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Womb versus Tomb in Harold's Pinter Play *The Birthday Party*

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Abstract:

*In the play *The Birthday Party*, the nature of complex relationships among the characters and their actions and motives can be illuminated by a strong conflict between womb and tomb, the two unavoidable impulses, though contrary to each other are always leading them to their present situations. The utter restlessness in their mind is an outcome of the unsettling clash of these two forces constantly pulling each other. Their unusualness and oddity spring from what both of them symbolize – womb, the protective abode to repel with motherly possessiveness and tomb, the dreadful end of a growing man from all his commitments. The dichotomy makes an attempt to bring out the urges and subtleties, working in their subconscious as a game of ceaseless struggle.*

Keywords: *womb and tomb, unsettling, restlessness, motherly possessiveness, dreadful end, dichotomy*

Although the play *The Birthday Party*, was a failure when it was first produced and even closed down after five performances, it gradually establishes itself as a must-read of Pinter's early stages and becomes a contemporary classic. The initial commercial failure cannot delimit the play's increasing appeal to be an existential metaphor with multiple layers of meaning that writers and critics still enjoy to decipher with great enthusiasm.

In *The Birthday Party*, the conflict between womb and tomb, rather womb versus tomb goes parallel with the action and truly exposes the crux of an unsettling, disturbing and indecisive tussle that shapes and controls the consciousness of every character, particularly the mind of the protagonist, Stanley Webber who appears rather a victim of this unending struggle. The existing dichotomy of womb and tomb appears as the two sides of the same coin, where womb stands for an insideness, a retreat, a shelter, a peaceful abode, and security from the world outside, is always in a conflict with the other that symbolises a growth, a maturity and fulfilment, a developing consciousness, one's engagement and confrontation with the outside world all of which are destined to a dreadful destruction. The idea of womb versus tomb is not here represented merely as clichés of a common binary, but is consistent with the dramaturgical strategy to delineate the internal conflicts that regulate the characters' motives, actions and their decisions whether to retreat with fanciful recollections or to face and deal with the world, lurking with inexplicable anxiety and menacing terror.

The idea for *The Birthday Party* springs from an autobiographical experience that Pinter's imagination fully develops and transmutes into a dramatic structure. As for Pinter, the essential preoccupation of a playwright is to give a public forum to his private dreams. In the year of 1954, while his tour with a play in Eastbourne he encountered a strange, laconic man with whom he was obliged to share an attic room in a sea side boarding house where lives a terrible landlady with her seemingly callous husband:

And I said to the man, "What are you doing here?" And he said, "I am a pianist. I used to play in the concert-party here and I gave that up." . . . He said, "Oh I used to play in London, yes. But I gave that up." . . . The woman was really quite voracious character, always tousled his head and tickled him and goosed him and wouldn't leave him alone at all. And when I asked why he stayed, he said, "There's nowhere else to go." That remark stayed with me and, three years later, the image was still there and I . . . this idea came to me about two men coming down to get him . . . (Billington 76)

From the beginning of the play, the prevailing conflict draws the attention of the audience when an old and matured lady, called Meg after her husband has departed for work is found in an ambiguous and equivocal relationship with a much younger man, Stanley Webber who reside in the same house, one of the renowned boarding house that gets a place 'on the list' as Meg proudly claims. The inappropriateness of Meg's girlish flirtation with Stanley suggests not only a relationship with Oedipal ambivalence, it also reflects the endless process in which the role-play of both the characters fluctuate and shift from one side to another with tremendous instability, trying to define their identity and circumstances. Meg performs simultaneously the role of both, a protective mother and a predatory lover, neither of which is able to achieve a required consistency and stability beneath her apparently coquettish intimacy:

Meg: Was it nice?

Stanley: What?

Meg: The fried bread.

Stanley: Succulent.

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Meg: You should not say it to a married woman who cans I say it to?

Meg: Stan?

Stanley: What?

Meg: Am I really succulent?

Stanley: Oh you are. I'd rather have you than a cold in the nose any day. (Plays One 12-13)

Sometimes Meg's teasing complicity and flirting becomes too physical:

Stanley (violently): Look why don't you get this place cleared up? . . . I need a new room.

Meg (sensual, stroking his arm): Oh, Stan it's a lovely room. I've made some lovely afternoons in that room.

He recoils her hand in disgust . . .

.....

Meg: I like cigarettes. (He stands at the window, smoking. She crosses behind him and tickles the back of his neck.) Tickle, tickle.

Stanley: *Get away from me.* (Plays One13)

The dual existence of a mother-cum-mistress identity in which Meg recklessly attempts to projects herself is to provide the emotional urge that Stanley is lacking she thinks earlier generalising his condition:

Stanley: All right, I'll go on the second course.

Meg: *He hasn't finished the first course and he wants to go on to second course!* (Plays one 9)

Her self-assigned role of taking care of Stanley reveals her intention to take an advantage of Stanley's apparent nervousness to uplift her in a dominating position that gives an outlet to fulfil the repressed desires of a callous wife and a childless mother. It is assumed as if she was looking for the right moment when she mentions before Stanley about the upcoming arrival of the two visitors in her house in order to frighten Stanley so that he is compelled to take shelter in her arms, fulfilling the role she intends to play.

The improperly oedipal relationship of Meg and Stanley already entertained gives a sharp contrast with the sexual liaison between two young people, Stanley and Lulu. Instead of the anticipated arrival of the two gentlemen increasing Stanley's anxiety, when there is a knock at the door it is found to be the neighbour girl Lulu who has come at Meg's behest. The subsequent exchange between Stanley and Lulu takes the form of a mock flirtation and the parodic nature of his refusal to go out with her not only suggests Stanley's cardinal fear of 'the dangers of knowing and being known', but also reinforces the sense of Stanley's neurotic impotence.

Meg's tricks on Stanley through her overtly provocations, are emotionally disproportionate with Stanley's hostility and abusiveness, masking an anxiety that seems to be out of control as a result of his failure to harmonise himself with the demands of an organised institution from where he has tried to escape to a seaside boarding house. He imagines that he has successfully sealed his past forever and made a right decision to lead his life without any further intervention. But Meg by her deliberate instigations, helps to remind him of his failure, dependence and helplessness – that he cannot take for granted as a man of artistic impulses – neither he can beg for a protective shelter for his inexplicable sufferings. By denying both the options Meg has offered him, he actually intends to withdraw himself from any kind of commitment and thereby avoid the possibility of betrayal by the agents of a repressive society for which he might have retreated. Therefore either he overreacts or abuses in harsh words while Meg is trying to intimate with him. His behaviour may be the outcome of his pent-up fury he gradually transmuted into uncontrolled anger by his increasing disillusionment with the norms and regulations of an organised society.

The shifting nature of womb and tomb in Stanley-Meg relationship comes out as a change of mood of Meg's affectionate extravagances emerges from a provocative voluptuousness. Meg's encouragement triggers Stanley to escape into a nostalgic fantasy in which he appears to pretend to be offered a world tour as a concert pianist. He then like an obedient son fancifully recalls a triumphant solo concert that gives another humiliating subsequent engagement in which no body attended and he was compelled to 'crawl down in his bended knees'. His long speech about his past career as a musician in the self-pitying way presents a classic narrative of betrayal in which he is the sensitive and talented artist, deserted by friends, critics and public ('they'), whose rejection has reduced him to humility and creative impotence. She also arranges to celebrate Stanley's birthday party in which the two gentlemen would be present and Lulu is also invited. Though Stanley is constantly opposing that it's not his birthday, she gives Stanley his birthday present and when he unwraps he discovers - it's a drum, a boy's drum. He puts the drum round his neck and starts beating the drum in a normal and regular rhythm first, and then to be more erratically and uncontrolled until he stands in front of Meg, "his face and the drumbeat now savage and possessed".

This unusual and disturbing antisocial act of Stanley bears multiple significances. It expresses the violence of Stanley's repressed desire in the form of an impotent and infantile rebelliousness, symbolising the ritualistic undercurrents of terror and defiant aggression hinted at his odd behaviour and foreshadowing the celebratory ritual of a birthday party that spirals into a nightmarishly terrible experience. The savage sound of the drum changing from a normal and rhythmic, symbolises his own metamorphosis – the process of his shocking disillusionment. Meg's blind incomprehension of the true state of affairs intimate a

state of hysteria and violence amidst chaos also signals the disorientation and existential alienation repressed beneath the humdrum routine of social banalities.

The parodic nature of the celebration of the birthday party itself is very suggestive in understanding the horrors beneath a conventional celebratory ritual in which Stanley has undergone through an Orwellian process by which agents of authority isolate and neutralize rebels and nonconformists through verbal mystification. The terrible experience of Stanley in the interrogation-scene represents ironically subverting the conventional notion of celebration as a means of momentary aloofness or a fanciful childish escape from one's own depressions and sufferings of a growing consciousness. It also reflects the emptiness and failure of an attempt to bring an end or reconciliation to the conflict between womb and tomb. And this failure is rather exemplified through a game of 'blind man's buff' at the climax of the birthday party. When it is Stanley's turn, his eyes are bandaged and his glasses are broken. Having stepped into the newly acquired drum, he moves to Meg and tries to strangle her and when the light comes out Lulu is seen lying spread-eagled on the table and Stanley bending over her. His desperation – by attempting to throttle Meg and sexually assaulting Lulu – reveals his repressed desire to bring an end of the kind of relationship trying to establish both of them – Meg constantly reminds him of his weakness and inactivity, taking the advantage of his situation by posing a mother-figure with Oedipal complex and Lulu who inflicts on him of his creative impotency and invites him to confront the world outside from which he has retreated.

That tension arising from a struggling conflict between tomb and womb is not only apparent in Stanley's relationship with Meg and Lulu, it also emerges as a major motif to comprehend the dramatic situation in the play from the intruder's point of view. Goldberg and McCann, the two gentlemen after their anticipated arrival, has duped the gullible Meg, instigated and participated in the birthday party where they are trying to dominate over Stanley to make a certain kind of confession from him. But interestingly, in his attempt, Goldberg himself makes a confession with nostalgic reflections about his past, an imaginative obsession with his happy childhood days. He recalls how he enjoyed the scheduled journey of every Friday of the month accompanied by his Uncle Barney who used to take him to the seaside and together they do several activities in a relaxed mood and watch the tide coming in and going out amidst the pleasing rays of a setting sun – the moments of his 'golden days'. The nostalgic recollection of his 'golden days' not only invokes a sentimental middle class English cultural idyll, it clearly indicates a contrast and the underlying disgust of his present circumstances that he regards much inferior to be compared with the moments of his 'golden days'. It also reduces him to be identified with Stanley whom he is trying to victimize, the same kind of suffering resulting from a conflict between a protective, carefree jobless childhood and the distressing frustration of a growing manhood with all its compulsions and limitations. The dichotomous conflict in the minds of both Goldberg and McCann, explicitly emerges in the final scene when both of them initially either refuse or hesitate to go upstairs to bring Stanley – to face the devastated condition of an innocent victim who dares to resist the established norms by the means of complete indifference and non-commitment.

The psychological interpretation that Goldberg and McCann are externalisation of Stanley's internal fear also explicates the reality about the tremendous turmoil working always in Stanley's disturbing mind as he fails to control his situation and decide whether he should rehabilitate himself in the seemingly protective nest offered to him or to recognise his manliness and fulfil the demands of its instinctual gratification. But as an active resister he cannot be tempted for any alternatives, rather he prefers to deal with a deeply-felt detachment.

By denying both – the protective womb of a mother-lover syndrome and the immediate gratification of full-grown animalistic instincts – Stanley perhaps provides a clue to penetrate his complicated psyche. His apparent hostility and his refusal to social conformism is a direct outcome of an increasing instability, resulting from a subtle clash for dominance between a nostalgic womb-like protectiveness and the dreadful end of an advancing maturity with all its living impulses. The ceaseless struggle of these two contradictory desideratum not only presents a possible explanation of Stanley's unexplained retreat and its subsequent menaces that Stanley experiences throughout, it also renders him deprived of all his promising vitalities leading him 'nowhere else to go'.

2. References

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