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Impact of Stanley's Past on the Movement of *The Birthday Party*

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This paper intends to read Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* in light of the past of the protagonist Stanley Webber, who in his paranoid state weaves an imaginary state around him and considers other characters like Goldberg, McCann to be parts of that imaginary community thus making his memory a driving force in the movement of the play.

'Past' is a term embracing a wide range of contexts: from the racial to the historic past; from the collective to the individual past; from the public to the private past; from the distant to the recent past; from the imagined to the real past, and so on. Stanley's past works as a driving force in the movement of Harold Pinter's play *The Birthday Party*. Pinter asserts that Stanley gives voice to the existential angst of a modern man.

In the play, Goldberg and McCann are new visitors related to Stanley's past. Martin Esslin gives various possibilities about Stanley's past. According to Esslin, like Heidegger, Pinter takes as his starting point that fundamental anxiety, which is nothing less than a living being's basic awareness of non-being, of annihilation. Pinter's people are in a room, and they are frightened of what is outside the room. Outside the room is a world peeping upon them which is frightening. Esslin also suggests that the root of the menace may be political – Stanley in his past may be belonged to some radical organization or Government or some Establishment and now he has escaped from that for which the party or Government itself is haunting for him. Stanley may be an absconder from some fanatic religious organization or he may have escaped from a mental asylum. Stanley goes on using 'they' which can mean that the concerned persons are unidentified or that Stanley is well-aware of their identity; again it can mean that he must have been associated with them where 'they' can stand for any group, organization or institution.

According to E. T. Kirby *The Birthday Party* shows in great detail the onset and phenomena of a paranoid state. The paranoid pseudo-community is an imaginary organization, composed of real and imagined persons whom the patient represents as united for the purpose of carrying out some action upon him. Pinter's play presents in considerable detail the psycho-dynamics of the paranoid consciousness in the formation of such an organization. There is a lack of specific danger in the delusional reconstruction. The paranoid person is already caught in the web of his own prejudices. Hence we have the name 'Webber' for Stanley.

These voices of the paranoid pseudo-community emanate from the bad conscience of the victim. They may have some basis in fact or they may totally lack any such basis. In the latter case, Petey is clearly doing precisely what he wants to do. So, we must assume that Stanley incorrectly believes that Petey has somehow been driven out. One might list whom and what Stanley has 'betrayed' or 'defiled', from his 'wife' and 'mother' to 'the

organization', to 'our land' and 'our breed'. What we have is a structure which represents a fundamental ontological insecurity. Reference to 'the organization' here is not to 'the Establishment' or any other socio-political reality but to the paranoid pseudo-community. The community is 'extended' by Goldberg's multiple first names, by the reference to Monty, and by the presence during the night of another character, Dermot, who does not appear, though this may only be McCann's first name. It is superficial and incorrect to refer to Goldberg and McCann as 'intruders' into the boarding house. Obviously, they 'intrude' only upon Stanley, upon his space, not of the others. In phenomenological terms they intrude upon his condition of Being-In The World.

Stanley creates make-believe past to test if McCann reacts to that, thus McCann's identity will be discovered. He wants to hide his own identity so that McCann cannot make him a target; therefore, he wants to confuse McCann.

Stanley's past predominates in shaping pattern of dialogue, making it sharp. Stanley's past shapes pattern of responses of listeners.

Whatever be the past, Stanley is trying to escape that. But it is haunting. He occasionally speaks about it; there is a recollection of his past. Probably Petey is well aware of Stanley's past so that he provides Stanley with shelter both mental and physical and supports his standpoint. A special technique is used in the drama. Stanley's past is left to audience to reconstruct to analyse his responses to others. This past is not clearly told. Stanley's past is related to the question of subtext. It works as the subtext of the play. Stanley's past is never clearly brought out, but it casts an overcrowding shadow over the play, sets the course of action of the play. The play moves in a criss-cross pattern of text-subtext or present-past, affecting the language, gesture (use of pause, silence) of characters. These sometimes turn ambiguous. One character does not understand language, gesture of another, but audience do and vice-versa. These attract us to the play, not the story-line. Memory plays a vital role. Present creates crisis and memory gives solution and vice-versa. There is a portion of shared memory between Stanley and Meg. Stanley responds to Meg's tenderness, who desperately tries to release the tension. Meg's giving Stanley a boy's drum is a symbolic gesture from a motherly old lady to her surrogate son. She knows about the past disaster in Stanley's artistic career. To arouse his aesthetic self she gives him the boy's drum. Stanley knows that his wish to go back to vibrant artistic self is only a wish not to be realised. His submerged anger, protest explores through his drum-beat. Suddenly the beating of drum changes expressing pain, frustration. Meg is pleased to see Stanley's past aesthetic self coming back. Meg's voice is the voice of home, assurance which gives him new start of life, assures him of a bright future of world tour. It cannot be taken as a totally unfounded dream.

Though spatial limitation is identified throughout with Stanley's blindness and future is blocked by the certainty of a terrifying and destructive event, the factor of an open future is stressed by Goldberg and McCann at the end of the play. A 'protest' is not only a view or scene but a mental looking forward. Stanley's glasses are now broken and he is offered a new pair of glasses which indicates the regimentation of the free, independent mind of Stanley who is now compelled to look at life in a directed way. But Stanley is not a cynic, depressed

person by nature. Pinter does not want to represent him like that. It is neither a totally dark comedy nor absurd drama. So far as theme is concerned, a note of optimism is there.

Stanley's narration creates suspense, which compels the audience to develop his past in their minds and makes *The Birthday Party* a drama of suspense.

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