

## **EN 404: British Drama – II**

### **Unit 31: Harold Pinter: *The Birthday Party***

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#### **The dramatic tradition of Harold Pinter**

Writing at a time when the world is torn by the two World Wars and suffering the reflexes of the Cold War with imperialist accessions and human delusions, Harold Pinter offers no solace for a lost generation. His early plays are less political and are more concerned in expounding the local, the home space where humans interact every day. Practically speaking, the political front is more public, and needs, as Pinter argued, presentation of ‘a simple picture even if you don’t see things that way’ (Quigley 9). In his Nobel lecture called “Art, Truth and Politics”, he essentializes the elusiveness of truth in dramatic art and what happens does happen and the thing can be understood or appropriated in many ways.

Human beings are surrounded by a ‘tapestry of lies’, and politics and power thrive in ignorance of people from the truth. It could be pertinent to quote the famous lines of George Orwell’s *1984* where ‘War is Peace. Freedom is Slavery. Ignorance is Strength.’ Therefore, the quest for truth, the true reasons and possibilities, the whys and hows is a futile search, a meaningless quest. The fundament of human life is essentially meaningless and absurd and there is in the human condition ... a basic absurdity as well as implacable nobility’, observes Albert Camus in “Hope and the Absurd in the Work of Franz Kafka” (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, Appendix 115) which thrusts on as real and natural.

This basic idea became the foundation of what Martin Esslin terms as ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ which emphasizes not lack of meaning, but even more embedded meanings and serious undertones; the quest of meaning in meaninglessness. Esslin points out the basic difference

between conventional theatre and the Theatre of the Absurd where the former follows a known framework of accepted values, rational view of life, a definite problem and a definable end, and the latter needs a critical acumen and sharpened wit to ‘puzzle out the meaning of what they have seen’ (Esslin 14). Like the theatre of Beckett, Ionesco or Adamov, Pinter too, reflects this indecipherability of the problem. In an address at the National Student Drama Festival in Bristol in 1962, Pinter recounts how he was booed and jeered by the audience at the performance of *The Birthday Party* in London in 1958. Pinter points out:

A play is not an essay, nor should a playwright under any exhortation damage the consistency of his characters by injecting a remedy or apology for their actions in the last act, simply because we have been brought up to expect, rain or sunshine, the last act ‘resolution’. To supply an explicit moral tag to an evolving and compulsive dramatic image seems to be facile, impertinent and dishonest. Where this takes place it is not theatre but a crossword puzzle. The audience holds the paper. The play fills in the blanks. Everyone is happy. (“Writing for the Theatre” 12)

It was only critics like Harold Hobson who initially saw the play as full of promises, and Pinter was ‘the most disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London’ (Ellis n.p). Ruby Cohn in her “The World of Harold Pinter” avers that ‘Pinter has created his own distinctive and dramatic version of Man vs the System. Situating him between Beckett and the Angries is only a first approximation of his achievement’ (56). Cohn makes this statement after she says that Pinter is not only Beckett’s spiritual son but also a cousin of the Angry Young Man of his generation. His plays, according to reviewers like Cohn, cemented together the dominant angry mood and detachment which was then much in vogue in the new wave in British theatre, along with the absurdist elements of Beckett or Ionesco. His plays have also been called the ‘theatre of menace’

as they are numbed by violence and threat but it is not always violent action or physical abuse, it is rather, as Arthur Ganz points out, the threat of meaning that lies at the root of Pinter's menace. Irving Wardle in his celebrated essay on Pinter, 'Comedy of Menace', published in *Encore* in 1958, exhibits Pinter's address to 'destiny' where the orthodox man is gripped in and is a collaborator in his own destruction, dismissing the classical austerity associated with the term.

### **The Play**

The houses are reduced to rooms in Pinter's plays; precisely to a claustrophobic space. In *The Birthday Party*, it is a living room in a seaside town and ironically, instead of comforts of a home space, an invisible discomfort looms over the characters. There is a passiveness in conversations, a stagnancy and reluctance of action. There is a pervasive monotony and dullness. The husband-wife duo Petey and Meg seem to be resigned to the state of a stoic while their tenant Stanley seems to be lost in the drudgery of modern existence. He is a lost man aware of the impossibility of reconciling himself to his situation. The split between the desiring mind and the disappointing reality, the inability to reconcile the two, results in a spirit of nostalgia of a good past which is unattainable at the present. That is why he dreams of his performance in some grand orchestra in front of a huge crowd, at the pinnacle of fame, while in reality, he is a jobless permanent boarder in a room by a seaside town. The arrival of Goldberg and McCann though initially tinged with a dark humour, gradually prepares us for the final coffin. The abrupt, discordant life symbolizes the perilous human condition and the danse macabre. By the end of Act I, the two newcomers Goldberg and McCann along with Meg decide to throw a birthday party for Stanley, while Stanley, perplexed and confused, and frightened by some invisible threat, delves into a hysterical

movement, beating the drum Meg gives him, erratically and uncontrollably, symbolizing the lost direction and passivity of existence.

In Act II, the party takes place but there seems to be unease and Stanley is eventually trapped in the claustrophobic questionnaire and interrogation of Goldberg and McCann. Soon the blind man's buff game is played on and the erratic Stanley tries to strangle Meg and rape Meg's neighbour Lulu. The last string of his sanity is snapped, and the act ends with the maniac Stanley laughing hysterically and 'he flattens himself against the wall' (BP). In Act III there is his complete nervous breakdown. He has lost his power of speech and is carried by Goldberg and McCann to some unknown Monty. Petey fails to resist and both he and his wife Meg return to their old routine of sameness, ordinariness and meaninglessness.

Language along with its stylized expressions is the most important element in his plays, and history, class, race, gender, sexuality, totalitarian and imperial policies, and above all an invisible power in the manner of state surveillance like 'Big Brother is watching you' always loom over. Silence is clothed in speech to cover the emptiness and vacuity, giving it even more sinister effect. In the play *The Birthday Party*, the symbolic significance of the wheelbarrow, the blind man's buff game, the use of the word 'succulent', the piano, the boy's drum, the reference to a certain Monty, who is absent on stage but there is an underlying menace behind the reference to the man who is also a reason of discomfort to Goldberg and McCann, the painful nostalgic revisiting of a past all culminate in a strangulation of hopes and dreams of a beautiful world.

Some probable issues pertaining to the play therefore include:

1. Absurdity
2. Comedy of Menace
3. Existential dilemma/Angst of modern man

4. Symbolic significance
5. Style
6. Pinteresque Oedipal household

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