

The Birthday Party



by Harold Pinter

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Introduction

Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, was the playwright's first commercially-produced, full-length play. He began writing the work after acting in a theatrical tour, during which, in Eastbourne, England, he had lived in "filthy insane digs." There he became acquainted with "a great bulging scrag of a woman" and a man who stayed in the seedy place. The flophouse became the model for the rundown boarding house of the play and the woman and her tenant the models, respectively, for the characters of Meg Boles and Stanley Webber.

In an earlier work, *The Room*, a one-act play, Pinter had worked on themes and motifs that he would carry over into *The Birthday Party* and some of his succeeding plays. Among these themes are the failure of language to serve as an adequate tool of communication, the use of place as a sanctum that is violated by

menacing intruders, and the surrealistic confusions that obscure or distort fact.

Directed by Pinter himself, the finished full-length play premiered in Cambridge, England, at the Arts Theatre, on April 28, 1958. There and on tour in Oxford it was quite successful, but when, under the direction of Peter Wood, it moved to London and later opened on May 19 at the Lyric Opera House in Hammersmith, it met with harsh reviews and closed down within a week. Among the reviewers, only Harold Hobson of the *Sunday Times* saw much promise in the play. He thought that Pinter had considerable originality and was “the most disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London.” However, his review appeared too late to do the production any good. The show was already off the boards, done in by abysmal attendance, including one matinee audience of six, and persistently hostile reviews. Most critics opined that Pinter floundered in obscurity and suffered from the negative influence of Samuel Beckett (*Waiting for Godot*), Eugene Ionesco (*The Bald Prima Donna*), and other avant-garde writers.

Pinter would later marvel at the fact that in London the play was "completely massacred by the critics" but noted that it was the only maltreatment he had received from reviewers and that it never dimmed his interest in writing. The work, in fact, became the dramatist's first full-length “comedy of menace,” a group of plays that secured Pinter's reputation as a premier, avant-garde playwright. Subsequent productions were much better received, including the play's 1964 revival at London's Aldwych Theatre and its 1968 Broadway premier at the Booth Theatre in New York. By the mid-1960s, the burgeoning appreciation of absurdist drama and the success of other plays by Pinter, including *The Dumbwaiter* (1959) and *The Caretaker* (1960), had secured for *The Birthday Party* a reputation as a classic in the dramatic genre that literary critic Martin Esslin dubbed the Theatre of the Absurd.

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Author Biography

Harold Pinter was born on October 10, 1930, in Hackney, a section of metropolitan London, England. His father, Hyman, and his mother, Frances Mann, were descended from Sephardic Jews from Portugal, who had, around 1900, migrated to England after an interim residence in Hungary. The family, relatively poor, lived very frugally, like the other working-class families in the area.

Between 1941 and 1947, Pinter attended the Hackney Downs Grammar School, where he began writing poetry and prose. He also took an interest in theater, taking roles as both Macbeth and Romeo in school productions of Shakespeare. His education continued in 1948, when he obtained a grant to study at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, but, finding the academy oppressive, he only stayed for two terms. In the same year, he tried to obtain legal status as a conscientious objector, which he was denied, and he was eventually fined when he refused to answer an army draft call.

In 1949, while he continued to write non-dramatic works as Harold Pinta, he launched a career as professional actor. His first work was as a bit actor for the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) Home Service radio, from which, in 1951, he moved up to a role in *Shakespeare's Henry VIII*, a production of BBC's Third Programme. He also resumed formal training at the Central School of Speech and Drama. Thereafter, under the stage name David Baron, he acted with Shakespearean and other repertory companies in both England and Ireland. On tour, he met and worked with the actress Vivien Merchant, whom he married on September 14, 1956. The pair struggled to make ends meet, and Pinter was forced to assume a variety of odd jobs, including stints as a dance-hall bouncer or "chucker," a dishwasher, a caretaker, and a salesman.

Pinter's first foray into play writing came in 1957, when a friend asked him to write a piece for production at

Bristol University. The result was *The Room*, a one-act play that earned the favorable notice of critic Harold Hobson and revealed Pinter's unique talent and technique. The work was not professionally produced until after *The Birthday Party* opened and floundered in 1958, but it was Hobson's review of *The Room*'s university production that brought Pinter to the attention of the young, new-wave producer Michael Codron, who decided to stage *The Birthday Party*.

Pinter's first major staged success was *The Caretaker*, which, in 1960, began a run in London's West End and won the playwright *The Evening Standard* Award. Along with *The Birthday Party* and *The Homecoming* (1965), *The Caretaker* established Pinter's reputation as a major absurdist playwright, and, in the opinion of some commentators, his claim to being Britain's most important dramatist since George Bernard Shaw (*Major Barbara*).

In the 1960s, Pinter proved his diversity by producing a steady stream of both stage and media works. He began an extended association with the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1962 with *The Collection* at the Aldwych Theatre, but by then he had also begun writing for cinema, adapting *The Caretaker* to film. Although his creative energy remained unabated, he devoted more and more of it to scripting plays for television and the screen. Some of these were originally written for the stage, but most were first written for specific media. Some, like *The Pumpkin Eater* (1964) and *The Quiller Memorandum* (1966), were adaptations from the fiction of other writers. Acclaim for his media works quickly rivaled that awarded his stage works and greatly expanded his creative involvement and focus.

Although some believe that Pinter's best theatrical works were his earliest pieces in the absurdist mode, the playwright has remained a major voice in the British theater since the early-1960s. If financial success and the diffusion of his creative energy have diminished his stage power, as some have claimed, there has been no real erosion in his reputation as England's premier, post-World War II playwright, his only serious rivals being John Osborne (*Look Back in Anger*) and Tom Stoppard (*Arcadia*). Nevertheless, despite some well-received plays like *One for the Road* (1984) and *Mountain Language* (1988), the playwright has met with some decline in his critical fortunes. It is almost become a scholarly truism that none of Pinter's works written for the stage after the 1960s has superseded *The Caretaker*, *The Homecoming*, or *The Birthday Party* as Pinter's major contributions to modern theater.

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Summary

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Act I Summary

The Birthday Party opens in the living-dining area of a seedy rooming house at an unnamed seaside resort in England. Petey and Meg Boles, the proprietors, converse while she prepares his breakfast and he reads the newspaper. Their talk is inane, centering on their tenant, Stanley Webber. Petey also tells her of two strangers who might come to rent a room.

Meg decides to wake Stanley for breakfast and goes to his room. Unshaven and half-dressed, Stanley comes

downstairs and sits at the table to eat. After Petey goes off to work, Stanley teases Meg about her "succulent" fried bread, but when she becomes affectionate, he gets irritated and complains that her tea is "muck" and the place is a "pigsty."

Meg tells Stanley about the two men who may be new tenants. At first he is worried but then shrugs the information off as a "false alarm." Meg fends off his insistence that she obey him, getting him to speak of his musical career. He tells her that once, after a piano concert, he had been "carved" up by persecutors identified only as "they." He then scares her by saying that the strangers will soon arrive, bringing a wheelbarrow in a van, looking to haul her away.

After Meg leaves to shop, Lulu enters with a package. She airs out the room, then sits at the table and chides Stanley for his unkempt appearance and anti-social behavior. He rejects her offer of going out, and she concludes that he is "a bit of a washout." When she leaves, Stanley goes to the kitchen to wash his face. Through the hatch separating the two rooms, he spies Goldberg and McCann entering through the backdoor and slips off. Goldberg advises McCann to relax and speaks of his family ties and his partnership with McCann, who responds as if Goldberg were his mentor. McCann, still uneasy, asks whether their current job will be the same as their previous ones, and Goldberg reassures him with official-sounding double talk.

Meg returns, carrying some parcels. Politely and affably, Goldberg introduces himself and McCann, then begins asking after Stanley. She says that it is Stanley's birthday, prompting Goldberg to insist that they have a party. Delighted, Meg leads the two men upstairs to their room.

Stanley returns just before Meg comes back. He grills her about the men, trying to find out if she knows who they are. He also denies that it is his birthday, but he accepts her present, left by Lulu on the sideboard. It is a toy drum. He straps it on his neck, then marches around banging on it. Just before the curtain, his beating becomes erratic and finally "savage and possessed."

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Act II Summary

It is evening of the same day. McCann, at the living room table, methodically tears Petey's newspaper into strips. Stanley enters and begins a polite conversation. When McCann mentions the birthday party, Stanley insists that he wants to celebrate alone, but McCann says that, as the guest of honor, Stanley cannot skip out on it.

When Stanley tries to leave, McCann blocks his path. Stanley angers him by picking up one of the strips of paper. McCann, now even more intimidating, contradicts Stanley's claim that they had met before. Unnerved, Stanley starts speaking of his plans to return home, asserting that he is the same man he was, despite his heavy drinking. Frustrated in his attempts to find out why McCann and Goldberg have intruded, he grows almost frantic. He finally grabs McCann by the arm, saying that what he has told him was a mistake. McCann observes that Stanley is in a bad state and that he is "flabbergasted" by Stanley's behavior. Stanley then speaks of his admiration for the Irish.

Goldberg enters with Petey, prompting a new round of introductions. Goldberg talks about his youth, confessing that he was then called "Simey," while Petey explains that it is his chess night and that he will miss the party. When he and McCann exit, Stanley tries to convince Goldberg to pack up and leave, but Goldberg simply talks about celebrating life, implying that late risers, like Stanley, miss out on a lot. Stanley cuts him off and orders him to get out, but Goldberg does not budge. McCann re-enters, and he and Goldberg

order Stanley to sit down. Stanley repeatedly refuses until McCann threatens physical violence. The two intruders then begin interrogating Stanley with rapid-fire questions that range from the accusatory to the ridiculous. When they tell Stanley that he is dead, he screams and tries to fight back by kicking Goldberg in the stomach and threatening McCann with a chair, but they all suddenly revert to civility when Meg enters beating on the toy drum. She is dressed for the party, and preens under Goldberg's compliments about her looks. She fetches glasses for toasting Stanley, and, prompted by Goldberg, McCann turns out the lights and shines his flashlight on Stanley's face while Meg toasts "the birthday boy."

With the lights back on, Lulu arrives and the celebration begins in earnest. Goldberg insists that Stanley sit down and then begins a meandering, sentimental speech. McCann turns out the lights and once more shines his flashlight in Stanley's face. When the lights are on again, Goldberg entices Lulu to sit on his lap while Meg tries to get Stanley to dance. Rejected, Meg settles for dancing by herself. While Lulu flirts with Goldberg, Meg breaks into a nostalgic reverie about her girlhood room, after which McCann talks of his heritage and sings an Irish ballad.

The characters then start playing blind man's bluff. When it is Stanley's turn to be the blind man, McCann takes his glasses from him and deliberately breaks them. He also makes Stanley trip over the toy drum, which catches on Stanley's foot. Stanley drags the drum around, then finds Meg and begins choking her. As McCann and Goldberg rush to interfere, the lights go out again. In the confusion, McCann once more shines his flashlight, but Goldberg knocks it to the floor. In the dark, Stanley picks up Lulu and deposits her, spread eagle, on the table. McCann finds the flashlight and shines it at Stanley, who appears on verge of sexually assaulting Lulu. Stanley backs away, giggling uncontrollably, and as the others advance towards him, the curtain falls.

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Act III Summary

It is early the next morning. As before, Petey sits at the table reading the newspaper. Through the hatch, Meg explains that Goldberg and McCann had eaten all the breakfast food. She enters to pour Petey some tea and spots Stanley's present, broken and discarded in the fireplace. She plans to fetch Stanley down, observing that she had gone up earlier and found him talking to McCann. Meg asks Petey about Goldberg's car and the suspicious wheelbarrow, which, he tells her, does not exist.

As Meg prepares to go shopping, Goldberg enters. She asks after Stanley and then about Goldberg's car, which he praises for its ample room. She leaves, and Petey inquires about Stanley's health. Goldberg tells him that Stanley had suffered a sudden, unexpected mental breakdown. Petey, growing suspicious, says that if Stanley does not improve, he will fetch a doctor, but Goldberg assures him that things are under control.

McCann arrives with two suitcases and tells Goldberg that he gave Stanley back his broken glasses. Petey suggests that they repair the busted frames with tape, then asks again about a doctor. Goldberg says that they will be taking Stanley to "Monty," and that the doctor is not needed.

Petey goes out, and McCann begins tearing the morning paper into strips again, annoying Goldberg. The two men try to decide whether to bring Stanley down, but the matter seems to depress Goldberg. When McCann, trying to console him, calls him Simey, he explodes with anger. McCann then decides to get Stanley, but before he leaves, Goldberg makes the younger man peer into his mouth. After talking of his excellent health as the secret to his success, he instructs McCann to blow in his mouth two times.

When Lulu enters, McCann excuses himself and exits. Lulu refuses Goldberg's familiar advances, claiming that she has had enough games. The two verbally spar for a moment. She speaks of her first love, Eddie, then laments that Goldberg, during the night, taught her things that no girl should know. McCann returns and tries to get Lulu to confess to him. She is encouraged by Goldberg, who claims that McCann is an unfrocked priest. As the men advance on her, Lulu retreats through the back door.

McCann then goes off and returns with Stanley, now dressed in a suit and clean, collared shirt. He appears defeated and docile. The pair make him sit and begin another harangue about Stanley's health and necessary recuperation. He can only emit nonsensical, gagging sounds. When they begin to take Stanley away, Petey enters and tries to interfere, but they back him off with threats. The pair take Stanley out.

Meg enters and asks about Goldberg and McCann. Petey confirms their departure, but when Meg asks after Stanley, Petey tells her that he is still in bed. The pair chat briefly about the party. Meg claims to have been "the belle of the ball," repeating her conviction as the final curtain falls.

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Themes

Absurdity

As in many absurdist works, *The Birthday Party* is full of disjointed information that defies efforts to distinguish between reality and illusion. For example, despite the presentation of personal information on Stanley and his two persecutors, who or what they really are remains a mystery. Goldberg, in particular, provides all sorts of information about his background, but he offers only oblique clues as to why he has intruded upon Stanley's life.

What has Stanley done to deserve persecution? The facts of his past are so unclear that his claim to be a pianist may even be false. *The Birthday Party* influences the audience to doubt anything with certainty, which as it does in Kafka's work, intensifies the dreadful angst experienced by the protagonist. This effect is achieved through truncated dialogue, by Pinter's deliberate failure to provide conclusive or consistent information, and by his use of ambiguity and nonsense.

Alienation and Loneliness

Stanley has isolated himself from society, with only the vaguest of explanations offered as to why. What is clear is that he has "dropped out" of everyday life. He is the sole lodger in the Boles' boarding house. He has forgone any efforts to make himself presentable, remaining depressed and sullen, half-dressed, unkempt, and unwilling to leave the womb-like comfort of his rundown digs.

Clues suggest that he is not simply hibernating. He is hiding out, fearful of some retribution if he is found. He is scared to leave the rooming house. He fends off Lulu's casual advances, and he is unwilling to look for a job as a pianist, though he fantasizes about taking a world concert tour.

While Stanley's loneliness is self-imposed, Meg's is not. She is mired in a marriage that is routine and uneventful, and she seeks to fulfill her needs by both flirting with and mothering Stanley. She is a decent but sad figure, easily tormented by Stanley, who treats her badly when he grows tired of her suffocating affection.

Lulu, too, looks to overcome her loneliness, first by trying to interest Stanley, then, at the birthday party, by flirting with the much older Goldberg. In the aftermath of the party, he goes to her room and introduces her to

some sort of deviant sexual practices, aided by unidentified toys and devices carried in a mysterious briefcase. In the last act, she claims that she has been abused and abandoned by Goldberg, who dismisses her with the suggestion that she got exactly what she wanted.

Apathy and Passivity

Although anger and even violence break through Stanley's apathy at key moments, he generally appears to have given up on life. His apathy is apparent in his slovenliness. He remains unshaven, unwashed, and half-dressed. He is unwilling to venture out, although he talks about dreams. He is, as Lulu says, "a bit of a washout."

In mood shifts that turn him suddenly aggressive, Stanley resists his tormentors, Goldberg and McCann, just as he sporadically lashes out at Meg. After the first interrogation conducted by his inquisitors, he kicks Goldberg in the stomach and threatens to hit McCann with a chair, and during the party he tries to choke Meg and, possibly, to rape Lulu. But at the end he is passive and docile, no longer able to resist, no longer even able to voice objections to his fate.

Doubt and Ambiguity

In the sense that it conveys doubt and ambiguity, *The Birthday Party* is built on words that confuse more often than they clarify. Things that the audience or reader thinks are revealed by one snatch of dialogue may be contradicted or rendered illogical in the next, making it impossible to separate allegations from truth and fact from fiction. Even the most mundane issues are cloaked in doubt—questions for which there should be simple yes or no answers. Is it really Stanley's birthday, as Meg claims, or is it not, as Stanley insists? Has Meg really heard Stanley play the piano, as she claims, or has Stanley's situation made that an impossibility? Is he, in fact, even a pianist?

Although there are many details in the play, it is almost maddeningly free of facts that confirm anything or sufficiently explain the behavior of characters. For brief moments, some key things seem to be known, but soon they slip away like water down the drain. Most importantly, the cause that Stanley has allegedly betrayed is never really identified, and it remains as mysterious as Goldberg's sexual implements carried in his briefcase, the literalness of the Monty, or the exact nature of Stanley's approaching fate.

Guilt and Innocence

Although Goldberg and McCann's verbal assaults on Stanley defy any easy interpretation, it is clear that Stanley is somehow vulnerable, that their accusations do wound him, and that there is guilt to expose and sins to expiate. Still, until the arrival of Goldberg and McCann, Stanley's self-imposed exile in the rooming house, though depressing, at least offers a modicum of security. He seems docile initially, only flaring up at Meg, whose motherly affection he finds suffocating. His dread is dormant until he learns that two strangers may arrive on the scene. They ignite his inner fear, offering some sort of retribution for Stanley's real or imagined crimes which, in their bizarre tribunal, run the gamut of crimes against humanity. Goldberg and McCann are hardly avenging angels, however. Although outwardly warm and engaging, Goldberg is perfectly willing to defile innocence. He not only seduces Lulu, he takes her on a journey into debauchery. It is such contradictions that obscure the intruders' true identities.

Language and Meaning

A concern of absurdist is their belief that language, rather than facilitate, may prevent genuine human communication. Meaning is more likely to be conveyed not by what is being said but by its subtext, what is left unsaid or the manner in which it is said. With Pinter's work in particular, words tend to mask the authentic self, while silence threatens to expose it and make it vulnerable. Pinter's characters seem to dread silence.

In *The Birthday Party* words are used in non-communicative ways. For example, there are the inane exchanges between Meg and Petey, who, when they are alone, really have little or nothing to say to each

other. They live in the ashes of their marriage, a condition they will not face. They evade the truth by mouthing empty and routine phrases that confirm only self-evident and insignificant facts. Their small talk both begins and ends the play.

Language for others is a tool of deceit, especially for Goldberg, who uses his insincere friendliness to torment Stanley. Using disingenuous flattery on Meg, Goldberg pushes for the birthday party, an ironic contrast to his more sinister purpose, which may well be to take Stanley off to be executed.

In *The Birthday Party*, as in many of Ionesco's plays, words are often used like physical objects. They are as palpable as clubs in Goldberg and McCann's interrogations of Stanley. In their inquisitions, their alternating lines even establish a rhythm that mimics striking blows.

In general, language is treated as an unreliable tool of human expression, which is of focal concern for Pinter. At the end of the play, it seems to fail altogether, at least for Stanley. About to be taken off by McCann and Goldberg, he is incapable of uttering anything but nonsensical syllables. It is only then that his terror is fully exposed.

Rites of Passage

Although it may be argued that interpreting the basic action of *The Birthday Party* as a rite of passage is very tenuous, some critics view Stanley as a symbol of the alienated artist who must be socially reintegrated. In this schema, Goldberg and McCann represent, respectively, the Judaic and Christian strains that impose on modern society, their "organization," various obligations. In this scheme, described by Martin Esslin in *Pinter*, "Stanley is the artist who society claims back from a comfortable, bohemian, 'opt-out' existence." The ritual of reintegration involves both the second-act initiation, the birthday party, and the third-act investiture, the dressing of Stanley in the habit or "uniform of respectable, bourgeois gentility."

There is also the second initiation, that of Lulu into sexual depravity, but this rite of passage is wholly secret and occurs offstage. It is one that also contributes an ironic comment on the other, for it is the fatherly Goldberg who is the ritual's high priest. The implication is that although society tries to redeem its outcasts, it also corrupts and violates its members.

Sex

The death of love is a common theme or condition in much absurdist drama. Aberrant behavior, violent aggression and sexual repression are likely to play important roles, as they do in *The Birthday Party*. In his listlessness, Stanley seems largely indifferent to Lulu, who, obviously on the prowl, tries to encourage his interest. Although momentarily hopeful at the prospect of going off with Lulu, Stanley falls back into his fatalistic despair, killing any hope of a "normal" relationship. His sexual repression finally gives way to his aborted rape of her at the end of Act II.

In the seedy rooming house, love seems either ineffectually sad or depraved. Meg, even in the face of his abuse, flirts with Stanley, though she is twice his age; and Lulu flirts with Goldberg, who introduces her to unspecified (though presumably horrible) sexual experiences. With Goldberg, sex is an empowering experience, a violent way to control or destroy and a terrible mockery of its function in a loving relationship. In Pinter's world, such a healthy relationship seems an impossibility.

Violence and Cruelty

At various points in the play, aggression gives way to verbal cruelty or physical violence, both actual and implied. Stanley is abusive towards Meg, whom he enjoys tormenting. During the party, he even tries to throttle her. Still, most of the threatened violence is directed at Stanley. Goldberg and McCann represent power that Stanley cannot effectively resist, although at first he tries. He attempts to remain uncooperative, and he even kicks Goldberg in the stomach; but he is really no match for the two men. After their abusive

interrogation, when the party starts, they ritually disarm Stanley, breaking his glasses and controlling his behavior. Unlike Stanley's violence, evident in his manic drum beating, choking of Meg, and aborted rape of Lulu, the violence of Goldberg and McCann is either merely threatened or is exercised offstage, as in the sexual abuse of Lulu. That they can achieve their aims with little more than veiled threats makes them a very sinister pair.

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Style

Setting

The Birthday Party uses a single setting, the living–dining room of a seaside boarding house somewhere on the coast of England. Its anonymity contributes to a sense of place as symbol, especially in allegorical interpretations of the play.

Although doors permit characters to enter and exit the room, there are features suggesting that the room is isolated from the world outside. The wall separating the room from the kitchen has a hatch allowing characters in the kitchen to peer into the room, like jailors peering into a prison cell. There are also windows that permit characters to see into the room but give no real glimpse of what lies beyond them.

References to the outside world beyond the room offer virtually no clues to time or place. Petey reads a newspaper (which McCann later destroys), but the information he relates from it is trivial. Names and places alluded to are either of little help or simply misleading. In his fantasy concert tour, Stanley mentions Constantinople, which had become Istanbul in the fifteenth century when it fell to the Turks, and in their interrogation of Stanley, Goldberg and McCann ask him about the Blessed Oliver Plunket, an Irish Catholic martyr executed in England in 1681, and about the medieval, Albigensian heresy. Such puzzling references help create the impression that the setting is either a microcosmic symbol or an existential, timeless vacuum.

Symbolism and Allegory

Justified or not, *The Birthday Party* has been read as a kind of modern allegory. That interpretation is partly based on the fact that there is little to anchor the play's setting in a world beyond its limits. Pinter's deliberate vagueness and use of fragmented information tend to confirm that he has a symbolic purpose. Some elements seem particularly conducive to interpretation. Among other things, the toy drum, the birthday party itself, McCann's seemingly gratuitous act of breaking Stanley's glasses, and the outfitting of Stanley in respectable clothes before he is led off.

Yet, to fit the diverse elements into some sort of consistent allegory has proven more difficult. Is Stanley the embodiment of the modern artist who has reneged on his obligations to both his craft and society and turned to living in an inert, totally irresponsible state? Critics have remarked that the play's setting is womb–like, offering Stanley a place of comfort and security and isolating him from the world beyond. Still, while it provides a refuge, the place is dingy and depressing, and Stanley is hardly happy living in it. He obviously shoulders some sort of guilt. Goldberg and McCann tap into that, and they intimate that there will be retribution for Stanley's alleged transgressions, possibly death. However, part of what they say in the last act suggests that they are not so much his inquisitors and potential executioners as exorcists and healers who have come to make Stanley whole again. Such uncertainties make a consistent allegorical interpretation of the play difficult.

Structure

Despite its absurdist elements, *The Birthday Party* has a conventional, three–act structure and follows a

straightforward chronology. The play begins the morning of Stanley's alleged birthday and concludes the following morning, after Goldberg and McCann cart him off. The first and second acts both end with strong, even manic moments: the frantic beating of the drum in Act I and the near-rape of Lulu in Act II. However, the last act, like the opening of the first, is understated in its emotional force, returning as it does to the shallow conversation of Meg and Petey. Meg, not even aware that Stanley has been removed, makes small talk about the party while Petey tries to read.

Working through some sort of causal necessity, such a structure traditionally imposes predictable patterns of behavior on character, but Pinter breaks through such strictures, at times letting his characters go amok. For example, at the birthday party in the second act, for no discernable reason, Stanley becomes very violent. There are also strange bits of stage business that border on the bizarre, as when, for example, in the last act Goldberg has McCann blow in his mouth. Such odd behavior offers a very unsettling contrast to the more predictable events that usually evolve within such a traditional structure.

Foreshadowing

In his teasing of Meg, Stanley claims that the two strangers who plan to show up at the boarding house will come in a van carrying a wheelbarrow, which they use to cart somebody off. Meg, a gullible target for Stanley, grows very nervous, fearful that she will be their victim.

Although Stanley's purpose is to frighten Meg, his description foreshadows his own fate. He is the one to be taken off. His teasing story predicts the sinister arrival of Goldberg and McCann and is an important bit of foreshadowing.

Irony

The Birthday Party has some ironic elements. There are, for example, ironic discrepancies in character, especially in Goldberg's case. On the surface, he is amiable and pleasant, a spokesman for old world values and familial loyalties, but he is also sexually abusive, even depraved. McCann, his associate, possibly a killer, is a rather taciturn, finicky sort of fellow. He sits quietly, methodically tearing newspaper into strips, an ironic bit of activity given the fact that he has a brutal purpose. Like Ben and Gus in Pinter's *The Dumbwaiter* or the hit men in Hemingway's short story "The Killers," the pair seem to be civilized and calm, not vicious or nervous. It is the ironic contrast between their normal exterior and their undisclosed but violent purpose that makes them so sinister and menacing.

Nonsense

Nonsense in Pinter's *The Birthday Party* is not as obvious as it is in Ionesco's dramas. Still, nonsensical elements are present, a fact which prompted some critics to note the influence of Ionesco on Pinter's play.

In the play, which avoids farce, the nonsense is mostly verbal. In the last act, it takes the form of Stanley's choking, unintelligible sounds. But it is also present in Act II, when Goldberg and McCann, alone with Stanley, put their victim through an incongruous and chaotic interrogation. The two henchmen ask a series of unrelated and often unanswerable questions, some of which are patently ludicrous. It is their barrage that gives hints but no firm indication of the two men's real purpose.

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Historical Context

In the late-1950s, when Pinter wrote *The Birthday Party*, the developed nations of the world were deeply mired in a cold war that pitted the communist powers of the Soviet Union and Red China against the

free-world nations, including both the United States and the United Kingdom. Fears of a third world war, one fought with atomic weapons, were widespread. At the beginning of the decade, war had broken out in Korea, pitting communist North Korea and its ally, Red China, against South Korea and a United Nations "police force" comprised largely of American troops. Further outbreaks of open warfare were threatened throughout the 1950s, as in 1956, when Hungarian rebels, pleading for help from the West, were crushed by Soviet troops and tanks.

In the same period, the United States and the Soviet Union began the "Space Race," an undeclared competition in which each country sought to prove itself the most technologically advanced. The Soviets launched Sputnik I in 1957, the first artificial satellite to be put into orbit, and in the following year, the United States sent up its counterpart, Explorer 1. Meanwhile, other events were setting the stage for further armed hostilities. The 1954 Geneva Accords divided Vietnam into North and South Vietnam, a division that would lead to war and the increasing involvement of the United States, while in Cuba, Fidel Castro began the rebellion that would bring down the Cuban dictator, Fulgencio Batista, and lead to a communist takeover of the country. Abroad, other nations formed important alliances, not just for political but for economic reasons. Of major importance to Great Britain, in 1957 the democratic countries of western Europe formed the Common Market, from which, initially, England was excluded, its membership vigorously opposed by France. Also, in the next year, Egypt, Syria, and Yemen formed the United Arab States, partly in response to Israel's defeat and invasion of Egypt in 1956.

In these same years, Great Britain continued its decline as a major world power. Its influence in Africa and Asia was quickly eroding. In 1952, India, the jewel of the British Empire, gained its independence and elected its first prime minister, Jawaharial Nehru. In 1956, Egypt nationalized the Suez Canal and forced the British to surrender control of the canal and withdraw. Meanwhile, at home, the British continued to suffer from the domestic bombings and mayhem carried out by the outlawed Irish Republican Army (IRA), whose primary goal was to liberate Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom and incorporate it into the Republic of Ireland.

The decline of England's world's prestige, if not directly evident in the British plays of the late-1950s, certainly contributed to the anger and detachment that dominated the mood of many of them. For many artists, in a period of doubt, pessimism, and insecurity, rage seemed the only genuine response.

John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956) is frequently named as the seminal play in this "Angry Theater." Its protagonist, Jimmy Porter, furious at having to live in a "pusillanimous" world that he cannot change, tunes it out. However, Osborne's method, like that of most of the "Angries," is basically conventional, despite his use of contemporary speech and anti-heroic characters. However, the sense of alienation and helplessness that characterizes some of the angry plays was also conveyed in the new, unconventional drama of the absurdist playwrights, led by Beckett and Ionesco, whose works, imported from Paris, evidenced both revolutionary dramatic methods and the existential conditions of nausea and ennui. London audiences encountered this very controversial drama in 1956, when English-language versions of both Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* were staged. To Pinter belongs some of the credit of synthesizing these new strains, for it is in his earliest plays, including *The Birthday Party*, that absurdist elements are for the first time welded to the angry mood and detachment then dominating the new wave in British theater.

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Critical Overview

The nearly unanimous negative reviews that assaulted the 1958 London premier of Pinter's *The Birthday Party* baffled the young playwright but never dampened his spirits. Those early reviewers, with the exception

of Harold Hobson, found Pinter's play unfunny, obscure, and derivative. In the *Evening Standard*, Milton Shulman, scoffed that the work would "be best enjoyed by those who believe that obscurity is its own reward" and further complained that the play was not very funny, in part because "the fun to be derived out of the futility of language" was becoming a "cliche of its own." Meanwhile, M. M. W., the reviewer in the *Manchester Guardian*, wrote that Pinter simply obfuscated both character and action with "non-sequiturs, half-gibberish, and lunatic ravings," and suggested that the playwright might do much better if he would forget "Beckett, Ionesco, and Simpson." For the anonymous reviewer in the *Times*, the play stacked up to a discordant and opaque conundrum. Act I "sounds an offbeat note of madness;" Act II rises to "a sort of delirium;" but Act III gives "not the slightest hint of what the other two may have been about."

Even though many of the early reviewers recognized Pinter's kinship with Beckett, Ionesco, and other new wave, anti-realist dramatists, they seemed to expect his play to develop an idea in the manner of the thesis-play. Critics were unable adjust to the playwright's "shifts in aesthetic key," those lurches back and forth between psychological realism and symbolic surrealism that create a sense of dislocation and menace, Pinter's signature moods. What bothered early critics most was the play's maddening failure to authenticate experience or verify facts. As Arthur Ganz noted in *Pinter: A Collection of Critical Essays*, however, "it is the threat of meaning rather than the threat of violence that lies at the root of Pinter's menace." The disclosure of verifiable information, such as the identify of Goldberg and McCann's organization, would only help relieve the angst that arises from an inner fear of its disclosure and thereby rob the play of its forceful intensity. Only Harold Hobson, writing in the *Times* seemed to recognize this fact, noting that the play's evasiveness gives it its power, and that it is precisely in its "vagueness that its spine-chilling quality lies."

In 1960, with the London staging of *The Caretaker*, critical assessments of Pinter markedly improved. There were still nay-sayers, but many important critics began amending their initial judgments of Pinter. For example, one of England's dramatic gurus, Kenneth Tynan, wrote in the *Observer* that in *The Caretaker* Pinter had "begun to fulfill the promise" that Tynan had "signally failed to see in *The Birthday Party*" two years earlier. By that time, too, reviewers had begun adjusting their critical radar to the new theater, aided by the much publicized "London controversy" in which Ionesco intellectually squared off with Tynan over Ionesco's supposed lack of doctrinal convictions and his assault on language. The debate, if it did not create sympathy for the new drama, at least prompted a better understanding. Furthermore, *The Birthday Party*, presented on television in 1960, impressed millions of viewers, whose influence certainly helped Pinter's growing reputation by revealing that his play could communicate with ordinary folk if not with critics.

In 1961, when Martin Esslin first published *The Theatre of the Absurd*, his important seminal study of the movement, he placed Pinter among its "Parallels and Proselytes" along with such important writers as Fernando Arrabal, Max Frisch, Edward Albee, Arthur Kopit, Slawomir Mrozek, and Vaclav Havel. Just three years after the premier of *The Birthday Party*, Esslin, recognizing the playwright's genius, concluded that Pinter had "already won himself an important place among the playwrights of this century." It was an assessment that stuck and has certainly not abated.

In 1964, when *The Birthday Party* was revived at the Aldwych Theatre in London under Pinter's direction, the work garnered greater respect among the city's drama critics. There were still those who remained belligerent, like W. A. Darlington of the *Daily Telegraph*, who, although he found the play more compelling than the first time around, still felt that *The Birthday Party* should have disclosed what it was Stanley had done. By then, of course, new assessments about what Pinter was about were slowly making such questions both unanswerable and ultimately irrelevant. It had become clear that Pinter, like Ionesco, had created his unique brand of "pure theater," one deliberately cut adrift from specific current events and doctrinal adherence in its questing through human fear and anxiety. *The Birthday Party* was well on its way to being recognized as one of the greatest examples of absurdist drama.

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Character Analysis

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Meg Boles

Petey's wife, Meg Boles is a good-natured woman in her sixties. If only from a lack of any reference to offspring of her own, it is implied that she and Petey are childless, thus she fills a void in her life by turning the Boles's boarding-house tenant, Stanley Webber, into a kind of surrogate child. She insists on calling him "boy" and mothering him. She even takes liberties appropriate to a parent—though not to the landlady of an adult roomer—by invading his privacy to fetch him down to breakfast.

At the same time, Meg flirts with Stanley, trying to fill a second void in her life. Her marriage to Petey has settled into mechanical routine, as their listless and inane dialogue that opens the play reveals. Meg tries to win Stanley's approval of her as a woman, shamelessly fishing for compliments. Stanley, in his mildly perverse manner, responds by teasing her, knowing that she is both vulnerable and gullible.

As the play progresses, it becomes clear that Meg, though a mental lightweight, is a decent woman. She is also rather sentimental. Although it is probably not even Stanley's real birthday, she insists that it is, determined to help Stanley weather his self-destructive despondency. She also seems to be his last hope, and her absence, when he is taken away near the end of the play, intensifies his final wretchedness.

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Petey Boles

Like his wife, Petey Boles is in his sixties. He is a deck-chair attendant at the unidentified seaside resort where he and Meg own their boarding house, which, although it is “on the list,” has seen much better days. Petey is dull and ambitionless, no more inclined than his wife to find challenges beyond the confines of their rooming house. The pair have simply settled into a humdrum existence appropriate to their mundane minds.

Because it is his chess night, Petey is not present during the birthday party. He leaves before it begins, then appears the following morning, when he makes a feeble attempt to prevent Goldberg and McCann from taking Stanley away, though he backs down when the two men suggest that they might take him as well. Petey's decency is finally as ineffectual as Meg's. At the play's conclusion, he can do nothing but slip back into vapid conversation with his wife, who reveals that she was not even aware that he had completely missed the party.

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Nat Goldberg

Nat Goldberg, in his fifties, is the older of the two strangers who come to interrogate and intimidate Stanley before taking him away. He is a suave character, a gentleman in appearance and demeanor. He also seems to exude superficial good will, inclined to give kindly advice to both his henchman, McCann, and the other characters. He is nostalgic, too. He fondly and affectionately recalls his family and events in his early life. He also insists that Meg and the others honor Stanley with a birthday party.

Goldberg's soft-heartedness is, however, pure sham. His outward charm and polite manner mask a sadistic nature. This cruelty is first revealed in his initial interrogation of Stanley. His ugliness is further betrayed by his unspecified carnal use of Lulu, who complains the morning after the party that Goldberg subjected her to some deviant sexual experiences inappropriate even for wives. It is this discrepancy between Goldberg's calm appearance and his vicious interior that makes him the more sinister of Webber's two persecutors.

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Other Characters

Benny

See Nat Goldberg.

Lulu

Described as a "girl in her twenties," Lulu is a neighbor who first appears carrying Stanley's birthday present, the toy drum and drum sticks that Meg had bought for him. On the flirtatious side, she is self-conscious about her sexual appeal and cannot sit still for long without taking out a compact to powder her face. To her, looks are obviously important, and she sees Stanley as a "washout" because he seems to care nothing about his unkempt appearance.

Behind her glamour, there is some youthful innocence to Lulu. She is blind to Goldberg's predatory nature and is drawn into his charm. She sits on his lap and flirts with him, a foreshadowing of what occurs between them later that night. That she is some sort of sexual sacrifice is also suggested in the conclusion to the bizarre events that take place when the lights go out during the party. When they are restored, she is revealed "lying spread-eagle on the table," with Stanley hunched over her giggling insanely.

In the last act, Lulu seems broken by the night's experiences, but she is also angry. Goldberg, who baldly claims that he shares some of her innocence, had entered her room with a mysterious briefcase and begun sexually abusing her, using her, she complains, as "a passing fancy." She leaves angry and frightened when McCann and Goldberg threaten to exact a confession from her.

Dermont McCann

McCann, in his thirties, is Goldberg's younger associate. Unlike Goldberg, who reveals a Jewish heritage, McCann is an immoral Irish Catholic, possibly a defrocked priest. Like Goldberg, he exercises careful self control, a quality which contributes to the sinister impression of both men. He is also methodical and compulsive, as is revealed in his ritual habit of carefully tearing Petey's newspaper into strips. He differs from Goldberg in important respects, however. More reticent, he is not as superficially warm or outgoing, and when he does speak he seems more inclined to echo Goldberg than to offer new observations. He is also physically more intimidating than Goldberg, who deliberately covers his viciousness with a mask of fatherly interest in the others and disarms everyone with his nostalgia. It is McCann who shoves Stanley at the party and snaps and breaks his glasses.

When he does talk, McCann usually just adapts to the mood set by Goldberg. Usually, too, he defers to Goldberg's age and authority, even obeying the older man's peculiar request that McCann blow into his mouth. However, at times he seems more Goldberg's equal partner, especially during the interrogations of Stanley, when, just as voluble, he become Goldberg's co-inquisitor.

Simey

See Nat Goldberg.

Stanley Webber

Until his nemeses Goldberg and McCann appear, Stanley is the only lodger at the Boles' run-down seaside boarding house. The basis of his relationship to Goldberg and McCann, at best hinted at, is never fully revealed, but their coming finally destroys Stanley's last vestiges of self-control. Near the play's end, when they have reduced him to idiocy, they haul him off in Goldberg's car to face the "Monty," some vague, ominous fate.

Stanley, in his late-thirties, is an unemployed musician, reluctant to leave the boarding house, which has become a kind of refuge from "them," the nebulous persecutors who, in the past, destroyed his career as a concert pianist. He has grown both slovenly and desultory, and although he fantasizes about playing in great cities on a world tour, he has no real hope. Lacking a piano, he cannot even practice. As he confides in an honest moment, his only success in concert was in Lower Edmonton, a pathetic contrast to the cities he names as venues on his dream tour.

Stanley's dread of what lies beyond the boarding house traps him in a trying relationship with Meg, for whom he must act as both wayward child and surrogate husband. He is not always able to mask his disgust with this relationship and is prone to express his contempt for her in cruel verbal jibes and petty behavior. He also teases her. For example, he tells her that "they" are coming in a van with a wheelbarrow, looking for someone to haul off, presumably Meg. His hostility finally takes a more violent form, when, during the birthday party, he tries to strangle her but is stopped by McCann and Goldberg.

Stanley, the nominal protagonist of *The Birthday Party*, barely struggles against his persecutors, quickly succumbing as if before some inevitable and implacable doom. Although he never evidences any guilt for his betrayal of the unspecified cause, he responds to his inquisitors as if he knows that there is nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. At the end, although unable to voice his feelings, he seems resigned to his unknown fate.

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Essays and Criticism

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The Birthday Party as a Work of Anti-Text

In this essay Fiero discusses *The Birthday Party* as a work of anti-text, pure theater that gains great power at points where language fails or simply eludes logical analysis.

If, as the poet Wallace Stevens maintained, there are thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird, there ought to be at least as many ways of looking at a play. There are really, however, only two essential perspectives: one which views the play as a literary text, and the other which views the play as a script to be performed. Judged strictly from the first perspective, Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* remains an impassable mote to trouble the critical eye, while, from the second perspective, it seems a powerful stage vehicle, capable, metaphorically speaking, of slicing through an eyeball like the razor in Salvador Dali's surrealist film, *Un Chien d'Anlou*.

Yes, astute directors will try to interpret a play for production through synthesizing the two approaches, yet they must ultimately evaluate the text as a vehicle for performance, concerned not with its literary merits but with its theatricality, which, arguably, Pinter's play offers in abundance. The problem for him and other writers identified with the theater of the absurd is that most literary critics and scholars concentrate on the text, which, of course, is their proper job. Unfortunately, though, they are the guardians of anthologies, the gate keepers who decide what passes into classical posterity. They cannot make their judgments on the basis of how well a play is realized, for its articulation on stage is ever-changing, subject to the individuals responsible for each production of the work. They must look almost exclusively to its printed text, which, if not just less, is certainly other than the staged play.

The texts of absurdist playwrights, like Pinter's early "comedies of menace," present such critics with a special problem. Distrusting language as an adequate or sufficient tool of communication, many of these playwrights deliberately strip their dialogue of logic or sense. This is the opposite of the realists, for example, who, while using commonplace language, advance their plots in the manner of Ibsen, in traditional, action-reaction models that rely both on rational discourse and known or verifiable events. In addition to rejecting logic, the absurdist writer frequently descends into ludicrous parodies of common speech, even, finally, into incomprehensible babble. As Pinter himself claimed, his characters often use "a torrent of language" as a kind of silence, as speech that "is speaking of a language locked beneath it." It is like so much verbal clothing, covering an emptiness that real silence might leave exposed and vulnerable.

Such an unconscious evasion of an inner fear—perhaps the fear of nothingness—is seen at the very beginning of *The Birthday Party*, in the opening dialogue of Meg and Petey Boles. Both characters confirm what is entirely self-evident, such as the fact that Petey has indeed come back and that, yes, he has his newspaper and is eating his cornflakes. What is not said in this silence of words is that their marriage is as passionless as a wet rag. They are not a very complex pair, to be sure. They are basically free of the sort of angst that afflicts their more intriguing tenant, Stanley Webber. The inner, frustrated longings of Meg are exposed quickly because her words become transparent clues as she speaks of Stanley as if he were both the male child she never had and the lover for whom she still pines. In fact, the two characters seem disarmingly realistic, for their conversation barely exaggerates the idle breakfast banter of many average people. They even offer evidence that Pinter is at least as faithful to actual human behavior as the many "realistic" plays that artificially imposed order on behavior to a suit some moralizing purpose.

The opening scene of *The Birthday Party* also has a conventional resonance, for it seems like a wry variation on the old "feather duster" of drawing-room comedy, the type of scene in which maids and butlers or cooks prep an audience for its encounter with the major characters. In fact, *The Birthday Party* starts much like a working-class burlesque of one of those sparkling depression-era comedies, such as Noel Coward's *Private Lives*, in which, dressed and groomed to the nines, the wealthy, well-heeled society gent first appears for a late breakfast and witty repartee. Instead, in Pinter's play, the proverbial cat drags in Stanley, slovenly, half-dressed, and grunting in monosyllables.

Of course, Stanley and his persecutors, Goldberg and McCann, will soon take the audience into strange and unfamiliar territory, lurching in and out of a dreamscape in which nothing is transparent and all realistic bets are off. No key events revealed can be confirmed or verified, even the assertion that Stanley is a down-on-his-luck pianist could be a fabrication—no on stage proof is offered that he can even play the piano. Even the most elementary questions go unanswered, whether, for example, it is actually Stanley's birthday or whether Meg has merely said it is as an excuse to give Stanley his present, the toy drum. Nothing important is decisively disclosed, for just as soon as a fact appears solidly established it is contradicted.

What is certain is that Goldberg and McCann somehow reach into Stanley's insides and set his fear racing violently. They menace because they threaten to expose the real Stanley to the other characters. Yet, paradoxically, they are also like confessors or exorcists, attempting to cure Stanley by finding the fear's source, that which has led to his withdrawal, hermit-like, from life. The final, devastating revelation of the play is that without his fear, Stanley is pitifully anemic. It has been that inner fear that somehow both defined and sustained him. In the last act, following the ritual release of this dread in the form of violence, he is reduced to an inarticulate automaton, outfitted with respectable dress but seemingly inert in his passivity and all but brain dead. It is as if, indeed, he has become nothing.

It is in his evasiveness that Pinter has been critically maligned. His text deliberately misdirects readers and audiences, leading to the charge that his earliest work is difficult at best, opaque at worst. If we know more than we need to know about Meg and Petey, we know far less than we think we want to know about Stanley and his relationship to the two intruders. Most perplexing, the source of Stanley's fear, although hinted at, is never revealed. As indicated, it is aroused and transmuted into violence during the birthday party, but it is never simply identified or explained. This fact has frustrated many critics, even those within theater. According to Robert Brustein, writing in the *New Republic*, Pinter in his "grotesque naturalism" fails to communicate at all, because although he uses "authentic colloquial speech," he has "stripped it bare of it of reflective or conceptual thought." But Pinter is, after all, a poet, and one who understands that a play, like a poem, as Archibald MacLeish insisted, "should not mean but be." Furthermore, as an actor and director, he knows that it can only truly "be" in performance.

Stanley's fear also simply is a monster within, evident from the start by his erratic and sometimes violent behavior. It does not first appear with the intrusion of Goldberg and McCann. It is latent, almost dormant, but it rises in his emotional gorge even before he learns about the two strangers. It breaks through his civil conversation with Meg, when he suddenly recoils from her in disgust and verbally assaults her for her lousy tea and poor housekeeping. When she tells him about the strangers, he is obviously shaken, and he cruelly teases her about two men in the van with a wheelbarrow who will come to the door. It is an ironic moment, for Goldberg and McCann come not to wheel Meg away but to draw out Stanley's fear and force him to confront it—though who they are and why they seek out Stanley remains an utter mystery. The result is that Stanley and the two intruders seem more symbolic than real.

That fact has led to interpretations of *The Birthday Party* as a modern "allegory on the pressures of conformity" as well as "an allegory of death," as Martin Esslin noted in *Pinter: A Study of His Plays*. But, as Esslin argued, such interpretations miss the mark, for Pinter's play, like Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, "simply explores a situation which, in itself, is a valid poetic image that is immediately seen as relevant and true." Like the Black Death, discussed by Antonin Artaud in *The Theatre and Its Double* as a sort of ultimate theatrical and awful presence, Stanley's gnawing fear is just there, a presence that is perhaps more devastating because its origins are unknown. Arguably, Pinter's verbal misdirections were designed to increase the nerve-wracking impact of *The Birthday Party*, deliberately obscuring the root cause of Stanley's fear and thereby making it even more devastating, just as the ignorance of the great plague's origin profoundly increased the terror of its potential victims.

Much of the play's power is released precisely at times when no words are spoken, when they utterly fail to communicate, or when what they communicate lies beyond their literal sense. For example, the first act ends with Stanley marching around the room, frantically and violently beating on the toy drum. Nothing is said, but as Stanley's beating grows more terrible, Meg's smiling pleasure gives way to an alarmed expression. Despite all the noise, it is a silence in Pinter's sense, an intense moment of exposure.

Even more violent moments of exposure occur in the second act, during the party games. Blindfolded, Stanley stumbles around the room, falls over the drum, gets up, finds Meg and savagely begins to choke her, just before the lights fail. Similarly, the act ends with another violent sequence in which Stanley, who appears on the verge of raping Lulu, is exposed by McCann's flashlight and forced to back away. As he moves off, Stanley begins giggling with a mounting, nearly insane intensity as the other characters move towards him, like lions circling their intended kill.

Memorable text-bound moments, when words are plentiful, are often moments when language fails, for the simple fact is that nothing that contributes to the indelible sense of Stanley's repressed fear can be expressed in words. It emerges in Stanley's cacophonous gagging on word fragments in the last act, for example, but perhaps is even more memorable wedged into the two word-rich litanies of Goldberg and McCann, used when they are alone with Stanley in the second and final acts. In their chant-like rhythm and responsive structure, these are like dreadful incantations. They are also verbal puzzles, a mumbo-jumbo melange of nonsense and serious but unsubstantiated accusations and inactivated threats. The words are powerful, not because of what they literally mean but because of the intimidating way in which they are delivered. They seem as physical as punches delivered with violent force to the abdomen or head, and, like such brutal attacks, Stanley cringes before them.

These moments are moments of pure theater, vivid and powerful. They erupt in text-empty places or tear through the text with an intense fury that contrasts with the disquieting deliberation of Goldberg and McCann; they are memorably caught in McCann's slow and methodical tearing of strips from Petey's newspaper. And they are, of course, moments to experience, to view. They lose their power when the text is simply read; stage directions describing Stanley's maniacal beating of the drum are no match for the realization of such a disturbing scene. Therein, however, lies the critical rub, for unlike much of the time-honored, poetic drama of Western culture, to an important degree valued for its language, an anti-text play like Pinter's *The Birthday Party* must be judged on more appropriate grounds, not just as ritual, myth, game, or symbol, but as viable theater. As well as any other modern dramatists, in *The Birthday Party* Pinter shows us why we must constantly rethink exactly what a classic work of drama should be. Until we do, we will not be at peace with the theater of the absurd or give it its proper regard.

Source: John W. Fiero, for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 1999. Fiero is a Ph. D., now retired, who formerly taught drama and play writing at the University of Southwestern Louisiana.

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Overview of The Birthday Party

In the following essay, Pountney provides an overview of Pinter's first full-length play, delineating the primary plot points and discussing the work's major themes.

The Birthday Party, Pinter's first full-length play, takes place at the home of Meg and Petey Boles and concerns their lodger, Stanley, whose past is obscure, though he fantasises about having been a concert pianist. Meg gives Stanley a drum for his birthday, which he plays as though possessed as the first act closes. In Act II Stanley tries to get rid of some new lodgers, Goldberg and McCann, but they respond by subjecting Stanley to rapid-fire interrogation, until he is reduced to speechlessness. The act culminates in Stanley's birthday party, in which McCann breaks Stanley's glasses during a game of blind man's buff, the lights go out and, in a sinister climax, Stanley (encumbered by the drum, into which he has stumbled) begins to strangle Meg and is bent giggling over a young girl, Lulu, when the curtain falls. Act III comes full circle with Meg and Petey at breakfast, as at the opening of the play. Stanley is brought down a changed man, still speechless ("Uhgug-ug-gug-eehhh-gag"). Goldberg and McCann leave, taking Stanley "to Monty" and threaten Petey when he tries to stop them. Meg at the end of the play has understood nothing and fails to register Stanley has gone.

The initial lack of success of *The Birthday Party* in the late 1950's is not surprising. Pinter had yet to create a market for the particular brand of menace that is the signature of his early plays, such as *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter* (also 1957), where, like Stanley, the protagonists are sequestered in a room and are threatened by intruders into their womb-like privacy. Critics, such as Milton Shulman, were puzzled: "The world of Harold Pinter is shadowy, obsessed, guilt-ridden, claustrophobic and, above all, private. You are expected to find your way through it without signposts, clues or milestones."

Pinter is even said to have received the following enquiry from an audience member:

I would be obliged if you would kindly explain to me the meaning of your play *The Birthday Party*. These are the points which I do not understand. 1) Who are the two men? 2) Where did Stanley come from? 3) Were they all supposed to be normal? You will appreciate that without the answers to my questions I cannot fully understand your play.

Pinter's reputed response (" 1) Who are you? 2) Where do you come from?", etc.) naturally ignored such strictures—and audiences gradually became increasingly fascinated, hooked into the plays by their ambiguities, a technique Pinter had learned from Samuel Beckett. (Pinter warmly acknowledges a debt to Beckett since first discovering his writing in 1949.)

One of the major pleasures of Pinter's drama is his use of language, ranging from jargon used as a protective shield to prevent intruders seeing what is underneath, to a characteristic use of pauses of varying lengths, so that a work is virtually orchestrated by silence, and meaning accrues in the subtext—in what is not said. At the opening of *The Birthday Party* it is as though Pinter had produced a tape recording of the inanities we actually speak, as opposed to the shapely sentences often given to stage figures by earlier dramatists. In using such dialogue onstage, Pinter not only introduces a rich vein of humour, but allows an audience to recognise the realism of stating the obvious. Many a breakfast-time conversation is based on similar emptiness:

Meg: Is that you Petey? (Pause) Petey, is that you?
Petey: What?
Meg: Is that you?
Petey: Yes, it's me.
Meg: What? (She opens the hatch and looks through.) Are you back?
Petey: Yes.

The Birthday Party also demonstrates a use of language as a weapon, as Goldberg and McCann, by their quick-fire questioning of Stanley (a known technique in brainwashing, designed to fluster and confuse) reduce him to inarticulacy:

Goldberg: Which came first?

McCann: Chicken? Egg? Which came first?

Goldberg: Which came first? Which came first? Which came first? (Stanley screams).

Stanley's subsequent silence marks the disintegration of his personality. Following Goldberg and McCann's ministrations he does indeed 'need special treatment'—for which the two men are 'taking him to Monty' as Goldberg ominously informs Petey. Goldberg and McCann seem in a sense to be projections or manifestations of Stanley's strongly-developed sense of guilt and fear of pursuit—of which we are made aware before he encounters the two men. At the same time Goldberg and McCann are frighteningly real. The barrage of words with which they crush Stanley, their vitality and comic vulgarity, the swagger and aggression, and the rhythms of their language have a richness that comes straight out of the Jewish idiom of Pinter's family background as well as the regional influence of London's East End. For audiences unused to the Jewish idiom, the disturbing power of Pinter's writing owes a good deal to the strangeness of this mixture of the unfamiliar with the familiar.

The ambiguities in *The Birthday Party* are integral to the play's impact. We never know precisely who Goldberg and McCann are, or what (if anything) Stanley has done, that they seem to be pursuing him. We are left with a sense of genuine unease, as though indescribable evil really were stalking outside the door of even the most ordinary of homes, awaiting its chance to enter.

Source: Rosemary Pountney, 'The Birthday Party' in *The International Dictionary of Theatre*, Volume 1: Plays, edited by Mark Hawkins-Dady, St. James Press, 1992, pp. 67–68.

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Review of The Birthday Party

In this excerpt, Disch favorably reviews a 1988 revival production of Pinter's play. In addition to affirming the power of the playwright's text, this production, in the critic's opinion, offers skilled direction and powerful performances.

Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* is appearing through May 22 at the C.S.C. Theatre on East Thirteenth Street. I regret being so tardy in my recommendation, for Carey Perloff's production is vivid and well marshaled. More than most plays, *The Birthday Party* depends on a director who can mold clear dramatic action from a text that is a puzzle-box of ambiguities. It was Pinter's specific inspiration to create a plot that is all event and atmosphere, where the warring tonalities of hard-boiled thriller and Beckettian farce alternate and finally fuse. Any effort to account for the action on the basis of the characters' histories and motivations is wasted effort, nor is there any simple one-to-one symbolic schema by which the action can be interpreted. But that's not to say Pinter has evaded writing about anything. *The Birthday Party* is very cogently and accessibly about the ways in which people tease and terrorize each other, about the kinds of intelligence specific to prey and predator, and much else that, rendered as a maxim of psychology, might seem dull or doubtful but that plays very well. By unmooring his story from a basis in strict narrative logic, Pinter gives his audience the distanced perspective of an alienist who listens for the meaning of what a patient says in the inflections and cadences of his speech. All good dramatists rediscover the primacy of body English, gesture and phatic utterance, each in his own way. In this, his first full-length play, Pinter made the discovery with unusually clarifying effect, an effect that is still invigorating thirty years later.

Georgine Hall and Robert Geringer as Meg and Petey are the incarnate spirit of English lumpen gentility. David Strathairn as Stanley, the cookie that all the play's machineries have been designed to crumble, is just smarmy enough that it is very hard not to identify with his gleeful tormenters, Goldberg and McCann, when they mysteriously appear and set to work on Stanley's nerves and sanity. In the latter roles, Peter Riegert and Richard Riehle steal the show, as is intended.

The only exception I take to the production is Loy Arcenas's set. More than most plays, *The Birthday Party* requires one invisible wall, not three. When the action hinges on Stanley being repeatedly prevented from exiting through an invisible door in an invisible wall, the suspense is theoretical at best.

Source: Thomas M. Disch, review of *The Birthday Party* in the *Nation*, May 21, 1988, p. 727.

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Compare and Contrast

1950s: Britain's decline as a world power continues and challenges to its remaining global influence persist for decades, reaching armed conflict in 1982 in the war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands.

Today: Although the United Kingdom still holds some far flung territories, including the Falklands, in 1998 it ceded Hong Kong, its last important Crown Colony in the Far East, to the Republic of China. The breakup of what was once the Great British Empire is now virtually complete.

1950s: Popular culture is on the verge of explosion with the impact of both television and rock music, though old institutions like the English dance hall are still popular. These halls feature sentimental ballads, swing dance music, and vaudeville comedians.

Today: Television and rock music dominate western culture. The dance-hall is long gone, having given way to large scale, arena concerts.

1950s: The Irish Republican Army (IRA) tries to achieve its primary objective, an end to British rule in Northern Ireland. Its activities, although sporadic and of varying severity, constitute a continual threat. The organization employs terrorist methods, murdering British soldiers and bombing government and commercial buildings. Although inconclusive, there are hints in Pinter's *The Birthday Party* that it is the IRA that Stanley is supposed to have betrayed.

Today: Although the radical offshoots of the IRA continue to use violence, serious efforts have been made by the British government and the political wing of the IRA to negotiate a settlement of the Irish "question." It remains difficult, partly because Protestants have a large and powerful presence in Northern Ireland. However, there is promise. Negotiators have arranged truces that both sides have tried to honor, and representatives of the IRA and British government continue to talk, something unthinkable in the 1950s.

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Topics for Further Study

Investigate the ways in which Pinter's ethnic background and his early years growing up in a working-class section of London helped shape both his pacifism and his craft.

Research the influence of Franz Kafka on Pinter's "comedies of menace."

Compare the style, structure, and techniques of Pinter's *The Birthday Party* with those of Eugene Ionesco's *Bald Soprano* or Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

Investigate Pinter's own observations about language and silence as concerns in his early work.

Research the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the possibility that it may be interpreted as the organization betrayed by Stanley Webber in *The Birthday Party*.

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Media Adaptations

On March 22, 1960, two years after its first staging, *The Birthday Party* was televised by ARD (Associated Rediffusion-TV). The work was directed by Joan Kemp-Welch and featured Richard Pearson as Stanley and Margery Withers as Meg. There has been no release of the video.

The Birthday Party was adapted to film in Britain in 1968. It was produced by Max Rosenberg, Edgar J. Scherick, and Milton Subotsky, directed by William Friedkin, and adapted by Pinter. The film features Robert Shaw as Stanley, Patrick Magee as Shamus McCann, Dandy Nichols as Meg Bowles, Sidney Tafler as Nat Goldberg, Moultrie Kelsall as Pete Bowles, and Helen Fraser as Lulu. The film has not yet been released on video in the United States.

In 1986, *The Birthday Party* was again produced for British television by Rosemary Hill. It was directed by Kenneth Ives and featured Colin Blakely as McCann, Kenneth Cranham as Stanley, Robert Lang as Petey, Harold Pinter as Goldberg, Joan Plowright as Meg, and Julie Walters as Lulu. The video has not been released in the United States.

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What Do I Read Next?

Franz Kafka's novel *The Trial*, written in 1914 but not published in English until 1937, bears similarities to Pinter's play. Its anti-hero, Josef K., beset by vague guilt, is taken to his execution by polite gentlemen who are death's angelic summoners. Along with Beckett, Kafka had a major and acknowledged influence on Pinter, who, in 1993, adapted *The Trial* to the screen.

Pinter's long one-act play, *The Dumbwaiter*, written at about the same time as *The Birthday Party*, includes parallel characters that invite contrast. In it, two hired killers, Ben and Gus, await orders from an organization which remains as mysterious as that for which Goldberg and McCann work.

Ernest Hemingway's short story "The Killers," first published in 1927, has a chilling pair of killers who appear in a small-town diner looking for their victim. Like Goldberg and McCann, they are unnervingly calm and fastidious in their manners. Critics have noted their similarity to Pinter's characters in both *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Birthday Party*.

John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger*, produced in 1956, is a seminal work in the Angry Theater of post-World War II Britain. Its protagonist, Jimmy Porter, offers an interesting contrast to Stanley Webber. Both are variations on the sensitive and angry young man mired in a world shorn of hope and human dignity.

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FURTHER READING

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This study treats Pinter's early plays not as comedies but rather as recreations of ancient fertility myths and rituals.

Dukore, Bernard F., *Where Laughter Stops: Pinter's Tragicomedy*, University of Missouri Press, 1976.

This brief study argues that Pinter's technique is to move from what is funny to what is unfunny and threatening, even though the source for what was comic remains the same for what has been transmuted into the tragic.

Esslin, Martin, *Pinter: A Study of His Plays*, expanded edition, W. W. Norton, 1976.

Esslin, who authored *The Theatre of the Absurd*, approaches Pinter in the fashion of that seminal work, attempting to explain the puzzling aspects of the playwright's work by examining and analyzing, among other

things, influences, sources, and techniques underlying "Pinterese." The work includes a useful chronology extending from 1930 through 1975.

Gabbard, Lucina Paquet, *The Dream Structure of Pinter's Plays: A Psychoanalytic Approach*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1976.

As Gabbard's title indicates, her approach is Freudian, and she relates various dramatic motifs in Pinter's early plays to the Oedipal and other subconscious wishes. For Gabbard, *The Birthday Party* is treated as "a punishment dream" incorporating, symbolically, "the wish to kill."

Gale, Steven H., *Butter's Going Up: A Critical Analysis of Harold Pinter's Work*, Duke University Press, 1977.

A stylistically direct study of Pinter's work written up to 1976, this text offers terse interpretations of each piece and several valuable aids to further study, including some chronologies and an annotated bibliography. It treats *The Birthday Party* as the thematic companion to two other "comedies of menace:" *The Room* and *The Dumbwaiter*.

Hinchliffe, Arnold P., *Harold Pinter*, revised edition, Twayne, 1981.

This study is a useful bio-critical study of Pinter that provides useful aids and a good overview of the playwright's early work. Three important chapters for the study of Pinter's *The Birthday Party* are 1. ("The Pinter Problem"), 2. ("Language and Silence") and 3. ("Comedies of Menace"). Includes a chronology and bibliography.

Kerr, Walter, *Harold Pinter*, Columbia University Press, 1967.

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An important aid to understanding absurdist plays, this work identifies and discusses the origins and purpose of various motifs and techniques used by Beckett, Ionesco, and other writers, including Pinter.

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A succinct monograph in the "Understanding Contemporary British Literature" series, Knowles's study offers an overview of Pinter's achievements in theater, radio, television, and film and the various influences on his craft. Knowles discusses *The Birthday Party* as an "amalgam" of diverse cultural undercurrents.

Taylor, John Russell, *Anger and After: A Guide to New British Drama*, revised edition, Methuen, 1969.

Appearing under the alternate title *The Angry Theatre*, this valuable study offers a critical survey of British drama from 1956 through the 1960s. It includes an important chapter on Pinter, who is identified as the most poetic writer among the new wave dramatists. He notes that Pinter deliberately employs contrary assertions by characters to thwart facile and superficial interpretation.

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