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## DEPICTION OF SOCIAL DISPARITY IN HAROLD PINTER'S THE BIRTHDAY PARTY: MARXIST CRITICISM

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### Abstract

This study analyzes Harold Pinter's play *The Birthday Party* using Marxist literary criticism, especially Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' idea of class struggle from *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and Georg Lukács's perspective of reflectionism. The purpose of this research is to show how the play represents social disparity through its characters and conflicts. Stanley is portrayed as a powerless and marginalized individual, similar to the proletariat, while Goldberg and McCann represent authority and domination, similar to the bourgeoisie. Their use of language, intimidation, and control shows how power works in society. By combining Marx's class conflict with Lukács's view of literature as a mirror of society, this study connects the play with the social condition of post-war Britain, where people often felt alienated and insecure. The result of the analysis shows that *The Birthday Party* is not only an absurd drama but also a reflection of real social inequality and the struggles between different classes.

**Keywords:** Harold Pinter, *The Birthday Party*, Marxist criticism, social disparity

### Abstrak

Penelitian ini menganalisis drama Harold Pinter berjudul *The Birthday Party* menggunakan kritik sastra Marxis, khususnya gagasan Karl Marx dan Friedrich Engels tentang perjuangan kelas dari Manifesto Komunis (1848) serta perspektif refleksivisme Georg Lukács. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk menunjukkan bagaimana drama tersebut menggambarkan ketimpangan sosial melalui karakter dan konfliknya. Stanley digambarkan sebagai individu yang lemah dan terpinggirkan, mirip dengan proletariat, sementara Goldberg dan McCann mewakili otoritas dan dominasi, mirip dengan borjuis. Penggunaan bahasa, intimidasi, dan kontrol mereka menunjukkan bagaimana kekuasaan bekerja dalam masyarakat. Dengan menggabungkan konflik kelas Marx dengan pandangan Lukács tentang sastra sebagai cermin masyarakat, penelitian ini menghubungkan drama tersebut dengan kondisi sosial Inggris pasca-perang, di mana orang sering merasa terasing dan tidak aman. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa *The Birthday Party* bukan hanya drama absurd, tetapi juga cerminan ketidaksetaraan sosial yang nyata dan perjuangan antara kelas-kelas yang berbeda.

**Kata kunci:** Harold Pinter, *The Birthday Party*, kritik Marxis, ketimpangan sosial

## 1. Introduction

The term “Pinteresque” is used to describe Pinter’s dramatic style, which mixes ordinary dialogue, strategic pauses, ambiguity, and a hidden sense of threat in seemingly casual talk. He was well known for his “comedies of menace,” plays that reveal the darker sides of human relationships, often dealing with issues of identity, power, and political symbolism. These stylistic features render his works intricate and allow for various interpretations.

*The Birthday Party*, written in 1958, was Pinter’s first full-length play. Despite its unfavorable early reception, the play was later acknowledged as a significant work in modern British theatre. Its dialogue, while plain and conversational, carries an undercurrent of tension and ambiguity. The play tells the story of Stanley, a man living in a boarding house, whose ordinary life is disrupted when two strangers, Goldberg and McCann, arrive and organize a birthday party for him. The play shifts from a joyful gathering to one dominated by intimidation, emotional violence, and an identity breakdown.

The play’s setting helps readers understand its social background. The boarding house, portrayed as rundown and isolated, stands for the struggles of individuals on the fringes of society. In 1950s Britain, everyday life was still defined by strong class distinctions: lower, working, middle, upper, and aristocratic. Disparities in wealth, opportunity, and power arose from this stratification, and many literary works reflected these social tensions explicitly or metaphorically.

One effective approach to analyze *The Birthday Party* is through Marxist literary criticism. Rooted in Marx and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto* (1848), this perspective emphasizes the role of class struggle in shaping history. Marxist criticism views literature not merely as art but as a cultural product that reflects and participates in social and economic structures. For Marx and Engels, social dynamics are driven by the clash between the bourgeoisie as the ruling class and the proletariat as the laboring and marginalized groups.

Marxist critics view literature as a medium that exposes how ideology functions within society and uncovers the ways dominant groups preserve authority over the less powerful. They interpret characters, settings, and conflicts in a text as reflections of broader social relations. Thus, studying a play like *The Birthday Party* with this approach allows readers to uncover the underlying structures of domination and inequality that may not be immediately visible in the surface narrative.

Georg Lukács, a Hungarian Marxist theorist, expanded Marxist literary criticism through his concept of reflectionism. He sees literature as a reflection of the social reality of its era, not in a direct or mechanical sense, but through exposing the deeper conflicts and tensions

within society. Literary works offer an understanding of the historical contexts and ideological struggles that influence human existence. From this perspective, literature functions not only as a mirror of society but also as a means of critique.

Through Lukács's reflectionism, *The Birthday Party* can be understood in relation to its social and historical background. The characters' sense of fear, isolation, and insecurity can be linked to post-war Britain, an era defined by instability, dislocation, and strong class hierarchies. Reflectionism enables a reading that sees the absurd and ambiguous elements of the play not as isolated artistic choices but as expressions of broader social realities.

Therefore, combining Marx and Engels' concept of class struggle with Lukács's idea of reflection provides a productive lens for analyzing Pinter's play. The introduction outlines the theoretical base and historical context needed for this research, demonstrating that *The Birthday Party* is not merely an absurdist drama but also a representation of the inequalities and social tensions present in 1950s Britain.

## **2. Method**

This study applies a qualitative approach with a Marxist literary criticism framework to analyze Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*. The analysis combines Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' concept of class struggle as formulated in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) with Georg Lukács's perspective of reflectionism, which views literature as a mirror of social reality. By employing Marx and Engels' notion of the bourgeois and the proletariat, the research investigates how the play stages social disparity through the characters' interactions and conflicts. Lukács's reflection perspective is used to connect the textual representation of alienation and marginalization with the broader social and historical context of post-war Britain. The primary data of the research is the text of *The Birthday Party*, supported by secondary sources such as books, journal articles, and critical essays on Marxist theory and Harold Pinter's works. Data are interpreted through close reading and textual analysis to reveal the way Pinter's play reflects the structures of social inequality and class domination.

## **3. Discussion**

The *Birthday Party* was written in 1958, when Britain was experiencing economic prosperity and technological growth after the second world war ended. Therefore, it is not surprising that in this story the actual conditions are reflected in the characters. The depiction of social disparity that occurred in British society in the 1950s in the story that depicted in the characters of the *Birthday Party*. British society in the 1950s was segmented into several classes

of society, namely the lower, working, middle and upper classes. the characters of the Birthday Party are representatives of those social classes. Stanley is from the lower class, Petey and McCann are working class men, Meg is from the middle class, Goldberg is the upper middle class. The characters have quite different lives, as experienced by British citizens who were segmented into different social classes.

*Stanley: I had a unique touch. Absolutely unique. They came up to me. They came up to me and said they were grateful. Champagne we had that night, the lot. My father nearly came down to hear me. Well, I dropped him a card anyway. But I don't think he could make it. No, I - I lost the address, that was it. Yes? Lower Edmonton. Then, after that, you know what they did? They carved me up. Carved me up. It was all arranged, it was all worked out. My next concert. Somewhere else it was. In winter. i went down there to play. Then, when I got there, the hall was closed, the place was shuttered up, not even a caretaker.*

Stanley mentions that he was once a pianist who toured various places, but he is now stranded in a seaside town's boarding house. He is isolated from his environment because he cannot meet the demands of modern life. He feels alienated and unable to find meaning in his own life. He is a lower-class man, as he is unemployed and living in a big city in affluent England, where people enjoy great provisions as a result of technological growth. When the country's economic conditions developed, residents were given the opportunity to have a better life. Incomes increased, and many people with stable jobs enjoyed fulfilling lives. However, Stanley was unable to achieve this.

Social disparity is reflected in Stanley, He is unable to live as well as he once did. He does not have enough money to buy a house. Instead, he stays in Meg and Petey's boarding house as a tenant. He is not happy living there. From a Marxist perspective, Stanley's condition reflects the impact of class struggle and economic inequality in capitalist society. His alienation and inability to adapt to modern life are the result of structural oppression. Thus, his isolation symbolizes the exploitation and exclusion experienced by the working class under capitalism. His downfall critiques how capitalism destroys individuality by subordinating human creativity (art, music) to career structures. His father never came, symbolizing lost support structures.

*STANLEY. Why are you down here?*

*MCCANN. A short holiday*

*STANLEY. This is a ridiculous house to pick on*

*MCCANN. Why?*

*STANLEY. Because it's not a boarding house. It never was*

Stanley actually doesn't want to live in that boarding house. He thinks it is a crazy place. He feels restless with his messy and dirty room upstairs. He is also the only one renting a room in the house before Goldberg and McCann come for their short vacation. He came to the city for business a year ago, but he failed to make any money and could not return to his hometown. Now, he is stuck in a seaside boarding house owned by Meg and Petey, who look after him. Although he does not like Meg, he has no choice but to stay there. His situation contrasts sharply with the upper class, who can easily meet the demands of modern life. As a lower-class man, Stanley has few opportunities to improve his life and feels the social disparity, which makes him scornful of the rich.

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

*McCann He likes to do it!*

*Goldberg Why do you behave so badly, Webber? Why do you force that old man out to play chess?*

*Stanley Me?*

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

Expanding this through Lukács' reflectionism, Stanley's character is not a simple reproduction of social reality but an artistic mediation of its deeper contradictions. Pinter's portrayal captures the totality of class relations: the prosperity of the middle and upper classes exists alongside the precarity of the marginalized. Stanley's decline from an active musician to an isolated tenant is emblematic of a broader social condition where capitalist progress produces both winners and outcasts. His dependency, dislocation, and inability to participate in consumer culture dramatize how systemic structures shape individual lives.

Most of the questions directed at Stanley function as mechanisms of menace and dominance. They are repetitive, often illogical, and even contradictory, trapping him psychologically. These verbal assaults reveal how the dominant class sustains power by oppressing the weaker. The interrogation is not intended to uncover truth but serves as an ideological tool to control Stanley and assert his lack of place within the social order. As a representative of the marginalized, Stanley can only remain passive and mentally broken, while the other actors dominate through symbolic authority and intimidation. This contrast illustrates

social disparity: the powerful are free to accuse, while the powerless are unable to defend themselves.

*[She exits. MCCANN goes to the door, left, and goes out. He ushers in STANLEY, who is dressed in a dark well cut suit and white collar. he holds his broken glasses in his hand. He is clean-shaven. MCCANN follows and closes the door. GOLDBERG meets STANLEY, seats him in a chair.]*

*[STANLEY concentrates, his mouth opens, he attempts to speak, fails and emits sounds from his throat.]*

*Stanley Uh-gug...uh-gug...eehhh-gag...[On the breath.] Caahh...caahh...*

In the play's final moments, Stanley is silent, neatly dressed, and taken away. He is no longer able to speak; his voice is gone. The working/marginalized class has lost its voice entirely, silenced by the dominant structure. The visual transformation from disheveled to neatly dressed suggests forced assimilation into an oppressive system. His silent dialogue reflects the alienation, powerless identity, and silence of the lower classes intimidated by antagonist actors and the repressive social structures. He represents a marginalized individual who is gradually broken down through ideological pressure and interrogation.

Meanwhile, Goldberg represents the upper class in mid-20th-century British society, enjoying privileges and opportunities that are inaccessible to lower-class individuals like Stanley. His upbringing, marked by leisure and travel with his wealthy uncle, demonstrates the material advantages of his class, allowing him to satisfy both basic and secondary needs. From a Marxist perspective, Goldberg's wealth and social position reflect the structural inequalities of capitalism, where economic and social capital determine access to comfort, freedom, and self-fulfillment. While Stanley struggles with unemployment and alienation, Goldberg benefits from the stability and security that come with his class. His character highlights the social disparities that Marxist theory critiques, showing how class divisions shape individual experiences, opportunities, and power, as illustrated in the dialogue below.

*GOLDBERG: "The secret is breathing. Take my tip. It's a well-known fact. Breathe in, breathe out, take a chance, let yourself go, what can you lose? Look at me. When I was an apprentice, McCann, every second Friday of the month my Uncle Barney used to take me to the seaside, regular as clockwork. Brighton, Canvey Island, Rottingdean—Uncle Barney wasn't particular. After lunch on Shabbuss we'd go and sit in a couple of deck chairs—you know, the ones with*

*canopies—we'd have a little paddle, we'd watch the tide coming in, going out, the sun coming down—golden days, believe me, McCann.”*

This dialogue shows Goldberg's access to leisure and travel, illustrating his family's middle-upper class status. Their ability to afford vacations and satisfy secondary needs demonstrates the material wealth and privileges associated with the upper class in mid-20th-century British society. Goldberg and McCann represent the dominant forces oppressing the lower classes in *The Birthday Party*. They appear not simply as individuals, but as symbols of the ideological and repressive apparatus. Using manipulative and intimidating language, they uphold a form of power that renders individuals like Stanley powerless.

*Goldberg Where was your wife?*

*Stanley In-*

*Goldberg Answer.*

*Stanley [turning, crouched.] What wife?*

*Goldberg What have you done with your wife?*

*McCann He's killed his wife!*

*Goldberg Why did you kill your wife?*

*Stanley [sitting, his back to the audience.] What wife?*

In this scene, Goldberg acts as a representative of the dominant class that enforces social hierarchy in the play. Through the birthday party held that night, he presents himself as an authority figure who dictates the rules of behavior and etiquette. With authoritative rhetoric and linguistic manipulation, Goldberg presses Stanley with repeated questions about his wife, even though Stanley clearly doesn't have one. Questions like "Where was your wife?" and "Why did you kill your wife?" are baseless accusations. From a Marxist critical perspective, Goldberg's way of speaking reflects the role of the dominant class, which doesn't require evidence or truth to maintain its power.

*Goldberg What's the matter? You go to the needle to Uncle Natey?*

*Lulu I'm going.*

*Goldberg Have a game of pontoon first, for old time's sake.*

*Lulu I've had enough games.*

*Goldberg A girl like you, at your age, at your time of health, and you don't take to games?*

*Lulu You're very smart.*

Moreover, Goldberg is a representative of the ruling class, who utilizes language as an ideological tool. He places Stanley and Lulu in a corner, limits his scope for response, and asserts that the voices of the lower classes are invalid or even non-existent. He also subtly pressures Lulu through social expectations, persuasion, and implied control. In the context of social disparity, Goldberg uses symbolic authority to demonstrate that the powerful have the freedom to accuse, while the weak lack the means to defend themselves. Thus, Goldberg can be read as a figure representing structural oppression: he maintains the social order by creating a false narrative and persuasion. Goldberg uses ambiguous terms to emphasize his position of authority and test other characters.

On the other hand, Petey, represents the middle and working classes. He is Meg's husband. He lives a modest but relatively stable life as the landlords of a shabby boarding house. Petey is portrayed as a hardworking man. From a Marxist perspective, Petey symbolizes the working class who survives through constant labor and discipline. Although he owns a boarding house with Meg, his life is far from luxurious, and he must keep working to sustain their livelihood. His character reflects how the working class is trapped within capitalism maintaining a fragile stability while lacking the power and privileges of the upper class. Petey's position highlights the Marxist idea of exploitation, where workers contribute essential labor but remain excluded from the wealth and comfort enjoyed by the bourgeoisie, as seen in the dialogue below:

*MEG You going back to work?*

*PETEY Yes.*

*MEG Your tea! You haven't had your tea!*

*PETEY That's all right. No time now.*

*MEG I've got it made inside.*

*PETEY No, never mind. See you later. Ta-ta, Stan.*

*Goldberg What does he do, your husband?*

*Meg He's a deck-chair attendant.*

*Goldberg Oh, very nice.*

*Meg Yes, he's out in all weathers.*

Moreover, Petey, although aware of the pressure Stanley faces from Goldberg and McCann, has only limited understanding and cannot provide real protection. From a Marxist perspective, he represents the lower-middle class, who can perceive injustice but lack the power to challenge it. His recognition of Stanley's suffering shows an awareness of social inequality, yet the power structure keeps him passive. Thus, Petey symbolizes those in the middle: close enough to power to notice domination, but too weak to assist those below him.

Meanwhile, Meg comes from a respected and wealthy family, which allows her to maintain a fairly comfortable life. She and her husband are able to own a boarding house by the seaside, and she enjoys shopping to pass her free time. Meg grew up as a happy girl and had a very comfortable childhood amidst her family's wealth. Her fulfilling life is symbolized by her childhood room, which was colorful and filled with objects that reflected her parents' ability to afford many secondary needs for their children. From a Marxist perspective, Meg represents the petty bourgeoisie or middle class. She is not as powerful or wealthy as the upper class, but her social and economic background gives her privileges beyond those of the working class. Her ownership of property and ability to enjoy leisure activities reflect how members of the middle class benefit from capitalism, even while they remain subordinate to the truly dominant upper class.

*MEG And my Nanny used to sit up with me, and sing songs to me.*

*MCCANN And a plate of fry in the morning. Now where am I?*

*MEG My little room was pink. I had a pink carpet and pink curtains, and I had musical boxes all over the room. And they played me to sleep. And my father was a very big doctor. That's why I never had any complaints. I was cared for, and I had little sisters and brothers in other rooms, all different colours.*

When Meg was little. She also had a nanny who took care of her and family. She said that his nanny used to accompany her every night and sing songs to her before going to sleep. In 1950s British society, middle or upper class families often employed a nanny or domestic helper to look after their children and home, and these servants were usually working class qualified only to do manual work. Moreover, Meg's father who worked as a doctor is the symbol of her prosperity. In the fact, Meg lives in a state of false consciousness. She is unaware of the tragedy and repression befalling Stanley. Petey is somewhat aware that something is "wrong," but remains passive, a symbol of the working class unable to resist authority. They are the oppressed lower class, able only to submit to the dominant forces (Goldberg & McCann = apparatus/agents of power).

*Goldberg Who opened the briefcase, me or you? Lulu, schmulu, let bygones be bygones, do me a turn. Kiss and make up.*

*Lulu I wouldn't touch you.*

*Goldberg And today I'm leaving.*

*Lulu You're leaving?*

*Goldberg Today.*

*Lulu [with growing anger.] You used me for a night. A passing fancy.*

*Goldberg Who used who?*

*Lulu You made use of me when my defences were down.*

*Goldberg Who took them down?*

*Lulu That's what you did. You quenched your ugly thirst. You taught me things a girl shouldn't know before she's been married at last three times!*

Lulu is socially inferior, limited in her ability to resist, despite her verbal resistance. She signifies the powerlessness of the lower classes; she is a victim of exploitation. This sentence reflects the social contradiction between power and subordination, where the self-interest of the dominant class (Goldberg) oppresses the weaker individuals (Lulu). It reflects social violence and power inequality. From a Marxist perspective, this interaction demonstrates how the ruling class maintains dominance without the need for evidence or reason, while the subordinate class has no room to resist. The exploitation, intimidation, and humiliation experienced by Lulu reflect the reality of social disparity, where the weak can only respond verbally or passively, while the powerful are free to determine the narrative and impose their will. Pinter uses this dynamic to expose the social structures that oppress and maintain inequality.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Pinter frequently employs ambiguity in his writing, leaving it unclear whether the stories told by each character are entirely true, partially true, or purely delusional. Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* portrays social inequality through the tensions and interactions among its characters. Stanley is depicted as a marginalized member of the lower class, whose isolation, alienation, and eventual loss of voice and mental stability illustrate the effects of structural oppression and class division. Goldberg and McCann represent the ruling class, employing language, subtle threats, and ideological power to assert control, showing how those in authority dominate the powerless. Characters such as Petey and Meg occupy intermediary

positions. Meg, an innocent middle-class woman who owns a boarding house and interacts with the upper class, remains largely unaware of Stanley's suffering, while Petey recognizes the social injustice and Stanley's psychological breakdown but lacks the capacity to intervene effectively. Through these character dynamics, Pinter reflects mid-20th-century British society, exposing hierarchical structures, class conflict, and the psychological consequences of dominance and subordination, making the play both an absurdist work and a commentary on enduring social inequality.

These characters illustrate that urbanization is a major aspect of modern city life. The pursuit of better employment and greater prosperity is a key factor driving this process. People from homogeneous rural villages often migrate to large cities in search of improved opportunities. As a result, they must not only compete for jobs but also adapt to an urban lifestyle that differs greatly from their previous rural way of living.

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