Chapter — VI
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AND THE MENACE LURKING

In about a year of Osborne's Look Back in Anger
and within a decade of the first performance of Samuel
Beckett's Waiting for Godot Harold Pinter came up with
The Room on 15th May 1957 in Bristol. In the same year
Pinter wrote two other plays The Birthday Party and The
Dumb Waiter though these had to wait for a year or two
to be performed in public.

The Room, performed first in Bristol University in
May 1957, was met with wide success and Pinter was at
once recognized as a significant voice upon the English
stage. In his own words:

Well the first play I wrote was called The Room
which I happened to give a pal of mine at Bristol
University which was the only drama department in
the country, and he wrote to me. I told him the idea
actually and he wrote and said, well what about this
idea. And I said ... I wrote back and said
'Impossible, I haven't written it, haven't even
thought about it and it would take me at least six
months to write.' And he said, 'If we are going to
get this done at the university, we’ll have to have it very, very shortly.’ And in fact in a week. So I wrote back and told him to forget about the whole thing. And then I sat down and wrote it in four days. I don’t quite know how that happened, but it did. And I sent it to him and he did it there, and things began to proceed from there. (Batty:104-105)

Henry Woolf the friend at Bristol University says that Pinter wrote the play in two days, “he says four days but I remember it as two”. (183) Be it either two or four this obviously shows that Harold Pinter’s genius as a playwright was quite manifest from the very beginning. The Room was a short one-act play with which Pinter started his career as a playwright. The very next play he wrote was a full-length three-act one regarding, which he says:

Well, when this play The Room was done I went down to see it at Bristol University and it seemed to get a very definite positive response from the audience — university audience though. And I started thinking in terms of drama. As I say, I had been writing for a long time before that, not drama, and I started to write The Birthday Party. I nearly gave it up very early on because I felt the characters were so horrible. But I didn’t and I
finished it. And then I wrote another one. I wrote *The Dumb Waiter*. This was all in 1957. By that time I was enjoying writing plays very much. (105)

So it was in 1957 that Harold Pinter started writing plays when he was only about twenty seven years old. As he himself says, though he had been writing for quite sometime now, he never tried to write plays before he wrote *The Room*. Prior to this play he wrote poems, short stories, and a novel called *The Dwarfs*.

*The Room* is a short one-act play that clearly exhibits some of the recurrent themes of Pinter’s plays. An old woman in her sixties lives in a room of a multistoried large house with her husband Bert Hudd who is about ten years junior to her. The woman, Rose, is the main speaker and carries the play practically on her own shoulders. On a chilly cold evening Rose prepares bacon, eggs, bread and tea for her husband before he leaves for his work. According to her the room they are occupying is the best in the house and she is quite secure here with her husband. She refused to accept the basement offered to her which is damp, and chilly as the roof leaks. In Pinter’s own words:

This old woman living in a room which, she is convinced is the best in the house, and she refuses
to know anything about the basement downstairs. She says it's damp and nasty and the world outside is cold and icy, and that in her warm and comfortable room her security is complete. But, of course, it isn't; an intruder comes to upset the balance of everything, in other words points to the delusion on which she is basing her life. (31-32)

The fundamental situation a cozy, comfortable room in a large house, wherein an old couple is living, is securely secluded from the outside world that is cold and chilly unsuitable for comfortable living. The old wife spends all her time and energy in making the life of her husband snug and comfortable. She is obsessed with the idea of the room she is occupying which, according to her, is the most comfortable one in the whole house. Pinter himself was obsessed with the idea of the room:

Two people in a room I am dealing a great deal of the time with this image of two people in a room. The curtain goes up on the stage, and I see it as a very potent question: What is going to happen to these two people in the room? Is someone going to open the door and come in? (Esslin:265-266)

The small talk that is wholly articulated by Rose, the old wife in The Room continues for quite sometime initially
till a knock is heard on the door. Though the husband, Bert, younger to her by about ten years, is sitting at the dining table wearing a cap and reading a magazine - he never responds to Rose and appears to be so impassive to his wife, who is spending all her time and energy to make life comfortable for her husband, that one starts doubting whether they are actually husband and wife or not? Thus from the beginning Pinter starts creating the atmosphere of mystery. Later on when Mr. Kidd knocks and enters, he is welcomed and all the talking is done by Rose. Though Rose takes Mr. Kidd to be the landlord, he doesn’t even appear to know how many storeys the building has! He said this particular room—Room No.7 — was his bedroom before Rose and Bert Hudd came and occupied it. He seems to be remembering to have the armchair, which Rose claims to have brought with her. Mr. Kidd says that it was his sister who looked after the property; but after her death it appears to be difficult for him to do the job. But Rose doubts whether he ever had any sister at all!

Upon such a mysterious scene appear a couple Mr. and Mrs. Sands after the departure of Mr. Kidd and Bert Hudd. This couple has been informed by a voice from behind a partition in the dark basement that Room No.7 — the room now being occupied by Mr. & Mrs. Hudd is
vacant. The Sands couple could not see anyone in the
damp, dingy basement and the voice seems to have come
from behind a partition. After the departure of Sands
couple Mr. Kidd again comes in to inform Rose that
someone is waiting to see her after her husband departs.
On enquiry Mr. Kidd could not enlighten Rose regarding
the identity of this person. While Rose and Mr. Kidd
were thus discussing the matter of this unknown person,
the latter comes in and is shown in by Mr. Kidd who
leaves after the intruder enters.

This intruder is a blind Negro who on entering the
room could feel the presence of the armchair with his
stick. Being asked to sit down on the armchair by Rose,
he thanks her and takes his seat. Rose appears at first to
be disgusted and disturbed by the presence of this blind
Negro and asks him to get out as soon as he has finished
his errand. The blind Negro informs her that his name is
Riley. Rose’s immediate reaction was that she didn’t
care if it is; but soon afterwards she seems to be
reminded of something and doubts whether this blind
Negro was actually Riley or not! This again creates a
mystery regarding a past that Rose perhaps wanted to
forget. But the past is unforgettable and irredeemable.

Riley the blind Negro has come with a message
from Rose’s father who wants her to come back home.
Though till now Rose was insisting that she didn’t know Riley, she now says it is too late for her to go home. Riley addresses Rose as ‘Sal’, her maiden name and Rose insists not to call her by that name. This is an indication that Rose was very touchy about a past that she wanted to forget. A similar objection was raised by Goldberg in *The Birthday Party* when his friend and assistant called him ‘Simey’, the name by which his wife used to call him.

Riley, the blind Negro, asks Rose to come home with him. Rose then starts caressing the blind Negro touching his eyes, back of head and his temples. At this juncture Bert, Rose’s husband enters and stops at the door. He then moves to the window and draws the curtains. After drawing the curtains he advances to the center of the room and looks at his wife with intense suspicion. He then starts talking for the first time in the play reporting that he has ultimately come back after performing a very hazardous journey in a cold chilly night. He draws a chair and sits close to Riley the blind Negro sitting in the armchair. He lifts armchair with his leg and Riley falls on to the floor. Trying to rise slowly Riley wants to say something to Bert Hudd, Rose’s husband regarding his wife. But Bert refuses to hear anything calling him ‘Lice!’ a very offensive person. He
then kicks the Negro 'knocking him down, and then kicks his head against the gas-stove several times'. Thus committing this inhuman brutal murder of a helpless blind creature he walks away nonchalantly leaving his wife Rose clutching her eyes and shouting

"Can't see. I can't see. I can't see". (Complete Works-1: 126)

This is how the play ends obviously with a bang that has shattered the cozy comfort of Mr. and Mrs Hudd's Room No. 7.

Quite some space has by now been devoted to Pinter's first play, The Room. As has already been indicated this first play contains some very significant elements that would reappear in the subsequent plays of Harold Pinter. First and foremost of these elements is the atmosphere of a cozy room that Rose the inmate feels to be most comfortable in the whole house. Outside world surrounding this room, including the damp dingy basement and the leaking upstairs, is chilly and unsuitable for living. Yet inside this agreeable atmosphere lives a couple among whom the husband hardly acknowledges or responds to the loving care of his wife for his comfort and well-being. Thus the
apparently soothing security enjoyed by the inmates of this room seems to be a placebo liable to be punctured.

Apart from this, there appears to be a lot of farrago emerging out of the interaction between the characters as and when they appear. Mr. Kidd, the landlord, talks about his dead sister who used to look after this house; but Rose doubts whether he had any sister at all. Mr. Kidd refers to have seen the armchair which Rose claims to have brought with her. The couple Mr. and Mrs. Sands whom Rose discovers on the landing was informed by somebody in the basement that Room No. 7—the one occupied by Bert and Rose Hudd was vacant. The voice in the basement came from behind a partition and the Sands couple could not see the owner of the voice. Then again, the person in the basement, waiting to meet Rose after her husband goes out, is revealed as a blind Negro, Riley, whom Rose refuses to recognize at first, but subsequently she caresses him gently which was seen by her husband entering the room. All these are confusing inconsistent talks and gestures that not merely puzzles the audience but appear to be muddled balderdash containing elements of farce and burlesque: The first night of The Room in 1957 glittered with laughter and menace. (Good old Martin Esslin—what a
wonderful phrase he coined: the comedy of menace.
(Batty, The Guardian: 189)

The violent ending including the inhuman brutality of the van driver brings the gradually accumulating tension to such a ghastly catastrophe that even the word 'menace' appears to be too mild a term to describe it. Behind this horror lurks the esoteric suggestion of racial hatred even though the Negro is such a helpless creature. Another suggestion of anti-Semitic allusions is contained in Mr. Kidd's statement that his mother was a Jewess and that too a very capable woman.

The Birthday Party. Harold Pinter's first full-length play in three acts written soon after The Room was enacted with success at Bristol University in 1957. Regarding the circumstances that prompted him to write the play, Pinter wrote to one of his friends in a letter:

I have filthy insane digs, a great bulging scrag of a woman with breasts rolling at her belly, an obscene, household, cats, dogs, filth, tea strainers, mess, bullocks, talk, chat, rubbish shit scratch dung poison, infantility...... Now the thing about this is that was The Birthday Party — I was in those digs, and this woman was Meg in the play, and there was a fellow staying there in Eastbourne, on the coast.
The whole thing remained with me, and three years later, (in 1957) I wrote the play. (Lall:51)

Though Pinter categorically says that his abominable experience of living in that repugnant lodge, and that disgusting woman with her breasts rolling at her belly was Meg and her lodging house in 'a sea-side town', in The Birthday Party there hardly appears any sign of filth excepting, when once Stanley describes it as 'a pigsty'!

Stanley: Look, why don't you get this place cleared up! It's a pigsty. And another thing, what about my room? It needs sweeping. It needs papering.

(Complete Works-1: 29)

And Meg, playing the part of both mother and mistress to Stanley appears to be repulsive only to Stanley. Other characters who appear in the play have no complaints against either the lodging house or Meg.

As in practically all the plays of Harold Pinter many things are left to the imagination of the reader/audience. Petey and Meg Boles share a house in a sea side town which according to Meg is listed as a boarding-cum-lodging house. Petey serves as a deckchair attendant on the beach and the house he lives in is a run-down boarding house with only one guest Stanley Webber.
After quite some small talk mainly by Meg while serving breakfast to her husband Petey and Stanley, Petey leaves for his work. Then Meg informs Stanley that she is expecting two gentlemen to come in at any time and she must do some shopping for these guests who are supposed to stay in her lodging house for a couple of nights.

Stanley suddenly becomes taut hearing about these two strangers about whom Meg could not enlighten him any further. A sense of mystery is created as Stanley appears to be apprehensive of being hunted and it seems that he is hiding in this lodging house to escape from some enemies. Who these enemies are and what is their grudge against Stanley is not clarified. Stanley then informs Meg that some people are coming in a big van carrying a wheelbarrow to take away a dead body indirectly suggesting that they would take away the dead body of Meg! Thus just a tense situation of menace is created.

Soon after Meg departs for shopping, Lulu, a girl in her twenties, enters carrying a big round parcel which she puts on the sideboard. Even though Lulu appears to be disgusted with Stanley's unshaven shabby appearance, she invites him to go for a walk which
Stanley refuses. After Lulu's departure Stanley goes to the kitchen sink to wash his face.

At this juncture enter two persons — Goldberg and McCann— the latter carrying two suitcases. Watching them enter Stanley stealthily escapes through the backdoor. As is quite usual with Pinter, these two guests are one Jew Goldberg and another Irishman McCann. From their discussions we gather that they are here to perform a specific job being appointed by some organization. McCann seems to be apprehensive about the nature of the job they are to perform as he doesn't know what they are to do exactly. Goldberg assures him that the job won't in anyway harm them. Yet the job remains unknown. And Meg enters to welcome her guests. A sense of mystery regarding the credentials and commission of the two guests appears to have been deliberately created to sustain the suspense.

After the customary exchange of courtesies Goldberg tactfully gathers information regarding the Boles' household, its members, and particularly their guest Stanley Webber. Meg informs them that it is Stanley's birthday today who is staying with them as a guest for quite some time. Goldberg insists that they must celebrate the occasion by having a party and he
will take care of all the arrangements. Meg then escorts her guests upstairs to the room they are to share.

Stanley enters through the back door and learns from Meg that the guests have arrived and they are going to celebrate his birthday by having a party at 9 O’clock in the night. Stanley refuses and says it is not his birthday today. But Meg insists and gives him the birthday present she has brought for him, a toy drum. She asks Stanley to play the drum and Stanley goes round the table hanging the drum round his neck. He starts beating the drum with regular rhythmic beats. But the beats gradually become rapid and savage. And the first act ends with this feverish frenzied gesticulation of Stanley.

Act two opens with another crazy gesture, this time from McCann. He is sitting at the table tearing a sheet of newspaper into five equal strips – a gesture which he again repeats just before his mentor Goldberg had a feeling of being dejected and depressed before they leave taking Stanley Webber with them in Act three. Arnold Hinchliffe interprets this as “surely a reasonable dramatization of the insecurity betrayed in Act One”. (Hinchliffe :51) The whole of the second act is a horrendous mixture of bizarre inebriated show of farcical behaviour and meaningless talks.
At the outset Stanley seems to be agreeing that it is his birthday though he is not willing to attend the party. But later on he says that his birthday will fall next month. He also suggests that this is not a boarding house and Meg, the so-called landlady is mad. When he says this to Goldberg posing as the manager, Goldberg refuses to accept it. After a bit of a hitch Goldberg and McCann harangue Stanley with a volley of questions attacking him with all sorts of charges both personal and institutional. Stanley keeps mum most of the time and does not effectively defend himself.

Every one seems to be contradicting himself during the loose talks. The charges leveled against Stanley by Goldberg and McCann were mostly absurd gibberish some hitting him below the belt. All these appear to be deliberate and intentional aimed at unnerving him. And they were quite successful in their attempt as Stanley’s reactions obviously show. During the game of blind man’s buff in the Birthday Party Stanley catches hold of Meg and tries to strangulate her. He was prevented by Goldberg and McCann. Then again when the lights go off Stanley attempts to seduce Lulu as she was found lying spread-eagled upon the table with Stanley bent over her. Before this McCann has deliberately broken the frame of Stanley’s glasses. Finding Stanley trying to
seduce Lulu Goldberg and McCann menacingly approach to deal with him as he backs out flattening himself against the kitchen hatch giggling.

Another remarkable feature exposed during this act is Meg for one and Goldberg for another appears to be in a reminiscent mood recalling their romantic pasts. Earlier in the first act Stanley Webber also recollected his experience of giving a very successful concert leading in the piano as he claimed; 'I had a unique touch. Absolutely unique.' (Complete Works-1: 32) But he also recalls another very unfortunate experience of being invited to give another concert and finding the hall locked up on arrival. A suggestion of irrevocable past emerges like the one hinted at in Pinter's earlier play The Room in case of its heroine Rose.

Second act ends with Goldberg and McCann approaching Stanley to deal with him for his attempt to seduce Lulu in the darkness. One cannot blame Alastair Macauley saying, The world of The Birthday Party is Kafka-on-Sea. Banal reality keeps tipping into the bizarre surreal and back again. (Review 2005, www)

Act three opens the very next morning after the night of the Birthday Party. In the same living room of Boles' household Petey enters with his fresh newspaper and sits
at the table reading it. Meg's voice is heard through the kitchen hatch who mistakes him for Stanley, but discovering Petey informs him that she has nothing for breakfast excepting tea. All her cornflakes have been consumed by the two guests. She also informs Petey that she took Stanley's morning tea as usual upstairs but was informed by McCann that he was talking with Goldberg; and he has already given Stanley his morning tea. This surprised Meg. But she appears to be more worried about a big black car standing outside the front door and enquires whether Petey has seen a wheelbarrow inside the car! Petey informed her that it was Goldberg's car and what the hell he would do with a wheelbarrow? Meg was relieved with this assurance. She complained of a splitting headache which obviously was a hangover from last night's bacchanalia. Yet she leaves to do her shopping for breakfast. But she turns back hearing footsteps on the stairs and finds Goldberg instead of Stanley whom she expected to come down. Before leaving she congratulates Goldberg for his nice car.

On enquiry Goldberg informs Petey that Stanley was suffering from nervous breakdown as a result of the strain of the late night birthday party. Petey has already been informed by McCann that Stanley was ill when he came home last night and found darkness shrouding the
whole house. He said that he put a shilling into the slot to restore the power supply a suggestion that this house was supplied electricity by a coin-operated metre i.e. you get a certain amount of power-supply by paying some amount. Goldberg was really surprised to find that the Boles household was so poor that they could not afford permanent power supply.

Petey suggested if Stanley does not recover by lunch time he would fetch a doctor to examine him. But Goldberg says that he and his friend have taken adequate care of Stanley. At this juncture McCann comes down with their two suitcases and Petey goes to the kitchen taking away the teapot and the cups. McCann informs that Stanley has stopped talking and is quiet now. But he says he is not going upstairs anymore. Goldberg asks when Stanley will be ready. McCann asks him to go and find out. He also says that he has given Stanley’s glasses back to him and Stanley was trying to fix the broken frame. Petey suggested that there must be some sellotape lying somewhere with which the broken frame of Stanley’s glasses could be repaired. But Goldberg said that the broken glasses would keep Stanley engaged for a while and that would be helpful to recover his shattered nerves.
Goldberg tries to get rid of Petey asking him why he is not going to attend his deckchairs in such a good sunny morning. But Petey says that has already made necessary arrangements to attend to his deckchair business. And he will soon be back home.

After seeing Petey going away McCann comes to the table and starts tearing a sheet of newspaper in five equal parts. This gesture now infuriates Goldberg who appears to be quite shaky now which is quite unusual for him:

Goldberg: I don’t know why, but I feel knocked out. I feel a bit..... It’s uncommon for me.

(85-86)

McCann, however, feels to be quite impatient:

McCann: Let’s finish and go. Let’s get it over and go. Get the thing done. Let’s finish the bloody thing. Let’s get the thing done and go ! (86)

Everyone seems to be having thorns in his flesh and mercurial in his temperament. Consequent upon several traumatic happenings during the last night’s birthday party, Stanley’s attempt first to strangulate Meg and then to seduce Lulu being prevented by Goldberg and
McCann who appear to have treated him roughly resulting in his being the victim of nervous breakdown; Petey helplessly trying to look after Stanley and being intercepted by Goldberg and McCann from doing so; Meg surprised to find Stanley talking with Goldberg so early in the morning when she took the morning tea to him upstairs. Finding the big black car standing in front Meg becomes apprehensive whether the car contained a wheelbarrow inside it. But when Petey assured her that it was Goldberg's car having nothing inside it, she was relieved.

Every body, thus, seems to be out of gear as a result of the traumatic experiences during the late night birthday party. Lulu also complains that Goldberg has seduced her during the night which Goldberg denies saying that it was Lulu who actually invited him to do whatever he did:

Lulu: You quenched your ugly thirst. You taught me things a girl shouldn't know before she's been married at least three times!

Goldberg: Now you're a jump ahead! What are you complaining about? (90)
When at last Goldberg and McCann are taking the crippled Stanley with them, Petey makes a last fruitless attempt to warn Stanley to which the latter is not in a position to respond:

Petey (broken): Stan, don't let them tell you what to do!

After they leave taking Stanley in their car Meg returns and is relieved to find that the big black car is no longer there. But she felt rather dejected when Petey informed her that the guests won't be back for lunch. When she enquires about Stanley and was informed by Petey that he was still asleep. Petey asks her not to disturb Stanley and allow him to sleep after the last night's strain. Meg then was relishing the bonhomie that everyone accepted her as 'the belle of the ball':

Meg: I was the belle of the ball.

Petey: Were you?

Meg: Oh yes. They all said I was.

Petey: I bet you were, too.

Meg: Oh, it's true. I was.

Pause

I know I was. (97)
With this placebo the play ends not with a bang, but a whimper. One is reminded of Goldberg's fawning: Goldberg. Madam, you'll look like a tulip. (Ibid: 43)

This is how *The Birthday Party* of Harold Pinter ends having passed through trauma, smash, crash, wreck, and an apparent show of compassion. And, as has already been pointed out in course of this resume, quite some points have been left unexplained and mysterious. A funny correspondence has been quoted by Mark Batty after the US premiere of *The Birthday Party* reported in Daily Mail on 28 November, 1967:

Dear Sir,

I would be obliged if you would kindly explain the meaning to me of your play *The Birthday Party*. These are the points that 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.

Dear Madam,

I would be obliged if you would kindly explain
to me the meaning of your letter. These are the points I do not understand: 1. Who are you? 2. Where do you come from? 3. Are you supposed to be normal? You will appreciate that without the answers to my questions I cannot fully understand your letter.

And the most interesting thing is the title given by the Daily Mail, 'Pinter Unperturbed' (Batty: 112-113). Indeed, Pinter appears never to have become ruffled by charges of unintelligibility against his plays. But at the same time he always claimed that his plays are quite straightforward and true-life portrayals of credible situations. The exchange between Pinter and Terence Rattigan reported in the beginning of the previous chapter of this dissertation supports this point of view.

Everything said and done the theme of The Birthday Party appears to be rather elementary. Stanley, after some imbroglio somewhere, has come to stay in Boles' boarding house in a seaside town. Goldberg and McCann being appointed by Stanley's antagonists seek Stanley out and take him away with them making him totally distraught. In spite of his sincere efforts Petey, the owner of the boarding house, could not prevent them from taking Stanley away. Rest of the action — minor skirmishes, volleys of attacks, nonsensical gestures and
talks — all seemed to be aimed at unnerving Stanley and to make him incapable of resisting. *The Birthday Party* thus ends with a ruthless shattering of a cozy chimera of Boles' decaying boarding house. Traumatic experiences of practically all the pawns in the make-believe world ultimately leave them buried in the same quagmire wherefrom they started.

Viewed thus the play appears to be plain and homespun. Hinchliffe's view quoted at the beginning of the previous chapter of this dissertation supports this claim in so far as one does not bother about allegorical, symbolic, surrealistic, or enigmatic meanings hiding beneath the surface. The corroborative evidence left unexplained by Pinter — Stanley's imbroglio, the task for which Goldberg and McCann were appointed, the so-called 'organization' that Stanley has left, mystery behind Stanley's marital status etc. — are not really relevant for the development of the plot.

The so-called well known A-B-A structure of musical compositions has been utilized by Pinter in *The Birthday Party*. The play begins with a given situation apparently calm but this calm shrouds indications of evil omens; explosions occur in the second stage through tense actions that disturb the initial equilibrium. Ultimately we again return to the
same imperturbable stasis in a modified way. Boles', boarding house with only one guest Stanley was quite normal till the arrival of two other guests Goldberg and McCann who came to take Stanley away. A suggestion of a mysterious and inglorious past of Stanley was exploited during the late-night birthday party by the two new comers in making Stanley a nervous wreck. Ultimately the two captors take Stanley away leaving the stasis of Boles' boarding house as calm as it was; but now without their almost permanent guest Stanley Webber.

Before this consideration of The Birthday Party is rounded up it would be relevant to look into the label 'Comedy of Menace' often attached to it and some other plays of Harold Pinter. Comedy is a play that entertains, amuses, and ends happily. Conflicts and complications of the plot that sustain the development and progress of the play are usually of a lighter kind exerting no serious pressure upon the minds of the characters involved. But the word 'menace' carries implications that are contrary to the spirit of the comedy. Hence the label 'comedy of menace' suggests a paradoxical genre rather difficult to define. The play The Birthday Party apparently centers round the happy occasion of the birthday of Stanley Webber that turns out to be the occasion of the nervous
breakdown of Stanley. Of course, Stanley himself instigated his own predicament by trying to strangulate Meg and to seduce Lulu. These and the reproaches of Goldberg and McCann were the menacing situations. But at the end of the play the stasis restored to Boles' boarding house was a fabricated tranquility without Stanley to whom Meg was so much devoted. With this so-called happy ending can *The Birthday Party* be called a comedy? If not, can it be designated as a tragedy? Neither of these labels seems quite appropriate. It is a play faithfully capturing an enigmatic storm created in the atmosphere of an apparently placid household and their semi-permanent guest Stanley, by the intrusion of two outsiders. Amusing farcical dialogue and actions keep the audience spellbound during the performance. Harold Pinter's unique handling of cockney dialect, choice of names like Webber, Goldberg, McCann containing ethnic overtones create an undercurrent of humanitarian indulgence impossible to overlook. Selda Ondull's *The Hero as Victim* discussed above has rightly captured these overtones.(Ondul: Ch.4) In all the great tragedies one finds the hero being victimized on account of a streak of nature that Shakespeare called 'a vicious mole of nature' in *Hamlet*. But, at the same time viewed from another angle, this streak is really an
inherent strength in hero's character. Being challenged Oedipus killed his father unwittingly; Brutus invited his own doom by killing Julius Caesar believing that he was doing a great service to the nation; Doctor Faustus sold his own soul to the devil to enjoy supreme power for a short while. Examples can be multiplied ad infinitum. But these are examples of great heroes. Pinter's play is neither a tragedy nor his hero is of the grand stature of the tragic heroes. Stanley Webber is just an expert pianist who was invited to give performance to a particular place; but his enemies locked up the hall where the performance was to take place. Thus the victimization of the hero has actually started before the play opens.

The stature usually associated with traditional tragedies or comedies is not obtainable in the plays of Harold Pinter. For that matter terms like 'tragedy' and 'Comedy' belong to ages past. Second half of the twentieth century was diminutive enough to scale the heights of those ages.

As for the term 'menace' it indicates a foreboding feeling equivalent to ominous threats. No doubt, Stanley's nervous enquiries regarding the two guests who approached Petey for accommodation suggest rancorous malignity. But no one else in the play seems
to be seriously affected by this menace till Stanley falls a victim to a total nervous breakdown.

References to and concerns regarding Stanley's sudden disruption and his incapacity to resist abduction by Goldberg and McCann are the only menacing situations in the play. This and Stanley's attempt to strangulate Meg or seduce Lulu in darkness are not really alarming enough to create an atmosphere of menace. The final dialogue between Meg and Petey restores the lighter vein:

Meg: I was the belle of the ball.

Petey: Were you?

Meg: Oh yes. They all said I was.

Petey: I bet, you were, too.

Meg: Oh, it's true. I was.

Pause

I know I was. (Complete works-1:97)

A placebo deceitful enough to contain the traumatic existence of the Boles couple for the time being.

To recapitulate in a nutshell the trauma as obtaining in the lines of the members of Hudd household in The Room and the Boles family in The Birthday Party.
The cozy comfortable room—Room No. 7—with the leaking upstairs and the dingy, damp basement and the chilly cold outside world is itself a superb image of placebo wherewith Rose tried to counter the trauma of her pre-marital existence; but she was accosted by intruders having affiliations with all that she wanted to escape and finally her husband's attempt to rescue her resulted in making her blind. In *The Birthday Party* Stanley's attempt to escape from his enemies by hiding in the dilapidated so-called boarding house of Meg and Petey Boles proved futile as he was hunted out by two appointed abductors who were one a Jew and another an Irishman. The trauma to which everyone present was subjected to during the late night birthday party resulted in making him a nervous wreck. The fate of the Boles couple has already been indicated above.

And the tragic overtone of 'As Stan is taken away, Petey says, 'Stan, don't let them tell you what to do.' I've lived that line all my damn life.' (Gussow: 71) is indeed touching.