

# HAROLDPINTER'S 'THE BIRTHDAY PARTY' AS AN ABSURD PLAY

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## ABSTRACT

The 'theatre of the absurd', a term used to describe the new style of theatre which developed following the Second World War. The concept refers to the plays of the 1950s and 1960s which centre on the notion that life is illogical, without purpose and devoid of meaning. 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.

The Birthday party was the first full length play of Pinter. The play depicts 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 feature of absurdity such as unclarity of scenes dialogues and plot. 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, Human Condition

The Theatre of the Absurd

The “Theatre of the Absurd” is also known as a “New Theatre”. “Theatre of Absurd” is a term or particular movement started in late 1950s. The word “Absurd” means foolishness, senseless, opposed to reason, something silly and ridiculous. The Theatre of the Absurd commonly associated with “Existentialism”. Critic Martin Esslin coined the term in his 1960 essay “Theatre of the Absurd”.

Largely based on the philosophy of existentialism, absurdism was implemented by a small number of European playwrights. Common elements included illogical plots inhabited by characters that appeared out of harmony with their own existence

Examples of Absurd plays are Samuel Beckett’s masterpiece ‘Waiting for Godot’; one of the great plays of the 20th century and ‘The Myth of Sisyphus’ is a philosophical essay by Albert Camus.

Basic elements of Absurd Theatre:

1. Language becomes meaningless
2. Meaningless or seemingly illogical plots
3. Human condition portrayed as meaningless, absurd, illogical
4. Disjoined and fragmented dialogs
5. Actions contradicts the words spoken

These are some of the important absurd elements in the plays.

Harold Pinter and the play ‘The Birthday Party’

The play birthday party is in three acts. The main characters in the play are Meg, Petey, Stanley, Webber, Lulu, Goldberg and McCann. The play centres on the life of the main protagonist Stanley Webber, an unemployed pianist, who has been living as a lodger with Meg and Petey Boles in their sea-side boarding house. Stanley is living in seclusion away from the outside world. However, the relatively peaceful, domestic atmosphere of the boarding house is disturbed by the intrusion of two unknown characters, Goldberg and McCann. 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

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 dialogue in the opening scene between Petey and Meg is filled with inane questions asked by Meg followed by Petey's monosyllabic answers:

MEG: You got your paper?

PETEY: Yes

MEG: Is it good?

PETEY: Not bad.

MEG: What does it say?

PETEY: Nothing much.

The language of nonsense is used abusively as Stanley is tortured with illogical questions. For example:

MCCANN What about the Albigensienist heresy?

GOLDBERG Who watered the wicket in Melbourne?

MCCANN What about the blessed Oliver Plunkett?

The use of pauses and silences by Pinter intensifies the menace. Human vulnerability is manifested through the characters of Stanley and Meg. In the play it is quite obvious that Meg has a troubled relation with Petey her husband. There is no love which Meg tries to get from Stanley. It could be motherly love or somewhat sensual love. Stanley on the other hand behaves in a peculiar way and does not reciprocate this love of Meg with any sincerity. So both of them are at some extreme edge of life where they need some affection and protection which is quite elusive. The verbal attack of Goldberg and McCann forces Stanley to surrender. We mark the complete disintegration of an individual in front of some unknown power. The arrival of the two outsiders shatters the security of Stanley that forces him to think in an absurd manner.

STANLEY. (Advancing) They're coming today. They are coming in a van.

MEG. Who?

STANLEY. And do you know what they've got in that van ?

MEG. What?

STANLEY. They've got a wheelbarrow in that van.

MEG (breathlessly).They haven't.

STANLEY. Oh yes they have. (Act I)

It is very difficult here in this play to know the past life of Stanley and it is equally difficult why he has been taken by Goldberg and McCann to an unknown place. Stanley job, identity and family background is unclear. Goldberg and McCann's character are quite mysterious and ambiguous. Another feature we observe here is the strange and incomprehensible behaviour of characters which often bewilders the audience and they don't associate themselves with the characters on the stage. Thus they don't sympathise with the condition of these characters. Without a credible plot and due to its non-linear progress The Birthday Party is closer to the absurd tradition.

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