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PINTER'S 'THE BIRTHDAY PARTY' STANDS "AGAINST INTERPRETATION"

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**ABSTRACT**

Susan Sontag's article *Against Interpretation* voices one of the most crucial issues that art is facing in today's society. This is the issue of "interpretation". Today in our society of information explosion and excessiveness, every work of art allows for more output than ever before. This leads to critics and interpreters analyzing and breaking down works of art as opposed to enlightening about them or experiencing them in a personal level. In this whole process of interpreting art there a massive loss in our sensory experience. This approach of Susan Sontag may prove extremely beneficial when discussing Harold Pinter's 'The Birthday Party' where it becomes obvious that narrative cohesiveness is not an option. In fact, the more one attempts to analyze the narrative structure and content of the play, the more one may find oneself utterly lost in an inescapable labyrinth of sorts. Analytical breakdown of such work which is purely meant to be felt is actually replacing it with one's own translation and taming it to make it comprehensible. Such reduction of the play hinders its full potential and completely ignores the intention of the writer. For Pinter the play itself is the thing. The truth is art does not have to make sense which is reflected in this Paper.

**Key Words:** Against Interpretation, absurdist play, dark play, post-modern drama, impious theories of explanation, comedy of menace, meaninglessness.

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The theory of Susan Sontag regarding interpretation of a text has been used as a major theoretical framework for the present paper. The paper aims at exploring how Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation" theory clearly defines the objectives of Harold Pinter's play 'The Birthday Party'. 'Against Interpretation and other essays' is a collection of essays by Susan Sontag published in 1966. This celebrated book quickly became a modern classic, and has had an enormous influence in America and abroad on thinking about arts and contemporary culture. The seminal essay focuses on Susan's averse attitude towards the contemporary style of interpretation which lays stress on the content and

the meaning of an artwork rather than appreciating the sensuous aspects of a given work and developing a descriptive vocabulary for how it appears and how it does, whatever it does.

According to Sontag, when we try to defend art by assigning value to it, we somehow separate "form" from "content" and also this move leads to making and viewing content as essential and form accessory. It is assumed that a work of art is its content or a work of art says something. This ruins the innocence of a work of art which need not justify itself. Today we look at a work of art not as a whole but we look at it from the approach of interpreting it, and when we try to interpret we

consciously try to apply certain code and certain rules of interpretation.

With the advancement of a scientific temperament, the credibility of classical myths came to be questioned. For this reason, the strategy of interpretation was adopted, to reconcile the ancient texts to modern demands, thus making them more intelligible, disclosing their true meaning without altering the texts. In the contemporary times, the definition of interpretation has become very complex. The modern style of interpretation excavates, destroys and digs behind the text to find a sub-text. These styles apply aggressive and impious theories of interpretation to produce a manifest content which sidetracks the latent content beneath. The modern style of interpretation is like the revenge of the intellect upon art and so such interpretation itself demands evaluation. But then, the interpretation is the modern way of understanding something, and it is applied to works of every quality. However sometimes interpretation does not prevail as in an abstract painting, which has no content and so there can be no interpretation; as also in modern poetry by turning away from the content in poetry in the old sense. When novels and plays don't reflect any changes in their form, they can remain prone to assault by interpretation. But such experiments with form at the expense of content is not the answer to defend a work of art from interpretations. A work of art can be made simpler, unified, clean and so direct that the work can stand alone just as it is and escape interpretations, as in the case of good movies, where there is always a directness which stops us from the itch to interpret. It is not that works of arts are ineffable but the point is what kind of criticism would serve the work of art. The best criticism is that dissolves considerations of content into those of form. What is required is to pay more attention to form in art because excessive stress on content provokes the arrogance of interpretation and a descriptive vocabulary is needed for forms. Criticism should provide a loving description of the appearance of a work of art, and reveal the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it. Criticism should be accompanied by transparency which exposes the luminousness of things being

what they are. Earlier it was creative and revolutionary to interpret works of art. But now it is not needed to assimilate art into thought and culture.

Interpretation takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted. The conditions of today's modern life conjoin to dull our sensory faculties. So its now important to sharpen our senses. The critic's task cannot be to squeeze more content from a work of art than is already there but to cut back content so that we can see more, hear more, feel more. Interpretation should make works of art close to our own experience rather than look less real to us . So it is the critic's task to employ criticism showing what it is and that it is what it is rather than showing what it means.

Thus by employing Susan's theory the present paper aims to establish its relation/association with Pinter's play 'The *Birthday Party*'. Harold Pinter is generally seen as the foremost representative of British drama in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was a director, actor and one of the most influential modern British dramatists, winning the Nobel Prize for literature in 2005. That he occupies a position as a modern classic is illustrated by his name entering the language as an adjective used to describe a particular atmosphere and environment in drama as "*Pinteresque*" which is a label often given to sum up something English, tense and ambiguous . Some of the elements of Pinter's style are as follows :

- There is an avoidance of communication in his plays and there is expression in silence.
- The characters as well as the audiences are engulfed by insecurity. Pinter frustrates the audiences need for the "truth".
- His plays are a mixture of comic as well as tragic but somehow at the end of Pinter's plays there is no humour found.
- Pinter is famous for his use of silences. There are different silences which mark his plays: ... three dots signify a pressure point. A search for a word – the character is unable to express him/herself clearly. Pause suggests a moment of tension where lack of speech becomes a form of speech-a threat. Silence suggests an extreme crisis point. Often a character emerges from a

silence completely changed. This change is often unexpected and highly dramatic.

- A conflict between the surface appearance and deeper reality is the basis of this subject matter and dramatic technique.
- His plays catch up or twist from the moment of intrusion into a room- privacy is invaded and a threatening situation emerges.
- Not only territory is coveted but there is always more at stake,
- Characters do not behave according to reason. The individual is affected by the past which cannot be defined with certainty. The past is a continuing mystery which leaves us in the present in a state of insecurity.
- Personal insecurity of characters leads them to use language games to protect themselves.
- Drawing a clear and accurate character sketch of Pinters characters is difficult because the characters do not want to be known and rarely offer a convincing explanation of themselves.
- Characters perception of himself/ herself can be at once both false and true. It may be true to the character but seemingly false to everyone else. Pretense plays a tremendous role in concealing the truth about the characters.
- Threats in the play are subtle. The victim is never sure that the antagonist is his enemy. But the presence of an imminent violence haunts throughout the play.

Pinter's celebrated and indefinable classic *'The Birthday Party'* was the first of his full length plays to be performed, and it baffled critics and audiences alike in a disastrous London production that lasted only a week. At a sleepy seaside boarding house in England, the humdrum routine of cornflakes, the newspaper and naps all interrupted by two mysterious strangers. They become guests at longtime tenant Stanley's surprise birthday party, which after a few glasses of whiskey, party games and a mysterious blackout turns into a deliciously impalpable nightmare. As excuses and alliances hastily shift, so does the truth in Harold Pinter's riveting dark comic masterpiece.

It's a play in which very little of importance is said- there are no monologues. It's rather in the insane babble of Meg that it first comes out that

there is something amiss. It's a sinister and dark play, which particularly highlights the unsaid, that which they never directly speak of. Barely anything said is of consequence in a grander perspective, and the communication often feels like a miscommunication between the characters. They flounder around in their own isolated spheres struggling to connect with others, what is never said, what does not happen is more telling about these people than what actually happens. Physical violence, psychological torture and sex images gain prominence in the play. The three unities of time, place and action have been respected here. The image of a trapped being and continuous exhibition of mental torture and physical cruelty is demonstrated throughout the second and the third acts. What is communicated to the audience is not only the rootlessness of modern life, but a highly coloured picture of the dominance of the violent and the ferocious in our social thinking and living.

#### **DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS OF 'THE BIRTHDAY PARTY'**

Harold Pinter is regarded as one of the early practitioners of the theatre of the absurd which started in the fifties. According to critics Pinters main concern is getting into the reality through the absurd. The generic analysis of Pinters works has been one of the main interests of and, at the same time controversial issue among the critics. Some have tried to prove that Pinter is a mere absurdist dramatist, and some others have provided clues to nail home the idea that he differs in many respects from the practitioners of the Absurd drama. According to some critics 'The Birthday Party' is an example of the existential drama in which the characters security is undermined. Pinter, like existentialists is involved in the discord of living. The character of Stanley figuratively reveals the same anguish apparent in Existentialism. He is an isolated being who has sought out refuge in a seaside boarding house, trying to escape an unknown danger. He is unable to predict the danger. Stanley is in the process of his essential adjustment to the world, at the point when he is compelled to find answers to his questions to solve his basic problem of existence. But this is only one layer of the play's meaning. Pinter, very cunningly, looks at a

particular side of existence, and as an absurdist writer and through his humor gives a picture of Stanley's victimization. Also the play does not even seem irrelevant to the postmodern theatre. Thus Pinter's uniqueness originates from his ability to create tension between the absurdist tradition with its baffling, purposeless activities and naturalistic use of language which is rendered through believable details. And as an example of postmodern drama '*The Birthday Party*' seems to display the persistence of the past in the present, indeterminacy, irony, anarchy, happening and silence which are known as the main elements of postmodernism.

**PINTER'S *THE BIRTHDAY PARTY* STANDS "AGAINST INTERPRETATION".**

*The Birthday Party* is an enigma to critics. Some critics place Pinter in the group of absurdist, some consider him an existentialist or postmodernist writer, others place him in the group of anti-humanists and amoral. Pinter's early plays are very different from the typical theatre of the late 50's/ early 60's when all theatre was commercial and there was no room for experimentation. No plays were written that reflected contemporary life in Britain. However the establishment of the new theatre companies assisted a renaissance of new plays. The most notable company was the Royal Court in London whose artistic director allowed the writers the right to fail and believed that theatre should not be dedicated to the west end notion of success. Thus there emerged young writers who were prepared to shock the audience. Peter Wood, the first director of '*The Birthday Party*' and a highly regarded director in English theatre, had asked Pinter to give Stanley some lines that would help the audience to understand his situation and motivations. But Pinter refused to do this saying that the character of Stanley cannot perceive his only valid justification – which is that he is what he is, he can only attempt to justify himself by dreams, by patience and bluff. If he could admit to himself what he actually is and what is not – then Goldberg and Mc Cann would not have paid their visit, the play would have been another play and the course of events would have been so different.

In a way Peter Wood proved to be correct because the audience were baffled and even the professional critics were puzzled by the first production as the play didn't fit into an established genre. The obscurity of the play produced precisely the same kind of recoil among reviewers as had the 'moral shock' among ghosts in a previous generation. But still, Pinter refused to impose any kind of self interpretation on the play. Like Susan Sontag he also believed that interpretation would ruin the innocence of a work of art and that it needed no justification. He wanted the audience to make up their own minds.

Harold Pinter's career was nearly strangled after a devastating set of initial reviews about '*The Birthday Party*'. Pinter himself was almost destroyed by the initial reviews and wanted to give up writing plays and concentrate on novels and poetry. But why were these initial reviews so antagonistic? And what is it about Pinter's plays that has enabled it to endure? If one could only answer those questions, one might discover something about the vexed relationship of critic and artist and the volatility of modern society. But why did '*The Birthday Party*' provoke such hostility from the daily critics? Today, there seems nothing strange about its plot, in which a truculent loner, Stanley is terrorized by two visitors to a seaside boarding house, Goldberg and Mc Cann, and ultimately carted off. But at that time, however, the reaction was one of bewildered hysteria. All the reviews at that time showed a baffled anger at Pinter's failure to explain himself. Who is Stanley? What do Goldberg and Mc Cann signify? And what is the mysterious organization they represent? The persistence of these questions tells us about the culture of the late 1950's, in which works of art were still expected to provide rational answers to clearly defined questions. But what we may note is that it is quite fair when a dramatist does not want to clarify his play. He may hold that it does not need clarification, that it is the duty of an alert listener to catch every nuance, unravel every thread, accept every suggestion. The fact that no one can say precisely what it is about, or give the address from which the intruding Goldberg and Mc Cann come, or say why is it that Stanley is so frightened of them, is of course one of its greatest

merits. It is exactly in this vagueness that its spine chilling quality lies. The ultimate paradox of *'The Birthday Party'* is that the same words will be spoken on stage, yet they will have acquired new meaning. Everytime it is read or dramatized, it becomes more and more real. And in Susan Sontags words ---" *we can see more, hear more and feel more*".

The characteristic elements of Pinters drama are well known as *Pinteresque*. Pinters plays are typically characterized by the implications of threat and strong feeling produced through colloquial language, apparent triviality, long pauses, the acutely naturalistic dialogue which carefully registers the repetitions, hesitations and equivocations of colloquial speech without ever quite sounding natural, ordinary setting etc. Thus, as pointed out by Susan Sontag , by highlighting these characteristics, the critics somehow tried to theorize Pinters work. But Pinter himself had always been very dismissive when people talked about languages and silences and situations as being "*Pinteresque*".

Once when interviewed and questioned about "*Pinteresque*" moment, the author replied :

"I've no idea what it means. Never have. I really don't . I can't detect where a thing is "Kafkaesque" or "Chekovian", but with respect to " Pinteresque", I can't define what it is myself. You use the term "menace" and so on. I have no explanation of any of that really. What I write is really what I write".

Mr. Pinter is also celebrated for what the critic Irving Wardle has called " *the comedy of menace*". After his two short poetic plays "Landscape" and "Silence" it was commented that there isn't any menace at all. They are in a very different form and later when Pinter was asked to expand on his view that he was " tired of menace", Pinter added:

"When I said that I was tired of menace, I was using a word that I didn't coin. I never thought of menace myself. It was called "comedy of menace" quite a long time ago. I never stuck categories on myself, or on any of us (playwrights). But if what I understand the word menace to mean is certain elements that I have employed in

the past in the shape of a particular play, then I don't think it's worthy of much more exploration".

Thus, like Susan Sontag, Pinter also tried to escape the application of the "*impious theories of explanation*".

What is the sum of all this? We can only say that Pinter's manner is icy: he does not declare himself. He leaves the interpretation onto the audience. Only when it was recognized that the verbal element need not be the dominant aspect of the drama, or at least that it was not the content of what was said that mattered most but the action that it embodied, and that inarticulate, incoherent, tautological, and nonsensical speech might be as dramatic as verbal brilliance, when it was treated simply as an element of action, only then did it become possible to place inarticulate characters in the center of the play and make their unspoken emotions transparent. Pinter is among the discoverers of this highly significant aspect of drama which Sontag calls *dissolving considerations of content into those of form*.

It can probably be said that Pinter raised a new level of acceptability by presenting the kind of play in which the audience not only has no precise idea of what is going on, but seriously doubts whether the author has, either. Characters of Pinters art is his refusal to say anything—anything that is, which may be readily formulated as a "position". Pinter refuses to "*paint it all plain out*" because that would be to falsify his vision, he rejects naturalistic completeness of detail because his insights are not validated or limited by such considerations, interpretations, rather he presents details which are also images requiring of the audience an act of imaginative comprehension. Harold Pinter alerts attention so that the audience becomes more aware and more questioning. He can present each element of the theatrical experience – speech, gesture, sound, grouping, movement, rhythm and progression – with such precision that the audience becomes attentive and perceptive. Pinter has discovered drama on the smooth and the ordinary surface of life. His play illustrates the power of language and also its unreliability which can be

labeled as “indeterminacy” or “ *Against interpretation*”.

Pinter’s earliest comments on the “meaning” of ‘*The Birthday Party*’ ask us to reorient our relationship to meaning itself as a possibility of art. In a letter to director Peter Wood from March 30, 1958, Pinter responds to the question ‘what does it all mean?’

“Meaning begins in words, in the action, continues in your head and ends nowhere. There is no end to meaning. Meaning which is resolved, parceled, labeled and ready for export is dead, impertinent and meaningless.”

The meaning of true art must be ambiguous, dynamic, uncertain. Here Pinter aligns his art with that which, as Susan Sontag puts it, “*resists interpretation*”. Later however Pinter addresses the matter of meaning from an opposing perspective, pointing out his conscious control over the play.

#### CONCLUSION

Thus the apparent mistake of reading or attending a Pinter play is to search for meaning or resolution. His work defines the notion of the absurd or stands “*Against Interpretation*”. For Pinter the play itself is the thing. What we need is to stop making sense. Why not? Who needs resolution, insight and happy endings? In fact *The Birthday Party* is not like those TV cop shows where the most complex crime is solved and wrapped up with a kicker all in an hour minus the ads. But it's not so for Pinter who never sends us whistling home that happy tune after watching his play.

The truth is art does not have to make sense. If it did, perhaps it would not be art or very good art. Perhaps it would be agitprop or illustration. Art does not have to teach a good lesson. This is why I rather like reading Pinter. He just tosses us in there. We get drawn into the flow of language, the absurdity of the situations, the reversals, characters becoming each other. The sheer brilliance of language and characterization is the case here. Isn't that enough? Why do we want anything more? Why can't we just let it be and give it a rest? As for happiness and meaning.... They can be sought somewhere else. Ultimately an artist owes us nothing. Pinter's vision is dark and horrific

but also well crafted and full of grace. But there's no redemption. Everything happens arbitrary. The text provokes us to participate in a probe for meaning, but a probe that will lead us down the paths that are all possible at once, but questionable. In other words, we will see possibilities but will be sure of absolutely nothing. So, there are supposed to be no answers and here there are no questions either. What I can say is that ‘*The Birthday Party*’ just is. And as Sontag rightly says, we ought to appreciate it as *what it is rather than exploring what it means*.

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