

A Postmodern Allegory: Absurdity in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*

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Abstract

The Birthday Party is an absurdist play written by the British playwright, screenwriter, director and actor Harold Pinter. He is one of the most celebrated dramatists of the Theatre of the Absurd. The objective of the paper is to examine how Pinter's play *The Birthday Party* incorporates the elements of an absurdist play. The paper also tries to explain how the fragility of language to communicate is being portrayed through the play.

Keywords: Absurd, fragility, Pinter Pause, Comedy of menace

The term Theatre of the Absurd is coined by the critic Martin Esslin who uses the term to describe a group of writers including Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Tom Stoppard, Harold Pinter etc. These writers throw light on the philosophy of Albert Camus that life is inherently without any meaning as explained in his work *The Myth of Sisyphus* wherein he suggests that life is "meaningless and absurd".

Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* is a play that revolves around the ambiguous, mysterious life of the complex character Stanley Webber, who resides at a seaside boardinghouse owned by Petey and Meg. Since the beginning the audience receives only disjointed information and crippled illusions rather than a complete reality. Through the effective use of 'Pinter Pause'-silence and pauses within the story- Pinter carves a wonderful play that deliberately fails to distinguish between reality and illusion.

The Theatre of the Absurd intends to depart from the realistic characters, settings and situations. In the play *The Birthday Party*, the complete identity of the characters including Stanley and his two persecutors Goldberg and McCann is never revealed and it remains a mystery throughout the play. Even though some hints are given about the past of Stanley and the other characters, no exact details are given. Other than from the fact that Stanley lives in the boardinghouse, no descriptions about the geography is clear. When Lulu tries to flirt with Stanley and makes him have a walk with her, he describes the destination as "nowhere". And at the end, when Stanley is taken by Goldberg and McCann, to where he is taken is unknown which makes the readers believe that he is taken to "somewhere". So the unclear, obscure details are seen from the beginning till the end.

One of the main features of the theatre is its focus on confusion and chaos. The manifestation of the theme in *The Birthday Party* is through the past lives and the relationship between the characters. The mysterious past of each of the characters and the confusion that arises among the audience through the unrelated hints given add to the theme. The relationship between Meg and Stanley remains unclear and some of the conversations between them make the audience trapped in a labyrinth. When Stanley finds Goldberg familiar, his

identity and past becomes delusional and vague. Meg too attempts to believe the things about her life that are actually not true.

The meaninglessness of life is clearly depicted through the unclear details of the plot. Several scenes showing the conversation between Meg and Petey, Meg and Stanley, Stanley and Lulu, Stanley, McCann and Goldberg, fabricates the ultimate fruitlessness of life. The way in which they fail to express ideas shows the fragility of language to communicate. Repetition of questions and answers proves the futility of language that has no power to convey meanings.

The absurdist plays do not present a meaning or moral, but represents the inevitable human conditions. In the play, Stanley allegorically represents a postmodern human being and symbolizes the absurdity of human life and existential suffering through the violence that has shattered his peace and security. The existential crisis of a postmodern man is beautifully crafted through the play as all the characters live their life at a given time; the present moment. Therefore there are no flashbacks and no insight into the future life.

The violence and apathy of men are also specific to the absurdist plays which make *The Birthday Party* a typical absurdist play. The play belongs to the genre of "Comedy of Menace", a play in which there is a picture of intrigue and confusion and a feeling of an impending danger. So it is obvious that the play has incorporated violence in it. Stanley's rude behavior to the caring Meg, McCann's cruel act of breaking Stanley's glasses, Stanley's attempt to

strangle Meg and sexually assault Lulu, as well as McCann's and Goldberg's act of taking Stanley add to the violence of the play. These circumstances also showcase the apathy of the characters of the play in particular and the postmodern men in general.

Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* stands as an allegory for the human conditions of the postmodern postwar era. The meaninglessness and fruitlessness of the human existence of the men is wonderfully portrayed through the use of various methods like mysterious characters, incomplete details, confusing descriptions, unrealistic circumstances, violence, apathy, fragility of language etc. The play shows us the inevitable human conditions and the futility of our existence. The use of Pinter's typical style of writing including pauses and silence highlights the theme of the play.

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