

Pinter's Comedy of Menace a critical study on the Uncertainty of One's Identity and Sense of Self

Md Mehedi Hasan
Lecturer, Department of English
City University, Bangladesh

Abstract

The profound and illustrious twentieth-century playwright Harold Pinter has written about man's existential issues in a hostile universe. In his comedy of menace, he addresses the prominent modern man's obsession with self and identity, which has been violated by various types of threats through various plays and his unique style. In order to demonstrate how the physical, psychological, and mental types of menace sparked by the exploitation, deprivation, and violation of man's intra - and inter-relationships have resulted in his hazy sense of self and identity. In this article, it has been examined *The Birthday Party*, Pinter's most famous comedy of peril.

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Introduction

The outstanding English playwright of the 20th century Harold Pinter has contributed significantly to the revelation of humanity's existential issues through his work and distinctive style. Major themes in his plays include alienation, a sense of disintegration, evasion, dominance, identity, and self-violation being violated. His plays have been extensively studied. Many critics have categorized them as political plays, plays of menace, plays of identity, plays of memory, and plays of menace, all of which aim to highlight and reveal particular tenets of human existence. "Seek to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought," according to Esslin (2004), are the characteristics of the Theatre of Absurd that he has utilized for this purpose. He does this by reiterating a few well-known existential themes and introducing the play as a whole so that it will operate in accordance with existential principles and rules. As a result, despite his plays' apparent naturalism, he tries to get at much more than just what is said on stage. He creates figures who exist alone in a scary world. "Revolt against a hostile abstract world" is not what they do. Instead, they seek shelter in the negotiation for a psychologically safe location or a physical shelter such as a room. "Fulfillment of their emotional needs" is always their goal (Olivera, 1999:54). The power relationships they form with one another serve as a symbiotic means of meeting these needs. An atmosphere of various types of danger is created when its equilibrium is disrupted, or this relationship is altered and misused. The primary focus of this paper's analysis is the identification of the menace's mainsprings in Pinter's well-known menace play, *The Birthday Party*, which collectively violate and target the individual's sense of self and identity as a shadow of one of the major obsessions of modern man's existential problems, the ambiguity of self and identity.

Discussion

The Birthday Party has been described as a "comedy of menace" for embodying a humorous and threatening atmosphere. The expulsion was first used to refer to Pinter's early plays by David Compton, who coined the term for his collection of one-act plays. Irving Warble used the term to refer to *The Birthday Party* in a critical article in the Magazine *Encore* (Peacock, 1997:31). The title itself is ambiguous because it combines horror and comedy elements. Even though Pinter's early play expresses feelings of fear, ambiguity, and restlessness, it also has some absurdity. According to Dukore (1998): 87, "Pinter's plays begin comically but turn to physical, psychological, or potential violence-sometimes, in varying sequences, to all three." As a result, we can see that most of them do so. The name of the play *The Birthday Party* suggests something; "The weasel under the cocktail cabinet" poses an imminent threat. Birth, the sign of a new life, a new self, and identity, is a new kind of resurrection in this case. The drama reaches its climax when Stanley refuses to attend his birthday party as if he knew his reluctant death would follow. Why should he have attended the party if he knew? The answer to the question lies in the emergence of an unavoidable and unpredictable threat in nature that threatens every facet of human existence. Stanley appears to be trapped in an isolated lodging house. What kind of threat might have led to his detention? "The prisoner's attitude to his imprisonment [which] depends on his attitude to

life" can, without a doubt, be searched for the answer (Foulkes, 1967:56). menace can manifest in various ways, including physically, mentally, and psychologically. Each one comes through uniquely. The mental type of threat, which is the most abstract, resides in the individual's mind, where he or she defines himself. This scary feeling can only escalate to the point of failure.

The first two, in their most severe forms, can continue and, in turn, produce the third type, which culminates in Stanley's existential ill-health as a model for modern man, which Pinter has attempted to micro-present in *The Birthday Party*. According to Dukore (1998):25, his fear of danger "may suggest the universal trauma of man in the universe." Now, referring to the play's protagonist, his greatest mental threat and obsession is his sense of self and identity, which looms over his existence.

From my perspective, Stanley can represent the disillusioned person in a cruel world where only conformist values are accepted. He may believe that he has failed to conform to the norm and has been rejected as a social outcast, resulting in his placement in a lodging house where he can lead his own life. This could be an interpersonal reference to his inability to respond to Meg's maternal love and Lulu's gentle affection at the beginning of the play.

His job, family, and identity are all murky. There is nothing that this never-ever-was pianist can draw a clear picture of his past.

He has been able to shelter himself based on his presumed identity, which has never been proven. He is deeply suspicious of any threat preventing him from having this. However, "the threat is somehow beyond articulation-literary unspeakable" (Coppa, 2001:44). In the presence of a nameless authority, this unfathomable nature of menace poses a character mental threat. Because of this, he descends into a state of panic that threatens to kill him when two strangers suddenly appear.

Stanley: Who are they?

Meg: I don't know.

Stanley: Did he [Petty] 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 chair.)

Stanley: Why?

Meg: This house is on the list Stanley

Stanley: But who are they? (*The Birthday Party*, p.14)

Stanley is personally prone to succumb to this chaos because there had already been confusion and polarity in his mind regarding his sense of self. The presence of the emissaries' never-proven mission and identity ignites Stanley's already in-tumult psyche. This sheer suspense of the identity of the imminent threat whirls the mental state of Stanley. "ambiguity generates fear and terror" (Prentice, 1994:40). This is regarded as one of Pinter's particular strategies. Belington asserts as such: "violence, even if it didn't always erupt, was sucked into the atmosphere, and Pinter [has] acquired a gift for skilled verbal evasion useful to an embryonic playwright" (2007:18). McCann: This job..., is it going to be like anything we have done before? Goldberg: The main issue is a particular issue and quiet distinct from your previous work.... (*The Birthday Party*, p.23)

They act on Meg's word when they arrive and plan a birthday party for Stanley. Even though his territory is in jeopardy, he resists and denies his birthday. In the play, he is assaulted and, for his complete physical torture, is stripped of his glasses to become completely submissive. The characters are inevitably and actively playing the game of their lives to expel one another from life to achieve their own lives. After that, "they hurl a barrage of questions at him, challenging every consolation—from the sublime," Franzblau describes it, Do you think there is a force outside of you to blame for your troubles? or theology: Is the number 846 necessary or possible? For the absurd: "Why does the chicken cross the road?)-shattering any support" (1967:47). He is also accused of every racial, national, and personal crime, from picking his nose to killing his wife. This psychologically takes him out of his normal state of mind, and then they target his mental sense of who he is. Either Stanley has committed all of the crimes mentioned above and is living his life as a fugitive; now being discovered by the two strangers who had been pursuing him to bring him to the court—here, Monty, literally. Or, he is the type of person who is the victim of power, which wants to give him a new identity based on its standards, which brings to mind the ideal society Huxley envisioned in *Brave New World*. Petty says, "Petty says one of the most important lines I have ever written" as Stanley is taken away. Stan, don't listen to what they say. That line has been my life's mantra.

Never more than now" (Gussow, 2006:65). This theme, adhering to one's strong sense of self, may have inspired Pinter to create Stanley; and, on the other hand, his sense of self-dangerous mental state.

A well-developed, stable identity necessitates striking a balance between an internal and external sense of identity. Another self acts as a mediator between the two on this line. The way Pinter describes himself and his characters are delicately correlated: I didn't consider myself to be a failure when I failed. According to Prentice (2000), "I'm not a success to me when I'm successful."

Before taking Stanley away at the end of Act 3, Goldberg acknowledges his unease and despair, criticizes the way his self has been formed by society's and the world's established disciplines, and questions his status as a person.

GOLDBERG (*interrupting*): I don't know why, but I feel knocked out. I feel a bit It's uncommon for me. What do you know? Never have I broken a tooth. Certainly not since my birth. Nothing has altered. He stands.) McCann, I've reached my position because of that. due to the fact that I've always been fit as a fiddle. I've always said the same thing. Play the game, play the game, and play up. Respect your mother and father. every step of the way. McCann, the line, and the line are all you need to follow. I'm a man who built himself, what do you think? No! I sat where I was instructed to. I stayed focused on the ball. School? Do not discuss school with me. best in every subject. And why is that? I'm telling you to follow my line because I'm telling you to. Do you have my mental? Learn 33 from memory. Never record anything. No. Also, and stay away from the water. You'll also discover that what I say is accurate. Because I think the world is empty... As a result of my belief that the ideal identity (*The Birthday Party*, pages 79-80). "Similar to Stanley's rebellion against authority, Goldberg's blind obedience reflects the unconscious response to received values; "both reflexively attack whatever does not conform to that self" (Prentice, 2000:35). In a sense, this is a true reflection of their lack of a real, determined, stable, and accomplished self. Because of his identity's fallibility, it's possible that "his life as a child-like, sheltered man locked into a parasitic relationship with an incestuous mother figure, his landlady, has already rendered him powerless." Second, Goldberg and McCann, who confront Stanley with his flaws and arrogance and educate him for his self-indulgence and failure in life, are personifications of Stanley's cruel superego and render him powerless to prevent his own demise (Schneidermann, 1988:183).

McCann and Goldberg make a surprise entrance in the play. These two individuals are the most enigmatic and puzzling figures who come across as a menace to the other characters. They handle all the characters with great poise and skill, manipulating them and creating whatever sense of fear they desire.

The straightforward inference that can be drawn from their treatment of the other characters serves as a reminder to the reader of the numerous frauds that occur in society and fall under the purview of the courts and security agencies. Leaving aside their connection to and affiliation with the authority, they could be seen as a group of cheaters snooping around looking for their tray.

The manner in which they adhere to Meg's words, arrange a birthday party that the celebrant does not want for their own amusement, and provide a bed for putting into practice their wicked actions—getting Stanley under control, his taking him away for possible future misuse, their affair with Lulu, and finally their boasting about their job—reminds me of vengeful but apprehensive exploiters. This perspective is mirrored at a higher level when we examine their relationship with the organization, in this case, Monty. Stanley was treated by them both as Monty intended. They took him to undergo the purification process on his behalf. When examined more closely, it may become evident that, in this relationship, they are both as much a victim of authority as Stanley is. Participating in creating a new identity and self for a miserable person rekindles that person's own ex-experience of self-formation. It brings out their nostalgia for their real selves. In a way, Stanley's questioning is a projection of their own self-discovery. Goldberg loses his breath and expresses his most profound hatred and disgust for his own assigned self and identity, which may have been attributed to him by society, authority, Monty, or others like him, during the interrogation. It's possible that Stanley's past experience was rekindled and this sense of dread and horror provided a flashback to his past in assigning his new self and identity; as a result, he was shocked by the appearance and sense of danger.

Regarding her psychic, mental, and emotional needs, Lulu, the play's minor character, has yet to develop a mature sense of herself. This may be because she lives in a remote area, as many people who live in big cities do. Her earlier attempts to win Stanley's affection for Stanley's bad attitude as a partner have made her a fragile, weak character who gives in to McCann's evil intentions. On the one hand, she is powerless to choose and handle a relationship, and on the other, she is already in danger of not having any relationships, so her mind is in danger, and as a result, she acts selflessly and loses out in the relationship she chooses. Her sense of threat to her identity and sense of self as a young person searching for self-perfection grows as the dream of a soothing relationship crumbles even before her eyes.

Meg, the play's mother figure, exhibits the same fear-induced sense of self and identity. As a mother figure, she experiences a nostalgic, instinctual yearning for children; she tries to compensate for that by suffocatingly flirting with Stanley, who does not respect her desires and even curses at her.

Stanley: How long has that tea been in the pot?

Meg: It's a good tea. Good strong tea.

Stanley: This isn't tea. It's gravy.

Meg: It's not. Stanley: Get out of it, you succulent old washing bag.

Meg: I am not! And it isn't your place to tell me if I am! (*The Birthday Party*, Pp. 18-19)

She is expected to act the other way because she has developed an expected flatulence of character in herself and her identity as a sixty-year-old woman. These internal feelings of deprivation were brought about by the mere threat of lacking proper interpersonal relationships, and they have even driven an elderly woman out of her normal behavior because it has already violated her sense of self. She is constantly "searching for an emotionally acceptable position [which] takes place in a very singular manner in Pinter's world" because this sense has mutilated her (Olivera, 1999:36).

Pety's only concern is that his business will fail and his belongings will be stolen. Either he is manipulating the chairs or he is lost in a dream reading newspapers; therefore, he depends on the routines. Meg and his relationship are neither reassuring nor threatening. He possesses characteristics of the contemporary absurdist: "the implication of a senseless, random universe, and the sense of an ominous but uncertain fate" (Grimes, 2005: 14).

Even though he is a man of reflection and study, his surroundings serve as an acceptable model for many an alienated modern man. Throughout the play, he does not experience any threat, as though he has abandoned all of his existential obsessions or adopted a neutral state of mind. Similarly to, other researchers like Bakhshizade et al. have maintained that there has been an inevitable interrelation between the events happening in the play and sociopolitical events of the modern world" in relation to *Hothouse*, a different play by Pinter (2010:110); The haziness and ambiguity of the characters' identities, as well as the variety of danger that these two major plays presented, may, without a doubt, have some underlying sociopolitical roots." The social violence of our time must be eradicated from the psyche of the individuals" is just one of the many causes of human identity and self crisis. To bring back people's accurate self-concept and individuality, for example, addressing one of the various motives for the identity and self crisis among humans "the social violence of our time must be eradicated from the psyche of the individuals" (Hollis, 1970:129).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Pinter's plays are not simply concerned with revealing the delicacy of the human condition and its problems. Instead, he portrays them in his own style to decipher them. People in Pinter's plays are entangled in a subtle web of human relations to capture the menace of the type. In order to do this in a manner consistent with the characteristics of modern man, his society, and his being, he creates characters who are besieged by it. Man establishes his self-image and identity in this labyrinth, where each person attempts to manage himself and others to make life bearable. The tranquility that is not secure is susceptible to imminent danger, the concept that has been dubbed 'modern-day catastrophe.' It is possible that man will be suddenly asked the sphinx's riddles and will be destroyed. The characters at *The Birthday Party*, including the protagonist and antagonist, are all relatively in a flux state of their sense of self and identity due to the come-into-existence menace of various types arising from the violation of those relationships.

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