The Birthday Party
A Comedy of Menace
Absurdity, Power and Violence

Focus Questions

• ‘The play makes one stir uneasily in one’s shoes, and doubt, for a moment, the comforting solidity of the earth.’ How is this a helpful comment in your reading of The Birthday Party?
• ‘Everything is comic until the horror of the human situation rises to the surface.’ How far is this a helpful comment in your reading of the The Birthday Party?
• Comment on the ways in which comedy is created in The Birthday Party.
• Discuss the presentation of violence and punishment in The Birthday Party.

Don’t Comedy and Menace Contradict Each Other?
Where comedy represents the humorous, the amusing and the laughable, menace can be defined as a ‘threatening quality, tone or atmosphere’. Where comedy is produced from incongruity, the bizarre, the out-of-place, menace is often produced from nothing. The longer nothing happens, the more anticipate something happening, the greater the tension, anxiety and fear!

From the video experiment, we witnessed how comedy is cathartic; we laugh because we know that the threat (of the ‘ghost’) is not real and completely absurd.

Thesis
The Birthday Party is ostensibly a ‘comedy of menace’, as it mixes comic absurdity in the form of Meg’s antics and the almost slapstick McCann-Goldberg partnership with the pitiful existence of the former and the constant threat of violence presented by the latter.

While the term ‘comedy of menace’ suggests that menace is secondary to comedy, the light, comic treatment of grave themes like oppression and cruelty in the play makes it more unsettling for the viewer alike. Thus, it is arguable that the comedy in the play heightens not only the menace but also Pinter’s criticism of political authority as frighteningly abusive and violent.

But First... A Simple Guide to Analysing Drama
Literature is ultimately about how style creates meaning. Put very simply, your job as a Lit student is to discuss how techniques and their effects are used to present characters and more importantly, themes.

Dramatic techniques might include genre (comedy of menace, Theatre of the Absurd), language (word choice, tone of speaker, rhythm of speech, motive or subtext), stage directions, stage properties / symbols and setting.

Dramatic effects are just as integral to analysing style in drama. We might describe certain scenes as comic, absurd, menacing, puzzling, ambiguous, tense or even nightmarish in quality.

The purpose of dramatic techniques and effects then is usually a comment on themes and characters. In our thesis, we proposed that the comic nature of Goldberg and McCann’s interrogation actually highlights the sheer brutality of their verbal ‘torture’. Style, in itself, comments on the action.
The Birthday Party as Comedy

The play does begin on a deceptively comic note that seems to be in conflict with the rest of the play. The laughable, everyday nature of Meg and Petey’s exchange completely belies the torment that Stanley will undergo later, as well as the tragedy of Meg and Petey’s condition that is revealed at the end.

In Acts One and Two, Meg is constructed as an absurd simpleton, whose motherly instincts and obtuseness are a source of much comedy. The opening scene is filled with a series of inane, pointless questions (“Petey, is that you?”, “What? Are you back?”) that are made even funnier by Petey’s monosyllabic, disinterested answers (“Yes”, “Very nice”). The frequent repetition of entire questions and the simplicity of Meg’s vocabulary similarly denote Meg as a ‘simple’, dim-witted character to be laughed at, rather than sympathised. On a darker level, Meg’s misreading of Stanley’s “tip” as a monetary reward rather than as sound advice (32) and the word “succulent” as a sexual term are hilarious in their concealment of the threats made unto Stanley and the sexual perversity respectively.

Thus, the comic elements in the play are used to balance the darker, more menacing parts of the play, providing relief for an audience held in suspense by Goldberg and McCann’s mysterious “job”. True to a “comedy of menace”, the character of Meg is pivotal both as a key source of comedy and the “trigger” for menace in the play: it is Meg who inadvertently informs Stanley of the two men’s arrival and sets off Stanley’s shock and distress, evident from the stage directions “speaks without turning” and “his head in his hands”. The audience too is discomforted in their lack of knowledge - of Stanley’s past and guilt and of the atrocities that might be committed. Comedy, in the form of Meg’s inappropriate tickling of Stanley’s neck followed by her equally strange teasing (“Tickle, tickle”), serve as a distraction from the impending threat and the fear evinced from Stanley’s reaction. Similarly, the frivolity of Meg’s preoccupation with her dress and looking “nice” in front of Goldberg and McCann counter-weight their menacing presence.

Comedy heightens menace

One can also suppose (!) that farce amplifies menace: laughter actually makes the figures of Goldberg and McCann all the more insidious. When juxtaposed with a distraught Stanley, the figure of Meg is used by Pinter to emphasise the “uncomic”, dreaded nature of Stanley’s would-be oppressors. Meg taking the “curlers out of her hair” and wiping of the table may be comic in how they again illustrate Meg’s obliviousness to her surroundings (20). However, the absurdity of her behaviour merely plays up Stanley’s melodramatic “pacing the room” and “grinding the cigarette” (20); Pinter deliberately draws attention to Stanley’s apprehensiveness about the two men, fuelling the tension and suspense in the play. Meg’s inability to perceive Stanley’s fear is again “comic” to the point of being “menacing”. When she consoles Stanley that the two guests “won’t be here long” and “won’t wake [him] up”, the audience is likely to doubt her credibility. Her words instead become foreboding; we are led to believe that Goldberg and McCann will do far more than just “wake” Stanley. That Meg, rather than Stanley, is the first in the house to meet Goldberg and McCann is just as significant to the use of comedy to heighten menace; the entire exchange, centred on celebrating Stanley’s “birthday”, delays the meeting between Stanley and his two oppressors, leaving Pinter’s viewer in further trepidation and anticipation.

Comedy as menace

The symbiosis of comedy and menace is perhaps most clearly represented in the comically horrific duo of Goldberg and McCann. While they are introduced to the audience as an innocent brain-and-brawn,
superior-and-stooge pairing, Pinter’s comic presentation of his villains conveys the senselessness and absurdity of their actions.

The dynamic between the Jewish “family man” and the Irish-Catholic “defrocked” priest is evident from their opening question-and-answer exchange. McCann’s questions (“Is this it?”, “Are you sure?”) display his insecurity and child-like dependence on Goldberg; Goldberg has to placate and re-assure him by offering to also “take a seat”, with his repetition of McCann’s words (“This is it”, “Sure I’m sure”) furnishing humour to the conversation. This juxtaposition of McCann’s dimwittedness and reliance with Goldberg’s self-assuredness provides a constant source of amusement, enhanced by Pinter’s use of stichomythia (where their alternating lines complete or repeat each other’s) and rhyme:

GOLDBERG. You skedaddled from the wedding.  
McCANN. He left her in the lurch.  
GOLDBERG. You left her in the pudding club.  
McCANN. She was waiting at the church.  
GOLDBERG. Webber! Why did you change your name?  

Yet, death and violence are inter-woven into their duet-like dialogue, wherein comedy itself becomes menacing. Goldberg’s quip that “Everywhere you go these days it’s like a funeral” (29) is both funny and disturbing in its allusion to a future funeral - Stanley’s. Goldberg and McCann’s verbal assault on Stanley in the interrogation scene in Act Two is absurd in every sense of the word, ranging from the trivial and amusing to the nonsensical and ridiculous. It starts with “When did you last wash a cup?”, an accusation of a failing so mundane in nature it is laughable and becomes increasingly befuddling for Pinter’s viewer as the accusations contradict each other: at one point Stanley is said to have “killed his wife”, in another he is questioned on why he “never married”. This incongruity may be farcical, but the rapid flurry of nonsense (“Is the number 846 possible or necessary?”) Goldberg unleashes on Stanley would qualify as an attempt to terrorise, if not, completely destroy Stanley’s sanity. The comic qualities of nonsense, when intensified exponentially, are terrifying because they are nonsensical. The lack of ‘sense’ and ‘meaning’ threaten the individual into losing ‘sense’ and ‘meaning’:

GOLDBERG. You stuff yourself with dry toast.  
McCANN. You contaminate womankind.  
GOLDBERG. Why don’t you pay the rent?  
McCANN. Mother defiler!  
GOLDBERG. Why do you pick your nose!  
McCANN. I demand justice! (51)

Goldberg and McCann’s rapid-fire accusations alternate between the silly (“stuff yourself”) and the serious (“contaminate womankind”). The serious however is silly (“Mother defiler!”) and the silly becomes serious (“Why don’t you pay the rent?”). It is this absurd confusion that multiplies the fear and tension experienced by both Stanley and the audience. On one hand, it becomes clear that Goldberg
and McCann’s “comic” interrogation is violent in its design to condemn (by accusation), to torment (by random accusation) and to psychologically demolish (by their taking delight in random accusation). The innocent childish riddle of “Why did the chicken cross the road?” becomes less playful than it is torturous. On a far more advanced level, the “comic dialogue” is also menacing precisely because it is merely verbal. Pinter arguably delays physical action or torture and uses incessant words to build up our anticipation of the violence to come (which is never seen or heard).

**Pinter’s Political Critique**

Ultimately, this overlap of comedy and menace in the play serves to reinforce the sheer senselessness of violence committed by political authority - the “Establishment”, the state, the “socio-religious” institutions Pinter has publicly declared Goldberg and McCann’s mysterious organisation to represent. Just as Stanley’s playing of the drum is itself absurdly comic and comically absurd, the use of torture or violence to remove “individuals”, rebels and outsiders like Stanley is presented as demented and absurd. The use of comedy then heightens the terror and incongruity of political violence (committed by the state or other forms of authority).

Even the play’s bleakest moment is layered with a mild hint of comedy:

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STANLEY. Uh-gug... uh-gug... eeeh-hh-gag... (On the breath) Caahh...
GOLDBERG. Well, Stanny boy, what do you say, eh?
STANLEY. Ug-gughh... uh-gughhhhh...
MCCANN. What’s your opinion, sir?
STANLEY. Caaahhh... caaahhh...
MCCANN. Mr Webber! What’s your opinion?
STANLEY. Caaahhhhh... caaahh...
MCCANN. Mr Webber! What’s your opinion?
GOLDBERG. What do you say, Stan? What do you think of the prospect? (84-5)
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One should be amused by McCann and Goldberg’s taunting questions but a sympathetic audience would be able to stifle its laughter. The “comedy” above would only have highlighted Stanley’s lack of power and intolerable, senseless barbarity of their methods. The failure to “emit sounds from his throat” instead presents an image of a brainwashed and re-configured Stanley that is at once pathetic and absolutely horrifying. By portraying an absurd image, Pinter has effectively portrayed the absurdity that lies behind political authority itself.

**Conclusion**

In that sense, what is comic in *The Birthday Party* is turned into menace and what is menacing, through comedy, becomes even more menacing. In other words, the emphasis in the concept “comedy of menace” falls on menace: everything, especially the comic, becomes menacing. The opening of Act 3 echoes Act 1 in structure, but fails to reproduce the comedy (because we know that “Stan” / “Stanny” has been extinguished). We cannot laugh at Meg’s obliviousness because our attention now is on the absence of Stanley, not on the insipidity of the question.
MEG. Is that you, Stan? (Pause) Stanny?
PETEY. Yes?
MEG. Is that you?
PETEY. It’s me.
MEG (appearing at the hatch). Oh it’s you. (67)

Effectively, menace has displaced comedy and the play, whilst funny at parts, indubitably paints the senselessness, absurdity and insanity of oppression by the state on the individual.

Pinter’s comic strategy is infused into the persecution of Stanley to highlight the disintegration of the vulnerable individual under the Establishment. Laughing at or with Goldberg and McCann, we - the audience - become complicit in their ruthlessness. Frightened by Goldberg and McCann, we are sympathetic to Stanley and “the individual” in each and everyone of us.

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