



MORE THAN A BOARDING HOUSE: GENERATION OF HETEROTOPIA IN HAROLD PINTER'S *THE BIRTHDAY PARTY*

Bir Pansiyondan Fazlası: Harold Pinter'in *Doğum Günü Partisi*'nde Heterotopya Oluşumu

Ömer Kemal GÜLTEKİN*

ABSTRACT

One of the pioneering playwrights of postwar British drama, Harold Pinter is usually known for his plays' absurd features and for his combination of elements like comedy and threat in an unprecedented way. Nevertheless, Pinter's ingenuity cannot merely be confined to such a specific framework, and this paper explores a rather neglected main dramatic element in his most well-known and commonly-studied play *The Birthday Party* (1959). Taking Michel Foucault's definition of heterotopia into consideration, this paper analyses the specific selection of a boarding house as the setting of the play and focuses on the spatial markers' contribution to the ambiguity intentionally engendered by the playwright. Meanwhile, the status of the boarding house put under scrutiny reveals the perfectly heterotopic nature of the place. The boarding house in the play hosts a spectrum of contradictory places in its complicated constitution such as a delivery room, a hideout, a womb, and a playground. In this sense, the boarding house constitutes a catalyser which Pinter employs to further blur the relationships and the dialogue between the characters. This study, investigating all these heterotopic features in detail, once again marks the undeniable influence of the setting on the action and dialogue in a play. By putting an emphasis on the heterotopic features of the setting in *The Birthday Party*, it underlines the significance of the setting in denying the revelation of a unique and simple conclusion and promoting multiple ways of reading the play.

Keywords: *The Birthday Party*, Harold Pinter, heterotopia, Michel Foucault, boarding house.

ÖZ

Savaş sonrası İngiliz tiyatrosunun öncülerinden biri olan Harold Pinter, genellikle oyunlarının absürt özellikleri ve komedi ile tehdit gibi elementleri daha önce görülmemiş bir şekilde bir araya getirmesiyle bilinir. Ancak Pinter'in ustalığı yalnızca bu

* Assist. Prof. Dr., Mehmet Akif Ersoy University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, English Language and Literature Department, Burdur/Türkiye. E-mail: omerkemalgultekin@mehmetakif.edu.tr. ORCID: 0000-0002-2438-0322.

çerçeveye hapsedilemez ve bu çalışma, onun en iyi bilinen ve en yaygın olarak çalışılan eseri *Doğum Günü Partisi*'nde (1959) oldukça göz ardı edilen bir ana dramatik unsuru değerlendirecektir. Bu çalışma, Michel Foucault'un yapmış olduğu "heterotopia" tanımını göz önüne alarak, özellikle bir pansiyonun dekoratif mekân olarak seçilmesinin yazar tarafından bilinçli bir şekilde oluşturulan belirsizliğe katkısını analiz eder. Bu esnada söz konusu pansiyonun statüsü, oyundaki mekânın mükemmel heterotopik doğasını ortaya çıkaracaktır. Oyundaki pansiyon, bir doğumhane, bir sığınak, bir rahim ve bir oyun parkı gibi çatışan mekânlar dizisine ev sahipliği yapmaktadır. Bu bakımdan oyundaki pansiyon, Pinter'in karakterler arasındaki ilişkiyi ve diyalogları daha da bulanık hale getirmek için kullandığı bir katalizör oluşturmaktadır. Tüm bu heterotopik özellikleri detaylı bir şekilde inceleyen bu çalışma, mekânın bir oyundaki aksiyon ve diyaloglar üzerine olan yadsınamaz etkisini bir kez daha vurgular. *Doğum Günü Partisi*'ndeki dekoratif mekânın heterotopik özelliklerine vurgu yaparak, oyundaki mekânın tek ve basit bir sonuç açığa çıkarmayı inkâr etmede ve oyunu farklı şekillerde okumayı teşvik etmedeki öneminin altını çizmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: *The Birthday Party*, Harold Pinter, heterotopya, Michel Foucault, pansiyon.

Introduction

Being one of the cornerstones of British Drama of the 20th century, Harold Pinter paved the way for an innovative representation of contemporary reality on the modern stage. His unique style brought about the coinage of the term "Pinteresque" in the following years after his literary success. Having attracted the attention of the critics with this novel style, Pinter's plays have been put under strict scrutiny. Meanwhile, more often than not the oeuvre of the playwright is associated with the Theatre of the Absurd and the dysfunctional language lacking accuracy and complicating the message is compared to the plays of Samuel Beckett. Besides absurd features, the other prominent criticism of Pinter's dramatic works focuses on violence and silence that are punctuating the action and the dialogue of the characters. In line with these popular subjects, with Peter Raby's words, "Critics, reviewers and academics constructed a vocabulary to help us deal with the elusive quality in Pinter: Pinteresque, the Pinter pause, comedy of menace" (2009: 2). As violence does not usually openly occur but rather stay as a form of threat, "comedy of menace" has become the other term that has often populated the writings of Pinter critics. Apart from these subjects, Pinter's works has been analysed to underline the politics, power relations, gender issues and the like. Among these critical works, the setting of Pinter's plays has probably been the least attractive to the critics. However,

the playwright's choice of settings, without any doubt, functions as a catalyst to improve the plot and language of his plays. The pivotal aim of this paper, in this regard, is to bring the setting of *Birthday Party* – the most well-known play of Pinter – under scrutiny to unfold the spatial markers contribution to the play, referring to the concept Heterotopia defined by French philosopher Michel Foucault.

Foucault defines heterotopia in comparison to utopias with a mirror analogy, that is, a mirror is a utopic site for being an unreal and virtual place, yet, on the other hand, it is real because it “does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that [the object] occup[ies]” (1986: 24). In a similar way, heterotopias inherit the same paradox, they are not only present but also absent – “a sort of mixed, joint experience” (Foucault, 1986: 24). They are present because heterotopias are real, just like the reality of the image on the mirror, yet on the other hand, they are different from the real, they are unreal and “placeless,” again like the reality reflected through the looking glass. As for the other real-life examples, this absent presence may not be detected as easy as it is to be seen on a mirror; yet heterotopias or the “counter-sites” are redundant in every other culture, and they are “simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” by the other places. As Foucault puts it, although the location of these places can be precisely indicated, they are “absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about” (1986: 24). For instance, “crisis heterotopias” – one of the forms Foucault defines – like “psychiatric hospitals” do not only function as hospitals but they are also “reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis” (1986: 24). Basically, it can be claimed that the definition, function and/or the meaning of heterotopias are multi-layered and they are not as clear as their physical location.

Heterotopia and The Boarding House

The boarding house, with regards to Foucault's conception of the term, constitutes a saturated instance of Heterotopia in Pinter's *Birthday Party*. The play is basically about an outcast protagonist, Stanley Webber, who has been living in a seaside boarding house for a while. The main conflict of the play is disclosed when two nebulous men in dark suits arrive at the boarding house and start threatening the household with their words and actions. The tension peaks during the games played at the birthday party given for Stanley and it becomes a transformative event for him. In the morning of the birthday party, Stanley appears to have become one of the

dark suited men and he leaves the boarding house with them. On top of Pinter's genius to utilise language, silence and action, the choice of setting in the play multiplies the layers of meaning generated. The playwright chooses a distant boarding house by the seashore as the only location for all the three acts. There is no doubt that this choice is for a reason and as the meaning of the boarding house is further analysed, the mystery behind this setting will further be disclosed.

One of the core principles Foucault identifies a heterotopia with is incompatibility and the heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. The boarding house, in this respect, is a perfect example of heterotopia, because it is a hybrid space carrying the features of a home, as well as an unknown place. It is supposed to offer the customers the comfort of a house while it is a home for strangers. Joanna Pready's analysis of hotel space to clarify the incompatibility of these heterotopic places is also applicable to a boarding house: "The dichotomies between the individual and the mass, and between alienation and community are caught up in the physical space of the hotel, and are further complicated by the opposition between home and holiday that the hotel rests upon" (2009: 7). In other words, someone visiting a hotel, or a boarding house is home while he is away; he is alone, while he is a part of the crowd; he is resting, while he is travelling. As Pready further elaborates on his idea, "Life in [. . .] the 'hotel-world' is built on contradictions; it creates both feelings of familiarity and strangeness, rootlessness and stasis, freedom and inhibition" (2009: 8). Pinter's boarding house is endowed with the same incongruities: on the one hand, it invites customers to visit this place and enjoy their time, yet, on the other hand, somehow paradoxically, it promises segregation and solitude just like a reclusory. It is both inviting people and keeping them away. Thus, this is the perfect spot for Pinter to brew the conflict between the inside and the outside, the familiar and the unknown, the safe and the threatening.

When the play commences, the familial atmosphere, which is the basic difference of a boarding house from a hotel and probably the reason why Pinter locates his play into the former rather than the latter, is so intense that it can be rather shocking to hear that Stanley, the protagonist, is indeed a customer rather than the naughty and lazy child of the old couple, Petey and Meg. Indeed, the audience can easily be confused about the status of the house, since Pinter does not disclose the commercial status of the house at the beginning of the play with stage directions, and rather leaves it

over to Meg's early speech with Petey in the first act. As it is aforementioned, *Birthday Party* is commonly classified as a part of the Theatre of the Absurd and the boarding house as the setting is another source of this absurdity with its incompatibility to being a business place. It is a replica of Foucault's mirror, that is, it is a commercial place and the customers are supposed to pay, but simultaneously, it is a house and not with a commercial status. The absurdity and incompatibility of the boarding house's status also accounts for the ambiguous relationship between the residents. As the primary example, the way Meg wakes Stanley up and calls him down to breakfast marks the absurd relationship between them:

PETEY. Didn't you take him up his cup of tea?

MEG. I always take him up his cup of tea. But that was a long time ago.

PETEY. Did he drink it?

MEG. I made him. I stood there till he did. I'm going to call him. (She goes to the door.) Stan! Stanny! (She listens.) Stan! I'm coming up to fetch you if you don't come down! I'm coming up! I'm going to count three! One! Two! Three! I'm coming to get you! (She exits and goes upstairs. In a moment, shouts from STANLEY, wild laughter from MEG. PETEY takes his plate to the hatch. Shouts. Laughter. PETEY sits at the table. Silence. She returns.) He's coming down. (She is panting and arranges her hair.) I told him if he didn't hurry up he'd get no breakfast.

PETEY. That did it, eh?

MEG. I'll get his cornflakes. (Pinter, 1990: 23-24).

Is she his mother or the landlord? Is this Stanley's home or is he a tenant? Later the situation even takes a more absurd form when the two start flirting with each other. The Oedipal references Pinter gives in his plays are already known (Gordon, 2013: 30; Wyllie & Rees, 2017: 65). The playwright utilises these references to generate a sense of ambiguity in *The Birthday Party* which he sustains during the whole play. Meanwhile, each novel ambiguity adds another level to Pinter's heterotopia. In that respect, the biggest ambiguity of the play is revealed when Meg informs Stanley about the imminent arrival of two strangers. The announcement of two unknown characters arriving soon detonates the peaceful home atmosphere of the boarding house and turns it into a possible hideout. As soon as he hears of the news, Stanley starts acting suspicious and this calls obvious questions into someone's mind.

MEG. Without your old Meg. I've got to get things in for the two gentlemen.

A pause. STANLEY slowly raises his head. He speaks without turning.

STANLEY. What two gentlemen?

MEG. I'm expecting visitors.

He turns.

STANLEY. What?

MEG. You didn't know that, did you?

STANLEY. What are you talking about?

MEG. Two gentlemen asked Petey if they could come and stay for a couple of nights. I'm expecting them. (She picks up the duster and begins to wipe the cloth on the table.)

STANLEY. I don't believe it. (Pinter, 1990: 29-30).

Robert Gordon indicates that the audience "may well wonder if Stanley has indeed been concealing a secret about himself" and consider him as "either criminal or victim" (2013: 32). This mystery is never resolved in the play, but it attributes a new spatial character to the setting. The protagonist is an outcast character and he has been hiding in this boarding house or hideout.

As the play proceeds, the layers of place keep accumulating on this boarding house. Another one of these layers is unravelled when McCann and Goldberg start interrogating Stanley and try to solve the mystery of his past. First "GOLDBERG sighs, and sits at the table right" next to Stanley and then "MCCANN slowly sits at the table, left" (Pinter, 1990: 56). With the stage directions, the place is transformed into an interrogation room and Stanley is pestered by the questions of the two dark-suited characters. Momentarily punctuated by some silence, the verbal and physical tension keeps rising until McCann grabs Stanley's glasses and they "circle" him and make him cry (Pinter, 1990: 59-62). This last scene also refers to the boarding house taking a form of delivery room, and as it will be further analysed in the following part of this article, McCann and Goldberg may easily be described as the surgeons conducting a caesarean operation to force Stanley out of his mother's womb. Before passing to the analysis these alternative places hosted inside the boarding house, it can be concluded that it is the heterotopic nature of the boarding house that makes McCann and Goldberg confront Stanley and create the main conflict of the play. On the one hand, it is necessary to refer back to Preedy's analysis at this point and remind that the boarding house is a place where the familiar and the

strange may co-exist. On the other hand, by creating such heterotopia of incompatible places could Pinter bring a home, a boarding house, a hideout, an interrogation room and a delivery room together. Or even, the list can be extended to include a prison, which Gülten Silindir Keretli uses to analyse the pressure Goldberg and McCann exerts on the protagonist (2023: 37-50).

The metaphorical reading of the play in consideration of the title further accentuates the heterotopic nature of the play's setting. For Foucault, "there are privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women" and he uses the term "crisis heterotopia" to refer to these special places (1986: 24). The boarding house, in this sense, is a true "crisis heterotopia," because it is a place where a birth is taking place and it is obviously the rebirth of the protagonist. As it is understood from the dialogue between Stanley and Meg, Stan used to be a pianist, yet, one disappointing experience of failure broke his courage and he gave up.

"In a sense," as Richard C. Slocum explains, "Stanley has withdrawn from society and returned to the womb represented by the surrogate parents Meg and Petey" (1978: 14). Rather than challenging the bitter reality and striving to find his way back, Stanley reclines to the comfort of laziness and sees no problem in relying completely on the old couple. At this juncture, once again Pready's words about a hotel can be inspirational to understand the pivotal role of the boarding house in the play: As a "self-contained building" the hotel provides an autonomous space, "a walled off space within a space, a mini city within a major one" with its own facilities to supply food, entertainment and protection for the customers (2009: 9). The same analogy perfectly matches to the relationship between Stanley and the boarding house. The protagonist, cocooned into the boarding house does not work to supply any kind of income to the household but rather grumblingly consumes the food served by them. He only steps out of the house to smoke and does not even bother to help Meg do the shopping. The boarding house provides him the comfort of an eternal holiday within this "walled off space" separated from the rest of the world.

Besides the food, the boarding house also provides Stanley protection or a sense of security from any external menace. To highlight the sense of security, Pinter, showing his spatial mastery, places a small hatch at the centre of the setting. Meg serves food through the hatch for Stanley and it

may stand for the naval cord to buttress the womb metaphor. Yet, the function of the hatch is not merely limited to this: whenever Stanley feels threatened, he reclines his back against the hatch or goes inside the kitchen and secretly spies through the hatch. The first instance occurs when Goldberg and McCann are introduced for the first time:

Enter, by the back door, GOLDBERG and MCCANN. MCCANN carries two suitcases, GOLDBERG a briefcase. They halt inside the door, then walk downstage. STANLEY, wiping his face, glimpses their backs through the hatch. GOLDBERG and MCCANN look round the room. STANLEY slips on his glasses, sidles through the kitchen door and out of the back door (Pinter, 1990: 36-37).

Without saying anything, Stanley watches them and then escapes. When he tries to do the same at the beginning of the second act, it is not possible for him to run away. As soon as he enters and spots McCann on the table busy with tearing the newspaper, Stanley attempts to abstain from confronting him: “STANLEY goes into the kitchen and pours a glass of water. He drinks it looking through the hatch. He puts the glass down, comes out of the kitchen and walks quickly towards the door, left. MCCANN rises and intercepts him” (Pinter, 1990: 47). Once again, at the end of the party Stanley attempts to go back to the kitchen through the hatch since he is intimidated by McCann and Goldberg: “STANLEY, as soon as the torchlight hits him, begins to giggle. GOLDBERG and MCCANN move towards him. He backs, giggling, the torch on his face. They follow him upstage, left. He backs against the hatch, giggling” (Pinter, 1990: 75). The kitchen is sitting at the heart of Stanley’s sense of security and satisfaction. It certainly constitutes a world within another world and it is privileged for Stanley and the surrogate mother Meg. The protagonist is lured by the privileges of this heterotopic space and has no intention to check out.

From this vantage point, the idea embraced by the critics like Jane Wong Yeang Chui presents the antagonist, McCann and Goldberg, as “liberators” challenging the common view of them being mere “intruders,” in that, “The intruders paradoxically take on roles of persecutor and liberator, and in doing so, they reveal the exploited as the exploiter.” (2013: 15). In other words, it is also possible to say Stanley, who is persecuted by McCann and Goldberg, is also a persecutor abusing the benevolence of Meg and Petey. Therefore, the act of forcing him out of his den can be attributed a positive connotation. Drawing attention to the first name of Goldberg,

which is Nat, Charles A. Carpenter, tags *The Birthday Party* as a play of “Nativity” and states that

Living up to his first name, Nat succeeds in separating the infantile Webber from an insulated web of self-indulgent womb-life, and in removing him to the exposed web of moral, social, and familial obligations outside. In short, he effects a forced birth (1974: 392-93).

It is the protagonist’s birthday and he is reborn as a different man right after his birthday party. As Bernard F. Dukore puts it, “The intruders turn Stanley into what McCann calls a new man. At their hands he is reborn, made into a different kind of person on a birthday that becomes a birth-day” (1988: 31). When the play begins, he is first visualised as “unshaven, in his pyjama jacket and wear[ing] glasses,” (Pinter, 1990: 24) whereas in the morning after his birthday he is converted into the opposite: he is “dressed in a dark well cut suit and white collar. He holds his broken glasses in his hand. He is clean-shaven” (Pinter, 1990: 91). With this regard, the boarding house is a crisis heterotopia and it witnesses a painful metaphorical rebirth.

Another common feature of Foucault’s crisis heterotopia is its temporariness. The crisis, as understood from the examples Foucault gives – “adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women” (1986: 24) – lasts for a while and then it must be resolved; it cannot be forever. Unlike a normal house, a boarding house is supposed to be a temporary residence for its customers, for people are allowed to stay there only for a limited period of time. This feature of the place is certainly in line with the womb metaphor of the play. This crisis heterotopia can be occupied or reserved for the defined duration of pregnancy, thus, Stanley’s attempt to return and stay here without any consideration to leave, is against its rules. Therefore, the selection of this heterotopic place again contributes to the meaning fostered by the whole play and adds another layer of contemplation for the dexterity of the playwright.

The final principle of Heterotopia to be discussed here is again related to the ambiguous nature of the boarding house. It is already highlighted that the boarding house both invites and keeps people away. By and large, customers are allowed to enter a boarding house while the others are supposed to stay out. Consequently, a boarding house is a place which everybody may use, yet it requires certain procedures to be followed. Just as Foucault clarifies,

Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place. Either the entry is compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications (1986: 26).

Pinter's heterotopia is as open as it is closed, is private as much as it is for the public; it is isolated but also in touch with the rest. Excluding the owners of the boarding house, there are four more characters visiting the place in *The Birthday Party*. Stanley, McCann and Goldberg are customers and they are supposed to pay the owners for their stay. Only character who does not intent to stay is Lulu and she is not a customer but a friend and a neighbour. Therefore, to have access to this place, one should either personally know the owners or must have an intention to pay, and to be able to stay, they are supposed to pay the price to the owners. The process of checking in, in this respect, can be considered as one of the premises of the boarding house as heterotopia. Stanley, McCann and Goldberg are all expected to follow this rite but it is never seen if they do. It is already discussed that Stanley's indefinite stay violates another rite of limited duration. Moreover, McCann and Goldberg's act of torturing the others is also not matching with the rites of the place. Although they look like suit-wearing gentlemen, they easily ignore the house rules. These conflicts between the rites of the place and the actions of the characters going on throughout the whole play becomes one of the major fuels energising the audience's attention. Once again, the subtle choice of such heterotopia becomes a critical element of the play to create an atmosphere of ambiguity. As Pinter does not seek a clear-cut conclusion but rather makes the audience question, the heterotopic nature of the setting provides an immaculate nest for this ambiguity to grow.

Conclusion

All in all, the boarding house serves as an immaculate example of heterotopia to match the ambiguity the playwright engenders to puzzle the audience. Primarily the boarding house becomes an imbrication of multiple incongruous places in a single setting, including a playground, an interrogation room, a party room, a delivery room, a womb, or a hideout. It is the liminal status of the boarding house that allows the unification of all in such a heterotopia; on the one hand it promises the comfort of a hotel or a utopia, while, on the other hand, it is imbued with domestic familial atmosphere. The boarding house is Pinter's mirror, it segregates the characters

from the outer world, but it still maintains the connection; it is a world promising familiarity while being unknown; it is inviting but also keeping out. Together with this, the boarding house turns out to be a crisis heterotopia, because it metaphorically narrates the rebirth of the protagonist. Only some people have permission to use the boarding house and the check in rites as well as the other rules of the house must be followed to stay here. Given all these peculiarities of the boarding house, its contribution to the meaning of the whole play is non-negligible. The ambiguity of the relationships between the characters and their past, the prospect of different realities and interpretations, and the arduousness of reaching a clear-cut conclusion are merged into the heterotopic nature of the boarding house.

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