

The Birthday Party is “Comedy of menace”

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Abstract

Harold Pinter (1930-2008) is a great modern British dramatist .The label , a comedy of menace , was first used in 1957 by David Campton¹ in the sub-title of his play “The Lunatic View “, and was a year later applied to the plays of Pinter in a magazine article .This is certainly an appropriate title for *The Birthday Party*. A comedy of menace is a play in which the laughter of the audience in some or all situations is accompanied ,or immediately followed, by a feeling of some impending disaster. Throughout such a play , the audience feels uneasy even while laughing, because of its perception of some threat , explicit or implicit, to the principal character and to the audience itself .In other words the audience is made aware , in the very midst of its laughter , of some menace .The menace proceeds from potential or actual violence in the play or from an underlying sense of violence throughout the play .Or , the menace may proceed from a feeling of uncertainty and insecurity , The play has different of the elements of the drama, it is ,therefore ,metaphysical and also symbolical. The play seems to have no story as such .However , if one dives deep , one will be able to find the different levels of meaning in the play.

Keywords: Harold Pinter , Drama, Comedy , Menace , Stanley , Goldberg , Theatre ,Birthday.

Introduction:

The Birthday Party is full of amusement and humour. It has satirical and ironic elements as well. The audience laughs or at least smiles throughout the play. However, the play cannot be called 'a comedy'. This is because the laughter is not pure but mixed with menace. In fact, there is more seriousness in the play than pleasure. Not only this but the laughter evoked too is deceptive. This play presents misery in the guise of mirth. The play is full of fear, danger, death and misery. It reminds us of Shakespeare's "Dark Comedies" or "Tragi-Comedies". It can better be described as a "Menace Comedy". Stanly Webber is the protagonist of *The Birthday Party*. Though he is not as vital as the villain, Goldberg, he can be called the hero of the play. This is because the story of the play would not take place without him. He is the cause of the arrival of the two intruders to the boarding house of Meg. He also contributes to the comedy and menace of the play (Esslin, 1984 :86).

The plays of Pinter have their own features which are often called 'Painteresque features'. 'Comedy of Menace' is one of them. *The Birthday Party* is not an exception to it. In fact, it is a fine example of a "Comedy of Menace". According to Lall (2010:203) says that, the audience may be made to feel that the security of the principal character, and even the audience's own security, are threatened by some danger. The label "a comedy of menace" thus implies the uneasy laughter which comes from nervousness, the laughter by which the audience tries to demonstrate that there is a safe distance between itself and what it sees or hears in the play. Menace feeds on people's acceptance, no matter how reluctant, of the possibility of the danger which lurks round the corner, hidden as yet and therefore all the more unnerving. The connection between the characters' predicament and the audience's private anxieties must be established strongly, or there will be no menace felt, and no reason for the defensive laughter, but Batra (2005:34), say that: *The Birthday Party* while *The Dumb Waiter* does not merely consist in a one-hour clowning act, thus denying the relevance of the expression 'comedy of menace'. The idiom has unfortunately become a catch-all phrase systematically applied to Pinter's plays without much thought being given to it. Yet the expression does have a specific meaning (apart from vaguely alluding to

the 'menacing atmosphere' in Pinter's plays) and it raises a number of interesting questions. The expression was first used by critic Irving Wardle in a review of Pinter's *The Birthday Party* entitled 'Comedy of Menace'. Actually the term "Comedy of Menace" was first coined by David Campton¹ who used the phrase as a subtitle of his four short plays *The Lunatic View*, published in 1957. However, in Pinter's hand, the concept of menace becomes highly symbolic and vague. Pinter's *The Birthday Party* is a perfect example of Comedy of Menace. Throughout the play, we find that the hint of menace is inflected upon the individual freedom of a person and it juxtaposes the comic element drastically dilutes the comic appeal. Pinter shows his state in the existential view that danger prevails everywhere and life can't escape from it. Pinter thinks that Stanley, the protagonist, might have committed a serious crime and is on the run for escaping the consequence and legal implications of his life. This is precisely comprehended while he almost never leaves his room and becomes furiously apprehensive when Meg informs him that two gentlemen are coming to stay in this boarding house. Stanley soon tactfully tries to conceal his apprehension by mentioning his successful concert and about a favorable job proposal of a pianist. But we can realize his innate apprehension for imminent interrogation or arrest by the two new guests at the boarding house. 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 Pete'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"(Hollis, 1970:18).

Amusing Dialogues Followed by One suggestive of Menace

In *The Birthday Party* this mingling of comedy with a perception of danger pervades the whole play and, at times, becomes very conspicuous. The play opens with an amusing dialogue between Meg and Stanly. These amusing dialogues occupy several pages and, on the stage, would take at least fifteen minutes of acting time. But then comes the menace. Meg informs Stanly that she is

expecting two gentlemen who are coming to stay in the boarding –house for a couple of nights .Stanly at first refuses to believe what Meg has said .But she informs him that Petey had told her that very morning that the two gentlemen had met Petey on the previous night and had expressed a wish to come and stay in this boarding-house .Meg says further that this boarding-house is on the approved list. There is something about this piece of information pertaining to the two expected visitors that disturbs Stanly(Lall:2010:50-51) .He seems to experience some feeling of apprehension and, in order to ward off the danger which he smells, he says that somebody is simply trying to throw dust into Megs eyes and that nobody will come to stay here .Moments later Stanly tries to impress Meg with his own importance by asking her if she realizes , while talking to him , who he is and what he is .Next he speaks of a job which has been offered to him ; and then he goes on to speak of a very successful concert which he had given as a pianist years ago and another concert which he had wanted to give but which had not materialized on account of the bitter hostility of some of the people who wanted to see him .This reference to the second concert , which did not actually take place , shows that Stanly had made enemies who wanted to do some damage to him. Of course , we never learn how or why those people had become antagonistic to him .Perhaps the danger from those people had not ended .Stanly’s account of the second concert(which did not take place) gives rise to a strong sense of menace pertaining both to the past and , the present and the future(Ibid:203-204). The characters who embody the menace already behave much more normally –realistically, we might say-in their relations with Meg ,with Lulu , the buxom blonde from down the road , and even with Stanly .Menace , the play implies , is a matter of situation :it does not come from extraordinary , sinister people , but from ordinary people like you and me ; it is all a matter of circum –stances whether at some point I suddenly become the menace in your life or you the menace in mine , and not anything inherent in either of us(Taylor,1971:336).

Either my point, of the amusing duologue the dialogue in the play is creates the dramatic tension due to conflict between the conformist social pretense’s and a character' s sub-conscious desire that remains repressed.

The Menace Resulting from the Reference

The Birthday Party is a political play about the need for resistance. Pinter depicts the world of fear and menace within a setting of a birth day party for Stanley, the main character, just as the Nazis depicted the concentration camps as "Jewish vacations" to the rest of the world. Within these euphemisms, the only thing that exists is the victimization and domination of innocent people. Esslin states:

" Words become weapons in the mouth of Pinter's Characters. The one who gets hold of the more elaborate or more accurate expression Established dominance over his partner. The victim of aggression can be swamped by Language which comes too thick and fast, Or is too non sensual to be comprehended, This happens, *above all, to Stanley in The birthday party, who is subjected to a process of brainwashing through a torrent of incomprehensible Questions and assertion fired at him by the two terrorists*(Esslin, 1977:49)

According to Lall, The amusing dialogue between Stanly and Lulu is followed by a dialogue between Goldberge and McCann who now arrive at the boarding-house. This dialogue again produces a feeling of menace in the hearts of the audience. McCann is already feeling nervous, but Goldberge asks him to relax, and to enjoy his " holiday" here. Says Goldberge: " McCann, what are you so nervous about? Pull yourself together. McCann is feeling worried about the job which Goldberge and he have to execute here. He would like to know what exactly the nature of this job is because he is ignorant of it while Goldberge has all the details. The play is a true "Comedy of Menace". It has all the features of the Menace Comedy, it is full of laughter or mirth mingled with fear and danger. The central figure, Stanly Wibber, as well as the audience are haunted by mysterious fear, though they seem to be satisfied and happy. The elements of the menace comedy in the play can be explain as follows(Lall, 2010:205)

But Simo think that, the mingling of comedy and menace pervades the whole play. In the very beginning we see Meg and Petey speaking amusing, then the conversation between Meg and Stanly too is pleasant. For instance, it is humorous that petey reads aloud the news in the amusing as it is trivial and rapacious, the word 'nice' is repeated for several times. Similarly, the dialogue between uses the word "succulent" Meg takes it to mean that he regards her as a 'sexy woman'. Meg calls Stanley a school boy when he repeats the words like ' sorry first ' and ' just sorry '. This amusement, however, does not last for longer time. Meg informs Stanly

that two strangers are coming to stay in the boarding-house for a couple of nights. This information disturbs Stanly, Stanly behaves in such a way that he has smelled a danger (Simon, 1973:65). While Taylor says that, *The Birthday Party* starts comically but gradually develops into psychological menace and physical violence, and this is done in terms of dramatic dialogue. Several passages, like the one given below, are apparently comic, but they tend to create an atmosphere of menace, evasion:

McCann : *Nat.*

Goldberg: *What?*

McCann : *He won't sit down.*

Goldberg: *Well, ask him.*

McCann : *I've asked him.*

Goldberg: *Ask him again.*

McCann (to Stanley): *Sit down*

Stanley : *Why?*

McCann : *You'd be more comfortable.*

Stanley : *So -would you (I, p.56).*

From now on tension rapidly mounts. Despite several comic overtones, *The Birthday Party* is heavily charged with references to physical violence (Taylor, 1969:127). Either my point, about the menace resulting from the references is that Pinter makes use of comedic aspect with a menacing atmosphere in order to make the audience of our own fears of what we do not understand.

Stanly tries to frighten Meg and so tells her that some men are coming that day in a van. They would bring a wheel-barrow too, the people would knock at the door of the boarding-house .They would take something or somebody they wanted in it .Meg feels there is menace hidden in the comic situation .It is not clear whether Stanly means that Meg is really going to die. It is not clear whether Stanly hints at his own departure .later on, Meg fears to see a car standing in front of the boarding house .She fears that there may be a wheel-barrow in it(Worth,1973:88) , Another example of a serio –comic event in the play is concerned with the knock at the door .Stanly has just told Meg that the strangers would knock at the door.At the very moment of it, a knock is heard on the door .This creates the atmosphere of fear. But it is Lulu, the next –door neighbor of Meg knocking on the door . This is followed by the amusing dialogue between Stanly and Lulu. For instance ,Stanly suggests that she should go with him .But when she asks him where they should go , he gives the following meaningless answer : “ Nowhere .There is nowhere to go .So we could just go”. Lulu then leaves saying that Stanly is a ‘a bit of washout ‘ .Thus , menace is followed by relief(Hall,1973:48). Stanly’s cross – examination too is serio-comic. The questions of the men amuse the audience greatly .They have no connection with one another and are mutually contradictory .The following questions serve as an example of the fact:

“ Why did you kill your wife?

Why did you never get married ?

Wegber! Why did you change your name ?

Why did the chicken cross the road ?

Chicken ? Egg ? Which came first ? “

Some of the questions are philosophical and so they too amuse the audience .However , in the course of the cross-examination. There is a hint of violence .McCann becomes ready to kick Stanly .The questions too seem to be related to some criminal situations. One more example of the mingling of menace and comedy is found in the ‘seduction’ of Lulu. This situation is very amusing but has a touch of pathos. Lulu complains that Goldberg has taken an undue advantage of darkness last night. She accuses him of seducing her However, the answer of Goldberg to the

accusation is comic . He ironically says that Lulu herself is responsible for the seduction .His wit and sarcasm create much mirth. McCann too joins this witty attack on Lulu .They say that Lulu has affairs with other boys too(Brown,1972:97)

Towards the end of the play , Stanly's condition is pitiable .He undergoes a complete change. He is well-dressed and holds his broken spectacles in his hand. He is almost speechless .It seems that he is mentally tortured. They tell Petey that they are taking Stanly to Monte , an expert doctor. This situation is full of menace .Monte may be the boss of the organization from which the visitors have come. The visitors themselves seem to be the hired murderers . Stanly may be murdered by them .This is really the climax of menace in the whole play . However, here too the terror is followed by mirth. Meg tells Petey that all enjoyed the party very much .She adds that everyone called her 'the belle of the ball(Raby,2009:242).

Conclusion

Pinter's comedy of menace is an intensification of the concept of dark comedy. Pinter was first labelled as an absurd dramatist. Like Beckett and Kafka Pinter is of the view that existential experience predetermines one's attitude towards society, politics and general ideas* Pinter deals with existential and metaphysical themes like other absurd playwrights and in his approach and style he has some similarity with Beckett. But Pinter developed in his own individual way and his approach in early plays is best characterized as Comedy of Menace which can be seen as a particular manifestation of the absurd tradition. Pinter's plays reflect contemporary British society, its false value system and the menace existing within and without. Compared to the other absurd dramatists he is much closer to the earth and the problems of the contemporary man. He has tried to probe deep in the experiences of modern man and the dehumanization of man in society. His characters in the plays discussed here are lonely persons living in their own private worlds. In The Birthday Party menace is primarily in the form of conformist forces in society destroying individuality, talent and original thinking. The central character Stanley who was an artist is turned into a puppet by Goldberg and McCann. The drama shows his total degeneration.The play is a complete play in all respects , and a

compact , well knit one too.It observes all the three united (of action ,time , and place)which are conducive to a concentration of effect and a dramatic intensity .

Pinter says: “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 our present day world everything is uncertain there is no fixed point and we are surrounded by the unknown.” This unknown occurs in many plays, there is no kind of horror about and I think that this horror and absurdity go together.

Pinter’s statement also shows hostile reality of life. One more thing is that here we are shown how nothingness is important for human predicament. “Nothing” means “Something” it is the main base of the play. Pinter has delicately deployed the theatre of absurd and his idiosyncratic theatre of comedy of menace so that he could forward solutions for the dominating existential problems of man entrapped in his era. Pinter was a leader in the theatre of menace.

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