

# Evaluation of the presented Menace and Violence in the Birthday Party and their impact on Post War Period and Current Time

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## ABSTRACT

The Birthday Party is one of the impressive plays written by Harold Pinter (1930-2008), a pioneer of the Theatre of Absurd. Writing of Pinter is marked by some unique techniques known as Pinteresque. Basically, presence of threat, menace, violence is the signature phenomenon of the plays of Pinter. The Birthday Party is not an exception in this regard as it has also created the vibe of menace and violence. The play “The Birthday Party” delineates the predicaments faced by the people in the second half of the 20th century. It represents the existential problems among the post-war generations who have given up life and stuck in utter seclusion. Life in post-war period is seen as a dark-phase in the history of England. The circumstances were completely instable to sustain and lead a life in the certain optimistic mood. Pinter has portrayed this sense of being and existence in dramatic approach through his narratives giving the image of menace and suffering in post-war period. However, this paper evaluates the theme of menace and violence in this play. Since, menace and violence is very common, this paper also attempts to locate the play both in post war and current 21<sup>st</sup> century context.

**KEYWORDS:** The Birthday Party, Menace, Violence, Post war

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## I. Introduction

Harold Pinter (1930-2008) has brought a revolution in contemporary theatre by his unique styles of writing. **Pinteresque** refers to the eponymous adjective of Harold Pinter. However, **Pinteresque** is a broad term that combines all the characteristics of his work in it. He has distinguished him from the other playwrights by “the presentation of a menacing atmosphere” (Bajestani 3).

However, *The Birthday Party*, like the other plays of Pinter has portrayed the sense of menace and violence which are the parts of **Pinteresque**. Pinter’s exposure to second world war as well as his upbringing in a middle-class life full of insecurity inspired him to infuse sense of menace along with the portrayal of violence in this very play.

*The Birthday Party* is the story of a man named Stanley who lives in a boarding house near a seaside town. However, his “warm, cozy world of childhood” is disrupted at the arrival of two strangers (Esslin, 84). Ultimately, Stanley is menaced by Goldberg and McCann who caused both mental and physical violence against Stanley. The themes of menace and violence are attached to the themes insecurity and fear. Menace and violence are the significant themes which are universal and felt by each and every modern man. Life of a 21<sup>st</sup> century man is surrounded by hopelessness and insecurity. Therefore, menace sensed by Stanley in *The Birthday Party* is the menace of one of us. The feeling of discomfort arises spontaneously in the minds of ours when we are out of our known comfort zone or escaping our guilty past. Different factors both tangible and intangible can victimize us in multiple ways. Bajestani (2012) states that “Pinter is considered as one of the most outstanding post-war playwright of his time in England for his influence on theatre—Menace and intrusions are undoubtedly the repeated themes in Pinter’s early plays written between 1950’s and 1960’s (3).

## II. Discussion

*The Birthday Party* is impregnated with an inference of potential menace which justifies the term **Pinteresque**. Again, this play identifies different forms of violence as well as diverse factors of menace applicable to post war people. The play revolves around the inhabitants of the aforementioned boardinghouse, Meg, Petey and mainly Stanley Webber, a not-so-young-anymore former pianist and possibly the most

important inhabitant of this rundown facility who is unexpectedly visited by two vastly ominous strangers, Goldberg and McCann, on what seems to be (in spite of Stanley's negating) his birthday. The two strangers who have intentionally come to the boarding house in hopes of finding Stanley for unknown reasons start a chain of events, ranging from physical violence to alleged sexual assault, that finally culminate in Stanley's utter breakdown thus turning the superficially harmless birthday party into an absurdly nightmarish setting strangely reminiscent of Franz Kafka's 'The Trial'. The best example of well-written dialogues and a careful choice of words used to convey the omnipresent violence through the usage of language are the characters of Goldberg and McCann primarily during the interrogation scene of Stanley Webber. During that scene Stanley is asked a series of irrelevant and completely unanswerable question

Webber: Why did the chicken cross the road?

Stanley: He wanted to-he wanted to-he wanted to....

McCann: He doesn't know!

Goldberg: Why did the chicken cross the road?

Stanley: He wanted to-he wanted to....

Goldberg: Why did the chicken cross the road?

Stanley: He wanted....

McCann: He doesn't know. (Pinter,1984, 45)

The aforementioned quote, found in the second act of the play, is only a part of a much greater series of absurd, nonsensical attacks directed towards Stanley on McCann's and Goldberg's behalf. It almost appears as if the severe outbursts of unnecessary and unprovoked aggression are not only a whole in itself, but also a piece in a much greater puzzle of hovering confusion, anxiety and malice. The two men keep verbally attacking him with these weird questions and fabricated details of his past in the 'organization' (that Stanley constantly tries to deny) until he finally lashes out at Goldberg kicking him in the stomach. The 'organization mentioned is not necessarily one controlled solely by the characters of Goldberg and McCann but is a part of a violent force beyond human influence in which they are only the actors. Their presence is required only to allow the violence to manifest (they themselves not being the reason or a cause of it) and escalate from the emotional into the physical plain of existence. Violence is here a purpose in itself and the characters seem unable to influence it in any way. It almost appears as though they are not in control of their own actions and are involuntarily riding the chaotic waves of the absurd societal construct which does not seem to offer any answers on the state of human situation.

Violence is not in the people themselves – it is the society as a greater structure that is violent. Violence is portrayed as omnipresent and is an integral part of any social construct all the while not being contained within every separate individual. It is an inevitable force with a tremendous potential for disaster which, at the same time serves as a harbinger of change which leaves an individual stranded in its course while at the same time being the very force that drives his existence onwards.

The play "The Birthday Party" represents the youth who have given up the external hostile world. So, the characters presented in the play are idle, sleepy, and dirty most of the time. Stanley, the protagonist is given refuge by the elderly couple in the boarding house. He usually wakes up late in the day and reflects upon the post-war young London generation. Such individuals are filthy, messy and a blot on family and society. These individuals have dragged families towards terror and anxiety. The personal and family dignity of such individuals is devalued and lost. The play portrays the hard work done by elder generation in society, who leave their homes at dawn and work throughout the day until dusk. Such individuals strive a lot to keep their house running. The elderly couple Petey and Meg give the impression of being firmly moored in their daily life. Their poor meals represent the turmoil in their day-to-day life. This paper consequently highlights the following as contained in the play: Pinter's bird-eye view, a mystery play, paranoiac protagonist, hopelessness and weirdness, aggression—an existential tool, identity and isolation, existential lingo, and strive to survive. Harold Pinter's plays still puzzle audience and critics after almost fifty years of acquaintance with his work. Pinter in his play *The Birthday Party* expresses his own vision of looking at the milieu of the modern age. He employs psychological devices to present melancholic post-war human affliction. In this play, he uses six individuals to narrate the plight and vicissitudes of life. Among these six, Goldberg and McCann are the antagonists who exploit other characters. They treat Stanley badly, who gets lost in thoughts, makes vigorous efforts to think, imagine and speak but is powerless to do so. In the words of Naismith(2000): "During the twentieth century the individual has become increasingly alienated and distanced from the centres of power" (39) . The play reflects the state of mid20th century youth—lost and hopeless. The idle and unpleasant life that Stanley lives is noticed by Meg's next-door neighbour Lulu who considers him to be busy. Lulu appears an uncomplicated character and a girl of little depth (Naismith, 2000, p.47) .She seems a dull girl through her activities but dares to revive Stanley's inert soul. She notices the absurd attitude of Stanley and desires him to feel calm and relaxed, and abandon all worries and miseries. She knocks down Stanley for being grimy and filthy, "Why don't you have a wash? You look terrible"; "Come out and get a bit of air. You depress me looking like that" (Pinter,1984) . The

modern individuals struggle for dominance over one another, and initiate their interaction in an aggressive fashion. This we detect in Stanley's first encounter with Goldberg and McCann where he strives to achieve supremacy. Goldberg has been the dominating figure in all events since his arrival into the house. He scolds Stanley many times for his foolish behaviour; and later he scolds McCann for continuing his childish activities.

### **III.Suitability of the presented menace and violence considering current time**

Sense of insecurity, feeling of threat, exposure to different forms of violence are some of the complexities that we all face . In the age of terrorism , moral declination , it is very common to have all those feelings. Number of the homeless and the jobless are increasing day by day. Everyday , people lose lives untimely either in hospital or in roads. People suffer at the hand of unspecific force. People has lost all meanings of life as money becomes bigger in place of humanity and all other meaningful ideas. The Birthday Party is highly influenced by Theatre of Absurd which re-establishes "an awareness of man's situation when confronted with the ultimate reality of his condition"(Esslin,400). In 21<sup>st</sup> century, we all are exposed to different types of violence for example physical violence or mental violence. Moreover, we all live our lives with number of menaces for example the menace of death, of not getting job, of not getting good grades, menace of losing close ones or menace of the revelation of our guilt. Therefore, this very project justifies its suitability as it deals with the issues closely connected to human life. Most importantly, this project justifies the condition of proper literature as literature is known to be the mirror of life.

### **IV.Conclusion**

Thus, the play reflects the ridiculous state of the individuals in the second half of the 20th century. It presents the grimness and despair in man's life. Pinter's characters are bewildered. They have put themselves in utter darkness and are unable to recognize their true nature and purpose. The modern life at each and every instance shocked the general folk in the post-war Western society. The play declares the multidimensional chaos, arbitrariness and illogical episodes at their virtual facades. It reinforces the idea of discreet solution to the existing human predicaments that have ailed and crippled the societies. The socio-political factors render the individuals meaningless. Existence is questioned and yearning to seek self-identity remains unfulfilled.

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