

## The Birthday Party And The Merit Of Ruthlessness

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When Harold Pinter ever thought of presenting The Birthday Party in May 1958, he did not have in mind that it would slightly diverge from the thematic linearity of his other plays. However, Ronald Hayman has substantially perceived it as having "more substance" than either of his other full length plays.(1) And it is this "substance" that forms the core of ruthlessness and draws the macabre line of thought in The Birthday Party.

The play, on the outset, does not abandon or underestimate the sense of obscure severity which though externally spurred is dramatically unmotivated. "This pattern", Charles Carpenter believes, "might be termed a rebirth into hell". He adds that

often touched upon – or rather skirted – by critics but ,never examined in detail, it impregnates the play to the extent that almost the entire work is an extended birthday metaphor.(2)

So there is hardly any little space quite left undecorated by hardships facing, for example, Stanley, the main character and the substitute child who found a cozy home in a "sleezy" seaside boarding house where he is mothered by a landlady, Meg.(3) Perhaps, the sense of severity has naturally oiled every rickety joint of the play and it is mainly attributed to what Andrew Kennedy, quoting Harold Pinter himself, said

He (Pinter) connects this with the difficulty of avoiding the searchlights' in contrast with his direct concern with writing – completely unselfconsciously. We assume that

writing against 'the searchlights' eans, among other things, the dramatist writing with intensified stylistic consciousness, aware of his own achieved work. (4)

Like any of Samuel Beckett's characters, the Pinterish Stanley lacks or does not divulge any hint of affiliation to any familial origin. As if it has become an entire prerequisite for the validity of his presence on stage.. Yet this obscure background prepares the character like Stanley not only to live in hide but to suffer well all alone supposedly without any consequential repercussions. Needless to say that Meg is his childless mother who nags him by her flirty words.

Of course the opening presence of Stanley and Meg, vis-à-vis the amazed audience, does not reveal the fact that is "no less obscure" than that of Beckett though this is not allusive to the indebtedness of the latter to the former. Pinter is virtually concerned, J.R. Brown believes, with the "inner truth" of his characters.(5). It seems, however, that this truth is what worries the character and sometimes works demonstratively as to be conducive to a catatonically tragic end. Therefore, this intended obscurity subtly revolves around the attempts of Stanley to execute his mission.

In this regard, Pinter is conceived to use 'trivia' (which) is here in line with many more writers and thinkers of the present century. (6) Yet, this 'trivia' is more ruthless than the serious undertakings in the other parts of other plays. In *The Birthday Party*, Stanley abruptly finds himself entangled in a teething crisis where his only haven is Meg' seaside boarding house. Yet, had he sinned somewhere , or committed a bad doing so as to deserve the Mephistophilian visitation of the two inspectors, McCann and Goldberg who would certainly take him to an unknown spot ? This is certainly not obvious.

Pinter, indeed, attempts to investigate the 'inner truth' which is rather scandalizing for a writer like Edgar Allen Poe, for instance. So in the case of Stanley, Pinter makes .masochistically enjoy the insistent agony he receives from Meg

everyday. And in spite of his seeming terror he expresses to her of the two inspectors who come to fetch him for some definitive fate, he feels sure that only one day these two would have been coming to him inevitably. Pinter, in this regard, is precisely thought to be

more discreet in the use of external stimuli to attention (because) the audience is puzzled and therefore wishes to know.(7)

Nevertheless, whether the audience will be able to know or not remains rather skeptical :

Stanley: (grinding his cigarette) When was this ? When did you see them ?

Meg : Last night.

Stanley: Who are they ?

Meg : I don't know.

Stanley: Didn't he tell you their names ?

Meg: No.

Stanley : (pacing the room) Here? They wanted to come here

( Act I, P. 20)

Nevertheless, it remains quite certain that the stimulus is rather tragic even if it is destructively triggered by ambiguous forces that move to chase Stanley immediately when the play opens. He told Meg that he had played the piano "all over the world", in exotic places like Constantinople, Zagreb and Vladivostock where he had "unique touch". Yet his concert at Lower Edmonton ended unexpectedly :

Stanley: My next concert ! Somewhere it was. In Winter. I went down there to play. Then, when I got there, the hall Closed, the place was shuttered up, not even a caretaker. They'd locked it up. A fast one. They pulled a fast One. I'd like to know who was responsible for that.

(Act I, p. 23)

The stream of obscurity that precariously coats Stanley's troubling worry was mainly related to the interrogation style that transforms "in Pinter's hands to the friendly-menacing baiting" (8) Stanley, like any other Pinterish character, does realize that the "roots of this menace lay not with an unspecified or cosmic fear of disaster, but with the real threat of physical violence." And this is mostly understood as a "mock belligerence concealing (his) terror".(9)

As a matter of fact, Stanley's agony begins when both McCann and Goldberg leave courtesy of the possible birthday party and seriously charge him with tiny little accusations such as :

-What did you wear last week ?

or -Where do you keep your suits

or -What would your old mum say ?

(p.48)

or - What can you see without your glasses ?

or - When did you last wash up a cup ?

(p.49)

However, these accusations seem to sugar-coat the most important one for which they come to arrest presumably. It is :

- Why did you leave the organization ?

(p.48)

Of course, Pinter neglects any interpretation of the nature of 'organization', yet the reader or the spectator may tend to conclude that it could be some secret intelligence agency or a revolutionary cell.

It is at this point Stanley begins to attract more attention to him as he seems to be more than what he looks like. He has managed, for years now, to live a life of a fugitive and the play now appears to depict the increasing worry of Stanley who comes to the close of his escape. There is, however, no way to shun the inquisitive questions of McCann and Goldberg which are meant to trap him more or less.

Goldberg: Is the number 846 possible or necessary?

Stanley : Neither.

Goldberg: Wrong ! Is the number 846 possible or Necessary.

Stanley: Both .

Goldberg: Wrong ! It's necessary but not possible.

Stanley : Both .

Goldberg : Wrong ! Why do you think the number 846 is necessarily possible ?

Stanley : Must be.

Goldberg : Wrong ! It's only necessarily necessary !

We admit possibility only after we grant necessity. It is possible because necessary but by no means necessary through possibility. The possibility can only be assumed after the proof of necessity.

( Act I, p.50)

Yet, as the case is always like that Pinter does not uncover any particular reason behind which the accusation against Stanley hides. Stanley, in other words, ought to have ruthlessly committed some kind of atrocity that left him shifting, as it seems, from place to place, probably abandoning all that is conducive to his whereabouts. Perhaps, the possibility of his innocence is also there. But the play neglects this part and focuses on his being chased. It seems that it is rather important for Pinter to think of the result than of the cause. His perception of such a situation resides on the significance of preserving the status quo of his characters who are made to live in a semi-inferno or worry all the time.

When examining the piles of accusations on Stanley, one cannot depict any as something serious that leads to his chasing or arrest. So 'lechery', 'suffering yourself with dry toast', 'contaminating womankind', 'not paying the rent', being a 'mother defiler' and 'picking your nose' are , among others, all petty crimes that do not seriously criminate him or let him live in the hide for a long time, or make the two detectives keen to follow him up.

Perhaps, only one thing is worthy the trouble of accusation or even crimination, i.e., "What about Ireland?" Yet, even this investigation is rather unverified. Probably, it is a false and twisted pretension or even a wrong one. Stanley's only self-defence is ambiguously "I play the piano" as if he implores to stress his being an artist hence removing or denying any doubt that he could have committed any crime. Nevertheless, the game proceeds on and the two inquisitors begin to stab metaphorically with words leaving him coiling with agony. The stage directions read: "They stand over him. He is crouched in the chair." (p.52) Goldberg sums up his ruthlessness when he resolves:

-You're dead. You can't live, you can't think, you can't  
you're dead. You're a plague gone bad. There is no juice  
in you. You're nothing but an odour.

(p. 52)

All this ruthlessness, however, was deliberately treated as if the two inquisitors were avoiding, due to the secrecy of the mission, any publicity. So the code name of their investigation was always referred to as "The birthday celebration" which entails "a nervous breakdown" (p. 71). But the atrocious behaviour they showed, especially that of Goldberg seems to have been inherited as Goldberg himself used to be a victim for family persecution. He, furthermore, does not deny that it is this severity or ill-treatment that made him what he is:

And that's why I reached my position, McCann. Because I've always been as fit as a fiddle. My motto, work hard and play hard. Not a day's illness.

(p. 78)

It is quite possible that Goldberg is now mixing, in his insistent chasing of Stanley, between his profession requirements and the already developed complex that he had inherited long time ago. And it is sometimes perceived that this harsh attitude is badly reflected on himself as it reveals some psychological masochistic tendency. Therefore, he asks McCann to "give me a blow" which is hardly justified. It is a hard "blow

in my mouth" (p. 79) Yet, this makes him "breathe deeply" so he "smiles". It gives his satisfaction which is rarely understood unless Goldberg enjoys to be agonized.

No matter how hard a spectator attempts to interpret the constituent reasons for the making of this complex, he (or she) may not be able to understand it as such, unless we are all wistfully driven to believe that Harold Pinter, like Beckett :

is essentially concerned with communicating a sense of being, with producing patterns of poetic imagery, not in words so much as in the concrete three dimensional happenings that take place on the stage.... Pinter wants to communicate the mystery, the problematical nature of man's situation in the world...(that is why) Pinter's plays are also basically images, almost allegories of the human condition. (10)

And the mystery critics are after is deliberately formed to cover up any sense of obviousness that might make the play quite undrestimated. As if it is another Godot whose identity should be confused, hidden or obliterated to give importance to his absence. Perhaps, this Godot or part of it does appear, yet his appearance is more difficult to discern although it turns to be some "nameless menace" (11).

Of course the appearance of Goldberg and McCann is as important as the disappearance of Godot in Beckett's well known masterpiece. And the insistent disappearance in Beckett's play is virtually parallel to the nagging appearance of the two inquisitors in Pinter's. Perhaps, McCann's and Goldberg's blaring and unclearly motivated presence alongside their intrusive contribution to the making of the play-game, i.e., the birthday party, as well as their familiarity with Petey or Lulu raises the same fatal question about their identity. Nobody seems to be interested or daring enough to discuss the nature of these inquisitors' mission. Moreover, it is not unconceivable to see what their appearance would be conducive to. Not only

Should it be taken into account that dramatically they bridged the gap or fill in the vacuum left by Stanley's hiding, their appearance was not so atrocious as to lead to some violence; because if they did so they could have arrested Stanley at once, hence leading to the finish of the play. On the contrary, when they appeared they behaved as professional detectives whose mission was to be controlled to the last moment. In other words, they seem so nice and sympathizing even not indifferent to proceed on with the details of the birthday part preparations. They were playing a pretentious rat-chase game taking into their account all the possible risks. It is rather bitter nicety that augments the necessity of ruthlessness and severity as it has depended entirely on nervous tension. It is not very clear, however, whether they want to give another chance, probably the last one, to Stanley to enjoy the freedom he may not be able to enjoy anymore.

At least, what justifies Stanley's terror is a matter of two things: first, he implicitly knows well what they intend to do to him. Second, he ought to have witnessed their harsh treatment to him when he was under their control. Also they seem quite certain of their 'omnipresent' ability to find him wherever he is. And this diminishes the sense of the little worry they show while finding him out.

Stanley's life, on the other hand, was rather barren. He was filled with the continuous and shadow-chasing worry that befalls him throughout the play. Yet, the plot does not attempt to tell of the consequences of his arrest as it relies on magnifying the horrible terror and the teething worry which collectively represent the climactic crisis of humanity more or less. This, indeed, interprets the reason why he is not keen to heed any personal romantic affair not even a motherly feeling of Meg. This is quite obvious through his absentmindedness and disinterestedness in all the world around him. And this has influenced his behavioural pattern, he becomes rather hesitant, cautious and worry-stricken. Besides, he becomes the center of attention among all the inhabitants of the boarding house around him not because an efficient and well known pianist but because

his mind is rather agonizingly, but silently, pressed. Of course, this is due to his over-thinking of what he hides and what this might lead to. Austin E. Quigley points out that,

The local texture of (Stanley's) dialogue which exhibits the tension between the implicit and the explicit information, thus recapitulates the larger patterns of the dialogue which manifest the tension in character interaction between concealing and revealing knowledge.(12)

So the tension in question is a resultant consequence of a volcanic struggle that needs some proper moment to erupt. Yet, its stay inside makes the character like Stanley hover above certain repercussions that naturally head towards his well-planned capture. In the same manner, Quigley believes that Pinter's concern is rather to "explore social interaction in the context of certainty confronting and negotiating with doubt."(13)

Perhaps, the left-over of such doubt and worry is anxiously revealed on several occasions when Stanley loses control over the world around him, hence, he loses the sense of belonging and even the sense of allegiance becomes quite obliterated without necessarily being regretful. Therefore, the Pinterish menace is deeply rooted that Pinter himself is hard at work to trace and examine its origins and work quite closely in the various gambits for dominance. Perhaps, this does not give significance to the result as much as it gives so to the effort of fixing the moment of menace. This avails the spectator a chance of meditating over the nature and degree of menace in an attempt to analyze it rather psychologically :

Goldberg: What makes you think that? As a matter of fact every single one of my senses is at its peak. (p. 44)

Here Pinter seems to freeze the moment without giving any opportunity of proceeding as if he attains the thrilling moment of stasis. It is rather an ecstatic moment after which there is

some containment of the bewildering situation. Stanley's nerves become tense even before the appearance of McCann and Goldberg, but immediately after being with them he expresses some kind of dubious familiarity that makes the suspense usually pertinent to the diminished results. He is, therefore, on the 'peak' of his feeling when he supposedly knows about the two men:

Stanley: (advancing) They are coming in a van.

Meg: Who?

Stanley: And do you know what they're got in the van ?  
What ?

Stanley: They've got a wheelbarrow in that van.

Meg: (breathlessly) They haven't.

Stanley: oh yes they have.

(p. 24)

It is in this way Pinter raises the tempo of the action to a high pitch :

Stanley: They're looking for someone.

Meg: They're not.

Stanley: They're looking for someone. A certain person.

Meg: (hoarsely) No, they're not.

Stanley: Shall I tell you who they're looking for ?

Meg: No.

Stanley: You don't want me to tell you ?

Meg: You're a liar.

(p. 24)

However, what paves the way for Stanley's subjugation to ruthlessness is the insistence of Pinter to fold Stanley on the over-whole mystery that contains the play. Sometimes, this menace is objected because it hinders the continual overflow of the play on the one hand and it makes the characters, especially Stanley, less realistic. Ronald Hayman, a critic, for instance basically attributes this to Pinter's lack of interest "in exploring experience". Hayman points out that :

his vision of the world remains a child's view. He is with the subject of the safety of the womb or room and the dangers of dispossession. Many of the men in his

work are either dispossessors or dispossessed...(14)

Of course, this does not reduce the significance of the menace that is evolved even before the appearance of Goldberg and McCann. Hence, we have no clear idea about Stanley's past in order to justify his present terror and continually insistent worry. Rather, it is believed that :

There is no interest in getting at the truth behind his (Stanley's) falsifications. What's important is that he is falsifying. The focus is always here-and-now.(15) In psychology, this means putting aside the motives and concentrating on responses. Pinter, in other words, is unlike Beckett, does not attempt to trace the genesis of menace. This part is mainly left to the audience to meditate on. Instead, it is plausible that:

The underlying premise is that we can and should understand the cause-effect relations among characters and action, past and present. Pinter, on the other hand, typically withholds expository information altogether, or else frustrates us with a few scattered details that are insufficient to verify backgrounds and motives. (16)

Perhaps, the atrocities that usually symbolically sugar-coat the sequence of events in this drama is rather deeply rooted in the natal origin of the crisis. That is the reason why critics do not remove any doubt that the play narrowly revolves round a specific axis of conflict between a motherly and fatherly figures. And this conflict is inevitably responsible for creating " a semi-conscious tug of war", Charles Carpenter believes. It is in this way Stanley becomes the "umbilical cord.....until Goldberg triumphs by virtue of superior tactics and strength." (17)

However, this 'tug of war' implies unforgettable trace of pain. It is a 'forced birth'. Carpenter notices further that

If his act is tantamount to wrenching a man from a living death and dragging him into a death-like life the tragedy lies not in one set of conditions or the other but rather in the appalling absence of

alternatives in such a drastically limited world.(18)

That is why Stanley's new life will be flabbergastingly desperate awaiting in the inferno of fear and worry which do not seem to sever from him all the way through. Perhaps, Meg's tantalizing manner and Lulu's sexy attempts which were sidetracked by Goldberg do not influence much on the course of Stanley who does not appear to belong to the inhabitants of the seaside boarding house. And though some critics still believe that the play is dominated by banal and pointless stretches of dialogue which stress the ambivalent absent-mindedness of the characters. It is not untrue, however, to point out that this absent-mindedness is rather justified on the ground of the volcanic worry that erupts with the appearance of the two inquisitors. It is in this way Pinter incarnates the menace in its active manner without necessarily stepping out to show where it can lead to. So everything in this seems to serve the point of ruthlessness as it activates the feeling of suspense which ascends up to the apex that turns to be surprisingly frustrating when Stanley finally appears submissively clean and starched to go quietly with McCann and Goldberg.

Definitively, Pinter reveals the core of his dramatic action although the anatomy of worry, menace and submission may add sometimes to the bewildering ambiguity of the moral message of the drama. Yet, looking at him from an Absurdist perspective, this ambiguity becomes a familiar constituent and an integral part of the play-making. Rather, it enhances the power of images, symbols and metaphors used.