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**Pinter and the Pinteresque: Semiotic elucidation in the light of Harold Pinter's  
*The Birthday Party***

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**Abstract:** Harold Pinter, the outstanding twentieth century English playwright has made a genuine contribution in the field of dramatic literature through his oeuvre and distinctive peculiar style that contributed much in revealing the existential problems of mankind. This paper attempts to trace the various contours of the term and tries to analyse its semeiology with special focus on his well-known play *The Birthday Party*. Although the play is written in the early stage of his writing career when the innovative dramatic methods were still experimented, this play, as one of Pinter's classical works, has exhibited overt characteristics of what the critics term as 'Pinteresque.'

**Key Words:** Absurd, Pinteresque, semeiology

**Introduction:** Harold Pinter, the outstanding twentieth century English playwright has made a genuine contribution in the field of dramatic literature through his oeuvre and distinctive peculiar style that contributed much in revealing the existential problems of mankind. He deployed the characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd which "strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought" (Esslin 24). His plays depicted the hidden menace, awful silence and pause and were especially noted for their systematic use of language. Pinter is considered to be the greatest British playwright after George Bernard Shaw. Together with Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugene Ionesco and Jean Genet, he is categorized as one of the most prominent figures of the Theatre of the Absurd. As a playwright, he had achieved great success and was awarded many important literary prizes. In 2005, his award of the Nobel Prize for Literature promoted him to be a universally recognized great writer: hence more and more scholars turn to concentrate on the study of his plays.

Pinter is one of the few writers to have an eponymous adjective-'Pinteresque' named for him. This paper attempts to trace the various contours of the term and tries to analyse its semeiology with special focus on his well-known play *The Birthday Party*. Although the play is written in the early stage of his writing career when the innovative dramatic methods were

still experimented, this play, as one of Pinter's classical works, has exhibited overt characteristics of what the critics term as 'Pinteresque.'

'Pinteresque' is a term used especially for dialogues that seem oblique, repetitive, interspersed with lengthy pauses, menaces and loaded with various hidden meanings. It refers to "situations full of unspecified menace and cryptic conversational sallies, in which the pause before speaking becomes a minefield" (Hudson 28). It is a unique combination of comedy and menace that arises out of very ordinary situations, but never resorting to the gothic or the supernatural. The term functions as shorthand for a complex medium of defining characteristics, including the poetry of banality, menacing atmosphere, seemingly intimidating silences, claustrophobic settings, bewilderingly vague language, multiple possible realities and dissident humor. The overall effect of the world in which Pinter's characters struggle is referred to as 'Pinteresque.' Ronald Hayman observes:

Pinter's style succeeds by breaking all the rules of writing. It's good because it's so realistically full of bad syntax, tautologies, pleonasm, repetitions, non-sequiturs and self-contradictions. The characters are not only uninterested in listening, they are hardly interested in what they're saying themselves. (2)

*The Birthday Party* dramatizes the story of Stanley Webber, the victim of the play who is accommodated in a seaside boarding house of Petey and Meg. He seems to have run away from a mysterious organization. Since then, it had been searching for its missing member through its emissaries. The moment he hears about the arrival of the two visitors, he appears tensed and tells Meg that they will be coming in a van with a big wheelbarrow in it. The two emissaries namely Goldberg, a Jew and McCann, the Irish come together for some unspecified assignment. They understand that they have come exactly on the day which is Stanley's birthday. They tell Meg that they will celebrate it together and make the event a grand one. But contrary to everyone's expectations, they harass him mentally and even physically. Finally, he is capable of making only some gurgling sounds and they take him away in a car to Monty. He becomes the victim of some cruel and brutal unspecified menace from which he is unable to escape.

A 'Pinteresque' play that lacks a well-defined plot presents an atmosphere of mystery before us. Several questions which remain unanswered in the minds of the readers/spectators after watching/reading the play baffle us greatly. In *The Birthday Party*, we do not know exactly who Goldberg and McCann are and which organization they represent. We are also not aware about the crime committed by Stanley so as to incur their wrath. The reasons for which he stays away from the society by residing in the boarding house too appears unstated. Why is he no longer playing the piano as he used to do it formerly? Why do the intruders subject Stanley to cruel harassments? Who is Monty to whom finally Stanley is being taken away? No clear answers to these and many more questions in the play are given by the dramatist. The readers make their own interpretations and try to answer the questions based on their assumptions. We are not sure whether it is Stanley's actual birthday and he denies it.

Or has Meg invented it just to please and bring him into spirits? What is his actual relation with Meg? Is she a mere mistress or a mother-figure or a flirt to him? Nothing gets confirmed in the play. It is not certain whether his description about a concert which he claims to have given is credible or not. About a Pinter play, John Arden says that “there is a deliberate haze about the past, and indeed the present, of all his characters, which never quite becomes so opaque that we are entirely bewildered...We never quite catch a complete view of them” (117). In an article Pinter wrote:

I can sum up none of my plays. I can describe none of them, except to say: That is what happened. That is what they said. That is what they did. (qtd. in Scott 8)

This type of mystery, uncertainty and ambiguity seem the main semeiotics of ‘Pinteresque’ for which *The Birthday Party* is an illustrious example. Prentice Penelope comments: “Ambiguity generates fear and terror as Stanley’s amorphous suspicions and Goldberg’s and McCann’s equivocally ominous actions become all the more terrifying because they cannot be confronted, pinned down, examined and then dismissed. Such menace assumes the proportions of necessity of fate” (40).

Another ‘Pinteresque’ feature is with regard to the technique of characterization. When the traditional dramas supplied enough background information about the characters in a play, Pinter’s plays lacked this kind of expositon. In *The Birthday Party* not much reliable information about the three major characters namely Stanley, Goldberg and McCann is provided. When Stanley tells McCann about his past life and the places where he had lived, we doubt whether he is giving correct details regarding them. He even tells Goldberg an obvious lie that he is the manager of the lodging house. The dramatist does not give adequate information about the past life of Goldberg and McCann. Goldberg reminiscences about his past life inhabited by a generous uncle, a loving mother, a devoted wife and a wise father apart from talking about a girl with whom he used to go for walk on Fridays. The audience can believe his words only to a slighter extent as we can’t associate these beautiful memories with that of a gangster’s life. The nature of Goldberg’s and McCann’s job is not made explicit by the dramatist. Nor does it become clear what job has brought them to this place, and what type of jobs they have been doing in the past. Goldberg makes only an oblique reference to the kind of activities which McCann has been previously occupied with, but the nature of these is not specified. Even if Pinter was successful in giving a realistic aura to the portrayal of the characters in the play, mystery surrounds their life, motives and attitudes. Stephen Lacey comments: “Reality [for Pinter] is problematic and uncertain, and the meanings that can be deduced from it ambiguous and transitory” (142).

Yet another clear symptom of a ‘Pinteresque’ play is the mingling of comedy and menace in the story line of the play. Comical situations are accompanied by a kind of sinister feeling that creates a sense of menace in the minds of the audience. *The Birthday Party* is a fine example of the label ‘Comedy of Menace’. The opening dialogue between Meg and Petey, Stanley’s fooling with Meg and his sarcastic comments on the tea and cornflakes appear quite

amusing. Meg proves herself to be a great comic figure and she makes us laugh on various occasions in the play. But there is always a feeling of apprehension in between these comic episodes and funny dialogues. When Stanley learns from Meg that two gentlemen are coming to stay in the boarding house, he appears quite tensed. He tries to instill fear in Meg's mind by telling her that they will be bringing in a wheelbarrow with them in order to take him away from there. Stanley's beating the drum in a savage way during the birthday party celebration, his kicking Goldberg in the stomach, McCann's retaliation by picking up a chair to hit Stanley, the physical and mental torture to which Stanley is subjected to, his attempts to strangle Meg and rape Lulu, the final action of the intruders when they take Stanley away in a car all supply sufficient amount of menace in the play.

Stanley's tragic fate marks the development of the whole story, while the sudden arrival of the two strangers initiates the sense of menace. At the beginning, Stanley's arrival leads to the implicit collision to the Boles' marriage because of his adultery with Mrs. Boles, i.e. Meg. Later, with the appearance of the new comers, Goldberg and McCann, who threaten and torture Stanley, and have him gradually deprived of the capabilities of seeing, taking actions, thinking and speaking, the menacing atmosphere is extremely heightened. The association of the characters' identities with their unfortunate experience and the constant worries of menace impel the story to its climax. The sense of menace is dramatized and at the same time realistic. John Russell Taylor comments: "The menace comes from the outside, from the intruder...and the menace is inverse proportion to its degree of particularization, the extent to which it involves direct physical violence or direct threats" (236). This type of mystery, uncertainty and ambiguity seem the main semeiotics of 'Pinteresque' for which *The Birthday Party* is an illustrious example. Prentice Penelope comments: "Ambiguity generates fear and terror as Stanley's amorphous suspicions and Goldberg's and McCann's equivocally ominous actions become all the more terrifying because they cannot be confronted, pinned down, examined and then dismissed. Such menace assumes the proportions of necessity of fate" (40).

The menacing figures are Pinter's technique for leading his characters into exposing themselves. The pattern is simple: 'intruder's' appearance initiates the breakdown of patterned words and games, the habitual stratagems to cover nakedness. It also challenges the serenity and security provided by the room, whose arbitrary structure in effect parallels the habits of word and deed. At last, as the internal menace is fully projected externally, language disintegrates, and the so-called victim is expelled from the room: he finally exhibits himself in all his mental nakedness.(Gordon 5)

Apart from the overpowering sense of intimidation the play provides, there is plenty of comedy in *The Birthday Party*. Almost every character contributes to the humour of the play. Meg generates a large amount of fun and she is not aware about it. Goldberg, who appears witty makes a lot of sarcastic comments and McCann too elicits much laughter. Stanley and Lulu too amuse us even though to a lesser extent. Inspite of the abundance of

comedy provided by these characters on diverse occasions, the play has serious implications and an undertone of some unspecified menace runs throughout the play.

Pinter's plays in general lack a well-defined theme and this is another marked 'Pinteresque' feature that gives a unique and particular but complex identity to the plays of Harold Pinter. Even if this can be pointed as a criticism, it does not necessarily go against him as a creative artist. In spite of this, a Pinter play is rich in meanings so that we can infer many meanings out of it and draw our own conclusions regarding its theme. *The Birthday Party* too lacks a well-defined theme and its story is open to a multitude of interpretations. Several ideas are dealt either directly or symbolically in the play. The difficulty of communication between individuals, people's longing for security, the feeling of isolation suffered by an individual in a society, the place of an artist in the society, nature of human personality, death etc are some of them. One of the most striking interpretation of the play is that Stanley is an artist who had moved out of a conforming society in order to lead a private life of his own, but ultimately forced by the pressures of the society to come back to it. Pinter's plays are assertions of the fact that it is not necessary that a dramatist should give us a direct message or that a play by him should have a distinct moral or social or political purpose. Even if *The Birthday Party* lacks an explicit theme, it stimulates our thinking on the probable interpretations stated above. Unlike traditional dramas, a Pinter play lacks a proper beginning and a conclusive ending. No strict dramatic line is observed in Pinter's plays as we can't observe a clear exposition or a climax that leads to the play's finale. In the case of *The Birthday Party*, we assume that Act I marks the beginning, Act II the middle and Act III the end. This feature indeed figures as a prominent 'Pinteresque' symptom that supplies an exceptional distinctiveness to his plays.

In respect of the technique and dialogue also, *The Birthday Party* is a typical 'Pinteresque' play. Unlike the conventional dramatists who gave a very detailed description of the dramatis personae, Pinter usually presented only a couple of hints about them. Realistic dialogues in Pinter's plays abound in silences, pauses and ellipsis. The setting and dialogues in the play, nevertheless, are basically Pinterian and one sees the situation laden with menace in which the ordinary speech conceals a violent battle for territory. The dialogues are characterized by the pervading sense of uncertainty and lack of co-ordination between the speeches of the characters. Meg repeatedly asserts that it is Stanley's birthday and she agrees with the idea of the two intruders to celebrate it. But, to our great surprise, Stanley denies it.

MEG. It's your birthday, Stan. I was going to keep it a secret until tonight.

STANLEY. No.

MEG. It is. I've bought you a present. (*She goes to the sideboard, picks up the parcel, and places it on the table in front of him.*) Here. Go on. Open it.

STANLEY. What's this?

MEG. It's your present.

STANLEY. This isn't my birthday, Meg.

MEG. Of course it is. Open your present. (Pinter 29-30)

Sometimes the dialogues appear most inconsequential and trivial. For e.g. the very opening dialogue between Meg and Petey illustrates the feature of repetition where the word “nice” gets repeated several times.

MEG. I’ve got your cornflakes ready. (She disappears and reappears.) Here’s your cornflakes.

*He rises and takes the plate from her, sits at the table, props up the paper and begins to eat.*

*Meg enters by the kitchen door.*

Are they nice?

PETHEY. Very nice.

MEG. I thought they’d be nice (Pinter 3).

Each character speaks his/her peculiar language and the dialogues appear highly economical and tightly controlled. They do not even talk explicitly about a situation. The final scene of *The Birthday Party* is a perfect example for this. Meg knows that Stanley will be taken away by the two intruders, but she cannot and will not admit it to herself, while Petey is unable to offer any word of consolation. The play ends thus:

MEG. I was the belle of the ball.

PETHEY. Were you?

MEG. Oh yes. They all said I was.

PETHEY. I bet you were, too.

MEG. Oh, it’s true. I was.

Pause.

I know I was. (Pinter 81)

The four-fold repetition of the statement that “she was the belle of the ball” is not used merely for repetition sake, but is a clear indication of the feeling of desparateness that stems from the feeling of tragedy of her son’s loss. It is an outward projection of her mental agony that gets revealed in the device of repetition.

Pinter uses each word in a highly meticulous and dramatic way so that it becomes a vehicle for dramatic action. He believed that real life conversations do not proceed logically from one point to another. The average everyday conversation which is full of bad syntax, pleonasms, repetitions, non-sequiturs and self contradictions is employed by the dramatist in a suprealistic way in his plays which in turn contributes highly to yet another ‘Pinteresque’ aspect. Every syllable is used by the dramatist in a highly careful way and it decisively contributes to the whole effect of the play. That is why silences and pauses play a decisive role in his plays. A Pinter pause is an indication of mounting up tensions; whereas silence signals the end of one movement and the beginning of another. It may also signify the incapacity to articulate, a total annihilation. Stanley’s gurgling sounds produced from his throat after the interrogation by the two intruders perfectly illustrates this. There is a blackout

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when the lights go out and this has a great visual impact which greatly contributes to the 'Pinteresque' ambience of the play.

To conclude, the semiotics of 'Pinteresque' gets explicit in the prevalence of an atmosphere of hidden menace and tension, realistic characterization despite inadequate and unrealistic information about the characters, a mixing of the comic and menacing situations, colloquial and realistic dialogues interspersed with pauses, ellipsis, silences and solecisms and also the ambiguous, mysterious and uncertain story line of the play. It can be thus be concluded that *The Birthday Party* generally and obviously includes all the 'Pinteresque' features characteristic of Harold Pinter's plays.

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