

Precarious Life: Understanding the Vulnerability of Stanley in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party**

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Abstract

In Harold Pinter's dramatic oeuvre, there exists a primal drive for possession operating the actions of the characters, which Robert Gordon in Harold Pinter: The Theatre of Power calls 'the territorial imperative'. Consequently, the space occupied by them, symbolized by the central metaphor of the 'room', becomes a significant motif in many of his works, highlighting the psychological reality of the characters. Thus, it is not simply the space they inhabit but also their inner space that they carry within is Pinter's concern. This paper aims at an exploration of this inner mindscape of Stanley in The Birthday Party (1957) with the objective to contend that the hidden fears, the repressed desires, and the unconscious wishes that lurk within play a dominant role in his struggle for the construction of his identity. However, in this strife, he undergoes an inevitable psychological paralysis as he ultimately regresses into infantile helplessness. Therefore, the study shall probe into the inner intricacies and emotional vulnerability of Stanley through the Freudian lens of psychosexuality, and the inter-relationship between masculinity and power. The relevance of this essay lies in contending that even men undergo emotional collapse and suffer from intra-psychic crisis.

Keywords: psychosexuality, room, identity, vulnerability, defence mechanism

Introduction

The plays of Harold Pinter present a slice of life that draw the attention of the audience, critics and scholars alike for their opacity of meaning. Steeped in mystery and uncertainty, they belong to the coterie of the Theatre of the Absurd, along with the works of Beckett, Adamov and Ionesco, among others. Regarding the plays of these dramatists, Martin Esslin says in *The Theatre of the Absurd*,

... these have no story or plot to speak of; ... these are often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets; ... these often have neither a beginning nor an end; ... these seem often to be reflections of dreams and nightmares; ... these often consist of incoherent babblings. (21-22)

Though Pinter shares these basic premises with the other playwrights of the school, his is a theatre with a difference. According to Bernard Dukore, it is "one of the strangest types of theatre ... the most bizarre and unique to have emerged in the English language" (43). Though Pinter acknowledges the influence of Dostoyevsky, Joyce, Henry Miller, Kafka and Beckett on his writings, Esslin observes in *Pinter The Playwright*, "But whereas both Kafka and Beckett are moving in a surreal world of acknowledged phantasy and dream, Pinter, essentially, remains on the firm ground of everyday reality" (40). Adopting the stance of an existentialist, Pinter reflects the existential fear of man through the unnamable apprehensions, inconceivable hysteria, irreconcilable trauma, unconscious repressions, paranoid trances, and unintelligible utterances of his characters. "Pinter, like Heidegger, takes as his starting point, in man's

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confrontation with himself and the nature of his own being, that fundamental anxiety which is nothing less than a living being's basic awareness of the threat of non-being, of annihilation" (39). It is this predicament of human condition in Pinter's depiction of the male character Stanley in *The Birthday Party* that this chapter will focus on from a psychosexual perspective situating the analysis of his masculinity alongside the postmodern readings of gendered power dynamics.

Discussion

Pinter's plays are not 'real' in the sense in which Ibsen's plays are 'real'. Though the characters seem to be goaded by some motivation, what it is remains uncertain. Their history and identity seem to be equally shrouded under a pall of darkness. For instance, in *The Room* we are unsure of the purpose of the blind Negro, Riley's visit to Rose or the meaning of the message he conveys. In *The Caretaker*, the exact relationship between Mick and Aston is never revealed, or in *The Dumb Waiter*, why Ben and Gus have been hired remains a perpetual secret. In a 1960 radio interview with Kenneth Tynan, Pinter mentions, "I'm dealing with these characters at the extreme edge of their living, where they are living pretty much alone, at their hearth, their home hearth" (qtd. in Esslin 38). Consequently, they are shown to inhabit a room where they are dreadful and deeply perturbed, apprehensive of some untold, malicious force that may intrude and disrupt their haven. Asked about the cause of their fear, Pinter enlightens,

Obviously, they are scared of what is outside the room. Outside the room is a world bearing upon them, which is frightening ... we are all in this, all in a room, and outside is a world ... which is most inexplicable and frightening, curious and alarming. (qtd. in Esslin 39)

In the world of Pinter, the room represents a sanctuary of security and warmth which is threatened by the intrusion of external forces. While Esslin views it as "a precarious foothold" (236) between life and death, Ruby Cohn gives an incisive evaluation in 'The World of Harold Pinter', "At the opening curtain, these rooms look naturalistic, meaning no more than the eye can contain. But by the end of each play, they become sealed containers, virtual coffins" (56). As a result, the characters become obsessively concerned with their 'room', preferring a life of isolation and recluse. In the words of Dukore, they live in a closed, womblike environment. They keep to themselves as if they are afraid to go outside their little world, afraid that their ordinariness, ineptness, or sheer emptiness will be seen in all of its nakedness (47). It is this anxiety over a possible exposure and consequent dispossession that invites a psychological exploration of the characters. In *The Dream Structure of Pinter's Plays*, L. P. Gabbard believes, "Much of the obscurity in the plays can be illuminated by applying the mechanisms that Freud attributes to the dream work" (16).

Pinter's first full-length play, *The Birthday Party*, directed by Peter Wood in 1958, provides a remarkable psychosexual study of the protagonist, Stanley Webber. Divided into three Acts, the play has a balanced overall structure. In the first Act, the episode culminates with Stanley beating a toy drum ferociously, which Meg has gifted as a birthday present; the second Act presents a grotesque and menacing birthday celebration concluding with Stanley's metaphorical death, and the final Act restores normalcy as Stanley is reborn in a life of conformity. In Pinter's biography, Michael Billington traces the origin of the play in the playwright's visit to Eastbourne in the summer of 1954 when he had encountered "a strange, laconic man" in a pub who was a "solitary lodger" in the house which was "really quite filthy", who claimed to be "a pianist" and when asked why he stayed there, he replied, "There's nowhere else to go" (76). This experience remained with Pinter and three years later it took the shape of the play. In this context, Jung's lecture at the Tavistock Clinic in 1935 on the influence of the writer's psychology on his art of creation becomes noteworthy.

When he creates a character on the stage, or in his poem or drama or novel, he thinks it is merely a product of his imagination; but that character in a certain secret way has made itself.

Any novelist or writer will deny that these characters have a psychological meaning, but as a matter of fact you know as well as I do that they have one. (qtd. in Billington 68)

Therefore, Freud's observation in *The Ego and the Id*, "The division of mental life into what is conscious and what is unconscious ... helps in understanding the mental level of the characters," forms the basic premise of this study (9).

In *The Birthday Party*, Stanley is a lonesome lodger who has sought the refuge of a house in a seaside town where the landlady is Meg Boles and the landlord, Petey. In the course of the play, we get to know that he was a pianist, but for some anonymous reason, he had to abandon his past life and is now in an exile in this resort. He lives a life of complete isolation, having cocooned himself on the upper floor of the lodge. He spends most of the time sleeping and is an unkempt, unshaven, bespectacled man in a pyjama jacket. He seems to have no aims or aspirations in life, no endeavours to undertake, no goals to reach, no promises to fulfill. Thus, his existence is marked by an overwhelming sense of apathy and despair. The figure of Stanley, therefore, questions the stereotypes regarding masculine agility and volition. R. W. Connell in *Masculinities* observes the cultural standpoint and puts forward the traditional view that "True masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from male bodies" that direct drives and action, (45) and even identifies the essentialist perspective in the understanding when Freud "equated masculinity with activity in contrast to feminine passivity" (68). The male body, therefore, is not only the site of gender difference but also the landscape where social symbols are imprinted. Stanley's recluse gives the impression of a self-imposed exile, much like Oedipus. He indulges in absolute inactivity and almost topples into oblivion. This posits him in a light where he is stripped off his dominant masculine role, presaging his metaphorical castration in the course of the play.

It may seem that Stanley lacks psychological motivation but Esslin observes, "There is the problem of the *possibility* of ever knowing the real motivation behind the actions of human beings who are complex and whose psychological make-up is contradictory and unverifiable" (243). In a programme note for the performance of *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter* at the Royal Court Theatre in London in March 1960, Pinter states,

A character on the stage who can present no convincing argument or information as to his past experience, his present behaviour or his aspirations, nor give a comprehensive analysis of his motives, is as legitimate and as worthy of attention as one who, alarmingly, can do all these things. The more acute the experience the less articulate its expressions. (7-8)

It is out of this acute isolation that Stanley, in a state of reverie, recounts his past when he had performed at a concert.

STANLEY (*to himself*).

I had a unique touch. Absolutely unique. They came up to me. They came up to me and said they were grateful ... Then after that you know what they did? They carved me up. Carved me up ... My next concert ... Then, when I got there, the hall was closed, the place was shuttered up, not even a caretaker. They'd locked it up ... I'd like to know who was responsible for that ... They want me to crawl down on my bended knees. (26)

This delirious and incoherent recounting, since who 'they' are remains perpetually ambiguous, perhaps is an expression of his desire for the lost Eden, exposing his vulnerable precarity.

From this point of view, his refuge at the seaside lodge can be viewed as his return to the womb that ascertains the safety and security from where he is about to be ousted back into the world of danger and complexity. Martin Esslin, therefore, rightly interprets the play as "a metaphor for the process of growing up, of expulsion from the warm cosy world of childhood" (88). Thus, Gabbard opines, "the play is also a concretization of regression itself. It depicts man's inability to be born out of infantilism" (57). In his attempts to resist maturation, Stanley seeks the motherliness of Meg and regresses, as Esslin puts it, "to the status of a babe in arms" (80). In Freud's developmental model, the oral stage is the phase when the principal pleasure is derived from eating. The oral stage in Stanley's psychosexual development is evident from

Meg's desperate concern to provide him with proper nourishment in the form of cornflakes, fried bread, and tea. Thus, Stanley's reluctance to leave the shelter of the boarding house, the protective care of Meg, reflects his oedipal desire for the surrogate-mother. "He is afraid," as Esslin observes, "not only of the outside world, but also of sexuality outside the cosy mother-son relationship" (88-89). Naturally, when Lulu proposes him to accompany her for a walk, he feels unsettled and declines the proposal.

LULU. So you're not coming out for a walk?

STANLEY. I can't at the moment. (29)

Ken Plummer in 'Male Sexualities' states, "It is men who are driven to seek sex in all its diversities. They are the assertors, the insertors, and the predators." David and Brannon, in a similar vein suggest, men "must exude a manly sexuality; and must be forceful, assertive and aggressive." On the contrary, failure to perform 'like a man' is a sign of impotence, dysfunction and shame. Later Plummer notes, "Male sexualities are also signs of weakness and vulnerability. Many accounts of male sexualities start from a sense of man's insecurity and fear" (Kimmel et al. 178-82). Moreover, as Lynne Segal believes, it cannot be simply reduced to sex acts alone; it is a potent symbol, "the site of any number of emotions of weakness and strength, pleasure and pain, anxiety, conflict, tension and struggle" (180). Stanley's refusal to Lulu, therefore, not only emasculates him in the conventional sense and paves the path for his subordination later in the play, but also reflects an unrecognized, unresolved apprehension that further disempowers him.

In the phallic stage of personality development, Freud notices, the boy's incestuous craving for the mother entails a growing resentment for the father. He imagines that the dominant rival is going to harm him, and his fears revolve around the threat to his own genitals since they are the source of all his lustful feelings. This 'castration anxiety', as Freud calls it, induces repression of his oedipal desire for the mother and hostility towards the father (Hall et al. 55). Stanley's sexual desire for Meg ensues a subconscious awakening of guilt and fear in him which in Freudian terms is referred to as 'moral anxiety'. Theodore Lidz in *The Person* states that "oedipal strivings with the ensuing guilt ... create anxiety over punishment by castration, abandonment, or death..." (qtd. in Gabbard 54). Stanley dreads all of these possible dangers. The chapter on 'Sigmund Freud's Classical Psychoanalytic Theory' in *Theories of Personality* elaborates,

Anxieties that cannot be dealt with by effective measures is said to be traumatic. It reduces the person to a state of infantile helplessness. In fact, the prototype of all later anxiety is the *birth trauma* ... When the ego cannot cope with anxiety by rational methods, it has to fall back upon unrealistic ones. These are the so-called *defense mechanisms* of the ego. (Hall et al. 47)

One of the principal 'defense mechanisms' adopted by Stanley is 'projection.' Gabbard observes, "projection displaces some inner fear onto a person or object in the outer world" (19). In this light, the characters of Goldberg and McCann can be viewed as externalized manifestations of Stanley's hidden guilt and fears, the figure of the rival-father. This is evident in his paranoid response on learning from Meg the arrival of two visitors in the guest house.

MEG. I'm expecting visitors.

He turns.

STANLEY. What?

MEG. You didn't know that, did you?

STANLEY. What are you talking about?

MEG. Two gentlemen asked Petey if they could come and stay for a couple of nights. I'm expecting them.

And a little later, he inspects,

STANLEY. Who are they?

MEG. I don't know

STANLEY. Didn't he tell you their names?

MEG. No.

STANLEY (*pacing the room*). Here? They wanted to come here?

MEG. Yes, they did. (*She takes the curlers out of her hair.*)

STANLEY. Why?

MEG. This house is on the list.

STANLEY. But who are they?

MEG. You'll see when they come. (23-24)

Such a fanatic concern on the part of Stanley inevitably reflects how deeply he feels threatened by the thought of being arrested; perhaps he is a fugitive escaping from the perils of his menacing past. This becomes even clearer from his reaction when he hears the name of Goldberg from Meg.

STANLEY. Goldberg?

MEG. That's right. That was one of them.

STANLEY *slowly sits at the table, left.*

Do you know them?

STANLEY *does not answer.*

Stan, they won't wake you up, I promise. I'll tell them they must be quiet.

STANLEY *sits still.*

They won't be here long, Stan. I'll still bring you up your early morning tea.

STANLEY *sits still.* (36-37)

Stanley's silent demeanour and unresponsiveness speak volumes of his growing insecurity. This proves that with the arrival of the visitors at the lodge, his fears and apprehensions take deeper roots. Consequently, he employs numerous strategies to effectively tackle his intra-psychic crisis.

Another 'defense mechanism' that Stanley takes up in his attempt to successfully cope with his neurotic anxiety, which Freud views as the anxiety about unknown dangers, is the adoption of the persona. In Carl Jung's analytic theory, the persona is a mask adopted by the person in response to the demands of social convention and tradition and to his or her own inner archetypal needs. The purpose of the mask is to make a definite impression upon others and it often, although not necessarily, conceals the real nature of the person (Hall et al. 88). Stanley dons the guise of a businessman when he meets McCann and resorts to falsehood about the purpose of his stay at the seaside boarding house. He tells McCann, "I like it here, but I'll be moving soon. Back home. I'll stay there too this time. No place like home. (*He laughs.*) I wouldn't have left but business calls. Business called, and I had to leave for a bit. You know how it is" (41). He concocts this unverifiable tale to establish his innocence upon the guest, in his wily attempt to escape from his past that he seems to be so afraid of. However, he fails to put up the garb consistently and soon his psychic fears resurface in a fit of frenzy.

STANLEY. It's a mistake. Do you understand?

MCCANN. You're in a bad state, man.

STANLEY (*whispering, advancing*). Has he told you anything? Do you know what you're here for? Tell me. You needn't be frightened of me. Or hasn't he told you?

MCCANN. Told me what?

STANLEY (*hissing*). I've explained to you, damn you, that all those years I lived in Basingstoke I never stepped outside the door. (43)

Thereafter, when Goldberg arrives and greets Stanley, the latter stands silent, muted by the unwanted reopening of his fearful past and terrified by the advances of the rival-father. He senses the threat that Goldberg's presence poses and fears of being driven out of this sanctuary. In *Identity and Anxiety: Survival of the Person in Mass Society*, Frieda Fromm-Reichman states, "separation anxiety which people first experience at birth and subsequently throughout their lives [is] present at all phases of personality development ... from weaning, that is separation from mother's breast, to separation from one's fellow men, by death" (qtd. in Gabbard 26). It is this 'separation anxiety' from Meg that urges Stanley to espouse various

means of defense. Therefore, he even resorts to a game of lies to drive the visitors away from the guest house.

STANLEY. I'm afraid there's been a mistake. We're booked out. Your room is taken. Mrs Boles forgot to tell you. You'll have to find somewhere else.

GOLDBERG. Are you the manager here?

STANLEY. That's right.

GOLDBERG. Is it a good game?

STANLEY. I run the house. I'm afraid you and your friend will have to find other accommodation. (45)

However, all his efforts to ensure his security at the guest house prove to be futile. "When a person is completely powerless", says Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery*, "and any form of resistance is futile, she may go into a state of surrender. The system of self-defense shuts down entirely" (30). Thus, when he appears next at his own birthday party, he is silenced into a mute spectator.

The episode of the birthday celebration enacts the painful reawakening of Stanley's repression. According to Gabbard, the oedipal anxiety is also associated with primal-scene fantasies, which Norman Holland in *The Dynamics of Literary Response* describes as, "the child imagines that he watches or hears his parents in the act of love." The fright emerges from having spied on what the parents consider taboo and from imagining himself in the role of the parents of the same sex. Images that trigger such visions in the mind of the infant include "darkness, a sense of vagueness and the unknown, mysterious noises in the night ... vague movements, shapes shifting and changing ... things appearing and disappearing ..." (qtd. in Gabbard 31-32). Stanley encounters all of these during the game of blind man's buff when there is a blackout and the room is engulfed in absolute darkness at the birthday party. He even witnesses a blatant reflection of his primal fantasies in the explicit fondling between Goldberg and Lulu. Moreover, there are mysterious and obscure movements, whispers and screams, grunts and whimpers. All these spark Stanley's repressed libidinous drives that have hitherto remained in a state of latency, and they find an outlet with a cataclysmic violence. According to Freud, repressions may force their way through the opposing anti-cathexes or they may find expression in the form of a displacement. When an original object-choice is rendered inaccessible, a new cathexis is formed to reduce psychic tension, a process Freud terms 'displacement' (Hall et al. 48-50). Stanley's oedipal desire for Meg finds an expression in his attempt to strangulate her but when that is foiled it gets displaced upon Lulu. When the torchlight is switched on, Lulu is found "*spread-eagled on the table, STANLEY bent over her*" (64). Thus, Gabbard observes,

As the light is shone on Stanley, the pre-psychotic fear of being under scrutiny is concretized, adding to the picture of inner hysteria that Stanley is experiencing. When his attempted rape is disclosed, he resorts to the childish feint of giggling. (55)

After the grotesque birthday party, therefore, Stanley is traumatized into a non-entity, and the phoenix is reborn. However, he has now been metamorphosed into a conformist, being driven away to some mysterious organization, Monty in a catatonic trance. In the course of his transformation, he seems to have relinquished his oedipal desires and expiated his guilt, having suffered as metaphorical castration in the hands of the figurative rival-father, Goldberg and McCann. Though they do not injure Stanley physically, he is psychologically intimidated and impaired. Connell observes how violence becomes important in gender politics among men. "Terror is used as a means of drawing boundaries and making exclusions" (83). Stanley is victimized beyond repair. He is dismembered of his autonomy and agency, leaving him silent. This is followed by his period of latency in his psychological collapse prior to the departure, manifested in his inability to speak coherently despite all his attempts. While Marilyn Frye in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* locates how oppression reduces, immobilizes and moulds people, and effects their subordination to another group (33), Ann

Cudd in *Analyzing Oppression* considers it to be “an institutionally structured harm” (23) that perpetrates, in the words of Sandra Bartky, marginalization, exploitation and powerlessness (Veltman 3). Andrea Veltman and Mark Piper in *Autonomy, Oppression and Gender* observe, “Oppression can distort or damage the self-conception of an oppressed person” alienating him from his authentic self (3). Stanley’s helpless stance at the end of the play embodies how the power dynamics of Goldberg and McCann has rendered him defeated. He fails to assert his masculine strength, fails to establish his individual identity, fails to voice his existence. Thus, the final deportment of Stanley unmistakably reduces him to a disembodied shadow of his former self.

Conclusion

Therefore, we find that Stanley in Pinter’s *The Birthday Party* has been depicted as powerless and vulnerable. In Pinter’s early plays, the male characters, for instance, Edward in *A Slight Ache*, Aston in *The Caretaker* or Richard in *The Lover*, like Stanley, exhibit an existential angst and catatonia. It goes without saying that these characters are steeped in enigma, betraying neither past history nor future motivations. In this regard, Martin Esslin notes, “We see Pinter’s characters in the process of their essential adjustment to the world, at the point when they have to solve their basic problem – whether they will be able to confront, and come to terms with, reality at all. It is only after they have made this fundamental adjustment that they will be able to become part of society and share in the games of sex or politics” (262). A close examination of *The Birthday Party* reveals that Stanley is hyper-vigilant, possibly because he is hiding from a past he wishes to disacknowledge; he is in the process of realignment. In his attempts to regain purpose and meaning in his life, he tries to escape but finally is not only regressed to an infant stage that supposedly helps him re-acquire psychic peace from which he had been inevitably banished, but also victimized into a non-entity establishing an inevitable interpretative negotiation between power politics and masculinity in gender discourse.

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