

Harold Pinter's 'The Birthday Party': A Social Drama of Human Dilemma.

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Abstract

Harold Pinter is undoubtedly the most significant British playwright of our era. In the 20th century, living under the shadow of a nuclear holocaust, men's faith in all accepted values and institutions had been shaken. He has lost faith in god, family, society, government or even in himself. Having lost its centre, human life has become peripheral and relative. Hence alienation from God and society has become the dominate theme of 20th century literature.

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As we study the plays of Harold Pinter, we feel that his plays express the dilemma of belonging and loneliness, of 'Being' and 'Becoming' in a highly individualized style. Infact Pinter does not adhere to the conventional method of prologue or exposition scene because he feels grater allegiance to reality. He knows how an actuality tantalizes us. We are doomed to live among the unknown and unknowable. He believes that a dramatist should not bypass the hard truth and that our greatest certainties are only half light. Hence Pinter rejected certainties are exposition in a drama.

The play The Birthday Party projects many ambiguities and dilemmas at various levels. There is, in the first instance, the ambiguity of relationship between the characters particularly between Stanley and his two tormentors. Another dilemma, to which the play is subject, is whether it should be taken as a parody of birth or a story of men's decay in to death. The Birthday Party illustrates different types of dilemmas that cover the entire situation of the play. In this play, the characters are few (six) and perhaps flat types. There is Petey the placid, excommunicating deckchair attendant, his wife Meg, the landlady of the Boles boarding hours. Another character is Goldberg, a hard hearted jew; McCann a whisky drinking violent person, the charming personality of Lulu, a buxom amorous girl, and Stanley whose identification is the chief concern of the play.

In the beginning of the play we only know that Stanley Webber who is a man of late thirties lives in the boarding house of Meg who is in her sixties is a skilled pianist. This is unknown to all why he is living there. There are many ambiguous situations in the

play that persist on the trivial life of human being in the society. Ambiguity becomes the cause of embarrassment on the social background of life.

On the fateful day to which the play relates, Goldberg and McCann, the two strange gangsters arrive at the boarding house of Meg and Petey. We do not know the reality about the uneasiness of Stanley Webber that is symbolically likened to death as well as birth. Stanley's uneasiness is the product of social human being who lives in the crowded world but feels alone and what he thinks and does, is on the verge of dilemma. On the other hand, according to Meg it's a welcome time because she has not been visited any guest during some time or it may be said that her boarding house almost starves for clients. Goldberg and Meg talked of Stanley when Stanley slinks out of the back door to avoid them. Why he comes back at all if he has dangerous time ahead, is not made clear. The shrewd Goldberg sieges the opportunity and tries to get some valuable information about Stanley from the hand of the simple rather unintelligent lady, Meg. Pinter points here how it is so easy in the society to enter (without knowing the permission of person) in the life of a strange person.

Meg goes on to tell rightly or falsely about him and lastly says that it is Stanley's birthday. McCann and Goldberg take the advantage of this so called false truth. Both of them insist on having a party for Stanley in the evening and they succeed to organise one with healthy drink and all. How is it strange? The strangers don't have any relation with Stanley still they want to celebrate his birthday. Stanley rightly or falsely says that his birthday will come in the next month. What's reason? This ambiguous action creates suspicion in the mind of the readers. After this, Meg presents Stanley with a toy drum which is bought with the advice of Lulu, a young neighboring girl whose advances Stanley has been resisting again for unknown reason.

A toy drum is given to him for reviving his musical association and make him less furlong, First he begins to beat the drum rhythmically and then beat wildly, 'savage and possessed', Stanley is unable to guess what is the intention of the two unknown guests, so he become much disturbed. He acts and speaks in a forceful rather boastful but unsteady manner but soon his behaviour changes in to flattering, Wheedling and silence-when Meg goes away from there Stanley become the object of torturing interrogation which infact is a blatant act of bullying. When the game of blind man buffs finisher, Stanley is found bending on the body of Lulu who is lying on the table embarrassed. It seems as Stanley is going to seduce Lulu. Stanley becomes upset too much. The two strangers shot hundred of confusing questions at Stanley in quick succession with giving him any change to answer them. He is unable to recover himself from the volley of question to level against him by them. They blame him of all conceivable crimes against human society. The following speech explains the dilemma of stress in Stanley's behaviour:

GOLDBERG : Where was your wife?
STANLEY : In
GOLDBERG : Answer
STANLEY : (Turning, crouched), what wife?
GOLDBERG : What have you done with your wife? Mc
CANN : He's killed his wife!
GOLDBERG : Why did you kill your wife?
STANLEY : (sitting, his back to the audience).
What wife?
Mc CANN : How did he kill her?
GOLDBERG : How did you kill her?
Mc CANN : You throttled her.
GOLDBERG : With arsenic. Mc
CANN : There's your man!
GOLDBERG : Where's your old mum?
STANLEY : In the sanatorium.
Mc CANN : Yes!
GOLDBERG : Why did you never get married? Mc
CANN : She was waiting at the porch.
GOLDBERG : You skaddaled from wedding. (P.59)

This speech highlights in stichomythia, is rather a thing of comical absurdity or a manner of extreme torture. Stanley is distracted and be wildered and becomes speechless. They remove Stanley's glasses and make his vision in to blindness. Behind this, they have a purpose. They play the game blind man's bluff. Stanley tries to grope his way forward. McCann places the drum before him so that so that Stanley puts his foot into it. He falls down on Meg and tries to strangle her. As Goldberg and McCann stop him suddenly the lights go out and there is the confusion in the darkness characteristic of a third degree atmosphere. Grunts, drumbeats, scream from Lulu and a quick search for light, everything happens in a very short time. What is going there is very confusing and unable to understand. This condition of dilemma shows the tragic as well as comic situation of human life in society. What is going to happen ahead is not certain.

Next morning the entire atmosphere presents in a different mood. Petey is worried for Stanley; McCann enters with suitcase and seems in a very sad mood; Goldberg is stunned and Lulu's embarrassment creates the horrible situation of education during the last night. She becomes meaningless and non-sensingly muttering some words. Stanley comes there with broken glasses. McCann and Goldberg want to take him somewhere. When Petey asks them being worried about Stanley they say that they are going to Monty with Stanley. Who is Monty and how are these men concerned with him, what he is likely

to do are things that will always remain obscure. Petey also becomes helpless after seeing the threatening posture of the two; Meg is worried about Stanley and makes some suggestions in her remarks that close the play:

MEG : We had dancing and singing, and games .You should have been there.

PETEY : IT was good, eh?
Pause

MEG :

PETEY : Were you?

MEG : Oh Yes! They all said I was.

PETEY : I bet you were too.

MEG : Oh, it's true. I was.
Pause
I know I was. (P.97)

She will soon realise how terribly nice the party has been. Infact the celebration of birthday party has been called Stanley's birth into hell and birthday parting. Thus The Birthday Party presents many situations of ambiguities and dilemmas at various angles. The first ambiguity of relationship is between the characters, especially between Stanley and the two tormentors. The entire situation of the play shows the humdrum of the disturbing society where everyone is engulfed in some sort of dilemma. It makes realise us that the values of society are put aside by the gangsters. The characters like McCann and Goldberg become dominate on the other characters. The conversation of the two proves it:

Mc CANN : We'll review your season ticket.

GOLDBERG : We'll take up pence off your morning tea.

.....

GOLDBERG : We'll watch over you.

McCANN : Advise you.

GOLDBERG : Give you proper care and treatment (P.92)

Another dilemma to which the play is subject is whether it should be taken as a parody of birth or a story of man's decay into death. Stanley first of all loses his peace of mind, then his power of speech and lastly ceases to be a lining man. It can also be said that the view of the birthday Party which takes a sense of shared guilt implicit in a society. According to the situation it seems that anyone who lives in a society that allows high handedness and in humanity of the type shown against Stanley may be called upon to pay the penalty for his acquiescence. Although the play has the conventional structure of a tragedy. Its beginning, middle and an end are well marked, if the first act can be called exposition (as exposing as it can be in the hands of Pinter) in as much it announce the event of the party, the second act is the conflict and the crisis. The violence of Stanley

provides the turning points. Then the consequences of the central events and the party are shown in the third act. The play can also be seen as having the spirit of classical tragedy. It opens with a prognostic nervousness of Stanley troubling the normal tenor of life. I was in those digs and this woman was Meg in the play, and there was a fellow staying there in East Bourne, on the coast .The whole thing remained with me and there years later I wrote the play.”

The most important dilemmas are those of violence a search for identity and the uncertainties of the situations. Pinter’s denial to identify his characters by a narrated past and by their present positions further intensify the dilemmas in a way that only the pristine essentials of human nature appear to be at work behind all that is said and not said, is done or is supposed to have been done. In certain cases the appeal of the play depends upon the lack of identify itself. The characters of the play ‘The Birthday Party’ seems to be engaged in a struggle for dominance. Infact the battles in the play are for a particular kind of dominance with a particular end in a view.

Thus we find the ritual of game playing, the ritual of violence and the like. By way of such rituals the characters repeat their speeches and their routines. Such behaviour can be funny but more often it is loaded with pathos. In order to focus attention on human dilemma Pinter had tried to arrange things according to the contradictions inherent in memory and keeping them open on all directions. The characters under such state of things, seem to hang on to a nervous existence, their relation to the life outside is a paradox. The mystery that surrounds the motives and action in the play stands firm from the complexity of the metaphors and images in which the play is conceived. On such situations and action, it is clear that Pinter’s play “The Birthday Party” is a Social Drama.

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