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**The Absurd Elements in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party***



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**ABSTRACT**

*The Theatre of the Absurd is mainly the Western phenomenon. The West with this kind of socio-political changes viewed art and literature quite differently. The European writers reviewed their very understanding of drama and theatre activities. They thought of the inadequacy of language in communicating man's ideas and sensibilities.*

*The absurd in life, art and literature arose due to several reasons. First of all, industrialization changed man's social nature. Its by-product urbanization added a further dimension to it. The growth of science and technology furthered man's scientific temperament and enquiry, thereby causing man's disbelief in the God and religion and the impact of the First World War and The Second World War.*

*Theatre of the Absurd is as old as the play. Only it was not as explicit as it became in the 19<sup>th</sup> century because, the traits of it were not so prominent in ancient drama. Martin Esslin says*

*its novelty lies in its somewhat unusual combination of such antecedents, and a survey of these will show that what may strike the unprepared spectator*

*Harold Pinter's two plays The Birthday Party and The Caretaker depict man's helplessness and unease today. The Birthday Party seems a play can be understood easily yet it has elements which make it unique and absurd. The features of absurdity such as unclarity of scenes, dialogues and plot are reflected. The lack of communication is used so strongly that even a pause and silence tells much more which makes the play special. The play isn't completely unconventional, it has the usual setting as of the cotemporary style but uniqueness is seen when surprise awaits in the form of imagery unusual circumstances and lack of dialogue or some time strange approaches. This play doesn't go to explain everything easily through the dialogues but the play itself reveals much more than the common elements of the play.*

### **KEYWORDS**

*Existentialism, Absurdity, Meaningless, Helplessness, Pinteresque, Human Condition*

## RESEARCH PAPER

This paper highlights absurd elements in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*. The idea of existentialism is widely experimented and focused by the some European playwrights in the late 1950s. The purpose of highlighting this theme was influenced by the philosophy of the human existent. It employs irrational and illogical speech and purposeless and confusing situations and plots that lack realistic or logical development. It is the result of the disastrous disturbance occurred during the post war period. Absurdity has become the part of common men's life.

Absurdity may also be a reaction to the gradual disappearance of religious life. There was a pedestal to these writers to convince the audience to think of a condition which is partially mystical. Harold Pinter's works gives an indication of their influence on Anglo-American culture. 'Pinteresque' that occupies a position as a modern classic is illustrated by his name entering the language as an adjective used to describe a particular atmosphere and environment in drama.

The theme of Absurdity is not a new concept to the history of man's existence. It was used to express human fate against challenges and deeds. The analyzation of the theme isn't clear and yet it shows men's fear to run away from human existence. The ancient works too contain absurdity as an aspect of existence, but it was apparent in expressing the very theme directly. We find the flow of this more clearly in works of those writers after The World War I and World War II.

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The absurd in life, art and literature arose due to several reasons. First of all, industrialization changed man's social nature. Its by-product urbanization added a further dimension to it. The growth of science and technology furthered man's scientific temperament and enquiry, thereby causing man's disbelief in the God and religion. The so-called Darwinism may be mentioned as an evidence of this. Then the two World Wars gave a deathblow to man's concept of the world as a safe place. These phenomena were the main reasons why man underwent a transformation.

The term absurd was coined by Martin Esslin and published a book by this title in 1961. According to Esslin, the five defining playwrights of the movements are Eugene Ionesco,

Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov, and Harold Pinter, although these writers were not always comfortable with the label and sometimes preferred to use terms such as “Anti-Theatre” or “New Theatre”. Other playwright associated with this type of theatre include Tom Stoppard, Arthur Kopit, Friedrich Durrenmatt, Fernando Arrabal, Edward Albee, N.F. Simpson, Boris Vian, Peter Weiss, Vaclav Havel and Jean Tardieu.

There is no definite date for the rise of an absurd plays in the Postmodern literature. It wasn't a new phenomenon to English literature either; it was an anguish reaction against post world war socio-political disturbance. The unpleasant development occurred after world war in Europe gave away a kind of dilemma in the mind of writers resulted in absurdity. As we know that literature reflects life, that is true to much destroyed European life and this opportunity was grabbed by some absurd writers.

Andre Malraux was one of the earliest writers to depict the western man's sense of the absurd. In his work *The Temptation of the West* (1925), he depicts Europe as a cemetery. Then the existentialist writer Jean-Paul Sartre in his works *Nausea*, *The Flies* and *Huis Clos*, described the nothingness of man's life. Sartre says absurdity causes anxiety, of course, freeing man. Existentialism stresses upon freedom of choice and action. The other European playwrights who have written absurd plays are Jean Tardieu, Boris Vian, Dino Buzzati, Ezio D' Errico, De Pedrolo, Arrabal, Max Firische, Wolfgang Hildesheimer, Robert Pinget, Edward Albee, Jack Gelber and Arthur Kopit. Some of the prominent East European absurd playwrights include Mrozek, Rozewicz and Vaclav Havel.

Interestingly the Theatre of the Absurd is as old as the play. Only it was not as explicit as it became in the 19<sup>th</sup> century because the traits of it were not so prominent in ancient drama. Martin Esslin says its novelty lies in its somewhat unusual combination of such antecedents, and a survey of these will show that what may strike the unprepared spectator as iconoclastic and incomprehensible innovation is, in fact, merely an expression, revaluation and development of procedures that are familiar and completely acceptable in slightly different contexts.

Harold Pinter's two plays *The Birthday Party* and *The Caretaker* depict man's helplessness and unease today. In Martin Esslin's view, *The Birthday Party* has been interpreted as an allegory of the pressures of conformity, with Stanley, the pianist, as the artist who is forced into respectability and pin-stripe trousers by the emissaries of the bourgeois world. Yet the play can equally well be seen as an allegory of death man snatched away from the home he has built himself, from the warmth of love embodied by Meg's mixture of motherliness and sexuality, by the dark angels of nothingness, who pose to him the question of which came

first, the chicken or the egg. But as in the case of *Waiting for Godot*, all such interpretations would miss the point; a play like this simply explores a situation which, in itself, is a valid poetic image that is immediately seen as relevant and true. It speaks plainly of the individual's pathetic search for security; of secret dreads and anxieties; of the terrorism of our world, so often embodied in false bonhomie and bigoted brutality; of the tragedy that arises from lack of understanding between people on different levels of awareness. Likewise, *The Caretaker* depicts man's callousness. Aston and Mick are brothers and they hire Davies for taking care of their house. But the outsider abuses the opportunity.

Harold Pinter is a great theatre personality in modern times. As so he has won an international acclaim for his contribution to drama. Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* is a full-length play, he wrote it in 1957. It was first performed in 1958, at Art Theatre, Cambridge. Harold Pinter himself directed it when it was performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Aldwych Theatre, London in 1964. The play depicts a tragedy arisen out of insecurity. It projects a shabby boarding house where Stanley Webber, a man in his late thirties has found a refuge from real life situations. He is the central character of the play. Other characters include Meg Boles, the owner of a boarding house, Petey, her husband, McCann and Goldberg, two sinister visitors and Lulu, a young lady. As Martin Esslin thinks the play combines some of the characters and situations of *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter* while, for the first time, omitting the melodramatic, supernatural element – without any loss of mystery or horror.

*The Birthday Party* has three acts. The first act opens with Meg is central character in the play, she was speaking to her husband Petey, a docile old man who worked as a deck chair attendant on the promenade. The old motherly woman Meg enquires him whether Stanley, the guest had got up. Her husband does not speak much, symbolizing modern man's dry existence. He does not answer any of her questions asked about Stanley, about his reading, or about his resting. Once Stanley gets up he engages our attention. He treats Meg as a motherly woman. He flirts with her as well. When he calls her 'Succulent washing bag,' she rebukes him. He says she does not cook well. Pinter introduces two tramp-like visitors at the end of Act I. We do not know who they are. Yet they interest us as visitors to the Boarding House. They bring a note of introduction from Mr Bales, Meg's husband. They start speaking to Stanley rudely. It soon becomes clear that they are after Stanley. As Meg announces Stanley's birthday the same day, they burst joyously. They plan to celebrate his birthday though he does not know that that day is his birthday

In the Act II we find Stanley getting into trouble. The two sinister visitors harmed him emotionally. There is much of music and dance. They play the blind's game. Stanley whose glasses have been snatched by McCann becomes more and more hysterical, tries to strangle Meg, and is finally driven upstairs by the two sinister strangers.

In Act III, Goldberg and McCann take Stanley away in a big car. He is now well dressed and when Meg comes down, she is still dreaming of the wonderful party and does not realize what has happened.

Even though *The Birthday Party* seems a play can be understood easily yet it has elements which make it unique and absurd. The features of absurdity such as unclarity of scenes, dialogues and plot are reflected. The lack of communication is used so strongly that even a pause and silence tells much more which makes the play special. The play isn't completely unconventional, it has the usual setting as of the cotemporary style but uniqueness is seen when surprise awaits in the form of imagery unusual circumstances and lack of dialogue or some time strange approaches. This play doesn't go to explain everything easily through the dialogues but the play itself reveals much more than the common elements of the play.

The characters used by Harold Pinter are similar to the modern men's psychology. He tries to become as close as to the life of disturb modern life. He explains the basic mood of the characters through the beautiful blend of silence and conventional techniques which sometimes ends in pause. The pause itself convinces something to be interpreted by the audience. Stanley is unwilling to be part of outside worlds and wants be away from it. It creates anxiety in the mind of the audience.

Since it is man's fear to the unknown danger, which is expressed through the condition of Stanley. The rush of modern life, its fear, anxiety and expectations and incomplete goals etc. Reflected through a technique of language so powerfully that adds to the effectiveness of the scenes.

The language used here is strange which portrait the character of Stanley as a young silent and sophisticated. Here is the ruin of individuality of the character and Stanley becomes speechless. Language here strategically to portray the meaningless state of the modern man.

Commenting on the role of language in the absurd plays

**GOLDBERG :** Your bite is dead. Only your pong is left.

**MCCANN :** You betrayed our land.

**GOLDBERG :** You betray our breed.

**MCCANN :** Who are you, Webber?

**GOLDBERG :** What makes you think you exist?

**MCCANN** : You're dead.

**GOLDBERG** : You're dead. You can't live, you can't think, you can't love. You're dead. You're a plague gone badly. There's no juice in you. You are nothing but an odour. (Pinter 12)

The use of technique of meaning and meaninglessness has been intensified by Harold Pinter through the characters of Stanley and Meg. Both Stanley and Meg aspire for some kind of relationship which is usual human expectation. Finally Stanley bends under the pressure. Another feature we observe here is the strange and incomprehensible behaviour of characters which often bewilders the audience. Harold Pinter tries to present realistic state of human life. The dramatic techniques like solitary life fear for unknown future, unwanted circumstances, and anxiety and meaningless are exceptional.

Martin Esslin comments that "*The Birthday Party* has been interpreted as an allegory of the pressures of conformity, with Stanley, the pianist, as the artist who is forced into respectability and pin-stripe trousers by the emissaries of the bourgeois world. Yet the play can equally well be seen as an allegory of death – man snatched away from the home he has built himself, from the warmth of love embodied by Meg's mixture of motherliness and sexuality, by the dark angels of nothingness, who pose to him the question of which came first, the chicken or the egg. But as in the case of *Waiting for Godot*, all such interpretations would miss the point; a play like this simply explores a situation which, in itself, is a valid poetic image that is immediately seen as relevant and true. It speaks plainly of the individual's pathetic search for security; of secret dreads and anxieties; of the terrorism of our world, so often embodied in false bonhomie and bigoted brutality; of the tragedy that arises from lack of understanding between people on different levels of awareness." (Esslin 88)

Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* is fine play. It has all the elements of Absurd so it reveals modern human condition.

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