

Neurotic Absurdity or Absurdist Neurosis: An Analysis of Harold Pinter's the Birthday Party

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Abstract

Harold Pinter vigorously shows absurdity in his works and the source of the absurdness is the meaningless commonplace existence of the humans in the post World War II society. Apparently, the characters in his works behaves normally and the absurdity lies itself in that normal behaviour that showcases the neurotic aspects. The then contemporary events and environment was very much responsible to drive the characters to become neurotic as the very existence of man was in question. The aim of this paper is to critically analyze how the elements of absurdity shapes Pinter's play *The Birthday Party* and how it is interrelated to the concept of neurosis. Freudian psychoanalysis will be used to demonstrate the relatedness of the concepts like trauma, repressed desire, sexuality. Qualitative research methodology will be used in this study. The researcher will try to find the interplay of absurdity and neurosis in the above mentioned text, that is neurosis the cause or the effect of absurdity and the absurdity is manifested through the neurotic behaviour of the characters or they become neurotic because of the absurd situation.

Keywords: Harold Pinter, Absurdity, Neurosis, Theatre of the Absurd, Freudian Psychoanalysis

Introduction

The growth of science and technology enlarges man's scientific temperament and furthers man's rational and enquiring nature, which causes their disbelief in god and shook their essential religious nature, which previously lies at the core of human existence. The two World Wars was the turning point in human history, which has a devastating effect in all the spheres of human life, showing the mere meaninglessness of life, the futility of human existence. The mass killing, use of nuclear weapons, holocaust, ethnic cleansing and other destructive strategies of the Wars leads to utter depravity of food, shelter, job, money and the security of psysical and mental peace. Many struggled physically as well as psychologically as a result of the terrible losses throughout the dreadful World Wars. In fact, mental conditions have more long-term effects on people's emotional well-being. People sought to find a means to hide their inner sentiments of insecurity and uncertainty since they were completely depressed and lonely. The irreversible psychological harm caused by the two World Wars was one of that unavoidable effects(Mostoufi). These circumstances create certain consciousness among some playwrights who take up a new dramatic form to represent the general absurdity and meaninglessness of the society. Harold Pinter was one of those artists who meticulously represents these absurdness in his dramas through his characters who takes up various forms of neurosis to cope up with the situation.

Harold Pinter and the Theatre of the Absurd

Harold Pinter (1930-2008), the famous British dramatist, is very well known for his "comedy of menace",

and is also considered as a playwright of the genre “the theatre of the absurd”. His play *The Birthday Party* (1957) is one such work where the absurdity is manifested fully in the characters and that is represented through their various neurotic behaviours by which they try to cope up or combat the adversity of the contemporary society. Because of the uniqueness of his presentation, the term “painterlike” was created to characterize his works. It explores the themes of absurdity, guilt, alienation and loneliness, all of which can be taken in different ways. It also depicts a sense of danger, minimalism and the unpredictable nature of language with long, realistic pauses seen in Pinter’s plays. The author conveys a feeling of isolation in this play (Oudah Neamah). One of the most influential works of this area is by French philosopher Albert Camus who in his 1942 essay ‘Myth of Sisyphus’ describes human situation as meaningless and absurd. The separation of man from his life, the actor from his environment, is appropriately the sense of absurdity. One’s behavior must then be determined by his/her conviction that life is silly. It is reasonable to question whether a conclusion of this significance necessitates giving up an inexplicable circumstance as quickly as possible. The sense of absurdity can hit any person in the face. In the distinct but interconnected realms of intelligence, the art of life, or art itself, will be able to overcome that elusive sense of absurdity (Camus). Martin Esslin coined the term “the theatre of the absurd” in the essay of 1960 with the same name. The term is used to describe a variety of dramatic and prose fiction works that share the belief that the human condition is fundamentally absurd and that this condition can only be adequately represented in works of literature that are themselves absurd; that the human world has no intrinsic truth, value, or meaning; and that human life, in its fruitless search for meaning and purpose as it moves from the nothingness from which it originated toward the nothingness from which it must end, is an existence that is both anguished and absurd (Abrams). At first, the four playwrights that Esslin included in his essay as part of the movement are Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugene Ionesco and Jean Genet, later he added Harold Pinter in this group. These plays present their audience with a disorienting experience, a genuine onslaught of highly irrational, frequently absurd events that seem to defy all recognized customs of stage convention. The action’s location and time are never made explicit. The theatre of the absurd depicts the world as an incomprehensible place since it is frequently unclear if the action is intended to depict a dream world of nightmares or actual events. The audience only witnesses the events on stage from the outside and never fully comprehends the significance of these peculiar patterns of behaviour (Esslin).

Freudian Neurosis

This study tries to analyze Pinter’s *The Birthday Party* taking the insights from the theory of Psychoanalysis, particularly with the help of the concept of ‘neurosis’. The term ‘neurosis’ is coined by William Cullen in the 18th century to designate the disorders caused by psychological issues. Austrian psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud takes this theory into the new height by delving deep into the concept. Freudian concept of neurosis will be particularly used in this research to explore the neurotic behaviour that the absurdity induces, is it the cause or the effect. According to Freud, sexuality appears to be a major factor in the pathophysiology of hysteria as a cause of physical traumas and a defense mechanism that involves repressing concepts from consciousness. The pathophysiology of traumatic neuroses and common hysteria are comparable. Physical trauma can be caused by any encounter that evokes unpleasant emotions like fear, anxiety, embarrassment or physical pain. When the inconsistency pushes itself on the ego and the latter chooses to reject the incompatible thought, that is the real traumatic moment. This type of repudiation only suppresses the concept into the unconscious rather than eradicating it. Here, neurasthenia and obsessional neurosis are clearly distinguished from one another. Although anxiety

neurosis lacks a physical cause, it always affects mental life; among its regular symptoms are anxious expectations, phobias and hyperaesthesia to pains (Breuer and Freud). Obsessions have no obvious source; instead, they serve as a surrogate or replacement for the incompatible sexual thought and have been ingrained in awareness. There is a subtle intensity to both the formation of the obsessional concept and the repression of the unacceptable sexual idea. The concept of mixed neuroses is inevitably described by three defense mechanisms. A defense-oriented psychosis progresses through hysterical or mixed neurosis (Freud).

Methodology

This study used Qualitative research methodology to analyze the thematic and theoretical dimensions of the primary text. Harold Pinter's play *The Birthday Party* is taken as a primary text for this study. Qualitative analysis of the literary text is done to understand the interplay of absurdity and neurotic behaviour of the characters and the critical situation of that time. The genre of the theatre of the absurd is used as the backdrop of the study and the psychoanalytical theory of Sigmund Freud is used as the theoretical framework. Close reading of the text is primarily used in this study to examine the detailed structure, pattern, language, meaning and theme of the play. These methodologies are specially appropriate for this kind of literary study to have a deep and holistic understanding of the text.

Literature Review

Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* is a very famous play and many literary studies are already done on this work, exploring various premises of this masterpiece. This article focuses on how women were mistreated by their male colleagues in the post-war era. Through an examination of Pinter's masterpiece *The Birthday Party*, it depicts sexuality, exploitation, masculinity, excesses, patriarchal thinking, deprivation of rights, injustices and much more. The portrayal of post-war women's status quo in Pinter's stories is one of his artistic traits. The drama initially represents women in the middle of the 20th century. Meg's perspective on the birth of a girl child appears absurd. It conveys the idea of a post-war mindset when women are viewed as unimportant and unworthy. Stanley, the main character, and Goldberg and McCann, the antagonists, both subtly take advantage of her simplicity. The post-war people's disdainful demeanor reveals their inevitable absurd mental condition. The women in Pinter's plays are shown getting ready for this moment because they are plagued by the anxiety of having to provide their counterparts convincing arguments and responses. Meg and Lulu, exemplify the stereotypical picture of women in the middle of the 20th century who, in spite of their resistance, have only been exploited at various points. The nature of relationships between men and women in post-war society has been severely damaged by the patriarchal mindset. Pinter has depicted this situation in his plays, highlighting the actual part of human existence that requires a specific change, wherein all genders are treated with equal respect and regard (Ahmad Mir and Vinita Mohindra).

The Birthday Party by Harold Pinter explores themes of absurdity, alienation and guilt, all of which can be interpreted in different ways. The drama takes place in a single location, the boarding house's sitting room, which is isolated from the rest of the world. The two persecutors reflect a society that mistreats independent artists like Stanley, exacerbating their distress. This study aims to address the questions of how a person escapes from his reality, what dangers assault him and why he is unable to fight these threats. The play features elements of confusion, disorder and linguistic breakdown, which are common characteristics of absurdist theatre. Stanley is messy and reclusive, wearing filthy old jeans and a pajama

top. Having grown accustomed to the quiet environment, Stanley is devastated when Goldberg and McCann arrive at the boarding home and start questioning him, making him feel guilty even though they never reveal what he has done. As he ultimately tries to rape Lulu and strangle Meg, Stanley's depravity is unsettling. By the play's end, Stanley is completely mad and unable to speak or defend himself. After Stanley is mentally abused by McCann and Goldberg, Petey is maybe the only character in the play who worries about him. As evidenced by his attempts to defend Stanley, he is actually the only one who notices any differences in him. Pinter's plays show how personal connections cannot protect men from feelings of horror and loneliness. This is reflected in conversations that show how man is vulnerable to attack because he conceals his true nature from others. The drama portrays the predicament of a man who lives in apathy and uncertainty and withdraws from social interactions. It illustrates man's fear of outside threats that invade his life and undermine his defenses(Oudah Neamah).

In order to demonstrate how the use of deceptive language can have negative consequences, this paper presents a pragmatic analysis of the dialogue between characters in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*. It basically makes use of Culpeper's and Spenser-Oatey's frameworks to show how these tactics encode characters' unequal power relations and identity loss due to excessive verbal abuse of the weak. In order to demonstrate how Stanley's identity progresses from a normal stage to an abnormal and ultimately unnatural state that demonstrates his total loss of personality, the researcher examines character conversations in *The Birthday Party* from the perspectives of Culpeper's impoliteness strategies and Spenser-Oatey's rapport management. The true root of this behavior is Stanley's extreme anxiety at Goldberg and McCann's arrival and stay, which makes him feel excessively uneasy. The purpose of Goldberg and McCann's visit to this boarding home is to exact revenge on Stanley, obliterate his identity, and then reintegrate him into their group. The characters use Culpeper's impoliteness tactics to attack their addressees. Additionally, Culpeper's counterstrategies, which the addressee or addressees have used to offend others or defend themselves, are discussed, along with the aspects of an individual's face or sociality rights that have been impacted in accordance with Spenser-Oatey's rapport management model. The variety of rapport-management techniques that Goldberg and McCann employ further demonstrates Goldberg's strength and control over Stanley. Stanley, who was initially able to defend himself, is no longer able to do so as a result of Goldberg and McCann's persistent rudeness and verbal abuse. Stanley gradually becomes quieter until the play's conclusion, when his incapacity to speak reveals his total devastation. Stanley's face has been cruelly and persistently attacked, turning him from a normal character into an abnormal one who cannot pronounce a single word correctly(Mostoufi).

The Analysis of the Text

Pinter's theatre reflects the spiritual and philosophical enigmas of the then age, which is often described as 'pinteresque' doomsday universe. Researcher is going to analyze Pinter's *The Birthday Party* in the above mentioned light. Various instances and situation from the text is also going to be critically examined to show how the characters express their neurotic behaviours and their respective defense mechanism to cope up with the absurd situation. How the interconnectedness of the neurosis and absurdity is manifested in the peculiar mannerisms of the characters is also going to be discussed.

In this play, trauma is one of the components that shows the reason of neurosis in the protagonist Stanley, which in turns manifests the absurdity in the play. The play is set in a room and for Stanley that is a safe place from which he did not want to come out. Critics remarks that the room is 'womb like', where Stanley wanted to stay. But as the title suggests, that it is a birth day for Stanley, he experiences the 'birth

trauma' like situations where he is remade at the end of the play when the two intruders takes him to an unknown place. Displacement enhances the trauma of loosing one's safe home for an uncertain cause. For this, neurosis can be seen as a cope up strategy for the characters to combat unwanted, unpleasant situation. Along with this one, Stanley was also haunted by his past traumas. His past is not told clearly in the play, who he is actually, from where he came, is he knows the two intruders before or not, what he had done in the past that was against the institution and what the institution is in reality, is not known, all is uncertain. These all are the causes of his experience of different kind of traumas. In the post World War time, everyone was traumatized because of the wreck the Wars created, the fear of nuclear bombings, the generational trauma of ethnic cleansing and displacements, all contributed to these traumas. These makes the people feel alienated, displaced and it also causes the loss of belief in humanity and religion, situations become very much absurd for the people. The playwrights became aware of the condition and manifested this absurdity of the situation through their characters, by making them traumatized individuals as one of the manifestations of neurosis.

The repressed sexual desires are one of the cause of neurosis and are present very much in this text, specially in the two women character of Meg and Lulu. The repressed sexual desire of Meg forces her to infantilize a grown up man Stanley. But for Stanley, Meg is both the mother-figure and the figure of the seductress. Meg wanted to protect Stanley from the outside world and also makes sexual advances towards him. Meg did not have a child and from her conversation with Petey, readers learn her preference for a boy, this is partly fulfilled by the presence of Stanley in their house. Here also comes the Freudian concept of 'Oedipus complex' in the relationship of Meg-Stanley-Petey. The libido of Meg, forces her behave in a peculiar manner, making her a neurotic character of an absurd age. Lulu, also driven by her repressed sexuality, first tries to attract Stanley, then flirts with much older Goldberg in the party. At the end, she finds herself sexually exploited by Goldberg, metaphorically showing the contemporary exploitative society.

The Birthday Party is also maked with the problems of social repression. Stanley, the artist-figure is not allowed to remain an artist by the two social agents. McCann and Goldberg, the two intruders enters into the safe place of Stanley and takes over the authority. Who they are, from where they came and what is there agenda, are the questions left unanswerd. There is a hint that they came for Stanley and belongs to an organization. Society does not allows any individual to retain their individuality and harbour rebellion in their mind. The artist's individuality, creativity and personality are smashed and ultimately, the society brings him down in an animalistic state only capable of uttering few sounds. Who earlier denies to be a conformist, now completely surrenders to the organization, or it is fair to be said that, he is forced to do that. They at last takes him away to Monty, whose identity is not known. The taking away of any person, especially a Jew, was very common incident during the World War II. The extremely repressive condition of the society is manifested in the play by the figures of McCann and Goldberg and their taking away of Stanley. This extreme repression makes the characters behave in their own peculiar way, making them neurotic and loosing their mental stability and peace.

Anxiety, another factor of neurosis, was inherent both in the contemporary society and in the play by Pinter. Anxiety is one of the features of the character of Stanley. This anxiety was also shown through the failure of communication between the characters or the unwillingness of the characters to communicate with each other at all. Pinter's pauses are one of his strategies to show the anxious mind of the individuals. There are various instances of anxiety in the play, such as, for Stanley anxiety comes from his past life, the threat it poses to his present and future and the pressure of the society; for Meg it occurs because of

her repressed sexuality and her dual position as a mother and a seductress; for Petey it is the fear of the unknown authority; for McCann and Goldberg, they are themselves under the pressure of the higher authority of society. In post World War time society faces various problems in terms of ideologies, religious beliefs, humanity, economic troubles, insecurity of life and many more, which causes a general anxiety among the masses. This anxiety is the result of the general absurd situation that the people faces in the contemporary time.

Violence and anger are other forms in which neurosis is manifested. McCann and Goldberg perpetuate violence upon Stanley, through language. In the Interrogation scene, they castigates him, uses torrent of questions to accuse him and also charges him. In the party, when Stanley was blindfolded, McCann deliberately snaps his glasses and places the toy drum before Stanley. He stumbles upon the drum, tries to strangle Meg and to rape Lulu, resulting in his complete mental breakdown. Stanley, who at first beats the toy drum violently to show his anger and protest against society, now is silenced completely. A new Stanley is made out of the old one, who has no voice or point of view of his own, clean sheaven and is in white shirt and dark suit. The violence of the Wars and the deep dissatisfaction and anger of the common people, caught the attention of the contemporary playwrights who in turn represents that in their absurd plays.

Conclusion

The above analysis shows the multifaceted dimensions of the absurdity and neurosis, and this study tries to establish the link between the theatre of the absurd and the psychoanalytical theory of neurosis, explained by Freud in Pinter's play *The Birthday Party*. Stanley has various traumas and for that he suffers from various forms of anxiety, ultimately repressed by the oppressive society. The representative of the authorities, McCann and Goldberg, interrogates and accuses Stanley, then uses violence to reduce Stanley into a subhuman stage, only capable of making some sounds, who was once an artist figure, now is totally silent. The post war socio-politico-economic scenario was very much absurd and depressive and that kind of turbulent situation makes people stressed and neurotic. As this was a different situation, so different dramatic form was required to showcase the situation and emotion of that time. So it can be said that, Harold Pinter aptly used the form of absurd theatre in his play to represent the post war scenario.

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