

## Analyzing Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* through William Empson's Theory of Ambiguity

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### Abstract

The difficulties that society faced in the latter part of the 20th century are portrayed in the play *The Birthday Party*. The play has been called a Comedy of Menace by reviewers, and Martin Esslin has used it as an example of Theatre of the Absurd in his writings. It is characterized by a breakdown of language, as well as the fluidity and ambiguity of time, place, and identity. Pinter devised his very unique method of dramatic presentation and infused it with his very own peculiarities. All of the hallmarks of insanity are present, including a confused sense of time and place as well as a muddled understanding of one's own identity. The researcher used Stanley's ambiguity theory as a lens through which to investigate the various aspects of ambiguity. *The Birthday Party* is a confusing play since neither Stanley's suffering nor Goldberg's aim are revealed to the audience. There is no indication given to either McCann or the audience that they intend to visit the boarding home. The dynamic duo instills a feeling of dread and unease in the audience.

**Key words:** Absurd, Ambiguity, Dilemma, Harold Pinter, Mystery

## الملخص

تم تصوير الصعوبات التي واجهها المجتمع في الفترة الأخيرة من القرن العشرين في مسرحية حفلة عيد الميلاد. سميت هذه المسرحية ب (كوميديا الخطر) من قبل النقاد، واستخدمها الكاتب مارتن ايسلن في كتاباته كمثال لمسرح العبث. حيث تميزت بانهيار اللغة وكذلك غموض الزمان والمكان والهوية. ابتكر الكاتب بنتر طريقة فريدة في العرض الدرامي وغرسها مع الميزات الخاصة به. كل بصمات الجنون كانت موجودة، بما في ذلك الاحساس المشوه للزمان والمكان بالإضافة الى الفهم المشوش لهوية الفرد. استخدم الباحث نظرية ستانلي للغموض كعدسة يمكن من خلالها البحث في مختلف جوانب الغموض. تعتبر حفلة عيد الميلاد مسرحية محيرة، حيث لم يتم الكشف عن معاناة ستانلي ولاهدف غولدبرغ للجمهور. لا يوجد مايشير بان مكان او الجمهور كانوا يزورون منزل الصعود. حيث غرس الثنائي الديناميكي شعوراً بالرهبة وعدم الارتياح لدى الجمهور.

## 1. Introduction

Pinter's plays are highly confusing and vague. Ambiguity, a familiar feature of postmodernism, is on view in almost all of Pinter's plays. His plays, therefore, never satisfy our curiosity. According to Dukori's observations, "each piece of knowledge is a half-knowledge, and each answer is a springboard to new questions" in Pinter's plays (44). The characteristic of postmodernism known as flexibility to many interpretations is present in all of Pinter's plays. Texts are left open to all sorts of interpretations and there is no question in anyone's mind that all of Pinter's plays are, in fact, open-ended. (Butler, 2002; Jabeen et al., 2022). According to Hooti too, in postmodernism, "there is no such a thing as objective truth and all definitions and depictions of truth are subjective, a mere creation of the human mind" (53). Pinter's plays often use lengthy pauses as an essential element. They take up a considerable amount of the plays overall and are much more prevalent than the

conversation. Morgan too mentions “We must look not towards what they say, but towards when they keep silent” (490).

A number of catastrophes that humanity faced throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century provided the impetus for the development of modern theatre. Playwrights started becoming caught up in the serious life issues of their time. In order to concentrate on the critical issues that are currently facing contemporary society, the romantic view of life has been ignored. In point of fact, both World Wars wiped out a significant portion of humanity. The finished outcome was horrible and will stick in one's mind forever. As the world continued to deteriorate into a true dystopia, the illusions that man had of a dream world were completely destroyed. The authors portrayed contemporary man as a miserable, estranged, and lost victim of a degenerating civilization.

The majority of the characters in Harold Pinter's plays are unable to have meaningful exchanges with one another (Peacock, 1997:31). When they try to communicate, they end up producing more ambiguity than clarity, which leads to the distortion of reality as well as a rise in the magnitude of the bewilderment and the mystique that surrounds the situation. Pinter was of the opinion that speech was nothing more than a mechanism that was used to conceal the truth. Rayner gives his opinion about Pinter's plays that “silences create atmosphere and mood, to be sure, and they may indicate something about character, but they are also part of a signifying structure” (482).

In Pinter's plays, then, truth is always relative and varies from person to person. What is true for one person may not be true for another. This is mainly because there is nothing logical and rational in Pinter's plays. His plays portray a world where irrationality rules over

rational justification of life. Power (1990) also says that, “postmodernism stands for the death of reason” (qtd. in Hassard 303). To quote Storch as well, “Pinter deliberately destroys all clues for a rational appraisal: the irrationality is the major part of the meaning” (703).

Pinter's characters almost always exhibit the tendency to manipulate and dominate the people around them. The majority of the language that is used by them to interact with one another is one that is strategic and dishonest. Because of this, they rarely take part in conversation that leads to fruitful outcomes. In Pinter's plays, “the efficacy of language is questioned and the characters' inability to communicate with each other becomes a source of dramatic tension” (Lowe, 509). In Pinter's plays, there is “a serious breakdown in communication” (Tecuciano, 247).

The concept of ambiguity, as used in common parlance, relates to something that is not only extremely clear but also generally humorous or dishonest (Empson, 1949). Both in the past and in the present, ambiguity has been the subject of a substantial amount of research conducted by linguists and writers. In everyday parlance, the term ambiguity refers to statements or sentences that can be interpreted in a number of different ways and for which there is insufficient information to discern the intended or maximal interpretation (Cruse, 1982; Kumar, 2021).

Professor Jan G. Kooij considers the terms lack of clarity and equivocation to be equivalent with the concept of ambiguity. This phenomenon, which can be thought of either as a shortcoming on the part of language users or as a gap in the structure of natural language, can be thought of either as a shortcoming or as a gap in the system. One interpretation of the phenomenon is that it is a deficiency on the part of

language users. Ambiguity can be compared to a virus that spreads through the pathophysiology of language. The logician is aware of the fact that equivocation is frequently the root of fallacious thinking. A person who studies public opinion and propaganda will see ambiguity as a significant hurdle that stands in the way of effective communication. Even in the world of science, linguistic arguments that centre on the nebulous and sometimes conflicting multiple interpretations of significant terms in a topic are not wholly absent. These disagreements focus around phrases that are essential to the discussion at hand (Kooij, 1971).

In his article titled 'Seven Types of Ambiguity', which was published in 1930, William Empson states that a single word can have multiple distinct meanings; meanings that are connected with one another; meanings that need one another to complete their meaning; or meanings that unite together so that the word means one relation or one process. In contrast to the work of Empson, which is entirely devoted to poetry and does so in great detail, the definition of the phrase ambiguity can be somewhat broad, but it can also be narrowed down for certain uses when necessary.

Ambiguity is connected to a range of different aspects of language use, which cannot be neglected in such a casual manner because of its connection to other aspects. If the idea of ambiguity were analysed only from a communicative or literary standpoint, it is possible that the same language could be ambiguous in one context while being crystal clear and unambiguous in another. This is because context plays a significant role in how ambiguity is interpreted. Pinter, who is a brilliant dramatist and a master of his craft, has a unique perspective on ambiguity, which differs from that of the majority of people. He is of the opinion that a single sentence can have a variety of meanings depending on a variety of other elements such as the environment, the age of the individual, the position

of the character on the stage, etc. He is of this opinion because he believes that a single sentence can have a variety of meanings.

The works of English dramatist Harold Pinter were created at a period when people were completely fatigued by the horrors of these two wars. His paintings are usually shrouded in mystery. Pinter describes the minutiae of his character's daily life while also illuminating what lies under the surface. In the opening scene, for example, Meg, who is ostensibly Petey's wife, begins a talk about some insignificant matters. This discussion depicts the tension, boredom, and dread that are significant components of this married couple's relationship.

Harold Pinter is opposed to categorizing his plays because he believes it is awkward and dishonest. Pinter's plays were once seen to be opaque and devoid of explicitness, but that very trait of being 'obscure' has revolutionized how people approach and enjoy them.

According to Austin E. Quigley and other critics, Pinter's lack of explicitness is a purposeful ploy to capture the audience's attention. While though Pinter regards writing as a solitary activity, it is true that once a work of art is made available to the general public, it will undoubtedly get both praise and criticism. An open play is one that has been staged for the benefit of the general audience. Pinter's plays are very deep in meaning, logic, humor, and even politics. Of course, there is an element of mystery and even apprehension in Pinter's plays, but Pinter believes that mystery has its own reward because the most important things are not being said. (Quigley 13)

Pinter's plays have a mysterious quality that is never entirely explained. The protagonists face perils from both the outer and their own inner worlds, but they are unable to identify their sources. They consequently experience a great desire for security and attempt to fulfill

it by restricting access to the outside world. The region is hazardous and doomed to be overthrown by the violent forces that rule the outside world, thus this security is illusory. This makes safety in a society where no one is ever left alone to a delusion, a futile yearning, and a manifestation of man's frailty less secure.

## 2. Discussion

Pinter's first attempt at writing a full-length play came in 1958 with the production of *The Birthday Party* (1958). The two one-act plays that he composed at the same time served as the impetus for this idea. The action of the play takes place in a dilapidated and dirty boarding house located in an English coastal resort. This setting was chosen for its authenticity. Meg and her husband, Petey, are responsible for managing the household. A spacious corridor, a back entrance, a small window, a kitchen hatch, a table, and some chairs can be found within the house. There are some very fundamental pieces of furniture as well as a structure present.

Petey is an evasive man who works as a deckchair attendant on the promenade. Meg is an elderly, chatty woman. Just Stanley Webber resides in the boarding house. Meg and Petey engage in a pretty pointless and uninteresting talk to commence the play. Meg speaks ceaselessly, while Petey reacts with one-liners.:

MEG: Is that you, Petey?

Pause,

Petey is  
that you?

Pause

Petey?

PETEY : What? (Pinter, *Plays 1 3*)

The meaninglessness of the talk and the fact that it kept repeating itself say a lot about their connection. After serving him breakfast, Meg asks him about the newspaper and then checks on Stanley, who is still sound asleep. Meg tries to fill the void in their relationship with hollow questions:

I've got your cornflakes ready. (She MEG :  
disappears and reappears) Here are your  
cornflakes.

In Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, a play about an impromptu birthday celebration that swiftly turns sinister, there are very few plain or provable details. In point of fact, the majority of the characters' assertions about the facts are ultimately disproven or disregarded by the author. Personal histories, for instance, are typically cloudy for a number of reasons. For instance, people like Goldberg and Stanley Webber have provided conflicting narratives of their pasts. However, because *The Birthday Party* is so malleable, even the names of certain characters are sometimes changed. Nonetheless, it seems that nobody in the play is aware of these swings or bothered about them in any way. Instead, the play continues as if these aspects are random, not following to the standards that most authors employ to thoroughly immerse the audience in the world of the story. These conventions are used to make the audience feel as though they are a part of the world. In point of fact, Pinter is not concerned with making certain that his audience understands every facet of the story he is telling. Instead, he messes with the audience's perspective of his characters and what drives them, he makes it difficult to understand what's going on in the plot, and he manipulates the speech in such a way that its core structure is frequently obscured. In this



approach, he wants the audience to experience each moment entirely on an emotional level, and he wants them to take cues from the interactions between the performers rather than from any larger storyline or purpose that may be presented. To put it another way, Pinter exploits ambiguity and even nonsensical language in his plays in order to elicit an emotional response from his audience. This response has more to do with the tone of the play than it does with any other aspect of the production. Remarkably, this resulted in a more accurate picture of the characters and their thoughts than would be the case with more traditional expository methods.

The most straightforward things are frequently the murkiest during the play. This is especially true with regards to one's own history, as evidenced by Goldberg's contradictory comments regarding his area of employment. At one point, he gives Meg a praise on her beauty and asserts that he is informed about fashion because he used to be in the business. He then advises Meg to dance around in her evening dress while she is doing so. Meg follows his instructions. Nevertheless, later on in the same scene, he makes a reference to working in a greenhouse although it is unclear whether or not he was getting paid to tend the plants there. Later on, he portrays himself as some kind of public intellectual by bragging about having once given a lecture at the Ethical Hall to Lulu, who he is obviously drawn to. He does this in order to establish his credibility. Even his name is different depending on the version of the tale he is telling. In spite of the fact that he introduces himself as Nat, whenever he discusses his mother or his deceased wife, he refers to them by the name Simey or, in one instance, Benny. Even in the final act of the play, he refers to McCann by a different name when they are having a conversation. Petey merely responds, "Anyway, Dermot's with [Stanley]

right now," when Goldberg brings up McCann and says, "Yes." Goldberg is referring to Dermot McCann. Shortly after that, Petey imitates Goldberg's behaviour and refers to McCann as Dermot, but Goldberg is perplexed and asks, Who? Because Goldberg can't even remember the name he was using to refer to McCann a few short minutes before, it is very evident that he considers such particulars to be flimsy and unimportant. Petey's confusion is reasonable and illustrative of how little he understands about the boarders that stay in his boarding home because of the sudden change. Pinter then encourages members of the audience to experience the same level of confusion as Petey.

*The Birthday Party*, one of Pinter's most distressing plays, disturbs readers and viewers because to their inability to comprehend the characters' intents and actions. Throughout the play, the audience/readers are kept in the dark regarding the genuine identities and motivations of the individuals. It looks that the main character made a mistake in the past. Yet, his exact offence is never revealed. It is unknown when the two guests will arrive or what their intentions are.

As a consequence of this, the drama conjures up an atmosphere that is postmodern in nature because it shows an unclear and confusing setting. Readers and spectators are left dumbfounded by the hopelessness of the relationships that are portrayed in the play. It would appear that human contacts are becoming less common. It might appear that people's relationships are not genuine. They take part in interactions that are phoney or simulated, to use Baudrillard's phrase for it. There is not a lot of back-and-forth conversation between the characters. They almost seldom engage in fruitful verbal communication with one another. They hardly ever manage to quench

one another's interest. In most cases, the only way to respond to a question is to ask another one. As a result, language as a means of communication is insufficient to completely bridge the gaps that exist between people. As a consequence of this, it appears to be unreliable using Derridian terminology (Kumar, 2023). *The Birthday Party* also touches on a variety of other postmodern themes, such as the mixing of many genres into one another, satire, irony, and the notion that there is no end to anything.

*The Birthday Party*, which illustrates how worthless interpersonal connections may be, is shocking to readers and viewers alike. The first scene of the play gives a glaring example of the superficial nature of the connection between Meg and Petey. The conversation that they have in the boarding house that is near the water is both uninteresting and unimportant. While he is eating breakfast, she asks him things that are both obvious and, at times, completely absurd, but he answers her queries with patience and grace. The initial conversation goes as follows:

MEG. Is that you, Petey?

*Pause*

Petey, is that you?

*Pause*

Petey?

PETE

Y.

What?

MEG.

Is that  
you?

PETE

Y.

Yes,  
it's me.

MEG. What? (*Her face appears at the hatch.*) Are you back? PETEY. Yes. (p.

3)

The above dialogue makes it abundantly evident that a significant portion of what is being presented as conversation is, in reality, merely idle chitchat. In reality, they don't engage in very much conversation with one another. Pinter exaggerates, to the greatest possible extent, the meaninglessness of a conversation between a husband and wife. The kind of conventional conversation that can hold the characters together suffers from the characters. It would appear that a reoccurring theme in *The Birthday Party* is the monotony of human connections, which is a well-known component of postmodernism. It appears that Pinter depicts his characters in such a way that they are virtually cyphers, in contrast to the unified and coherent figures that are typically found in modern tragedies; this may be done to emphasise the meaninglessness of their lives.

For the entirety of the play, characters pay very little attention to one another's feelings or sentiments almost never at all. People end up receiving misleading information about one another as a result. Towards the beginning of the play, Stanley brags to Meg about how well his piano performance went (his father was not there), but when Meg tells Goldberg about it, she completely embellishes the story by saying that Stanley's father was there.

MEG: (*falteringly*) In ... a big hall. His father gave him champagne. But then they locked the place up and he couldn't get out. The caretaker had gone home. So he had to wait until the morning before he could get out. (p. 26)

The characters are constantly getting it wrong with one another because they are unable to comprehend what's expected of one another. Meg has a real concern for Stanley, but she is not highly attuned to the

requirements that he has. When Meg mentions the two men who would be staying, Stanley's stomach starts to turn and he becomes quite uncomfortable. It is of the utmost importance to him to learn who they are as well as determine whether or not they have already arrived. The characters have difficulty responding to one other's questions and providing information that is true. Language, the primary medium through which humans exchange information, is insufficient for the development of meaningful interpersonal connections. The connection between linguistic failure and communication failure is one of the postmodernist philosophy's primary concerns.

The characters in *The Birthday Party*, struggle to communicate effectively with one another. Even when a character has a burning desire to learn something, he is not provided the chance to do so. Instead, this only serves to increase his sense of confusion and perplexity. Most of the time, we respond to questions by asking new ones instead of delivering answers. The characters are unable to supply the information that they require from one another. This is due to the fact that they usually use language in a way that serves to confuse each other rather than deliver accurate information. They use language as a weapon to subjugate and control others, and this is how they do it. At the scene of the questioning, Goldberg and McCann ask Stanley a barrage of questions without any intention of getting answers from him but rather to intimidate and perplex him.

Hence, during the entirety of the play, the characters never use words to either provide or receive information of any kind. They do so rather in order to further their own personal interests through language. They engage in what could be described as a postmodernist version of the Language Game when they do this. They attempt to exert their

authority over others through the use of language. During the moment in which Stanley was being interrogated, Goldberg and McCann utilised words to subjugate Stanley, which is an evident illustration of how language can be used to control. The line of questioning that Goldberg and McCann utilise is nothing more than a verbal assault on Stanley, and their goal is to wear him down to the point where he can't defend himself. Stanley is put to nonstop barrages of rapid-fire interrogation by Goldberg and McCann throughout the entire book. Stanley is aware that he is in danger and he is making every attempt to stay alive in spite of this. Conversations such as, "Let me – just make this clear." You have no impact on my quality of life. His words "To me, you're nothing but a dirty joke...", which attest to his attempt to survive, are indicative of his struggle. But when confronted with their weird and ludicrous inquiries, Stanley is ultimately unable to protect himself.

The juxtaposition of serious and comical events in *The Birthday Party* is so typical of postmodern writing. While it does contain a few humorous moments, the rest of it is rather menacing and hostile in nature. The bits that aren't at all funny coexist with a large portion of the humorous elements, in fact. The drama opens with a scene that, at first glance, appears to be ordinary but quickly develops into one that is full with risk, danger, anxiety, and violence.

The interrogation scene in Act 2 of the play is tragic and comedic at the same time. It makes one giggle while at the same time inspiring feelings of terror. On the one hand, the method of interrogation is comedic, but on the other, it is incredibly terrifying and unsettling. The chain of ridiculous allegations, which range from a mediaeval Catholic heresy to cricket to the question of whether or not the number 846 is possible or essential to the question of why the chicken crossed the

road, cannot help but elicit laughter from anybody who reads them. Nevertheless, at the same time, one experiences an underlying sense of agony due to the fact that one is aware that they are the means by which a man is reduced to inarticulate violence. As a result, readers and spectators are put in the uncomfortable position of being caught between laughing at the characters and feeling sorry for them. As a result, it seems as though the play is a mash-up of a few different types of drama.

The drama moves closer to ambiguity as a result of the characters' frequent use of weird and ludicrous language. In Act 1, as Stanley is describing his history to Meg, he seems to be puzzled about the specifics of that history himself. In the same vein, Goldberg's account of his history is quite hazy. His history is further complicated by the fact that McCann refers to him as Nat, although in the past he was known by the names Simey and even Benny. Meg and Lulu both have complicated histories as well. Hence, *The Birthday Party* portrays to us a world that is full with ambiguity.

It is unknown why Goldberg and McCann have travelled all the way here to retrieve Stanley. We are never given any information about who they are, and similarly, we are never told what led to Stanley's lack of success. As the play continues, our understanding of Stanley's true identity and the motivations behind his actions get more clouded. We also become less certain about why he acts the way he does. There is no way for us to know for definite what Stanley has done in order to bring Goldberg and McCann into the picture. Both his actions upon learning of them and his response when they arrived at the scene point to guilt; yet, the nature of his guilt is unclear.

During the course of the Blind Man's Buff game, there is a blackout for no apparent reason. McCann attempts to shine his torch,

but he is unable to do so because it is knocked out of his hand. The search for the torch is being conducted by Goldberg and McCann as Stanley "picks up Lulu and places her on the table" (p. 59). In a short amount of time after that, McCann finds the torch and "shines it on the table and STANLEY" (p. 59). The following phrasing can be found in the stage direction: "Lulu is lying spread-eagled on the table, STANLEY bent over her" (p. 59). The entire occurrence is shrouded in mystery. Pinter does not reveal to us if Goldberg attempted to seduce her in the night or whether Stanley planned to rape her; he simply leaves us to speculate. Because Pinter does not provide a clear presentation of the circumstance, the readers and audiences are required to construct the event out of small suggestions that may or may not be genuine. This is another example of the uncertainty.

The nature of Meg's relationship with Stanley is also not clear.

At the first scene of the play, she has a conversation with Petey in which they discuss Stanley. This dialogue gives the impression that she has a maternal affection for Stanley. But a little time later, when Stanley makes a caustic comment about the fried bread being 'succulent,' Meg appears to misunderstand the meaning of the word, and she interprets it as having a connotation that is suggestive of sexual activity. She inquires of Stanley in a timid manner whether or not she is truly succulent. She flirtatiously tickles the back of his neck while speaking of the delightful afternoons she's spent in Stanley's room, stroking his hand in a seductive manner, and speaking of the afternoons she's spent in Stanley's chamber. All of these clues point to the fact that she and Stanley engage in sexual activity together. As a result, the nature of Meg and Stanley's connection is not entirely obvious. Hence, ambiguity, a common component, serves as the play's



central governing force.

Characters are frequently driven to make ironic comments because of the ambiguity that surrounds them and the actions that they take. Ironic as it may sound, Meg's comment that throwing Stanley a party will make him feel better is not the case. Meg is completely oblivious to the threat that is posed by the two gentlemen, Goldberg and McCann, and they are the individuals that Stanley wants to stay away from. She is so stupid that she is easily taken in by Goldberg's slick language, and as a result, she continues to be oblivious to the idea that the party is likely to result in Stanley's complete and utter collapse. Even the name of the book, *The Birthday Party*, contains an element of irony. In contrast to what one might expect from a celebratory event like a birthday celebration, the one depicted in the play results in the main character's mental collapse.

Another way in which *The Birthday Party* subverts the conventional notion of closure is through its conclusion. Pinter has encouraged readers and spectators to retain an open mind towards the different meanings of his play, which is in keeping with the poststructuralist criticism that is prevalent today. The play ends on the same level of monotony that it began: with nothing particularly interesting happening. Meg and Petey continue their conversation over the breakfast table as the play comes to a close; however, the focus of the play has shifted to the loss of Meg's cherished boarder Stanley, who has been taken away. At the conclusion of the play, Stanley makes his exit, which leaves the audience and readers with many unanswered issues. Are they planning to put Stanley to death? Will they hand him over to a certain group to work for? Or do they have a very different strategy or purpose in mind when they decide to take him away? As a

result, the conclusion does not bring an end to our contemplation of Stanley; rather, it generates a great deal of suspense. It would appear that this is not the conclusion of the story but rather the start of a new one.

### 3. Conclusion

Based on what has been discussed, it is clear that *The Birthday Party* introduces us to a world full of ambiguity, irony, and language inadequacy. These are all characteristics that are commonly associated with postmodernism. The majority of what is spoken by the characters can be interpreted in a variety of ways and is generally mysterious. Their motivations are never made clear, and their actions are never vindicated in any way. They don't really have any conversations that are straightforward. They employ language almost exclusively for the aim of asserting their dominance or defending themselves. They almost never mean what they say they mean. Hence, language demonstrates what is known as unreliability or what is known as indeterminacy in postmodernism. The comedic and tragic aspects of the characters are balanced out in an odd way. It is impossible for Meg not to make people laugh with her antics. Nonetheless, the reader or audience will feel sorry for her because she is unable to comprehend the events that are transpiring around her. So, the play satisfies another one of the postmodernist criteria, which is the mixing of diverse types of drama. *The birthday party* that serves as the play's focal point is completely ironic because it morphs from what should be a joyous celebration into a dreadful catastrophe. In addition to this, the play focuses on the hollowness of human connections and the precarious nature of human existence, both of which are prominent postmodernist concerns. As a

result, *The Birthday Party* tackles a wide range of postmodern topics and centres its narrative on a number of essential postmodern traits.

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