The Rhetoric of Games in Harold Pinter’s *The Birthday Party*

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Abstract:
Harold Pinter is one of the significant dramatists of ‘The Theatre of the Absurd’. His play *The Birthday Party* depicts man’s life in society as a game and the play itself can be analyzed from the perspective of ‘Game Theory’. Pinter’s play is a site of different games operating at multifarious levels. In the play Stanley deliberately tries to cheat Goldberg for he fears that Goldberg might play an unfair game with him later on. Goldberg, McCann, Lulu, Meg and Stanley decide to play ‘blind man’s bluff’. Although Meg’s desire to play a game seems spontaneous, a seemingly innocent game turns out to be a nightmarish one in the hands of two cruel hunters. Thus, under the façade of a mere sport, the actual intention of ‘hunting’ is carried out. The game of ‘blind man’s bluff’ forms the climax of the birthday party. Pinter stresses the relationships of characters that are playing games with one another and with the theme of the play. The symbolic significance of the game ‘hide and seek’ that the characters intend to play is that McCann and his cohort will ‘seek’ Stanley out even if he ‘hides’ in hell. In the play, it is not clear whether Stanley is playing a dirty game or Goldberg is playing a loathsome game with a harmless pianist like Stanley. Goldberg’s advice ‘Play up, play up, and play the game’, though addressed to McCann, is applicable to Stanley also. In the play women are subject to the game playing scheme of men. In the play every character — be it male or female, younger and older — plays different types of games with one another and in the process subject themselves to the game playing project. It is important to note that it is not only the characters alone that are playing games among themselves but their creator also engages himself in game-playing scheme. In the play language is reduced to a bantering game where words complicate more than they explicate. In the play games played here are non-cooperative for most of the characters like Lulu, Stanley do not adjust to the game-playing scheme of Goldberg and McCann. One will have to ‘play the game’, follow the line. Thus, according to Pinter, the world is a theatre where the ceremoniousness of games and playing shape men’s lives.

Keywords: The Theatre of the Absurd, Game Theory, hunting, non-cooperative game.

Of all the major dramatists of ‘The Theatre of the Absurd’, a phrase coined by Martin Esslin to refer to those dramatists of the post-War era such as Sartre, Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter *et al*, Harold Pinter (1930-2008) stands prominent as one who, most innovatively, as it were, combines the avant-garde and traditional elements. Though Pinter is hailed by some critics as Beckett’s heir or ‘spiritual son’ (Ruby Cohn, “The World of Harold Pinter”, 25), he remains an original and a unique figure, thereby pinpointing the complex predicament of modern man through certain ingenuous experimental techniques usually labelled as ‘Pinteresque’, ‘Pinterian’ or ‘Pinterism’. It is significant that although some critics have sought to group the plays like *The Room* (1957), *The Birthday Party* (1958), and *The Caretaker* (1960) under hackneyed headings
like ‘Comedy of Menace’, ‘Existentialist play’ or ‘Kitchen-Sink drama’, Pinter’s plays defy distinct definition or categorization. His first full-length play, The Birthday Party, is what Martin Esslin has pointed out in his seminal book The Theatre of the Absurd, “an allegory of the pressures of conformity” as well as “an allegory of death” (241). It depicts man’s life in society as a game which is the dynamic principle of civilization. The present paper proposes to analyze Pinter’s The Birthday Party as a site of different games operating at multifarious levels.

The word ‘game’ has varied ramifications. It may mean an activity engaged in for amusement. It may suggest a form of competitive activity or sport played according to rules. It may also mean a secret plan or trick, that is, subtle strategy. In Economics, a game is any type of competitive activity in which two or more than two players pursue their own interests and no player can dictate the outcome. Theoretically speaking, ‘Game Theory’ was developed in the 1950s by John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern. A game is a formal description of a strategic situation, and Game Theory is the formal study of decision-making where some players must make choices that eventually affect the interests of the other players. It is a distinct and interdisciplinary approach to the study of human behaviour. What economists call ‘Game Theory’; psychologists label it as the theory of social situations. There are two main branches of Game Theory - Cooperative Game Theory and Non-cooperative Game Theory. A game is called a cooperative one if the players can negotiate binding contracts that allow them to implement and to enforce joint strategies, whereas in a non-cooperative game, the negotiation or enforcement of a binding contract is not possible. Sampat Mukherjee has pointed out in his book Analytical Microeconomics (Exchange Production and Welfare): From Alfred Marshall to John Nash that ‘A game is described in terms of the players, the rules of the game, the payoffs of the game, and the information that players have about the details of the game. These common elements are found in any situation involving conflict. Gaming involves strategic decision making, i.e., decision making under conflict. A game is any situation in which players (the participants) make strategic decisions — i.e., decisions that take into account each other’s actions and responses: Strategic decisions result in payoffs to the players: rewards or benefits” (686).

Although, previously Game Theory was applied exclusively to Economics and Mathematics, the use of this particular theory in the social sciences has expanded, and it has now been applied to political, sociological and psychological behaviour as well. Thus, nowadays Game Theory has become an umbrella term. In the domain of literature, novel, short-stories, plays, narrative poems have been subjected to game-theoretic treatment, all of which involve Non-cooperative Game Theory: Steven J. Brams states in “Games Theory and Literature”:

Game theory has the potential to illuminate and render coherent strategic features of a narrative, but not without delving into its textual details ... It may also be used to explore new relationships, such as games played between an author and a reader that incorporate prior expectations of each player. (3)
Literature has, thus, become a fertile source of ideas for the game theorists. Game Theory can enrich one’s understanding of the strategic elements of a fictional situation. A number of constant conflicts in the literary works can be seen as constant-sum, in which what one player wins the other players lose.

Game Theory has proved useful in exploring the strategic choices of characters by making tighter the linkage between motives and actions in plot construction. Applications of Game Theory in the domain of literature have a critical and historical aspect. It is worth mentioning that Game Theory is more an art than a science. Game Theory offers an economical structure only to lay bare the strategic issues in plot design and character development. Steven J. Brams in “Games Theory and Literature” states:

In applying game theory to literary works, it is useful to bear in mind the admonition of Howard (1971, p. 146) that “skillful authors often conceal certain essential motivations of their characters in order to reproduce the mystery we often feel in real life as to why people behave in the way they do”. (6-7)

Game theory, in its application to literature, is considered fruitful in divulging certain mysteries or even helping authors gratify their own ends, that is, to puzzle the reader. There are many literary works to which Game Theory has been applied such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *Sherlock Holmes* (Morgenstern, 1935; Vorob’ev, 1968), Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* (Williams, 1954), Harold Pinter’s *The Caretaker* (Howard, 1971) and a medieval poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (O’Neill, 1991) written by an anonymous writer. According to Howard, although *The Caretaker* is “almost classically austere and simple from a game-theoretic point of view, Pinter’s view is however interesting in that at least he has risen to the level of dramatizing a three player interaction” (qtd.in Brams, 13)

Pinter’s first full-length play *The Birthday Party* opens with a brief conversation between Meg and Petey during which Meg comes to know from her husband Petey that two ‘gentlemen’ want to stay at Meg’s boarding house. Although Meg is not the least bothered about the arrival of the duo, that is, Goldberg and McCann; Stanley, the sole lodger in Meg’s rooming house, becomes perturbed on hearing the arrival of the two outsiders:

STANLEY. Who are they?
MEG. I don’t know.
STANLEY. Didn’t he (Petey) tell you their names?
MEG. No. (20)

Even if Meg assures Stanley that they will not ‘wake you up ... I’ll tell them they must be quiet’ (35), Stanley is not ready to take the two outsiders normally or naturally. Stanley can perhaps smack of the villainous nature and the sinister scheme of the two apparently gentlemen like figures who would come to disrupt, dishevel, and ultimately, bombard his little nest, his safe haven, his little ‘room’ by playing dirty games with the inhabitants of the house.

In *The Birthday Party* Pinter uses the dark sides of game-playing to enforce the sense of menace and to arouse the audience’s unease. That Goldberg is a devil is evident at the beginning of the play when he is conversing with the owner of the house, Meg:
MEG. Oh, I’m so glad you came today.
GOLDBERG. If we hadn’t come today we’d have come tomorrow. (32)

Goldberg’s speech clearly buttresses that he is the messenger of death; his sole objective being to take the sap or juice out of Stanley. When he learns from Meg that that particular day in which he has arrived at her house is Stanley’s birthday, he immediately proposes to the mistress of the house to arrange a ‘party’ at night in order to celebrate Stanley’s birthday. Goldberg says, “Sure. We’ll give him a party. Leave it to me (32).” The villainy in Goldberg is evident when he describes McCann, his partner, as the “life and soul of any party” (33) and when he says, ‘We’ll bring him out of himself (33).’

Meg, Goldberg and McCann now decide to arrange a party in honour of Stanley’s birthday; though Stanley refuses to accept the day as his birthday. Meg’s husband, Petey declares that he will not be able to stay at the party saying that “… we’ve got a game on”, (44, italics mine), thereby referring to his chess game. The reference to game is echoed when Stanley turns on Goldberg by telling him that he (Goldberg) cannot stay any longer at the boarding house for the room is already hired by somebody and Goldberg enigmatically answers by asking Stanley if it is ‘a good game’ (44) as the manager:

STANLEY. (moving downstage) 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? (44, italics mine)

Stanley is deliberately trying to hoodwink, to deceive and to cheat Goldberg by giving him wrong information for he fears that Goldberg might play an unfair game with him later on.

A party means fun and games. The group consisting of Goldberg, McCann, Lulu, Meg and Stanley decides to play ‘blind man’s buff’ which is usually a children’s game in which a player, whose eyes are covered with a piece of cloth, tries to catch and identify other persons. The sequence arises when Meg suddenly rises to announce that she wants to play a game:

MEG (rising). I want to play a game!
GOLDBERG. A game?
LULU. What game?
MEG. Any game,
LULU. (jumping up) Yes, let’s play a game.
GOLDBERG. What game?
MCCANN. Hide and seek.
LULU. Blind man’s buff.
...
GOLDBERG. All right. Blind man’s buff. Come on! Everyone up! (Rising.) McCann. Stanley-Stanley!
...

MEG. (bending over him). Stanley, we’re going to play a game. Oh, come on, don’t be sulky, Stan. (61)

Although Meg’s desire to play a game seems spontaneous, Goldberg and McCann have a completely different concept about their game play. No selection of game other than the ‘blind man’s bluff’ could have been more apposite and apt for symbolizing the utter cruelty impinged upon Stanley during the ‘party’. In the name of playing a game what Goldberg and McCann do to Stanley is not a mere game but something much more than that. Perhaps, it is not this type of ‘game’ that Meg and Lulu had intended to play. A seemingly innocent game playing turns out to be nightmarish, a game through which the two lions catch and then pounce upon a mere hare, that is, Stanley. It is thus not an itsy-bitsy game, but a big game in which a wild animal is hunted by ferocious hunters. Thus, under the veneer of sport, the actual intention of ‘hunting’ is carried out.

Although ‘blind man’s buff is somewhat associated with children’s game, the utter cruelty that it betrays, the malevolence that it exhibits, the harshness it displays, the pitilessness it lays bare, the severity it unmask, immediately brushes aside the notion of game playing related to children. A perceptive reader can immediately remind ‘the mock-hunting scene enacted by Jack and his followers in Golding’s Lord of the Flies (1954) where the prophet Simon is mercilessly killed, though perhaps unconsciously and unknowingly, by Jack and his company. Although Stanley is not brutally murdered by the two intruders as is the case with Simon; his condition is much more pathetic than that of dead Simon. Stanley is thrown into the nadir of helplessness. He is reduced to a mere non-entity, to an animal and what is more horrifying is that it is not done unknowingly or unconsciously but with a deliberate plan, trick or scheme.

When the game of ‘blind man’s buff is about to start, McCann asks a question ‘How do you play this game?’ (62). McCann’s inquiry can be interpreted in two possible ways. First, one may say that McCann does not really know the whereabouts of the game and therefore wants to know from Lulu and Meg the details of it. But this interpretation would be too naive, too simple to an otherwise complex play like The Birthday Party where the characters like Goldberg and McCann are complex characters. So, one will have to search for the hidden second meaning. The second possible meaning may be that McCann knows this game very well; he asks about it only to fathom the gap between insiders’ concept of game and his concept of this game. This point becomes clear when the blindfolded McCann draws near Stanley, stretches his arm and touches Stanley’s glasses. Obviously, McCann had long been searching for that wild bird, that game bird that has now fallen into his trap. When Stanley is blindfolded, McCann breaks Stanley’s glasses snapping the frames and then puts a drum (which is given to Stanley by Meg as his birthday present) in Stanley’s path so that he steps on it stumbling and breaking it. Ultimately, Stanley breaks down. He even proceeds to strangle Meg. At the end of Act II, the figures of Goldberg and McCann, the two emissaries of a mysterious and brutal organization converge upon the helpless, hopeless, hapless Stanley. Thus, the game of ‘blind man’s buff, ultimately, forms the climax of the party. David L. Miller in “Emiiiaizein: Playing the Mock Game (Luke 22:63-64)” states:

It is a birthday party we are witnessing. It is Stanley’s birthday. He is about to be born. He has been dead, out of touch. Not being able to
make contact, things do not come together for him. He cannot see connections. He has eyes, but is blind. The only way out for Stanley is to play his blindness all the way through. In the game he is able to take his weakness upon himself. He contacts his true self. He plays blind and is thus able to see (312).

Thus, in this play one finds that an apparently funny scene is simultaneously horrifying and inhumane in terms of what the characters are experiencing.

Pinter stresses the relationships of the characters that are playing games with one another and with the theme of the play. One can realize the underlying malignant pressures exerted upon characters such as Stanley, Lulu. People like Goldberg and McCann manipulate those around them. In The Birthday Party it is McCann who first proposes to play ‘hide and seek’ - a children’s game in which one player covers his eyes while the other players hide and then tries to find them. In Pinter’s play, this game assumes a symbolic significance. Stanley is deliberately trying to ‘hide’ himself from his tormentors and devastators— Goldberg and McCann. At the very outset of Act II, Stanley is trying to flee from Meg’s boarding house owing to the arrival of the two terrorists, that is, Goldberg and McCann from whom Stanley can smack of his oncoming danger. Although Meg’s rooming house was not at all a beatific and paradisiacal place to Stanley, after the arrival of the two persecutors of Stanley, it certainly turns into a veritable ‘Inferno’. It was a cosy place, a safe haven after all, if not heaven, where Stanley was at least safe, where he was free from any external threat of his suitors, where he could exercise his free-will partially, if not totally. Although Stanley wants to go out of the boarding house for he is not in his proper mood to celebrate his birthday, McCann is unwilling to let Stanley get out of the ‘room’ simply because ‘they’ are holding a ‘party’ for him tonight. So in spite of Stanley’s effort to ‘hide’ himself from Goldberg and his partner McCann, he is unable to do so. It is, as if, McCann and his cohort will ‘seek’ Stanley out even if he hides in the dark hell. Rightly does Martin Esslin point out in his seminal book Pinter the Playwright:

Goldberg and McCann could also be seen as messengers, sent out to transport a human being into the nether world (---) (74)

In The Birthday Party Pinter presents such characters like Goldberg, McCann, Meg and Stanley who consciously or unconsciously, knowingly or unknowingly inhabit certain persona and the drama comprises the processes through which these characters interact with one another. This is akin to types of psychological game-playing or demeanour, what Berne termed “the games that people play” (qtd.in Dawn Lewcock, 1) in their interactions with other characters. In the play, Pinter deals with the theme of the hounding and the ultimate defeat of Stanley in the hands of Goldberg and McCann. Just before the beginning of the birthday party celebration, Goldberg and McCann subject Stanley to rapid-fire verbal barrage and weird surrealist cross examination:

GOLDBERG. Why do you behave so badly?
Webber? Why do you force that old man out to play chess?
STANLEY. Me?
GOLDBERG. Why do you treat that young lady like a leper? She’s not the leper, Webber!
GOLDBERG. You hurt me, Webber? You’re playing a dirty game. (47-48, italics mine)

It is not clear whether it is Stanley who has played a dirty game or it is Goldberg who is playing a loathsome, abominable game with a harmless pianist like Stanley. Further, towards the end of Act III, Goldberg and McCann treat Stanley with the utmost cruelty and throw him in a whirlpool of language which crushes Stanley into insensitivity. Stanley’s will to resist seems to have dispersed and he can only make meaningless sounds, ‘Uh-gug ... uh-gug ... eeehhh-gag ... Caahh, ... caahh ... (84).

In The Birthday Party there are allusions to childhood and childhood games. Goldberg tells he passed a children’s playground in due course of his going home to his mother. During the conversation between Goldberg and Lulu, one can decipher more hints of darker meanings under the surface talk of childhood games:

GOLDBERG. May be I played piggy back with you.
LULU. May be you did.
MEG. He didn’t take me.
GOLDBERG. Or pop goes the weasel.
LULU. Is that a game’?
GOLDBERG. Sure it’s a game! (60, italics mine)

In Act III, there are ironical references to games in Goldberg’s use of the clichés like ‘Play up, play up, and play the game’ (77). This phrase is not Pinter’s invention but a quotation from an English jingoist poem, “Vita Lampada” written by Sir Henry Newbolt (1862-1938). The poem is about a school-boy cricketer who while fighting in Africa in the later part of his life, becomes panic-stricken because of the horror of war. While he is to face death, he remembers his captain’s exhortations in the cricket playground “Play up! play up! And play the game!” The phrase acquires a connotative meaning in Pinter’s play. Goldberg’s advice to “Play up, play up, and play the game” is addressed to his cohort, McCann but, significantly and ironically enough, it also includes Stanley. Likewise, Stanley has been compelled to surrender to the social norms as is confirmed by Webber’s Phoenix-like metamorphosis at the end when he is in his clean shaven appearance and ‘dark well cut suit’. But who are Goldberg and McCann? Pinter is ready to provide clue to his readers—“Goldberg and McCann? Dying, rotting, scabrous, decayed spiders, the flower of our society. They know their way around. Our mentors. Our ancestry. Them. Fuck’em “(qtd. in Lena Petrovic, 61).

It is Burghardt who in “Game Playing in Three by Pinter” ventures to explore a theoretical system at the infrastructure of all of Pinter’s early poetics. He divides the aspect of game playing into several groups - ‘signifying games’, ‘physical games’, ‘interaction games’, ‘make-believe games’ etc. As per Burghardt, the major function of the ‘game playing’ frame is explanatory and integrative. The characters are construed as engaging in psychoanalytically defined games so that their action may be accounted rot’. Burghardt opines in “Game Playing in Three by Pinter”:

Many of the actions in the play make sense only when we see that the underlying sexual betrayal opens the door for social retaliation (qtd. in Peli Grierger, 10).
The playing of games, however formal and methodical it might be, is within the bounds of the fictional world, knowledgeable to characters but for the limits on one’s access to the uncanny and the unconscious. Sometimes, rhetorical ramifications and psychological efficacy collapse —“Stanley’s identify, his stage three game, is shattered and the act is mirrored in the remaining characters. They are cast into the dark when the lights go out and McCann and Goldberg with the torch are the purveyors of what light there is ...” (Burghardt, 384).

In *The Birthday Party*, women like Meg, Lulu are subject to the game-playing scheme of men like Goldberg, McCann, Petey and even Stanley. That Goldberg is a womanizer, a flirt, a born and bred opportunist is evident in his speeches like “Lulu, you’re a big bouncy girl. Come and sit on my lap” (58), “You know, there’s a lot in your eyes” [58]. After the end of the party, Goldberg goes to Lulu’s ‘room’ and introduces her to some sort of sexual practices, Lulu comes to Goldberg and accuses him of committing severe crime against her. But Goldberg is not at all bothered about her accusations:

GOLDBERG. Have a game of pontoon first, for old time’s sake.

LULU. I’ve had enough games.

GOLDBERG. A girl like you, at your age, at your time of health, and you don’t take to games? (79, italics mine)

But the ill-treatment of women by men is only the one side of the coin. There are a few references in the text to show that Lulu plays verbal games with the much older Goldberg when she tells ‘You’re empty. Let me fill you up’ (57). Meg wants to hear the word ‘succulent’, which means juicy or sexy, from Stanley and ruffles Stanley’s hair as she passes. She has spent some lovely afternoons with Stanley. When Lulu charges Goldberg of profaning her virginity, Goldberg immediately replies ‘Who opened the briefcase, me or you?’ (80), thereby implying that it is Lulu who took the initiative to have sex with him:

GOLDBERG. You wanted me to do it, Lulula, so I did it. (80)

Thus in this play every character - be it male or female, younger and older, insider or outsider - plays different types of games with one another and in the process subject themselves to the game playing project.

But it is significant that it is not the characters alone that are playing games among themselves. Their creator also engages himself in game-playing scheme, though somewhat differently from their types. Pinter says in his Nobel Prize Acceptance speech that the author’s position is an odd one because “The characters resist him; they are not easy to live with; they are impossible to define. You certainly can’t dictate to them. To a certain extent, you play a never ending game with them, cat and mouse, blind man’s bluff, hide-and-seek” (qtd. in John Lahr, 2). In *The Birthday Party*, language is reduced to a bantering game where words complicate more than they explicate. For example, during the brain-washing sessions, Goldberg and McCann subject Stanley to innumerable crazy questions which are so contradictory in their nature that the audience gets lost, for they do not comprehend the specific crimes for which Stanley is subjected to such inhumane torture. At one point he is asked why he had killed his wife and a moment later they want to know from him why he had never got married.

GOLDBERG. Why did you kill your wife?
... GOLDBERG. Why did you never get married?
...
GOLDBERG. Why don’t you pay the rent?
...
MCCANN. What about the blessed Oliver Plunkett? (49-51)
It is only the lips which are moving and the rage, with which they move, that matters rather than the words they utter. The audience does not know whether Goldberg’s real name is Benny or Simey or Nat. Is Stanley really a pianist or has he concocted a cock and bull story to Meg? Is it really Stanley’s birthday (as Meg demands) or is it not (as Stanley insists)? Meg’s version and Stanley’s version as a pianist are at loggerheads with each other. Pinter uses language in a dramatic way. Pinter’s characters use words as ‘a stratagem to cover nakedness’ (qtd. in “Literature in Context”, 194). More often than not, words are repetitive, colloquial and meaningless. There are ample examples of the repetitive and nonsensical use of language as is seen in the conversation between Meg and Petey at the very beginning of the play:
MEG. Is that you, Petey?
   Pause.
   Petey, is that you?
   Pause.
   Petey? (9)
But to Pinter this apparent meaninglessness itself is the meaning; nonsense itself makes sense. In Pinter’s The Birthday Party silence is more eloquent than speech. In the third Act, Stanley is unable to speak; he only utters incoherent babbles like ‘Ug-gughh ... uh-gughhh ... ‘(85) that makes one aware of Goldberg’s heart of darkness, gives a peep into McCann’s ferocity, indicates that Goldberg is a variable Pluto and McCann, an Iago.

Game theory, as has been stated earlier, may also be used to divulge new relationships such as games played between an author and a reader that incorporate prior expectations of each player. Thus, a reader may be either delighted or disappointed by the genesis as well as the ending of a story. After reading Pinter’s play, The Birthday Party, one will obviously shiver in panic owing to the fact that we do not know what would be Stanley’s ultimate condition, his destiny, his destination. That Stanley will suffer a ‘special treatment’, due punishment is certain, because of his rebellion against the mode of life which society has thrust upon him; but to what extent he will suffer is not certain. If The Birthday Party convinces the readers about anything, it is the conviction of uncertainty that it ensures.

Game theory, as has been stated earlier, can enhance one’s understanding of the strategic elements of a fictional situation. A number of conflicts in the literary works can be seen as constant-sum, in which what one player wins the other players lose. In Pinter’s The Birthday Party, Stanley, Lulu, Petey and even Meg have been defeated by the representatives of society or ‘organization’, that is, Goldberg and McCann. It is noteworthy that Goldberg and McCann, despite not making use of physical violence or the threat of violence, have the drama’s other characters at their mercy.

Thus, in The Birthday Party Pinter gives different nuances and varied ramifications of game play - the literal as well as metaphorical, denotative as well as connotative, superficial as well as symbolic. Games played here are, obviously, non-
cooperative, for most of the characters like Lulu, Stanley, and Petey do not adjust to the game-playing scheme of Goldberg and McCann. Of the two terrorists, it is Goldberg who is more fulsome, more abominable than McCann. In his poem “A view of the Party” (1958), Pinter himself puts Goldberg into the centre:

The thought that Goldberg was
A man to dread and know

... A man of weight and time,

To supervise the game (qtd. in Esslin’s Pinter the Playwright, 71, italics mine).

The core, the essence, the fulcrum of Pinter’s play lies in Goldberg’s words - “Play up, play up, and play the game - Follow the line, the line, McCann, and you can’t go wrong” (77). It is worth pointing out that although this advice is given particularly to McCann, it is applicable to everybody - Stanley, Meg, Petey, Lulu and even the readers. What Pinter wants to buttress here is that one will have to ‘play the game’, to follow the line, to abide by the rules and regulations of the societal norms and mores if one wants to live in society. Everybody will have to participate in this game-playing project; everybody will have to subscribe to this gambling. If somebody becomes unwilling to play the game, he will have to suffer terrible fate as is the case with Meursault in Camus’ The Stranger, who refused to play the game. Burghardt very aphoristically describes the rhetoric of game-playing in Pinter’s play:

This game — demonstrates a truth too horrible for any of the characters to face—Stanley alone perceives this (qtd. in Peli Grietzer, 10).

According to Pinter, the world is a theatre where the artifice of roles and rituals and the ceremoniousness of games and playing shape men’s lives. Steven J. Brams speaks of the relationship between literature and game theory in “Games Theory and Literature”:

— game theory and literature have their own coordination problem, with game theorists and literary analysts not often benefitting from each others’ insights. What makes a literary creation is not just its overall structure but its details, including the emotional lives of its characters. Game theorists need to ponder these and adopt their theory accordingly, just as literary scholars need to appreciate that game theory has its own richness that goes beyond mathematical symbols and abstract forms. (31)

So, the analysis of Harold Pinter’s The Birthday Party from the game-theoretical perspective, thereby bringing out various meanings of game play and combining strategic and psychological aspects, can make the reading all the more fertile, all the more fruitful, and all the more rich.

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