

**Comedy of Menace in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party***  
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### **Abstract**

Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (1957) clearly portrays the condition of modern man where there is a real communication failure among the characters. Through this play, Pinter tries his best to reflect this fact. He uses a lot of pauses and silences, i.e., the usage of language is no more significant to modern man. Pinter considers silence to be more powerful than the words themselves. That's why long and short pauses can be seen throughout all Pinter's plays.

Modern man has been living in a state of alienation. All the characters are isolated by their own desire not to communicate with each other and to lock themselves away from the world. They are unable to express their feelings. Therefore modern man has buried himself in life just like the character of (Stanley) in this play who has buried himself in the boarding house in an attempt to be away from his own society after being rejected as a pianist by the people of that society. The play deals with human deterioration and the process of death. The disaster in the play does not lie in the idea of death, but in the more terrible state of being dead in life, as in (Stanley)'s case, who hides himself in a room ceasing all his relationships with life outside.

This paper deals with Harold Pinter as a well-known British playwright who has his own unique style that is called Pinteresque, his language, and how he uses silences and pauses in his play *The Birthday Party*. It consists of an abstract, Pinter's comedy of menace, his play *The Birthday Party*, and a conclusion.

**Key Words:** Comedy of Menace, Harold Pinter, Pinteresque, The Dramatic Value.

## كوميديا الخطر في مسرحية "حفلة عيد الميلاد"

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### المستخلص

مسرحية "حفلة عيد الميلاد" (١٩٥٧) لهارولد بنتر تصور بوضوح حالة الإنسان في العصر الحديث ، ووجود الفشل في التواصل الحقيقي بين الشخصيات. ومن خلال هذه المسرحية يحاول بنتر ما بوسعه إظهار هذه الحقيقة. فهو يستعمل كثير من الوقفات، أي انه لا يستعمل اللغة ، لأنها لم تعد مهمة بالنسبة للإنسان المعاصر. فالصمت أقوى تعبيراً من الكلمات ، لذلك نستطيع رؤية الوقفات القصيرة والطويلة في كل مسرحيات بنتر.

إنسان العصر الحديث أصبح يعيش حالة من الغربة . فكل شخصيات المسرحية منعزلون بناءً على رغبتهم أنفسهم بأن لا يتواصلوا مع بعضهم بعضاً وليبقوا في عزلة عن العالم، لأنهم غير قادرين على التعبير عن مشاعرهم حيال الآخرين. لذلك نرى إنسان العصر الحديث يدفن نفسه في الحياة كشخصية (ستانلي) في هذه المسرحية الذي قام بدفن نفسه في البيت الداخلي في محاولته البقاء بعيداً عن مجتمعه بعدما رفضوه كعازف بيانو. إن المسرحية تتعامل مع تدهور الإنسان وموته، وإن المأساة فيها لا تكمن في فكرة الموت بقدر ما تكمن في الحالة الأكثر رعباً وهي حالة الموت في الحياة، كما هي حالة (ستانلي)، الذي أخفى نفسه في غرفة منهيماً كل علاقاته مع الحياة خارجاً.

يتناول هذا البحث هارولد بنتر ككاتب مسرحي بريطاني له أسلوبه الفريد الذي يسمى "بنترسك" ، لغته، وكيف استعمل الوقفات في مسرحيته "حفلة عيد الميلاد". ويتكون من خلاصة ، كوميديا الخطر لبنتر، مسرحيته "حفلة عيد الميلاد"، واستنتاج.

الكلمات المفتاحية: كوميديا الخطر، هارولد بنتر، بنترسك، القيمة المسرحية.

### I. Comedy of Menace and Pinteresque

Pinter is known for his so-called comedies of menace which humorously portray people trying to communicate as they respond to an invasion or threat of an invasion of their lives. His drama was first considered as a variation of absurd theatre, but later it was considered as comedy of menace.

(URL:[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761559080/Pinter\\_Harold\\_htm](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761559080/Pinter_Harold_htm)) The term 'comedy of menace' best describes the early plays of Harold Pinter. These plays include that the world outside is threatening; the circumstances look ordinary, but there is a generalized, undefined horror setting beneath the action. In his later plays, Pinter transformed the menace from the outer, unseen world to the inner world of the mind. His comedies of menace are real comedies, in which the humor has to match the horror every step of the way. (J. N. Mundra & S. C. Mundra, (n.d), p.150.)

Susan Harris Smith, a professor of English, observes that the term ‘Pinteresque’ had an established place in the English language for almost thirty years; the OED defines it as “of or relating to the British playwright, Harold Pinter, or his works”; thus, like a snake swallowing its own tail, the definition forms the impenetrable logic of a closed circle and begs the tricky question of what the word specifically means.”

([URL:http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761559080/Pinter\\_Harold.htm](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761559080/Pinter_Harold.htm).)

The Online OED (2006) defines Pinteresque more clearly: “Resembling or characteristic of his plays.... Pinter’s plays are typically characterized by implications of threat and strong feeling produced through colloquial language, apparent triviality, and long pauses.” (Ibid) Pinteresque is typical of Pinter’s plays which are well-known for their use of silence to increase tension, understatement, and cryptic small talk; a Pinter’s drama is dark and his language is full of threatening pauses.

([URL:http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/412869/harold\\_pinter\\_leading\\_english\\_dramatist.html](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/412869/harold_pinter_leading_english_dramatist.html))

Ifor Evans, an author, believes that Pinteresque is those situations when language is used without interacting, when one misunderstanding leads on to another, when no one quite listens to what anyone else is saying. He adds that it is part of Pinter’s achievement that he had enabled his readers to categorize each failure of communication with new understanding, and possibly, new sympathy; Pinter focused on problems of communication; on how far a small group of people can convey anything to each other, whether by words or pregnant silences or gesture. (Evans, 1951, p.379) Dilek Inan, an author, thinks that the Pinteresque “is often interpreted as pauses, enigma and menace. The word, which implies the use of silences, vague dialogues, memory games and menacing outsiders, has passed into everyday language.” (Inan, 2005) What makes Pinter’s style different, Pinteresque, is the fact that he said nothing obviously. He found people and things mysterious. Any meaning in his work must be predicted, grasped intuitively, read between the lines. The meaning of the dialogue can be grasped only if the public is capable to add to the words, the pauses and the silences, and undertones. (Matuz, 1984, p.378)

## II. Language and Use of Silences and Pauses

The language used in Pinter's plays is simple, direct, and exceeding the commonplace. Like Chekhov, Pinter used the trivial remark and the small gestures which seem to hide deeper meanings, but which reveal the truth about people in a given situation. (Corrigan, 1979, p. 214) One of the labels by which criticism of Pinter has been bedevilled is that of a theatre of non-communication. The difficulty of clear communication is involved in the dialogue not a failure of it. Pinter said:

I think we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is continual evading desperate regarded attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves. Communication is too alarming. To enter into someone else's life is too frightening. (Esslin, 1982, p.51)

Pinter is well-known for his distinguished use of dialogue which exposes his characters' alienation from each other and explores the layers of meaning produced by pauses and silences. That is why his theatre is considered to be a theatre of dialogue; Pinter's language is vague. His characters are not only incapable of communicating with each other, but also they avoid that communication. That is why Pinter's language hides as well as reveals, as he said, "A language... where under what is said, another thing is being said." (Gassner & Dukore, 1970, p.1183.)

Martin Esslin suggested that Pinter drew the readers' attention to the fact that "in life human beings rarely make use of language for true communication." (Hall, 2002, p.109) Pinter was criticized for his mannerism of silence and his excessive use of long pauses. But Esslin thought that Pinter's use of such pauses and silences is a highly personal way of experiencing, and reacting to the world around him as he says:

If we try to listen, with an ear unbounded by an age-old tradition of stage dialogue, to the real speech of real people, we shall find that there are more silences, longer pauses than those allowed by stage convention. And also that a great deal of what is spoken, in effect, qualifies as little more than silence. (Esslin, 1980, p51)

Esslin also believed that Pinter exercised precision, economy, and control over the language of his dialogue. This links him to the tradition of up-to-date English high-comedy. Noel Coward expressed his respect to and admiration for Pinter's use of language. Esslin related Pinter to Kafka and Beckett on the one hand, and to Oscar Wilde and Noel Coward on the other; this relation to those writers is highly characteristic of Pinter's originality and his ability to work on a multiplicity of different levels. (Ibid, p.53)

Billington believes that the real connection between Pinter's life and work is language. Pinter did speak, in his daily talking, with quite exaggerated pauses and with regular hesitation. He also suggests that the silences in Pinter's plays are partially a reflection of the silences found in his own life. (URL:<http://www.bbc.co.uk/pinter>) Pinter's strength lies in skillful use of language, which shows Samuel Beckett's effect. He used realistic language to show the difference between what people say and what they mean to emphasize his characters' disinclination to understand one another. Much of the menaces as well as the humor of his plays arises from this non-communication. (Mundra, (n.d)), p.150)

Pinter's relationship and utilization of language is very significant to be taken into consideration when trying to study his works. The effect of Pinter's language is that the most important things are not being said. Hollis, an author, believes that "Pinter employs language to describe the failure of language; he details in forms abundant the poverty of man's communication; he assembles words to remind us that we live in the space between words." (Hollis, 1970, p.13) A pause is definitely Pinter's most famous line. The precious seconds of silence are the key moments of Pinter's drama in which something important is deliberately left unsaid. In Pinter's plays, the silences "test the extremes of human behavior: they are the silences of resistance, of terrified or complacent acquiescence, of outrage."

(URL:<http://www.villagevoice.com/theatre/0131.feingold.26843.11.html>) Peter Hall believes that Pinter's usage of pauses and silences became the trade mark of his dialogue; when his characters are not speaking at all, a pause occurs and it is called the 'Pinter pause'. According to Cole,

A pause in Pinter is as important as a line. They are all there for a reason. Three dots is a hesitation, a pause is a fairly mundane crisis and a silence is some sort of crisis. Beckett started it and Harold took it over to express that which is inexpressible in a very original and particular way, and made them something which is his.

(URL:[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761559080/Pinter\\_Harold\\_htm](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761559080/Pinter_Harold_htm).),

Demonstrating the frequency and relative duration of pauses in Pinter's plays, Cole observes that Pinter wrote 140 pauses into his work *Betrayal* (1978), 149 into *The Caretaker*, and 224 into *The Homecoming*. The longest are typically ten seconds. Lisa Cohn, a writer, observes that Pinter entered popular culture with what is called 'the Pinter pause'. (Ibid)

Allardyce Nicoll, a writer, argues that,

A Pinter pause is not a theatrical gap between words but a resonance of speech: his repetitions do not appear for the sake of emphasis, they are both part of a rhythm and an indication of character. It is essential, too, to realize how closely both words and pauses are bound up with action.

(Nicoll, 1976)

Pinter determined the meaning of silence by his saying: "a silence equally means that something has happened to create the impossibility of anyone speaking for a certain amount of time until they can recover from whatever happened before the silence." (Gussow, 1994, p.36.)

Pinter's silences signal not so much a failure of language as a denial to use language to communicate. In effectiveness, Pinter's language looks like some of the prose-fiction dialogues of the early Hemingway, which also had their compelling projections of silence. (Hollis, 1970, p.ix.) Silence is as expressive of the relationships among Pinter's characters as his words. It implies a rejection of the relationship with others. Pinter's characters resort to silence to hide their different emotions states such as fear, despair and loneliness. (Gordon, 1969, p.3) That is why Peter Hall says: "The unsaid in Pinter is as important as the said, and is frequently as expressive. He once rang me up and announced a rewrite: 'Page thirty-seven', he said (I found page 37.) 'Cut the pause.' There was a smile in his voice as he spoke, but he was nevertheless dead serious. It was

like cutting a speech. The placing of the pauses, and their emotional importance, has always been meticulously considered.” (Hall,2002, p.148)

Esslin is the person who paid the closest attention to the use of pauses and silences in Pinter’s work.; he thinks that there is a difference in Pinter’s use of the pause and silence: “When Pinter asks for a pause, therefore, he indicates that thought processes are continuing, that unspoken tensions are mounting, whereas silences are notations between the movements of a symphony.” (Benston, 1993, p.119)

To conclude, Pinter’s pauses are very powerful. This fact is emphasized by Tina Packer, artistic director of Shakespeare & Company in Lenox, when saying: “I think we all learned the power of the pauses from Harold. They’re almost more important than the words because they focus their attention that you are in a theatrical space.” (Ibid)

### **III. The Dramatic Value of “Pauses and Silences” in *The Birthday Party* (1957)**

*The Birthday Party* is the first full-length play by Harold Pinter, a play of three acts and it is now considered Pinter’s masterpiece, flopped on its initial London run after being attacked by critics; it was revived after Pinter’s second full-length play *The Caretaker* in 1960 which established him as a major force in the English language theatre; Pinter was following in the footsteps of the great absurdist Samuel Beckett in that he steadfastly refused to give clear motivations to his characters, or rational explanations for the sake of his audience; this play, as all Pinter’s early plays, is rooted in the absurdism that became the theatrical paradigm on the European stage in the third quarter of the twentieth century, after the horrors of the war and the

**IV.** Holocaust.(URL:[http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/412869/harold\\_pinter\\_leading\\_english\\_dramatist.html](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/412869/harold_pinter_leading_english_dramatist.html)) Pinter wrote this play in 1957; on tour he shared with a young man who claimed to have been a pianist. When Pinter asked the man why he stayed, he responded that there was nowhere to go. That man informed the main character of the play, Stanley; their slovenly landlady became Meg. This play was massacred by the critics after it was produced, with an exception: Harold Hobson; the cause was the bewilderment critics felt at the mystery,

anything that could not be easily categorized and explained. Hobson recognized the mystery as the play's strength; he said:

The fact that no one can say precisely what it is about, or give the address from which the intruding Goldberg and McCann come, or say precisely why it is that Stanley is so frightened by them is, of course, one of its greater merits. It is exactly in this vagueness that its spine-chilling quality lies. If we knew what Miles had done, *The Turn of the Screw* would fade away. As it is Mr. Pinter has learned the lesson of the Master, Henry James would recognize him as equal. (Prentice, 2000, p. xliii)

Hobson wrote his famous review of *The Birthday Party*, aware of the bad notices and not even sure the play would still be running where his review appeared, he believed that Pinter's name and the play would be seen elsewhere. He says:

Deliberately, I am willing to risk whatever reputation I have as a judge of plays by saying that *The Birthday Party* is not a Fourth, not even a Second, but a first, and that Mr. Pinter, on the evidence of his work, possesses the most original, disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London.... (Ibid, p.xliv)

In September 1993 interview, Pinter told the *New York Times* critic Mel Gussow: "I felt pretty discouraged before Hobson. He had a tremendous influence on myself." (URL:[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761559080/Pinter\\_Harold\\_hm](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761559080/Pinter_Harold_hm).), After the success of *The Caretaker* which established Pinter's theatrical reputation, *The Birthday Party* was revived both on television and on stage and well received. (Ibid) This play was the first of Pinter's to be presented in The United States of America.; it was performed one hundred times; the reason behind its success is the language used by the characters. (Wickham, 1962, p.27)It was inspired by Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (1925), a novel that Pinter first read when he was seventeen years old. (URL:[http://www.boston.com/globe/living/articles/2004/03/05/art\\_director\\_celebrates\\_simplicity\\_in\\_pinter's\\_complex\\_birthday\\_party](http://www.boston.com/globe/living/articles/2004/03/05/art_director_celebrates_simplicity_in_pinter's_complex_birthday_party)) The play is about Stanley, a failed piano player, lives in a boarding house run by Meg and Petey, in an English seaside town. On a day claimed to be Stanley's birthday by Meg, the boarding house is visited by two men, Goldberg and McCann. They throw a birthday party for Stanley through which Goldberg and McCann torture him psychologically. This torture results in Stanley trying to strangle Meg and to assault Lulu sexually. The aftermath of the party is observed: the drum, Meg's present to her beloved Stanley, lies broken on the floor; Lulu comes



downstairs after having spent the night, regretting her participation in unnamed sexual activities with Goldberg; and Stanley is led downstairs by McCann, unable to walk on his own or even speak. The name of the play is very suggestive. Although Stanley rejects that it is his birthday in the play, the celebration of his birth climaxes a drama that obviously leads the reluctant celebrant to his death, whether physical or spiritual. "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more." (Esslin, 1980, pp.60-63) Stanley's position in Meg's house is so central that any addition will result in a change for the worst. The focus of Meg's attention is on Stanley almost to the exclusion of her husband, Petey. As Pinter noted, Stanley "rules the roost and doesn't do any work, and carries on like an emperor." (Prentice, 2000, p.25.) What happens in *The Room* happens in this play. Again this man, Stanley, is hidden away in a seaside boarding house. Then two people, Goldberg and McCann, unexpectedly arrive out of nowhere and this cannot be considered an ordinary happening. Stanley questions in order to discover the truth, but his intention extend further, like a classic hero. He transposes fear for himself to his described concern to benefit others. (Ibid, p.31) He says: "But I have a responsibility towards the people in this house. They've been here too long. They've lost their sense of smell. I haven't. And nobody's going to take advantage of them while I'm here." (Pinter, 1976, p, 55) Stanley's observations form the smallest details of the house to the men's larger threat appear reliably correct. In contrast to the others who commend Meg and her house, Stanley sees that the house is "a pigsty" (Act I, p. 29) and Meg, a "bad wife," (Act I, p. 26) because in the first act she fails to have tea for Petey, in the last, she forgets his breakfast altogether. While Goldberg compliments Meg, and Petey praises her cornflakes as "very nice," (Act I, p.24) Stanley refuses the cornflakes as "horrible" (Act I, p.24) and says, "The milk's off." (Act I, p. 25) When he condemns Meg's housekeeping, she dusts the table while he eats. (Prentice, 2000, p.36) When Meg drops the information that two strangers are coming to see about a room, Stanley's reaction is seemingly exaggerated. He asks a number of questions about the strangers and appears agitated that they are coming, perhaps because his isolation is threatened. (Ibid, p.33) Billington suggests that Pinter's characters are strangers to themselves like Stanley who is a persecuted figure. He has buried himself away, but he himself could not clarify

his actions and does not explain them. He just feels a sense of alienation. ([URL:http://www.bbc.co.uk/pinter.](http://www.bbc.co.uk/pinter)) Stanley is hiding out from life in the boarding house. He is even hiding from Meg and Petey. He is unwilling to come down to breakfast, to see the birth of a new day. (Burkman, 2000, p.24)

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. (Act I, p. 20)

From the beginning of the play, Stanley behaves somewhat like a caged animal waiting for the slaughter. He attacks the breakfast of cornflakes, which Petey had listlessly praised when they were served to him by Meg as if they were a seven-course meal. The daily rituals upon which Meg depends annoy and disgust Stanley, who is overwhelmed with a sense of despair at his intentionally caged-in existence. Even afraid to go outside, Stanley contemplates escape with the visiting Lulu, the next door neighbor girl, but he knows such escape is impossible. There is nowhere to go. Here the echoes from *Waiting for Godot* are important in the sense that place and time have no meaning. (Ibid, p.36) Stanley is victimized by two men who are themselves frightened, political victims of the power they serve. Also he becomes more than a victim when he attempts to repress his landlady Meg and rape the visiting Lulu. Stanley has buried himself in the boarding house. He never goes out, does not wash, and does not work. He is anti-social. The reason he gives for his self-burial is that, after one great concert success, they pulled a fast one; when he went down for his second concert, the hall was locked, and no one turned up. Whether Stanley is, or is not, an artist is left in doubt, the evidence is intentionally inconsistent. More direct is the evidence for Stanley's relationship with the elderly Meg, who runs the boarding house, and Petey, her husband. Both regard him with genuine affection; typical of Pinter's style is the deliberately vague shifting of ground. In the opening scene, trying to get Stanley out of bed, Meg calls, "Stan! I'm coming up to fetch you if you don't come down! I'm coming up! I'm going to count three! One! Two! Three! I'm coming to get you!" (Act I, p.23) Then "So he's come down at last, has he? He's come down at last for his breakfast. But he doesn't deserve any, does he, Petey?"

(Act I, p. 24) A few minutes later she enters into a ridiculous and hilarious seduction scene with him. The mother-son, man-woman relationships are quickly sketched in one movement by the ambiguity. Stanley, however, does not respond; he is constantly rude and has one terrifyingly cruel scene in which he brainwashes Meg into believing that they have come to cart her away in a wheelbarrow (a reflection, incidentally, of his own fear). Petey's attitude to Stanley is calmer, almost imperceptible, until the final scene when he is taken "away"(Act III, p.96) by Goldberg and McCann, and it is Petey who makes the protest; first to Goldberg "We can look after him here," (Act III, p. 95 ) and then to Stanley himself "Stan, don't let them tell you what to do!" (Act III, p. 96) (Prentice, 2000, p.43) This very speech of Petey is of great importance. He acts as a chorus. All he says, Pinter stated, "is one of the most important lines I've ever written. ... I've lived that line all my damn life. Never more than new." ( Gussow, 1994, p.71.)

The play has a political dimension through the characters of Goldberg, a Jew who stands for Judaism and McCann, an Irishman who stands for Catholicism. They arrive unexpectedly and clearly from nowhere. Their speeches are full of oblique, shifting reference to establishments against which the human being can sin: big business, the church, the I. R. A, test cricket, morality, and so on. (Prentice, 2000, p.44) The audience never know why the two men are after Stanley, merely that they have come to terrify him and to take him away. They might be members of a political party or a spy ring he has abandoned, they might be sent by his family who want to bring him back to responsibility or they may be death's messengers. The play simply conveys the poetic image of the kind of nameless menace they represent. (Brown, 1980, p.67) Goldberg tells Stanley: "You stink of sin," (Act II, p. 60) and asks him, "Do you recognize an external force, responsible for you, suffering for you?" (Act II, p. 60) and "When did you last pray?" (Act II, p. 60) McCann accuses Stanley of being a traitor to Catholic morality and Irish nationalism. He asks him, "What about Ireland?" and "What about the blessed Oliver Plunkett?" (Act II, p. 61) Goldberg and McCann "represent not only the West's most realistic religions, but its two most persecuted races." (Billington, 1996, p.80) From the moment the two men enter, they refer to a "job" (Act I, p. 38), a "mission" (Act I, p. 40) and an "assignment" (Act I, p. 40) to perform, but nowhere does either man specify

the job or obviously link it with what happens to Stanley. Even in the final scene before taking Stanley away, McCann says only, "Let's get the thing done and go." (Act III, p. 86) Not let's get the job done. (Prentice, 2000, p, 44) Stanley tries to escape before the party McCann requests, but McCann does not force him to stay. Stanley's unfortunate choice to sit, a pivotal mistake assumes the form of hamartia, the classical mistake. The significance of Stanley's choice to sit is carefully prepared when Goldberg and McCann enter and McCann refuses to sit until Goldberg sits. (Hollis, 1970, p.30.)The celebration of Stanley's birth increases the pressure on his tormented psyche. Goldberg and McCann in this celebration blame him of committing many crimes. They are, as Burkman suggests, senseless accusations designed to baffle him. These accusations reflect the personal sufferings of the tormentors, the inferior sufferings of Goldberg and McCann of some guilt feelings. Besides, they show in a tragi-comic way the sufferings and sins of the tribe and how they are transformed into a scapegoat. Stanley's role as a scapegoat is clearly related to his disobedience of the system. (Burkman, 1993, p.30)When Meg decides to make a party for Stanley's birthday, he denies it. But the visitors throw a nightmare party during which they hound Stanley down, brainwash him, and deprive him of speech. In the morning Stanley comes downstairs clean, shaved, bowler-hatted and anonymous, to an unclear fate. The image is clear here. He has rejected society, both in the shape of his career and in the characters of Meg and Petey. Society, in the shape of Goldberg and McCann, takes its revenge. (Prentice, 2000, p, 44)When Meg returns after the men have taken Stanley away, Petey, trying to shield Meg from the loss and horror, tells one of the few unambiguous lies in the play, that Stanley is still upstairs. But Petey's kindly intended to cover up and Meg's suspended realization until after the final curtain make what happens to Stanley more horrifying than if he had actually been murdered. Meg asks Petey, "Is he still in bed?" (Act III, p. 96) and he tells Meg to "Let him ... sleep." (Act III, p. 97) The final ironic comedy emphasizes not only the folly but also the evil of ignorance. (Ibid, p. 38)

Pinter introduced the drum as an image that indicates Meg's wish to have a little boy and that Stanley would take her for a walk someday. She presents to Stanley a drum as an image of her maternal affection. The instrument is a visual image that reveals

Stanley's position as Meg's substitute boy, i.e., Stanley will be like the child who fills her loneliness and her maternal needs. It also shows the reduction and deterioration of Stanley's career as a musician. (Hollis,1970, p. 35.)The game motif, which Pinter employed in many of his plays, reveals the nature of the conflict and of such themes as subservience and domination, identity, violence of the struggle to survive. Furthermore, it represents the spread of Stanley's blindness as he is deprived of sight by McCann's destruction of his glasses and the blind fold that is part of the game. The technique of plunging the room into darkness during the party and illuminating Stanley's face only may be considered as an image that suggests torture and another kind of burden that Stanley has heavily been exposed to. (Dukore, 1976, pp. 11, 12)

Pinter also presented an image of the absurdity of human existence in Stanley's pantomime when he "lights a match and watches it burn." (Act I, p. 44) Stanley looks now to feel that his existence is as unimportant as this match is. It starts with the little noise of lightening and then ends gradually and quietly unnoticed, leaving nothing but ashes. Likewise, after destroying everything, his past, identity, sight and even his ability to express, nothing remains in Stanley as Goldberg and McCann take him away so quietly and without objection. (Ibid, p. 13)Martin Esslin indicated that the play may be similar to Beckett's *Endgame* in the sense that both plays deal with human deterioration and the process of death. The catastrophe in the play does not lie in the idea of death, but in the more terrible state of being dead in life, as in Stanley's case, who hides himself in a room ceasing all his relationships with life outside. (Esslin, 1970, p. 82.)Pinter's choice of the theme is not merely inevitable, it is conscious and purposeful. Referring directly to *The Room* and *The Birthday Party*, Pinter explained, "This thing of people arriving at the door has been happening in Europe for the last twenty years. Not only the last twenty, the last two or three hundred." (Kane, 1998, p. 19) This play appears to be informed by the latest European experience of the left-and right-wing totalitarianism, the Holocaust, and the nuclear threat that over-shadowed the 1950s and 1960s, leading to the formation of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in 1957. (Peacock, 1997. p. 68) Violence is a common theme in this play. Pinter said, in responding to Gussow's question whether this play is like *One for the Road*, it is

a deeply political play about the individual's imperative need for resistance. It's the destruction of an individual, independent voice of an individual. I believe that is precisely what the United States is doing to Nicaragua. It's a horrifying act. If you see child abuse, you recognize it and you're horrified. If you do it yourself, you apparently don't know what you're doing. (Gussow, 1994, p. 69.)

Pinter used ambiguity here purposefully. The ambiguity not only creates an unnerving atmosphere of doubt and uncertainty, but also helps to generalize and universalize the fears and tensions to which Pinter's characters are subject. The hired killers appear as powerful and inscrutable. They might be from another world, emissaries of death. (Taylor, 1962, p. 238)

The theme of identity makes the past ambiguous: Goldberg is called "Nat" (Act II, p. 65), but in his stories of the past he says that he was called "Simey" (Act II, p. 69), and also "Benny" (Act III, p. 88), and he refers to McCann as both "Dermot" (Act III, p. 81) in speaking to Petey and "Simey" (Act II, p. 53) in speaking to McCann. Given such contradictions, these characters' actual names and thus identities remain unclear.

(URL:[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761559080/Pinter\\_Harold\\_htm](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761559080/Pinter_Harold_htm).)

Childhood and family in this play is one aspect of People's search for security, an idea which features heavily in any discussion of the room's concept, non-communication, and a hostile world. Stanley tries to recreate a family unit in the boarding house, with Meg as a substitute mother. On the other hand, Meg is looking for a substitute family in Stanley, maybe to make up for the loss of her own. She states at the party "My father was going to take me to Ireland once. But then he went away by himself." (Act II, p. 69) Stanley's father also appears to have abandoned him. The attempt to re-create a family failed by all means. Even McCann sings mournful songs full of homesickness and yearning to return to Ireland. Pinter suggested that much of life is a search for personality and a sense of individual's identity, but that the personality that a person takes as his own is often not based on his real nature. (Stephen, 1980, p. 42) The failure of language is a theme in this play which serves as an insufficient tool of communication. The theme of non-communication is very clearly shown by the characters in this play. They are isolated by their unwillingness or incapability to communicate, and also by a wish to lock themselves away from the world. Stanley portrays this theme in a very clear way through his isolation in the boarding house. (Ibid, p. 39) Petey's newspaper itself is one of the most effective barriers to communication devised by man. It exposes the failure of communication. (Almansi, 1983, p.37) This play has comedy in plenty, largely drawn from the inability to communicate adequately with each other, or understand what the other is trying to say. Yet, it contains an equal amount of menace connected from an underlying violence through the play and a feeling of uncertainty and insecurity. That is why the play is characterized as a comedy of menace. Throughout the play, the spectators find themselves on the brink of terror besides their amusement. Some identifiable and vague fear keeps their nerves on an edge. They feel uneasy all the time even when they are laughing or smiling with amusement. (Lall, 2008, p.50) Hall believes that the menace comes from outside in some way; in this play it is as

much Stanley's fears as the threats of the outsiders that bring about his breakdown. (Hall, 1999, p. 42) *The Birthday Party* is a Pinteresque play, because there is an atmosphere of mystery and certain questions remain unanswered till the very end; also because it does not have a well-defined theme. (Lall, 2008, p. 248) The language of the play is intentionally ordinary and a spoken language, in keeping with characters who are distinctly lower in the social order and whose use of language pretends to no obvious distinction between the language of the theatre and the language of everyday discourse. (McRae & Carter, 2001, p.416) The dialogue Pinter used in this play is also colloquial and perfectly realistic. It is economical and tightly controlled. Pinter used repetition of words and sentences as a device to fulfill a definite function in the action. For instance, the repetition of the word "nice" (Act I, pp. 19, 20, 21) in the opening dialogue conveys the emptiness of the relationship between Meg and Petey. (Lall, 2008, p. 252) Pinter's use of language in this play is his most distinctive and original feature; dialogue can be interspersed with silences and pauses, showing an awareness of the rhythm and oddness of spoken language; everyday language is not spoken in perfectly constructed sentences and Pinter's plays reflect this rather than traditional language. Characters usually use language as a means of self-protection or self-assertion often with overtones of grotesque comic menace. Stanley here often seems to be speaking from a position of defensive panic. (URL:[http://www.sheffieldtheatres.co.uk/.../birthdayparty/bparty\\_hallmarks.pdf](http://www.sheffieldtheatres.co.uk/.../birthdayparty/bparty_hallmarks.pdf)) Through dialogue, Pinter ensured the fact of how inadequate a form of communication language has become for those people, as they cannot make themselves understood to one another on even the simplest level. (Abbotson, 2003, p.2) For example, Meg needs comfort, reassurance, and solace, but cannot achieve it through language. People in *The Birthday Party* are shown as being either unable or unwilling to convey accurately their feelings and thoughts to other people. (Stephen, 1980, p. 39) Pinter made his characters indulge in repetitive and insignificant activities to make silence effectively work upon audience's awareness. The silence that accompanies such repetitive activities represents a vehicle to express emotions that are too profound to utter. (Hollis, 1970, p. 35) However, when the characters, in Pinter's plays, feel menaced by another source of threat, they retreat. They say nothing or throw up a smokescreen of words and sound to hide their real sensations they experience. Their response is seen as an attempt to mask their fear, insecurities, and anxieties. For example, Petey's silence throughout the play is similar to that of Bert in *The Room*. When Stanley is taken away by Goldberg and McCann, Petey protests on behalf of Stanley's friends, but they tell him that maybe Monty would like to see him, too. The anonymous threat is enough to silence Petey. (URL:<http://www.bbc.co.uk/pinter>.) Language is not only used as a means of communication, but as a weapon as well. Beneath the words, there is a silence of fear, domination, and fear of intimacy. Words have become worthless for those people, some kind of incomprehensible code they are unable or unwilling to break. Ignorance, for them, becomes a kind of bliss. What is most interesting and challenging in Pinter's language in this play is his famous and very specific use of pauses, interruptions, and silence. Akalaitis, a critic, says: "The whole use of pauses and silence is really, really hard. It makes you think, 'What is a pause? Do things stop? 'Of course they don't. Are the silences filled? How are they filled?'" (URL:[http://www.boston.com/globe/living/articles/2004/03/05/art\\_directorcelebrates\\_simplicity\\_in\\_pinter's\\_complex\\_birthday\\_party](http://www.boston.com/globe/living/articles/2004/03/05/art_directorcelebrates_simplicity_in_pinter's_complex_birthday_party).) Pauses and silences are frequent stage-directions, as they are regular features of real conversation, and each has a different implication. They are intended to convey much meaning. The pause in this play usually

symbolizes an intense through process in the mind of the character, while silence denotes that the conversation is moving from one topic to another. (Stephen, 1980, p. 58) Pinter carefully placed silences throughout all his plays, showing their significance in shaping his characters. He stated that: "it is in silence that they are most evident to me." (Hollis, 1970, p. 127) Pauses in this play tend to be used to convey rhythm, often laced with menace. In the earliest scene, Meg fails to engage Petey's interest in a conversation about cornflakes and whether they are nice or not. This reveals how bored people with not much to say, make half-hearted attempts to communicate. But their lives are so humdrum, that they have to pause to think of something worth saying on the mundane topics they choose. The pauses happen when a character decides not to say something. Pinter's characters often talk around the situation, rather than dealing with it directly. The pauses happen when someone has something very specific to say about the situation or the conflict but chooses to remain silent instead. (URL:<http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?gid=2007072913680?AAB3EV>.) The pauses that punctuate the breakfast conversations of the couple, Meg and Petey, heighten the effect of non-communication which Pinter's observant ear recorded, whether the focus be cornflakes or honeysuckle.

yes. (Act I, p.19)

The pauses in the above-mentioned exchange show the repetitious emptiness of that dialogue. At the end of the play, Meg and Petey still converse over the breakfast table, but the play resolves around the sacrifice of Meg's beloved boarding house guest, Stanley, who has been taken away. (Burkman, 2000, p.5)

Pinter's pauses and silences are often the climaxes of his plays and the tension around which the action is structured. In this play, there is the speechlessness of annihilation, of total collapse. It can be noticed very clearly in Stanley's inarticulate "Uh-gug... uh-gug ... eehhh-gag ..." and "Caahh ... caahh ..." (Act III, p. 94) at the end of the play. (Esslin, 1982, p. 236) Stanley's silence in Act II of this play is a true silence and as such it is an immensely difficult and frightening state to play. Indeed, maintaining Stanley's silence during the party scene in *The Birthday Party* was one of the hardest acting tasks the actor David Strathairn had ever encountered. At times Stanley has as huge desire to cry out, to release all that is inside. But he remains silent, because being silent in Pinter is not giving up, it is holding out. Through his silence, Stanley is the only character in the play who ultimately speaks the truth. (Kane, 1998, p. 65)

### Conclusion

Pinter is distinguished by using economical style in all his plays. He did that through the use of a lot of pauses in his works more than any other writer. The pauses in Pinter's plays are as prominent and suggestive as words. For example, in his play *The Birthday Party* he uses a lot of pauses in order to reflect the inner conflict inside each character of the play.

In Pinter's plays, for example, when the characters feel menaced by another source of threat, they retreat. They say nothing. Their response is seen as an attempt to mask their fear, insecurities, and anxieties. They seem to escape from the harsh reality they live in.

Pauses and silences, in Pinter's plays, indicate a break in the dialogue. All the characters in his plays seem to reach their ends sooner or later. That is why they seem to be silent at the end of the plays. For example, in *The Birthday Party*, Stanley's silence is a true silence because he is the only person in the play that expresses the truth through his silence. At times Stanley has as a big desire to cry out, to release all that is inside.



But he remains silent in an attempt to be away from the society that rejected him as a pianist.

To conclude, the play reflects in a very clear way the state of modern man who has lost communication with the people around him. This is also reflected in the life of modern man in the 21<sup>st</sup> century although there are a lot of communication means, but in reality they are not really connected to each other. They are living in a virtual world instead of interacting with each other.

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