

Language and silence in the birthday party



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Language in the “ Birthday Party” is seen as a major theme of the play, despite its absurd nature. Through the use of language, Pinter creates silences that are monumental to the meaning and overall understanding of the play. With language, Pinter also manages to bridge the gap between his cold silences and the absurd actions of the play. Language is devalued; to the audience its use does not seem correct by our realities social rules and norms. However, it is within this devaluation that Pinter gives language in his play a primary role in bridging silence and action to create a masterpiece of confusion and self-discovery. Silence in the play is one of the most important aspects of language as used by Pinter. As Martin Esslin suggests, “ Communication itself between people is so frightening that rather than do that there is continual cross-talk, a continual talking about other things, rather than the root of their relationship.” In our everyday reality, people hide behind their meaningless conversations and never get to the “ root” of what their mind desires to know. In an absolute fear of the nerve-breaking negative connotation of silence, people ramble in their everyday lives so that they never have to be faced with the awkwardness of silence. In an almost satirical gesture, Pinter makes the audience laugh at the meaningless rambling of the characters in the play, such as Meg’s repetitive and pointless questions. “ I’ve finished my cornflakes.” “ Were they nice?” “ Very nice.” The audience laughs at the absurdity of this rambling where it is actually just an overdramatized reflection of their everyday conversations. The use of silence in the play is therefore given more meaning than these conversations. The pauses fragment the repetitive rambling, as the way of communicating cannot be as explicit as it is used to. The silence also adds to the feeling of absurdity in the play, where it is actually tied to the actions of the

characters. Rather than the conventional way of leading to an action, as is usually found through the use of conversation, “The Birthday Party” gives silence this role. Stanley’s silence followed by his insane actions gives a more powerful feeling of dread than any normal conversation, leading to that action, would. Since language is used as a buffer between silence and action, it serves to bring the two together on strict terms. It does not act directly as a bridge, but rather as a protective barrier to allow the two to interact in moderation. For the majority of the play, meaningful words are used, but not in a context where they can apply. Understanding and recognition of these words is possible, but no meaning derives from them. However, when the play reaches its most critical point in Act III, words start to lose their meaning completely. Stanley’s silence throughout the entire act works as a barrier to shield him against the change that has come to rip him away from his safe haven and to throw him into the world that he has so vigorously avoided for a long time now. Stanley does not utter a word in the entire Act, except towards the event, where through his meager attempts all he can manage is an “Ug-gug...uhgug.... eehhh-gag.... caahh...” and not an actual word or sentence. While this may at first seem like Stanley has just gone completely crazy and therefore cannot form a coherent sentence, it is also as if language is keeping him in one piece. If Stanley had actually uttered a sentence while in his unstable state, his body may have not handled the drastic change from safe haven to vicious world. With language being the barrier between his silence and his actions it also, in a way, shields him from himself. By talking in his self-defense, the conflict that was playing out in his mind could have been materialized in the form of words, essentially destroying him in the crossfire. In the Theatre of the Absurd, rules and

regulations do not exist. The world in which “ The Birthday Party” takes place is not bound by social norms. Absurdity reigns supreme within every scene of the play, from the characters movements to their personalities. As language keeps Stanley’s mind in one piece, it is also the one solid fabric keeping the world together. Within the use of language, the characters are formed. To its power, they are but mere puppets. Harold Pinter uses language in an almost divine way, making it the cornerstone of every movement that goes on in his world. The actions of the characters are governed by the use of language. Their silence, their actions, their words govern them. They have no thoughts and thus cannot make decisions. It is the absurdity of the world around them that makes them move forward. And language is the solid form of that absurdity, which shows in the aforementioned ridiculousness of their conversations, as well as the ridiculousness of their actions as Stanley shows when “ he arrives at her chair, banging the drum, his face and the drumbeat now savage and possessed.” So language acts as the shield between total inability to communicate, or silence, and a chaotic array of absurd actions. If language did not exist, then the characters actions would be frantic, destroying the very structure of their existence, and thus forcing them to succumb to a false reality in order to survive, which would essentially force them to become more...human. In conclusion, language not only acts as a bridge to bring the worlds of silence and action together, but also as a shield that keeps the very fabric of Harold Pinter’s version of the Theatre of the Absurd intact. Language creates the silences in the play to contrast the ongoing rambling of the audience members’ everyday lives, but it also serves to quell and calm the interaction between silence and action, so that the two can balance

each other out, and not engage each character in an all-out war to keep their sanity. It, in this way, keeps the Theatre of the Absurd from crumbling down into the disgusting everyday notion we know as our harsh reality.