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## **Unit-3 □ Harold Pinter: *The Birthday Party***

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### **4.3.0 Introduction**

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- This unit introduces you to the life and creative output of Harold Pinter, one of the most prominent British playwrights of the second half of the twentieth century and in some detail to his second play, *The Birthday Party*
- It gives you a brief idea of the background in which Absurd drama emerged
- Issues related to plot, characters and themes are discussed for greater clarity of understanding; non-verbal elements, so crucial for any performance-text are also scrutinised
- Elements in the play that make the title significant are looked at; thus aspects that enable you to embark upon a meaningful study of the play are covered in moderate detail

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### **4.3.1 The Theatrical Context: Absurd Drama and Comedy of Menace**

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Drama as a genre had gone through phases of substantial experimentation in the

twentieth century itself with radically altered world-views stemming particularly from the World Wars and demanding an altogether different response through the arts and literature. The theatre adapted to this changed world which was fragmented and whose shared values and ideals were disintegrating. It sought to restructure both form and content such that they would reciprocate each other in conveying to the audience the all-pervasive meaninglessness that engulfs the existence of man in the contemporary world. The immediate precursors to such an approach to literature and theatre were the Existential philosophers, who felt that existing categories of understanding and defining man were not sufficient in the present times. Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus were two of the most influential thinkers of this school.

The kind of drama that reflected this mood best was the **Theatre of the Absurd**. The term was popularized by Martin Esslin through the identical title of his book (1961). It was taken from Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Man was shown as leading a life completely devoid of purpose and meaning; he would struggle to communicate only to be trapped in an endlessly repetitive cycle of actions and gestures which would lead him nowhere as the old certainties that man had held onto for so long had ceased to make sense as nothing was real and nothing mattered. Absurd Theatre would capture this 'nowhere' (no fixed perspective of place) and 'nowhen' (no fixed perspective of time) through the form itself. The form has to stand in for content as there are no perspectives of time and space and hence telling a story in the conventional way becomes quite impossible. Divorced from any logical development of plot, character and even theme, *Waiting for Godot* in French and English both by Samuel Beckett is one of its best examples. The other exponents of absurd drama were Eugene Ionesco and Jean Genet.

Pinter acknowledged the influence of Beckett and the two corresponded substantially over their writings in course of time. In *The Birthday Party* actions like Meg bringing breakfast, having to call Stanley as the latter might have been sleeping for too long, asking whether the cornflakes were "nice" to which her husband Petey would predictably reply "Very nice", Petey sitting in the morning reading a newspaper, Meg asking whether there is anything good in it and her assertion "This house is on the list" happen to be repeated meaninglessly as dialogues interspersed to intervene in the silences and overall lack of communication. Although the play has more characters, all with their ages specified unlike *Waiting for Godot*, much of the conversation happens to be merely put on, communicating next to nothing and leading nowhere. The solipsism of some of the characters knows no bounds with Goldberg's

inflated glorification of past warmth and its present version through Meg, using Lulu as a plaything, his pride in holding a position and his intimidation of Stanley aided by McCann. Stanley himself is not far behind beating his drum “savagely possessed”, trying to strangle Meg in the game “blind man’s buff” and assault Lulu with the lights gone out. Meg, at the end, savours being “the belle of the ball” innocently ignorant of all that was potentially sinister the night before.

Influenced by Beckett, Pinter put together his own design of what would often be referred to as the “comedy of menace”. The term was used for the first time in 1958 by the drama critic Irving Wardle, who borrowed it from the subtitle of David Campton’s play *The Lunatic View: A Comedy of Menace*, which in turn owed its origin to a nuanced pronunciation of the Restoration “Comedy of Manners”. Although the critic happened to withdraw that label from Pinter’s works before long and Pinter himself was not inclined to have such categories, subsequent studies of his early plays in particular found the term quite useful.

While the meaningless acts, movements and some of the dialogues generate fun and laughter coated with ridicule to bring out the comedy in *The Birthday Party*, there is some unknown threat lurking in the background that disturbs some of the characters so persistently, that they are unable to hold back their annoyance. Stanley expresses displeasure at the news that two people had opted for that boarding house “on the list”; he makes it clear in no uncertain terms that he did not want it. What might possibly have been the reason for such a repulsive stance? Was he apprehensive that people may be following him and now that they opt for this house, they have successfully traced his whereabouts? Had he then perpetrated some crime before coming to this seaside location? We are not given a clear answer but he finds himself terrorized by a barrage of intimidating questions like “Why did you leave the organization?”, “Why did you kill your wife?” etc. What perhaps aptly captures the sense of menace is the one that Goldberg puts thrice - “**Do you recognize an external force?**” (emphasis added) It prompts us to conclude that Stanley considered the arrival of Goldberg and McCann an intrusion because, as his ordeal at the party would suggest, they knew not only him but at least some, if not many of his misdeeds as well. Lulu is always vulnerable, whether in lights with Goldberg, who treats him as a mere sexual plaything, or in darkness with Stanley all over her. Petey can sense some potential harm being caused to Stanley when the two visitors force him away; yet he is able to articulate nothing about his fear either to his wife or to the audience. Apart from imagined threat, there is actual violence too with Stanley being the main

offender, trying either to strangle Meg, kick Goldberg or rape Lulu. Prolonged verbal violence, however, is inflicted on Stanley by Goldberg and McCann together. The very fact that Meg asserts that their “house is on the list” begs questions of sinister nature - was the house earlier, a place for some illegal activities presently under investigation which Meg herself was completely unaware of? Thus, what could spell doom for these characters happen to be obliquely hinted at quite frequently, whereby the tragic potential of menace can coexist with laughter and the comic. While you will read the text at length, the following excerpt will give you an idea of how the element of the Absurd works in Pinter’s play. Notice how dexterously language is used to create what apparently appears to be a comic situation but one that ultimately takes menacing proportions:

**STANLEY’S TURN-OFF AT THE VISITORS: (sensing menace)**

McCann. .... Many happy returns of the day. [Stanley withdraws his hand. They face each other.] Were you going out?

Stanley. Yes.

McCann. On your birthday?

Stanley. Yes. Why not?

McCann. But they are holding a party for you here tonight.

Stanley. Oh really? That’s unfortunate.

McCann. Ah no. It’s very nice.

.....

Stanley. I’m sorry. I’m not in the mood for a party tonight.

McCann. Oh, is that so? I’m sorry.

. Yes, I’m going out to celebrate quietly, on my own.

McCann. That’s a shame.

[They stand.]

Stanley. Well, if you’d move out of my way -

McCann. But everything’s laid on. The guests are expected.

Stanley. Guests? What guests?

McCann. Myself for one. I had the honour of an invitation.

.....

Stanley [moving away] I wouldn't call it an honour. It'll just be another booze-up.

.....

McCann. But it is an honour.

Stanley. I'd say you were exaggerating.

McCann. Oh no. I'd say it was an honour.

Stanley. I'd say that was plain stupid.

McCann. Ah no.

[They stare at each other.]

.....

[Stanley walks round the table towards the door. McCann meets him.]

Stanley. Excuse me.

McCann. Where are you going?

Stanley. I want to go out.

McCann. Why don't you stay here?

..... Goldberg. A warm night.

Stanley [turning] Don't mess me about!

Goldberg. I beg your pardon?

Stanley [moving downstage] I'm afraid there's been a mistake. We're booked out. Your room is taken. Mrs. Boles forgot to tell you. You'll have to find somewhere else.

Goldberg. Are you the manager here?

Stanley. That's right.

Goldberg. Is it a good game?

Stanley? I run the house. I'm afraid you and your friend will have to find other accommodation.

Goldberg. [rising] Oh, I forgot, I must congratulate you on your birthday. [Offering his hand] Congratulations.

Stanley [ignoring hand] Perhaps you're deaf.

.....

Get out.

Goldberg. You are in a terrible humour today, Mr Webber. And on your birthday too, with the good lady getting her strength up to give you a party.

Stanley. I told you to get those bottles out.

Goldberg. Mr Webber, sit down a minute.

Stanley. Let me- just make this clear. You don't bother me. To me you're nothing but a dirty joke. But I have a responsibility towards the people in this house. They've been down here too long. They've lost their sense of smell. I haven't. And nobody is going to get advantage of them while I'm here. [A little less forceful] Anyway, this house isn't your cup of tea. There's nothing here for you, from any angle, any angle. So why don't you just go, without any more fuss?

Goldberg. Mr Webber, sit down.

Stanley. It's no good starting any kind of trouble.

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## 4.3.2 Harold Pinter – A Literary Bio-brief

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### ➤ Early life, education and exposure to the Theatre

Pinter was born on October 10, 1930, in Hackney, east London, the only child of English parents of Jewish East European ancestry: his father, Hyman “Jack” Pinter (1902-1997) was a ladies' tailor; his mother, Frances (née Moskowitz; 1904-1992), a housewife. He studied at Hackney Downs School, a London grammar school from 1944 to 1948. A major influence on Pinter was his English teacher Joseph Brearley, who directed him in school plays and under whose instruction, “Pinter shone at English, wrote for the school magazine and discovered a gift for acting” according to his biographer Michael Billington. At the age of twelve, he began writing poetry and by twenty had published some of his poetical works as well.

### ➤ Career

Apart from being a playwright, Pinter was an actor, director, and a screenwriter. His acting career spanned over 50 years. In the early 1950s he toured Ireland with the Anew McMaster repertory company and worked for the Donald Wolfitt Company, at the King's Theatre, Hammersmith. He worked under the stage name David Baron

from 1954 to 1959. During this period, he also performed occasional roles in his own and others' works for radio, TV, and film, as he continued to do throughout his career. Pinter began to direct more frequently during the 1970s, becoming an associate director of the National Theatre (NT) in 1973. He directed almost 50 productions of his own and others' plays for stage, film, and television. Pinter composed 27 screenplays and film scripts for cinema and television, many of which were filmed, or adapted as stage plays.

Pinter was the author of 29 plays and 15 dramatic sketches and the co-author of two works for stage and radio. He was considered to have been one of the most influential modern British dramatists. His style has entered the English language as an adjective "Pinteresque", which, however, Pinter himself did not approve of. His works could broadly be grouped into three categories:

**a) "Comedies of Menace" (1957-1968)**

Pinter's first play, *The Room*, written and first performed in 1957, was a student production written in three days. Written in 1957 and produced in 1958. Pinter's second play, *The Birthday Party*, one of his best-known works, was initially both a commercial and critical disaster despite an enthusiastic review in *The Sunday Times* by its influential drama critic Harold Hobson, which ironically appeared only after the production had closed. Pinter himself and later critics generally credited Hobson as bolstering him and perhaps even rescuing his career. In 1964, the play would be revived both on television (with Pinter himself in the role of Goldberg) and on stage (directed by Pinter at the Aldwych Theatre) and would be well received.

In a review published in 1958, borrowing from the subtitle of *The Lunatic View: A Comedy of Menace*, a play by David Campton, critic Irving Wardle called Pinter's early plays "comedy of menace"- a label applied repeatedly since to his work. Such plays begin with an apparently innocent situation that becomes both threatening and "absurd" as Pinter's characters behave in ways often perceived as inexplicable by his audiences and one another. Pinter acknowledges the influence of Samuel Beckett, particularly on his early work; they became friends, sending each other drafts of their works in progress for comments.

Pinter wrote *The Hothouse* in 1958, which he shelved for over 20 years. Next he wrote *The Dumb Waiter* (1959), and *The Room* (1960). The first production of *The Caretaker*, at the Arts Theatre Club, in London, in 1960, established Pinter's theatrical reputation receiving an Evening Standard Award for best play of 1960.

By the time Peter Hall's London production of *The Homecoming* (1964) reached Broadway in 1967, Pinter had become a celebrity playwright. During this period, Pinter also wrote the radio play *A Slight Ache* in 1959. *A Night Out* (1960) was broadcast to a large audience. His play *Night School* was first televised in 1960. *The Collection* premiered in 1962, and *The Dwarfs*, adapted from Pinter's then unpublished novel of the same title, was first broadcast on radio in 1960, then adapted for the stage in a double bill with *The Lover*, which was then televised in 1963; and *Tea Party*, a play that Pinter developed from his 1963 short story, was first broadcast in 1965.

#### **b) "Memory Plays" (1968-1982)**

From the late 1960s through the early 1980s, Pinter wrote a series of plays and sketches that explore complex ambiguities, elegiac mysteries, comic vagaries, and other "quicksand-like" characteristics of memory and which critics sometimes classify as Pinter's "memory plays". These include *Landscape* (1968), *Silence* (1969), *Night* (1969), *Old Times* (1971), *No Man's Land* (1975), *The Proust Screenplay* (1977), *Betrayal* (1978), *Family Voices* (1981), *Victoria Station* (1982), and *A Kind of Alaska* (1982). Some of Pinter's later plays, including *Party Time* (1991), *Moonlight* (1993), *Ashes to Ashes* (1996), and *Celebration* (2000) draw upon some features of his "memory" dramaturgy in their focus on the past in the present, but they have personal and political resonances and other tonal differences from these earlier memory plays.

#### **c) Explicitly Political Plays and Sketches (1980-2000)**

Following a three-year period of creative drought in the early 1980s Pinter's plays tended to become shorter and more overtly political, serving as critiques of oppression, torture, and other abuses of human rights, linked by the apparent "invulnerability of power." *The Hothouse* (1980) concerns authoritarianism and the abuses of power politics, but it is also a comedy, like his earlier "comedies of menace".

Pinter's brief dramatic sketch *Precisely* (1983) is a duologue between two bureaucrats exploring the absurd power politics of mutual nuclear annihilation and deterrence. His first political one-act play is *One for the Road* (1984). *Mountain Language* (1988) is about the Turkish suppression of the Kurdish language. The dramatic sketch *The New World Order* (1991) was followed by Pinter's longer political satire *Party Time* (1991). Intertwining political and personal concerns, his



next full-length plays, *Moonlight* (1993) and *Ashes to Ashes* (1996) are set in domestic households and focus on dying and death. After experiencing the deaths of his mother (1992) and father (1997), again merging the personal and the political, Pinter wrote the poems “Death” (1997) and “The Disappeared” (1998).

Pinter’s last stage play, *Celebration* (2000), is a social satire set in an opulent restaurant, which lampoons The Ivy, a fashionable venue in London’s West End theatre district, and its patrons. These characters’ deceptively smooth exteriors mask their extreme viciousness. Pinter’s final stage plays also extend some expressionistic aspects of his earlier “memory plays”, while harking back to his “comedies of menace”.

### **The Last Phase**

In December 2001, Pinter was diagnosed with esophageal cancer; from 2002 onwards he was increasingly active in political causes, writing and presenting politically charged poetry, essays, speeches, as well as developing his two final screenplay adaptations, *The Tragedy of King Lear* and *Sleuth*. In 2005 he stated that he would be devoting his efforts more to his political activism and writing poetry. Some of this later poetry included “The ‘Special Relationship’”, “Laughter”, and “The Watcher”. He also completed his screenplay for the film of *Sleuth* in 2005. His last dramatic work for radio, *Voices* (2005), collaboration with composer James Clarke, adapting his selected works to music, premiered on his 75th birthday on October 10, 2005.

From May 8-24, 2008, the Lyric Hammersmith celebrated the 50th anniversary of *The Birthday Party* with a revival and related events, including a gala performance and reception hosted by Harold Pinter on May 19, 2008, exactly 50 years after its London première there.

On the Monday before Christmas 2008, Pinter was admitted to Hammersmith Hospital, where he died on Christmas Eve from liver cancer.

### **Awards, Honours and Positions held**

Along with the 1967 Tony Award for Best Play for *The Homecoming* and several other American awards and award nominations, he and his plays received many awards in the UK and elsewhere. An Honorary Associate of the National Secular Society, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and an Honorary Fellow of the Modern Language Association of America (1970), Pinter became a Companion of

Honour in 2002, having declined a knighthood in 1996. In 1995, he accepted the David Cohen Prize, in recognition of a lifetime of literary achievement. In 1996, he received a Laurence Olivier Special Award for lifetime achievement in the theatre. He received the World Leaders Award for “Creative Genius” as the subject of a week-long “Homage” in Toronto, in October 2001. In 2004, he received the Wilfred Owen Award for Poetry for his “lifelong contribution to literature, ‘and specifically for his collection of poetry entitled *War*, published in 2003’”. On October 13, 2005, the Swedish Academy announced that it had decided to award the Nobel Prize in Literature for that year to Pinter, who “in his plays uncovers the precipice under everyday prattle and forces entry into oppression’s closed rooms”. Although still being treated in hospital, Pinter videotaped his Nobel Lecture, “Art, Truth and Politics”, which was later released as a DVD. In March 2006, he was awarded the Europe Theatre Prize in recognition of lifetime achievements pertaining to drama and theatre. On January 18, 2007, French Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin presented Pinter with France’s highest civil honour, the Légion d’ honor, at a ceremony at the French Embassy in London. In October 2008, the Central School of Speech and Drama announced that Pinter had agreed to become its president and awarded him an honorary fellowship. His presidency of the school was brief; he died just two weeks after the graduation ceremony, on December 24, 2008.

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### **4.3.3 *The Birthday Party*: Plot and Critical Summary**

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*The Birthday Party* is a Three-Act play. It opens with Meg, the caretaker of the seaside guest house appearing with breakfast in the living room before her husband Petey. We come to know that two guests are scheduled to arrive, a piece of news which, later, incurs the wrath of Stanley, the only boarder there for one year. Meg treats Stanley as a child, possessively as she listens to his make-believe version of a world-tour as a pianist with credulous naïveté. Lulu, a young woman appears and Stanley contemplates going away with her but has nowhere to go. She alleges that Stanley troubles Meg all day long and is “a bit of a washout”. Goldberg and McCann, the visitors enter; the latter seems to be nervous about the job to be done, whereas the former appears relaxed. When they meet Meg, they come to know that it is Stanley’s birthday and Goldberg proposes giving him a grand party that night. Stanley is silent when he hears Goldberg’s name from Meg who presents him with a drum on his birthday as he does not have a piano there; the Act ends with Stanley beating the drum “savagely possessed”.

In Act 2, McCann denies that he knows Stanley although the latter claims familiarity and tries to convince McCann of the same. Stanley refuses to accept that it was his birthday and that he caused any trouble. McCann savagely hits him. When Goldberg arrives, Stanley claims that their room had already been booked and therefore McCann and Goldberg were supposed to leave without further ado. Both visitors respond with a flurry of intimidating (many of them meaningless) questions to put Stanley out of guard; the latter kicks Goldberg in the stomach and both are ready to fight. Meg arrives in party dress and urged by Goldberg gives a toast to Stanley on the occasion of his birthday with the lights put out and torch light on Stanley. Lulu arrives and is physically close to Goldberg most of the time while Meg is nostalgic in her conversation with McCann. They play blind man's buff and when Stanley is blindfolded, he catches Meg and tries to strangle her when he's thrown off by the visitors. When the torch was missing and all the lights out, Stanley takes advantage of the darkness to be physically all over Lulu. With the lights on once again, Stanley giggles and retreats as he senses danger once more from the two visitors.

In the final Act, as Meg serves Petey breakfast, they discuss about a car parked outside which happened to be Goldberg's. Petey insists that Stanley be allowed to sleep; when Goldberg arrives, Petey expresses concern about Stanley's condition and what transpired at the party; Goldberg assures him that they would take care of what is required as Petey prefers to have Stanley see a doctor. McCann enters with two suitcases evidently wanting to leave. Goldberg feels "knocked out" and lost as Petey waits for Stanley to come down. Lulu feels used by Goldberg and is furious that he is leaving; she leaves herself on being insulted by McCann. When Stanley enters, Goldberg and McCann are ready to take him away ignoring the entreaties of Petey who prefers that his traumatized boarder be left alone. After the three leave, Meg enters and is told by Petey that Stanley is still in bed. She loses herself in pleasant memories from the previous night's party where she was "the belle of the ball".

### ➤ **Critical Summary**

A review in *The Sunday Times* by its influential drama critic Harold Hobson mentioned earlier reads like this:

I am well aware that Mr Pinter[']s play received extremely bad notices last Tuesday morning. At the moment I write these [words] it is uncertain even whether the play will still be in the bill by the time they appear, though it

is probable it will soon be seen elsewhere. Deliberately, I am willing to risk whatever reputation I have as a judge of plays by saying that *The Birthday Party* is not a Fourth, not even a Second, but a First [as in Class Honours]; and that Pinter, on the evidence of his work, possesses the most original, disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London ... Mr Pinter and *The Birthday Party*, despite their experiences last week, will be heard of again. Make a note of their names.

Now let's look at the text. Meg's initial dialogues seem to be no more than time-fillers accompanying a predictable routine; the tendency of pampering Stanley is accompanied by traces of self-indulgence to boost her otherwise dull and eventless life. From Stanley's side it happens to be more irritation and disgust, only intermittently accompanied by the odd flirtatious verbal like "succulent". We do not know how far this peevish exterior could be attributed to Meg's nagging approach; they could well be an expression of his already disturbed state of mind for which he could not sleep the previous night and would soon raise objection to the two visitors coming. He even threatens Meg posing her superior only to drift into a hyperbolic vision of a world tour as a pianist even as Meg entreats him to stay back. The prolonged magnification of the self suggests some inner crisis, a veiled externalization of talent possibly gone astray or not given due opportunity or recognition. Stanley's purposeless existence becomes more apparent with Lulu sparing no opportunity to point at his negatives - "You could do with a shave... Don't you ever go out?" "You depress me, looking like that" "Hasn't Mrs. Boles got enough to do without having you under her feet all day long?" "You're a bit of a washout, aren't you?" Stanley's offer to Lulu of going away together, yet without any idea as to where even when asked thrice, in its emptiness reminds us distinctly of the stasis in *Waiting for Godot* where Vladimir and Estragon are trapped in the repetitive pattern of "Let's go" "We can't" "Why not?" "We're waiting for Godot". His act of slipping away at the sight of Goldberg and McCann arouses suspicion that he is trying to escape being caught, being found out for some possible transgression; it goes without saying that fear of facing the consequences looms large and is reflected in his conduct throughout the play. The initial exchange between Goldberg and McCann suggests that Goldberg is in a very cheerful mood with complete knowledge of what he is up to and McCann nervous about the job at hand. But the superficial eloquence of Goldberg might well be a strategy of a seasoned professional to camouflage corruption and other subtle means of exploiting subordinates and those in a vulnerable position. The act of proposing a birthday party for Stanley, a co-boarder in the guest house, begs the obvious

question as to what can Goldberg's interest in it possibly be, what end does he want to achieve through it and more pertinently, whether it is not too far-fetched to suppose that it is merely an act of fellow-feeling of one boarder for another without any ulterior motive. Stanley's silence at hearing the name of Goldberg as a visitor suggests that there was, in all likelihood, some hostile association between the two. It is also evident that he still has fears, and this may be attributed to the fact that he apprehends persecution from Goldberg. We are at a loss as to whether it was indeed Stanley's birthday; does his irritable mood deny even though it is, or does Meg take the day of his arrival there a year ago, as his birthday? The "savagely possessed" beating of the drum, his birthday gift from Meg, scarcely answers this.

The rising action is accompanied by increasing discord in the uneasy conversation between Stanley and McCann, where both try to gain control and ascendancy culminating in violence with Stanley at the receiving end. They never arrive at an agreeable footing; McCann expresses disappointment at Stanley's fastidious behavior on his birthday and his intention of celebrating "quietly on [his] own", ignoring the arrangements for the party, Stanley denies as before, that it was his birthday, claims to have known McCann before throwing a wide range of associations none of which McCann could relate to, and dismisses their choice of that boarding house and speaks derisively about Meg, both of which are objectionable to McCann. As one who could have understood and clarified Stanley's conduct better (as the final Act would suggest), the departure of Petey for a game of chess; and the arrival of Goldberg, become complicit in turning things from sour to bitter in no time. Once Stanley says point blank that Goldberg and McCann should leave and stays obstinate in his stance, there is a flurry of invectives more from Goldberg than Stanley followed by relentless interrogation of Stanley by both visitors leading to a preparation to fight, after Stanley kicks Goldberg on the stomach. It is here that menace rises to a higher pitch with the atmosphere of hostility and aggression all-pervasive. There is no trace of acceptance of one for the other, let alone the expected harmony of a pleasant occasion like a birthday. The battle lines are clearly drawn and there is only a brief respite with Meg's entry and toast to Stanley greatly appreciated by the ever-voluble Goldberg, who, as is clear by now, feigns warm participation with sinister motives temporarily shelved. He shifts to entertaining himself with Lulu, a girl young enough to be his daughter; he readily seduces her, reducing her to a sexual toy, while Meg, blissfully unaware of any trace of vice around carries on a rather reflective conversation with McCann about her father and early life. Over drinks, there is hardly anything

meaningful that is said or done; in the process, Lulu gives in to Goldberg's advances with her characteristic liking, as she declares, for older men. The blind man's buff is not only the climax of the play's action, but is very symbolic; with all the frenetic activity in the dark, aggression, violence, counter-attack, a possible attempt at rape ending in giggles, no end is reached. It not only becomes a mockery of a party, but lets us know significantly, that, barring Petey, all the characters, embroiled in meaningless acts of persecution and vengeance are in a continuum of playing exactly such a game as this.

Meg remains completely oblivious to the previous night's disaster; she can do no more than spot the drum broken before her without realizing the greater damages caused elsewhere to the people around. She even supposes McCann to be an old friend of Stanley, both gossiping late into the night before. It would be a gross exaggeration to remark that she has entered second childhood but to say the least, she dwells in a pleasant make-believe world to keep herself happy. Lulu having seen the real face of Goldberg, who used her for one night just to satisfy his perverse appetite, expresses resentment but meets with only insult from McCann in return. Whether from Stanley or these visitors, it is only suffering that is inflicted upon Lulu. Meanwhile, Goldberg astutely handles Petey's genuine concern for Stanley; quite diplomatic, he never says a word against Stanley, mentions that Dermot was looking after him, and that they would take him to Monty. In his answer to Petey's enquiry about what might have caused Stanley's nervous breakdown at the party, Goldberg manufactures a confidently circumlocutory reply bringing in a plethora of possibilities, vague but deftly covered up through rhetoric. Petey remains helpless before the proactive visitors, and can only put in a word of caution to Stanley not to be dictated by them, which, the latter (having lost all strength, physical and mental), is in no condition to abide by. Even as Goldberg and McCann take away the hapless Stanley with them, Meg, ignorant of any untoward development as ever, reminisces with pride, having been "the belle of the ball" in the party.

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#### **4.3.4 Analysing Characters in *The Birthday Party***

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**Petey:** Introduced as a man in his sixties in the dramatist personae, Petey Boles is easily the most laconic and reasonable character in the play. He is perceptive about the insidious motives of the two visitors and more realistic in his concern for Stanley's well being towards the end compared to Meg's melodramatic affection and

self-admiration. He is a deck-chair attendant in a seaside resort and according to his wife, “is out in all weathers”. However, he is too passive to implement what he feels and remains a helpless spectator as Goldberg and McCann carry Stanley away forcefully. He humours his wife’s idiosyncratic behaviour occasionally even as his eyes are glued more often to the newspaper.

**Meg:** A distinctly prominent presence through most of the play, Meg, also in her sixties, manages the boarding house, keeping everything in order. Unlike her self-effacing husband Petey, Meg is very expressive about whatever she speaks and has a complex relationship with Stanley, the only boarder for the last one year. She treats him as a child and we are given to think that she pampers him too much for his liking; sometimes it verges on flirtatious affection and Stanley is repelled by its excesses. When Goldberg later asks about her husband, Meg says that “he sleeps with me”; is she, through this statement trying to conceal something she is guilty of, easy before a stranger? She is very positive about their house being “on the list”, not suspecting ever, the intrusion of troublesome elements; her understanding of reality is woefully poor as she retains her festive mood throughout at the prospect of, with respect to, in and the day after the party. Although Stanley had frowned on her and tried to dominate and even strangle her playing blind man’s buff, there is no aggrieved reaction on Meg’s part at all. She is taken in by Goldberg’s hyperbolic eulogies and becomes increasingly self-absorbed as the play draws to a close. Even Petey prefers shutting her out from reality seeing her euphoric; he deliberately lies to her that Stanley might have been sleeping even though he knew very well that he was taken away in a wretched state. She is given to nostalgia too, as her dialogue with McCann in the party over drinks brings to the fore, even though, in the context of the play it might have been no more than an intermediate diversion with something intense about to erupt.

**Goldberg:** A man in his fifties Goldberg seems to wield more power in words and actions than any other character in the play. He is/was called by various names such as Nat, Simey, etc. by various people which casts some doubt on his actual identity; however, through persistent verbal fluency he puts up a substantially sociable exterior given to appreciate older values, warmth and auspicious occasions like birthdays. While he wins over the gullible women Meg and Lulu (not in the same manner though) who fall for his cheerful mien and advances respectively, his real self appears wickedly through the encounters with Stanley who is dented and crushed, physically and psychologically at the end. He finds a way to dodge past

Petey's concerns about Stanley, is successful in using Lulu for one night only to leave and dismiss her with humiliation and has the loyalty of McCann whose personality is shadowed by him at least at the beginning. He reads the pulse of the house readily - once Meg is appeased beyond doubt, the rest shall fall in place perfectly according to his design and command. The workings of menace are shown through him to a large extent though not exclusively.

The following textual excerpt will give you an idea of this:

**GOLDBERG'S RHETORIC ON BIRTHDAY AND CELEBRATING MEG'S COMPLIANCE:**

(Build-up to the climax)

Goldberg: But a birthday, I always feel, is a great occasion taken too much for granted these days. What a thing to celebrate - birth! Like getting up in the morning. I've heard them. getting up in the morning, they say, what is it? ..... Whenever I hear that point of view I feel cheerful. Because I know what it is to wake up with the sun rising, to the sound of the lawnmower, all the little birds, the smell of the grass, church-bells, tomato juice -

.....

Goldberg. Say what you feel. What you honestly feel. [Meg looks uncertain.] It's Stanley's birthday. Your Stanley. Look at him. Look at him and it'll come. Wait a minute, the light's too strong. Let's have proper lighting...

.....

Meg. Well- it's very, very nice to be here tonight, in my house, and I want to propose a toast to Stanley, because it's his birthday, and he's been here for a long while now, and he's my Stanley now. And I think he's a good boy, although sometimes he's bad. [An appreciative laugh from Goldberg.] And he's the only Stanley I know, and I know him better than all the world, although he doesn't think so. ["Hear-hear" from Goldberg] Well, I could cry because I'm so happy, having him here and not gone away, on his birthday, and there isn't anything I wouldn't do for him, and all you good people here tonight ...[She sobs.]

Goldberg. Beautiful! A beautiful speech ... That was a lovely toast....Well, I want to say first that I've never been so touched to the heart as by the toast you've just heard. How often, in this day and age, do you come across real, true warmth? Once in a lifetime. Until a few minutes ago, ladies and



gentlemen, I, like all of you, was asking the same question. What's happened to the love, the bonhomie, the unashamed expression of affection of the day before yesterday, that our mums taught us in the nursery?... the lady of the house said her piece and I for one am knocked over by the sentiments she expressed. Lucky is the man who's at the receiving end, that's what I say....we've known a great fortune. We've heard a lady extend the sum total of her devotion, in all its pride, plume and peacock, to a member of her own living race.

**McCann:** A thirty-year old man accompanying the seasoned Goldberg on duty, McCann is given to anxiety and nervousness before getting into the job assigned which he performs "as cool as a whistle" according to his superior. He is unable to relax and is a bit restless, something that gives Goldberg enough cause to lecture at some length. In his bilateral interaction with Stanley, there is no common ground created, opinions and claims of one are at loggerheads with those of the other and bitterness knocks at the door. With Goldberg joining hands, their hostility towards Stanley assume alarming proportions culminating in violence and mental derangement of the latter. He, by and large, follows Goldberg's instructions to manipulate the party scene with the torch, although he could be aggressive on his own too, as could be seen in an earlier blow to Stanley who gripped his arm. He treats Lulu derisively for Goldberg's convenience. He appears to be a good listener though, whether to Goldberg's self-glorification or to Meg's reminiscences.

**Stanley:** Perhaps the most complex portrayal of the play, Stanley, in his late thirties and the only boarder in the seaside guest house for the last one year, remains an enigma throwing up a lot of questions for the audience. Is he lazy and laid-back by nature, or has he lost his will to work because of some transgression on his part or an unfortunate incident? Why does he vent his fury and displeasure at Meg? Is it merely her motherly affection that grew out of familiarity or is the relation more intimate - "I don't know what I'd do without you" - with Stanley's such professed dependence? Why does he make no attempt to seek Petey's guidance regarding his well-being and future when there was no better and sensible well-wisher? Given to sexual perversion, as was clear in his attempt to rape Lulu, how was it possible for him to accommodate himself in the guest house for as long as one year with a woman in charge of it? Before the effort to strangle Meg in the party, did it never surface before the old lady, and if so, what was her response? Why is Stanley so bereft of defensive strategies when he already apprehends some wrongdoing before the

intruders actually arrive? Why does he claim familiarity with McCann? Why does he pretend to be such a renowned pianist embarking on a world tour? Does the expression of a troubled mind before the wrong and entirely unsympathetic people spell his doom, or is it retributive justice for some crime of his? Why could he not prevent the fiasco as to whether it was his birthday or not by making an assertive and conclusive statement instead of merely denying it? Does his inability to mention any place (given three attempts) where he could take Lulu suggest that he had no shelter elsewhere, that the boarding house was his only hiding place?

Once again, the following excerpt from the text will give you an idea:

**LULU TO STANLEY (Puts Stanley's condition in perspective)**

....Do you want to have a look at your face? (Stanley withdraws from the table.) You could do with a shave, do you know that? (Stanley sits, right at the table.) Do you never go out? (He does not answer.) I mean, what do you do, just sit around the house like this all day long? (Pause) Hasn't Mrs. Boles got enough to do without having you under her feet all day long?

Stanley. I always stand on the table when she sweeps the floor.

Lulu. Why don't you have a wash? you look terrible.

Stanley. A wash wouldn't make any difference.

Lulu (rising) Come out and get a bit of air. You depress me, looking like that.

Stanley. Air? Oh, I don't know about that.

.....

Stanley (abruptly) Would you like to go away with me?

Lulu. Where?

Stanley. Nowhere. Still, we could go.

Lulu. But where could we go?

Stanley. Nowhere. There's nowhere to go. So we could just go. It wouldn't matter.

Lulu. We might as well stay here.

Stanley. No. It's no good here.

Lulu. Well, where else is there?

Stanley. Nowhere.

.....

Lulu. You're a bit of a washout, aren't you?

**Lulu:** The youngest character in the play, having just entered adulthood, Lulu falls an easy prey to Goldberg's perverse sexual appetite and although she expresses resentment having seen the ugly side of his, it gets too late and she is only despised by McCann. Her own preference for "old men" to satisfy her carnal needs without exercising discretion in terms of taste and compatibility becomes her undoing. She does not appear so thoughtless though, when she first appears and makes certain very clear observations about Stanley without being inclined to flirt or be intimate.

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### 4.3.5 Form and Content

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In the earlier Unit on Postmodernity, you have read much about the dissolution of the conventional parameters of form and content in literature. Pinter's play actually gives you a fair idea of how this happens and the effects that it leads to. Notice for instance, the opening of the play, where you find unnecessary repetitions of dialogues and Meg's desperate attempts at seeking attention:

Meg. Is that you Petey?

Pause.

Petey, is that you?

Pause.

Petey?

Petey. What?

Meg. Is that you?

Petey. Yes, it's me.

Meg. What? (Her face appears at the hatch) Are you back?

Petey. Yes.

Meg. I've got your cornflakes ready. (She disappears and reappears.) Here's your cornflakes.

He rises, takes the plate from her, sits at the table, props up the paper and begins to eat. Meg enters by the kitchen door.

Are they nice?

Petey. Very nice.

Meg. I thought they'd be nice. (She sits at the table.) You got your paper?

Petey. Yes.

Meg. Is it good?

Petey. Not bad.

Meg. What does it say?

Petey. Nothing much.

Meg. You read me out some nice bits yesterday.

Petey. Yes, well, I haven't finished this one yet.

Meg. Will you tell me when you come to something good?

Petey. Yes.

Pause.

Meg. Have you been working hard this morning?

Petey. No. Just stacked a few of the old chairs. Cleaned up a bit.

Meg. Is it nice out there?

Petey. Very nice.

Pause.

Meg. Is Stanley up yet?

Petey. I don't know. Is he?

Meg. I don't know. I haven't seen him down yet.

Petey. Well then, he can't be up.

Meg. Haven't you seen him down?

Petey. I've only just come in.

Meg. He must be still asleep.

.....

What time did you go out this morning, Petey?

Petey. Same time as usual.

Meg. Was it dark?

Petey. No, it was light.

Meg. (beginning to darn) But sometimes you go out in the morning and it's dark.

Petey. That's in the winter.

Meg. Oh, in winter.

Petey. Yes, it gets light later in winter.

Meg. Oh.

Pause.

What are you reading?

Now see if you make the same observations about this section, as we make below:

The play gets off to a sedate start as Petey is quiet and laconic at the breakfast table with his newspaper; the speaker is mostly his talkative wife whose household chores make up the early action described through precise stage directions. Her off-stage chores give way to silence while her innocent quarrels over the food served to the fastidious Stanley result in pauses in conversation. As the dialogues proceed, Stanley becomes more irritable pushing away Meg's arm as she ruffles his hair; disagreement over the tea served heats up somewhat with Stanley taking verbal liberties - "succulent" - and disapproving of Meg entering a man's bedroom, all leading to another phase of silence. Even though Meg strokes his arm sensually or tickles him, Stanley recoils in disgust and leaves or pushes her away. It goes to show along with some of Meg's dialogues like "Am I really succulent?" that there was a peculiar love-hate, affection-dependence relationship in which, in all likelihood, liberties that crossed the line, were taken. The next silence allows Meg to change topic and divert the anguished Stanley (on hearing that two visitors were to arrive shortly) to something pleasant as the piano. Lulu's critical comments on Stanley's appearance make him wash his face and slip away as soon as he could see the visitors entering. The next pause after quite some time enables Meg to bring up the topic of Stanley's birthday for the first time after she had been describing how he came to their boarding house. Without the speaker's least anticipation and awareness, it becomes the turning point in the drama, a moment of grim foreboding. Stanley becomes still at the mention of Goldberg's name, too confounded to say anything and although he kisses Meg on getting his birthday gift from her, it is only after she wants

it and far from spontaneous. The “uncontrolled” and “savagely possessed” beating of the drum becomes a loud and obtrusively announced disapproval of Meg accommodating the aforementioned guest.

In the second Act, McCann, tearing newspaper into strips, even with just an elementary introduction, succeeds in preventing Stanley from going out on his birthday and stretching a conversation that generated increasing disharmony and a bit of physical combat too. Goldberg’s presence shortly after raises Stanley’s temper even more and he is unable to sit despite being told to do so umpteen times. When he finally does, preceded by silence, it becomes the last time before he loses all physical and mental strength as he is hounded by scores of questions and his glasses snatched away. Although he recovers to land a kick on Goldberg’s stomach and prepare for a fight with McCann holding up a chair, it is a lone battle after which he can do no more than sweat profusely and utter incoherent sounds. Once Meg enters the scene, Goldberg switches to a warm exterior with a slightly indulgent gesture of slapping her bottom. Lulu sitting on Goldberg’s lap promptly makes her his ideal lecherous pastime for the party. Meg, in true party spirit wants Stanley to dance and does so herself; all the action around notwithstanding, there is immovable stillness inside Stanley. The fact that Meg and Lulu in unison welcome Goldberg’s proposal of playing blind man’s buff - this time an irrecoverable blow for Stanley, again without their anticipation, though - is meaningful in that both are absolutely blind to the astute Goldberg’s schemes. In the next major piece of action Stanley - we may speculate, in revengeful anguish - becomes violent on Meg and is thrown off by his two adversaries. Silence accompanies darkness on the stage and the search for the missing torch. There are grunts, stumbling and groping of Lulu in the dark; she is made the next target by Stanley whom his enemies do not spare; just as Lulu whimpers, Stanley can put up no better resistance than to giggle and retreat once the torchlight reveals his deed. Compared to the first Act, the thrust of the actions here, punctuated by silences both verbal and physical, is markedly negative; it is aimed more often at causing harm and injury.

The final Act begins much the same way as the first; it surprises us as to how Meg could have slept “like a log” the previous night and still reflect pleasantly upon Stanley being able to use the drum (which she finds lying broken before her) on his birthday. The pauses are Meg’s conjecture about Stanley and McCann possibly knowing each other for long and what and how long they talked that night. When McCann arrives with two suitcases ready to leave, from what he reports refusing to

go back to the room upstairs, we sense that Stanley's speech has been paralyzed. Goldberg, in perfect command of the situation for much of the play, feels "knocked out", fatigued and gravely ponders over what they ought to do with Stanley. When Stanley is brought on to the stage for the final time, in spite of the wooing and marathon bullying by Goldberg and McCann, he is unable to utter anything beyond a few agonizingly broken syllables; the pauses and silences are centred chiefly around him. No physical or verbal defiance was possible any more. The playwright, like many of his predecessors from Shaw to Beckett through varying degrees, usurps the role of the director by specifying not only the movements, gestures and expressions that accompany many of the dialogues but also the action as well as the inertia of non-action substantially.

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#### **4.3.6. Significance of the Title**

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It seems inappropriate by all counts to throw a party for someone who, on that day, plainly denies it being his birthday more than once. Besides, the more the arrangements proceed, the more self-occupied Stanley becomes and is completely out of tune with the spirit of a party. There is no turning towards or greeting anybody as the party approaches but adamant turning away from and having a go at everybody verbally/physically except Petey. He is not in the least in harmony with himself to celebrate an occasion and be sociable.

The title is ironical in every respect. Meant to be a community gathering, the characters not only lack bonding (Petey going out and Lulu coming late) and fellow-feeling, there is consummate hostility and ill-feeling culminating in violence and sexual assault. They are fragmented within themselves, and the inner discord does not wait long to manifest itself externally. Stanley makes obtrusive noise instead of properly playing his birthday gift, asks Goldberg to leave straight on his face even as the latter wishes him on his birthday, is hit by McCann, kicks Goldberg and attacks both Meg and Lulu. The mean and insensitive Goldberg makes Lulu a sexual toy, combines with McCann to launch a nightmarish interrogation of Stanley and tortures him mercilessly after the game blind man's buff gets over. Meg and Lulu, over drinks drift away from collective enjoyment. Given the battle lines drawn in the scene, the night clearly becomes a mockery of a party.

After Stanley's ordeal at the party is over, we find the emergence of a living corpse; the day observed in supposition of it being his birthday, puts an end to his

speech and renders him virtually invalid and incapable of resistance. It turns out to be a party of violence giving birth to physical paralysis and spiritual death. There could not have been any greater irony than witnessing the absolute termination of joy on such a day.

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### 4.3.7 Themes and Issues

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- **Confusion and Disorder:** Unsure communication accompanied by misunderstanding and displeasure abound in the play. Fluctuation in mood, particularly in Stanley's case, makes a mess of things, whether with the innocuous Meg serving breakfast, or with McCann as most of his assumptions go negated and opinions mismatch, or with Goldberg with loss of temper. His proposal of taking Lulu away with him, yet not knowing where, naturally puts her off; it is an obvious marker of absurdity and a confused state of mind. Lulu, discarding Stanley and falling for Goldberg, invites further disorder; not only is she assaulted in the dark by the disbalanced Stanley, she is used for one night and dismissed by the crafty Goldberg and insulted by McCann. Petey is unable to resolve his confusion and come to a concrete decision to facilitate the well-being of Stanley. With insightful perception of what might have transpired at the party, a man of purpose could have done better but he does not take a step forward to restore order. The height of fragmentation is reached as the characters play blind man's buff - in the dark, blindness, obstinacy, mutual intolerance, violence, aggression and sexual perversion commingle and coalesce.
- **Sex and Violence:** These are present either separately or together; Meg and Stanley appear to share a sexual relationship on top of the pampered mothering on display. Although the moody Stanley seems too easily repelled and reacts with anger, irritation and frowns to stamp his domination, there is, notwithstanding these repulsive responses, some endearing affinity. His attempt to rape Lulu, however, combines sex with violence, even revenge. Goldberg cleverly avoids violence and resorts to persuasion in his sexual exploitation of Lulu. Violence is seen when McCann hits Stanley, when Stanley kicks Goldberg, tries to strangle Meg (another possible act of revenge) and is thrown off by his enemies, who, on discovering his attempted rape of Lulu, inflict further physical damage and cruelty that is not described but is to be inferred from his loss of speech.
- **Atonement and Retribution:** The characters, Stanley, in particular, are



haunted by guilt from an unrevealed past, which they are unwilling to confess or lay bare. Stanley atones through torture, Goldberg through fatigue and discomfiture in the final Act and Lulu by fleeing. McCann also tries to run away from his sins by packing up and leaving Stanley's room hastily. Meg is also at the receiving end of physical aggression from Stanley, perhaps a roundabout punishment for misdirected sexual overtures. Even Petey, at the end has reason to feel guilty as he does nothing to save Stanley from possibly being treated more brutally in future.

- **Recollections:** Goldberg is the most elaborately nostalgic, building up a pure, clean, value-based image of the past; however, in the merciless treatment of Stanley that he masterminds, and the dismissive attitude to the young lady Lulu used insensitively for mere sexual entertainment, he makes a mockery of such reflected glory. There is self-aggrandizement of Stanley as a world famous pianist which Meg supplements through nostalgia. The two women also recollect their past with mixed memories. There is disparity in claims between Stanley and McCann as the former recalls incidents and associations not recognized by the latter.
- **Complacency:** Petey, Meg and Stanley are confined to the comfort of a seaside boarding house with exchanging routine pleasantries or giving prolonged indulgence to lethargy. The spell of such inaction is broken by the arrival of Goldberg and McCann but the former is no less complacent regarding his past, values, warmth and position held. Petey, at the end, despite full knowledge of Stanley's predicament, chooses to retreat into the complacency of the boarding house without taking any trouble to intervene actively and rescue their one-year long boarder. Meg is complacent with their house being "on the list", while Lulu is complacent with her choice of old men, in this case Goldberg, for which she has to suffer.
- **Language:** Language in *The Birthday Party* hides more than it reveals. Meg's meaningless repetitions point at her attention-seeking tendency betraying inner insecurity thereby. Stanley's displeasure at Meg is directed more towards himself, something which he could not extricate himself from. Goldberg manipulates language at every turn to his advantage, masking his true self and projecting a genial nature with appreciation and praise generously showered, particularly on Meg, whose confidence he wins easily. Lulu, the least given to concealment, is trapped easily through Goldberg's adept use of persuasive language; Petey also is likewise kept at arm's length through promises and assurances from Goldberg profusely expressed though scarcely meant.

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### 4.3.8 Summing Up

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Having a fair idea of the relevant issues that are treated in the play, we are now in a position to make the following observations:

- The play combines tragic and comic elements through uncanny candour
- There is pretentious, false and at times vain exhibition of power
- The actions, attitudes and tendencies of the central character are potentially the most futile
- Women are treated slightly and with scorn; the appreciation that comes from Goldberg is loaded with ulterior motives
- The only character with clarity of thought and feeling for the endangered is the most passive

When asked why *The Birthday Party* has endured, Pinter observed: “It’s possible to say that two people knocking at the door of someone’s residence and terrorizing them and taking them away has become more and more actual in our lives. It happens all the time. It’s happening more today than it did yesterday and that may be a reason for the play’s long life. It’s not fantasy. It just becomes more and more real.” To this we may well join in chorus and add that it’s no less real with us in India.

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### 4.3.9 Comprehension Exercises

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● **Long Answer Type Questions-20 Marks**

1. How does Pinter use language in *The Birthday Party* to expose the hypocrisy of the powerful over the weak?
2. How do violence, aggression, displeasure and irritability become self-defeating in Pinter’s play?
3. How do silence, pause and stillness contribute to the atmosphere of menace in *The Birthday Party*?
4. Give a sketch of the meaningless, repetitive and inconsequential speeches and actions and show how they build up the pervasive mood of *The Birthday Party*.

● **Medium Length Answer Type Questions-12 Marks**

1. How do Pinter’s characters brag, glorify oneself falsely and pretentiously to immerse themselves in incorrigible complacency?

2. How does sexual perversion manifest itself and to what effect in *The Birthday Party*?
3. Does the play offer retributive justice to its characters?
4. How do undisclosed facts about characters contribute to the interest of the play?

● **Short Questions: 6 marks**

1. What is the setting for the entire play?
2. What was Stanley's nightlong daydream?
3. What do Meg and Stanley find objectionable in each other?
4. What is Goldberg's view of an occasion like birthday?
5. What is Goldberg's opinion on the toast that Meg gives to Stanley on his birthday?
6. What is Meg absorbed in as the play ends?

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### **4.3.10 Suggested Reading**

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