



International Journal of Advanced Academic Studies

E-ISSN: 2706-8927

P-ISSN: 2706-8919

www.allstudyjournal.com

IJAAS 2021; 3(1): 447-449

Received: 19-11-2020

Accepted: 26-12-2020

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The elements of violence, menace and intrigue in the birthday party

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Abstract

Pinter's absurd plays are marked by an atmosphere of underlying fear, violence, menace and mystery. These aspects of his plays were highlighted and projected via the use of his linguistic techniques, and his absurd yet apt characterization. Pinter's characters are symbolic of the fear, insecurity and frustration of the individual. They also portray the mental anguish, and loneliness coupled with the struggle within and with the system. Hence, the frustration which is depicted through the medium of oblique, repetitive and menacing language. Thus, language as well as characterisation are important for the depiction of the all encompassing feeling of fear, insecurity, distrust, aggression, menace and mystery that is felt in all of Pinter's plays including *The Birthday Party*. The background of *The Birthday Party* is a boarding house, the co owners of which are Meg and Petey. Stanley, the central figure, and the dishevelled, struggling, lost individual is the sole boarder of the boarding house. Stanley is symbolic of the angry young man of Pinter, frustrated and angry at the chaotic system around, of which he does not wish to be a part. The two characters responsible for inculcating profound fear and anxiety in Stanley, and for adding on to the atmosphere of fear and menace are Goldberg and McCann, the henchmen of the system, who annihilate Stanley's personality totally, and help in his forced rejuvenation to be incorporated as a respectable member of the system. Thus, the entire play has a profound aura of menace, mystery and fear throughout which is highlighted by the violence in the mannerism and language of the characters. This essay thus, aims to explore the menace, intrigue and silent aggression in the play through the medium of the body language and utterances of the characters. The paper further aims to analyse each and every aspect of the elements as projected by the playwright in the play.

Keywords: Absurd theatre, fear, violence, menace and intrigue, linguistic techniques, characterization

Introductions

The fear factor, and distrust of each other is the primary aspect of Pinter's plays. He explores this facet with the help of his obscure absurd characters, who might appear ordinary like the common folk, yet their distinct personalities and the struggle within is projected via their insecurity and their sense of fear. Dukore (1962) ^[1] in his research on the theatre of Pinter, has spoken about the obscurity and mystery that is an inherent part of all his plays. Violence and horror also form a part of this study done on his plays. Dukore has referred to the social background of the plays to highlight the profound struggle of man against the established system. The social background has also been studied in the context of the usage of language to produce a sinister effect, and also to evoke humour. Toprak (2008) ^[6] has explored the idea of an ever prevalent menace in all the plays of Pinter including *The Birthday Party*. The study speaks about the fear of an unknown terror, the fear of self, of not really knowing others, and the fear of the established system which dehumanize the individual. The study specifically discusses the absurd world outside and the inner struggle of man. The study describes man's outside struggle culminating in his final internal struggle leading to his disintegration. Thus the mystery in all of Pinter's plays lead to the menace factor. Gross (1971) ^[3] looked into the importance of 'room' in Pinter's plays. He significantly spoke about the societal pressures on the characters, and how the 'room' impacts the characters psychologically, physiologically, and also confines them to their destiny. The study talks about the room as a symbol of 'enclosure' and 'deceit'. The author elaborates on the room being the entire world of the characters of Pinter's plays. Thus, there are several dimensions to the elements of the fear, menace, violence and intrigue in the play, *The Birthday Party*.

Characterisation portraying the violence, fear and menace in the Birthday Party

The characters of *The Birthday Party* are symbolic of the fear and insecurity that reigns supreme in the individual's mind.

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The characters have all been depicted deliberately with a hazy background, to further add on to the sense of mystery and intrigue. Pinter deliberately does not give the physical attributes of his characters in detail, nor does he talk much about their background leaving them in ambiguity. The reader/audience has to make assumptions about their past, their ambiguous present and their equally obscure future. Evidence of this is Stanley himself, who is depicted as the dishevelled, unkept, temperamental individual struggling to keep his individuality intact, and also struggling to constantly prove himself to others as well as to himself by narrating stories of his successful career as a pianist. Nobody knows anything about his past, and his present is equally shady. The room which further adds a sense of fear, and mystery to all of Pinter's plays is depicted via the boarding house in *The Birthday Party*. Hence, Stanley seldom ventures out of it, not even when Lulu tempts him for a walk with her. The longing to go is there as he asks Lulu to go away with him, yet he dare not venture out. His fear is proven true, when Meg speaks to him about the arrival of two strangers whom Stanley appears to know, as he is visibly shaken at Meg's announcement. The fear and frustration, finding vent in anger and violent behaviour, especially towards a weaker target, is visible, when on hearing this news, a visibly shaken Stanley takes out his anger on Meg.

The other characters exhibiting violent traits are Goldberg and McCann, the henchmen of the system, who are out to annihilate Stanley, and forcibly make him a part of their respectable system. The violence in McCann, is evident, when he is shown cutting the paper strips, and he warns Stanley to stay away from them. The quiet anger simmering within him is palpable. He even delivers a blow to Stanley in the course of their conversation, when Stanley tries to make him understand the facts about himself. McCann has been projected as someone who likes to know what he is doing. Thus, when he is not clear about the course of action to be taken, his distrust of Goldberg is evident. Distrust is yet another aspect of the characters which adds on to the element of fear and insecurity. Similarly, Stanley is also shown distrustful of Lulu and Meg, when they are shown sharing a secret in the initial part of the play. The factor of distrust further accentuates the feelings of loneliness, insecurity and corresponding fear and intrigue. The violence of Goldberg is silent, yet lethal. He comes across as an authoritative figure, powerful, wealthy and strong. He likes to take charge of things, and is shown manipulatively getting the work done according to his wishes. The menace exuded by him comes across when he threatens Petey that even he would be carried away like Stanley, if he tried to protest. He is a man with few words to spare for others as he is sort of self obsessed and keeps talking of his past and his affluent present, though his warning to McCann to not call him by his childhood name, is evidence of the fact that he might be fabricating lies, thus adding on to his mysterious persona.

The portrayal of violence, menace and intrigue via language

The language that has been used by Pinter in *The Birthday Party*, is riddled with cliches, pauses, repetitions and sounds. His linguistic style also includes the usage of oblique and menacing language. The oblique is testimonial to whatever he wishes to convey indirectly, be it the fear and angst of

Stanley, the insecurity of Meg, or the hypocrisy of Goldberg. The manipulation of language leading to the loss of identity in *The Birthday Party* is the main subject of research and study by Mostoufi (2013). Mostoufi has used Culpeper's (1996; 2003) and Spenser-Oatey's (2002) frameworks to illustrate and show the strategies involved in verbal power play, by which the powerful by attacking the weaker verbally makes him lose his identity. as referred to the case of Stanley in *The Birthday Party*. The Pinteresque conversation is very popular, and evident in all of his plays including *The Birthday Party*. His technique of dialogues between characters has an undertone of violence and domination which is evident in the interrogation scene of *The Birthday Party* which has been studied extensively. The interrogation scene of *The Birthday Party*, and the power play involved in it has been explored by Elyamany (2017)^[2]. The study elaborates on the constant fight for survival and domination in the dialogues of this particular scene. The interrogation scene is evidence of the violence simmering within the individual. The questions bombarded at Stanley, which include questions like why did he betray the organisation, and whether he will feel happy and contented with an affluent, powerful life are symbolic of the final annihilation of the individual by the system. The evidence of the total dissolution of Stanley's character is evident in his forceful birthday party, where he appears as an animal making sounds, when found in an uncompromising state near Lulu. The scream of agony earlier portrayed the agony of the victimised individual, and the guttural sounds and the mad laugh is indicative of the primeval nature of man. Man is stripped of all masks and pretensions, showing his bare face, absurd but real and frightful.

Conclusion

Thus, Pinter like the other playwrights of the Absurd theatre, projected his vision and perception on stage. The Absurd theatre which evolved after the World Wars, was a result of the individual's struggle to make sense of the chaos around him. It reflected his agony, fear, anxiety, and strife to retain his individuality, just like Stanley the central character of the play. Thus, each playwright had their own way of dealing and presenting this chaos, and Pinter's approach was one of fear, doubt, menace, intrigue and manipulation. His characters in the play are all mostly lying to conceal their insecurities, and make an effort to put up a brave front in front of the absurdly real world. This thus, is the reason why one comes across almost all the characters of the play, scheming, lying, playing power games and threatening each other, thus imparting an aura of an encompassing fear and intrigue coupled with violence and silent aggression.

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