

# Postmodern Cultural Fragmentation and Subjectivity in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*

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Received: May 1, 2025      Accepted: August 5, 2025      Online Published: January 9, 2026

doi:10.5430/wjel.v16n2p479

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v16n2p479>

## Abstract

This paper attempts to explore postmodern fragmentation in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*. It focuses on the thematic insights of postmodern fragmentation to infer Pinter's concern with contemporary changes of cultural values. These changes include the transformation of human view of life and humanistic ethical principles at the onset of postmodernism. Therefore, the theme of fragmentation will be elaborated in the light of postmodernism's relative consideration of life i.e., people perceive life and its pertinent matters according to their judgmental subjectivity. Such judgments will be the nexus of cultural fragmentation because people have contradictory views concerning their relations or judgments of facts. For this reason, the study follows a qualitative analysis of the theme of cultural fragmentation by interpreting the characters and their subjective relationships with each other. The characters' relationships are not on appropriate accord because they undergo cultural fragmentation in terms of their relationships and judgments of life.

**Keywords:** culture, fragmentation, Pinter, postmodernism, subjectivity

## 1. Introduction

Postmodernism addresses critical issues regarding man's place in the history of community. It has digressive yet pithy expression of humanistic relations and the nature of life. The discussion of life has been related to the perception of reality in light of human living conditions controlled by the progressive continuation of history in different temporal phases. Critics have dealt with the transitional temporal stages of history from modernism to postmodernism through "texts [which] actually illuminate the transition to a new type of postmodern society, and provide perspectives that might be of use for critical social theory and for projects of political transformation" (Kellner, 1989, p.84). They primarily focus on the political factors governing the historical changes concerning postmodernism and its perspective on aspects of reality that "are different from each other yet similar in their sense of belonging to the homeland" (Kaur et al., 2023, p.1947). Postmodern literary works highlight this transition in relation to socio-politics intricate issues. Literary texts are the cogent textual vehicles used to convey the authorial formulation of themes and techniques by dint of precise consideration of the work as a whole. Postmodern literature serves as a connective channel between the authorial treatment of themes and techniques culturally-based texts.

The cultural aspect of postmodern literature is also conveyed in the implied expressions about the position of man in society and history. The political and social factors are of paramount importance as they govern the entire literary writing style employed by authors to project their relative perception of reality in their literary works by means of "modernity in order to accentuate the supremacy of the native traditions over the foreign culture" (Majeed et al., 2022, p.575). Postmodernism becomes a new form of literary expressions harnessed for the sake of informing the reader the essential tenets of the literary work and its thematic insights. Scholars have tended to describe the new form as literary experimentation that emerges forcefully in the course of works about life and humanity because postmodernism "period was a time of ferment, experimentation; novelty and synthesis that combined theories from diverse fields" (Kellner, 1989, p.5). Literary experimentation incarnates the genuine sense of novelty and innovation in creating new forms related to the reader's ability to deduce the thematic attributes of the works and how the reader could make sense of them because "postmodern fiction problematises the grand narrative revealing relative authoritative perspectives which are, to a great extent, self-reflexive" (Abu Jweid and Termizi, 2015, p.1069). The thematic feature of postmodern literature could be similarly grasped in the context of diverse cultural fields; whereby they reflect the authentic authorial consideration of reality. The conceptualization of reality in postmodern literature has utmost importance to understand the relationship between different social groups. Reality is often perceived as relative i.e., it relates to any individual or any social group differently. People have discrepant and contradictory views of reality as they live in various and subjective circumstance which "unravels the allegorical references made by the author" (Kaur and Abu Jweid, 2018, p.7). This circumstance differentiates people and their lives from each other. There is almost no commonality, unity, or connection between their lives as they lead different living conditions. Therefore, this paper tries to explore postmodern fragmentation in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*.

## 2. Literature Review

There are different studies done on Pinter's *The Birthday Party*. They provide the reader with new critical perspectives and literary insights about the play. Nabamita Das (2015) applies the concept of existential anguish suffered by man in the postmodern world. Das (2015) contends that Pinter's portrayal of existential anguish is a typical reflection of the postmodern look at man in hopeless states. Therefore, she (2015) finds that the concept of existential anguish as an analogy of loss of identity of contemporary postmodern man. To put it another way, postmodernism inflicted psychological existential anguish on people who "suffered a mental and psychological turmoil that ultimately culminated in their loss of identity" (p.27). As a result, Das (2015) followed a psychological study of postmodern existential anguish to explore Pinter's depiction of the inner and outer facets of people of the time.

In "Treatment of Themes and the Female Characters: A Critical Study on Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* and *The Room*," Niranjan Majhi (2024) applies feminism to examine the various features of female character in Pinter's *The Birthday Party*. He (2024) claims that Pinter had especially focused on female characters that had been victims of the world wars. Consequently, females suffered from the loss of life as they were devastated by the sequences and horrible events of the wars. Females had developed a sense of meaninglessness of life which inspired Pinter "to write after experiencing the huge loss of life and property caused by the two destructive World Wars. These World Wars have such huge impact on lives that it seems as if the people were living meaninglessly. Their existence in the world is meaningless" (p.576). In this respect, Majhi's (2024) study discovered the direct influence on wars upon the female characters that were victims of wars; and, simultaneously, how they remained negatively influenced by these wars even after they ended.

Khomdram Guneshwor Singh (2020), in "Political and Metaphorical Implications in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*," discusses Pinter's metaphorical use of dramatic techniques in order to comment on the political themes in the play. Singh (2020) argues that the play abounds with a number of literary metaphors about politics that governs and shapes the entire impression of the British society. He (2020) maintains that the play parades political themes to uncover people's quest for domination and power in order to make people be submissive to political authority: "Pinter's *The Birthday Party* can be regarded as a play with underlying political and metaphorical implications. It depicts the use of authoritarian power and force to exercise control and overcome an individual into submission" (p.216). Accordingly, Singh's (2020) study found that Pinter uses laconic and expressive metaphorical description of politics to offer a vivid picture of how individuals could be controlled and powered by strong minority.

The aforementioned studies tackle thematic and some technical elements of Pinter's *The Birthday Party*. Though they are similar to the subject of this study, there will be a more profound discussion of the play from a postmodern perspective. The current study attempts to explore postmodern fragmentation which is scarcely and sufficiently interpreted in the previous studies. It accentuates Pinter's depiction of cultural fragmentation and subjectivity by analyzing the characters and their social conditions. For this reason, it perceives postmodern fragmentation as a result of the characters subjective judgment of life and relative view of its related issues which are not completely interpreted in the play. Hence, the study's main argument will be the exploration of the characters' cultural and relative subjectivity as the motivation of their social fragmentation as a sign of postmodernism.

## 3. Analysis and Discussion

Postmodernism's perception of reality is limited to the relative view of life. Reality is tackled in a critical way that relates to people's interactions and personal relationship with each other. Jean Baudrillard (1994) discusses the integral "signs" of reality; and argues that these signs are needed for creating a sense of cultural relativity through which people could interact with each other. Baudrillard (1994) describes these signs as vicissitudes governing people's personal affairs: "for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short circuits all its vicissitudes" (p.2). In Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, Stanley and Meg undergo this kind of reality. They have strong social personal ties, but they feel that they are detached from each other. Such detachment exemplifies their subjective judgement of life and reality in which they live. Pinter employs their speech and dialogues to unravel the social reality of the British society:

**Stanley:** Who is it?

**Meg:** The two gentlemen.

**Stanley:** What two gentlemen?

**Meg:** The ones that were coming. I just took them to their room. They were thrilled with their room.

**Stanley:** They've come?

**Meg:** They're very nice, Stan.

**Stanley:** Why didn't they come last night?

**Meg:** They said the beds were wonderful.

**Stanley:** Who are they?

**Meg (sitting):** They're very nice, Stanley.

**Stanley:** I said, who are they?

**Meg:** I've told you, the two gentlemen.

**Stanley:** I didn't think they'd come. (p.3)

Stanley and Meg, here, are the dramatic replicas of postmodern reality which hinges on religious frameworks, stable truth, and collective identity. They represent the genuine sense of cultural fragmentation as they lead a detached life per se. They are separated from each other since they do not perceive their existence on the grounds of mutual appreciation. By the same token, David Tracy (1994), discusses the substitutions of postmodern reality in literary works. He (1994) argues that authors are concerned with the projection of the truthful reality outside the text into the fictional reality in the literary works. The fictional reality is traditional because it is inherited from the modernism's argumentation of reality and illusion in literature. Tracy (1994), consequently, offers a profound literary insight of postmodern alternative of "self-understanding" illusive reality in the course of fictional plots: "postmodern thought has exposed two illusions of modernity: the unreality of the notion of presence in modernity's concept of present time and the unreality of the modern subject's self-understanding as grounded in itself" (p.15). Similarly, Stanley and Meg embody this fact in Pinter's *The Birthday Party*. They represent the authorial depiction of postmodern reality and relative interest in cultural fragmentation which imprints the contemporary American society. They have reciprocal conversation about their relationships which has begun to be broken as a result of this fragmentation. Meg, for example, brings a gift for Stanley and she asks him not to be sad:

**Meg:** ... You mustn't be sad today. It's your birthday. A pause.

**Stanley** (dumbly): Uh?

**Meg:** It's your birthday, Stan. I was going to keep it a secret until tonight.

**Stanley:** No.

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

**Stanley:** What's this? (p.3)

Stanley and Meg's conversation about their moods and subjective relationship lies at the heart of postmodernism's focus on relative reality. To clarify, they look at their inner states differently from each other. On the one hand, Meg considers reality as pleasing and they must enjoy it. On the other hand, Stanley does not find any joy in life as they lead bad living conditions. In this sense, they embody the essential postmodern consideration relative reality as they console each other to withstand the bitter living conditions. In this respect, Tracy (1994) has a similar argument about the postmodern relative reality. He (1994) looks into the two contradictory views of reality and two "candidates" revealing the core of self-hood subjectivity: "there are two major candidates in our period for a replacement of the modern individual and the empty time enforced by the reign of the techno-economic realm and its social evolutionary views ... the anti-modern communal self of the neoconservatives and the postmodern claim to non-selfhood and non-presence" (p.11). The discussion of the modern literary nuances of relative reality is necessary for understanding their positions in postmodernism which "has been looking at literature from various critical perspectives. It merges fictional forms with their predecessors to synthesize new literary modes capable of coping with the reviving narrative fiction and protecting it from artistic decline" (Abu Jweid, 2023, p.21). Pinter projects this kind of reality in *The Birthday Party*. Stanley meets another person whose name is McCann. They also talk about their current social affairs by contemplating their reality as despondent persons. McCann is introduced as an intruder who interrupts Stanley's life and does not offer him anything to get rid of sadness:

**McCann:** I'm glad to meet you, sir ... Many happy returns of the day ... Were you going out?

**Stanley:** Yes.

**McCann:** On your birthday?

**Stanley:** Yes. Why not?

**McCann:** But they're holding a party here for you tonight.

**Stanley:** Oh really? That's unfortunate.

**McCann:** Ah no. It's very nice ...

**Stanley:** I'm sorry. I'm not in the mood for a party tonight. (p.3)

In this respect, Stanley and McCann are dramatic miniatures reflecting postmodernism. This is because they exemplify the sense of cultural fragmentation created by their contradictory subjective attitudes towards life and reality. They are also dramatic stereotypes of postmodernism's cultural changes which makes people socially fragmented. This notion is tackled in Stuart Sim's *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*. Sim (2001) elaborates the postmodern innovative styles used by writers to depart from the inherited styles used to comment on reality inside literary texts. Postmodernism tends to write creative stories about real life and real people with deliberate concentration on cultural fragmentation expressed in fictional narrative: "the postmodern writer distrusts the wholeness and completion associated with traditional stories, and prefers to deal with other ways of structuring narrative" (p.127). In *The Birthday Party*, Pinter concentrates on this cultural fragmentation in terms of the characters' personal subjectivity. Meg and McCann are at loggerheads with their social state of affairs. They do not feel at ease with their subjective relationships. Strikingly, their relationship is visited by Goldberg who adds up the play's perception of cultural fragmentation via the sense of relative reality:

**Meg:** it's your turn, Stan. McCann takes off the scarf.

**McCann**(to Stanley): I'll take your glasses. McCann takes Stanley's glasses...

**Goldberg:** He can't. Ready? Right! Everyone move. Stop! And Still! Stanley stands blindfold. McCann backs slowly across the stage to the left. He breaks Stanley's glasses, snapping the frames....Stanley begins to move, very slowly, across the stage to the left. McCann picks up the drum and places it sideways in Stanley's path. Stanley walks into the drum and falls over with his foot caught in it....There is now no light at all through the window. The stage is in darkness. (p.3)

Pinter depicts this postmodern fragmentation in a supreme dramatic dexterity. His innovative style is employed as a means of the thematic attributes of postmodern fragmentation. In like manner, Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (2004) approach the postmodern cultural fragmentation in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. They (2004) contend that postmodern writers use specific forms to comment on reality in the literary elements of the fictional text. In so doing, authors separate themselves from the text by shedding light on the language as a vehicle conveying the sense of cultural fragmentation to the reader: "the author distances himself from this common language, he steps back and objectifies it, forcing his own intentions to refract and diffuse themselves through the medium of this common view that has become embodied in language" (p.678). In Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, McCann and Goldberg are utilized as a way of informing the reader of how postmodern individuals are separated from each other by cultural fragmentation. That is, they are not united in connected social atmosphere because they are not friendly connected. Instead, they are set in in lugubrious social atmosphere where they do not belong to their relationship except in subjective interlocutory affairs:

**McCann:** You betrayed our land.

**Goldberg:** You betray our breed.

**McCann:** Who are you, Webber?

**Goldberg:** What makes you think you exist?

**McCann:** You're dead.

**Goldberg:** You're dead. You can't live, you can't think, you can't love. You're dead. You're a plague gone bad. There's no juice in you. You're nothing but an odour! (p.3)

In this case, McCann and Goldberg represent the essential sense of cultural fragmentation addressed by postmodern literary discourse innovatively created by Pinter. Paul Hollander (2018), in *Discontents: Postmodern and Postcommunist*, maintains that multiculturalism is an obvious token of postmodern fragmentation. This is due to the fact that postmodernism paves the way for societies to mix and interact with each other on the grounds of similar cultural co-existence and mutual social entities. Hollander (2018) adds that multiculturalism, in this way, serves as connective channel among discrepant cultures and social backgrounds. Furthermore, politics is a decisive factor of creating multiculturalism is a blatant subjective identities: "there is at last the phenomenon of identity politics, intertwined with both multiculturalism and the battle of self-esteem" (p.110). In Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, Stanley and Goldberg are the dramatic stereotypes of cultural fragmentation as they lead subjective misunderstanding. They could not appreciate and adapt to their co-existence. They incarnate the nexus of lack of understanding; and they appear as not being able to cope with their social circumferences. In other words, they suffer from cultural fragmentation and subjective detachment as a manifestation of postmodern view of human distinctive subjectivity:

**Goldberg:** Webber, what are 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?

**Stanley:** Me? What are you—

**Goldberg:** I'm telling you, Webber. You're a washout. (pp.47)

Stanley and Goldberg, consequently, are the typical reflections of Pinter's perception of relative reality in the play. They are not appropriately reconciled since they suffer from the reality of social fragmentation. As previously argued, the relative reality is one indicative condition of postmodern cultural fragmentation resulting in cultural oppression which "acts as an influential proxy on suppressed people. The oppressor is undoubtedly motivated by a desire to impose his power on the oppressed" (Abu Jweid, 2016, p.531). Hollander (2018) claims that relative reality does not enable people to adopt distinctive social identity because they are in progressive influences of contemporary politics: "identity politics assumes that some basic characteristics of human beings, such as race, sex, ethnicity, or sexual preference, is the single determinant and source of a person's true identity and all political interests" (p.110). Hollander (2018), in this sense, refers to the primary binary oppositions among postmodern people who lead cultural fragmentation conditions.

In Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, Goldberg and Stanley exemplify the core postmodern human subjectivity affected by contemporary politics. They seem that they live in post-war circumstances that deprive them of their social stability and mutual understanding. As a rule of thumb, postmodernism accentuates the position of man in the light of the war aftermath. This is because

people had developed a weird feeling of their surroundings where they do not have sufficient opportunity to have safe and natural reciprocal relationships. In the quotation below, Goldberg, Stanley, and McCann have contradictory view of their chicken and egg puzzle. This indicates their contradictory relationship affected by the dominant social and political atmospheres. They could not come into good terms regarding their existential symbiosis:

**Goldberg:** Why did the chicken cross the road?

**Stanley:** He wanted to- he wanted to...

**Goldberg:** Why did the chicken cross the road?

**Stanley:** He wanted...

**McCann:** He doesn't know. He doesn't know which came first!

**Goldberg:** Which came first?

**McCann:** Chicken? Egg? Which came first? (Stanley screams.)... (p.51)

Goldberg, Stanley, and McCann embody the conventional and paradigmatic view of human beings in postmodernism. They discuss the traditional puzzle of the chicken and the egg which is a complex and difficult issue by its very nature. Consequently, they represent the nature of lost people who are affected by the sequences of the war. Such war is intricately caused by conflicting political regimes that had several opposing views of life and people in the light of contemporary socio-cultural affairs. Such affairs are tackled D. C. Schindler's *Love and the Postmodern Predicament: Rediscovering the Real in Beauty, Goodness, and Truth*. Schindler (2018) discusses the essential and radical influences of political regimes upon people's lives. Postmodern political regimes indicate the notion of relative reality in which people live together in various subjective conditions. Consequently, postmodern literary works offer "a re-interpretation of the private-public distinction in politics, not to mention the subtle and pervasive shift in cultural expressions of human nature" (p.80). The cultural expressions of human nature are reiterated in the context of the literary discourse of postmodern literature. That is, culture is conveyed via the complex cultural backgrounds of contradictory living conditions of postmodern people. By the same way, Meg and Petey, in Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, are other characters that are subjects to cultural fragmentation. Though they know each other very well, they do not know how to treat and respect each other. Their subjective relationship is overwhelmed by the political and military residuals left in their societies after the war; Pinter depicts this fact in the following dialogue:

**Meg:** I was the belle of the ball.

**Petey:** Were you?

**Meg:** Oh yes. They all said I was.

**Petey:** I bet you were, too.

**Meg:** Oh, it's true. I was. Pause. I know I was. (p.81)

As a result, Meg and Petey embody the cultural insights of postmodern social fragmentation. They apparently suffer from the complexities of their social plights that had been projected on their entire social affairs. These plights are representative features of postmodern literary themes. Thomas Zengotita (2018), in *Postmodern Theory and Progressive Politics: Toward a New Humanism*, explicates the thematic aspects of postmodern accentuation of relative reality and their social affairs. He (2018) argues that postmodern literary experimentation is the primary motivation of writing themes on humanistic issues in which "all the humanistic disciplines, however ready they might have been to experiment with form.... They rightly understood that they were themselves – and not just the canonical texts they cherished – the targets of history" (p.319). Consequently, literary experimentation is a conspicuous indicator of postmodern avant-gardism. Being so, literary experimentation exemplifies the innovative themes innovated in postmodernism. Pinter's *The Birthday Party* reflects this innovation by the theme of the lack of communitarian. Meg and Petey do not have proper and logical communication. This is because they quarrel over trivial problem in their life. They could not understand what they are doing because they are victims of lack of communication caused by cultural fragmentation and their detached reality. In the dialogue below, the word "pause" is repeated, which means that they lack the proper communication connections:

**Meg:** Is that you? Petey?

Pause

Petey, is that you?

Pause

Petey?

**Petey:** What?

**Meg:** Is that you?

**Petey:** Yes, it's me.

**Meg:** What? Are you back?

**Pete**: Yes.

**Meg**: I've got your cornflakes ready. Here's your cornflakes. (P.3)

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper attempted to explore postmodern fragmentation in Pinter's *The Birthday Party*. The study pinpointed the postmodern thematic aspects of the play and how they are projected in the course of the plot. Consequently, it has three interrelated findings. First, it explored postmodern fragmentation in the light of the cultural differences and discrepancies among the major characters. The interpretation of postmodern fragmentation was appropriated through the discussion of the characters' anticipation of cultural changes in their societies. In this case, the analysis unraveled Pinter's depiction of postmodern fragmentation on the grounds of contemporary views of contradictory relations of people who experienced the real postmodern advent and its implicative conceptualization of man in society, which is partially tackled in previous studies.

The second finding lies in the interpretation of postmodern perception relative reality. To clarify, postmodernism has complicated and intertwined considerations of reality through which people have dichotomous understanding of each other. They do not come into terms with each other on the basis of united and common appreciation of their co-existence on the same social peripheries. Instead, they undergo constant opposing stances concerning reality and life. As a result, they differently judge life and each other's existence because their lives are set on persistent changes and progression; whereby people do not have any control over their life, which is rarely approached on the current scholarship on the selected play.

The characters' subjectivity was the third finding of the study. The sense of subjectivity inherently relates to the second finding, namely, the postmodern view of relative reality. In this respect, the analysis of the characters' subjective depended on their dialogues and points of views. It revealed each character's personal view of life according to his / her subjective experiences that are not completely approached in previous studies done on the play. In other words, their experiences are relatives, and, therefore, they can differently make their judgments of life and its meaning to them. Hence, these judgments depend on their living conditions, social problems, personal affairs, socio-cultural relations and so forth.

#### Acknowledgments

Not applicable.

#### Authors' contributions

Dr. Abdulhameed A. Majeed was responsible for the abstract, keywords, and introduction. Dr. Ghada Sasa was responsible for data collection and literature review. Dr. Mohammad A. Rawashdeh was responsible for analyses, discussion and conclusion. Dr. Haydar Jabr Koban has participated the theoretical farmwork. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

#### Funding

This work received no external funding.

#### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

#### Informed consent

Obtained.

#### Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

#### Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

#### Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

#### Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

#### Open access

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