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Political and Metaphorical Implications in Harold Pinter's

The Birthday Party

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Abstract:

Harold Pinter is now considered to be one of the most original and influential British playwrights who rise to fame and success in the second half of the twentieth-century. His first full-length play *The Birthday Party* is one of his most important works. It is an interestingly complex play that resists any attempt to reduce it into fixity. The fact that it is open to various interpretations adds to its strength as a play. Many of Pinter's plays can be said to be about the struggle for power and domination which has been one of the recurrent themes in his plays. The present paper is an attempt to identify the political and metaphorical implications in the play as can be interpreted from the study of the play.

Keywords: Political, metaphorical, authoritarian, nonconformist, power, conscientious objector.

The Birthday Party is one of Harold Pinter's most celebrated plays. It is Pinter's first full-length first presented at the Arts Theatre, Cambridge 28th April 1958 and subsequently at the Lyric Opera House, Hammersmith, London, under the direction of Peter Wood. The play's production in London's Lyric Opera House turns out to be a total flop and was said to be "taken off by the producers after only one week in response to a generally unfavourable press" (Naismith 2000: 1). The only favourable review which saved the play and Pinter's dramatic career came from a well-respected drama critic, Harold Hobson. Hobson in his 25 May 1958 review of the play published in *The Sunday Times* writes:

Deliberately, I am willing to risk whatever reputation I have as a judge of plays by saying that *The Birthday Party* is not a Fourth,

not even a Second, but a First; and that Pinter, on the evidence of his work, possesses the most original, disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London. (Harold Hobson "The Screw Turns Again")

Interestingly, at that time Hobson was the lone critic who saw great merit in *The Birthday Party* and appreciated the originality of Pinter's work. No wonder, Pinter has now been regarded as one of the most original and influential post-World War II British dramatists.

Pinter's *The Birthday Party* is a fairly complex play. It is hard to supply a definite meaning of the play and is generally subjected to various interpretations. In the opinion of the critic Simon Trussler it "is many plays to many men" (Trussler 1974: 37). It obviously is a play that clearly defies the traditionally accepted methods of dramaturgy. As Harold Hobson in his famous review of the play has rightly pointed out: "The fact that no one can say precisely what it is about, or give the address from which the intruding Goldberg and McCann come, or say precisely why it is that Stanley is so frightened of them is, of course, one of its greatest merits. It is exactly in this vagueness that its spine-chilling quality lies." (Hobson "The Screw Turns Again"). *The Birthday Party* is said to have based on a real experience which the dramatist have transformed into a play. According to what Pinter has said in an interview with Lawrence M. Bensky, the play ". . . was sparked off from a very distinct situation in digs when I [Pinter] was on tour" (Qtd. Smith 2005: 51). The tour which Pinter is referring to is the one he made in the summer of 1954 with a play in Eastbourne in which he had to share a room with a stranger, who turns out to be a former pianist, in a seaside boarding house (Gordon 2013: 28).

The play *The Birthday Party* is about Stanley Webber, the lone guest in the boarding house who claims to be a former pianist. Stanley is an indoor person. He loves to stay indoors and seldom goes out to mingle with the world outside the house. He entirely depends on Petey and Meg for everything and is much pampered by the great attention with which he is treated by Meg. The boarding house, thus, has become a safe haven for Stanley where he finds himself secure from all trouble. However, Stanley's sense of security is short lived as it is threatened by the sudden arrival of Goldberg and McCann, two sinister agents of a mysterious organisation who have come to take him away to a person called Monty.

Ultimately, a helpless Stanley suffers a mental breakdown and is escorted out of the house by Goldberg and McCann for a ‘special treatment’.

Pinter’s *The Birthday Party* can be regarded as a play with underlying political and metaphorical implications. It depicts the use of authoritarian power and force to exercise control and overcome an individual into submission. Stanley Webber is presented as a chosen victim of a powerful organisation. Though we know little about Stanley’s past, he tells Meg that he was once a successful pianist and that he was betrayed by some people by sabotaging one of his concerts in which he was suppose to play. The fact that he has been staying as a recluse in the seaside resort for the last one year suggests that he is under some sort of threat from which he is trying to escape. But unfortunately, the threat arrives in the forms of Goldberg and McCann to pursue him. In the famous interrogation scene Goldberg and McCann accuses Stanley with various allegations. He is said to be guilty of betraying the organisation and playing a dirty game, but it remains unclear what it is exactly that Stanley has done that have caused the authority to follow his trail:

GOLDBERG. What did you wear last week, Webber? Where do
you keep your suit?

MCCANN. Why did you leave the organisation?

GOLDBERG. What would your old mum say, Webber?

MCCANN. Why did you betray us?

GOLDBERG. You hurt me, Webber. You’re playing a dirty
game.

MCCANN. That’s a Black and Tan fact.

GOLDBERG. Who does he think he is?

MCCANN. Who do you think you are?

STANLEY. You’re on the wrong horse.

GONDBERG. When did you come to this place?

STANLEY. Last year.

[.]

MCCANN. You betrayed the organisation. I know him! (Pinter 1990: 58)

As the drama critic Bill Naismith has pointed out: “[t]he problem that exists with regard to Stanley is that the play does not make explicit what exactly he has done to provoke the arrival of Goldberg and McCann. His behaviour on hearing of them, and his reaction

when they arrive, both suggest guilt, but the guilt is undefined" (2000: 50). Stanley Webber, thus, is one of the most complex characters that we usually find in a Pinter play.

In spite of all its obscurities, Pinter's *The Birthday Party* can be interpreted on one level as a highly powerful play that portrays how a helpless individual is forced to conform to the accepted norms of the society. Stanley is suggested to be a nonconformist and an escapist. He is a man who has turned his back to all his responsibilities as a person and has forsaken all his relations with people in his life. Bill Naismith opines that: "Stanley is guilty of being Stanley. His fears concern the world outside, which makes immeasurable demands on him (the individual) from the kinds of directions which he chooses not to fulfil" (2000: 43). The political dimension in the play becomes more apparent if we consider the role of the organisation that sends its agents to exercise its control and authority over Stanley. Monty, the mysterious character who sends the two agents to get Stanley, stands as a strong symbol of authoritative power whose order is to be followed at all cost. It is worthy to note what Michael Billington, who is also Pinter's biographer, has expressed in his book *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter*: "The power of the play, however, resides precisely in the way Pinter takes stock ingredients of popular drama and invests them with political resonance. At its very simplest, the play shows an obstinately reclusive hero being obliged to conform to the external pressures of conventional society" (1996: 77).

Harold Pinter is a playwright who has always refused to comment on the meaning of his plays. In his letter to Peter Wood (the director of the first production of the *The Birthday Party* in 1958) Pinter denies Wood's suggestion of supplying 'a clarification or moral judgement or author's angle' of the play saying that: "[e]verything to do with the play is in the play" (Pinter 2005: 12). However, in an interview with Anna Ford, Pinter has revealed a very important aspect of some of his important plays including *The Birthday Party* when he said:

. . . I think that the plays like *The Birthday Party*, *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Hothouse* are metaphors, really. When you look at them, they're much closer to an extremely critical look at authoritarian postures – state power, family power, religious power, power used to undermine, if not destroy, the individual, or the questioning voice, or the voice which simply went away from

the mainstream and refused to become part of an easily recognizable set of standards and social values. (Smith 2005: 85)

The fact that Pinter was a Jew and he himself has experienced the hardship of growing up in a hostile environment during and after the Second World War in the East End of London speak volumes of his preoccupation with the theme of power and violence in his plays. As Robert Gordon has rightly pointed out, Pinter's ". . . imagination was haunted by crimes committed by the Nazis, but his own personal attitude as a citizen was also formed in response to the violence of British fascist gangs he personally encountered at the end of the war" (Gordon 2013: 3). The political and metaphorical aspects of *The Birthday Party* can also be understood in the light of the experiences Pinter has gone through during his childhood days. From a very young age Pinter has started to develop a very critical attitude towards any form of authoritarian impositions. In fact, as a youth he has had to face court trials and nearly escaped prosecution for being a conscientious objector by refusing registration for service in the British military.

One of the most interesting facts to note about the plays of Harold Pinter is that many of them almost always share a similar setting, usually a 'room'. The image of two or more people in a room has always been the subject of most of Pinter's plays. *The Birthday Party* is not an exception. It is also set in the living room of a seaside boarding house owned and run by an old couple Petey and Meg, both in their sixties. Pinter's rooms are private worlds inhabited by people who remain constantly afraid of an intrusion from the outside world. It is the sudden and uninvited arrivals of a person or two from the outside world which has caused misfortune to the inhabitants of the rooms in many of Pinter plays. For example, it is the arrival of Riley in *The Room*, the match seller in *A Slight Ache*, the old tramp in *The Caretaker*, and the two agents of the organisation in *The Birthday Party* which has been the cause for trouble to all the inhabitants of the rooms in the plays. Bill Naismith has suggested that: "a character – or two characters (as in *The Birthday Party*) – intruding as some kind of threat into a very private, personal situation might even be regarded as a metaphor" (Naismith 2000: 6). In fact, the 'room' in Pinter plays can perhaps be regarded to serve as a metaphor in itself. It may be interpreted to represent a secure place supposed to be another Eden free from all worries and threats but it unfortunately fails to prevent the intrusion that brings message of doom for its inhabitants.

Goldberg and McCann can be regarded as one of the strangest pair of characters in all literatures. The real identity of the two men is kept a mystery. They only reveal themselves as agents of an unnamed organisation that puts them on a mission which is to be successfully accomplished at all events. Their 'job' in the play is to take Stanley away with them to be presented to the authority. Goldberg, the senior partner of the two, is a cunning professional. He skilfully plans the operation of the mission with great accuracy and mastery and forced their helpless victim into submission. It is believed by many critics that Pinter has invested a slight hint of symbolism in his portrayal of the two agents in the play. In his letter to Peter Wood written in 1958 Pinter has offered an important clue regarding the two characters, Goldberg and McCann: "I think the house is in pretty good order. We've agreed; the hierarchy, the Establishment, the arbiters, the socio-religious monsters arrive to affect alteration and censure upon a member of the club who has discarded responsibility . . . towards himself and others" (Pinter 2005: 14-15). A very significant statement that supports the strong presence of political and metaphorical implications in the play comes from none other than Pinter himself when he said in his interview with Mel Gussow: "Between you and me, the play showed how the bastards . . . how religious forces ruin our lives. But who's going to say that in the play?" (Gussow 1996: 71, author's ellipsis) With the power invested on them by the authority Goldberg and McCann carries out their task which resulted in what Pinter calls "the destruction of an individual, the independent voice of an individual" (*ibid.* 69).

The struggle for domination through the exercise of powerful language game has been a recurrent theme in the plays of Pinter including *The Birthday Party*. No wonder, as Pinter tells Anna Ford: "I've been writing plays for thirty years and many of them have to do with that mode of operation – of terrorising through words of power – verbal power, verbal facility. In *The Birthday Party*, I think it's most evident" (Smith 2005: 83). However, as Michael Billington has suggested, Pinter's *The Birthday Party* ". . . is not simply a play about a pathetic victim brainwashed into social conformity. It is a play about the need to resist, with the utmost vigour, dead ideas and the inherited weight of the past" (1996: 78). There is no doubt that Stanley exhibited this spirit of resistance when at the time of his first encounter with the two agents he emphatically tells them:

STANLEY. Let me - just make this clear. You don't bother me.

To me, you're nothing but a dirty joke. But I have a

responsibility towards the people in this house. They've been down here too long. They've lost their sense of smell. I haven't. And nobody's going to take advantage of them while I'm here. (*A little less forceful.*) Anyway, this house isn't your cup of tea. There's nothing here for you, from any angle, any angle. So why don't you just go, without any more fuss? (Pinter 1990: 55)

However, in spite of his best attempt to defend the forceful intrusion into the house he is ultimately overpowered by the superior force that Goldberg and McCann represents. As the play ends with Stanley being taken away from the house, a broken Petey utters one of the most forceful lines in the play when he tells Stanley: "Stan, don't let them tell you what to do!" (Pinter 1990: 96) It can be interpreted as an expression of the author's strong belief for the need of an attempt to put up resistance against any form of injustice.

From some of the clues highlighted above it is safe to say, without denying the possibility that the play can also be subjected to various other interpretations, that Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* is a play that expresses strong implications of political and metaphorical significance. Such is the quality of a great work of art. As regard the meaning of the play one may take a careful note of what Pinter himself has to say: "There is no end to meaning. Meaning which is resolved, parcelled, labelled and ready for export is dead, impertinent – and meaningless. I examine my own plays and ask, what's going on here" (Pinter 2005: 13). The drama critic Harold Hobson has rightly pointed out that:

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 Pinter's 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. There is something in your past – it does not matter what – which will catch up with you. [. . .] one day there is a possibility that two men will appear. They will be looking for you, and you cannot get away. [. . .] There is terror everywhere" (Harold Hobson: "The Screw Turns Again," *The Sunday Times*, May 1958).

The Birthday Party is, indeed, one of Pinter's most well-known plays. It has now been recognised as an important play depicting the human condition to have appeared in the English theatrical world after the Second World War.

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