Deconstructing Delusion, Confusion and Chaos in Harold Pinter's The Birthday Party

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Abstract

The Birthday Party of Harold Pinter (1930-2008) is one of the three full length plays, called his "comedy of menace", the other two being The Caretaker and The Homecoming. A critic Irving Wardle describes the play as an expression of the realistic picture while creating a subtext of intrigue and confusion, as if the playwright employed a skill of dramatic trick. Pinter once said, "What I write has no obligation to anything other than to itself," which both belies the designation Wardle gave his plays, and acknowledges the eccentricities of the playwright along with the originality that inspired such a designation in the first place. This paper deals with the theme of absurdity, existentialism and deconstructionism as employed by Harold Pinter in The Birthday Party. Pinter in fact is deeply inspired and influenced by Samuel Beckett as he himself acknowledges this later.

Keywords - *Absurdity; Ambiguity; Confusion; Chaos; Deconstruction; Delusion; Expression; Lack of Communication; Pause; Silence.*

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> The past is what you remember, imagine you
> remember, convince yourself you remember,
> or pretend you remember — Harold Pinter

Harold Pinter was highly appreciated by Michael Codron and David Hall, the producers who saw much promise even in the eccentricities of the playwright. *The Birthday Party* is Pinter's one of the three full length plays, called his "comedy of menace", the other two being *The Caretaker* and *The Homecoming*. A critic Irving Wardle coined the term "Comedy of menace," to describe a play as an expression of the realistic picture while creating a subtext of intrigue and confusion, as if the playwright employed a skill of dramatic trick. Pinter once said, "What I write has no obligation to anything other than to itself," which both belies the designation Wardle gave his plays, and acknowledges the originality that inspired such a designation in the first place

Before analyzing and deconstructing the central events and characters of the play, let us be familiar with the linear story of *The Birthday Party*. *It* takes place in the living room of an English seaside boarding house in the period 1950s. Petey Boles, a man in his sixties, enters the living room with his newspaper and sits at the table. His wife Meg Boles, also in her sixties, appears with Petey's breakfast of cornflakes, and asks him "Are they nice?" Petey agrees that they are, and the couple then engages in dull conversation. Meg then gives Petey a plate of fried bread, asking again whether it's nice. Petey says that it is. Petey then tells his wife that he met two men on the beach the night before, who were asking for a room. Suddenly, Meg says she's going to "wake that boy," indicating for the first time that there is an occupant in the house. Petey asks her if she already brought him his cup of tea, and Meg replies that she had watched him drink it earlier that morning. Meg then goes up the stairs and shouts for Stanley Webber, to come down for breakfast.

Stanley, a shabby, bespectacled, unshaven man in his pajamas, enters and sits down in his seat at the table, where he stares morosely into his cornflakes and Stanley complains that he can't eat his cereal because the milk has gone sour. Meg calls him a liar, but quickly replaces the cereal with fried bread. Stanley even teases Meg, calling her a bad wife for not giving her husband a cup of tea in the morning. Meg reprimands him and asks him to mind his own business, but quickly turns flirtatious when Stanley uses the word "succulent" to describe her fried bread. She ruffles his hair, telling Stanley he shouldn't call a married woman succulent. Stanley replies that a married woman has no business coming into his room and "waking him up." Meg begins to dust the room, and asks him if he really thinks she's succulent. He says that

he does, but when she sensually strokes his arm and tells him she has had "some lovely afternoons in that room," Stanley recoils and starts to lambaste her for the state of the house. His room needs cleaning and papering; he wants a new room. He continues to insult her. Either oblivious to his behavior or accustomed to it, Meg changes the subject and mentions that two gentlemen are coming to stay. Stanley grows suddenly benumbed. There has never been another boarder since he came to the house. He accuses her of lying, but Meg insists she is telling the truth. Stanley remains harsh towards her, and they begin to shout until Stanley, very quietly, asks her, "who do you think you're talking to?"

This is the first indication of Stanley's mysterious past. In a long monologue, he tells of a concert he once gave, stating the concert as a great success, but claims his next show was a disaster. Stanley refers to a mysterious group of people (only calling it "they") who boarded up the concert hall and humiliated him. "They wanted me to crawl down on my bended knees. After his speech, Meg tries to comfort him, but he unkindly claims that a van is approaching the house with a wheelbarrow that will take her away. She panics and accuses him of lying as he advances on her.

They are interrupted by Lulu, a young girl in her twenties, who has arrived with a package. Meg prohibits Stanley from opening it. Two gentlemen, Nat Goldberg and Dermot McCann, enter the room from the street. Goldberg insists McCann is the best in his profession, and they indulge into a discussion about the mysterious job they have come to perform. This is the first indication that a person in the boarding house is "the job," though the particulars of the job remain unclear. Meg enters, and Goldberg charmingly introduces himself and McCann. He quickly establishes a flattering bond with Meg, whom he calls a tulip. Meg informs the gentleman that they have arrived on Stanley Webber's birthday. Goldberg seems very interested in Stanley, and learns from Meg that he is her only boarder, that he once gave a concert, that he was a good pianist, and that he has been at the boardinghouse for some time. Goldberg suggests that they throw a spontaneous birthday party for Stanley. Meg is thrilled at the idea, and decides she will wear her party dress. She then shows the gentlemen to their room, at McCann's insistence. Meanwhile, Stanley renters the room and sits at the table. When Meg reenters, he showers her with questions about the gentlemen: Who are they? What are their names? When are they leaving? Stanley is visibly upset when he learns Goldberg's name. To cheer him up, she gives him the package that Lulu had brought over. He opens the package to find a toy drum with two drumsticks. She asks him to play, and he hangs the drum from his neck and moves around the table tapping a merry beat. Then, Stanley suddenly begins to bang the drum erratically, almost savagely. He arrives at her chair and, leaning in towards

her face, he bangs the drum harder and harder as if he were possessed.

Overall, *The Birthday Party* is both extremely conventional and entirely unique. Most of its elements are easy to recognize and understand, but the relationship between those elements is slippery and difficult to pinpoint. Pinter's work is prized for the way it approaches and comments upon the limitations of communication, The play, suggests that our attempts to communicate with one another are futile and often tinged with deep-seeded resentments that we are unable to fully articulate. The truth, in other words, lies in the silence, not in the words characters use.

To understand and appreciate the play, it is useful to know about the famous 'Pinter pause.' While it is perhaps not accurate to interpret this silence as deliberately designed to communicate an idea, it certainly does create a general unease, a feeling of sinister motives, that has become a hallmark of the writer's work. Act I of *The Birthday Party* opens with a traditional domestic scene of a husband and wife around the breakfast table. Their conversation is tasteless but comfortable. On the page, it can seem hardly theatrical: there is no conflict, no exposition, and no challenge to expectation. However, hidden beneath the surface of Petey and Meg's morning routine is a heavy sense of apathy, a recurring motif within the play. Both Petey and Meg, like Stanley, have accepted their tedious existence to the point that they fear change, as proven by Meg's reaction in Act III when she does not have breakfast ready. Her morning routine is disrupted and she is extremely upset. In performance, one can sense the undercurrent, which gives the scene tension if not conflict. Again, their relationship on the surface seems perfect - in the silence beneath it, however, an audience can sense a problem.

The specific setting of the play on a boardinghouse on an unnamed coast in the 1950s, is set within the generalized idea of the domestic home." By establishing such a recognizable setting Pinter sets the stage to reverse expectation and make commentary upon it. Effectively, he reinvents the domestic scene by adding elements of confusion and chaos. Stanley, as a character, represents the essence of confusion; he lies about his past, speaks rudely, lies regularly, and later denies any wrongdoing, even though Goldberg and McCann, who are also mysterious, strongly insist upon his guilt. Pinter establishes the layers of social norms so that he can later peel them back to reveal the ugly potential of the human condition like a true absurd play expressing irrationality and chaos on stage in the style of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

Act I also introduces the odd relationship between Meg and Stanley. Of course, their relationship is far more intimate. Their sexual tension is abundantly clear, though the particulars of their relationship remain ambiguous. Meg is much older than Stanley,

which allows the reader to create his or her own details: is Stanley taking advantage of a lonely old woman? Did they have a sexual relationship that faltered? An examination of their relationship reveals how ambiguous Pinter's play is. Stanley openly flirts with Meg. Unlike her conversation with Petey, which centers on whether the food was "nice", Meg wishes to know whether Stanley finds her "nice." She wants intimacy with him; she wants something deeper than her relationship with Petey affords. In effect, she is confessing the depth of her loneliness, her desire to break from an apathetic routine. We discover it while she is more than happy simply to be called "succulent." It can be argued that Meg is simply delusional. Certainly, she harbors delusions about the quality of her house. She believes it is "on the list," but its shabby quality is mentioned by Stanley on several occasions. Arnold P. Hinchliffe, Polish critic Grzegorz Sinko points out that in *The Birthday Party* "we see the destruction of the victim from the victim's own point of view:

"One feels like saying that the two executioners, Goldberg and McCann, stand for all the principles of the state and social conformism. Goldberg refers to his 'job' in a typically Kafka-esque official language which deprives the crimes of all sense and reality."... [Of Stanley's removal, Sinko adds:] "Maybe Stanley will meet his death there or maybe he will only receive a conformist brainwashing after which he is promised ... many other gifts of civilization...."

However, her greatest and most poignant delusions involve her relationship to Stanley. She may not have even had an affair with him. He may merely see her as comic relief, or as a way to ensure his security in the house. Her sentimental touches and her affectionate reminder of having spent "many lovely afternoons" in his room only inspire violent and rash outbursts from him. Is he tired of her flirtatious ways and delusions, or is he guilty of having entered into an affair with his much older, married landlady? Has Stanley taken advantage of her? They certainly seem familiar with one another, since Stanley allows her to enter his room uninvited, but again, Pinter leaves the exact details up to his audience.

Yet their conversation is barbed as well as comfortable. Through the eyes of this younger man, Meg can see herself not as a generic housewife, but as something special - not as a failure (her business is quite meager, after all), but as a worthwhile woman. Stanley, on the other hand, is defined not by his fear but by his disgust. He is disgusted by himself, by the boardinghouse, and by Meg, who represents his guilty conscience, his jailer, or both. While she is comfortable because she accepts who he is, one could argue that she also makes him see himself too clearly, and hence he hates as well as accepts her for what she is.

Pinter never confirms or denies the intimate details of Meg and Stanley's relationship. Petey, however, offers some insight when he lies to Meg about Stanley's whereabouts at the end of Act III. He knows she will be hurt when she finds that Stanley has left, and in an effort to spare his wife's pain, he allows her to go about her domestic routine instead of telling her the truth. If nothing else, Petey recognizes her delusion, her need to find self-worth through the boarder. There is no specific incident within the play which conclusively determines what Petey knows of Meg and Stanley's relationship, but lack of closure certainly aligns with the play's general ambiguities.

Confusion, one of the most dominant themes within the play, is perpetuated by the characters' needs to maintain their delusions by lying to one another. Stanley consistently lies within the play. He tells Meg he has a new job and will be leaving, but in reality, nothing could be further from the truth. Stanley does not want to leave the boardinghouse, and yet he feels trapped there, stuck in the mindless and repetitive world of Meg and Petey's relationship. He is both drawn to and disgusted by the safety of such a lifestyle. When he does cross the line into cruelty, telling Meg that she will be taken away by a wheelbarrow, he does not realize he foreshadows his own fate. Stanley, like the other characters, is not what he seems. His continued deceit discredits him as a trustworthy character.

Further, he lies about his father, confusing even himself. Even he has forgotten what is true. As he continues his story about the concerts, he begins to reveal serious paranoia. His passion during this part of the speech suggests either that his is speaking truthfully or that his delusions have taken over. Stanley seems to believe he has been forced from his career and vocation. Perhaps an initial nervous breakdown forced him from a high life (real or imagined) to this secluded seaside boardinghouse. Regardless, he has certainly left his old life behind, and now sees fit to reinvent the particulars of his old life. The question is whether, for Stanley, the difference between the reality and his delusion really matters. Adding to the play's confusing atmosphere is the miscommunication manifest in Pinter's use of language; miscommunication is another recurring theme throughout the play.

Each character uses language not only to express himself, but also to further his own cause, lie, mislead, and simply cause pain. Pinter once reflected that he had used too many dashes in *The Birthday Party*, and not enough dots. Although his example is esoteric, his meaning is clear. The language serves to confuse us, even as the characters give lots of information. For instance, Goldberg's long winded speeches reflect on a past which may or may not have relevance toward his current circumstances, and may or may not suggest a deeper interpretation. The dialogue is

outwardly conversational, but his deliberately paced silences and carefully chosen language suggests a deeper confusion than the characters mean to express. Consider how the superficiality of the opening dialogue hides deep apathy, or how Goldberg's charming demeanor only makes his presence doubly sinister. Similarly, Stanley's hesitancy, his rash outbursts represent his fear, or perhaps his guilt. One of the most telling moments of the Act uses no dialogue at all - Stanley's possessive beating of the drum not only feeds the ominous atmosphere, but foreshadows his own descent into madness.,

Goldberg and McCann's conversation showcases Pinter's use of language as a dramatic element. Their entrance creates chaos, as they throw the seemingly unoriginal day at the boardinghouse into a state of perplexity. Goldberg and McCann's friendly but businesslike conversation ironically creates a menacing atmosphere. They are here to "do a job." By avoiding the particulars, the audience is left to construct their own sinister details, an effect made doubly effective when performances utilize the rhythmic silence and pauses. Goldberg's cryptic message is partly for the benefit of the audience. Pinter certainly does not want to give too much away, and yet Pinter himself may not know what the job is. He was famous for following his characters intuitively, learning about them as he wrote, rather than determining their identities before writing. If we accept this approach as true, then Pinter himself would have discovered the existence of a "job" precisely at this point of the play, and continued writing to determine its conclusion. As there is no conclusive resolution within the *The Birthday Party*, one can assume that Pinter did not know what happened to Stanley after he left the boardinghouse. He may not know what Goldberg and McCann's "job" is, or if they successfully completed it. What this suggests, then, is that plot is far less important than atmosphere, and the general commentary on the limits of communication.

Pinter's later works would examine characters similar to Goldberg and McCann, who represented a corrupt 'organization.' However, in this early work, the two gentlemen only represent a potential organization from which they may have been charged with a job. At its core, *The Birthday Party* is frustrating from a story perspective but wildly successful in terms of atmosphere. Its sense of confusion and delusion are all the more powerful for its narrative ambiguities.

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