

MENACE MOTIF IN PINTER'S *THE BIRTHDAY PARTY*

Dipanjan Ghosh
Research Scholar
Department of English
University of Kalyani,
West Bengal -741245

In 1957 David Campton coined the term 'Comedies of Menace' as the subtitle of his one-act plays collectively called *The Lunatic View*. In 1958 Irving Wardle applied it to *The Birthday Party*. Although he subsequently wanted to withdraw the label, its aptness made it stick. "Comedies of Menace' puns on 'Comedies of Manners'. Like such comedies by Congreve and others, Pinter's drama provokes laughter through balanced phraseology, antithesis, and the language and manners of social classes—though the classes in his plays are usually lower than those in Congreve's. There are various references of the comic passages in Pinter's plays which also help in creating atmosphere of menace, mystery, evasion, and matters deliberately concealed" (Dukore 23). In Pinter's plays comedy and menace coalesce at the level of presenting characters and dramatic situations. 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, we are surrounded by the unknown. This unknown occurs in my plays. There is a kind of horror about and I think that this horror and absurdity (comedy) go together.

Harold Pinter, while working within the tradition of West-end naturalistic drawing room comedy, in the first production of *The Birthday Party* on 28th April 1958, introduced an element of absurdity, latent and explosive violence, sinister mystery, menace and threat. In the play the atmosphere of gloom, psychological aberration, tumult, anxiety, tension, neurosis along with an atmospheric drabness and monotony is omnipresent. Performed in the Royal Court Theatre, especially after the onset of the Theatre of Anger, Epic Theatre and the Theatre of Absurd, the play hinges upon themes drawn from atheistic existentialism, philosophy of the absurd and the theatre of social commitment.

The 'menace' motif rules supreme through all the plays of Pinter. The post-war anxieties of a generation that has lost its metaphysical roots and pushed to the periphery of a dismal and sinister social reality can produce a play of social commitment with such menacing bitterness. The vacuity, uncertainty, even the absurdity along with moral, social and physical inertia shapes the content of Pinter's plays. In his early plays, menace lurks outside, but it also has psychological roots. The titular room in *The Room*, in which the heroine lives fearful of an outside force, not being specified by her, is dark. In *The Birthday Party*, the sheltered young man fears visitors; in *The Dumb Waiter*, outside forces menace a questioning killer; in *A Slight Ache*, a psychologically disturbed man fears a man he invites inside. While menace may take the shape

of particular characters, it is usually unspecified or unexplained and thus becomes more ominous.

The Birthday Party portrays a lonely and pathetic individual who, trapped in inexplicable guilt, is trying to evade social responsibility in an act of self-imposed solipsism. If tragedy is ‘an imitation of an action that is serious’, Pinter’s play depends on the seriousness of the theme. Yet, the play deviates into imitable absurdities at the conduct of a man whose reason collapses under the threat of social compulsions. Stanley Webber, the protagonist has found a temporary refuge in a sea-side resort, in the comfortable maternal shelter of Meg, the landlady. Though not explicit, still it seems that Stanley has escaped from some invincible forces of social control that disclaims his righteous inclination towards music and artistic vocation. In this self-imposed exile, Stanley is threatened by some mysterious forces finally arrived in the form of Goldberg and McCann, the secret emissaries of an undisclosed organization. The forces of the underworld arrive in a black van, subject Stanley to a surreal cross-examination that shatters Stanley’s sanity, and finally drag him out after converting him into a lifeless vegetable.

Pinter attempts to break the social, moral and political inertia of human beings by staging a static life. As Stanley is introduced in the scene, the apparent complacency of a laid down life is broken. Meg talks about “coming up to fetch” Stanley if he does not come down. She even counts “One! Two! Three!” to threaten Stanley. “STANLEY enters. He is unshaven, in his pyjama jacket and wears glasses...” (Pinter 14). Underlying these activities, what is often called the subtext, is that someone make Stanley do what he does not want to do? This attempt to make someone go where he does to wish to go becomes a leitmotif having the form of menace. Meg suggests Stanley to go for shopping with her; he refuses. Lulu urges him to go outside for a walk; he refuses. At the end he is forced to leave the house, not merely his room.

The unspoken subtext of *The Birthday Party* is as important as dialogue. Silence creates an atmosphere of menace by threatening the characters. Sometimes silence is used as a stratagem to cover their psychological nakedness. Everything in the play seems apparently normal. Yet, the room that we encounter gradually creates tonal changes. The tone of the play changes to anxiety, pathos or fear as Stanley confronts some strange predicaments and seeks to defend himself against some unknown and unidentified danger both from outside and from within the room. In an interview to the BBC in 1960, Pinter said: “We are all in a room and outside is a world... which is most inexplicable and frightening, curious and alarming”. Stanley is an isolated self within this room. He is an intruder sheltered by Meg in that sea-side boarding house. When Goldberg and McCann arrive ‘out of nowhere’, it threatens both Stanley and the spectators. When Stanley hears of the two visitors, he apprehensively questions Meg about them, paces the room and insists they will not come. Pinter does not explain why he is so nervous. What matters is that he is nervous. When Goldberg and McCann arrive, Stanley peeps at them through the kitchen serving-hatch and sneaks through the rear door. Mystery and menace increase when McCann asks Goldberg if they are at the right house for he saw no number on the gate. “I wasn’t looking for a number” (1.38) says Goldberg. They intensify when Goldberg questions Meg about her lodger and, upon learning it is the lodger’s birthday, decides—not impulsively but ‘thoughtfully’—that a party should celebrate the event. After Goldberg and McCann go to their rooms, Stanley questions Meg about the newcomers. Upon hearing that one is named Goldberg, he responds by slowly sitting at the table. What the play shows is that their presence and Goldberg’s name becomes a threat which unsettles Stanley.

Pinter himself provides a clue to the mechanics of power and menace embedded in the types of Goldberg and his henchman McCann. In an interview he says: “I believe that there are

extremely powerful people in apartments in capital cities in all countries who are actually controlling events....” All through the play there is a looming shadow of the imperiled individual who has opted out of an unnamed mammoth system. The real theme of the play is this nameless danger or a painfully understated sense of it. Pinter conjures, by the principle of the unsaid, an apprehension of a nameless menace haunting the individual and his human values. When he was nineteen, in a book namely *Conscientious Objector Speech* Pinter writes:

To join an organization whose main purpose is mass-murder, whose conception of the true human values is absolutely nil, speeding on the utter degradation of a prematurely fatigued man, and whose result and indeed ambition is to destroy the world’s very, very precious life, is completely beyond my human understanding and moral conception.

Pinter recognizes the universality of his theme which is endemic to the existential impulse of modern living. In *Writing for Myself* he writes:

I’m convinced that what happens in my plays could happen anywhere, at any time, in any place, although the events may seem unfamiliar at first glance. If you press me for a definition, I’d say that what goes on in my plays is realistic, but what I’m doing is not realism.

As in Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, Pinter’s play introduces the ‘games people play’ as stage metaphors to bring out psychological states. The players decide to play ‘blind man’s buff’. This game is metaphorically related to the hide-and-seek game of the play played by Stanley and the secret emissaries respectively. Stanley is hiding his identity and befooling the interrogators. Through this game paradoxically, the blind man seeking someone collapses into a mental state that exposes his real intentions. As Stanley stands blindfold and left to seek other players, amid the sound of breaking glasses, strange drumbeats, Stanley’s hands move toward Meg and he begins to strangle her. The scene converges into horror. In the concluding act of *The Birthday Party*, the spectators are disturbed by the mundane domesticity of the opening scene. The meaning and consequence of Stanley’s mental breakdown are not deliberated as the playwright uses the stratagem of deferral to create an atmosphere of suspense and menace. Situational menace, moreover, is audibly palpable at climactic moments. For instance, in the party scene when the revelers are engaged in celebration, we find Stanley dragging his drum and creating a cacophony. The spectators are disturbed by the noise. The broken glasses, the sound of furniture’s breaking, and the confusion of the characters produce a chaotic sound play converging upon the absurd and the grotesque. Through the tools of sound Pinter creates a situation that is physically threatening even the spectators.

Works Cited:

- Aragay, Mireia, and Ramon Simo. Pinter’s Interview in Universitat De Barcelona. 1996.
Cuddon, J.A. *Dictionary of LITERARY TERMS & LITERARY THEORY*. 13th ed. London: Penguin Books, 1999. Print.
Dukore, Bernard F. *Macmillan Modern Dramatists: Harold Pinter*. Macmillan. 1982. Print.
Pinter, Harold. *The Birthday Party*. First. London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1960. Print.