



Pedagogická
fakulta
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Jihočeská univerzita
v Českých Budějovicích
University of South Bohemia
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Závěrečná práce

Anxiety and Violence in Harold Pinter's *Birthday Party*

Strach a násilí ve hře Harolda Pintera *Narozeniny*

Vypracovala: Mgr. Michaela Horká
Vedoucí práce: PhDr. Kamila Vránková, Ph.D.
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Abstract

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The final thesis focuses on one of the most important plays of British literature, the drama of *The Birthday Party* by Harold Pinter, one of the most outstanding playwrights of British modern drama. The main subject of my thesis is to interpret and analyse *The Birthday Party* as a comedy of menace. The first part of the theses deals with Pinter's biography, especially with the connection between his life a work. His life, which was filled with tragedies and disasters, shortly, had a lot of elements of menace theme. The second part of the thesis introduces an outlook on a comedy of menace. The thesis also discusses the play from the anti-violence perspective. The atmosphere of violence fills a lot of Pinter's works. The picture of violence is hidden in the characters themselves, in their indifference and insensitivity to the environment.

Keywords: Harold Pinter, *The Birthady Party*, comedy of menace, anxiety, violence

Abstrakt

Práce je zaměřená na jednu z nejdůležitějších her britské literatury, na divadelní hru *Narozeniny*, napsanou Haroldem Pinterem, jedním z nejvýraznějších dramatiků britské moderního dramatu. Hlavním cílem práce je rozbor a interpretace této divadelní hry jako komedie hrozby - „a comedy of menace“. První část práce se zabývá Pinterovou biografií, zejména spojením jeho života a díla. Představuje jeho život, který byl naplněný tragédiemi a katastrofami, a vlastně nesl prvky jeho divadelního stylu – „comedy of menace“. Práce se také věnuje otázce hrozby násilí ve společnosti.. Atmosféra násilí zaplňuje řadu Pinterových prací: krutost je ukryta v samotných postavách, v jejich nevědomosti a necitlivosti k okolí.

Klíčová slova: Harold Pinter, *Narozeniny*, komedie hrozby, strach, násilí

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Introduction

This paper focuses on Harold Pinter, a Nobel Prize-winning English playwright. He is generally seen as the foremost representative of British drama in the second half of the 20th century. The fact that he occupies a position of a modern classic is illustrated by his name entering language as an adjective used to describe a particular atmosphere and environment in drama "Pinteresque". Menace plays a vital role in Harold Pinter's plays. The mainspring of menace in Pinter is usually connected with the outside forces, which are latent and invisible. The sense of menace is reflected in certain human feelings like fear, insecurity, uncertainty and hopelessness. Menace may appear in a number of ways including physical, psychological and mental ones.

Harold Pinter's first full length play, *The Birthday Party*, is regarded as one of the classics of twentieth-century English theatre. The main subject of this work is the analysis of *The Birthday Party* by Harold Pinter, it deals with anxiety, violence, fear and the struggle for power.

1. Pinter's life as a comedy of menace

In more than 30 plays — written between 1957 and 2000 and including masterworks like *The Birthday Party*, *The Caretaker*, *The Homecoming* and *Betrayal* — Mr. Pinter captured the anxiety and ambiguity of life in the second half of the 20th century with terse, hypnotic dialogue filled with gaping pauses and the prospect of imminent violence.¹

In the case of Harold Pinter it is possible to see connections between his early life, his formative career in the theatre, and his work as a dramatist. (Naismith 2000: p.14)

Harold Pinter was born on the 10th of October, 1930, in Hackney, a working – class neighbourhood in London's East End. His grandparents were Ashkenazic Jews who had fled persecution in Poland and Odessa. His father, Jack, was a tailor whose own family had artistic leanings. His mother, Frances (nee Moskowitz), came from a convivial, extrovert and spiritually sceptical clan. It was not difficult to trace in Pinter's own complex personality elements from both sides of the family. He balanced his father's iron determination with his mother's instinctive generosity.²

He spent his first nine years in Lower Clapton, a short walk from the school in Hackney Downs that he would later attend. At the start of England's war with Germany, in 1939, Pinter was evacuated, with other London children, to the country. It is hard to exaggerate the impact of this sudden expulsion on a solitary, sensitive nine-year-old used to being the spotlit focus of parents' love.³ After a year or so in Cornwall, unfamiliar terrain to a city boy, he returned to his parents in London, then left with his mother for an area closer to the city.⁴

His prime memories of evacuation today are of loneliness, bewilderment, separation and loss, themes that recur in all Pinter's works. On the day they returned, in 1944, the Germans staged a V-2 rocket attack. Rocket raids continued, but while the Pinters evacuated their home several times, it remained unburned. From September 1942 until July 1948 he attended the all-boys Hackney Downs Grammar School. He particularly admired his English

¹ GUSSOW, Mel, BRANTLEY, Ben. *Harold Pinter, Playwright of the Pause, Dies at 78*. Dostupné z: www.nytimes.com/2008/12/26/theater/26pinter

² BILLINGTON, Michael. *Harold Pinter. The Guardian*. Dostupné z: www.theguardian.com/culture/2008/dec/27/harold-pinter-obituary-playwright-politics

³ BILLINGTON, Michael. *The life and work of Harold Pinter*. Faber and Faber, 1996, 418. Page 6

⁴ DUKORE, Bernard Frank. *Harold Pinter. New York: Grove Press, 1982, 139*. Page 13.

master, Joseph Brearly, who was devoted to theatre and who directed him as Macbeth and Romeo.⁵

Not only was London in the front line of attack and regular bombing an event that was either experienced directly or heard about while evacuated, but Fascist anti-Semitism was a reality in East London even after the war. Pinter experienced violence from this source in the streets of Hackney. The threat and actuality of violence, symbolised by the German Gestapo and carried on after the war, became a part of a general consciousness – a permanent scar on the mind. The threat of violence, from unspecified authorities, is reflected in some of Pinter's early plays, which have been called Comedies of Menace.⁶

In 1948 he received a London County Council Grant to study acting at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. There he felt uncomfortable, it turned out to be unhappy and seemingly most unproductive periods of his life.⁷ Pretending a nervous breakdown, he roamed the streets instead of attending classes. Soon he left this school. That year, on his eighteenth birthday, he became eligible for National service in armed forces, but he refused on the ground that was a conscientious objector. Twice he appeared before magistrates, who might have sent him to prison, instead they fined him. Pinter's refusal to join the army, so soon after the war, is indicative of his independent spirit and moral awareness. He simply found the idea of another war 'immoral', and his radical rejections of official brutality and oppression has been carried through to his later plays and his activities in support of persecuted writers worldwide. It was the most momentous decision of Pinter's young life. Everything marked Pinter out, from his earliest years, as an independent spirit. Pinter started out as an actor. After studying at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art for a time, he worked in regional theatre in the 1950s and sometimes used the stage name David Baron.⁸

In 1956, Pinter was married to the actress Vivien Merchant. For a time, they lived in Notting Hill Gate in a slum. Eventually Pinter managed to borrow some money and move away. In an interview in 1966 Pinter said that he had never written any part for any actor, however his wife Vivien frequently appeared in his plays.

A turning-point came in 1957 when one of Pinter's old Hackney friends, Henry Woolf, asked him to write a play for Bristol University's recently established drama department. The result was *The Room*, and it reveals Pinter staking out his territory from the start. The play

⁵ DUKORE, Bernard Frank. *Harold Pinter*. New York: Grove Press, 1982,139. Page 14

⁶ NAISMITH, Bill. *Harold Pinter, The Caretaker, The Birthday Party and The Homecoming*. Faber and Faber, 2000,198. Page 15

⁷ BILLINGTON, Michael. *The life and work of Harold Pinter*. Faber and Faber, 1996,418. Page 20

⁸ Bibliography. *Harold Pinter*. Dostupné z www.biography.com/people/harold-pinter-9441163

shows an anxious recluse resisting the insidious pressures of the outside world, and artfully blends comedy and menace. It was a staggeringly confident debut which attracted the attention of a young producer, Michael Codron, who decided to present Pinter's next play, *The Birthday Party*, at the Lyric Hammersmith in 1958. The result was a disaster. The play was roundly dismissed by the critics and taken off at the end of the week.

The play that finally secured his reputation was *The Caretaker*, first produced at the Arts Theatre in 1960. *The Caretaker* was a real turning point for Pinter. It gave him fame and security. It prompted all sorts of exciting commissions. But it also led to the unravelling of his marriage. Like many of his plays, it was triggered by personal experience, in this case, that of living in a house in Chiswick, South-West London. The landlord was a builder whose handyman-brother one day brought back a vagrant who was eventually expelled⁹

His next major play, *The Homecoming* (first produced 1965), helped to establish him as the originator of a unique dramatic idiom. Such plays as *Landscape* (first produced 1969), *Silence* (first produced 1969), *Night* (first produced 1969), and *Old Times* (first produced 1971) virtually did away with physical activity on the stage. Pinter's later successes included *No Man's Land* (first produced 1975), *Betrayal* (first produced 1978), *Moonlight* (first produced 1993), and *Celebration* (first produced 2000). From the 1970s on, Pinter did much directing of both his own and others' works.¹⁰

In July 1975, while he was directing *Otherwise Engaged*, Vivien Merchant sued Pinter for divorce because he was otherwise engaged with Lady Antonia Fraser, a popular bibliographer, wife of the Tory MP Hugh Fraser, and daughter of the Earl of Longford, whose anti-smut crusades brought him the nickname 'Lord Porn'. In December 1976 the Frasers were divorced. Vivien Merchant then withdrew her suit, but in August 1980, she and Pinter were divorced. On December 9, Pinter and Lady Antonia announced that they were married. In suitably Pinteresque secrecy, they would not say where or when the ceremony took place. In November, however, with equal suitability, certainty disappeared from Pinter's factual announcement. That month, it was discovered that Vivien Merchant had neglected to sign the divorce papers, thereby invalidating Pinter's new marriage. She then signed them, whereupon Pinter and Lady Antonia underwent a second marriage ceremony.¹¹ His life had its tragedies, but his marriage to Fraser provided infinite joy. She survives him, as does his son Daniel by

⁹ BILLINGTON, Michael. *Harold Pinter*. *The Guardian*. Dostupné z: www.theguardian.com/culture/2008/dec/27/harold-pinter-obituary-playwright-politics

¹⁰ ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA. *Harold Pinter-BRITISH DRAMATIST*. Dostupné z: www.britannica.com/biography/Harold-Pinter

¹¹ DUKORE, Bernard Frank. *Harold Pinter*. New York: Grove Press, 1982,139. Page 20,21

his first wife, who died in 1982. For all his rage against injustice and constant illness, his later years were crowned with happiness.¹²

His blissfully happy new life with Fraser undoubtedly helped him to intensify his fascination with politics. His plays had always dealt with the intricacies of domestic power. His closest friends included the Marxist playwright David Mercer and the campaigning actor Peggy Ashcroft, who in 1973 encouraged him to voice his opposition to American involvement in the overthrow of Chile's President Allende. But it was only in the mid-1980s that he started to express, in dramatic form, his strong feelings about torture, human rights and the double-standards of the western democracies.¹³ An outspoken political campaigner, Pinter was a critic of Tony Blair and George Bush, who he called a "mass murderer". He condemned the invasion of Iraq as „bandit act, an act of blatant state terrorism, demonstrating absolute contempt for the conception of international law".

Harold Pinter had long been an admirer of the dissident Czech playwright Václav Havel and had corresponded with him. He had also acted in Havel's plays in England in order to draw attention to them and persistently advocated his freedom from arrest.¹⁴ In June 1989, Harold Pinter and Antonia Fraser visited Václav and Olga Havel in their farmhouse in Bohemia, overlooked by a 24-hour police guard. Six weeks later, Havel is chosen as President of Czechoslovakia.¹⁵ Antonia Fraser in her autobiography, *Must You Go?* Describes Pinter's interest in politics:

„Politics began to feature increasingly in Harold's life now that he had become, in his off-repeated words, 'the luckiest man in the world.' It has to be said that this was not a popular move in the general estimation. ...Nevertheless Harold strongly rebutted the idea that the artist was honour-bound to stick to his art and had no duties as a citizen.” (Fraser 2010: 147).

His final work, *Celebration* (2000), is a wry look at power-conscious couples dining in a chic restaurant that bears a striking resemblance to the Ivy, a famous theatre gathering place in London. *Celebration* was inspired by the playwright's early days as an unemployed actor, when he took a job as a busboy at the National Liberal Club. Because he dared to

¹² BILLINGTON, Michael. *Harold Pinter. The Guardian*. Dostupné z: www.theguardian.com/culture/2008/dec/27/harold-pinter-obituary-playwright-politics

¹³ BILLINGTON, Michael. *Harold Pinter. The Guardian*. Dostupné z: www.theguardian.com/culture/2008/dec/27/harold-pinter-obituary-playwright-politics

¹⁴ FRASER, Antonia. *Must you go?*. Orion Books, 2000, 392. Page 191

¹⁵ HAROLDPINTER. *Harold Pinter With Vaclav Havel*. Dostupné z: www.haroldpinter.org/politics/politics_freedom.shtml

intrude on a conversation among several diners, he was fired. Between 1957 and 2000, he wrote 31 plays; between 1963 and 2007, 27 screenplays.

As for the man himself, he was full of contradictions. He had a reputation for being short-tempered, but, in writing a critical biography of him, I was more struck by his unflinching loyalty. He remained close to the friends of his youth - the Hackney gang of Henry Woolf, Mick Goldstein and Morris Wernick. He also listened to what other people said - the secret of his gift as a writer. And he had an immense zest for life. He loved poetry, wine, bridge and just about every kind of sport, especially cricket. I often thought he was as proud of the cricket team he first played for and then managed, the Gaieties, as of almost all his literary accomplishments.

Mr. Pinter learned he had cancer of the oesophageal in late 2001. In 2005, when he received the Nobel Prize in Literature, he was unable to attend the awards ceremony at the Swedish Academy in Stockholm but delivered an acceptance speech from a wheelchair in a recorded video. *“There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false.”*¹⁶ On January 18, 2007 he was conferred the Legion d'honneur by the French Prime Minister at a ceremony at the French Embassy in London. It was probably the last major honour received by him.¹⁷

Harold Pinter passed away in London in the presence of his wife Antonia Fraser at the age of 78 on December 24th, 2008 after a long fight against cancer. His funeral was conducted on December 31, 2008 at the graveside in Kensal Green Cemetery. In the half an hour secular ceremony passages were read from seven of his works and one from ‘The Dead’ written by James Joyce. These were selected in advance by Pinter himself. As Michael Billington sums up:” *Pinter was a man of infinite complexity and abundant contradiction”*. (Billington,2009. p.401)

¹⁶ HAROLD, Pinter. *Art, truth and politics*. Dostupné z: www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/dec/08/theatre.nobelprize

¹⁷ GUSSOW, Mel, BRANTLEY, Ben. *Harold Pinter, Playwright of the Pause, Dies at 78*. Dostupné z: www.nytimes.com/2008/12/26/theater/26pinter

2. *The Birthday Party* – a comedy of menace

In 1957 David Campton used the term „Comedies of Menace “as a subtitle of his one-act plays collectively called *The Lunatic View*. In 1958 Irving Wardle applied it to *The Birthday party*. Now it signifies a kind of play in which a character or more characters feel the menacing presence—actual or imaginary, of some obscure and frightening force, power or personality.¹⁸ *The fear and the menace become a source of comedy, albeit laconic, grim or black. Harold Pinter, among others, exploited the possibilities of such a situation in such plays as The Birthday Party (1958) and The Dumb Waiter (1960). (CUDDON,2013,p.156)*

Harold Pinter exploited the possibilities of this kind of situation in his early plays like *The Room, Birthday Party* and *A Slight Ache*, where both the character/s and the audience face an atmosphere apparently funny but actually having suggestiveness of some impending threat from outside. The atmosphere of menace can drop suddenly from a high comic level to deep seriousness. Pinter himself explained the situation: "*I agree that more often than not the speech only seems to be funny - the man in question is actually fighting a battle for his life*".¹⁹ The main sources of menace are the feelings of the unknown and uncertainty. Menace feeds on people's acceptance, no matter how reluctant, of the possibility that danger or disaster lurks round the next corner, hidden as yet and therefore all the more unnerving.²⁰ Pinter's comedies of menace have a rather simplistic setting; they might focus on one or two powerful images and usually are set in just one room.

In fact, the play *The Birthday Party* is built around the exchanges of words which contain hints that suggest the impending doom lurking around them. But more importantly, menace is presented through the fears the characters feel but cannot spot. First of all, fear of weather is introduced: the characters repeatedly enquire about weather, and this becomes tangible once the audience understand that the lodge is situated on the coast of a sea.

Another technique that Pinter uses to create an atmosphere of menace is to cast doubt on almost everything in the play. One method of doing this is to have a character give a clear and definite statement and then have him flatly deny it later on. The nature of reality here is confused - the audience no longer knows what is or is not true and out of this comes an atmosphere of mystery and uncertainty. Like many of Pinter's other plays, very little of the

¹⁸ DUKORE, Bernard Frank. *Harold Pinter*. New York: Grove Press, 1982,139. Page 23

¹⁹ ESSLIN, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. 2004, 479. Page 242

²⁰ PINTER, Harold. *The Birthday Party: With Commentary and Notes*. Methuen Student Editions, London, 1981, 97. Page 15

expository information in *The Birthday Party* is provable; Pinter does not give background information about the characters and it is often contradicted by the characters and otherwise ambiguous. Therefore, one cannot take what they say at face value. For example, in Act One, Stanley describes his career, saying "*I've played the piano all over the world,*" reduces that to "*All over the country,*" and then he states „*I once gave a concert.*"

3. The plot of *The Birthday Party*

„My second play, *The Birthday Party*, I wrote in 1958 - or 1957. It was totally destroyed by the critics of the day, who called it an absolute load of rubbish.“ Harold Pinter²¹

On April 28, 1958, the full-length play *The Birthday Party* was performed at the Arts Theatre in Cambridge, directed by Pinter himself, toured to Oxford, Wolverhampton and Brighton, and then, in May, opened at the Lyrics Theatre, Hammersmith, in West London. It closed after only one week, having been savaged by the critics, only Harold Hobson, drama critic of the Sunday Times, recognized Pinter's quality. However, his review appeared too late to do the production any good. Most critics opined that Pinter splashed in obscurity and suffered from the negative influence of Samuel, and other avant-garde writers.

Act I.

Meg and Petey, a working-class couple in their mid-sixties, run a boarding house in a washed-up English seaside town. Meg is in her sixties, sentimental and unintelligent. She dotes on Stanley, trying to be both mother and mistress to him. They begin their routine morning conversation while she prepares breakfast.

MEG: *“Is Stanley up yet?”*

PETEY: *“I don't know. Is he?”*

MEG: *“I don't know. I haven't seen him down yet.”*

PETEY: *“Well then, he can't be up.”*

MEG. *“Haven't you seen him down?”*

PETEY. *“I've only just come in.”*

MEG. *“He must be still asleep.”* (PINTER, 1981.p.4)

The two characters, Meg and Petey, have their routine conversation at the breakfast table, but they are not really paying attention to each other. He refuses to talk more than what is absolutely necessary with Meg. There is a comic play on words, which also contributes to the absurdity and meaninglessness of their life.

Stanley, their sole tenant, comes downstairs for his meal. Petey mentions two strangers seeking a room who approached him as he was collecting chairs on the beach the previous

²¹BRAINYQUOTE. *Harold Pinter Quotes*. Dostupné z: www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/h/harold_pinter.html

night. A neighbour, Lulu, comes to call and tries to convince Stanley to take a walk, but he declines. Two strangers, Goldberg and McCann, arrive. Stanley's reaction to their arrival suggests that he has been expecting and dreading this moment. He creeps out of the back door to avoid them. Meg is delighted by the idea that her boarding-house is on the list. When she declares that it is Stanley's birthday, Goldberg and McCann suggest that they organise a party for him that evening. Meg attempts to satisfy Stanley by giving him his birthday present, a toy drum, bought with the assistance of Lulu. Stanley begins to play the drum gently, then with an uncontrolled frenzy.

Act II.

That evening, McCann tells Stanley about the birthday party. McCann congratulates Stanley on his birthday. Stanley wants to spend the evening alone and tries to leave, but McCann does not let him. Stanley insists that he has met McCann before, and grows upset when McCann denies the connection. Stanley is evidently frightened and tries to discover who Goldberg and McCann are and why they are at the boarding house. Goldberg and McCann interrogate Stanley and accuse him of betraying their "organization". Meg arrives, beating Stanley's toy drum and interrupts the growing violence between Stanley and his two tormentors. Meg is dressed for his birthday party and Goldberg compliments her. Stanley's isolation is emphasised when Lulu arrives and begins a flirtation with Goldberg while Meg and McCann, relax by whiskey, talk of happy times they think or they remember. The mood changes when Meg suggests to play blind man's buff. During Stanley's turn, he is blindfolded by McCann, who breaks his glasses and places the drum in his path. Stanley reaches Meg and tries to strangle her. The lights go out and he assaults Lulu. Panic grows, heightened by a series of sounds - an insistent drum beat and a scream from Lulu. McCann shines his flashlight on the table to discover Stanley standing over Lulu and he giggles manically.

Act III.

The following morning Meg, suffering a hangover. Meg and Petey have their morning conversation. Their chat this morning concerns the conversation which Meg overheard the previous night between Goldberg, McCann and Stanley. Meg assumes that they must have been friends in the past. Meg goes out to buy food, leaving Petey at home. Goldberg enters

and sits and joins Petey explaining that Stanley has had a nervous breakdown. Petey is worried about Stanley. Goldberg's answers to his questions are evasive. McCann enters with suitcases. He is uneasy, apparently disturbed by the hours he has spent with Stan during the night. Lulu enters and accuses Goldberg of having taken sexual advantage of her the night before. McCann insults her and she leaves. When Stanley comes down for breakfast, he is clean shaven, and neatly dressed in a dark suit and white shirt. He holds his broken glasses. Petey suggests a way to fix the glasses and offers to fetch a doctor Goldberg rejects it. When Petey talk with Stanley, the two strangers are preparing to leave. They inform Petey that Stanley is coming with them. Stanley tries to speak but can only make sounds. Petey protests, but is unable to prevent them from leaving. Meg returns, unaware of what has happened. She asks after Stanley. Petey tells Meg that he sleeps. Meg loses herself in her memories of the lovely party last night, where she was "*the belle of the ball*".

Despite its initial commercial failure, *The Birthday Party* has since proven to be one Pinter's most reproduced plays. It was revived by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Aldwych Theatre in London in 1964, to critical success. Pinter directed this rendition of the show and later wrote, directed, and appeared in subsequent productions, including the 1968 film version which starred Robert Shaw as Stanley. The Lyric Opera House celebrated the play's 50th anniversary in May 2008, just months before Pinter's death.²²

²² GRADESAVER. *The Birthday Party*. Dostupné z: www.gradesaver.com/the-birthday-party/study-guide/short-summary/

4. Characters of *The Birthday Party*

Meg and Petey

Meg is Petey's wife. She is sweet, dotty, and deeply and inexplicably attached to Stanley. She appears to be oblivious to the underlying menace of the situation. Petey is a working class man in his sixties who owns a boarding house with his wife, Meg. He is a gentle man.²³ Petey is tolerant, observant, but leads a life of quiet simplicity – attending deckchairs, reading the paper, playing a weekly game of chess and working in his garden.²⁴ Meg's situation as a childless old woman who talks through repetitions may seem funny and odd, but those cover up her unconscious desire to have son. She tries to fulfil the desire through the mothering of Stanley and Petey. Her lack of intelligence is all too evident but her limitations are not only exposed for amusement.²⁵

The emptiness of the relationship between Meg and Petey is evident from the beginning of the play. Their conversation in their seaside boarding house is banal and inconsequential. She asks him the most obvious and even idiotic questions and he replies patiently while having breakfast. The opening conversation is as follows:

MEG. "*Is that you, Petey?*"

Pause

MEG: "*Petey, is that you?*"

Pause

MEG: "*Petey?*"

PETEY. "*What?*"

MEG. "*Is that you?*"

PETEY. "*Yes, it's me.*"

MEG. "*What? Are you back?*"

PETEY. "*Yes*" (Pinter, 1981, p.3)

²³ MCCARTER. *The Birthday Party*. Dostupné z: www.mccarter.org/Education/birthday-party/html/bdayprint.pdf

²⁴ NAISMITH, Bill. *Harold Pinter, The Caretaker, The Birthday Party and The Homecoming*. Faber and Faber, 2000,198. Page 57

²⁵ NAISMITH, Bill. *Harold Pinter, The Caretaker, The Birthday Party and The Homecoming*. Faber and Faber, 2000,198. Page 54

From the above conversation, it is evident that much of the supposed conversation is actually just talk. In fact, they have nothing much to say to each other. Here, Pinter pushes the emptiness of a husband-wife conversation to its very limit. The characters suffer from the lack of traditional dialogue that can keep them together. Thus, the banality of human relationships, a familiar feature of postmodernism, seems to be a dominant theme of *The Birthday Party*.

Stanley

Stanley Webber lives in a modest flat run by Petey and Meg Boles. He is an emotionally troubled man in his thirties. Stanley's disposition suddenly turns sullen at the news of new boarders in the boarding house where he resides. He claims to be an accomplished pianist who tries to get back on his feet, but his reliability is unclear.²⁶ The problem that exists with regard to Stanley is that the play does not make explicit what exactly he has done to provoke the arrival of Goldberg and McCann. His behaviour on hearing of them, and his reaction when they arrive, both suggest guilt, but the guilt is undefined. This is the whole point of the play. The accusations that are levelled at him during the interrogation of Act Two become so bizarre that the situation moves into the surreal and what is shown is a mental breakdown caused by a horrific verbal assault by two overpowering bullies. When Goldberg and McCann have the opportunity to speak to Stanley alone, they force him to sit down and begin questioning many questions. During this interrogation, they blame Stanley for many things and asked a number of questions, both true and false, funny and serious, ridiculous and serious, with the sole purpose of intimidating and abusing Stanley. The whole interrogation is conducted in the atmosphere of terror and brings Stanley into an emotional and psychic collapse.

Did Goldberg, McCann and Stanley know before? It is not evident because McCann denies knowing Stanley. On the other hand, Goldberg lists the same places such as: Fuller's Tea House, Boots Library, which Stanley has known since his childhood. The character of Stanley is filled with dread. It is not clear whether Stanley is frightened of two foreigners or the hopelessness of lifelessness.

Stanley's shabby appearance is combined with inconsistent words and memorising may seem strange and invoke mild laughter. Stanley is the opposite of a romantic hero. His treatment of Meg initially is rough, playful, teasing. It seems that he projects his own fear on

²⁶ MCCARTER. *The Birthday Party*. Dostupné z : www.mccarter.org/Education/birthday-party/html/bdayprint.pdf

to Meg by terrorising her with stories of nameless men coming to abduct her in a van. In the panic of the party, he attempts to strangle Meg and rape Lulu. Even though Stanley is finally carried off shaven, besuited, white-collared and ostensibly tamed, the spirit of resistance is never finally quelled.²⁷

Lulu

Lulu is closer to Stanley than other characters. She is described as an attractive woman in her twenties, but Stanley seems unimpressed. She is not a complicated character, which reflects her role in the play. Her lack of sophistication and her naivety help to keep the action in a real world. During *The Birthday Party*, she is completely taken in by Goldberg's eloquence and offers herself to 'the older man' quite willingly.²⁸

Lulu: (to Goldberg): "*Do you think you knew me when I was a little girl?*" (Pinter,1981, p.53)

Lulu is childish and seductive and she flirts with Goldberg. At the beginning of the party, she enjoys the party but she is also aware of the strange atmosphere of the party.

Lulu (to Goldberg): "*You're the dead image of the first man I ever loved.*"

Goldberg: *It goes without saying.* (Pinter,1981, p.55)

Goldberg is not surprised when Lulu says that he reminds her of her first love. Finally, she becomes a victim at the hands of the male gangsters, because Goldberg only wants to exploit her both mentally and physically. Lulu is seduced by Goldberg and she becomes infatuated with him. There is mentioned another type of violence - violence against women, also known as gender-based violence, where women and girls disproportionately suffer.

McCann: „*Your sort, you spend too much time in bed*". (Pinter,1981, p.80)

In this case, Lulu is treated as a prostitute and insulted by McCann in this way. In the male-dominated world, there is a widespread violence and cruelty inflicted upon women.

Goldberg and McCann

The two intruders, Goldberg and McCann, arrive together and form one of the most famous double-acts in modern drama. Goldberg is an attractive, charismatic and charming leader. His past is vague, but he clearly has a dark history, and his presence brings a sense of

²⁷ BILLINGTON, Michael. *The life and work of Harold Pinter*. Faber and Faber, 1996,418. Page 78

²⁸ NAISMITH, Bill. *Harold Pinter, The Caretaker, The Birthday Party and The Homecoming*. Faber and Faber, 2000,198. Page 55-56

menace. He is a brilliant manipulator, with a sinister and charming side. McCann is an Irish henchman. He is a bit of a thug, and an imposing figure who serves as the muscle of the operation. Good at what he does, but oddly nervous about it in anticipation.²⁹ They create a frightening image and they evidently members of an unnamed "organization. They aim is to take Stanley away from the boarding-house. Ironically, they are also vulnerable characters – subject to and victims of their social background. Both are deeply insecure, and this becomes increasingly evident during the play. The two act on behalf of the dark forces of social orthodoxy.³⁰ Generally, McCann is a quiet, brooding a menacing presence, while Goldberg dominates with a series of marvellously evocative reminiscences of glorious childhood filled with happy sunny days and great family affection. These speeches are made up entirely of clichés.³¹

²⁹ The Birthday Party. Dostupné z: www.mccarter.org/Education/birthday-party/html/bdayprint.pdf

³⁰ NAISMITH, Bill. *Harold Pinter, The Caretaker, The Birthday Party and The Homecoming*. Faber and Faber, 2000,198. Page 48-49

³¹ NAISMITH, Bill. *Harold Pinter, The Caretaker, The Birthday Party and The Homecoming*. Faber and Faber, 2000,198. Page 64

5. Violence, anxiety and fear in Harold Pinter's *Birthday Party*

The Birthday Party is a mixture of tragic and comic events, quite characteristic of postmodern texts. Though it has moments of great humour, most of it is of the extremely threatening and violent kind. In fact, much of the humour co-exists alongside unpleasantness. At the beginning of the play, we are presented with an apparently trivial situation which, as it develops, becomes laden with threat, fear, danger and violence.

Harold Pinter reflected threat, anxiety, conflicts, and violence between people in his works. The power of the play resides precisely in the way Pinter takes stock ingredients of popular drama and invests them with political resonance. *The Birthday Party* works as a thriller and as a deeply political play about the imperative need for resistance. But on yet another less noticed level it is a private, obsessive work about the time past, about some vanished world, either real or idealised, into which all but one of the characters readily escapes.

Comedic moments rapidly shift towards menace, such as when a party game of blind man's buff quickly transforms into violence. The game of 'blind man's buff' forms the climax of *the Birthday Party*. 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. Seemingly innocent birthday party suddenly turns into a deadly game of cat and mouse. The blind man's buff is a bizarre and violent game which builds the dramatic suspense. The most vulnerable is Stanley who fights for his identity. His vision is different from other's vision so he is not ready to accept society's rules and regulations and society does not want to accept him with his freedom.

MEG: "I want to play a game!?"

GOLDBERG: "A game?"

LULU: "What game?"

MEG: "Any game.!"

LULU: "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!”

McCann: “Stanley. Stanley.”

MEG: “Stanley, we’re going to play a game. Oh, come on, don’t be sulky, Stan.”

(Pinter,1981, p.54)

Perhaps the violent post-war atmosphere that Pinter experienced in England in his early youth was one of the major historical and social influences on his early work and the reason for his emphasis on the theme of menace. The plotline of *The Birthday Party* was being played out as the most utter realism throughout Europe during Pinter’s childhood and teens. It is not simply a play about a pathetic victim brainwashed into social conformity. It is a play about the need to resist, with the utmost vigour, dead ideas and the inherited weight of the past.³² It is equally noticeable how particular aspects of the author’s own biography influences the characters’ reminiscences. From the very outset, the defining quality of Pinter’s play is not so much fear and menace – though they are undoubtedly present – as “a yearning for some lost Eden as a refuge from the uncertain, miasmic present.”³³

The play’s autobiographical significance could hardly be more explicit: Pinter identifies with Stan and Petey’s active and passive resistance to Goldberg and McCann. The mysterious pair plays the role of the intruders: they arrive uninvited, their identities and motivations are questionable, and they disrupt the peace that Stan hopes to find in the house. According to Billington, Stan is as dubious as Goldberg and McCann, and his behaviour in the house, particularly towards Meg, marks him as an intruder figure as well. In removing him from the house, Goldberg and McCann inadvertently liberate Meg from Stan’s tyranny.

Goldberg attacks Stanley for betraying wife, mother, origins and religious faith. It could be said that Goldberg and McCann are themselves victims. As the play proceeds, the two characters gradually fall apart making the climax much more equivocal than is generally recognised. Through the character of Goldberg, Pinter also reveals something of his own complicated attitude to the whole question of Jewish identity. He exposes the shakiness of a blind, unthinking obeisance to the past. Pinter, while satirising Jewish tradition, also shows Goldberg as a terrified, even beleaguered figure. *The Birthday Party* demonstrates how Pinter himself instinctively resisted any form of oppression. It shows how Pinter was able to divorce his private identification with Jewish suffering from his public critique of Jewish tradition.³⁴

In his Interview to Larry Bensky Harold Pinter says:

³² BILLINGTON, Michael. *The life and work of Harold Pinter*. Faber and Faber, 1996,418. Page 78

³³ BILLINGTON, Michael. *The life and work of Harold Pinter*. Faber and Faber, 1996,418. Page 82

³⁴ BILLINGTON, Michael. *The life and work of Harold Pinter*. Faber and Faber, 1996,418. Page 79-80

*“Violence is really only an expression of the question of dominance and subservience, which is possibly a repeated theme in my plays.... A threat is constantly there: it's got to do with this question of being in the uppermost position, or attempting to be.”*³⁵

The Birthday Party is full of violence, both physical and emotional, overall suggesting that violence is a fact of life. The violence is doubly affecting because the setting seems so pleasant and ordinary. Most of the men show 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.

Much of the violence in the play 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 we realize that disaster might come, we can feel the potential through many moments of silence and tense atmosphere.³⁶ Anyone living in a society which permits injustice or inhumanity may be called upon to pay the penalty for his acquiescence.

*„Words become weapons in the mouth of Pinter's characters. The one who gets hold of the more elaborate or more accurate expression established dominance over his partner. The victim of aggression can be swamped by language which comes too thick and fast, or is too non sensual to be comprehended. This happens, above all, to Stanley in *The Birthday Party*, who is subjected to a process of brainwashing through a torrent of incomprehensible questions and assertion fired at him by the two terrorists.”*³⁷

The Birthday Party represents a kind of dramatized theory of power, in which language works as a principle for determining characters' superiority and inferiority. Language is used as a manipulative weapon to dominate others. There is a certain temptation to compare totalitarian rulers to Goldberg and McCann. Totalitarian leaders attempt to be masters of the universe to mould characters into certain forms. Totalitarian power uses tools such as physical violence, manipulative language or brainwashing, to get the people to believe

³⁵ BENSKEY, Larry. *Harold Pinter, The Art of Theater* No. 3. Dostupné z:

www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4351/harold-pinter-the-art-of-theater-no-3-harold-pinter

³⁶ *The Birthday Party Themes*. Dostupné z: www.gradesaver.com/the-birthday-party/study-guide/themes

³⁷ ESSLIN, Martin. *Harold Pinter. A Study of his Play*. London: Eyre Methuen, 1977, 262. Page 49

a certain sets of ideas. The particular political system is not specified in *The Birthday Party* but it seems that Goldberg and McCann could be members of a political or religious organization, such as Stalin's KGB, Hitler's Gestapo, or Orwell's Big Brother. Stanley deals with the terror of being taken away and destroyed by forces bigger than himself. Finally, he remains silent to protect himself from the torture and violence which is used by the mechanism of power.

Conclusion

Harold Pinter was an English playwright, poet, actor, director, screenwriter and one of the most original, stylish and mysterious writers. His life and work show that there are various influences that create the skills, opinions and talent of the human personality. The main source of anxiety in his plays comes from his dark view of his life. The violent post-war atmosphere that Pinter experienced in England in his early youth was one of the major influences on his early work and the reason for his emphasis on the theme of menace, fear and violence. Pinter's views and styles in writing were influenced by his childhood experiences that he witnessed during the Second World War. Based on these experiences, Pinter was able to form his firm opinions against the war and violence. Consequently, he used the ideas in his plays. The theme of violence, anxiety, fear is widely reflected in his work. He created a violent world where the characters are in a constant struggle and the theme of menace is a ubiquitous issue.

The Birthday Party shows people in desperate and distressing situations. It gives a picture of threat, violence and fear and raises a lot of questions about human morals and values. Stanley is an artist who looks for ideal society. He wants to escape emptiness of modern life but he becomes a pitiful figure, an embodiment of the anxiety and fear.

The Birthday day is full of ambiguity and absurdity. For instance, Stanley's birthday is questioned. Meg bought him a gift, but Stanley says he has his birthday in a month. Finally, it is clear that there is no birthday party for Stanley, but it is s actually Stanley's interrogation. The story has a shocking and destructive ending.

For me, the main message of the play is Pinter's protest against brutality, violence and people's indifference. We are surrounded by violence every day. Brutality in our society is increasing and it is so terrible that our society becomes more indifferent to it. We are to blind to see how it affects us, perhaps it reflects on our lack of interest in society. The themes of resistance to violence are just as relevant today as they were in Pinter's conception.

Resumé

Harold Pinter je anglický dramatik, básník, herec, režisér a scenárista; jeden z nejoriginálnějších, nejstylovějších a nejtajemnějších spisovatelů. Na jeho životě a díle je patrné, jaké různé vlivy mohou ovlivňovat dovednosti, názory a talent lidské osobnosti. Hlavním zdrojem úzkosti v Pinterových hrách je jeho temný pohled na život. Násilná poválečná atmosféra, kterou Pinter v Anglii zažil v raném mládí, byla jedním z hlavních vlivů na jeho počáteční dílo a příčinou jeho důrazu na téma hrozby, strachu a násilí. Jeho literární názory a styly byly ovlivněny jeho dětskými zážitky, kterých byl svědkem během druhé světové války. Na základě těchto zkušeností dokázal Pinter formovat své jasné názory proti válce a násilí a následně použít tyto myšlenky ve svých hrách. Téma násilí, úzkosti, strachu se v jeho díle objevuje ve velké míře. Pinter vytváří násilný svět, kde jsou jeho postavy v neustálém boji, a téma hrozby je všudypřítomné.

Hra *Narozeniny* ukazuje lidi v zoufalé, strašlivé situaci. Podává obrázek o hrozbě, násilí a strachu a vyvolává mnoho otázek ohledně lidské morálky a hodnot. Hra je plná nejednoznačnosti a absurdity. Například Stanleyho narozeniny jsou obklopeny mnoha nejasnostmi. Meg mu koupila dárek, ale Stanley tvrdí, že má své narozeniny až za měsíc. Ukáže se, že nejde o oslavu Stanleyho narozenin, ale jedná se o Stanleyho výslech. Stanley je člověk, který hledá ideální společnost. Chce uniknout prázdnotě moderního života, ale stane se žalostnou postavou, ztělesněním úzkosti a strachu. Nevinná situace se mění v teror a celý tento příběh má šokující, možno říci destruktivní konec.

Hlavním poselstvím této hry je protest proti brutalitě, násilí a lidské lhostejnosti. Je nutné zdůraznit, že násilí nás obklopuje neustále. Brutalita vyskytující se v naší společnosti se zvětšuje a je tak děsivá, že se stáváme vůči ní lhostejní a neteční. Jsme slepí a nevidíme, jak nás to ovlivňuje. Možná se zde odráží nedostatek našeho zájmu o společnost. Odpor proti násilí je i dnes stejně důležitou a naléhavou výzvou.

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