



The Themes of Memory and Fear in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*

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Abstract

The Theatre of the Absurd was a literary movement in English drama that began after the Second World War. Although the pioneers of the movement already established their positions in the respective fields, it was through *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Becket that the audience started to really think about the essence of the Absurd Theatre. Harold Pinter was a playwright whose works come under the classification of the 'Comedy of Menace.' In a Comedy of Menace, a person or a group of people for that matter is likely to cause harm to himself or his surroundings. He poses a threat to his atmosphere. This novel movement in English literature was indeed a challenging one for the then audience who were yet to escape from the trauma of the Great War. It reflected the disillusionment and the idea of the meaninglessness of life the War had showered upon people. *The Birthday Party* is a fine example of a 'Comedy of Menace.' But this article is not intended to define the play as a 'Comedy of Menace' but to analyze the aspects of memory and fear in it.

Keywords: Memory, Fear, Reality, Menace

Introduction

The Birthday Party cannot literally be classified into a perfect category since it's neither a comedy nor a tragedy. It is in fact a fusion of both. Pinter showcases a show with is technically minimal but suggests a feeling of great importance to the spectators. There had been protests against Pinter, criticizing him to be a theatrical fraud because of his unwillingness to specify in his plays, the points or themes he is trying to explicate. But the truth is, through this mysterious behavior, Pinter succeeded in creating an aura of suspense in his plays which indeed was a very aspect in the same. Pinter's characters are normal humans set in an unfortunate environment who experience difficulty in communicating properly with others and are in desperate search for security. It's up to the audience to derive meaning from his plays for they are open to several different kinds of interpretations. *The Birthday Party* is

again about an individual who cannot run away from fate and his very existence creates a mystic vibe around him, spreading to the people around him as well. This is what accounts for the aspect of fear in the play connected to human relationships.

A Humane Birthday Party

In *The Birthday Party*, the characters are portrayed as unable to express their feelings towards one another. This inability can be coupled with their desire to stay away from the maddening crowd of the outside world. Stanley is the perfect example here although Lulu too can be a part of it. Stanley never leaves the house. He vehemently tries to resist the forces against him. But his efforts become unsuccessful. The world punishes him for his attempt to isolate himself.

One of the classiest skills of Pinter is his quality in making the standard and mundane, strange and intriguing. The setting of the play is naturalistic. It's the schematics of the plot that make it extraordinary. It is through that, he treads through an atmosphere of menace. By making the ordinary strange, he mixes two contrasting tones such as happiness and tension. That way, much of the play is terrifying in that manner.

The crowning strategy that Pinter uses to create an atmosphere of menace is to sprinkle doubt on almost everything in the play. He employs an insecure omnipresence tactic throughout the play to achieve this mark. He makes a character assert an idea which he defies later. Hence, the nature of reality is made unclear and in confusion. The audience then feels a sense of longing for truth because they no longer know what to believe. They can draw a parallel between what happens in the play and in their own lives through this feeling of dread. Pinter oozes out the sense of fear, tension and insecurity the audience have hidden inside them. This strategy becomes successful since the audience is not given any primary or secondary information for that matter about the characters of the play and it's along with this that Pinter keeps the ideas of the characters defy each other.

Stanley is an icon of the normal man who is faced with Goldberg and McCann who forces Stanley to face reality. Goldberg and McCann act as the sorcerers, unleashing the dread upon Stanley, upon the poor normal man. They try to unleash the evil out of Stanley's life which he has been trying to cover up all along.

The world itself is dreadful in *The Birthday Party*. This menacing world forces the characters in the play to cling on to the boarding house that in turn makes Stanley surrounded with no possible way to escape the insecurity he feels inside the house. It makes Meg believe that she is a good wife and a mother like figure to Stanley. Goldberg has memories of childhood where the sun always shines. It's a call more than a memory to Goldberg. A call to bring back the golden days of his childhood. In this way, memory plays an important role in this play.

But Goldberg's memories of youth are deceptive. They are simply idealized to give only an impression of reality. Pinter used the strategy of asserting and defying mostly with Goldberg. He says he is generous to beggars but later we understand what he was doing to

Stanley. The terms 'dogs' and 'animals' appear periodically which provide a hint of Goldberg's and McCann's animalistic sensibilities. This is again an interesting take on his memories of youth. He longs for it which fuels his insecurity. His insecurity is always triggered whenever McCann calls him 'Simey'.

The temperature inside the boarding house is elevated by Stanley as he tries to establish relationships with Meg and Lulu. Meg as mentioned earlier thinks that she would make a good mother and Stanley responds to this feeling. His seemingly unusual behavior with Meg also provides an essence of sexual undertones. Meg's father according to her deserted her years ago and went to Ireland. Stanley's father is supposed to have deserted him. So, the unconscious minds of both Stanley and Meg believe that their union will be platonic. But both their efforts to unite fail. Their union would have also put a closing seal on the doors of their dreadful past which could block their bitter memories of it. So is the case of Lulu who tries to establish a father-daughter relationship with Goldberg but the end result is similar. McCann too seems to crave for the past which is evident from his mournful songs about his longing for Ireland. Petey seems to be the only person who is free from the evil clutches of memory and past.

Conclusion

Memory and insecurity hold on to the characters of the play like they're their air and water. It is the security and happiness that Meg enjoyed during her early childhood, craved by Goldberg as well. This feeling towards memory is what destroys most of the characters towards the end of the play. Reality is established as the menacing factor in *The Birthday Party* as it is in Pinter's other works as well. Reality pins down memory destroying security and the characters that rely on that security. Pinter thus successfully proves his point about people who are fed up of the reality of the hostile world. No matter how hard they try to escape reality, they will be challenged and kept at bay by the memories of the past, which instill in them, a fear about the same which in turn, paves way for their doom.

Works Cited

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