

## **Nihilism and Nothingness in the Play Entitled *The Birthday Party* (1957) with Special Reference to The Existential Philosophy**

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The two world-wars and its massive destruction and horror had a great impact on human mind. Inevitably complete cynicism, pessimism, alienation, nothingness, existentialism reflected in the literature of that time. Pinter's play *The Birthday Party* (1957) is based on the philosophy of existentialism which later on became the source for the "Theatre of the Absurd". Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre gave the philosophy of existentialism according to which the universe and man's experience in it are meaningless. All attempts by human mind to understand the world are futile. All philosophical systems and religion which claim that they can enable man to make sense of the world are delusive and useless. Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) wrote :- "

In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light , man feels a stranger. ... This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting constitutes the feeling of Absurdity. "

In the play *The Birthday Party* , Pinter has shown how Stanley Webber , the hero of the play has isolated himself in the boarding house. Stanley was a piano player who shares with Meg about his two concerts that one of them was successful and the other one was not held at all. He seems to be a frustrated artist who has taken refuge at Meg and Petey's Boarding house to lead an isolated existence.

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"Stanley: I've played the piano all over the world. All over the country."

Although there , must be a reason why Stanley came to line at the boarding house . The way Goldberg and McCann came in search of him suggests that Stanley may have done some serious wrong to somebody or some group of people and that is why he might have come to the boarding house to escape from the consequences of what he did. He may have a sense of guilt and in order to lighten the weight of that guilt he is living on the Boarding house. In any case , from all this we get that Stanley was an unsocial man and he likes to live a life a aloofness. Eugene Ionesco says, " People drowning in meaninglessness can only be grotesque, their sufferings can only appear tragic by derision ".

The life of people became aimless and meaningless after World War II. This aimlessness is seen in the characters of *The Birthday Party*. For instance , in the play Pinter has used repetition as a mode to create laughter and at the same time he uses dialogues with pauses which are aimless and time killing. In the first act Meg repeatedly asks questions to create laughter.

" Meg: Is that you Petey ?

Pause

Petey: Is that you ?

Pause

Petey: What ?

Meg: Is that you?

Petey: Yes it's me . "

Although Meg and Petey are husband and wife but from their conversation it seems that there is lack of communication between them. The monotonous dialogues make them alienated to themselves.

"But Pinter's plays are not solely about unexpected moments of isolation, they are equally about unexpected moment of alliance. "

Harold Pinter sees the funny side of absurd. He employs a comic way of expression to laugh at everything, even at the tragic fractions of existence. In an interview Pinter declares :

" Everything is funny ; the greatest earnest is funny ; even tragedy is funny. And I think what I try to do in my plays is to get to this recognizable reality of the absurdity of what we do and how we behave and how we speak."

In *The Birthday Party*, menace prevails everywhere. There is mingling of comedy with a perception of danger pervades the whole play and at times, becomes very conspicuous. For instance , the first act of play opens with amusing dialogues between Meg and Petey, and it is followed by an amusing dialogue between Meg and Stanley . These amusing dialogues continue for several pages but then comes the menace. Meg informs Stanley that two gentlemen are coming to stay in the boarding house which terrifies Stanley. The information of the arrival of the two gentlemen gives rise to a strong sense of menace pertaining both to the past and to the present and the future.

" We are surrounded by the unknown . "

The terror is further intensified with the arrival of two agents who starts interrogation or cross examination of Stanley . The two men put all sorts of questions to Stanley and there was no logic about the questions which they asked and there was no connection between one and the other which follows , yet cumulatively these questions shows that Stanley has definitely done some wrong or committed some crime and that he is haunted by a sense of guilt. The questions of Goldberg and

McCann for Stanley are as follows :-

" Why did you leave the organization ?"

" Why did you betray us ? "

" What have you done with your wife?"

" Why did you kill your wife ?"

" Why did you never get married ?"

" Why did you change your name ?"

" Do you recognize an external force?"

" You contaminate woman kind . "

Few questions are philosophical and some are political.

" Is the number 846 possible or necessary ?"

" Which came first ?"

" Chicken ? Egg ? Which came first?"

" What about Ireland?"

" What makes you think you exist? "

These questions show not only Stanley's sense of guilt but also the existential anguish which Stanley may be experiencing. It has been suggested that Goldberg and McCann are personification of Stanley's own consciousness and of his own innermost thoughts. In brief it can be said that Stanley is carrying a sense of guilt and he is also experiencing the existential anxiety of having to live in a world where complete security is impossible .

Esslin in his book states that :

" The play speaks plainly of the individual's pathetic search for security... of the tragedy that arises from lack of understanding between people on different level of awareness. "

It is ironical that the little suggests the celebration of a birthday but in the play it seems that all the characters were celebrating for the upcoming death of Stanley's soul , as the interrogation by Goldberg and McCann leaves Stanley numb and speechless basically - " a body without soul ." In the modern age after he Wars various sorts of psychological disorders are found in man. One of them is Oedipus Complex. In the play we see that Meg considers Stanley as her son, but an unusual absurdity can be seen in their relationship. Similarly another unusual thing happens in the midst of the birthday party of Stanley where everyone was enjoying the party but Goldberg took the advantage of Lulu in that party. In this way Pinter has highlighted the moral corruption that existed during his age. In Act III we see Stanley again , he has undergone a complete transformation both in regards of his appearance and his state of mind. Stanley now seems to have submitted to the pressure of society represented by Goldberg and McCann and he agrees to return to the old society in order to lead a conventional kind of life.

Stanley has suffered incalculable damage mentally and he has lost his individuality. Now he was again subjected to another brain washing exercise. This time the two men do not ask questions but they offer all sorts of alluring promises and assurances to him about a golden future. Finally they

take Stanley to Montey, whoever Montey may be. At the end Stanley's plight was terrifying as well as pitiable. Meg easily enters into her world of happy memories and illusions on the next day after the birthday party. She was not aware of the harsh reality and Stanley was harassed and was taken away by force by McCann and Goldberg. With the unconscious irony, she recollects the happy memories and insists that - I was the belle of the ball. To conclude, we can say that Harold Pinter's plays reveal our state of solitude, nothingness, meaninglessness and isolation. In this drama with the use of language and behavior of the characters the inharmoniousness between the human beings and the world is portrayed. T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* (1922) has talked about the spiritual degradation, moral corruption and a vast increase in materialistic views of life. The same elements Pinter has used in his play *The Birthday Party*.

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