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Peering at the Unconscious: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Pinter's *The Birthday Party*

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Abstract:

According to Freud, human consciousness is just the tip of the ice-berg while the real man constitutes what remains submerged in his unconscious, virtually indecipherable. The unconscious, Freud opines, can be accessed only though indirect means. The paper is an attempt to uncover the repressed fear, anxiety, desires, and wishes, at play deep within the psyche of the various characters, which invariably influence their actions, gestures and speeches but elude direct expression.
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Psychoanalysis, writes Peter Buse, "is the methodology *par excellence* for revealing latent depths" [1], while Richard Allen Cave asserts "since the late 1950s the plays have variously been claimed as fine examples of absurdism and of Freudian psychological theory applied to drama" [2]. Harold Pinter, one of the foremost playwright of the post-50s era might have aimed at writing plays in the "basic childlike terms" which "tell a story, chronicle a series of happenings" but nevertheless ended up in endowing them with a "teasing air of meaning more than they say" that invariably have "resonances which hang disturbingly in the air and vibrate in the memory long after the tale has been told" [3]. Hence Martin Esslin's "psychological approach to Pinter's play… which divines a subtext", and Austin E. Quigley's differentiation between the "explicit" and the "inexplicit" [4] in Pinter's work. Evidently Pinter's plays always have something more to offer to the readers, more than the *prima facie* impression one gets form a cursory reading of the play. Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, a jewel in his literary oeuvre, likewise connote much more than it denotes. This paper is an attempt at making a vivid excursion into the rich array of significances the play tends to evoke when the surface is scratched. A psychoanalytic reading of the play provides fresh insight into actions gestures and comments of the various characters thereby unraveling what seem to be the innermost recesses of the characters' psyche.

As the barest possible outline of the play goes Stanley, a man in his late thirties lives as a boarder in the small seaside house owned by the elderly couple Meg and Petey. Two mysterious persons by the name of Goldberg and McCann jars on their humdrum world and wreaks havoc in the cocooned existence of Stanley , reduces him to "catatonic, infantile state" [5], in the course of the party celebrating his not so sure birthday , and the following day in the absence of Meg , takes him away with them. As is evident from the story the element of causality is glaringly lacking in the play. "Because events and actions" opines Bernard F. Dukore with respect to Pinter's early plays "are unexplained and apparently illogical or unmotivated, the world seems capricious or malevolent .One can rely upon nothing. What is apparently secure is not secure. A haven does not protect." This menace which lurks outside "also has psychological roots" [6]. *The*

Birthday Party attests to a similar presence of pervading menace. The fear psychosis in Stanley begins to reveal itself from the moment he is told about the two persons inquiring about the house. He apprehensively questions Meg about them, paces the room and insists they will not come:

Meg.	Two gentlemen asked Petey if they could come and stay for a couple of nights. I'm expecting them…
Stanley.	I don't believe it.
Meg.	It's true.
Stanley (moving to her) .	You're saying it on purpose.
Meg.	Petey told me this morning. …
Stanley.	Who are they? [7]

Francis Gillen explaining Stanley's anxiety opines, "like Oedipus we all seem to cay within us the sense of secret guilt and suspicion that sooner or later someone will come around to collect on debts outstanding"[8]. It is his unconscious fear that makes him abusive towards Meg. He bursts out at her for taking away his tea:

Stanley.	What did you take it away for? …Who gave you the right to take away my tea? [9]

Himself threatened, he transfers his menace onto Meg and rakes the suppressed fire of fear in her. He prophesizes the arrival of a wheelbarrow that would come to cart somebody off. She gets unsettled and nervously dismisses his assertions:

Stanley.	They've got a wheelbarrow in that van…They're looking for someone.
Meg.	They're not…No, they are not! [10]

When Goldberg and McCann arrive, he secretly observes them and sneaks out through the rear door. Menace also operates in McCann. He tries to ensure whether they are in the right house and desperately inquires about the nature of their immediate task: "Hey Nat, just one thing…This job-no, listen-this job, is it going to be lie anything we've eve done before? [11]. In the end of the fist act, Stanley's psychic turmoil changes into gross violence, and he marches round the room beating the drum regularly , then erratically, looking "savage and possessed" [12]. In the following act, Stanley's apprehension of the threat posed by the external world against his sheltered niche is expressed through his constant perturbation about the voices he hears coming form outside. Agitated, he asks, "Where the hell are they... Why don't they come in? What are they doing out there? [13]. With no plausible reason behind the fear psychosis this can be identified with what John Russell Taylor calls "a consciousness of Original Sin, or a Big Brother super-ego watching over us" [14]. In the birthday party his repressed fear, menace culminates in his peculiar gesture of bending over "spread-eagled" [15] Lulu as the "subconscious expression" of "submerged violence" [16]. Never does Stanley vocalize his fear. Rather, it is not possible for him to do so, as they are the workings of his unconscious. The menace underlying his psyche is decipherable only though meticulous observation of his actions and gestures and a perceptive reading of the words attributed to him. The same applies even to Goldberg and McCann.

Goldberg, a seemingly dominant and authoritarian figure feels "knocked out"[17] in the end, while McCann in spite of all his aggression is desperate to "finish and go", to "get it over and go" [18].The play finally ends with Stanley's forced removal from the house by Goldberg and McCann. Considering the fact that they are menacing only in relation to Stanley, critics have questioned the reality of their existence. According to John Russell Taylor, they are "perhaps largely figment of Stanley's overheated imagination" [19].Russell Taylor also goes onto explain the overarching nature of menace that operates in the psyche of almost all the characters:

> …we all have, somewhere, a hidden fear, an unidentified sense of guilt…
> which can in right circumstances be played upon.[20]

While several critics have focused on the fear psychosis, as is evident from the above discussion, Charles A Carpenter perceives the play in a completely different light of the "conflict between the highly particularized mother and father figures of Meg and Goldberg" [21]. Meg's presenting Stanley with a toy-drum is indicative of he "subconscious passion for keeping her 'Stanny' close to he womb"[22]. Stanley accepts it with bemused indifference but gradually starts beating it mechanically, that soon changes into erratic banging, signifying "the stifled forces inside Stanley" [23]. Carpenter on the other hand interprets it as an expression of Stanley's desperate wish to escape the "womb-room provided by Meg" as "aliens have invaded it"[24].His fear actualizes during the birthday party . Desirous of inducing Stanley's forced birth McCann keeps the toy drum in his way. He stumbles over it, causing the membrane to rupture. With the toy drum sticking to his feet, he moves towards Meg and attempts to throttle her, thereby indicating the severance of maternal ties. Charles A. Carpenter pertinently points out:

> Responding unconsciously to these stimuli, he carries out the symbolic
> action of tying to strangle the old woman. Suppressed, he mutely conveys
> the focus of his rage a second later by giving "a sharp sustained rat-a-tat
> with a stick on the side of the drum"[25]

In the concluding moments of the final act, when the torch light is flashed, he is discovered bending over a vulnerable Lulu. "The fact is that", argues Charles A. Carpenter, "he does not have sex on mind at all. Unconsciously…he sees a new source of the Edenic womb-life he has lost"[26].The glare of the flash light puts the final nail on his coffin, thus ensuring Goldberg's victory over Meg in the "semi-conscious tug of war" that they indulged in "with Stanley's umbilical cod as the rope"[27] . Goldberg with the aid of McCann has managed to negate all possibilities of maternal care he enjoyed in the vicinity of Meg. Stanley is ushered into a new life where patriarch Goldberg replaces motherly Meg. His rebirth is confirmed in the following act. He appears in a new avatar, clean shaven and well dressed, in stark contrast to his former unkempt self. Stanley is reduced to an infantile state. He is fondled lie a baby. Goldberg and McCann "woo him gently" [28].Stanley of the third act may be treated as the Freudian polymorphously perverse child-without an unconscious and without a gender. He is to be attributed with one:

> Goldberg. We'll make a man of you.
> McCann. And a woman. [29]

He is as if at the threshold of the Lacanian Symbolic order, yet to enter the domain of language. In the final act of the play, Stanley does not speak, he only utters incoherent babbles "Uh-gug…uh-gug…ccchhh-gag…caah…caahh" [30].The Symbolic realm associated with the figure of the father represented by Goldberg in the present context, awaits him. In this new life, it is Goldberg who would be at the helm of all his affairs. He promises to reintegrate Stanley, make him their "pride and joy" [31]

Goldberg. You'll be integrated.
McCann. You'll give orders.
Goldberg. You'll make decisions.
McCann. You'll be a magnate
Goldberg. A statesman. [32]

Goldberg succeeds in separating Stanley from Meg and thrusts him into a world of social obligations. In plucking Stanley off from the maternal space, Goldberg as though destroys his realm of the Lacanian Real.

Thus psychoanalysis unravels the hidden, speaks out the unspoken. It transcends the obvious textual premise and transports the readers into the realm of the unplumbed depths of the characters' minds thereby providing newer perspectives of critical interpretations. The commonplace, the insignificant appear particularly revelatory when approached psychoanalytically. It enables resolution of thematic and symbolic mysteries thus becoming an excellent tool for reading beneath the lines.

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