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STUDYING ELIZABETHAN AND MODERN TRAGICOMEDY: AN ANALYSIS OF WILLIAM
SHAKESPEARE'S *THE WINTER'S TALE* AND HAROLD PINTER'S *THE BIRTHDAY PARTY*

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ABSTRACT

The present paper attempts to make an analysis of William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, an Elizabethan tragicomedy and Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, a modern tragicomedy. But these are tragicomedies with a difference. *The Winter's Tale* moves from tragedy in the first half to comedy in the second half. Things end well for all the major characters although there is suffering and sadness and the loss of lives cannot be undone. *The Birthday Party*, on the other hand, is a dark comedy. There is an aura of terror, revulsion and dread throughout. And things end on a threatening and despairing note for the major character Stanley Webber who seems to have lost his mental faculties in the end.

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As in *The Tempest* and *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* portrays tragedy in the first half of the play. Like in *The Tempest*, tragedy strikes at the very outset when Leontes, the king of Bohemia suddenly starts doubting his queen's constancy and Polixenes's friendship. His disastrous jealousy springs from a trifle incident of Polixenes agreeing to stay in Sicilia for some more time on the behest of Hermione whereas earlier he had refused Leontes's request for the same.

Hermione: ... Will you go yet?

Force me to keep you as a prisoner,

Not like a guest; ...

Polixenes: Your guest, then, madam:

To be your prisoner should import offending;... (*The Winter's Tale* Act I Scene II 9-10)

As in the case of *Othello*, the poison of doubt and distrust starts corroding and corrupting Leontes's love and his judgement. In *Othello*, it is Iago who is the agent of this corruption. In Leontes's case it comes from within him with no instigation from any outside source as is clear in an Aside:

... How she holds up the neb, the bill to him!

And arms her with the boldness of a wife

To her allowing husband! (*The Winter's Tale* Act I Scene II 16)

His rage and ruthlessness at the presumed infidelity of his wife and the disloyalty of his friend is so absolute that he commands his trusted servant Camillo to poison Polixenes. The fact that Polixenes has been his

childhood friend and a guest at his palace under his protection does not deter him from making such a merciless order. When Polixenes and Camillo flee and escape to Bohemia, Hermione becomes the innocent target of his baseless wrath. Leontes snatches Mamillius from her and declares shamelessly that the child she is carrying is not his but Polixenes's:

Bear the boy hence; he shall not come about her;
Away with him! and let her sport herself
With that she's big with; for 'tis Polixenes
Has made thee swell thus. (*The Winter's Tale* Act II Scene I 33)

His paternal feelings of affection and protection for the child are not aroused even when Paulina puts the child at his feet and he orders Antigonus to desert the presumably illegitimate child though the Oracle of Apollo declares that:

Hermione is chaste;
Polixenes blameless; Camillo a true subject; Leontes
a jealous tyrant; his innocent babe truly begotten;
and the king shall live without an heir, if that
which is lost be not found. (*The Winter's Tale* Act III Scene II 61)

Leontes irreverently dares to declare that there is no truth in the Oracle and is immediately punished with the news of his son's death. Hermione who is a picture of grace, virtue, piety and patience faints at the news and is reported dead to the king. It is now that the full import of the gravity of his actions and the consequent misfortune dawns on him. With one stroke of misfortune, his entire family is disintegrated leaving him in the dark abyss of loneliness and guilt. He vows to mourn and repent for his wrongdoings till the end of his life. Here the tragedy of Leontes seems complete with Hermione and Mamillius dead and his daughter left to be dead on some desolate island. In Shakespeare's tragedies *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, the sins and flaws of the tragic protagonists lead to their eventual destruction and death. They never get a chance to atone or repent for their sins. But in his tragicomedies, the playwright incorporates the elements of repentance and regeneration after the tragic events.

After a transition of sixteen years, *The Winter's Tale* moves from the tragic note to a comic one through young and vivacious characters Perdita, Florizel, the shepherd and Autolycus. In the later part of the play, the atmosphere is not of gloom and dejection but of happiness and celebration with the love of Perdita and Florizel. Perdita turns out to be a beautiful damsel whose noble birth speaks for itself even though she has been brought up as a humble shepherd's daughter. Polixenes comments:

This is the prettiest low-born lass that ever
Ran on the green - sward: nothing she does or seems
But smacks of something greater than herself,
Too noble for this place. (*The Winter's Tale* ActIV SceneIV 89)

Florizel also pays a glowing tribute to her ethereal beauty and professes his undying love for her:

...That, were I crown'd the most imperial monarch,
Thereof most worthy, were I the fairest youth
That ever made eye swerve, had force and knowledge
More than was ever man's, I would not prize them
Without her love; ...(*The Winter's Tale* ActIV SceneIV100)

Autolycus's antics and his songs also add to the general aura of merriment:

When daffodils begin to peer,
With heigh! the doxy over the dale,
Why, then comes in the sweet o' the year,
For the red blood reigns in the winter's pale... (*The Winter's Tale* ActIV SceneIII 77)

Tragic note again makes a transitory appearance with Polixenes disapproving of Florizel's love for Perdita. He rebukes and warns them in very stern terms:

I'll have thy beauty scratch'd with briers and made

More homely than thy state. For thee, fond boy,
If I may ever know thou dost but sigh
That thou no more shalt see this knack ,as never
I mean thou shalt, we'll bar thee from succession;
Not hold thee of our blood, no, not our kin,
Far than Deucalion off: mark thou my words:
Follow us to the court. (*The Winter's Tale* ActIV SceneIV 104)

It is at this juncture that Camillo helps both the lovers in fleeing to Sicilia as he is also secretly desirous of meeting his master Leontes. It is here that all the principal characters of the play come together. Like in *The Tempest*, all misgivings and doubts are erased with the help of young lovers Florizel and Perdita who is recognized by Leontes as his own daughter. Miraculously enough, the statue of the wronged Queen Hermione comes to life owing to Leontes's true repentance, sincere mourning and steadfast faith. Hermione embraces the king and prays for Perdita with immense affection. *The Winter's Tale* gets a happy ending unlike the tragedies of Shakespeare. But the happiness and merriment is not absolute like in the comedies as Mamillius, their son, is dead and Antigonus, Paulina's husband, is gone for good. And the sixteen years of what could be a joyous time is spent in guilt and penance by Leontes and sadness, mourning and overwhelming patience by Hermione. There is no doubt happiness, regeneration and reconciliation but it is mingled with a heavy streak of sorrow for what is lost forever and is irredeemable. Hence the tragicomedy.

Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* too is a tragicomedy but unlike *The Winter's Tale*, it is a dark comedy, a comedy of terror. Comedy here is not an end in itself but an instrument for creating horror. Petey and Meg's repetitive and inconsequential conversation is both comical and pathetic. This repetition produces comedy but at the same time is indicative of a stagnant relationship and an intensely monotonous routine and existence:

Meg: Is that you, Petey?
Petey, is that you?
Petey?
Petey: What?
Meg: Is that you?
Petey: Yes, it's me.
Meg: What? (Her face appears at the hatch). Are you back?
Petey: Yes.
Meg: I've got your cornflakes ready.(She disappears and reappears.)Here's your cornflakes.
Are they nice?
Petey: Very nice.
Meg: I thought they'd be nice.(She sits at the table.) You got your paper?
Petey: Yes.
Meg: Is it good?
Petey: Not bad (*The Birthday Party* 1-2).

Stanley's relationship with Meg is both comical as well as pathetic. It defies any proper definition. Meg's behaviour and emotions towards Stanley are both motherly and of a beloved. She doesn't seem to have a child of her own and as a result she showers all her motherly affection on Stanley, but at the same time expects a lover's response from him.

Meg: ...Was it nice?
Stanley: What?
Meg: The fried bread.
Stanley: Succulent.
Meg: You shouldn't say that word.
Stanley: What word?
Meg: The word you said.
Stanley: What, succulent -?

Meg: Don't say it!

Stanley: What's the matter with it?

Meg: You shouldn't say that word to a married woman... (*The Birthday Party 10-11*)

The title *The Birthday Party* is also deceptive. The title connotes enjoyment, gaiety and celebration but the actual birthday party brings disaster and terror in Stanley's life in the form of Goldberg and McCann, the mysterious intruders who intrude his temporary safe haven. They both exude fear and menace and accuse Stanley of incomprehensible and useless things:

Goldberg: Webber, what were you doing yesterday?

Stanley: Yesterday?

Goldberg: And the day before. What did you do the day before that?

Stanley: What do you mean?

Goldberg: Why are you wasting everybody's time, Webber? Why are you getting in everybody's way?...

McCann: Why did you leave the organization? (*The Birthday Party 39-40*)

Stanley here has begun to lose his mental balance and his diminution begins with his trying to rape Lulu, Meg's neighbour. Both Goldberg and McCann try to overpower Stanley by their strange accusations. One doesn't understand the meaning of these allegations and Pinter does not provide any explanations for the same but it successfully creates an atmosphere of dread, fear, fright, ghastliness, dismay, shock and revulsion.

McCann: He's killed his wife!

Goldberg: Why did you kill your wife?

Stanley: What wife?

McCann: How did you kill her?

Goldberg: How did you kill her?

McCann: You throttled her.

Goldberg: With arsenic (*The Birthday Party 41*).

And

Goldberg: Webber! Why did you change your name?

Stanley: I forgot the other one.

Goldberg: What's your name now?

Stanley: Joe Sap.

Goldberg: You stink of sin.

McCann: I can smell it...

He's sweating!

Goldberg: When did you last pray?

McCann: He's sweating! (*The Birthday Party 42*)

They declare that he needs to be treated and so they decide to take him to Monty. Monty is a very elusive and mysterious personality like Godot in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Both of them are mentioned in the play but none of them ever appears. But whereas Godot gives the two tramps Vladimir and Estragon something to hope for, something to wait for and something to live for, Monty seems to be a terrifying figure whose name creates an atmosphere of dread and horror. The playwright gives no explanations or specifications as to who Monty is.

Goldberg: I agree with you. It's all taken care of. We'll give him a bit of time to settle down, and then I'll take him to Monty.

Petty: You're going to take him to a doctor.

Goldberg(staring at him): Sure. Monty (*The Birthday Party 60*).

Stanley loses his normal self and starts behaving like a robot at the hands of Goldberg and McCann and they shatter his illusion that he can run away from his past forever. In the end, it is clear that his psychological torture and overpowering by these two messengers of inexplicable violence is complete and absolute when he loses his power of speech and starts uttering incomprehensible childlike cries:

Goldberg: ... What's your opinion of such a prospect? Eh, Stanley?

(Stanley concentrates, his mouth opens, he attempts to speak, fails and emits sounds from his throat.)

Stanley: Uh-gug... uh-gug... eeehhh-gag... (*On the breath.*)Caahh...caahh....

Goldberg: Well, Stanny boy, what do you say, eh?...

Stanley: Ug-gughh...uh-gughhh....

McCann: What's your opinion, sir?

Stanley: Caaahhh...caaahhh.... (*The Birthday Party 68*)

One can conclude that in *The Winter's Tale*, after a lot of suffering and penance, things take a happy and pleasant turn for the major characters although the loss of Mamillius and Camillo can't be reverted. But in *The Birthday Party*, things end on a menacing and threatening note with Stanley going to Monty forever with no hope of ever coming back or regaining his power of speech and mental capabilities to the fullest. Thus both the plays, although tragicomedies, are very different from each other.

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