UNDERSTANDING THE ELEMENTS OF ABSURDITY IN HORALD PINTER’S THE BIRTHDAY PARTY

Ahmed Saadon Azeez Al Hammadi, Dheyaa Brer Alwan AL-Salih

1General Directorate of Education in Babylon / Iraq
email: sadoun88@gmail.com
2General Directorate of Education in Babylon / Iraq
email: dheyaa.alsalih2012@gmail.com

ABSTRACT
Harold Pinter is one of the most accomplished dramatists of the Theatre of the Absurd. The Theatre of the Absurd is the Western phenomenon. The absurd in life, art and literature arose due to several reasons. The West with this kind of socio-political changes has viewed art and literature quite differently. The industrialization has changed man's social nature. The Birthday Party can be understood easily yet it has elements which make it unique and absurd. The features of absurdity such as un-clarity of scenes, dialogues, language and plot are reflected. The lack of communication is used so strongly that even a pause and silence describe much more which makes the play unique and special. The play has the usual setting as of the contemporary style but uniqueness is seen when surprise awaits in the form of imagery unusual circumstances and lack of dialogue or some time strange approaches. The Birthday Party has adhered to the Aristotelian concept of a drama having a well-defined beginning, middle, and an end. Stanley’s state of being has become a representation of the condition of man who is struggling against the threat of a sudden reduction from being to non-being. In the play, Pinter seems to be fascinated by the way in which people communicate, or fail to communicate, with each other, by their use of language. This paper explores the elements of absurdity and its uniqueness of characterization and alien world of the modern man in the play The Birthday Party.

Keywords: Absurdity, Horald Pinter, birthday party

INTRODUCTION
Harold Pinter is one of the most accomplished dramatists of the Theatre of the Absurd. He was born on October 10, 1930 in Hackney, a section of metropolitan London, England. He was a great manipulator of language, which he has seen not as a bridge that brings people together but as a barrier that has kept them apart. Ideas and notions in the larger sense are not his province; he plays with words, and he plays on our nerves, and it is thus that he grips us. He is an influential dramatist of the contemporary English stage. Pinter attended the Hackney Downs Grammar School between the years 1941 and 1947, where he had begun writing poetry and prose. He also took an interest in theatre, taking roles as both Macbeth and Romeo in school productions of Shakespeare. Pinter, as a dramatist of the absurd, invariably prefers the tense, symbolic manner of Samuel Beckett. A large part of his accomplishment is his ability to persuade us that he is presenting life-like situations in traditionally realistic terms, and at the same time jolting us into an awareness of utter absurdity. Isolated elements in his plays are intensely realistic, and the combination of elements is utterly absurd.

Pinter is usually regarded as an existentialist dramatist par excellence, as a playwright of the ‘ambiguous’, as a member of the ‘angry young men’ or ‘kitchen sink school’ of British playwrights and as a dramatist of the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’. But the last label, as a dramatist of the Theatre of the Absurd, sees to be most appropriate to him. Basically he has remained a lyric poet whose plays are structures of images of the world, very clear, precise and accurate. However, that is the point, which never aspire to be arguments, explanations or even coherent stories, aiming at satisfying the audience’s craving for vicarious experience through involvement in a nicely rounded incident.
Pinter’s plays present us with a situation, or a pattern of interlocking situations, designed to coalesce into a lyrical structure of moods and emotional insights. This does not mean that one cannot find in Pinter’s plays good deal of dramatic incidents, suspense, good characterisation and pointed dialogue, while the overall effect is lyrical, the detail is intensely dramatic. Indeed, the indeterminacy of the characters, the ambiguity of events, heightens the dramatic tension. Why is Stanley in The Birthday Party being pursued by two sinister figures? Why does Ruth in The Homecoming accept the offer to become a prostitute so calmly? These questions are not raised by Pinter to be answered; nor are they as his critics sometimes suggest, raised gratuitously merely to create spurious curiosity and suspense. They are raised as metaphors of the fact that life itself consists of a succession of such questions which cannot be answered.

Pinter’s first foray into play writing has come in 1957, when a friend had asked him to write a piece for production at Bristol University. The result was The Room, a one-act play that had earned the favourable notice of critic Harold Hobson and had revealed Pinter’s unique talent and technique. The work was not professionally produced until after The Birthday Party opened and floundered in 1958, but it was Hobson’s review of The Room’s university production had brought Pinter to the attention of the young, new-wave producer Michael Codron, who decided to stage ‘The Birthday Party’. The Birthday Party is Pinter’s first full length play, and the first of three plays considered his “comedy of menace” pieces. The other two are The Caretaker and The Homecoming.

Pinter’s first major staged success was The Caretaker, which, in 1960, had begun a run in London’s West End and had won the playwright The Evening Standard Award. Along with The Birthday Party and The Homecoming (1965), The Caretaker had established Pinter’s reputation as a major absurdist playwright, and, in the opinion of some commentators, his claim to being Britain’s most important dramatist since George Bernard Shaw (Major Barbara).

Majority of the people has believed that Pinter’s best theatrical works were his earliest pieces in the absurdist mode. The playwright has remained a major voice in the British theatre since the early-1960s. If financial success and the diffusion of his creative energy have diminished his stage power, as some have claimed, there has been no real erosion in his reputation as England’s premier, post-War World II playwright, his only serious rivals being John Osborne’s ‘Look Back in Anger’ and Tom Stoppard’s ‘Arcadia’ Nevertheless, despite some well-received plays like One for the Road (1984) and Mountain Language (1988), the playwright has met with some decline in his critical fortunes. It is has almost become a scholarly truism that none of Pinter’s works written for the stage after the 1960s has superseded The Caretaker, The Birthday Party or The Homecoming, as Pinter’s major contributions to modern theatre.

THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD
The term ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ had coined by the critic Martin Esslin, who had made it the title of a 1962 book on the subject. Esslin has seen the work of these playwrights as giving artistic articulation to Albert Camus’ philosophy that life is inherently without meaning, and so one must find one’s own meaning as illustrated in his work The Myth of Sisyphus, wherein he described the human condition as “meaningless and absurd”. The ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ is originated from Dadaism, nonsense poetry and avant-garde art of the 1910s – 1920s. Despite its critics, this genre of theatre achieved the French audience, to say the least, attending the premiere performance at the Theatre de Babylone. The expression ‘Theater of the Absurd’ has been criticized by some writers, and one also finds the expressions ‘Anti-Theater’ and ‘New Theater’. It is a designation for particular plays written by a number of primarily European playwrights in the late 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, as well as to the style of theatre which has evolved from their work. According to Martin Esslin, the four defining playwrights of the movement are Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, and Arthur Adamov, although each of these writers has entirely unique preoccupations and techniques that go beyond the term ‘absurd’. Other writers often associated with this group include Tom Stoppard, Friedrich Durrenmatt, Fernando Arrabal, Harold Pinter, Edward Albee and Jean Tardieu. Playwrights who have served as an inspiration to the movement include Alfred Jarry, Luigi Pirandello, Stanislaw Ignacy
Witkiewicz, Guillaume Apollinaire, the surrealists and many more. The ‘Absurd’ or ‘New Theater’ movement was, in its origin, a distinctly Paris-based (and Rive Gauche) avant-garde phenomenon tied to extremely small theatres in the Quartier Latin; the movement only gained international prominence over time. It is also often known as the theatre intended to shock the audience. Most exemplary is Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, a play about two bums that would have shocked.

Influences on the absurdist theatre have gone as far back as the Elizabethan tragicomedies of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. The tragic plays Macbeth and Hamlet have offered segments of comedy that shifted the play’s perspective, if only for the briefest moments. For example, Hamlet’s wit and the porter scene in Macbeth had offered moments of comedy to alleviate the drama’s intensity. Other influences on the absurdist playwrights included the work of Sigmund Freud, and the Surrealist movement of the 1920s and 1930s, which had introduced the avant-garde to mainstream media.

**Characteristics of the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’**

➢ The Theatre of the Absurd has departed from realistic characters, situations and all of the associated theatrical conventions.

➢ A sense of isolation from other beings.

➢ The plots of the play are limited to single incident or situation.

➢ The key element to an absurdist play is that the main characters are out of sync with the world around them. There is no discernible reasoning behind their strangeness, though a threatening sense of change shakes their existence to the core.

➢ Time, place and identity are ambiguous and fluid, and even basic causality breaks down frequently.

➢ Meaningless plots, repetitive or nonsensical dialogue and dramatic non-sequiturs are often used to create dream-like or even nightmare-like moods.

➢ People make efforts to find love, happiness, security. But they fail in their efforts.

➢ Human condition is meaningless, absurd, and illogical. Humans are lost and floating in an incomprehensible universe and they abandon rational devices and discursive thought because these approaches are inadequate.

➢ Absurdism is “the inevitable devaluation of ideals, purity, and purpose”. Absurdist Dramas asks its audience to “draw his own conclusions, make his own errors”. Though Theatre of the Absurd may be seen as nonsense.

➢ The mechanical nature of many people’s lives may lead them to question the value and purpose of their existence; this is an intimation of absurdity.

➢ Another characteristic of the absurd drama is the devaluation of language.

➢ A sense of being left in an alien world.

➢ Human relations are very delicate and complex and they can be broken easily.

➢ The problem of communication is a common theme in absurd drama.

The drama of the absurdist theatre is dreamlike which is almost lyrical. Like the Surrealists before them, the absurdist playwrights use imagery, subtext, mythology, and allegory to express a
deeper meaning which is often never fully explained. In fact, the playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd have allowed their plays to speak for themselves. Pinter explained this absurdist concept best in his 1962 speech “Writing for the Theatre,” which was presented at the National Student Drama Festival in Bristol. He stated as “I suggest there can be no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, or between what is true and what is false.” The thin line between truth and lies is perhaps the defining characteristic of the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’.

**UNIQUE SETTING OF THE PLAY THE BIRTHDAY PARTY**

The Birthday Party has a single setting i.e. the living-dining room of a seaside boarding house somewhere on the coast of England. Its anonymity contributes to a sense of place as symbol, especially in allegorical interpretations of the play. Although doors have permitted characters to enter and exit the room, there are features suggesting that the room is isolated from the world outside. The wall is separated the room from the kitchen which has a hatch allowing characters in the kitchen to peer into the room like jailors peering into a prison cell. There are also windows that have permitted characters to see into the room but give no real glimpse of what lies beyond them.

The play implies that the world outside that room is threatening; the circumstances seem ordinary; but there is a generalised, unspecified horror sees thing beneath the action. Mystery and terror are frequently created in the form of unanswerable accusations; nothing is verifiable, and there is a chilling sense of the isolation of people. Characters in the early plays, although they might communicate, on a low level, are not chosen to do so. Characters in the later plays are well educated and have the means to communicate, but they still have chosen not to do so.

**ABSRDITY IN THE BIRTHDAY PARTY**

The Birthday Party is full of disjointed information that has defied efforts to distinguish between reality and illusion. For example, despite the presentation of personal information on Stanley and his two persecutors, who or what they really are remains a mystery. Goldberg, in particular, has provided all sorts of information about his background, but he has offered only oblique clues as to why he has intruded upon Stanley’s life. Stanley has been leading a life of aloofness from society. He is a disappointed and frustrated artist who has taken refuge in seaside resort of Meg. He has felt that society has not treated him well. What has Stanley done to deserve persecution? The facts of his past are so unclear that his claim to be a pianist may even be false. He feels disgusted with the prevailing customs and conventions of society. He finds it impossible to continue to live amidst such society. He prefers an isolated existence. He is brutally and inhumanly tortured by the intruders McCann and Goldberg who represent society at large. The society treats such an individualistic artist like Stanley as a danger and pulls him back from his isolation. Those who have chosen to be alienated, thus, cannot have such right. Stanley’s quest is for respectful identity as an artist which he sought to establish. His endeavour to establish a healthy social relationship is futile. The Birthday Party has influenced the audience to doubt anything with certainty, which as it does in Kafka’s work, intensifies the dreadful angst experienced by the protagonist. This effect is achieved through truncated dialogue, by Pinter’s deliberate failure to provide conclusive or consistent information, and by his use of ambiguity and nonsense.

**a) Confusion and Chaos**

One of the key elements of “the absurdist theatre” is its focus on confusion and chaos. In The Birthday Party, confusion and chaos manifest constantly, especially through its characters. The primary ways in which the themes manifest are through the ambiguities of lives and pasts. Stanley has some sort of mysterious past that has deserved a violent reckoning, but nobody really provides its details. When Stanley describes his past to Meg in Act I, there is even the sense that he himself is confused about its particulars. Goldberg’s name and past seem shrouded in mystery and delusion, and Meg has convinced herself to believe things about her life that are clearly not true. Further, because of these types of confusions, the situation devolves into total chaos. From the moment Goldberg and McCann arrive, the audience can sense that the simplicity of the boarding house is about to be compromised, and indeed, the chaos at the end of Act II has confirmed it. The only truth of The
Birthday Party is that there is no truth, only chaos and confusion. The hopelessness in the life of
human being is well portrayed through the characters of Meg and Petey. The meaningless, trivial,
inconsequential conversation of Meg and Petey in the opening sections of the first and the third act of
the play have pointed out the essential hopelessness of their situation and emptiness of their lives:

MEG: [...] What time did you go out this morning, Petey?
PETEY: Same time as usual.
MEG: Was it dark?
PETEY: No, it was light.
MEG: (beginning to darn). But sometimes you go out in the morning and it’s dark.
PETEY: That’s in the winter. MEG: Oh, in winter.
PETEY: Yes, it gets light later in winter [Pinter 1987, 20-21].

This is the metaphor beautifully highlights the absurdity of human life and existential suffering faced
by the human beings. The sufferings of Stanley and the violations made on his peace and security are
allegorical. He has suffered in the hands of an inevitable power. The absurdist plays do not represent a
meaning or moral. They present human situations as it is and not as it ought to be. The characters are
designed as poetic images. So, the absurd plays have lent themselves to different meanings and
interpretations. Pinter’s characters are like passing fancies. They have represented life lived at a given
moment. Therefore there is no gain an insight into the past and future of Stanley, Goldberg, McCann,
Meg, Petey, and Lulu in The Birthday Party.

b) Complacency
The most pessimistic aspect of The Birthday Party is that the only alternative Pinter gives to chaos
and confusion is a life of apathy and complacency. The play’s opening scene sets this up - Petey and
Meg have revealed a comfortable but bland life in which they talk in pleasantries and ignore anything
of substance. Stanley is more aggressive than they are, but he too has clearly chosen the safety of
complacency, as he has made no effort to change his life. His lethargic lifestyle has reflected the
attraction, comfort for him. When Goldberg and McCann arrive, they challenge this complacent
lifestyle until the whole place falls into chaos. Ultimately, Petey chooses to refurbish the complacency
of the boarding house over bravely fighting for Stanley; neither choice is truly attractive.

c) Language as a Buffer
Language is strategically used to portray the meaningless state of the modern man in The Birthday
Party. The precision Pinter has employed in crafting his rhythmic silences is enough to justify
language as a major theme, but he moreover reveals how language can be used as a tool. Each of the
characters has used language to his or her advantage. In fact, characters have manipulated words to
suggest deeper subtexts, so that the audience understands that true communication happens beneath
language, and not through words themselves. When Stanley insults Meg, he is actually expressed his
self-hatred and guilt. Goldberg is a master of language manipulation. He has used speeches to deflect
others questions, to redirect the flow of conversation, or to reminisce about past events. Goldberg’s
speeches often silence another character’s opinions or arguments. For instance, when he and McCann
first have arrived, Goldberg speaks at length about his Uncle Barney in an effort to calm McCann.
Goldberg has used his stories to distract, educate, and perhaps annoy. His words are so closely
cropped together that they can engender a silence, a void after he finishes speaking. His words are not
confused, but his strange use of them has created confusion. Language seems more a tool or a weapon
in this way. His words are rarely wasted. Meg, on the other hand, repeats herself by asking the same
questions again and again in a bid for attention. Even though she often speaks without affectation, her
words mask a deep neurosis and insecurity. These are just a few examples of instances in which
language is used not to tell the story, but to suggest that the story is hidden. Hence, language in The
Birthday Party is a dangerous lie.
Pinter shares this distrust of language with Beckett and other dramatists of the absurd drama. The Birthday Party has stressed upon the dangers of communication. Here language is used as hide and seek. The characters have used the language not to be understood. It is used to mislead others:

GOLDBERG: When did you come to this place?
STANLEY: Last year.
GOLDBERG: Where did you come from?
STANLEY: Somewhere else.
GOLDBERG: Why did you come here?
STANLEY: My feet hurt!
GOLDBERG: Why did you stay?
STANLEY: I had a headache!
GOLDBERG: Did you take anything for it?
STANLEY: Yes,
GOLDBERG: What?
STANLEY: Fruit salts!
GOLDBERG: Enos or Andrews? [Ibid. 58].

It is observed that each of Harold Pinter’s first four plays end in the virtual annihilation of an individual. He tells how language and words are often used deliberately to hinder communication, and stop other people knowing the truth. Thus, much of the language is an attempt to cover up and evade the truth.

d) Atonement
One of the great ironies in this play is that it uses what appears to be a fairly non-dramatic, realistic setting which nevertheless hides a surplus of guilt. The theme of atonement runs throughout the play. Stanley’s past is never detailed, but he is clearly a guilty man. He is vague about his past, and has done everything to distract Goldberg and McCann. He is not intentionally wish to atone for whatever he has done, but he is forced to do so through torture. Goldberg, too, wishes to avoid whatever sins torture him but cannot fully escape from them; his mood in Act III has shown that he is plagued by feelings; he does not wish to have. At the climax, all of the characters are like Lulu, who flees when McCann has offered her a chance to confess - everyone has sins to atone for, but nobody wants to face them.

e) Nostalgia
The theme of nostalgia is implicit but significant in The Birthday Party as it is the most suitable situation for a contemporary audience who would see this play as something of a period piece. Goldberg, particularly, is taken by nostalgia, frequently waxing poetic both on his own past and on the ‘good old days’ when men respected women. Certainly, Goldberg has told some of these stories to contrast with the way Stanley treats women, but they also suggest a delusion he has, a delusion that breaks down when he himself assaults Lulu between the second and third acts. He has idealized some past that he cannot live up to. Other characters also reveal affection for nostalgia. During the birthday party, Meg and Lulu both speak of their childhoods. However, their nostalgic feelings have darker sides. Meg has remembered being abandoned, whereas Lulu’s memories of being young have led Goldberg to bounce her perversely on his knee. Similarly, the characters play blind man’s bluff specifically because it has made them nostalgic, but the sinister side of such nostalgia is inescapable in the stage image of Stanley preparing to rape Lulu. Nostalgia is very interesting to feel, the play seems to suggest, but more insidious in its complexities.

f) Violence
The Birthday Party is full of violence, both physical and emotional. It is overall being suggested that violence is a fact of life. The violence is doubly being affected because the setting seems so pleasant and ordinary. Most of the men have shown their potential for violence, especially when provoked. Stanley is cruel and vicious towards Meg, but much more cowardly against other men. Both McCann
and Goldberg have violent outbursts no matter how hard they try to contain themselves. Their entire operation, which boasts an outward civility, has an insidious purpose, most violent for the way it tortures Stanley slowly to force him to nervous breakdown. In both Acts II and III, they reveal how language itself can be violent in the interrogation scenes. Much of the violence in the play has concerns women. Stanley not only intimidates Meg verbally, but he also prepares to assault Lulu. Goldberg in fact does assault Lulu. Finally, the threat of violence is ever-present in the play. Even before it is realized that disaster may come, it can be felt the potential through the silences and tense atmosphere.

g) Sexual Tension
Sexual tension is present throughout the entire play, and it has resulted in tragic consequences. Meg and Stanley have a strange, possible sexual relationship that frees him to treat her very cruelly. The ugliness of his behaviour is echoed when Goldberg has called him a “mother defiler” and “a lecher.” In fact, Goldberg has suggested that Stanley’s unnamed sin involves his poor treatment of a woman. Lulu seems interested in Stanley as well, but is quickly attracted to Goldberg in Act II. Her innocence makes her prey to men’s sexuality. Her openness leads to two consecutive sexual assaults, and yet she is nevertheless upset to learn that Goldberg is leaving. Moreover, it is a strange, perverse undercurrent throughout the play. Sex is acknowledged as a fact of life, and yet has not ever revealed positive aspects of the characters.

CONCLUSION
Harold Pinter’s play The Birthday Party reflects the futility of human endeavour in a variety of facets. The Theatre of the Absurd represents a deeper level of the audience’s mind. It has focused more sharply on the fight for existence. Industrialization, urbanization, and the World Wars, development of scientific temper and technology have led man to frustration and hopelessness in life. All these reasons have culminated into the birth of the Theatre of the Absurd. This theatre has seemed to be a reaction to the loss of the spiritual dimensions of life. It is attempted to make man aware of the ultimate realities of his situation. The modern man’s attitude towards life is sheer negative. Pinter has chosen characters from ordinary life speaking everyday language. Their joys and sorrows, laughter and tears are very simple but the characters are not without their singularities. The uniqueness of the play lies in his peculiar way of using common man’s language. The existential dilemma of his characters is the threat to their autonomy. The characters are involved in an existential struggle to defend themselves from what they perceive. Despite of achieving almost all material progress and luxuries, the life of man has become purposeless and aimless. This is apt for the Western society living especially in the post World Wars world. The characters used by Harold Pinter are similar to the modern men’s psychology. He has tried to become as close as to the life of disturb modern life.

REFERENCES
Cohn, Ruby: The World of Harold Pinter, The Cambridge Companion To Harold Pinter, 1962.