



The Birthday Party A Comedy of Menace

Research Paper—Education

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“No one made the sound of silence more ominously theatrical than Harold Pinter. The influential British playwright, who died Christmas Eve after a long battle with cancer, created unforgettable moments of quiet, often filled with terror, outrage or the blackest of humor. The “Pinter pause,” as those silences were known, could send a shiver through an audience, jolting it into an unease that permeated many of his best plays, particularly such classics as “The Caretaker” and “The Birthday Party.” When Harold Pinter was awarded the Noble Prize for literature in 2005 the citation from the Swedish Academy named him as ‘the foremost representative of British drama in the second half of the 20th century’. The Birthday Party started the ball rolling for Pinter in 1958 and nearly fifty years later the Graduate Dramatic Society is proud to present this classic of absurdist theatre as the third play of our 2007 season. Acclaimed in the Guardian Newspaper as a “brilliant play: one that was ahead of its time in 1958 but that now seems frighteningly timeless” (London Guardian), The Birthday Party is one of Pinter’s most important works.

It’s an in your face drama without being in your face. It’s riveting, yet nothing happens. The passage of time for a sleepy seaside guesthouse contains madness, emotional breakdowns, yet leaves you feeling like you’ve just chatted with a next-door neighbour. It is a play of opposites, contradictions and a continuous struggle for power. The Birthday Party examines the similarities and differences between the dramatic speech found here and naturally occurring conversation. The

importance in Harold Pinter’s work is what he is trying to say to the audience via his chosen style of language, action and silences. Initially, Pinter’s dramatic dialogue appears to be similar to natural occurring conversation, the two speakers ask questions, respond and repeat utterances. The stage setting, devoid of props other than a table emerges as a blank page enabling Pinter’s specific language of oblique dialogue to be foregrounded. With the pauses, interactions and dislocated conversation, Pinter creates incoherence; the audience is not sure what is going to happen next. In Pinter’s own words: ‘A threat is constantly there: it’s got to do with this question of being in the uppermost position, or attempting to be.’

Pinter mixes an acute awareness of realism through the common speech of his characters with a harrowing insight into the human condition to terrifying results. I am unaware of whether it is his stark realism, ambiguity of theme or unanticipated haunting which develops in the reader, and one would presume audience, the sinister discomfort with which one attempts to leave the play (in that ‘The Birthday Party’ is not a drama one can remove from one’s consciousness with any ease). As is quite obvious by its position in the Canon, a masterpiece of modernist drama.

The term “comedy of menace” was first used by David Campton as a subtitle to his four short plays *The Lunatic view*”. Now it signifies a kind of play in which a character or more characters feel the menacing presence—actual or imaginary, of some obscure and frightening force, power or personality. The dramatist exploits this kind of

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menace as a source of comedy. Harold Pinter exploited the possibilities of this kind of situation in his early plays like “The Room”, “Birthday Party” and “A Slight Ache”, where the both the character/s and the audience face an atmosphere, apparently funny but actually having suggestiveness of some impending threat from outside. Pinter himself explained the situation thus: “more often than not the speech only seems to be funny - the man in question is actually fighting a battle for his life”. He also said: Everything is funny until the horror of the human situation rises to the surface! Life is funny because it is based on illusions and self-deceptions, like Stanley’s dream of a world tour as a pianist, because it is built out of pretence.” In fact the play *Birthday Party* is built around the exchanges of words, which, though funny enough, contain hints that suggest the impending doom lurking around to them.

Pinter creates an atmosphere of menace through a variety of dramatic elements and techniques. First of all, he lets situations fall from a light-hearted situation unexpectedly down to one which is highly serious. For instance, while talking to Meg among other things, he tells her about a wheel-barrow which will come to the house for some body. Here we get a suggestion of impending death through the sudden reference to coffin. Again, we see Meg offering Staley the gift of a drum as a compliment to his supposed musical talent. But Stanley begins to beat it with such savagery that the audience is left dumb-struck as to the real intention behind this. This kind of abrupt explosion of violence is once again seen when Stanley kicks at McCann. But more importantly, menace is presented through the fears the characters feel but cannot spot. First of all, fear of weather is introduced: the characters repeatedly

enquire about weather, and this becomes tangible once the audience understand that the lodge is situated on the coast of a sea. Then Stanley tries to frighten Meg by prophesying the arrival of wheel-barrow which, of course, does not come for her. On the other hand, on hearing the visit of two strangers, Stanley feels a complex fear—first of all, the fear of being driven away from the lodge which has become for him as comfortable as his mother’s womb. A house represents security and comforts from the hazards of the outside world but sadly it is impossible to sustain.

With the hosting of the birthday party, the play reaches its climax of menace. A birthday party is expected to be a ritualistic celebration of one’s life, but in the case of Stanley it turns out to be the greatest ordeal of life leading to his complete mental derangement. The audience now understand the menace turning real though in transformed forms. Stanley faces not only physical assault but also a torrent of words, with the serious accusations like “He’s killed his wife” mingled with trivial and ludicrous like “Why do you pick your nose?”. The persons who could have saved him are either absent or drunk. The play ends with Stanley’s forced removal from the house by Goldberg and McCann who leave a further note of unknown menace awaiting Stanley in near future. This uncertain menace is further strengthened by Petey’s inability to communicate to Meg what has exactly happened with Stanley. To conclude, it can be said that the final impression of the play on the audience echoes Pinter’s own words: “In our present-day world, everything is uncertain, there is no fixed point, we are surrounded by the unknown ... There is a kind of horror about and I think that this horror and absurdity (comedy) go together.”

REFERENCE

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