into an irremediable exile. The Theatre of the Absurd also explains man's apparently purposeless role and position in a universe which is popularly imagined to have no discernible reason for existence (Cuddon 967).

Esslin in an "Introduction" to the Theatre of the Absurd says that it 'aims to shock its audience out of complacency, to bring it face to face with the harsh facts of the human situation... It is a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity, and to bear it with dignity, nobly, responsibly; precisely *because* there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence, because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world' (unnumbered).

Samuel Beckett is perhaps the most eminent and influential writer of this mode. Abrams observes – "His plays such as *Waiting for Godot* (1954) and *Endgame* (1958) project the irrationalism, helplessness, and absurdity of life in dramatic forms that reject realistic settings, logical reasoning, or a coherently evolving plot" (1, 2). Niaz Zaman notes that though Pinter began

writing in the shadow of Beckett and was initially known as an absurdist, there are subtle but important differences between him and Beckett. Unlike Beckett who suggests that, despite everything, human relationships make existence meaningful in an absurd world – witness the relationship between Didi and Gogo, the two tramps in *Waiting for Godot* – in Pinter there is no possibility of a relationship.

From the above discussion of the Theatre of the Absurd, it is therefore conceived that the term is closely associated with existentialism, which was an influential philosophy in Paris during the rise of the Theatre of the Absurd. Existentialist philosophy questions life in a hostile environment. It deals with the bleak side of the universe where the meaninglessness of human existence finds expression in nothingness. In the film 'Play It Again Sam' (1972) the Girl's visions of life and the world while replying to Woody Allen's query convey the crucial aspects of existentialism:

It (existentialism) restates the negativeness of the universe, the hideous lonely emptiness of existence, nothingness, the predicament of man forced to live in a barren, godless eternity, like a tiny flame flickering in an immense void, with nothing but waste, horror, and degradation, forming a useless bleak straightjacket in a black absurd cosmos¹.

The drama critic Irving Wardle in a review of Pinter's plays in *Anchor* used the term 'Comedy of Menace' (Comedy of Menace, unnumbered). Pinter's response to this categorisation has already been quoted in the head "Introduction" of this paper. Here it can however be noted that Pinter's ideas or philosophy (whatever they are) are not projected purposefully in his plays as Bernard Shaw did in his plays where every character is the product of a definite philosophical intuition. Pinter's Davies and Stanley are, in any way, not like Shaw's Louka or Bluntschli in *Arms and the Man*. Menace in Pinter's plays is intensified through different forces or an established System that is never defined. If menace is a part of our life, Pinter simply depicts it in our lives.

In Pinter's plays the distinction between reality and illusion is never made clear. This makes his world mysterious, thrilling and even ambiguous. Behera in the Preface to his doctoral thesis 'Reality and Illusion in the Plays of Harold Pinter' comments that 'Pinter's plays thus project an enigmatic world in which man, caught between shapeless reality and deceptive illusion, goes on exploring his self, frantically using his energies and

1. <<http://www.friesian.com/existent.htm>> Accessed on Saturday, November 19, 2008.

resources to form various patterns, images and structures as strategies of survival" (vii).

In response Pinter has to say "I suggest there can be no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false" (11).

Now a careful look at Pinter's comment reveals that the existentialist theory — 'a human being as an isolated existence who is cast into an alien universe, to conceive the universe as possessing no inherent truth, value, or meaning'² — is dominant in his plays. Unlike traditional theatre attempting to create a photographic representation of life, Pinter's plays aim to create an illusive dreamlike representation of characters and attempt to indicate their torment and suffering, and their bid to adjust to the dominant system.

It is clear then that Pinter is more concerned with existentialism than absurdism. His portrayal of menace comes from his belief that this is just what human life faces in a hostile world of reality. Furthermore, if there is any absurd element in his plays, it is because absurdity is an essential part of human life, which exposes the very crisis of human existence.

The Birthday Party: The Portrait of the Human Predicament

Although *The Birthday Party* (1958), Pinter's second play and among his best-known works, was initially both a commercial and critical disaster, it has now become one of his most performed plays, and representative of a number of literary issues with which Pinter's works are concerned. The play focuses on Stanley Webber, a piano player now in his 30s, who is hiding away in a dingy boarding house, run by Meg and Petey Boles in an English seaside town. Two sinister strangers, Goldberg and McCann arrive on Stanley's birthday and are supposedly looking for him. They soon turn his apparently innocuous birthday party, organised by Meg, into a nightmare.

Pinter took the setting and the characters of *The Birthday Party* from his real-life experience, utilising psychological realism to portray the contemporary human predicament. This is how he describes origins of the play to his official biographer Michael Billington:

I went to these digs and found, in short, a very big woman who was the landlady and a little man, the landlord. There was no one else there, apart from a solitary lodger... I slept in the attic with this man I'd met in the pub ... I said to the man, "What are you doing here?" And he said, "Oh well I used to be...I'm a pianist. I used to play in the concert-party here and I gave that up." ... The woman was really quite a voracious character, always tousled his head and tickled him and goosed him and wouldn't leave him

2. Abrams 1.

alone at all. And when I asked him why he stayed, he said, "There's nowhere else to go (Billington 76).

Obviously, the figures mentioned above — the lonely lodger, the voracious landlady and the little landlord — refer to Stanley, Meg, and Petey respectively in the play. However, in a review of *The Caretaker* Sommer points out that Pinter found the source of the play when he went into a room and saw two people sitting down (unnumbered).

The plot of *The Birthday Party* reminds one of the bogeyman story used to frighten children—"if you don't behave, somebody will come and get you". When Stanley takes shelter in a house for personal security and tries to maintain his individuality, the hostile world outside encroaches on his privacy and warns him that it is almost impossible for him to sustain such a life. Stanley offence is never made clear. Furthermore, his terrifying experience during the play reminds one of the fear that s/he might have of committing misdeeds in the past. So Stanley's nightmare experience in the play, as Naismith observes, "becomes a metaphor for the fear that anyone might have of offending society at large" (37).

In this regard, Franz Kafka's *The Trial* is worth mentioning, which begins, "Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong, he was arrested one fine morning" (7). Pinter had tremendous fascination for Kafka's *The Trial*. He talked about *The Trial* in the following manner:

I read *The Trial* when I was a lad of eighteen, in 1948. It's been with me ever since. I don't think anyone who reads *The Trial*—it ever leaves them (qtd. in Naismith 38).

Now we can say that the world of *The Birthday Party* is 'Kafka-on-Sea'³ as it is possible to see similarities between the lot of Stanley and Joseph K.. Lesser notes that—

Some of Pinter's borrowing from *The Trial* in *The Birthday Party* must have been deliberate. Like *The Trial* the play opens on the hero's birthday and it ends with two men taking him away — but the next day, not a year less a day later — perhaps to put him to death (35).

Here, we can also mention Camus' *The Stranger* with regard to the plot of *The Birthday Party*. However, the obvious difference between these two works is that in *The Stranger* the protagonist accidentally murdered an Arab

3. Macaulay, Alastair (2005, April 27). In a film review of *The Birthday Party*. Available: <http://www.haroldpinter.org.com>. [2008, November 21].

(39); so he was brought to trial and executed, but in *The Birthday Party* Stanley without doing any apparent sin is faced with an unconventional trial the consequence of which is never made clear. Hobson makes the following comments on *The Birthday Party* in his review:

Mr. Pinter has got hold of a primary fact of existence. We live on the verge of disaster. One sunny afternoon... a hydrogen bomb may explode. That is one sort of threat. But Mr. Pinter is of a subtler sort. It breathes in the air. It cannot be seen, but it enters the room every time the door is opened ... here is terror everywhere (qtd. in Naismith 40).

That is, we are always haunted by something that may be from our past. We keep hiding from that in our bid to be secure. However, it tracks us down, enters our life and eventually destroys our hope of staying in a peaceful and secure retreat.

In *The Birthday Party*, Goldberg and McCann are obviously outsiders or strangers who, at least, from their point of view, come to right a wrong. But they do not seem to be organisers; rather they are just destroyers — destroyers of peace and normality. However, who Stanley is and whether he is a stranger (outsider), as far as his helplessness and predicament in the world surrounding him are concerned, is worth discussing. Certainly, what Pinter said about him in an interview conducted by his personal biographer Michael Billington establishes him (Stanley) as an outsider ("There's nowhere else to go") (Billington 76). Stanley is also mentioned *alone* in Pinter's poem "A View of the Party" twice. It is also said about him that 'Goldberg jarred Stanley in the blood. Stanley had no home' (Pinter, *A View of the Party* 83, 84)

Actually, Stanley has nowhere to live except with Meg and Petey. Meg doesn't know exactly who Stanley is. Whether he is really a pianist is a mystery as he doesn't want to reveal himself.

STANLEY. I want to ask you something. (MEG fidgets nervously. She does not go to him.) Come on. (Pause) All right. I can ask it from here just as well. (Deliberately.) Tell me, Mrs Boles, when you address yourself to me, do you ever ask yourself who exactly you are talking to? Eh? (31)

When Meg asks Stanley if he is going to play the piano, he starts grunting, which seems to imply that he is not interested in the topic any more. Stanley even questions his ability to play the piano or defend his identity as a pianist:

I can't, can I?

MEG. Why not?

STANLEY. I haven't got a piano, have I?

MEG. No, I meant like when you were working. That piano.

STANLEY. Go and do your shopping. (32)

It can be noticed here how Stanley feels irritated with his past (if he has one) and wants to change the topic. But Meg insists on prolonging the conversation as she also seems to be confused about Stanley's real identity,

MEG. But you wouldn't have to go away if you got a job, would you?

You could play the piano on the pier.

He looks at her, then speaks airily.

STANLEY. I've...er...I've been offered a job, as a matter of fact.

MEG. What?

STANLEY. Yes. I'm considering a job at the moment.

MEG. You're not.

STANLEY. A good one, too. A night club. In Berlin.

MEG. Berlin?

STANLEY. Berlin. A night club. Playing the piano.

A fabulous salary. And all found. (32)

Not having a definite identity to be revealed, he is confused and resorts to telling lies. He is more or less like Davies in *The Caretaker*, jobless but pretending to have possibilities to get one. He has some dreams, but nothing is certain. He even tells Meg that he will pay a 'flying visit' somewhere but he fails to utter the name of the place he would like to go to. He stammers:

'Then we pay a flying visit to...er...whatsisname'... (32)

He boasts to Meg that he has played the piano all over the world and that he once gave a concert, but all his boastful utterances turn out to be a pack of lies if we examine his manner of speaking to Meg. None will believe Meg, quite a silly and funny character when she addresses Stanley as a pianist. Therefore, the uncertainty about a character's identity, which comes out of the feeling of non-existence and insecurity— you have nothing to identify yourself, you have nowhere to go— is crucial in a typical play of Pinter.

Whether Stanley committed any crime in his past life is not directly mentioned in the course of the play; however, some clues can be found from his paranoid responses on hearing of the two visitors coming to reside in Meg's house. After getting informed by Meg that two visitors were on their way, he starts getting anxious, and behaves abnormally. Not only is he alarmed, but he is terrified.

STANLEY. What two gentlemen?

MEG. I'm expecting visitors.

.....

STANLEY. I don't believe it. (30)

Then Stanley asks Meg a number of questions about their identity and the time of their arrival. The thought of the two visitors, Goldberg and McCann, coming is, perhaps, in a distinctly Kafkaesque way, projections of his past guilt. So, the obviously worried Stanley consoles himself that they will show up.

STANLEY. They won't come. Someone's taking the Michael.
Forget all about it. It's a false alarm. A false alarm. (*He sits at the table.*)
Where's my tea? (31)

In other words, as a lonely person Stanley tries to forget his past, keeping himself busy with an activity ('Where's my tea?').

Lulu calls Stanley 'a bit of a washout' in Act -1 of the play. Goldberg also calls him 'a washout' (57).

STANLEY (*abruptly*). How would you like to go away with me?
LULU. Where.
STANLEY. Nowhere. Still, we could go.
LULU. But where could we go?
STANLEY. Nowhere. There's nowhere to go. So we could just go. It wouldn't matter.
LULU. We might as well stay here.
STANLEY. It's no good here.
LULU. Well, where else is there?
STANLEY. Nowhere.

.....
LULU. So you're not coming out for a walk?
STANLEY. I can't at the moment.
LULU. You're a bit of a washout, aren't you? (36)

Through the above dialogue between Stanley and Lulu, Stanley's vulnerable existence in the world of nothingness becomes obvious. We also get a glimpse of his outlook on life and discover his hapless wriggle to survive despite being 'a bit of a washout'.

Much of *The Birthday Party* is both frightening and funny. Stanley is silenced by a number of serious accusations as well as silly or absurd questions. For instance, 'You betrayed the organisation', 'He's killed his wife', 'You betrayed our land', 'You betray our breed' (58, 59, 62) are some of the serious accusations made against him by McCann and Goldberg. He is asked some absurd questions as well such as 'Why do you pick your nose?', 'What do you use for pyjamas?', 'Chicken? Egg? Which came first?' (61, 62). However, the absurdity here intensifies the enigmatic nature of the play. Therefore, the ultimate result of Pinter's use of the absurd is to underscore the uncertainty of human existence in an inhuman world of cruelty and hostility.

Facing a number of questions which amount to vague accusations against his past activities, at one point Stanley starts screaming. The unconventional trial faced by Stanley makes him like an accused criminal in an interrogation cell:

MCCANN. Wake him up. Stick a needle in his eye.

The interrogation continues—

GOLDBERG. You're a plague, Webber. You're an overthrow.

MCCANN. You're what's left!

GOLDBERG. But we've got the answer to you. We can sterilise you.

.....
MCCANN. You betrayed our land.

GOLDBERG. You betray our breed.

MCCANN. Who are you, Webber?

GOLDBERG. What makes you think you exist?

MCCANN. You're dead.

GOLDBERG. You're dead. You can't live, you can't think, you can't love. You're dead. You're a plague gone bad. There's no juice in you. You're nothing but an odour! (62)

The interrogation proceeds until Stanley is completely cowed down. The interrogators make him shed off layers of his self and try to strip him off his individual identity—'What makes you think you exist?'

When Stanley reappears on the stage at the end of the play as a completely changed person—clean-shaven and dressed in a dark, well cut suit and white collar, McCann and Goldberg begin to woo him, gently and with relish. 'How are you Stan?' asks Goldberg. They then begin to make him a lot of promises through a series of clichés apparently intending to make him 'a new man':

MCCANN. We'll provide the skipping rope.

GOLDBERG. The vest and pants.

MCCANN. The ointment.

GOLDBERG. The hot poultice.

MCCANN. The fingerstall.

GOLDBERG. The abdomen belt.

MCCANN. The ear plugs.

GOLDBERG. The baby powder.

MCCANN. The back scratcher.

GOLDBERG. The spare tyre. (91-93)

Obviously overwhelmed by their rhetorical prowess, Stanley shows no reactions and seems to have been rendered immobile. Next Goldberg calls him—'Still the same old Stan. Come with us. Come on, boy,' which implies that he is being urged to return to the position he occupied in the

past, though we do not definitely know what will finally be done with him. They lead him out of the house towards the car waiting to take him to 'an unexplained Monty' (Cohn 86). Petey the generous landlord confronts them one last time but backs down when they take Stanley away, 'broken'. He, however, strongly protests against the intruding forces who have come to dehumanise and consequently destroy an individual by saying: "Stan, don't let them tell you what to do!".

The intruding force in the guise of the two outsiders Goldberg and McCann arranged the birthday party (the trial) for Stanley to give him a new birth. As Dukore's comment points at, 'the intruders turn Stanley into what McCann calls a new man. At their hands he is reborn, made into a different kind of person on a birthday that becomes a birth-day' (106). From the outsiders' (Goldberg's and McCann's) point of view, Stanley's rebirth is essential as he is accused of 'verminating the sheet of his birth' (*The Birthday Party*, 61).

Now through the annihilation of Stanley's individuality Pinter underscores the vulnerability of our existence in a world of horror and brutality. A force or entity beyond our control arbitrarily determines an individual's destiny, justly or unjustly. More importantly, through Stanley's doom Pinter points out the vulnerable and rather fluid state of human existence. The purpose of living is questioned. Lonely, human beings stride helplessly in a crowded emptiness and are always haunted by a bogymen who threatens to come and wipe out their identity. Human existence is threatened and mankind's hopes of living are driven away by the fear of non-existence and a feeling of insecurity. In the end people are thrown into an uncertain world of hollowness and absurdity that only intensifies the essential predicament of their existence 'in a barren, godless eternity', making them into 'like a tiny flame flickering in an immense void, with nothing but waste, horror, death and degradation'⁴.

The Birthday Party, indeed, enacts the basic dilemma of our existence. The essential human predicament in relation to the hostility, menace and absurdity that keeps intruding into our existence is highlighted in the portrayal of the predicament of the protagonist of the play. Stanley suffers from paranoia and is haunted by the fear of the unknown, apprehending the arrival of outsiders coming to wipe out his identity and annul his existence. He is homeless and jobless, he is an outcast trying to hide himself from an oppressive force or power. He takes refuge in a temporary shelter but soon

4. 'Play It Again Sam' (1972) <<http://www.friesian.com/existent.htm>> Accessed on Saturday, November 19, 2008.

his territory is invaded. He is caught and brought out before a force or system that dehumanises him.

Stanley is dehumanised in the play as he stands accused of betraying an unknown organisation⁵. On the other hand, Davies in *The Caretaker* is thrown out because he is blamed for being violent, terrible, a barbarian, 'an old skate' and a man who stinks (*The Caretaker* 118, 119). Whereas Davies who is a down-trodden person exists on the fringes, Stanley's manner of speaking and references to places indicate that he is an educated member of society. In terms of consequences they undergo there are obvious differences between them. While Davies is thrown out of his last place of refuge, Stanley is made to be a changed person, a new man, and is thrown into an unknown destiny where he may live, provided that he is willing to comply with an unknown force that is able to annihilate one's identity and individuality. Davies is manipulative and sometimes speaks in a threatening manner to dominate others; for instance, in his long speech to Aston in the last act of the play he makes a number of complaints and demands a lot of things⁶. On the other hand, Stanley is not as explicit as Davies and his fate is quite unclear compared to that of Davies.

Pinter's characters are thus quite unique in terms of their predicament and suffering in a brutal world where there is nothing for them to look forward to. In fact, *The Birthday Party* articulates Pinter's concern with the human predicament and focuses on the question of survival rather than on absurdist philosophical issues. Thus, Pinter's *The Birthday Party* is neither a projection of absurdity nor a comedy of menace; it is a portrayal of human predicament.

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5. Pinter 58

6. Pinter, *The Caretaker* 99.

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