



Language as an Arrow and a Shield in the Hands of Harold Pinter's Characters: A Study of the Play *The Birthday Party*

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Received: 28 Jul 2022; Received in revised form: 20 Aug 2022; Accepted: 25 Aug 2022; Available online: 31 Aug 2022

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"One of the most naturally gifted dramatists to have come out of England since the war,"¹ Harold Pinter has emerged as the most original theatre talent who gave fresh life to the British theatre in the second half of the twentieth century. He has achieved international recognition and has been hailed as "Britain's best living playwright"² of post-World War II period. In 2005, the Nobel Prize was conferred upon him for his contribution to drama. That he occupies the position of a modern classic is illustrated by his name entering the language as an adjective used to describe a particular atmosphere and environment in drama: 'Pinteresque'. Pinter has been known for his experimentation and innovation in dramatic action and language. *The Birthday Party* (1957), *The Caretaker* (1960), *The Homecoming* (1965), *No Man's Land* (1975), and *Betrayal* (1978) are some of his best-known plays. The present paper undertakes to explore the language of only one of his plays – *The Birthday Party*.

Pinter catches hold of his characters at the decisive points in their lives when they are confronted with the crisis of adjustment to themselves, which precedes their confrontation with the outer world, with its issues and ideas. That is why Pinter's characters are found frightened and scared. In one of his interviews Pinter reveals: "Obviously, they are scared of what is outside the room. Outside the room is a world bearing upon them, which is frightening . . . we are all in this, all in a room, and outside is a world . . . which is most inexplicable and frightening, curious and alarming."³ However, man's existential fear is not an abstraction here but as something real, ordinary and acceptable as an

everyday occurrence, exactly different from the one in Pinter's predecessor Samuel Beckett's dramatic world. The reason behind such an impression is that his characters and dialogues are real, though the overall feeling they leave behind is one of mystery, uncertainty and poetic ambiguity. His characters' sense of uncertainty and insecurity make them behave as if they were convicts escaped from some prison. They desperately tend to hide their identity, adopt all sorts of tactics to gather confidence and prove their metal. Garrulousness, as well as reticence, appears to be used in a strategic manner by these characters. They try to dominate others by various means – hiding their cards close to their chest, by recalling the past real or invented, attacking others through aggressive torrents of words and sometimes by escaping into silence or irrelevant answers. While guarding their dear interests, these characters internalise their pretended concoction to such an extent that they sometimes appear to betray their own self. Even their silences and pauses are not mere breaks in communication, as critics have often seen them, rather they have a lot to say. The language of his characters also appears strategic because in it they give little away. Moreover, it is unreliable, elusive, evasive, obstructive, and unwilling to reveal the true self of the characters. Out of such tendencies of the characters a language arises where under what is said, another thing is being said.

Whereas linguistic gaps, devaluation and disintegration of language and failure of communication are hallmarks of the language of Beckett's characters, none of these appears to characterise the language of Pinterian

characters. There, in Pinter's plays, appear to be nothing like a failure of communication, though many of the critics have tried to thrust it on his plays as it was the case with Beckett's plays. However, Pinter himself has made the things clear in one of his interviews:

I think that we communicate only too well in our silence, in what is unsaid, that what takes place is continual evasion, desperate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves. Communication is too alarming. To enter into someone else's life is too frightening. To disclose to others the poverty within us is too fearsome a possibility . . .⁴

This statement gives multiple hints towards the language of his characters which is full of guile and deception.

Pinter's language is the language of real people. His 'tape-recorder' ear has often been praised. But apart from accurate observation, there is a lot more in his language which makes theatre critics such as Martin Esslin say "Pinter's theatre is a theatre of language; it is from the words and their rhythm that the suspense, dramatic tension, laughter and tragedy springs."⁵ Indeed significance of language in Pinter is so heightened that it is not wrong to say that in his plays language is action. Words become weapons in the mouth of characters and they decide the course of action in the life of characters. Moreover, there are varied other colours of the function of language in Pinter which can be brought to the fore only through an elaborate study of language in his plays.

Pinter's first full-length play *The Birthday Party* appears to be a play where linguistic deception and guile work as a stratagem for the characters. In this play, the characters appear to avoid the harsh reality of their repulsive existence through the strategic use of language. In the very opening part of the play, we find Mrs Meg Boles serving breakfast to her husband Mr Petey and at the same asking him question after question. About the cornflakes that she serves him, she asks Petey "Are they nice?"⁶ Then she serves him fried bread and again asks a similar question:

MEG. Here you are, Petey.

He rises, collects the plate, looks at it, sits at the table. Meg re-enters.

Is it nice?

PETEY. I haven't tasted it yet.

MEG. I bet you don't know what it is.

PETEY. Yes, I do.

MEG. What is it, then?

PETEY. Fried bread.

MEG. That's right.

... ..

PETEY. Very nice.

MEG. I knew it was. (I, 22)

About the newspaper he is reading, she wants to know if it is "good". Now, the cornflakes do not offer different tastes, nor do they need any cooking. And fried bread is easily distinguishable from any other eatable item, and a newspaper cannot be called 'good' or 'bad' as it simply depicts the things that happened in reality. Hence the questions that Meg raises here are clearly superfluous. It appears that she needs to ask such questions for some purpose. Under the verbiage, she seems to cover up her lack of ability as a cook by emphasising the 'wonderful' taste of her preparations because when the same cornflakes are served to Stanley Webber, the visitor who resides in Meg's boarding house, he finds them "horrible" (I, 24) and the tea "gravy" (I, 28). Thus, it appears that there is nothing special in Meg as a cook. And asking meaningless questions is a ritual with her to avoid the feeling of disappointment generated by a sense of incapability. Such query is not only a linguistic stratagem to conceal incapability as a cook but also an attempt to foster an illusion of capability so that self-esteem can be protected. Thus "speech is . . . a constant stratagem to cover nakedness"⁷ in Meg's case.

Another instance of Meg's use of strategic language is found in her attempt to cover up her state of being childless. The infertility is a painful sore in the body of her life. To beat this bitter reality of the unfulfilled wish, she escapes into the illusion that Stanley is her child. Motherly care and affection are unmistakably perceptible in her behaviour towards Stanley - she maintains an emotional bond with him, takes care of him and ensures his comfortable stay in her house. She calls him a 'boy' despite his being in his late thirties and gifts him a boy's drum on his birthday. She consoles him whenever he is off, just the way a mother would pacify her little one. The pot of the illusion is kept boiling with the help of linguistic chatter

while she asks questions like: "Stanny! Don't you like your cup of tea of a morning—the one I bring you?" (I, 28), "Didn't you enjoy your breakfast Stan?" or "Stan? When are you going to play the piano again?" (I, 31) and also by inviting him to narrate his wonderful experiences of the past. The love and affection of a mother are evident in her addresses, and a desire to make Stanley happy speaks volumes of her bond with him. Thus, strategic use of language is clearly perceptible in Meg's words.

Yet another linguistic ploy used by Meg to evade reality is to repeat her fantasy time and again so that it looks like becoming a reality. She believes that hers is a great boarding house and that "this house is on the list" (I, 30, 44). Though Stanley underlines the inconsiderate truth that there has been only one visitor (that is, he himself) in her boarding house since last one year or so, she basks in the glory of her imagination that hers is the best boarding house in the area and that is why, she says, Goldberg and McCann, the expected visitors, have selected her house for stay. By repeating this illusion over and over, Meg wishes to establish it as truth. Perhaps the belief in such a truth serves as a source of relief for her; it lets her escape from confronting the bitter reality and thus makes her existence tolerable. Therefore, Meg escapes into inconsequential talk and creates illusions to evade exposure of her real situation not only to others but to her own self also.

Not only Mrs Meg, but Stanley also makes strategic use of language. We see Stanley attempt to safeguard his sanctuary while Goldberg and McCann try to pull him out of his refuge. Stanley appears fretful on learning from Meg that two gentlemen are coming to stay in her house for a couple of nights. The news startles him and he endeavours to console himself as he reacts to Meg: "You're saying it on purpose" (I, 30). The lady's further emphasis on their expected arrival sends him to push aside the very thought of the impending danger compellingly and he tries to hide in a self-created burrow: "They won't come. Someone's taking the Michael. Forget all about it. It's a false alarm. A false alarm" (I, 31). Not convinced by the false succour against the 'false alarm', he drowns himself into a memory of exquisite past real or imagined:

Played the piano? I've played
the piano all over the world.
All over the country. (Pause.)
I once gave a concert [. . .]
Yes. It was a good one, too.
They were all there that night.

Every single one of them. It
was a great success. Yes. A
concert [. . .] (to himself) I had
a unique touch. Absolutely
unique. They came up to me.
They came up to me and said
they were grateful.
Champagne we had that night,
the lot. (I, 32-33)

Thus, he attempts to dissolve himself in the golden past to escape the brutal reality of imminent menace. With a desire to run away from the present situation he cooks up a story and tells Meg: "I've been offered a job, as a matter of fact" (I, 32). But before he goes into the depth of his imagination the dreaded messengers arrive.

The apparently fearful Stanley faces Goldberg and McCann confidently and tries to disparage them right at the outset through his linguistic attack. Through his gestures, body language and deeds, he tries to deride them. While shaking hands with McCann he registers his aggression and protest by withdrawing his hand from the grip of the dreaded messenger McCann quickly. Further, he flouts McCann's idea of celebrating his birthday with his strong refusal to join them: "I'm not in a mood for party tonight" (I, 48). When McCann tries to push himself in front suggesting that he is the one who "had the honour of an invitation" (I, 48) for his birthday party, Stanley mocks his claim with a derisive rejoinder: "I wouldn't call it an honour, would you? It'll just be another booze-up . . . I'd say that was plain stupid" (I, 48). However, he does not find Goldberg and McCann much discouraged from his disdainful attitude. Pinter bestows this character with varied linguistic tactics to evade unpleasant situations. He can change colours like a chameleon. When Stanley finds his antagonistic stance ineffective, he changes gears. Now he praises the Irish man's (McCann) and his country:

STANLEY (reasonably).
Look. You look an
honest man. You're
being made a fool of,
that's all. You
understand? Where do
you come from?

MCCANN. Where do you
think?

STANLEY. I know Ireland
very well. I've many
friends there. I love that
country and I admire and
trust its people. I trust

them. They respect the truth and they have a sense of humour. I think their policemen are wonderful. I've been there. I have never seen such sunsets. What about coming out to have a drink with me? (I, 52)

However, before the changed stance produces positive results Goldberg enters and Stanley has to come back to his original self to keep this man at bay. In his very first meeting with Goldberg, he makes his intentions clear. To Goldberg's "A warm night" Stanley retorts "Don't mess me about!" (I, 54). He also forbids McCann when the latter brings in bottles of wine for his birthday party: "Get that drink out. These are unlicensed premises" (I, 55). Thus, Stanley attempts to warn his opponents that they should be prepared to receive resistance in case of any offence from their side.

However, Stanley's too much eagerness to defeat his opponents through speech fails in its purpose. Rather it exposes his weak points and the fear lurking inside him comes out in the open. Now Goldberg and McCann find an opportunity to assault Stanley through the strategic use of ferocious accusations. The intensity of their diatribe increases gradually and the questions they ask perplex Stanley as they seem impossible to be answered. In a highly stylized language, they question Stanley:

GOLDBERG. Why are you wasting everybody's time, Webber? Why are you getting in everybody's way?

STANLEY. Me? What are you—

GOLDBERG. I'm telling you, Webber, you're a washout. Why are you getting on everybody's wick? Why are you driving that old lady off her conk?

MCCANN. He likes to do it! . . .

GOLDBERG. Why do you treat that young lady like a leper? She's not the leper, Webber!

STANLEY. What the—

GOLDBERG. What did you wear last week, Webber? Where do you keep your suits?

MCCANN. Why did you leave the organisation?

GOLDBERG. You hurt me, Webber. You're playing a dirty game. (I, 57-58)

In this strategic pattern of questions, Pinter divulges the brute power of words. He makes Goldberg begin in a 'cool' mood and then proceed to 'killing' instinct, and thus shows how words can do the magic. In the above instance, Stanley, who had an upper hand earlier, gradually loses the linguistic battle. He is not allowed to complete his answer as unanswerable queries are shot at him in quick succession. Pointing out a unique feature of Pinter's dialogic art Martin Esslin says:

The dialogue of Pinter's plays is a casebook of the whole gamut of *non sequiturs* in small talk; he registers the delayed-action effect resulting from differences in the speed of thinking between people – the slower witted character is constantly replying to the penultimate question while the faster one is already two jumps ahead.⁸

The subject of Goldberg and McCann's questions is quickly changed making the pattern of questions go from subtle to subtler. The ferocity is on increase. The language is used in such a way that it may remind Stanley of his possible guilt and thus make him vulnerable and at the same time it may bewilder him beyond repair.

As the grilling proceeds further, Stanley finds it difficult to handle the situation. His answers shrink at a quick pace. The menacing twosome brings in more illogical questions: "Where was your wife?"; "Why did you kill your wife?"; "Why did you never get married?" (I, 59); "Is the number 846 possible or necessary?" (I, 60); "Speak up, Webber. Why did chicken cross the road?" (I, 61); "Chicken? Egg? Which came first?" (I, 62). All such questions are illogical, and absurd. They are aimed at confusing Stanley, at making him feel culpable, and not to obtain answer:

GOLDBERG. Where was

your wife?
STANLEY. In—
GOLDBERG. Answer.
STANLEY (turning, crouched). What wife?
GOLDBERG. What have you done with your wife?
MCCANN. He has killed his wife!
GOLDBERG. Why did you kill your wife?
STANLEY (sitting, his back to the audience). What wife?
MCCANN. How did he kill her?
GOLDBERG. How did you kill her?
MCCANN. You throttled her?
GOLDBERG. With arsenic. . .
.
GOLDBERG. Why did you never get married? (I, 59)

These dialogues are obviously nonsensical, illogical and self-contradictory. If he 'never got married', wherein lies the question of 'killing or throttling' his wife? Indeed Pinter, by making the interrogators put such unfounded and contradictory questions, intends to bring to the fore the atrocious nature of simple words. Here questions are not important, what is important is the violence that lies beneath them.

The interrogation further speaks of thousands of sins that Stanley is said to have committed. Goldberg and McCann charge him of all possible mistakes: they allege him of behaving "so badly", forcing the "old man out to play chess", treating Lulu "like a leper" (I, 57), leaving "the organisation", betraying them (I, 58), killing his wife, changing name (I, 60), not paying the rent, contaminating womankind, verminating the sheet of his birth, being a traitor (I, 61) and of betraying their land and their breed (I, 63). They indict him of a wide range of crimes which vary from the trivial acts like 'not washing up a cup' to the grave offences like the one of being a "mother defiler!" (I, 61). Such accusations devastate Stanley completely and finally he finds himself unable to speak and articulates only a few indecipherable babbles: "uh-gug...uh gug...eeehhh...gag...Caahh...caahh..." (I, 94). He is

totally helpless as the stage direction reveals - he "shows no reaction. He remains, with no movements, where he sits" (I, 92). In this way Stanley's transformation underlines the capacities of language. The dreaded messengers make the aggressive Stanley sink under the weight of absurd, illogical and nonsensical questions.

Now the question arises – what crime Stanley has committed and who are Goldberg and McCann? The play does not offer any explanation in this regard nor do the interviews of the playwright. However, one thing is for sure and that is Stanley is a vulnerable human being who has made some mistakes in the past. He has hidden himself in Meg's boarding house to escape punishment internal or external. The kind of life he leads here is a clear indication of his being guilty. In one sense the pair of Goldberg and McCann represents an organisation that Stanley has betrayed and they have come to accomplish the task of recovering the erring personnel for the said organisation. Another opinion is propagated in Katherine J. Worth's statement that "Pinter brilliantly conveys the suggestion that the inquisitors are unreal beings, a projection of Stanley's obscure dread, without quite destroying the possibility of their being taken as real."⁹ Thus, Goldberg and McCann can also be a manifestation of Stanley's feeling of shame and sense of guilt which finds expression through his dreams. When the play begins Stanley is asleep in his room and so is he when it ends. At the close of *The Birthday Party*, we come across the following conversation between Meg and Petey:

MEG. Where's Stan?
Pause.
Is Stan down yet, Petey?
PETEY. No . . . he's. . . .
MEG. Is he still in the bed?
PETEY. Yes, he's . . . still asleep.
MEG. Still? He'll be late for his breakfast.
PETEY. Let him . . . sleep. (I, 96-97)

This conversation hints that Stanley is still asleep and all adversities fall on him in his dream. But the reason behind all such ominous reflections is the same—his guilty and shamed consciousness about his vulnerability, his mistakes and his sins that he might have committed in the past. If the duo comprising Goldberg and McCann is real then they take Stanley

away to some unknown Monty, and Petey is aware of this harsh fact as they drive him out in his presence yet in the final conversation between Meg and Petey the latter sustains the purposeful illusions of the lady. Though Stanley fails to shield himself as he is attacked through the subtle linguistic tools by Goldberg and McCann and is finally taken away, the lady succeeds in keeping the illusion of Stanley's presence as well as her own capabilities intact through her linguistic prattle at the end of the play as she reminisces about the party which she enjoyed last night:

MEG. . . It was a lovely party. I haven't laughed so much for years. We had dancing and singing. And games. You should have been there.

PETEY. It was good, eh?

Pause.

MEG. I was the belle of the ball.

PETEY. Where you?

MEG. Oh yes. They all said I was.

PETEY. I bet you were, too.

MEG. Oh, it's true, I was.

Pause.

I know I was. (I, 97)

Pinter's art in expressing the unsaid comes to the fore in the above conversation. The first 'pause' in this conversation speaks volumes about how Meg wishes to hang on to her illusions. She is determined to believe that nothing has happened with Stanley, that he is in his bed, and that last night's party has made her happier. Her husband also supports her in her attempt to evade the harsh reality. However, the second 'pause' and the tone of the last dialogue ensure Meg's frustration and sorrow. The dramatic effect of this fabulous and touching yet economical conversation makes the play reach its climax.

Pinter holds that people are not always ready or willing to reveal their mind or to allow others easily to peer into it. His convoluted language pattern also shows that people can be capable of revealing their true selves but they deliberately evade doing so. Pinter's language in all these plays is marked with an element of puzzle, inconsistency, suppressed tension over the struggle for power and dominance, deceptive double talk and the pervasive overtone of menace and the absurd. Pinter's dialogue also shows that the reality of his character is double and that it is almost always to be experienced at two levels. The verbal exchanges between the

characters reveal that there is not only a surface, window-dressed reality that everyone tends to take for granted, but also the hidden reality of secret emotions which often contradicts the surface reality, alters it, and imparts psychological intensity to the characters.

In Pinter's world language occupies the central position as there is little action and more verbal exchange in his plays. In a sense, language takes the lead role elbowing action aside. His characters are directed and controlled by their linguistic capabilities. Their victory or defeat depends on their use of language as a weapon of attack and defence. Language in the hands of these characters acquires subtlety owing to its deceptive use by them. They twist and mould it, manipulate words and manoeuvre linguistic contexts for their benefit or to deflate others. They may appear to be acting arbitrarily on the surface but, in fact, they are acting for very deep-seated desires and reasons and often the games and manoeuvres through language are their most reliable instruments to get them closer to their desires. From the beginning to the end of the play *The Birthday Party*, the language of Pinter's characters becomes subtle to subtler and serves as a tool in the strategy of survival. Gradually Pinter's language appears to have become more economical, subtle and artful.

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