



Treatment of Themes and the Female Characters: A Critical Study on Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* and *The Room*

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Abstract

This paper intends to highlight how the themes and the female characters are treated in the post 50s drama. And for this purpose I have selected two well known plays – *The Birthday Party* and *The Room* written by one of the most influential post 50s writers i.e. Harold Pinter. The drama *The Room* was written in 1957 and in the same year he published his masterpiece *The Birthday Party*. Harold Pinter began to write after experiencing the huge loss of life and property caused by the two destructive World Wars. These World Wars have such huge impact on lives that it seems as if the people were living meaninglessly. Their existence in the world is meaningless. In such a circumstance no one can expect a comedy of the Elizabethan Age or the Restoration Age where the basic purpose of comedy was to create laughter to the audience. But when the situation is changed, the theme as well as the purpose of it also has to be changed. And therefore Harold Pinter has introduced new themes to uphold the condition of the post 50s people.

Keywords: Comedy, Fear, Female Characters, Human condition, Violence.

Introduction:

Harold Pinter (1930-2008), a Noble prize winning British dramatist, was an unconventional and untraditional dramatist writing in the post 50s era. He did not follow the beaten track rather he created his own track. He first broke the tradition of comedy writing. He realized after experiencing the horrors of the two consecutive great World Wars that when the people are living meaninglessly and suffering from anxiety and fear, in such a juncture comedy cannot produce laughter to the audience. And hence in his dramas we can find an undercurrent of fear. This paper strives to explore the themes invented by Harold Pinter in the texture of *The Birthday Party* and *The Room* and after dealing with it, it also zeroes in how Harold Pinter has treated his female characters in the texture of the two aforesaid dramas. But before focusing light on the locus-classicus of the paper few terms like comedy, comedy of menace are necessary to discuss as his plays are called comedy of menace.

Comedy:

Comedy is a fictional work in which the materials are selected and managed in order to interest and amuse us. We are made to feel that no great disaster will occur and it will end happily (Abrams 38).

Basically comedy is a dramatic presentation of the delightful spectacles of human life. It includes marriage, union, celebration and music. Every comedy has the very tendency to end with marriage. Actually a comedy ends happily.

Comedy of Menace:

The drama critic Irving Wardle termed Harold Pinter's first three plays as comedy of menace (Sakellaridou 29). As his plays have the very tendency to create fear. The comedy of menace denotes the supernatural fear that the unknown universe inspire in the limited human mind (Ibid 29). As an unconventional and untraditional dramatist he has shown the world that comedy can not only create laughter but it can also create menace or fear.

After describing these terms briefly it's the right time to focus light on the themes treated in the play *The Birthday Party* and *The Room*.

Theme of Violence:

Theme of violence is a predominant theme in the play *The Birthday Party* and *The Room*. This violence is not physical violence or domestic violence; rather it called verbal violence which is done by means of words. This verbal violence has been used extensively by Harold Pinter and it became his central dramatic device. *The Birthday Party* centres around Stanley Webber who has been living as lodger and substitute son at the seaside boarding house of Meg and Peter Boles. We know little about him or what he said is known to us. He claimed that he was once a concert pianist whose career ended due to bad reviews. Verbal violence actually begins in the Act II which opens with a meeting between Stanley and McCann. He begins to torture Stanley and this torture reaches to its culmination when Goldberg enters. Goldberg and McCann speak in a quick, gapless rhythm, a totalitarian style which allows no space for response and no option for self defence (Malkin 57).

GOLDBERG: Webber, what are you doing yesterday?

STANLEY: Yesterday?

GOLDBERG: And the day before. What did you do the day before that?

STANLEY: What do you mean?

GOLDBERG: Why are you wasting everybody's time, Webber? Why are you getting in everybody's way?

STANLEY: Me? What are you—

GOLDBERG: I'm telling you, Webber. You're a washout. (pp-47).

The assault does not stop here, rather it becomes more violent and ultimately reaches to the apex as Stanley's very existence is put in question.

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. He doesn't know which came first!

GOLDBERG: Which came first?

McCANN: Chicken? Egg? Which came first?

(Stanley screams.)...

McCANN: Wake him up. Stick a needle in his eyes.

GOLDBERG: You're a plague, Webber. You're an overthrow [...]

McCANN: You betrayed our land.

GOLDBERG: You betray our breed.

McCANN: Who are you, Webber?

GOLDBERG: What makes you think you exist?

McCANN: You're dead.

GOLDBERG. You're dead. You can't live, you can't think, you can't love. You're dead. You're a plague gone bad. There's no juice in you. You're nothing but an odour! (pp-51-52).

Stanley ends up screaming and striking out in horror. This is how the theme of violence has been woven in the texture of *The Birthday Party*. Though verbal violence is not used extensively in the play *The Room* but few instances of verbal violence can be perceived in this play.

When the play *The Room* opens we find that Rose, a sixty-year old woman, is serving tea with bacon and eggs to a fifty-year old man, who- we later learn is her husband. The visual impression is that of a domestic scene. Here we do not find violence. But the violence becomes conspicuous as soon as the blind Negro makes his entry into the play. Mr. Kidd, the landlord, forces Rose to recognise the man who is waiting in the basement to meet her alone.

MR. KIDD: ...I've had a terrible week-end. You will have to see him. I can't take it anymore. You've got to see him.

Pause.

ROSE: Who?

MR. KIDD: The man. He's been waiting to see you. He wants to see you. I can't get rid of him. I'm not a young man, Mrs. Hudd, that's apparent. You've got to see him.

ROSE. See who.

MR. KIDD: The man. He's downstairs now. He's been there the whole week-end. He said that when Mr. Hudd went out I was to tell him. That's why I came up before. But he hadn't gone yet. So I told him... So I came up again, to ask you if you'll see him.

ROSE: Who is he?

[...]

MR. KIDD: Shall I tell him it's all right?

ROSE: That what's all right?

MR. KIDD: That you'll see him.

ROSE: See him? I beg your pardon, Mr. Kidd. I don't know him. Why should I see him?

MR. KIDD: You won't see him?

ROSE: Do you expect me to see someone I don't know? With my husband not here too?

MR. KIDDD. But he knows you, Mrs. Hudd, he knows you.

ROSE: How could he, Mr. Kidd, when I don't know him?

MR. KIDD: You must know him. (pp-109-111).

Theme of Fear:

Fear for unknown is another dominating theme in the dramatic oeuvre of Harold Pinter. Regarding his plays Pinter suggests that they are about "the weasel under the cocktail cabinet" (Burkman 4). This above quoted line clearly indicates that an undercurrent of fear always lurks in his plays. This is prominent from the very beginning of the play *The Birthday Party*.

MEG: Is that you, Petey?

Pause.

Petey, is that you?

Pause.

Petey?

PETEY: What?

MEG: Is that you?

PETEY: Yes, it's me.

MEG: What? (Her face appears at the hatch.

Are you back?

PETEY: Yes.

MEG; I've got your cornflakes ready. (She disappears and reappears).

Here's your cornflakes.

He rises and takes the plate from her, sits at the table, props up the paper to eat. Meg enters by the kitchen door.

and begins

Are they nice?

PETEY: Very nice.

MEG: I thought they'd be nice. (She sits at the table.) You got your paper?

PETEY: Yes. (Act-I, p-9)

From the passage it is clear that Meg is suffering from fear of unknown and that's why she is asking Petey again and again to make sure that it is Petey.

Not only Meg but Stanley also suffers from fear of unknown. In one scene of Act –I we find that Meg is talking to Stanley that two visitors are coming to stay in the boarding house. It creates fear within Stanley to such an extent that he loses his patience.

MEG: ...I've got to get things in for the two gentlemen.

A pause. STANLEY slowly raises his head. He speaks without turning.

STANLEY: What two gentlemen?

MEG: I'm expecting visitors.

He turns.

STANLEY: What?

MEG: You didn't know that, did you?

STANLEY: What are you talking about?

MEG: Two gentlemen asked Petey if they could come and stay for a couple of nights. I'm expecting them. *(She picks up the duster and begins to wipe the cloth on the table.)*

STANLEY; I don't believe it.

NEG: It's true.

STANLEY *(moving to her)*. You're saying it on purpose.

MEG. Petey told me this morning.

STANLEY *(grinding his cigarette)*. When was this? When did he see them?

MEG. Last night.

STANLEY. Who are they?

MEG. I don't know.

STANLEY. Didn't he tell you their names?

MEG. No.

STANLEY *(pacing the room)*. Here? They wanted to come here?

MEG. Yes, they did. *(She takes the curlers out of her hair.)* (Act- I, P-19-20)

The haunting fear of the unknown at first sight figures as the major theme of the play *The Room*. Rose, the female protagonist of the play, has a fear about the mystery of the basement and the coldness and darkness of the outside world. Her room provides her safety and security. Moreover she is also terribly afraid when Mr. Kidd, the landlord, informs her that a blind Negro is waiting for her to meet in the absence of her husband. She reiterated not to meet the unknown person. Mysteriousness of the characters threatens the Pinter hero (Burkman 5). The characters in Pinter's plays are not fully identified. Pinter has not provided full details of his characters and thus creates menace within the mind of his hero. This happens to Stanley as well as Rose in *The Birthday Party* and *The Room* respectively.

Human condition:

Another important theme that is running throughout his plays is the human condition. Harold Pinter has very artistically woven the theme of human condition in the play *The Birthday Party* and *The Room*. The impact of the Second World War was such that people were living meaninglessly. Their existence in the world was meaningless. Such meaninglessness or the absurdities of human life has been portrayed in the play *The Birthday Party*. Martin Esslin, who coined the phrase "Theatre of the Absurd",

cites Ionesco's definition of the Absurd which says that severed from the so-called divine roots man is lost, and consequently the sum total of his actions becomes "senseless, absurd, useless (Lahiri 66) .Through the character of Stanley Pinter has very adroitly presented the existentialist absurdity of life. Stanley, the central character, is an indolent and an apathetic man in his thirties. He is cabined, cribbed and confined to the house out of his own volition, owing to his uncanny fear for the world outside, feeling that intruders from outdoor are menacing bringers of his death. The menace to this isolated man suggests the absurdity of human condition; for, this man, like mankind, is unsafe and without certainties in his universe (Ibid 54).

The play *The Room* also dexterously delineated the theme of human condition in the universe which is the Rose's plight (Sakellaridou 20). Her plight is not of a strictly feminine nature, as one might expect, but purely and essentially human. Her questions are ontological, her fears existential. Like Stanley Rose also confined herself in room no seven where she feels cosy and safety. Her room symbolised her limited known world and the dreading the vast, unknown, dark universe symbolised by the basement of the house and the outside world. Throughout the play Rose constantly stresses how comfortable and warm her room is and how terribly cold, dark and damp it must be in the street or down in the basement. The room offers her protection (Ibid 19). Her fear for the outside world is prominent from her words- "It's very cold out, I can tell you. It's murder... the room keeps warm. It's better than the basement, anyway" (pp-91).

These are the major themes which these two plays deal with. Apart from these themes, the theme of mystery, absurdity, existentialist anxiety, quest for the self are also intricately woven in the texture of *The Birthday Party* and *The Room*. After elaborating precisely the themes it's the right time to focus light on the other topic i.e. treatment of female characters in the aforesaid plays.

Treatment of female characters:

This part basically concentrates on how Harold Pinter has treated his female characters in these two plays *The Birthday Party* and *The Room*. There are four female characters in these two plays. They are – Meg, Lulu, Rose and Mrs Sands. First two are from *The Birthday Party* and the last two are from *The Room*. Pinter has depicted his female characters from the patriarchal point of view. As a result they are suppressed by the dramatist. They have never given freedom rather they are always at the mercy of the male power (Sakellaridou 19-20). This is true to all the female characters. Just like in a patriarchal society female do all the domestic activities like cooking, cleaning, caring the male etc, in the same way Meg as well as Rose does the same thing. When the play *The Birthday Party* opens we find that Meg is presented in her serving role- "I've got your cornflakes ready" (Act-1, pp-9), which reflects her subordination to her husband. She is doing nothing except household activities which is assigned to her by the patriarchal society. The same thing happens to Rose, the protagonist of the play *The Room*. She is also serving food to her husband which also reflects her subordination to her husband- "Here you are. This'll keep the cold out. *She places bacon and eggs on a plate, turns off the gas and takes the plate to the table.*" (R, pp- 91). Lulu, a girl visitor, has also been given a subsidiary role and presented in an unflattering light. In his hand women are less likeable than the men (Ibid 30). She is the stereotype of the young, provocative, empty headed female, a sex object with no personality and no sense of responsibility. She willingly lends herself to Goldberg and then poses as the innocent victim of male lasciviousness and bestiality (Ibid 42). Mrs Sands has also been suppressed by her husband Mr. Sands. In one scene of the play *The Room* Mrs. Sands asks Mr. Sands to sit down but he resists. It seems to him as if it humiliated his masculinity and he does not take long to retaliate triumphantly (Ibid 22):

MRS. SANDS: You're sitting down!

MR. SANDS (jumping up): Who is?

MRS. SANDS: You were.

MR. SANDS: Don't be silly. I perched.

MRS. SANDS: I saw you sit down.

MR. SANDS: You didn't see me sit down because I did not sit bloody well down. I perched!

MRS. SANDS: Do you think I can't perceive when someone's sitting down?

MR. SANDS: Perceive! That's all you do. Perceive.

MRS. SANDS: You could do with a bit more of that instead of all that tripe you get up to.

MR. SANDS: You don't mind some of that tripe!

MRS. SANDS: You take after your uncle, that's who you take after!

MR. SANDS: And who do you take after?

MRS. SANDS (rising): I didn't bring you into the world.

MR. SANDS: You didn't what?

MRS. SANDS: I said, I didn't bring you into the world.

MR. SANDS: Well, who did then? That's what I want to know. Who did? Who did bring me into the world? (R, pp- 106)

In the dramatic world of Harold Pinter there is always a soft corner for the male characters but the woman characters do not count. The fate of the woman characters throughout Pinter's long dramatic career remains that of the castaway. They are redundant and useless. They are marginal and secondary, never fully rounded personalities. They have not any extra-domestic activities or interests whatever (Sakellaridou 44-45). They are bestowed with three roles- mother, wife and whore. If we go through the play *The Birthday Party* and *The Room*, it will be prominent to us. When the play *The Birthday Party* opens it shows that Meg, the central female character is performing the duty of a wife by serving food to her husband. Rose, the central female character in the play *The Room* is also doing the duty of a wife in the beginning of the play. Meg is not only performing the duty of a wife but also the role of a mother and mistress to her lodger Stanley. Like a mother figure Meg takes care of Stanley but at the same time she flirts Stanley and thus she taints her relationship to her lodger with quasi-incestuous desires (Ibid 33). Rose is also performing the role of a wife on one hand and on the other hand she is performing the role of a mother to her husband. Rose is fully ten years older than her husband, Bert and she has a motherly attitude towards her husband. In one scene of the play *The Room* it is shown that Bert is about to leave the room and Rose becomes the fussy, overprotective mother (Ibid 21):

[ROSE]: All right. Wait a minute. Where is your jersey?

She brings the jersey from the bed.

Here you are. Take off the coat. Get into it.

She helps him into his jersey.

Right. Where's your muffler?

She brings a muffler from the bed.

Here you are. Wrap it round. That's it. Don't go too fast, Bert, will you? I'll have some cocoa on when you get back. You won't be long. Wait a minute. Where's your overcoat? You'd better put on your overcoat. (R, pp-100)

Rose's role is not limited to that. She bears the stamp of whoredom, a grave vice connected with woman from time immemorial (Sakellaridou 27). It becomes conspicuous when Rose encounters with the blind Negro. Rose gets indignant when Mr Kidd, the landowner suggests that a male visitor is waiting to meet her in her husband's absence: 'Do you expect me to see someone I don't know? With my husband not here too?' (R, pp-110). Her objection is ridiculous because there is no reason why a mere visit by a man should necessarily imply sexual encounter, as Rose seems to fear. The projection of a forbidden erotic element into the situation is a pure fabrication of Rose's mind. It reflects her guilty mind. It could be that Rose is afraid of the disclosure of a really guilty past, that of a whore. There are several indications that she might have formerly been a prostitute and is trying to lead an honest life. The change of her name from Sal to Rose and her denial of the former imply her anxiety to wipe out a stained past and a desire to change identity and lifestyle (Ibid 26).

Conclusion:

Harold Pinter through his new themes has ultimately succeeded to create menace in these two plays- *The Birthday Party* and *The Room*. He has woven these themes in the texture of these two plays in such a way that they ultimately produce menace. By doing that he has shaken the notion that comedy is only to please and to amuse the audience. And so far the topic of female characters is concerned it is a matter of worry. Women, who have been treated as marginal, subsidiary, secondary and insignificant creature from time immemorial, have been performing the same role in the dramatic world of Harold Pinter. They have never fully rounded personalities and always defined by their relation to men as mother-whore. In his plays the woman occupies a disadvantageous, defenceless position against a set of male mythology and ideology (Sakellaridou 24).

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