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The Pinteresque in *The Birthday Party*: A Dissolving Line between Modernism and Postmodernism

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Abstract:

Born in London, Harold Pinter (1930-2008) is mostly acclaimed as a wonderful playwright of the twentieth century despite his other roles of a poet, an actor and so on. He was influenced by the modernist playwright Samuel Beckett and his plays. But as a tribute to his unique style of writing Pinter was accredited with the adjective 'Pinteresque', which makes him different from other writers of the period. His 1958 play *The Birthday Party* serves a best example for the justification of the Pinteresque as remarkably distinctive. The play employs a very few characters and portrays the life in the post-war world. This paper attempts a study of the play so as to define the term 'Pinteresque' in various possible ways by exploring the concept of contradiction in the postmodern world and that of Keats' negative capability.

Keywords: Pinteresque, The Birthday Party, Modernism, Postmodernism, Contradiction, Negative Capability.

Unprepossessing, ugly, vain, flippant, obscene, unscrupulous, even at times dishonest, - Voltaire was a man with the faults of his time and place, missing hardly one. And yet this same Voltaire turns out to have been tirelessly kind, considerate, lavish of his energy and his purse, as sedulous in helping friends as in crushing enemies, able to kill with stroke of his pen and yet disarmed by the first advance of conciliation;- so contradictory is man. (The Story of Philosophy, 257- 258)

Indeed the kind of contradictory nature Will Durant cites about the French philosopher Voltaire is inherent in every human being.

In stark contrast to the celebratory tone of the title, Harold Pinter's play *The Birthday Party* (1958) carries the danger lurking around every bend. Reminding one of the gruesome 'Kafkaesque', Pinter is one such writer with similar attribute called the Pinteresque to mark his uniqueness. At the outset, the term denotes a few stylistic device employed by Pinter such as the pauses, ellipses and the long silence seen in between the dialogues. But it can also mean the notable thematic aspect of the play. This paper attempts to offer various interpretations of the term Pinteresque with special reference to *The Birthday Party*. It is more of an effort to illustrate how the postmodern factor of contradiction or irony plays a crucial role in defining 'Pinteresque', aligning it with Keats' notion of negative capability. As

Kevin Hart observes: “It might well be that postmodernists work with particular attitudes and styles- incredulity and irony, for example- that cannot be dissociated from what they do” (Postmodernism: A Beginner’s Guide, 26).

The term ‘Pinteresque’ is nothing but a zeitgeist of postmodernist era. It outlines the transition from modernism to post modernism. Modernism marks the lamentation over the outside reality of the post war world and the disruption of its foundations or a centre in particular. Postmodernism can be, in Derridean terms, something that promotes a free play in the same decentred world. The word ‘play’ literally means to have fun and thus postmodernism hints at a kind of celebration of something. In order to mark this transition, the Pinteresque in *The Birthday Party* offers a clear cut distinction between the two periods and hence takes in both the elements of modernist and postmodernist movements in the history of English literature and the post war world in general. This makes Pinter an absurdist in style while drifting away from the complete sense of an absurd writer. The very fact puts his play in the list of the comedy of menace which intermingle the elements of tragedy and comedy.

First and foremost, the word ‘Pinteresque’ defines the period of high modernism after the 1950’s when the play was written. It was a time when disorder was the order of the day. The fundamental belief that man is a social animal proved to be a failure. Because the disorder was due to the fragmentation of particularly the social institutions and thereby confusion pervaded in the society. At a point when a meaningful coexistence was not possible, people became self- centred. They turned to their inner self, trying to gather a meaning for their existence.

Harold Pinter is trying to portray a similar twentieth- century culture when he deviates from the usual custom of giving enough background information about the characters. They are known by their age, that is simply some meaningless number, and not by their profession or their relationship with each other. For instance, Petey is a man in his sixties and Meg a woman in her sixties. Meg could have been introduced as Petey’s wife, just like Madeline is introduced as Amedee’s wife in Ionesco’s absurd play *Amedee*. This lack in background information may mean that the characters are different independent individuals with little connection between them and who are yet to create a meaning for their own life. Thus people’s individuality and subjectivity became important.

Being subjective is to be influenced by personal feelings. Its foremost function is to expose one’s sense of being with no relation to outside forces. One thing that is common about everyone’s sense of being is the striving to create something or creatively do something. So this striving can be at its zenith in the minds of artists especially when ‘to be subjective’ also means to be ‘imaginative’. In Aristotelian terms, there are two instincts in human beings: firstly, the inborn instinct of imitation, and secondly, the instinct for rhythm and harmony. The second one hints at a correlation between the external and internal circumstances of a human being and is mostly evident in an artist. Pinter’s play shows how the life of an artist is threatened by the influence of a chaotic outside world.

In his History of English Literature Edward Albert observes:

Harold Pinter conveys the rambling ambiguities and silences of everyday conversation with an amazing authenticity that is obviously much influenced by Beckett, and uses them to build up the sense of menace and scarcely restrained violence which characterize *The Birthday Party* (1958), *The Dumbwaiter* (1960), and *The Caretaker* (1960). The plays are quite short and set in an enclosed, claustrophobic space; the characters are always in doubt about their function, and in fear of someone or something 'outside'. (*History of English Literature*, 595)

So is *The Birthday Party*. Stanley, the non-conformist character in the play is disturbed at the thought of an unknown guest who may come into his closed circle. He is so much concerned about having a space of his own. "What about my room? It needs sweeping. It needs papering. I need a new room!"(19), says Stanley.

Another instance is when Stanley says to Meg that it is not her place to come into a man's bedroom and wake him up. This shows that he is a person who very much values his privacy. In fact everyone values privacy but somehow ends up in meddling up with each other's things. Pinter tries to say that this was the characteristic feature of the post war world. People lose control over themselves and an unknown external force starts acting out in their lives. The danger or menace can also be the boredom that pervades in the daily lives of people. This boredom or monotony is reflected in the beginning of the play.

In the conversation between Petey and Meg given at outset of the play, one sees the long repeated routine of the husband and the wife.

Meg: Is that you?

Petey: Yes, it's me.

Meg: What? (Her face appears at the hatch.) Are you back? (*The Birthday Party*, 9)

The above question by Meg reveals her suspicion in the outside reality. Being hesitant to accept the truth, she seeks confirmation to answers she already knows. Likewise, when she asks Petey if the cornflakes are nice and though he admits it is nice, one can feel the indifferent and the disinterested tone of his answers to most of her questions. In addition to the boredom, these things also show the communication gap and the void that has entered the characters' lives, particularly after the World War II.

Further the menace that may befall the characters can be in any form. It may manifest itself as people, desires, dreams, memories and so on. In *The Birthday Party*, it is in the form of two men, Goldberg and Mccann who enter the life of Stanley. Though Stanley is seen insisting on the fact that it is not his birthday, Meg and others are adamant about celebrating it. This insisting overrules poor Stanley's thoughts and arguments that he becomes a puppet from now on in others' hands. From this moment onwards, the danger of an impending disaster looms

over not only Stanley but also the viewers. As is foreseen by the viewers, the non-conformist Stanley is finally seen a conformist. His intellectual and humane qualities are drained out, and hence the play with its Pinteresque style can be viewed as a way of mourning over these realities. These details further emphasize the modernist perspective of the play.

As M. H Abrams puts it: “The catastrophe of the war had shaken faith in the moral basis, coherence and durability of Western civilization and raised doubts about the adequacy of traditional literary modes to represent the harsh and dissonant realities of the postwar world” (A Glossary of Literary Terms, 226). In fact this loss of faith and increasing doubts were visible in all walks of life.

Therefore modernism is definitely a lamentation on bygone days and about a hopeless future. Now the question arises: ‘What do we celebrate in a postmodern world?’ It can be anything. Peter Barry says: “For the postmodernist, by contrast, fragmentation is an exhilarating phenomenon, symptomatic of our escape from the claustrophobic embrace of fixed systems of belief. In a word, the modernist laments fragmentation while the postmodernist celebrates it.”(Beginning Theory, 80)

According to Harold Pinter, it seems that we should celebrate the conflicts and the contradictions of life. They did not, in fact, creep as the aftermath of world wars but were in existence since mankind, perhaps, in one way or the other. Pinter treats these threatening conflicts as amusing ironies that should form a part of life. As an elementary way of putting this, the playwright deliberately chooses every day conversations in a household so as to form his dialogues. It is because irony manifests itself very well in the usual, familiar utterances of people as some Freudian slips or the like.

Glennis Byron in connection with Keats’ poems observes, “At the centre of Keats’ mature vision is the paradox that an awareness of mortality increases one’s sense of beauty and joy. Mortal life becomes more valued the more one experiences its fragility and transience. Furthermore, for the later Keats, a poet who has not achieved an awareness and understanding of the dark realities of life cannot be an adequate spiritual physician. The very fact of change becomes an essential part of his eventual belief in purposeful growth” (John Keats Selected Poems, 53-54). A closer analysis of Pinter’s play validates that Harold Pinter followed a similar approach in writing his play *The Birthday Party*. First of all we find a similar paradoxical nature visible in both the title of the play ‘*The Birthday Party*’ and the title ‘*The comedy of menace*’ attributed to it by the critics.

In a birthday party, it is an irony that the clang of a toast reverberate an unheard death knell. Still Pinter maintains the realistic vision that life is transient by attempting no escapist mechanism, and thereby all his characters except Stanley exhibit a tendency to fit into the system. They in fact possess an optimistic view of future, carrying the postmodernist tone of the play. Martin Esslin in his famous work *The Theatre of the Absurd* observes: “For Pinter, there is no contradiction between the desire for realism and the basic absurdity of the situations that inspire him. Like Ionesco he regards life in its absurdity as basically funny- up to a point” (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, 272).

So the playwright owing justice to the subtitle of David Compton's *The Lunatic View: A Comedy of Menace* (1957) intertwines comic elements with the horrible situations of his characters. For instance, though Stanley's words are left unheard, everybody is eager to know his artistic life. Further his act of drumming which started as a passionate hum is seen turned to a violent one. Likewise, Lulu, the most jovial and playful character in the play is seen raped hinting at the fatal side of life. Despite Meg's eagerness to get a birthday present for Stanley, she is towards the end seen awestruck by seeing the wheelbarrow. Wheelbarrow in the play serves a powerful image of death and destruction alluding to the destructive nature of scientific inventions. Such instances constantly change the atmosphere of the play getting it to shift in between lighter and darker moments. Indeed the effort is to show that the menace is a comedy or that it is a triviality. It is too trivial to be feared since Pinter celebrates the mortality of human beings.

One can say that Pinter takes pleasure in negative sides of life so as to ground himself more into reality. In that he becomes a modernist in approach since he represents harsh reality of the modern life. But what he does is a balanced mixing of entirely different moods of the period. There is a whole lot of silence pervading throughout the play, possibly an influence of Beckett's absurd plays. But unlike the situation of "nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful" (*Waiting for Godot*, 41), anything may happen at any moment in Pinter's plays. Pinter never keeps his characters, at least in this particular play, in the act of waiting.

The celebration of conflicts is also achieved through his brilliant characterization, one of the elements of the Pinteresque. Each character carries with them the changing spirits of the time through their contradictory ideals. Also the pauses they have for themselves serve a warning signal to reflect to their own inner selves. For Pinter, perhaps, it is the only time when one can stay true to oneself amid the chaos of the external world, again throwing light into the positive tone of the play. For example,

Meg: What time did you go out this morning, Petey?

Petey: Same time as usual.

Meg: Was it dark?

Petey: No it was light.

Meg (beginning to darn): But sometimes you go out in the morning and it's dark.

Petey: That's in the winter.

Meg: Oh, in winter.

Petey: Yes, it gets light later in winter.

Meg: Oh.

Pause. (*The Birthday Party*, 10- 11)

This occasion shows that Meg is unaware of the changes going on in the outside world. Thus the pause given here may suggest her contemplation of her own ignorance. In fact people in those times were ignorant in many ways, a factor for their miserable existence and Pinter points out this characteristic feature of the age.

Similarly when Petey talks about a show and says that it is a straight show meaning “no dancing or singing” (13), he hails the political control that existed over art forms against which emerged many twentieth century movements. But he does not project himself as someone who works for the government or the capitalist society just like Goldberg and Mccann. Instead he plays a sympathetic role throughout, silencing himself but not others even when Stanley is taken away by the two men, despite his urge to stop them.

In contrast to Petey, Goldberg and Mccann use their powerful rhetoric to silence others, especially Stanley, and become representatives of the capitalist ideology. But the unique charm of Pinter as a writer lies in the fact that he never makes these characters especially Goldberg villainous in nature. This could be the most important reason to get him the adjective ‘Pinteresque’ to his credit. It is in the course of introducing these characters his acknowledgement of Keats’ negative capability is visible. According to Glennis Byron, Keats’ negative capability is the ability to contemplate the world without the desire to try and reconcile its contradictory aspects or fit it into closed and rational systems.

Both Stanley and Goldberg become foils to each other and not a protagonist and an antagonist respectively. In his analysis of negative capability, M. H Abrams takes the term as follows:

1. To characterize an impersonal, or objective, author who maintains aesthetic distance, as opposed to a subjective author who is personally involved with the characters and actions represented in a work of literature, and as opposed also to an author who uses a literary work to present and to make persuasive his or her personal beliefs.
2. To suggest that, when embodied in a beautiful artistic form, the literary subject matter, concepts, and characters are not subject to the ordinary standards of evidence, truth, and morality, as we apply these standards in the course of our everyday experience. (A Glossary of Literary Terms, 236)

This equals the style of Pinter which is called Pinteresque. For more understanding, let us delineate instances from the text.

The objective stand of Pinter can be seen in his way of presenting the most antithetical aspects of his time through Stanley and Goldberg. Those antithetical aspects are nothing but the conflicts within a person about either maintaining a questioning attitude towards the society or being complacent about it. It is sure that the author must also have been experienced the same. Yet he remains ambivalent because he is not seen sympathizing with either Stanley or Goldberg.

But it can be noted that the quintessence of the period is revealed to the viewers through the dialogue of Goldberg and not Stanley so that the readers are more likely to empathize with the latter. The quintessence of the period was the rising capitalism and commercialism prevalent in the world. Goldberg's words are as follows:

You know what? I've never lost a tooth. Not since the day I was born. Nothing's changed. That's why I have reached my position, McCann. Because I've always been as fit as a fiddle. All my life I've said the same. Play up, play up, and play the game. Honour thy father and thy mother. All along the line. Follow the line, the line, McCann, and you can't go wrong. What do you think, I'm a self-made man? No! I sat where I was told to sit. I kept my eye on the ball. School? Don't talk to me about school. Top in all subjects. And for why? Because I am telling you, follow my line? Follow my mental? Learn by heart. Never write down a thing. And don't go too near the water. And you'll find- that what I say is true. Because I believe that the world... (Vacant)... Because I believe that the world... (Desperate) ...Because I BELIEVE THAT THE WORLD... (Lost) ... (The Birthday Party, 77-78)

The words 'desperate', 'vacant', and 'lost' along with the repeated ellipses give an emphasis that the play is more of a predicament of Goldberg than that of Stanley. Here too Pinter is not identifying himself with the former, rather he just considers the opposite of Stanley to convey the spirit of the time. In a way Pinter throws light into the German author Hermann Hesse's philosophy: "The opposite of every truth is just as true" (Siddhartha, 127). Perhaps, as a way of highlighting the need to accept such opposite truths, Hesse begins his novel Siddhartha (1922) with the chapter "The Son of the Brahman" and ends it with its opposite "Govinda". Such writers through their writings tried to show that conflict is inherent in human beings and knowledge lies in the midway of contradictions, and so does Pinter with his Pinteresque traits. Apart from that, it also shows a change from one form to another and indeed postmodernism was a loud cry for a change.

Moreover, the postmodernist element of reviving the past as Peter Barry identifies it in his work *Beginning Theory* materializes itself in the dialogues of Goldberg. Unlike Stanley, Goldberg is filled with nostalgia for his past referring to it as "golden days" (27). And yet again, Goldberg and McCann, they themselves serve as metaphors of past alluding to the days when people were strongly connected to nature. In Petey's words, they made their appearance firstly on the "beach" (12), a place where people usually go to get themselves away from the hustle and bustle of modern life. Apart from this, Meg's declaration that she has got the room with the "armchair" (13) all ready for visitors calls reader's attention. In the modern way of life an armchair usually becomes a thing of antiquity, suggesting the visitors' association with the past.

Finally regarding Stanley, as stated earlier, he does not try to fit himself into the system. He does not confine himself to the rules and regulations imposed on him by others. But the question is whether he was able to reign in the claustrophobia of Meg's room created by him

for himself. He seems a failure in it primarily because he was not able to keep up with the conflicts within his inner self. He was a character with an added advantage. He was a pianist. He never kept Goldberg's motto of being "fit as a fiddle" (78). Since 'fiddle' refers to a violin and it is said that a piano could display more versatility than a violin, it is a fault from Stanley's part that he never gathered courage to play it, despite Meg's insistence upon it. He asks Meg: "I can't, can I?" (21) Thus his subjective reality itself posed a threat to him. It is also evident in his difficulty to choose between his motherly affection and sexual desire towards Meg.

Moreover, despite his non-conformism, deep inside he might have had a constant leniency towards the growing commercialism. It is seen in his sudden utterance: "Well, I can see I'll have to go down to one of those smart hotels on the front" (15), a similar predicament of Kafka's protagonist Josef K. In Kafka's novel *The Trial*, the police men say to K: "But in spite of all that we are still willing, if you've got the money, to go and get you some breakfast from the café over the road" (*The Trial*, 5), throwing light into the fact that the men who are intruders are the flag bearers of commercialism. But we can see K. in a contemplative state after which he decides to have a nice apple as his food. In Stanley's case, even after taking a contemplative pause, he could not help making the above statement of getting food from a smart hotel.

Yet contrary to the things mentioned above, Pinter also incorporates a postmodern ideal into the character of Stanley. "Postmodernism involves not only a continuation, sometimes carried to an extreme, of the counter traditional experiments of modernism but also diverse attempts to break away from modernist forms which had, inevitably, become in their turn conventional, as well as to overthrow the elitism of modernist "high art" by recourse for models to the "mass culture" of film, television, newspaper cartoons, and popular music," observes Abrams and Harpham (*A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 228). Stanley's frequent act of newspaper reading and collecting paper bits can be viewed as his yearning thus to popularize mass culture. Indeed an effort to popularize mass culture is a contradiction in Stanley's character when he confines himself to the microcosm of his claustrophobic experience. But the playwright never blames or criticizes any of his characters, allowing them to experience their conflicts to the fullest, with a style that could be considered as the manifestation of negative capability.

So to conclude Harold Pinter took extreme care in characterization and in the inclusion of imageries or metaphors and stylistic devices which altogether constitute the Pinteresque. And the peculiarity is that every such thing has dual or multiple implications adding to the postmodernist tendency of rejecting absolute truth and celebrating the irony of life. Pinter never takes sides with any of the characters thus maintaining an ambiguous atmosphere throughout, satisfying Keats' notion of negative capability. From all these, we can infer that the Pinteresque is that technique by which Harold Pinter, in spite of being a modernist writer acts as a forerunner to postmodernism. Moreover it is a plea to embrace all the anti-positive stuff yet solely based on one's subjectivity.

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