



The Mirror of Ritual: A Study of Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*

C.S.Biju Ph.D, Associate Professor, Dept. of English.
 St.Thomas' Collge, Thrissur, Kerala, India.

Received 6th March 2017, Accepted 30th March 2017

Abstract

The play *The Birthday Party* has intense implications to the critic who tries to use Lacanian psychoanalysis. *The Birthday Party* opens up an individual's entry into a world of trauma, a system of oppression and to a set of codes he is not familiar with. This research article attempts to inquire the crisis in *The Birthday Party* with some fundamental concepts of Lacanian psychoanalysis such as mirror stage, desire, imaginary and the symbolic orders.

Key words: Mirror stage, symbolic order, *The Birthday Party*, the trail of Stanley Weber, Sea side House of Meg and Petey.

© Copy Right, IJRRAS, 2017. All Rights Reserved

1. Introduction

The setting of *The Birthday Party* is the living room of an enlisted house owned by Mrs. and Mr. Boles in a sea side town. There is a guest named Stanley who is leading a miserable and unfulfilled life. The questions like who Stanley is or what he represents are unanswerable even for Mrs. Boles. Stanley's question, "Tell me Mrs. Boles, when you address yourself to me, do you ever ask yourself who exactly you are talking to? Eh?"¹ does not elicit any proper response. The opening scene, the breakfast at Bole's reminds us of the breakfast rituals at the beginning of *The Room*; another play by Pinter. Against a background of comfort and the warmth of the room, the breakfast is an embarrassingly formal episode.²

In *The Birthday Party*, Petey rises and takes the plates from Meg, sits at the table, props up the paper and begins to eat, making stereo-type responses: "Very nice, yes, yes I do; very nice". Contrary to the lack of enthusiasm and disinterestedness seen here, a passionate reenactment of the breakfast scene is performed as Stanley Weber enters, unshaven, in his pyjama jacket.

The polite banalities, sophisticated small talk and verbal gamesmanship often accompanied by the dispensing of food items are frequently enacted as a part of the inter-subjective communication in Pinter's plays. To ask question and demand answers is a battle game and the question-answer sequence becomes merely a ritualized form of social intercourse. The exchanges over the breakfast table; together with the movements of the opening gambit intensifies the ritual effect of the situation. The meager food served with elaborate details suggests that the meal is immaterial. The trivial, somnolent nature of the husband—withdrawn, almost imbecile, and his wife shouting through the kitchen hatch emphasizes the banality of the situation. Hence the action in the entire scene pivots around the rituals of homely living. The ritual aspect prevails through Petey's newspaper reading also. The newspaper is an inevitable part of the breakfast table in the Pinteresque setting. For instance Edward reads "Telegraph" in *Slight Ache*. Pinter's obsession with newspapers reminds us of Ionesco's fascination in *The Bald Prima Donna* for obituary columns with empty meaningless statistics. The newspaper reading in *The Birthday Party* contains the details of ritual gossiping over a cup of tea.

At the breakfast table, Stanley fabricates a scheme of verbal rituals against Meg's assertion of motherliness. She establishes a maternal control over Stanley and hence, the entire resort becomes for him, a place providing womb-like warmth. The

Correspondence

C.S.Biju Ph.D,
 Associate Professor, Dept. of English, St.Thomas'
 Collge, Thrissur, Kerala, India

expression of maternal care is obviously an effort to seek an identity and personal validity for her presence in the seaside resort. Stanley is accustomed to the house which is 'on the list' and "pampered by his stupid, doting, suffocatingly motherly land lady."³ Meg's attentiveness shows the wish to give and receive attention, combined with an insulting reduction of the grown man to the 'status of a little boy'⁴, Observes Ronald Hayman. It is clear that an infant-mother relationship is established between Meg and Stanley. In the seminal part of the verbal combat, Stanley describes the fried bread as "succulent". For Meg, this expression is directed towards her body.

Stanley : What?
 Meg : The Fried bread
 Stanley : Succulent
 Meg : You should not say that word.
 Stanley : What word?
 Meg : That word you said
 Stanley : What, succulent-? '
 Meg : Don't say it
 Stanley : What's the matter with it?
 Meg : You should not say that word to a married woman⁵.

The expression "succulent" is a sensual one and is similar to the child's manifestation of an external object in speech in terms of his mother's body. For Sigmund Freud, the human infant begins life in a symbolic relation to its mother's body because it is born prematurely. According to Freud, the central feature of this dyadic child/ mother relationship is that the small infant makes no distinction between self and other, self and the world outside. According to Lacan, this stage of the infant's life provides an essential basis for the first drafting of self-hood. At this the infant cannot distinguish himself from the maternal body in which gives pleasure and fulfillment to his biologically fixed needs. This is the Imaginary Order⁶ according to Jacques Lacan. Stanley's "succulent" is a word which is sliding about an object; most probably his mother's breasts. Since the imaginary order is a realm of ideal completeness, there is a merging of the maternal warmth with the external world. The "imaginary" for Lacan is a Pre-Oedipal and realistic state of being. It is within this imaginary realm of being, Lacan insists "that the first part objects of the mother's body-such as breasts, lips, gaze, skin surface, and so on are given an emotional investment by the child"⁷.

With the help of this awareness, the first scene of The Birthday Party raises some questions regarding the effect of ritualized forms of inter-subjective intercourse, the rhythm of question-answer battle games and the undue emphasis given to the rituals

of homely living like breakfast, serving tea, chatter over a cup of tea etc. These rituals provide a fictitious effect to the seaside resort which is radically connected to the subjectivity of Stanley and Meg. Stanley's subjectivity is associated with a fiction, emanates from the assumed warmth and security of Meg's house.

This problem can be analyzed further using the insights of psychoanalysis. Lacan's material is the infant-a 'shapeless mass'⁸ - with an unbounded world of experience of sense or of need. It is an 'I' hommelette- home-lette-a little man. Lacan puns it as 'omelette'⁹; the shapeless mass of egg. To denote the beginning stage of separation, Lacan accepts Freud's early concept of ego¹⁰ and the mirror as a central metaphor of narcissism. The result was the concept of the "mirror stage"¹¹. There is a mythical, fictional moment of the mirror stage in which the infant makes an imaginary identification with its reflection in a mirror.

Lacan widens the scope of the metaphor mirror to external objects, people, situations and speech. Lacan states: "The idea of the mirror should be understood as an object which reflects – not just the visible, but at also what is heard, touched and willed by the child"¹². In The Birthday Party Stanley as a child faces the same moments of imaginary identifications. The mirror image gives the child the sense of a coherent identity in which it can recognize itself. But the apparent totality and smoothness of the mirror image is a myth. The rituals of homely living in *The Birthday Party* function as a 'mirror' and give Stanley's self a sense of wholeness and coherence. The presence of mother guarantees the-reality of the moment for the child. But the image in which he recognizes himself is a 'mis-recognition' as Lacan terms it. 'Imaginary mis-recognition', says Lacan, 'situates the agency of the ego before its social determination, in a fictional direction'¹³. Therefore the Oedipal suggestions which loom large in the first scene of The Birthday Party throw light upon Stanley's myriad experience of imaginary identifications and the child/ mother dyadic relationship.

The mirror and imaginary identifications of the former part of the play constitute the first movement. The spectator through the mechanisms of identification enjoys a similar kind of fluidity of environment and a unified sense of his own subject position. As a result the spectator's gaze advances towards the stage and embarks on exploring the hidden meanings and fabrication of plot in the off – stage.

After the first scene, the entire setting is permeated by fear and hallucinations. In Stanley's memoirs

comprising world tour, Constantinople, Zagreb, Vladivostok; the piano is foregrounded as a central object which justifies Stanley's survival. The piano isolates Stanley from the society as an artist and outcast. Jacqueline Hofer remarks in this connection: "The Birthday party has the finality of a postmortem in which the artist has lost his function of before Stanley play begins"¹⁴. The seminal thing in the life and times of Stanley, Piano; now exhausts him from the centre to the fringes of the world by its very absence.

Meg : It is. I've brought you a present. (She goes to the side box and takes up the parcel, and places it on the table in front of him). Here. Go on. Open it.

Stanley : What's this?

Meg : It's your present

He stares at the parcel, slowly stands, and open it. He takes out a boy's drum.

Stanley : (flatly). it's a drum. A boy's drum.

Meg : (tenderly). It's because you haven't got a Piano.¹⁵

The piano is re-placed by the toy drum brought by Lulu as Meg's birthday gift to Stanley. Hence the Piano is the missing object or Lacan's Object (a). This absence or lack is created within the barred [S/s] subject as a result of the fundamental 'split' or 'cut' happened due to the imaginary mis-recognition. So Lacan's argument, "Man's desire is the desire of the other"¹⁶ is worth considering in this context. Desire is the desire of the missing thing; the desire of nothing¹⁷ or the desire of death. The object missing is the object of phantasy, understood as the object cause of desire.

The offering and acceptance of the amusing but humiliating gift (boy's drum), is central to the rituals of birthday celebration. It shows not only Meg's maternal care and love towards her surrogate son, but the emergence of the drum as Meg's object cause of desire. This is hinted at as Meg insists on presenting her lodger with a parcel on the day she resolutely maintains as his birthday. Meg's insistent, smothering maternal attentions and Stanley's diminution to childhood status are suggestive of the affairs. Stanley's position is insisted by the drum and the rituals of birthday celebrations connected to it. The next scene is a moment of frenzied drum beat which grows savagely out of control.

Meg : It's because you haven't got a piano. (He stares at her, then turns and walks towards left). Aren't you going to give me a kiss? (He turns sharply, and steps. He walks back towards her slowly. He steps at her

chair, looking _ down upon her chair, looking down upon her. Pause his shoulders sag, he bends and kisses her on the cheek). There are some sticks in there (Stanley looks into the parcel. He takes out two I drum sticks. He taps them together. He looks at her).

: Shall I put it round my neck?

She watches him, uncertainly. He hangs the drum around his neck, taps it gently with the sticks, then marches round the table, beating it regularly. Meg pleased watches him. Still beating it regularly, he begins to go round the table a second time. Half way round the beat becomes erratic, uncontrolled. Meg expresses dismay. He arrives at her chair, banging the drum, his face and the drum beat new savage and possessed. Curtain.¹⁸

Stanley desires the desire infants' desire is to become the object of the desire of the mother, which is the phallus. In the scene above, Stanley identifies intensely with the drum; because it is the object cause of desire, the "object a" in Lacan's terminology. The toy drum is only "the object cause of desire" because desire can have no object. "Desire is the pure transcendence of a subject who desires himself in negating/ passing beyond the object that he wants not to be – he can desire himself only in (and as) a non object"¹⁹. Desire is the "desire of desire", the desire to be desired by the Other; and not the desire to be the object of the Others desire. But the subject actually, identifies himself as an object, where as he is nothing – nothing but "lack of being"²⁰. The signifier presents this absence and it is true for the "signifier of signifiers"²¹: the phallic signifier. Lacan tells us that this is the "signifier of a lack in the Other", with which the subject can identify only on the condition of the "law" of castration. The boy's drum represents the object cause of Meg's desire and Stanley desires himself as well as Meg's desire. Hence the drumbeat manifests Stanley's desire.

The dramatic tension arising out of the Act II leads Stanley to his phase of inevitable ruin. On the one hand *The Birthday Party* parodies the rites regarding initiation and rebirth but paradoxically enough, it leads to the total disintegration or transformation of the hero. On the other ritual aspect of birthday celebrations are stressed. We have at the beginning of this Act, McCann tearing a sheet of news paper in to vertical strips. Stanley's encounter with McCann is full of hidden menace. Each of them whistle alternate pieces of a tune while the other speaks. It seems the whistling tune is twined with dialogue.

McCann : (Begins to whistle "The Mountains of Morne")

Stanley : (Moving away). I would not call it an

honour,

Would you? It is just be mother
booze – up.

Stanley joins in whistling 'the mountains of Morne.' During the next five times the whistling is continuous. One whistling while the other speaks, and both whistling together.²²

Stanley is obtaining more and more images of his own self from these rituals. The images in the mirror of rituals are no more coherent. The conflicting realm of rituals discourse clarifies his subject position in the new atmosphere.

Stanley is informed about the The Birthday Party and compelled to stay for the night by McCann. McCann does so without using any violence, but by indicating that he will if necessary. The title-tattle of verbal game strikes the scene. The game turns vigorously into an immensely formalized version as Stanley tries to pick a piece of paper.

McCann : (Stanley picks up a strip of paper.
McCann moves . in) Mind that.

Stanley : What ism

McCann : Mind it. Leave it.

Stanley : I've a feeling we've met before.²³

Stanley's sharp advance and McCann's striking defense are suggestive of the hidden psychological battle game brewing between them. Stanley's advance towards the paper stripes always provokes McCann such that it seems that the hidden violence may burst out at any moment. Stanley hence makes use of this device with a ritual emphasis to topple McCann. Finally Stanley wins the game by overpowering McCann physically and attempts painfully to make him aware of the situation.

Stanley crosses to him anti grips his arm.

Stanley : (urgently) Look!

McCann : Don't touch me

Stanley : Look, listen a minute.

McCann : Let go my arm.

Stanley : (Savagely hitting his arm) Don't do that.

Stanley goes back across the stage, holding his arm.

Stanley : Listen.

The emergence of Goldberg in the scene leads to the central action in the play; the frightening trial scene; in which Stanley is infantilised, blinded and paralyzed by the powerful opponents Goldberg and McCann. 'It mainly comprises of ritual cross questionings. Irving Wardle stresses the analysis of Pinter's characters from an ethological perspective. And hence the animal nature of the characters in their fight for territory is brought to the focal point. The trial scene also resembles-the psychoanalytic seduction of the therapist in the clinic.

Goldberg : What's your trade?

McCann : What about Ireland?

Goldberg : What's your trade?

McCann : What about Albigenesist heresy?

Goldberg : Who watered the wicket in Malbourne

McCann : What about the blessed Oliver Plunkett?²⁵

Asking questions without any regard to answer does evolve a language of crisis and 'conflict. The very act of asking questions signifies a conflict because it presupposes another subject. Slavoj Zizek in his *The Metastases of Enjoyment* justifies; in the-last chapter, a self interview : "I, in the guise of the questioner, endeavour to assume the role of the Lacanian 'big Other' to look myself through the eyes of common knowledge ..."²⁶

The questioner assumes the role of the 'Other' in the discourse. The hints which lead us to the concept of the 'Other' are terror evoked by the trial in Stanley and his position as a person subjected to the execution of the law of some other world by Goldberg and McCann. At the moment of entering into the symbolic order, the child seems smashed by such a fear. The fear and threat of castration. Fear of Castration is the final under cutting of finality of the imaginary order. According to Lacan, paternal Law or 'Name of the father', which is the dyadic other of desire appear in guise of castration complex. "... it is castration governs over desire" and castration means that "jouissance must be refused, so that it can be reached on the inverted ladder of the Law of desire" says Lacan. Jouissance is the infant's primordial union with the mother. The grilling trial scene manifests conflict latent in the subject. This conflict and split are emphasized by the Paternal strictures.

The scene of rapid-fire questioning indicates Stanley's demotion to the rank of an inert (being as well as the process of gradual subjectification to certain law. When Stanley attempts to answer, only ugly voices are emanating.

Goldberg: Well, Stanley boy, what do you say Eh?

They watch. He concentrates. His head lowers, his chin draws into his chest, he crouches.

Stanley : Ug-gu ghh – uh – gughh – –

McCann : What's your opinion of the prospect?

Stanley's body shudders, relaxes, his head drops, he becomes still again, stooped.²⁹

This split in the subject is caused by his entry into the symbolic order. (The imaginary unity of the infant/mother dyadic relationship is smashed by the paternal signifier or name of the father at this moment). The term symbolic order is first used by Lacan in the Rome Speech to define "the preexisting

trans-individual matrix of signification on which man is fundamentally dependent"³⁰, in a Levi-Straussian fashion. The symbolic order governs all forms of social organization and hence described it as the "primordial Law"³¹. Child has a preexisting position in the world, even before birth. The child as subject is produced in and by the domain of the signifier. The subject is constituted the agency of the signifier by his insertion into the symbolic order.

The imaginary unity of the infant/ mother dyadic relationship is smashed by the Oedipal father at this moment. It is the dead father who "constitute the law of the signifier"³². The birth of symbols spells the death of things. All direct awareness of things fall under the shadow of signifier. Thus the symbol manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing, and this death constitutes in the subject the eternalization of his desire³³. The Father's signifying strictures, his prohibiting Law- the law of the signifier- subverts the subject. Stanley's state of being is that of a subverted subject under the paternal Law represented Goldberg and McCann. This catastrophic movement is suggested by the game of blind man's buff. This is both a ritualized game and the establishing of the order of Goldberg since he is the law of the game.

Lulu : (tying her scarf round Meg's eyes) Haven't you ever played blind man's bluff? Keep still, Mrs. Boles. You mustn't be touched. But you can't move after she's blind. You must stay where you are after she is blind. And if she touches you then you become blind. Turn round. How many am I holding up?

Meg : I can't see

Lulu : Right

Goldberg : Right: Every one 'move about.

Meg : Caught you:

Lulu : Take off your scarf.

Goldberg : Put it on

Lulu : (tying it on McCann) Then turn round , How many fingers am I holding up.

McCann : I don't know.

Goldberg : Right. Every one move about. Right. Stop-still.

(McCann Stretches his arm and touches Stanley's glasses.)

Meg : It's Stanley.³⁴

The procedure of the game is repeated again. McCann breaks Stanley's glasses. I—le picks up the drum and places it side Ways in Stanley's path. Stanley walks in to the drum and falls over with his foot caught in it.

The unpredictable ending of the game signifies the destruction of the victim. The law of the father or the law of the signifier prevails the seaside resort. Stanley entered into a new social order as a fading

subject.

The party and the game as a part of it are conducted for the celebration of the birth day. The birthday celebrations have immense connections with rituals of resurrection and rebirth. The echoes of a rite of passage can always be heard in such celebrations. Hence the party in the birthday party exhibits a kind of vague resemblance to the corresponding rite of passage. Arnold Van Gennep makes use of the term 'rite of passage'³⁵ for rituals accompanying an individual's or a cohort of individual's change in social status. The term has come to be used almost exclusively in connection with 'life—crisis' rituals.

The overwhelming emphasis on rituals of day-to-day life in "Birthday Party" enforces the spectator to share the trauma of the riddle of rituals. However, the rituals of discourse and movements in the theatre parodies, to a large extent, the life-crisis rituals. The parodic nature of rituals transgresses speech and as a result, the illusion of language is thwarted.

They begin to WOO him, gently and with relish. During the following sequence Stanley shows no reaction. He remains, with no movement, where he sits.

McCann : Out of our own pockets

Goldberg : It goes without saying. Between you and me, Stan, its about time you had a new pair of glasses

McCann : You can't see straight

Goldberg : He is right. You've gone from bad to worse.

McCann : Worse than worse.

Goldberg : I You need a long convalescence.

McCann : A change of air.³⁶

In such scenes, the very act of asking questions, making suggestions or comments and raising threats are performed as rituals of null significance.

The banal parodies of rituals open up a new order of theatrical discourse and the spectator, through a reversal his 'gaze' becomes reified to this order. Over and above it is the designation of the law which grounds the symbolic order or it is the symbolic father or the name of-the-father in the Lacanian sense.

The spectator subject is also preoccupied by the rules of the symbolic father in a manner entirely different from that of the stage. In the third act of the play, there is an abrupt and starting shift, from the chaos and cacophony of the earlier situation to a forced harmony and integrity. More specifically, an embarrassing tranquility pervades the calamitous struggles of the first movement of the play and it constitutes the second movement of the play.

The second movement, which enforces the

spectator's gaze back signalizes the reversed situation on the stage. The precise mechanism of entry into the play involves a reversal based on the initial, expository scene. The intruding panic turns into confidence, commotion into complacency. Birthday Party, like all well made plays results in a reestablishment of its initial conditions.

1. Pinter, Harold. *Plays*: p. 31
2. Ibid. p. 101 t.
3. Taylor, John Russell. *Anger and After*. p. 337
4. Hayman, Ronald. *Pinter*. p. 35
5. Pinter, H *Plays: One* p. 27 '
6. Lacan, J. E'crits: A selection. tr. By A. Sheridan. Norton, New York. 1997. p. 197.
7. Elliot, Anthony. *Psychoanalytic Criticism* Blackwell, Cambridge. 1993 p. 93
8. Ibid. p. 1-7
9. Ibid. p. 197
10. Freud. On Narcissism. XIV; 1953.
11. Lacan, J. E 'crits :A selection 1997. p. 197
12. Lacan, J. E 'crits :A selection 1949. p. 567
13. Lacan, J. E'crits ./1 selection 1977. p. 2
14. Hofer, Jacqueline. *Pinter and Whiting: Two attitudes Towards The Alienated Artist*. Modern Drama IV 1962 p.
15. Pinter. *Plays: One* Methuen London. 1989 p. 46
16. Lacan, J. Seminar Book I p. 146
17. Lacan, J. Seminar Book II p. 223
18. Pinter. p. 45-46
19. Borch-Jacobson, Mikkel. *The Alibi: of the Subject in Speculations After Freud*. Ed. Senu Said Michael M.. Routledge London 1994 p. 91
20. Lacan, J.. *Ecrits* p. 852 –
21. Lacan, J. *Ecrits*. A selection 1977; p. 164
22. Pinter, H. *Plays: One* 1987. p. 48
23. Ibid p. 49 P
24. Ibid p. 51
25. Ibid p. 61
26. Zizek, Slavoj. *The Metastases ofEnjoyment*. Verso London. 1994. p. 167
27. Lacan, J. *Ecrits* 1997. p. 105
28. Ibid p. 105
29. Pinter; H. *Plays : One* 1987 p. 94-95
30. Britton, Celia. *Lacanian Wreory in Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*. 1995 p. 202
31. Lacan, J. *Ecrits* 1977 p. 66
32. Ibid p. 217
33. Ibid p. 104
34. Pinter *Plays One* p. 72-73
35. Genep, Arnold Van. *The Rites of passage*. London : Routledge and Kegan Paul 1960.
36. Pinter, H. *Plays: One* p. 92 .

Please cite this article as: C.S.Biju Ph.D (2017) *The Mirror of Ritual: A Study of Harold Pinter's The Birthday Party* . *International Journal of Recent Research and Applied Studies*, 4, 3(22),97-102