

## The Pinteresque Absurdum in *The Birthday Party*

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### Abstract

Utilizing reasonable components in his plays, Pinter's dialect is not confusing or surprising, but genuine-because of its unadulterated English dialect. *The Birthday Party* is Pinter's second full-length play and one of the most celebrated plays categorized under the title of the Theater of Absurd. This masterpiece follows the dilemma in the dialogue between the main characters. Meg, Petey, and Stanley demonstrate the preposterousness with the embodiment of human identity under practical components, such as goodness. The play's central theme is loneliness and explains the story of the reborn man who realizes that his life cannot continue in the boarding house. *The Birthday Party* is outfitted with all the sensible components of an impeccable diversion; genuine characters with genuine sentiments, unpretentious dangers, ghastliness fulfilled with an inevitable setting that accentuates to blend of the real world and drivel. In *The Birthday Party*, the solidarity in the real world is clearly described, and the absurdity of social status by the real characters is uncovered. The threats of exploiting the hearts and minds of postwar individuals have shocked them both physically and mentally. Individuals did not want to be exposed to the outside world while they were afraid of strangers in society. To be amusing, the play coasts the title of Men's Comedy of Menace while battling with the genuine risk of exploring the focal character.

**Keywords:** Pinteresque, the theatre of absurd, *The Birthday Party*, Chaos, Blind Man's Buff.

### **Doğum Günü Partisi: Bir pinter modeli absürt tiyatro**

### Özet

Tiyatro oyunlarında makul bileşenleri kullanan edebiyat Nobel ödüllü Harold Pinter'in dili, şaşırtıcı veya kafa karıştırıcı olmayıp, asıl İngilizce kabul edileceği kadar saftır. Pinter'in ünlü oyunlardan biri olan ikinci uzun oyunu *Doğum Günü Partisi*, Absurd Tiyatro başlığı altında kategorize edilir. Bu başyapıt, ana karakterler arasında geçen ikilemi diyalog halinde gösterirken, Meg, Petey ve Stanley, pratik bileşenlerin altında, insan kimliğinin mantıksızlığı sergilemektedir. Üç bölümden oluşan öykü, 1950'lerde yalnızlık teması altında, yatılı evde hayatını devam edemeyecekini fark eden ve küllerinden doğan bir adamın hikayesini anlatır. *Doğum Günü Partisi*, bir değişimin bütün mantıklı bileşenleri ile donatılmıştır; hakiki duygulara bürünmüş samimi karakterler ve sıradan tehditler, gerçek dünya ve saptırmayı harmanlayarak bir arada tutarlar. İkinci dünya savaşı sonrası, gerçek dünyada bireyleri tehdit eden fiziksel ve zihinsel zorluklar neticesinde, onları tedirgin eden konular gösterilerek tanımlanırken, sosyal statü saçmalığının karakter üzerindeki etkileri gösterilir. Oyunun tuhaf görünen karakterleri dış dünyaya maruz kalmaktan kaçınırken, toplumdaki yabancı korkusunu da gizleyemezler. Asıl karakteri tamamen deşifre etmeden heyecanı bozmayan oyun, bir Karakter Dramı örneği olarak bilinir.

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**Anahtar kelimeler:** Pinter modeli oyun, absürt tiyatro, *Doğum Günü Partisi*, Kaos, Körebe Oyunu.

## Introduction

Harold Pinter (1930-2008) was an influential modern British playwright, author, and poet who wrote for over fifty years and combined preposterousness and reality with the mixture of social highlights in the womb of histories. Pinter awarded by the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2005 because not only he rules the jabber plays, the lines of reality can be found amidst the diversion. *The Birthday Party* (1957) as his second full-length play is composed of three acts takes place in the 1950s. The first act starts with an absurd dialogue between Meg and Petey by the repetition of every question. Meg—in her sixties—helps to run boarding by doing daily routine such as shopping and preparing breakfast. Meg lives in an imaginary world while supposes that their boarding is on the list. She takes care of Stanley—their only customer—more than her husband, Petey. Every morning, Meg steps a cup of tea for Stanley, and she never forgets her responsibilities against him, having a fear that Stanley may leave the boarding. Petey is another owner of the boarding who works as a deckchair attendant near his home while looks more genius than other characters. Petey keeps a close eye to his wife, also Stanley, Goldberg and McCann until act III that he becomes delusion. Stanley is the only guest at the Boles's horse boarding who does not care about his life; although, the readers are not sure about his musician or agent past. Gradually, we can get unclear information about Stanley through Goldberg and McCann. Peter Thomson mentions that Pinter's characters flounder among approximations and hopeless enquiries (21-8). Every character reflects a different humanistic perspective to be studied. Petey Boles is working as a sunbed attendant at an unspecified beachfront near his home on the English coast. He is probably aware of his wife and Stanley's weird relationships, but eventually, he makes a little compromise with the cosy, cunning assassin that he shares with Meg. Meg Boles is a sixty years old lethargic and dull woman who frequently asks repeated questions and needs constant attention. Meg has a very humdrum life that allows her to pursue her charm dreams. At the beginning of the play, Meg tends to be sincere with Stanley, and she always behaves in an excellent way to him. The interactions between Meg and Stanley are not like the relation between customer and guesthouse owner. The attitudes of Meg allows Stanley to act as her second husband. The delicate attitudes of Meg towards Stanley and the desire of Petey brings about the possibility of a sexual relationship between Stanley and Meg.

the ending of *The Birthday Party* is provisional. Since Stanley has been pushed over the line into psychosis and is completely at the mercy of the men who inflicted this injury, no happy ending is conceivable, but the involved reader or spectator is likely to extrapolate and supply some ending, or endings. Since whatever particulars he supplies are the work of his imagination, they are likely to be especially vivid and moving. No matter what shape the ending takes, it is likely to be hard to accept (Lesser, 41).

In act II, all characters prepare a celebration for Stanley's birthday, but he denies his birthday date. For Stanley, everything is meaningless. After Goldberg and McCann arrived as a guest, Stanley struggles for the reason they choose this board. They work for the unnamed organization and try to take Stanley away from the boarding; so, they keep on at Stanley by questioning his past. Considering birthday at the end of the drama as a symbol of 'rebirth,' Stanley (has to) leave the boarding with strangers to start a new life. Nat Goldberg, also known as 'Simey' or 'Benny' is a Jewish gentleman who works for a secret organization and creates an angry and violent line under this ridiculous attitude. His respectful and concise attitude is precisely the opposite of his assistant, McCann. Dermot McCann is an Irish member of a secret organization who is a paragon of human aggression but cannot make attractive words like Goldberg. Goldberg and McCann ironically represent two oppressed—Jewish and Irish—societies and their attitudes such as hierarchical, institutional, referee, socio-religious monsters, and the appearance

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of a member of the club explains the mysteriousness of the event. On the other side, Lulu, a twenty-year-old young woman is a visitor of the Meg, and the hostel who is childish, rascal and initially seems interested in Stanley, but attracted by Goldberg's charm. She becomes ironically disturbing after the sexual assault.

### An absurd tale of a Chaos Party

Postmodernism questions and criticizes the world and the people while everything seems empty and aimless. Postmodernism changes perceptions about this malfunction; while it is a threat for anyone, it aims to control society by waking up society from their aimless and degenerated lives. Harold Pinter, Samuel Beckett and Tom Stoppard are well-known playwrights who reveal different malfunctions of modern time and the common degenerateness of the modern world. Thoroughly, postmodern literature expands thinking capacity in the current aimless generation while pushing modern people as emotionless monsters to think and question. Because of people's ignorance and selfishness, human nature is about to be corrupted. Absurdism elements such as nonsensical of human existence above all character, such as Meg, Petey and Stanley, reflect the theme of the play. As Esslin depicts, absurd theatre is "a grotesquely heightened picture of [our] world: a world without faith, meaning, and genuine freedom of will. In this sense, the theatre of the absurd is a true theatre of our time." (Esslin, 1963) Peter Thomson thinks the lack of determinate values is a common feature of Pinter's plays and his characters flounder among approximations and hopeless enquiries (Thomson, 21-8). Aleks Matosoğludo the rest accordingly emphasizes, "the absurdist plays do tackle with the despair caused by the realization of futility of the routine events that make up the whole life, of the hopelessness and of having nothing to be done about it." (84) Absurd plays, as Matosoğlu mentions, instead of reflecting the human behavior through highly intellectual dialogues, "stage the reflection of the absurd life as it is" (*ibid.*).

As absurd plays depict the modern men, characters are anti-heroes who are pathetic and guilty. They are constructed in the way that the audience would not identify themselves with them and even are not put in a position to grasp who they are, instead there is always a distance kept between the audience and what is shown on the stage. This very much responds to the very feeling of alienation that the postwar man suffers from. (*ibid.*, 83)

After the Second World War, Europeans became more alienated, and this situation has already been reflected in their literature. Western society was plagued by modern life in the post-war period and affected their feelings. The Theatre of Absurd supports the sense of ruthlessness and helplessness of individuals in the second half of the twentieth century. The Second World War resulted in a weird situation in Europe, at the time people were disillusioned by living at the mood of meaninglessness. Consequently, the Theater of Absurd was popularized in literature by Martin Esslin is not another idea apart from the historical backdrop of man's presence, but it is utilized to express human destiny against difficulties and deeds. It demonstrates men's dread of humanity and the strange idea of the world. By development of the technology—not only at the time of two World Wars but even after the nineteenth century—society lost its belief in God. For example, in *Waiting for Godot* (1953) by Samuel Beckett, Vladimir and Estragon try to demonstrate that living is nothing but waiting. They are waiting for an unknown existence—even if they are not sure about what would they do after Godot's arrival. Beckett shows lives are coming to an end, time runs out, but nobody does anything worth to live, thoroughly without questioning the world around us. Nobody should be afraid of producing new ideas because any incident has a rational explanation. Mass powers make people's brains jello, while people look out from a peek hole. When people wait for something that may never take place, they friendly are awarded by nothing. People just come and go through this life, and it is their choice to live it fully or gainless.

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Similarly, in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966), Tom Stoppard emphasizes on an unanswered question ‘Do our lives depend on fate or chance?’ Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s preferences end up with their own deaths. When they prefer to remain neutral without making any choice, they know that add no choice is also a choice. Every step we take influences the rest of our lives. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are responded differently to the same question, their lives look completely different. The play makes the audience to think about their existence in the universe by searching for the purpose of their short lives. To get back to the subject, Harold Pinter “deconstructs social realism by divorcing the identification of character and environment, defamiliarising the pedestrian and establishing the audience with ultimately self-recriminating laughter.” (Knowles, 74) Similarly, Beaufort mentions *The Birthday Party* “presents the human predicament dilemma: the individual in conflict with overpowering forces. In what is now a familiar rather than an avant-garde manner, the author builds from a casually realistic situation a weird, surrealist nightmare.” (6)

The Pinteresque, which involves a situation as an advanced exemplary, is delineated in the dramatization and utilized as a descriptor to portray a specific mood. The topic of absurdity is not another idea, except as the historical backdrop of man’s presence. It was utilized to express human destiny against difficulties and deeds. The investigation of the topic is not precise, but it demonstrates men’s dread to flee from human presence. Although idiocy is not another idea in the historical backdrop of human presence, absurdity was utilized to express human predetermination against difficulties and activities. The examination of the topic is vague and still demonstrates the dread of men who are getting away from human presence. ‘Pinteresque’ that possesses a situation as an advanced exemplary is delineated by Harold Pinter’s name—by entering the dialect as a descriptive word used to portray a specific air and condition in show. Disch says, “By unmooring his story from a basis in strict narrative logic, Pinter gives his audience the distanced perspective of an alienist who listens for the meaning of what a patient says in the inflections and cadences of his speech.” (727) Pinter’s characters are multidimensional, and they put themselves in absolute darkness while they do not know their true nature and purpose of life. The game creates a wide variety of chaos, offering both arbitrariness absurdity, and also unreasonable results. It strengthens the idea of a common-sense solution to existing human disasters that hurts communities. Socio-political factors make life meaningless for any individual. Being is questioned, and the investigation of self-identity is not satisfying. For Bogumil, “What is significant about this game is that the other players seem to act like a tragic Greek chorus conspiring against doubly blind Stanley: There is a powerless participant in the game, a pawn.” (79)

In *The Birthday Party*, dialect—as a method of correspondence—turns into a conventional and inane method of communication. Words cannot express the substance of human encounters, and the performance centre of Absurd dialect appears as a response to the continuous vanishment of most common religious beliefs. There was a platform to essayists to persuade the crowd to think about a condition which is almost magical. In *The Birthday Party*, characters do not confess the truth about themselves. Harold Pinter portrays an untenable situation by using fragmented language, absurd humour of the world, and meaningless style through the dialogue between characters; “Pinter not only introduces a rich vein of humour, but allows an audience to recognise the realism of stating the obvious” (Pountney, 1). In the first act, Meg prepares breakfast for Petey. Meanwhile, they continue a weird conversation while Meg asks the same question repeatedly: “Is that you, Petey?” (Pinter, 2). Therewithal, Meg always takes care of Stanley more than her husband because there is a relationship between Meg and Stanley that is more than a friendship and it is clearly shown in the third act; while Meg is so happy due to celebrating of Stanley’s birthday, Stanley does not feel excited and tells her: “This isn’t my birthday Meg” (*ibid.*, 27). Stanley seems an alienated character. Goldberg and McCann ask some

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question that is to pain Stanley: "What have you done with your wife?" and McCann answers, "He's killed his wife!" (*ibid.*, 41). They ask these question to confuse the audience and show a sense of nonsensical. For Pinter, according to Esslin, "language is incapable of establishing true communication between human beings;" because "human beings rarely make use of language for that purpose, at least so far as spoken language is concerned" (Esslin, 39).

### **Stanley and others**

The central character in *The Birthday Party*, Stanley Webber is the only guest on the boarding house of Boles and identified by his laziness, disorganization, and self-inflicted cruelty toward Meg. He is a jobless musician, and he repeatedly asks Meg that if he has got a piano, or not? In the third act, after Goldberg and McCann interrogate him, his aggressive behaviour with his foolish correspondence and nervous breakdown brings about the question that many details about his past have never been confirmed. Stanley acts as a refuge in Meg and Petey's house, and this boarding house is a sanctuary for Stanley, and he feels safe in this place. When he is informed by Meg about the visit of two gentlemen, starts to act strangely. His behavior turns violent while he acts like a threatening outburst, who reflects sinfulness and the sense of guilt. Later, at the time strangers enter the house, the illogicality and distress begin to exploit. Thoroughly, Pinter manages a mental game which is developing from the warm and comfortable world of childhood to maturity. For Beaufort, "Stanley, a loutish boarder at a shabby seaside rooming house, is visited by two menacing, malignly mysterious intruders who brutally subdue, paralyze, and in the end abduct him." (6) Although Stanley isolated himself, it seems that he is escaped from the real world, but eventually evil cathed him. Stanley lives in his dream world where he is an excellent concert pianist. Hewes introduces Stanley as;

a John Osborne cadher [...] a sensitive young pianist who finds an apathetic and conformist England pushing him into an intolerable existence. The play begins with a hilarious sketch of British domesticity that reminds one of Ionesco, but reveals an ear for dialogue and a sensitivity to speech rhythm that are closer to Gertrude Stein. Then it moves into something like a Kafka nightmare as two mysterious and threatening boarders named Goldberg and McCann move in. And a wonderful scene in which Stanley receives the shock treatment of a birthday party owes something to Eliot's 'Sweeney Agonistes.' (26)

In *The Birthday Party*, Pinter introduced six original characters who own particular pre-prominence in uncovering the genuine idea of man in a strange circumstance. Protection and detached correspondence as components of the Theater of Absurd has been depicted in reasonable shape and *The Birthday Party* is an absurd drama with the dominion of the real world. The interactions between Goldberg and McCann in one hand and Stanley, on the other hand, is unclear, but the most uncertain point is the relation between Stanley and Meg. For instance, Goldberg tries to establish an emotional connection with Lulu at the party and Lulu suggests playing blind man's buff, in which someone should cover the other one's eyes to head seeing off. McCann asks, "How do you play this game?" (53) and Lulu replies, "Haven't you ever played blind man's buff?...You mustn't be touched. But you can't move after she's blind. You must stay where you are after she's blind. And if she touches you, then you become blind" (53). The conversation between Goldberg, McCann and Stanley has a prominent meaning to understand the ambiguity of the play. For Kaufman, blind man's buff is a literary metaphor for Pinter to define human activity through "simultaneous images of aggressive hostility and helpless alienation" (170) Conversations give us a clue that they know each other precisely. Stanley does not want Goldberg and McCann to stay at the guesthouse, and he tells them; "You don't bother me. To me, you're nothing but a dirty joke. But I have a responsibility towards the people in this house. They've been down here too long.

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They've lost their sense of smell. I haven't. And nobody's going to take advantage of them while I'm here." (37).

*The Birthday Party* is labelled as 'Threat Comedy'—because of the funny torture terror demonstrated in the scenes—while the audience is entertained by the threat of Stanley. The individual identity is reduced to the background, and the social identity is brought to the forefront. While both Lulu and Meg are enjoying the party with Goldberg and McCann, only Stanley is suffering. Stanley disappears deeply into his thoughts of isolation, and when they play the blind man's buff, the audience feels a gloomy mood and a distorted body almost crippled. Does Pinter quip the identity crisis that harms human society and brings people into endless crap? While Meg and Petey symbolize any ordinary person's life, MacCann and Goldberg symbolize the truth of life; it means, whatever you do, truths reach you. The problem of modern youth is lack of mud, power, and feeling insecure and defenceless against the opponent. They are exposed to lousy torture and are unable to perceive their power. Such people find it difficult to survive and try to save themselves from torturing their anxieties. Stanley's comfort in the residential home is the result of the intruders entering the house and ending for the rest of the day. Initially, Pinter's antagonists appear to be victims, but as the game progresses, their identities are unleashed through skillful dialogues on stage. At first glance, Goldberg and McCann voiced their unfortunate situation, but later they were both antagonists, and that is because Stanley was mentally and physically disturbed and tortured throughout the game. Since Stanley, Goldberg, and McCann have entered the house, the sensation seems to be lost. After the analysis of the game, it seems that they are not really suffering by Stanley, but are trying to uncover the terror and worries of him. They want a lively soul to devote his body in order to let him live a free and responsible life that he has left. Finally, Stanley, a human figure who could not say a single word and ultimately was removed from the boarding house by Goldberg and McCann, becomes a living corpse. Simply, "Stanley knows what it's all about, though, even if he doesn't quite know how he knows. Goldberg and McCann have come to do a job, and he is the job." (Campbell, 18)

In *The Birthday Party*, the boardinghouse owners—Meg and Petey—have a routine monotone relationship. They would be happier if they change their lifestyle, but they do not have the courage to break their routine. Even Stanley's aggressive manner gives her more excitement than her husband's calm and Petey's unwillingness to change, he represents the modern world people's situation. People usually do not show the courage to take a risk. An important topic to discuss Pinter's plays is the identity crisis. Stanley hides his earlier life and establishes a new one. The boardinghouse is a safe haven for him, and it is the only place that helps him to be hidden from the outside world and his past. The arrival of Goldberg and McCann represents the truth and the real world. They force Stanley to face with his past that is unpleasant for him. Society has a significant impact on people who need to carry the burden of socially constructed stereotypes. Matosoglu believes "the postwar man feels locked up in a world of irrationality" and tries "to give a meaning to his life that composes of but his daily routines;" thereby, the plays expressed the absurdity of human life under the term 'absurd,' "abandoned conventional dramatic structures and staged a reflection of the absurdity of life." (80)

Harold Pinter evokes the reader to be aware of the reality of life, outside of the boarding house. People can feel happy when they are dependent on someone and do not have any responsibilities; so that it is a necessity to have dominant and submissive characters. This idea is symbolically represented in the play. While McCann, Goldberg, Stanley, Meg, and Lulu play to blind man's buff, Meg is the first blind, and Stanley loses the glasses which represents the life of Stanley—who is blind and cannot manage his life but led by Meg. At the end of the play, "Stanley is dressed in a dark well-cut suit and white-collar. He

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holds his broken glasses in his hand. He is clean-shaven" (71). Stanley starts a new life with new perspective symbolized by wearing-off glasses. Thanks to Goldberg and McCann, he finds out that there is a life outside of everyday life that continues in the boarding house. After his birthday party, Stanley experiences a rebirth and the reality of life. Matosoglu reminds that in the absurdist plays, without any conflicts there are "recurring situations";

Caught up in those situations that generally represent human position in life, characters appear as anonymous and hardly to grasp figures, as if thrown randomly on stage, completely unmotivated. They do not know one another and even themselves. They usually have no idea why they are there. As the dialogues make no sense most of the time, there is not much given through dialogues to the audience except what they might be their own interpretation. (Matosoglu, 82-83)

### Conclusion

Harold Pinter's plays usually start with laughter; he uses funny elements, and eventually, the setting turns into psychological and physical violence. His plays are more surprising for the audience, and during these stages, the play examines identity, through existentialism in the form of the Absurd Theatre. The play shows how a man in the entertainment of others has been ignored and wholly abandoned. In a hotel in a ruined coastal town in England where no one visits frequently, a small birthday party turns into a nightmare by the unexpected arrival of strangers. The play depicts the hard work of an old couple in society, leaving their homes at dawn, and they work all day long until sunset. The elderly couple Petey and Meg are impressed by the tight anchorage in their daily lives. Mysterious play, paranoid actor, identity and isolation, and struggle to survive to represent the chaos and the organized birthday party demonstrates the primary purpose of the play. The people who have attended the party, do not know each other, the matter clearly represents the insincerity of the society. The flawless story of obscurity is recounted adequately, but Harold Pinter explains the current situation of the world by creating a not only compelling story but also an ambiguous story. The play depicts the mental and neural depression of postwar individuals and reflects how people are abstracted from society. Obscurity is the most prominent component in *The Birthday Party* that takes place through conversations and interactions that give us some significant clues to understand the ambiguity of the world where we live in. Harold Pinter creates an ambiguous story to recount the current situation of the world.

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