CHAPTER TWO

Dramatic Dialogue in The Birthday Party

The Birthday Party was first presented at the Arts Theatre, Cambridge on April 28, 1958, and at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith on May 19 of the same year. The play failed spectacularly despite the enthusiasm of a few reviewers. The unsigned reviewer of The Manchester Guardian dismissed Pinter as a writer of "half-gibberish and lunatic ravings" as his characters were "unable to explain their actions, thoughts or feelings." Milton Shulman of The Evening Standard compared the play with a "cross-word puzzle where every vertical clue is designed to put you off the horizontal." He thought that the play would be "best enjoyed by those who believe that obscurity is its own reward." Almost the entire audience was baffled, and failed collectively to decode the playwright's precise dramatic idiom in the theatre.

It was Harold Hobson of The Sunday Times who risked his critical judgement as a renowned theatre critic by standing obstinately in the teeth of the strong current of adverse criticism holding that the young playwright "possesses the most original, disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London."

In The Birthday Party Pinter has successfully created a drama of human relations at the level of language itself.
Pinter is known less for what he intends to convey thematically than for how he handles and controls dramatic dialogue in order to achieve the compulsive force that his drama exercises over an international audience. "A Pinter play", as Gordon aptly points out, "exists at the level of language as opposed to plot." Pinter's first full-length play, *The Birthday Party*, is a case in point.

Verbal repetition and incongruity become the sources of humour in *The Birthday Party*. Here, as in Pinter's other plays, the plot is light and can be stated in a few words. As Russell Brown observes, "More important than story-line, for Pinter, is scope and occasion for his characters to work through, and work out, the potentialities of their beings and relationships." This is so because Pinter presents his plays as if they are discoveries of potential energies within a small number of characters, and, as such, no vertical story-line is required. The scene is confined to the dining room of a seedy, sea-side boarding-house kept by a slovenly and elderly housewife Meg and her taciturn, docile husband Petey Boles. Stanley, the central character — an indolent, apathetic man in his late thirties — is the only boarder who has been staying for about a year. He is cabined, cribbed and confined to the house out of his own volition, owing to his uncanny fear of the world outside, feeling that intruders from outdoor are the menacing bringers of his death. The menace to this isolated man suggests the absurdity of the human condition, for this man, like mankind, is unsafe and
without certainties in his universe. Although Stanley is a fully grown-up middle-aged adult, Meg behaves in relation to him as a surrogate doting mother. Her attitude sometimes turns to assume overtly sexual undertones. Stanley lives unshaved and unwashed.

Nothing substantial is known about Stanley’s past life except some sketchy apocryphal references that he makes while talking to Meg in Act I. He tells her that he has been a pianist, once giving a greatly successful concert at Lower Edmonton. Later things went wrong for him, and he turned a broke. Pinter holds: "Apart from any other consideration, we are faced with the immense difficulty, if not the impossibility, of verifying the past." The dialogue involving Stanley has several layers of meaning and insinuation:

Stanley: Yes. Lower Edmonton. Then after that, you know what they did? They carved me up. Carved me up... it was all worked out. My next concert.... In winter, I went down there to play. Then, when I got there, the hall was closed, the place was shuttered up, not even a caretaker. They'd locked it up.... A fast one. They pulled a fast one. I'd like to know who was responsible for that.... They want me to crawl down on my bended knees (I, p.33).

This passage has several undertones. Stanley’s monotone registers a lurking fear in his mind. Something occurred in his blurred past. He might have been a pianist in some night-club or some such rough and tough joint. It may also be deduced that over some of his faux pas, he was not only
fired but was also hotly pursued by the henchmen of the organisation after he had bolted. The dialogue between Goldberg and McCann suggests that the organisation really wanted Stanley to "crawl down on... bended knees" (I, p.33). It is clear from Stanley's words that the breaking up of his concert symbolises his being cut off from conformist, dynamic and engaging outdoor life having inherent dangers and difficulties, trials and tribulations. Stanley, crouched under a fear, experiences a gnawing consternation about going out, doing some job, or having normal sex life. For, even if he does all these things, he fears that he will not be spared from the eventual human mortality. Stanley's position reminds us of the questions asked by a character in O'Neill's The Great God Brown: "Why am I afraid to live? ... Why am I afraid to love?... Why must I live in a cage like a criminal, defying and hating?" Stanley, therefore, refuses to live in an absurd, menacing world. This refusal to live as an adult has turned him into a wrinkled and aging child.

Even if Stanley wants to keep himself shut in Meg's shabby dump, shunning the world outside, he would not be spared by that world, and would be dragged out. Goldberg's words to Meg are indeed menacing: "If we hadn't come today we'd have come tomorrow" (I, p.42). He learns from her that two persons were already enquiring about her boarding-house intending to put up therein:

Meg : Two gentlemen asked Petey if they could come and stay for a couple of nights.
I'm expecting them.

Stanley: I don't believe it.

Meg : It's true (I, p.30).

Stanley gathers at once that these persons from the organisation are after him and he is gripped by panic.

Stanley : They're looking for someone.

Meg: They're not.

Stanley: They're looking for someone. A certain person (I, p.34).

Then there arrive the two sinister figures — McCann who is gloomy, brutal and silent, and his accomplice Goldberg who is falsely jovial, glib and full of spurious worldly wisdom. They are supposed to be the liquidators of some mafia gang which Stanley might have betrayed somehow in the past. Their identity is shrouded in mystery. Here the dialogue of The Birthday Party does not clarify why the intruders get Stanley roughed up. Language here is indeed "a highly ambiguous business", to quote Pinter's familiar phrase. The presentation of the intruders reminds us of Pinter's observation in respect of his characters: "My characters tell me so much and no more, with reference to their experience, their aspirations, their motives, their history." As regards these two executioners, it is up to the audience to fill in the blank sheet in front of them.

Meg decides and informs them that it is Stan's birthday, though Stanley does not accept it as such. The
dialogue runs thus:

Meg : It's his birthday to-day.
Goldberg: His birthday? ...
        Doesn't he know it's his birthday?
Meg : He hasn't mentioned it (I, p.42).

Then again at the very end of Act I:

Stanley : This isn't my birthday, Meg.
Meg : Of course it is (I, p.46).

Meg gives a present to Stanley: "It's a drum. A boy's drum." To this Meg answers: "It's because you haven't got a piano." Stanley asks: "Shall I put it round my neck?" Then "he hangs the drum around his neck" (I, p.46). The word "piano" in the dialogue may stand for the normal external rhythmic life of an adult. "A boy's drum" may suggest an alienated, make-believe world of phantasy and escape which Stanley wants to put round his neck. Pinter's dramatic dialogue obliquely suggests that Stanley deliberately plunges into the falsified reality, avoiding the stern facts of life. He begins beating frenziedly on the drum as the first Act ends. Stanley's "face and the drumbeat" get "savage and possessed" (I, p.46). Stanley's frenzy, devoid of all rationality, brings in an element of the absurd to which Pinter's language greatly contributes.

The birthday party then proceeds in a grostesque manner. Lulu, the next door blonde, pretty but rather vulgar, "a big bouncy girl" is also invited. Hitherto Lulu had often solicited Stan to take a walk with her outside
the lodge, but only to be blatantly refused:

Lulu : So you're not coming out for a walk?
Stan : I can't at the moment.
Lulu : You're a bit of a washout, aren't you? (I, p.36).

During the course of the party Goldberg assumes several names, gets intimate with Lulu and seduces her. While everyone else in the party enjoys heavy drinking, Lulu ends up in Goldberg's lap kissing him. When Meg proposes to play "any game", Lulu suggests "blind man's buff." They begin a drunken game. The recurring image of blindness serves dramatically as a symbolic foretaste of death. Blindfolded McCann touches Stanley's glasses, and it becomes Stanley's turn to be blind. First McCann takes Stanley's glasses, then "he breaks Stanley's glasses, snapping the frames"(I,p.73). Blind Stanley begins to move, walks with the drum, begins to move towards Meg, dragging the drum on his foot. Then he reaches her... his hands move towards her... he begins to strangle her. McCann and Goldberg rush forward to throw him off (I,pp.73-74).

When suddenly the light goes out, in the prevailing gloom, Stanley picks up Lulu and places her on the table. McCann focuses the torch and Lulu is seen lying spread-eagled on the table, with Stanley bent over her. Goldberg and McCann move towards Stanley whose giggle grows as he flattens himself against the wall. Goldberg and McCann converge upon him.
The audience may read in Pinter's theatre language that with his impending doom, the drink-sodden Stanley tries desperately to tear out of the lodge as well as the sterile childhood he is shut up in. He comes up to strangle Meg, the surrogate mother, who suffocates his normal buoyancy, and to have normal copulation with Lulu. Before he gets mad, entrapped and "re-orientated", Stanley tries desperately to have the first-hand taste of real life he has hitherto denied himself in his "angst" or fear of reality in order to escape the inevitable obliteration through death.

In Act III the dialogue between Meg and Petey shows Meg as worried because Stanley is not yet up. Goldberg informs Petey that the birthday celebration was too much for Stanley, and that he has a nervous breakdown. Lulu is turned away by Goldberg and McCann when her presence becomes a deterrent to their uninhibited liberties with Stanley. McCann ushers in a nearly catatonic Stanley who is clean-shaven and dressed in a dark well-cut suit and white collar, holding his broken glasses in his hand. He stares blankly at the floor and does not speak at all. Goldberg and McCann begin to woo him alternately with a shower of incoherent nonsensical words and idioms. Stanley attempts to speak when they are through, but fails. He emits choked sound from his throat:

Stanley: Up-gug... uh... gug... eeehhh-gag ...
(on the breath) caahh... caahh....

Goldberg: Well, Stanley boy, what do you say, eh?
Stanley: Ugh-gughh ... uh-gughhh ....
McCann: What's your opinion, Sir?
Stanley: Caaahhh ... caaahhh ... (I, pp.94-95).

Stanley, then, is transported by these two henchmen to an unknown "Monty" by a black car. Petey makes a feeble, half-hearted attempt to save Stanley from being whisked away, but to frustrate his attempts, Goldberg insidiously says: "Why don't you come with us, Mr. Boles? ... come with us to Monty. There's plenty of room in the car!" (I, pp.95-96). This dialogue reminds us of the medieval morality play Everyman. Everyman is carried off by Death; his family and friends promise to be true to him and help him. But the moment they are invited to accompany him, they find some pretext to stay behind.

Pinter's dialogue aptly brings out the latent situation of the play. It shows that Stanley gets nervous on learning from Meg about the two impending visitors. But it does not clarify why he is nervous. Menace increases when McCann and Goldberg arrive on the scene. Dramatic dialogue then becomes overtly meaningful:

McCann: Is this it?
Goldberg: This is it.
McCann: Are you sure?
Goldberg: Sure I'm sure....
McCann: Nat. How do we know this is the right house?
Goldberg: What?
McCann: How do we know this is the right house?
Goldberg: What makes you think it's the wrong house?
McCann: I didn't see a member on the gate.
Goldberg: I wasn't looking for a member.
McCann repeats his question twice to know if they are in the right house. This deepens the mystery of the situation which is so crucial to an absurd play. Goldberg says he is not at all looking for a number. He is quite convinced that he is in the right place. The situation of menace and absurdity gets intensified. Here the universal is involved in the particular because Stanley's fear is representative of modern man's existential angst and anguish.

Meg ponders over the party of the previous night, oblivious of what has happened. She thinks Stanley is still asleep upstairs.

Meg: Wasn't it a lovely party last night? .... It was a lovely party...
Petey: It was good, eh?
(Maze)
Meg: I was the belle of the ball.

Curtain finally falls over the play (I, p.97).

The birthday party in this play does not refer to the birth anniversary of someone; it refers to the actual day of a particular birth. The henchmen turn Stanley into what McCann calls "a new man." Stanley is reborn in the hands of these two sinister figures. The dramatic dialogue drives this point home:

Goldberg: You need a long convalescence.
McCann: A change of air.... We'll renew your season ticket (I, p.92).

Stanley has been made into a different personality on a day,
a birthday:

Goldberg: You'll be re-orientated.
McCann: You'll be rich.
Goldberg: You'll be adjusted (I, p.93).

It has been aptly shown earlier in the play that a conscious Stanley has all along refused to accept the day as his birthday: "This isn't my birthday, Meg" (I, p.46). On learning from Meg that it is Stan's birthday, Goldberg decides not impulsively but "thoughtfully" that they are going to give him a party: "Goldberg (to McCann): There's a gentleman living here. He's got a birthday today, and he's forgotten all about it. So we're going to remind him. We're going to give him a party." Meg initially does not think of any party at all:

Meg: A party?
Goldberg: Weren't you going to have one?
Meg: (her eyes wide) No.
Goldberg: You must have one. (He stands) We'll have a party, eh? (I, p.42).

Goldberg's decision is deliberate and he at once assumes command of the lodging house. He stands up and by this deliberate action establishes his confident hold on the situation.

The boarding house does not bear any identification whatsoever, the landlady and her taciturn husband are nondescript, and Stanley who is living a rather anonymous, underground, miserable and unfulfilled existence is an undefined fellow. Queries as to who exactly Stanley is or what he represents are as unanswerable by the audience as
they are by Meg or Petey:

Stanley: (quietly): Who do you think you're talking to?

Tell me Mrs. Boles, when you address yourself to me, do you ever ask yourself who exactly you are talking to? Eh?

(I, p.37).

It is clear from the dialogue that the playwright is deliberately avoiding to pin down the facts about Stanley or related expository devices to illuminate the story-line. He does so in order to allow Stanley to be viewed by the audience in a more cosmic and symbolic sense.

The characters plan their conversational strategies to achieve interpersonal relationships which they are supposed to establish. Through a convoluted language pattern Pinter demonstrates how the characters exchange meaningful ideas with one another and how the ongoing interaction continues. Quigley has rightly pointed out that "the point to be grasped about the verbal activity in a Pinter play is that language is not so much a means of referring to structure in personal relationships as a means of creating it."12

In The Birthday Party dramatic meanings are created in subtle ways, dextrously organised, related, grafted and realised. In Pinter's drama implied meaning with an undertone of ambiguity is quite manifest in the dialogue through interactive processes. The Birthday Party is marked by a unique dynamism through a clever
manipulation of the exchange-pattern of dynamic dialogue. In his lingual system Pinter stresses four different aspects of rhythm, tempo, intensity and tension. The units of rhythm in the context of dialogue are brief exchanges amongst characters. Their subtle moves are aptly illustrated through lingual variations. In *The Birthday Party* the terse exchange structure of dialogue plays a vital role in creating a tense dramatic atmosphere of menace and the absurd. Changes from one to two-part or three-part exchange structures in tune with the tension of the situation are one of the major elements in *The Birthday Party*. This causes the proceedings either to follow slowly or reach a climax or to form a contrast between the two. The two-part exchange patterns at the beginning and the end stand in sharp contrast to the one-part exchanges in the middle. Closely related to rhythm is the variation of dramatic structure that is expressed by tempo. Different rhythmic patterns create changes in the tempo of the dramatic dialogue, either cutting down or speeding up the activities. The movement of a conversation may be leisurely because of the length of the responding moves; or, it can be quick with the short and brisk responding moves. We may cite an example to illustrate the change in movement:

Meg : Was it nice?
Stanley: What?
Meg : The fried bread.
Stanley: Succulent. ... What about some tea?
Meg : Do you want some tea? ... Say please.
The passage shows that the tempo of this dialogue between Meg and Stanley is quite leisurely. Responses are quite in tune with the questions. But when we consider the following set of dialogue, the movement changes:

Stanley: You haven't heard it?
Meg: No.
Stanley (advancing): They're coming today.
Meg: Who?
Stanley: They're coming in a van.
Meg: Who? ...
Stanley: They're looking for someone.
Meg: They're not.
Stanley: They're looking for someone. A certain person.
Meg (hoarsely): No, they're not.
Stanley: Shall I tell you who they're looking for?
Meg: No (I, pp.33-34).

Here the tempo of the dialogue has become faster and far too rapid than the earlier quoted passage. The response-move of the exchanges has become very sharp. It reveals at the lingual level itself, that a tension is gradually building up, and at the same time a latent menace is slowly developing over the thematic atmosphere. It is where the language of Pinter's absurd drama vertically cuts the horizontal line of the theme, and the grotesque-ness of the dramatic situation establishes itself, thereby bringing about an understandable harmony between the form and the content. The moment Meg breaks the news to Stanley that two visitors are about to arrive, Stanley
loses his cool. It is shown by a carefully chosen dialogue:

Stanley : I don't believe it.
Meg : It's true.
Stanley : (moving to her): You're saying it on purpose. ... (grinding his cigarette) when was this? ... who are they? ... Didn't he (Petey) tell you their names? (pacing the room) Here? They wanted to come here? ... It's a false alarm. A false alarm (I, pp.30-31).
(He sits at the table)

Stanley's actions like excitedly moving to Meg, grinding his cigarette, or pacing the room themselves constitute a significant dramatic language, denoting the suppressed menace and mounting tension in Stanley. This shows that in Pinter's plays what is not said becomes as significant as what is said. This emphasises the importance of non-verbal factors such as visual effects and physical indicators referred to above.

Stanley's sitting at the table indicates beyond doubt that Stanley is nervous or frightened. When, after the arrival of the two strangers, Stanley knows from Meg that one of them is called Goldberg he responds by again sitting slowly at the table:

Stanley : Then what are they? Come on. Try to remember.
Meg : Goldberg.
Stanley : Goldberg?
Meg : That's right. That was one of them (I, p.45).
(Stanley slowly sits at the table)
Stanley's gesture shows his utter helplessness and defeat, creating a superb theatre language. When asked by Meg if he knows them, Stanley avoids the pointed question and keeps silent.

Meg: Do you know them?
Stanley does not answer.
Stan, they won't wake you up, I promise.
Stanley sits still.
They won't be here long. Stan.
Stanley sits still (I, pp.44-45).

Here the dialogue has been masterly handled by the dramatist. "They won't wake you up" is an example of subtle irony, for Goldberg and McCann do wake Stanley up from his slumber in the make-believe world he has slipped into. There is a similar irony in "they won't be here long", for, in actuality, even in their short stay in the lodge, they would get Stanley "reorientated" for good. Stanley is no more nonconformist when he is taken to the mysterious "Monty". The dramatic sequence conveys to the audience that the name Goldberg has unnerved and unsettled Stanley. This is one of Pinter's strategies to uncover nakedness.

Pinter's dramatic language is of great importance when we explore his theatrical strategems. It provides ways of enjoying or appreciating The Birthday Party, though often in a non-explicatory manner. When the play was first presented in England and in the United States, most of the spectators, ordinary ones as well as academics, tumbled against the incomprehensibility of actions and speeches, in an inconvenient way. Yet they did not fail to notice that the play created "so rivetting
a world of its own" with a distinctive and fresh
dramatic idiom exemplifying a new language-oriented
drama. The Birthday Party was a new drama of subtle
sensibility, of menace and the absurd. Its form and
content are expertly welded into a consolidated composite
unit. Its effect becomes almost akin that of poetry.
Indeed, it is a highly conscious yet articulate poetry,
its force being rather aural than visual. This poetic
quality of Pinter's drama has been well described by the
famous Pinter-director, Sir Peter Hall:

I actually believe that Becket and Pinter are
poetic dramatists in the proper sense of the
word: they have a linear structure and a formal
structure which you'd better just observe —
don't learn it wrong, don't speak it wrong,
you can't, you mustn't.14

The Birthday Party often attains poetic quality in
communicating feelings, emotions and experiences of its
characters. Pinter's acting career helps him in writing
dialogue which is marked by virtuosity and excellent verbal
control. When Petey introduces Stanley to Goldberg in
Act II, the latter reminisces poetically:

Humming away I'd be, past the children's
playground. I'd tip my hat to the toddlers,
I'd give a helping hand to a couple of
stray dogs, everything came natural. I can
see it like yesterday. The sun falling behind
the dog stadium. Ah! (I, p.53).

Here the meaning and the dramatic effect are closely
related to the evocative power of words, which is akin
to poetry. This is just one example of Pinter's mastery
of using an apt rhetoric. Such dialogue can enormously
persuade the audience, as intended by Pinter. The dialogue refers to a strange and unnatural situation when Goldberg talks of his extending "a helping hand" to stray dogs and not to any children. Again, the reference to the dog stadium instead of what should be a description of a natural scene endows the speech with a sinister undertone of a dark humour that "everything came natural".

One of the influences on Pinter is that of T.S. Eliot who experimented in dramatic forms during the first half of the twentieth century, especially in dramatic language. Eliot's influence is to be seen in repetition of phrases in Pinter's plays. In The Birthday Party Pinter catches hold of a word or phrase and then repeats the same in succeeding sentences, keeping it up almost in the air like a bobbing ball. These chosen words or phrasal idioms together with the aptly pitched intonation of the actor, act as a unit of tonal composition and accordingly make a great impact on the audience:

Stanley : Where's my tea?
Meg : I took it away. You didn't want it.
Stanley : ... You took it away?
Meg : I took it away.
Stanley : What did you take it away for?
Meg : You didn't want it.
Stanley : Who said I didn't want it?
Meg : You did(I, p. 31).

Here it is not what is spoken literally that matters. What is important is that which remains locked within the speeches, not being communicated on the surface.
Nevertheless, it has much bearing on the entire situation with a strong sense of inadequacy of language. Listening to the speeches we gather that Stanley is gripped by a definite tension which has made him peevish and woolly. Invisible menace is boldly underlined. He was told initially by Meg that the tea was taken away as he didn't want it, yet Stanley chose to make silly repetitions. Not that he was not aware that he refused to accept the tea earlier, not that he wanted a rational answer from Meg, but that the repetitious dialogue was just a mental process to follow in shielding him, for the time being, from a disturbing, gnawing fear which has upset his equipoise since he heard about the two strangers enquiring after this down-and-out boarding house. Such a repetitious passage at once confirms Pinter's notion about the function of a stage dialogue: "A play is not an essay... Language is a highly ambiguous business. So often below the word spoken is the thing known and unspoken."  

In the earlier quoted passage, below the words spoken by Stanley, remains the world of his obscure past, known to himself, but not communicated to the audience. The memory of his past torments him. His repetitions are sure off-shoots of his suppressed unsettling fear. His questions are mere ploys to gain time to get hold over his distressing fear. The dialogue shows Pinter's dramatic use of language in connection with search, surprise and the understanding of a character. Russell Brown pertinently observes:
Given that the dramatist is concerned with eventual disclosure here, in describing his characters "conversations", Pinter touches upon the dangerous, or precarious, nature of his plays and their stunning, appalled and held (or arrested) climaxes. From the first word spoken on stage, the hunt is on.¹⁵

One more example may be cited from The Birthday Party to show how Pinter's use of dramatic dialogue is capable of creating, through curious repetitions, an atmosphere of nameless, latent menace:

Stanley: It's late.
Goldberg: Late. Late enough. When did you last pray?
McCann: He's sweating.
Goldberg: When did you last pray?
McCann: He's sweating.
Goldberg: Is the number 846 possible or necessary?
Stanley: Neither.
Goldberg: Wrong. Is the number 846 possible or necessary?
Stanley: Both.
Goldberg: Wrong. It's necessary but not possible.
Stanley: Both.
Goldberg: Wrong. Why do you think the number 846 is necessarily possible?
Stanley: Must be.
Goldberg: Wrong (I. pp.60-61).

Here, repetitions create an idiom of their own. The charged atmosphere is felt to the hilt. The absurdity is woven round the repetitious inconsequentiality. Realism becomes manifest in the tonal shifts and variations. Such a scene is usually poised on the edge of realism.

Repetitions in this passage still further suggest the depth of the drama underneath the seemingly inconsequential exchanges. The subtext in a Pinter play
can thus be read by the audience easily through the significant dramatic dialogue. This sub-textual strength gains in momentum inside a proscenium or a closed-framed stageboard where the characters are conveniently shut up to be closely examined. Audience-interest in a Pinter play gathers round the revelation of characters through apt and optimum dramatic dialogue. Pinter focuses attention on the sub-text — the Freudian slips in talk, compulsive repetitions and correlated accessories like pleonasms, incomplete sentences, sudden shifts of the subject-matter, non-sequiturs, self-contradictions and bad syntax which reveal the character in order to extract the fullest dramatic possibility of the scene concerned. The playwright draws the audience into reading the characters through their spoken interactions, as thoroughly as possible with scanty or no biographical details. The audience is struck by an ardent curiosity requiring to look back into the past of the characters visualising them through the sub-text:

Goldberg: Webber, you're a fake.... Where was your wife?
Stanley: In -
Goldberg: Answer.
Stanley (turning, crouched): What wife?
Goldberg: What have you done with your wife?
McCann: He's killed his wife.
Goldberg: Why did you kill your wife?
Stanley: (sitting, his back to the audience): What wife?
McCann: How did he kill her?
Goldberg: How did you kill her?
McCann: You throttled her.
Goldberg: With arsenic.
McCann: There's your man (I, p. 59).

The passage is reminiscent of a familiar real world of throbbing animation which lies behind the shadowy interrogation. The information may be added up piecemeal, and the jigsaw puzzle would be set right. At the level of visual imagery, an idea of Stanley's past may be constructed. A feeling runs within us that the episode, as enacted through verbal exchange, resembles a quite similar scenario of the contemporary socio-political issue. Esslin has rightly pointed out the unmistakable influence of Anton Tchekhov on Pinter with regard to the acute visual Tchekhovian sense of Pinter's characters. Pinter himself accepts this: "I write visually - I can say that. I watch the invisible faces quite closely. The characters take on a physical shape. I watch the faces as closely as I can." 16

Now, when Pinter watches the faces closely he also perhaps watches, as we find in his plays, how the lips of those invisible faces move, and what and how they utter words. The audience gropes for better knowledge of the characters on the stageboard and tries to explore a compact theatrical message, carefully wading through the effective stage dialogue modelled on analytical investigation. This aspect emerges brightly through the intense staccato
form of *The Birthday Party*:

Meg : Two gentlemen asked Petey if they could come and stay for a couple of nights....
Stanley : I don't believe it.
Meg : It's true.
Stanley : (moving to her): You're saying it on purpose.
Meg : Petey told me this morning.
Stanley : (grinding his cigarette): When was this? When did he see them? ... Who are they?
... Didn't he tell you their names?
... But who are they? ...
(decisively) They won't come ...
(quickly) I tell you they won't come....
They won't come.... Forget all about it.
It's a false alarm. A false alarm
(I, pp.30-31).

A very familiar, menacing real world emerges from underneath this dialogue exchanged between Meg and Stanley. A watchful and eager audience would want to put the fragments together and reconstruct the episode. Here, another significant aspect of Pinter's drama, that of audience participation, reveals itself through the dialogue. The audience has to participate in the events to get fully involved in what is narrated or hinted at, and only then the action may be deciphered. Pinter avoids providing an easy clue, or any ready-reckoner whatever with which to follow the tangled terrain of his theatre. The playwright cautions:

Beware of the writer who puts forward his concern for you to embrace, ... who declares that his heart is in the right place, and ensures that it can be seen in full view, a pulsatory mass where his characters ought to be.
The dialogue quoted above shows how tension is being built up rather surreptitiously. Stanley has these two strangers in mind, and they would be his tormentors. Yet, as his speech indicates, he wants to slip into a make-believe world with his beguiling thought that "It's a false alarm". His repetition of "false alarm" establishes two things simultaneously: one, that the "alarm" is not "false", and the other, that Stanley is so much psychologically moved as to stifle his conviction that he has been found at last and would soon be doomed.

With the help of Pinter's dramatic dialogue an audience is able to pick up the cues in order to explore as much as it can, about the characters. Involvement and participation of the audience in the dramatic events to the extent of identification help them to feel that something is happening here, and the playwright acts as the catalyst in between the characters, the events and the audience. That Pinter never attempts to explain his plays with their surface naturalism is due to their kinship with the theatre of the absurd. A Pinter play deals with our essential inexpressibility, the incommunicable essence of the self and soul and our confusion over the meaninglessness of life. As Pinter points out, "You and I, the characters which grow on a page, most of the time we're inexpressive, giving little away, unreliable, elusive, evasive, obstructive unwilling."\(^{19}\)
Through the character of Stanley Pinter brings out the existentialist absurdity of life. We cannot express ourselves and as such our communication gets baffled or frustrated. Esslin who coined the phrase "theatre of the absurd" cites Ionesco's definition of the Absurd which says that severed from the so-called divine roots man is lost, and consequently the sum-total of his actions becomes "senseless, absurd, useless." Dukore has put the matter thus: "The sensation of a metaphysical anguish when confronted by the absurdity of the human condition is the chief theme of the theatre of the absurd, which avoids discursiveness in dramatising it."  

Pinter's dramatic dialogue avoids logic and does not proceed regularly from premises to conclusion and logic. The absurdist theme of The Birthday Party is presented with apparent irrationality in terms of concrete stage images. The play does not argue about the absurdity of human condition. Pinter, here, refuses to be "lost in a prison of empty definition and cliche." Pinterian dramatic dialogue proves that if the playwright perceives things in the light of absurdity, his presentation must be through a form similar to his perception. So Esslin rightly points out that playwrights like Sartre, Anouilh, Giraudoux, Salacrou or even Albert Camus, although they dealt with the existentialist themes envisaging the senselessness of life or its utter purposelessness, yet they took pains to present absurdist episodes of the
irrationality of human situation through a rationally modelled, lucid, logically structured language of reasoning. As such form and content in their plays could not be merged one into the other to turn into symphony.²³ Pinter never feels satisfied with restating a handful of existential themes inside familiar forms of conventional play-writing. As The Birthday Party shows he remakes his play altogether so that it functions according to existentialist principle.

Pinter's absurdist theatre is different from Sartre's existentialist theatre because in his theatre there is an optimum amalgamation between the content and the form, whereas in the existentialist drama the content overflows and cuts through the limit of the form. The absurdity of the situation strikes through Pinter's non-realist verbal games, and not through any discursive talks adopted by the characters, as in Shaw's Apple Cart. Pinter, on the other hand, strives to give voice to this sense of metaphysical anguish at the obvious absurdity of the human predicament, and also to the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open rejection of rational devices and modes as well as the discursive thought. As such it may be said that while Sartre, Camus or Anouilh tried to give vent to the new content by means of old, conventional methods, Pinter has moved ahead of them in trying to achieve a unity between his basic assumptions and the form through which they have been brought forward.
This causes Kerr to observe that "Harold Pinter seems to me the only man working in the theatre today who writes existentialist plays existentially." The blending of humour and pathos, realism and symbolic undercurrents is seen in the fully developed dramatic dialogue in its richness, circumlocution, repetitiveness, spurious logic. All these diversified elements, commonly termed "Pinteresque", are quite evident in The Birthday Party.

The relationship between Stanley and Meg, who combines motherly tenderness and sexuality, has become both comic and pathetic. It is comic in the sense that it has a ludicrous overtone. A middle-aged man that Stanley is, gets mothered and pampered excessively, behaves in a frivolous, ridiculous manner like a prodigal son stunted in normal, healthy growth. It is pathetic in the sense that we accept both these characters of Meg and Stanley as no chimerical or melodramatic figures, but we accept them very much as living human beings.

On a close examination of the following conversation in The Birthday Party we find that the subtle and apparently naive dialogue has got a tremendous potentiality in building up a tense atmosphere, and in giving out a weighty meaning on a double scale:

Stanley: They've come?
Meg : They're very nice, Stan.
Stanley: Why didn't they come last night?
Meg  : They said the beds were wonderful.
Stanley: Who are they?
Meg (sitting): They're very nice Stanley.
Stanley : I said, who are they? (I, p.44).

Meg has already known (I, p.30) that these two persons are not going to be liked by Stanley. Stanley has also mentioned that they would bring with them a wheelbarrow (I, p.34). She knows that Stanley had reasons to be uneasy about these two persons. Accordingly, when asked by Stanley if they have come and who they are, Meg tries deliberately to evade the issue by shunning the direct and clear-cut answer. Her reply "they're very nice", repeated twice, and the other one "they said the beds were wonderful" actually betray her serious concern at the moment over Stanley's reaction at the news of the arrival of these two persons. Here the dramatic dialogue brings out the latent menace struck over the scenic atmosphere. The dialogue creates dark humour which is typically Pinterian.

The following dialogue again serves the purpose of exposition in a subtle manner:

Meg : How long for? ....
Stanley: Constantinople. Zareb. Vladivostock. It's a round the world tour. ...
Played the Piano? I've played the piano all over the world. All over the country. (Pause). I once gave a concert.
Meg : A concert? (I, p.32).

Stanley's briefing about his career of a pianist dwindles, creating a verbal comedy underlined by gloom or pathos, from his giving concerts all over the globe to giving them
throughout the country, to even giving a concert just
only once. From the absurdist's dramatic point of view,
it is not significant to what extent these past references
are stamped with truth. What is important is that these
references in this sequence make Stanley verbally non-
existent.

Goldberg and McCann arrive to subdue Stanley.
They don't reveal their purpose. Goldberg's language is
wonderfully comic with a sinister inclination, being an
assortment of politicians' cliches, shallow vainglorious
philosophy and hoodlum argot. There is the brilliant
scene when Goldberg and McCann first encounter Stanley at
Meg's lodge and interrogate him with a dizzying landslide
of insane questions termed by Esslin as "terrifying but
non-sensical cross-examination." 25

Goldberg: What can you see without your glasses?
Stanley : Anything. ...  
Goldberg: Why did you never get married? ...  
McCann : You contaminate womankind....
Mother defiler....
What about Ireland? ...
What about the Albigensenist heresy?...
What about the blessed Oliver Plunkett?
Goldberg: ... Why did the chicken cross the road?
Stanley : He wanted to - he wanted to - he wanted
to....  
Goldberg: Why did the chicken cross the road?
Stanley : He wanted to - he wanted to....
Goldberg: Why did the chicken cross the road?
Stanley : He wanted....
McCann : Chicken? Egg? Which came first?
Goldberg and McCann: Which came first? Which came
Stanley screams.
Stanley can no longer bear the brunt of this excruciating interrogation, and screams. The interrogation, which consists of rationally meaningless combinations of questions and accusations, is by itself suggestive of the absurd giving out its own meaning in its own way. This particular scene of interrogation of Stanley by Goldberg and McCann endows dramatic dialogue and theatre language as a whole with an altogether new dimension of theatrical meaning almost unachieved heretofore except perhaps in Beckettian drama. This interrogation scene stretches the territory of absurdism to encompass in dramatic dialogue both the impenetrable and the zany. This, indeed Pinter's unique dramatic dialogue suited exactly to its professed purpose, altogether different from the conventional dialogue.

In fact, any cut and dried system breaks down with Pinter who has been acclaimed by Taylor as sui generis. Some critics have suggested that Pinter's dialogue is an exact reproduction of everyday speech. This is only partly true, because this dialogue is orchestrated with multiple overtones and reminiscences. This results in a tightly-knit and complex texture. The so-called naturalistic words spoken by Pinter's characters are supported by rich and intricate harmonies, giving his plays like The Birthday Party an unusual density. Consequently, even the apparently banal exchanges of dialogue between Pinter's characters acquire a new meaning and appeal for the audience.
Even in the most naturalistic plays dialogue, despite its pretension to be natural, works harder than what ordinary day-to-day conversation does. Pinter arranges his words meticulously, and he listens to them being alert to the two silences - "one when no word is spoken, ... the other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed." The playwright demonstrates by this interrogation-dialogue that communication becomes alarming to the extent of a total collapse, and that there must be deliberate evasion. As an absurdist he knows that Life with a capital L never shapes itself in accordance with the symmetry of a detailed plot, nor does human speech get carefully and logically constructed. The playwright wants the existential adjustment to come first and hence the characters and situations are minutely observed. Dialogue thereupon is shaped on bad syntax, anacoluthon, tedious repetitions and excruciating contradictions.

All these intensify the mystery of life. Pinter never tells a story; he only explores a given static situation in life's perspective. His dramatic dialogue, as exemplified by the interrogation scene, is an indication of that which we don't hear. Some mysterious terror lurks in the background. The speech pattern used in the scene is exactly what the playwright himself calls "a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smoke-screen which keeps the other in its place." The speeches are haunted by questions to which there can be no answer. The concerned dialogue puts forth the verbal restlessness
and sensitivity, restraint, ambiguity, awkwardness and sometimes a tonal music of a Beckettian play. The interrogation dialogue has an analogy with a passage in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in its tone and temper:

Estragon: Carry on.
Vladimir: No no, after you.
Estragon: No no, you first.
Vladimir: I interrupted you.
Estragon: I interrupted you.
Vladimir: On the contrary.

*They glare at each other angrily.*

Vladimir: Ceremonious ape.
Estragon: Punctilious pig.

Vladimir (Violently): Finish your phrase, I tell you.
Estragon: Finish your own....
Vladimir: Moron.
Estragon: Vermin.
Vladimir: Abortion.
Estragon: Morpion.
Vladimir: Sewer-rat.
Estragon: Curate.
Vladimir: Cretin. ... 
Estragon: What do we do now?
Vladimir: While waiting.
Estragon: While waiting. *Silence*
Vladimir: We could do our exercises.
Estragon: Our movements.
Vladimir: Our elevations.
Estragon: Our relaxations.
Vladimir: Our elongations.
Estragon: Our relaxations.29

Pinter, like Beckett, suggests in his plays that we can hardly know the truth and that there is hardly any truth to be known at all. According to Pinter, this mysterious
situation is inherent in human life and as such it is realistic:

There can be no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal. ... 'reality' is quite strong firm word we tend to think, or to hope, that the state to which it refers is equally firm, settled and unequivocal. It doesn't seem to be, and in my opinion, it is no worse or better for that.30

The real motives of other people are not known to us. Even our own motives are pretty obscure. Pinter does not believe that a dramatist can know his own characters, for people can hardly be known in our living and moving life. On the contrary, he holds that what life offers to us is fragmented, mysterious, suggestive, flickering and contingent. In this respect Highliffe aptly observes: "His plays work... like poems offering short lyrical insights rather than an argument and asking questions, not to answer them, but because life is a series of questions."31

In Pinter's absurd theatre menace is evoked through the indefinable nature of the characters and their manoeuvres. The same point is repeated, and a subtle wit emerges when his characters share a pattern of behaviour and are engaged in conversation. Pinter has shown a penchant and a felicity for reducing common behaviour to absurdity, but he has done it objectively without rousing any immediate sense of a metaphysical doubt or anguish at the subjective level.

Through an appropriately designed dramatic dialogue in the interrogation scene, Pinter has expressed a very
significant philosophic question pertaining to the existentialist probe. The western mind accepted, more or less, the Platonic theory that before man came into being on earth, there must have existed somewhere in the divine sphere, an idea or essence of man an immaterial essence which contained the nature of the species. So it is to be deduced from the Platonic principle that this essence or idea did exist before the advent on earth of any single individual. The homo sapiens are all, in effect, derived from this essential source from which there have emanated their corporeal, psychological and moral tendencies. But man is not quite the incarnation of the divine essence, for the individual human beings are incorporated in matter — earth, air, fire, water — and are basically governed by their concrete physical limitations and characteristics. Therefore, no single individual should be taken as the perfect imprint of that immaterial essence. No man perfectly expresses or realises the abstract universal divine pattern from which he has been shaped or designed.

Aristotle made this theory more explicit and interpreted accordingly the threefold divine, human and artistic realities dichotomising, in the light of this theory, the factual truth from the poetic truth. Platonic theory expostulates that this essence or being remains ideally in the universe — pure and perfect. The
individual beings on earth imbibe in varying degrees the spirit of that unblemished fountainhead. Aristotle wanted to identify this immaterial and universalised source with the Divinity. It may thus be deduced that an individual being comes to exist on earth from this idealistic essence or concept of Man. So we all are pre-defined beings conforming to a universal essence which precedes our existence.

The absurdists, under the influence of the existentialist philosophy, intend to cut through this Platonic position. Existentialists like Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) hold that existence precedes essence. They don't accept any universal 'essence' after which man takes his concrete shape. They believe that man is born undefined, and no one can say what a man essentially is except what he makes himself out to be through his independent, deliberate individual action. As such, man is a sum total of his own deliberate actions, having no God to comfortably shift the responsibility onto. Man is solely responsible for his life on earth.

Pinter's dialogue in this uncanny interrogation scene between Goldberg, Stanley and McCann points to the existential proposition that man does not come to earth labelled with any identity. His predicament is to move inevitably from the cradle to the grave seeking to arrive at an identity. This is Stanley's predicament in The Birthday Party: this is man's indictment on each day after his birthday on which he starts existing on this planet.
Modern day reality, covered with the philosophy of Sartre or Camus, accepts that man must move along all alone like an Everyman without a friend or an associate to comfortably share his personal anguish, without confidence that his intelligence reflects anything absolute, with a firm assurance that he fits into any discernible scheme. Man is nameless, featureless, footloose in a void. His only task, if any, is to create his identity by exercising his freedom to act. When all his actions are consummated, he may be able, somehow, to conclude as to what he is. He may achieve his essence perhaps. Until that final moment of his arrival at the conclusion, he must move forward trotting and tumbling through an indifferent, silent universe. This is human predicament sketched by the existentialist thinkers.

By means of this interrogation episode of Stanley in The Birthday Party, Pinter has tried to give us realistically, through a very powerful dramatic dialogue, a glimpse of this basic absurdity of life, that is, man seeking after his identity in life. Pinter's theme centres round this basic quest of man, his homeless instability, his inability to communicate, his confusion over intellectual reasonings, logic and morality, his precarious existence on earth, and a pointless absurd waiting for he-knows-not-what. This waiting may be for an invisible Godot who never turns up. We are reminded, while going through this interrogation episode, of
Whitehead's warning: "Insistence on clarity at all costs is based on sheer superstition as to the mode in which human intelligence functions. Our reasonings grasp at straws for premises and float on gossamers for deductions."\(^{32}\)

Pinter establishes through dialogue in *The Birthday Party* that this perception of the inadequacy of language can affect all our normal social relationships. The belief that thought can be perfectly or even adequately expressed in verbal symbols is highly erroneous. Verbalisation of an idea leaves out nearly everything of importance and relevance, and only a tiny part gets conveyed. We tend to accept statements and accounts which are essentially lacking in accuracy, in their exact relationship with the conceptual truth. When, therefore, these oversimplified ideas are verbally conveyed to someone else who is not in a position to catch the left-out presuppositions, the ideas fail to communicate the essential meaning which they were intended by the speaker to convey. We may cite the following passage from the interrogation scene:

Goldberg: Webber. Why did you change your name?
Stanley: I forgot the other one.
Goldberg: What's your name now?
Stanley: Joe Soap.
Goldberg: You stink of sin. ...
            Do you recognise an external force?
Stanley: What?
Goldberg: Do you recognise an external force? ... Do you recognise an external force, responsible for you, suffering for you?

Stanley: It's late.

Goldberg: Where is your lechery leading you? ... You stuff yourself with dry toast. ...

McCann: What about Drogheda?

Goldberg: Your bite is dead. Only your pong is left....

McCann: Who are you, Webber?

Goldberg: What makes you think you exist?

McCann: You're dead.

Goldberg: You're dead. You can't live, you can't think, you can't love. You're dead.... You're nothing but an odour (I, pp. 60-62).

Pinter is quite aware of the position: "There are at least twenty-four possible aspects of any single statement.... A categorical statement ... will never stay where it is and be finite. It will immediately be subject to modification by the other twentythree possibilities of it. No statement I make, therefore, should be interpreted as final and definitive." 33

In The Birthday Party Pinter presents through an apt dramatic dialogue the inadequacy of the words we use to each other. He continually hints at what remains unspoken and latent and what are the obvious hinderances to comprehension. He creates an absurd atmosphere by the theatrically useful nature of words pertaining to correct rhythm and optimum range. The interrogators come up with contradictory or illogical statements. But in what precise
way they say it, especially against the backdrop of Stanley's apparent inarticulateness or near taciturnity, is what matters from the angle of meaningfulness in the theatre. Stanley is accused of killing his wife and of not marrying, of "contaminating womankind", of being "a mother defiler". The effectiveness of the scene is unrelated to any causal logic whatever. Wickham aptly observes in this context: "Three characters are speaking in this interrogation episode, but the rhythmic structure is a single sequence. The horror of this remarkable scene, and its impact on the audience, is achieved by the deliberate antithesis of verbal non-sequitur against the remorselessly mounting insistence of the verbal rhythm."^3^4

Pinter brings the audience to listen with rapt attention to the words exchanged between his characters, so that they are in a position to identify in these words and dialogues, their own attempts to communicate with fellow beings. Pinter's dramatic capital gets accumulated over man's difficulty in using words in his crucial endeavour to communicate with others. Pinter himself states his position thus: "So often, below the words spoken, is the thing known and unspoken.... most of the time we are inexpressive, giving little away, unreliable, elusive, evasive, obstructive, unwilling."^3^5 The 'interrogation scene illustrates this point. Stanley, in response to the question "why the chicken wanted to cross the road" answers unreliably, unwillingly that "it wanted
to". But why it wanted so he does not know. Nor does anyone in the audience know — not even the interrogators, Goldberg and McCann. What is enacted here is "Under what is said, another is being said." In this context we may agree with Russell Brown that "interplay between confidence in words and fear of them and between what is meant and what is betrayed, is a constant source of excitement in Pinter's stage dialogue." The words in the dialogues can have different meanings for different members of the audience.

It may be added here that Pinter's subtle use of language in the interrogation scene is similar to that of T.S. Eliot in his Murder in the Cathedral. The dialogue between Goldberg and McCann subtly assumes the role of cudgels and sticks to torment Stanley with. It has been brilliantly demonstrated by Pinter in this scene that Goldberg who commands more precise, blunt and crisp expressions gets the upperhand over Stanley who falters over words and expressions. Stanley as a victim of torture is rather swamped by a torrent of fast flowing words — coarse, obscene, blunt, sharp and mostly nonsensical. Incomprehensible questions, assertions, aspersions and blames to which he gets subjected by the two tormentors create an absurdity of its own kind. Here one recalls Pinter's own views about the similarity between the content and the form: "What is made evident before us on the stage can clearly only be made fully
evident where the content of the scene has been defined."

Pinter does not believe that the content of a scene should be defined elaborately through the intellect. It, as Pinter feels, should be "a definition made by the actors, using quite a different system. In other words, if I now bring various criteria to bear upon a production, these are not intellectual concepts but facts forged through experience of active participation with good actors and, ... a living text."

As such the full significance of the interrogation scene lies in a rapt audience participation in each and every word pronounced by the characters in order to get at their connotative and denotative meanings. With an eye to this theatrical approach we tend to get at the meaning when the playwright says: "I can sum up none of my plays. I can describe none of them, except to say: that is what happened. That is what they said. That is what they did."

The dramatic dialogue in a naturalistic play does not follow the exact pattern of our speech in life. As the dialogue has an artistic responsibility of conveying something, it is obliged to depart from the actuality. A one-dimensional language spoken in life is required to acquire a multi-dimensional aspect when it is presented as a work of art.
The apparent reproduction of an ordinary conversation in *The Birthday Party* is in fact a clever construction of words designed to perform several functions. Pinter's dialogue can be effective enough to further the actional movement of the play. The utterances of Goldberg and McCann illustrate a pattern of coherence beneath their apparently illogical exchanges and the absurd goings-on in the play. The following dialogue shows that their verbal gambits are calculated to debunk Petey's rather feeble and pseudo-rational logic:

Goldberg: Still the same old Stan. Come with us. Come on, boy.
McCann : Come along with us.
Petey : Where are you taking him?

They turn. Silence.
Goldberg: We're taking him to Monty.
Petey : He can stay here.
Goldberg: Don't be silly.
Petey : We can look after him here.
Goldberg: Why do you want to look after him?
Petey : He's my guest.
Goldberg: He needs special treatment.
Petey : We'll find someone.
Goldberg: No. Monty's the best there is. Bring him McCann (I, p.95).

This dialogue also shows that for the spectators there is an element of irony in the sense that they recognise an attitude and a relationship between the two characters exchanging words and this meaning comes only to them as detached observers, and not to Petey,
the character spoken to. This reminds us of an Ibsenite sentence which, as Bentley observes, "functions ironically in conveying to the audience a meaning different from that conveyed to the characters."¹⁴ Petey's question "where are you taking him?" is followed by a pertinent, sinister silence which in itself is highly meaningful. The response that comes after the prevailing silence pelts the eerie situation with a piece of pebble to create echoing ripples of mysterious meanings: "We're taking him to Monty." Then comes the more meaningful one: "He needs special treatment." Obviously these two responding moves mean quite differently to Petey and to the audience intently witnessing the play. Both "Monty" and "special treatment" create a menace of their own, meaningful only to the careful audience who has already entered far into Pinter's dramatic territory.

In The Birthday Party the difference in the meaning lies first in an insistence that the words go somewhere towards some predetermined end. It lies in an enveloped meaning designed to advance the dramatic action. This is what occurs in Strindberg's manifesto for the naturalistic theatre. It says that while the dialogue seems to stray a good deal in the opening scenes, "it acquires a material that later on is worked over, picked up again, repeated, expounded, and built up like the theme in a musical composition."¹⁵ The pertinent silence which prevails in between the question and the response is essentially a
means of implanting a dramatic impression and schooling the audience to hear and see what the author wants them to. For, to react fully to any single effect, the audience aught to be given a certain span of time during which it can consider that single given effect to the exclusion of anything else. This means that any sentence or part thereof which is intended by the dramatist to convey a particular message or to impart a particular effect should be followed by a pause or an appropriate silence so that the particular message or effect may have time to sink into the consciousness of the audience.

Hence as soon as Petey intervenes in the smooth operation of Goldberg and McCann the situation becomes grim with serious implication. It is the play's final moment of recognition. The clean-shaven, well-dressed Stanley is being forcibly taken to some unknown destination, to his extinction. The henchmen encounter resistance for the first time from Petey. The stunning silence helps the audience to have a feel of the crucial moment, moment of recognition, before the end.

The lingual idiom in The Birthday Party shows that the play has been written by a dramatist who has an acute sense of reality. It at once reminds us that humanity is immense and reality has myriad appearances, having several levels of meaning. A playwright, like any other literary artist, must write from experience. As an absurdist,
Pinter tries to establish the basic human situation that our experience is neither strictly limited nor comfortably complete. We read this message clearly in Stanley's predicament. As a self-conscious and essentially free dramatist Pinter has endeavoured in *The Birthday Party* to confer upon the stage language a total autonomy in order to create a verbal vision of life that cuts across both time and space to assume a cosmic voice of the distressed humanity. As a consummate craftsman, Pinter here creates the required atmosphere with his subtly suggestive dramatic dialogue:

Goldberg: You'll be reorientated.  
McCann: You'll be rich.  
Goldberg: You'll be adjusted.  
McCann: You'll be our pride and joy.  
Goldberg: You'll be a mensch.  
McCann: You'll be a success.  
Goldberg: You'll be integrated.  
McCann: You'll give orders.  
Goldberg: You'll make decisions. ... Animals.  
McCann: Animals (I, pp.93-94).

This interchange embodies tension and intensity which result from variations in the patterns of rhythm and tempo. Here tension is created through the dialogue because the opening moves do not receive their responding moves. It is noteworthy that the suggesting moves of Goldberg and McCann, occurring in quick succession without any response from Stanley, help in creating a high degree of tension. When we go through the experience of Stanley, Goldberg and McCann, we find that
words are imposed upon the characters from the external
world of speech and movement as known and experienced by
the playwright himself. This is what has prompted Pinter
to submit himself to the uncanny influences of the words
as they are used practically. It is through these words
that he has tried to break through the mysterious
absurdity of modern life. We may cite the following
passage:

Goldberg: When did you come to this place? ... Where did you come from? ...
Stanley: Somewhere else.
Goldberg: Why did you come here?
Stanley: My feet hurt.
Goldberg: Why did you stay?
Stanley: I had a headache (I, pp. 58-59).

The passage gives us an indication of the modern
ontological quests for determining man's existential
predicament. Stanley can make out that he has come from
"somewhere else", but why he has come here he does not
know. His answer gets lost in the cobweb of nonsense —
"my feet hurt". Nor can he clarify why he has been
staying there. Unable to express his existential anguish,
he babbles: "I had a headache." Then the conversation
further degenerates into the absurd, pointing unmistakably
to the sudden fearful experience of the time. The passage
quoted above throws overboard the conventional stage-
dialogue, inviting the audience to share a flux of
composite and unsorted-out experiences of human life.
Pinter's plays do not help us to account for the behaviour of his characters such as Petey, Meg, Lulu, Stanley, Goldberg, McCann. There is no mighty Shavian stage-direction or any specific description about their behaviour. "My characters", as Pinter puts it, "tell me so much and no more". 

The dramatic dialogue employed in the play is in harmony with the dramatist's conviction that "communication is too alarming. To enter into someone else's life is too frightening. To disclose to others the poverty within us is too fearsome a possibility." Pinter's stage dialogue in The Birthday Party continually strives to achieve this "too fearsome a possibility", giving rise to a "language... where under what is said, another thing is being said." Pinter discards the track leading to the easy correlation, synchronised narration or comfortable distinction. In his quest for equation between form and matter, as in The Birthday Party, time plays a vital role. The dialogue focuses on events as and when they occur. Pinter has drastically reduced the details regarding characterisation to a few stylized gestures and attitudes. But through an unspecified time-frame the characters of The Birthday Party pass through a definite movement, and this movement is more or less spatial. The characters do not develop in time; they move forward towards the last act to "time's livid final flame", to use Harry Levin's phrase, when the audience is pervaded by a sense of the
meaninglessness of life.

Stanley will have to accept such a life. After being roughed up by Goldberg and McCann, who may be taken for the inexorable forces of life, he resigns himself to this life. We find in Act III that Stanley is not shabbily dressed which was the sign of his apparent revolt against the documented life thrust upon him. He is now "dressed in a dark well-cut suit and white collar" which bear testimony to his compromise with the law-book of reality. He is also "clean-shaven", showing that he has been baptized into the worldly reality. His glasses which he used in order to see beyond reality, are crushed by McCann. Stanley is made to hold "his broken glasses in his hand". The dialogue at this point intensifies Stanley's discomfiture:

McCann : He looks better, doesn't he?
Goldberg : Much better.
McCann : A new man (I, p.91).

Though Stanley objected to conform to the patterned life by refusing to accept his superimposed "birthday", yet he has to get re-orientated to such life. The pattern of life is dexterously presented through the following dialogue:

Goldberg : We'll watch over you.
McCann : Advise you.
Goldberg : Give you proper care and treatment.
McCann : Let you use the club bar.
Goldberg : Keep a table reserved. ...
McCann: Take you for constitutionals. ... We'll provide the skipping rope. ... The ointment.

Goldberg: The abdomen belt.
McCann: The ear plugs.
Goldberg: The baby powder. ...
McCann: The stomach pump.
Goldberg: The oxygen tent. ... The plaster of Paris.
McCann: The crash helmet.
Goldberg: The crutches. ... We'll make a man of you.
McCann: And a woman (I, pp. 92-93).

Here Pinter's dramatic dialogue effectively conveys to the audience how the runaway Stanley is successfully nailed on the chess-board of reality. Every word of Goldberg and McCann following the pendulum movement of ticking alternation hits the audience in the dark auditorium. This symbolises modern man's existential predicament. Stanley will be "watched over" and "advised" which clearly denotes Stanley's formidable loss of freedom. Stanley will have "care" and "treatment" — which reminds us of later Pinter of The Hothouse and One for the Road — to be essentially cured of his malady that compelled him to seek a breakaway. "Club bar" will be there and a besotted Stanley won't falter. He will have a "table reserved" and won't have to keep fumbling for a seat for himself away from the bar. His "constitutionals" will be done under expert eyes, and "skipping rope" will be provided to tone up his weight and measure. For Stanley there won't be any getaway from the demonstrated drills of the orchestrated life.
He will acquire "abdomen belt" and "ear plug". In other words, his proportion can't betray his upkeep, and with an ear-plug he won't even have to listen to the murmur of complaints around him. Stanley will be smeared with "baby powder". As a baby he won't have to raise his deliberate discordant voice of protest which a grown-up man may raise. "Stomach pump" and "oxygen tent" will be kept ready for Stanley in view of an emergency in case he tries to go astray. "Plaster of Paris" will turn Stanley's face into a mask. "Crash helmet" will protect his head from dashing against any solid rock of corrective thought or idea — reactionary or anti-reactionary. Ultimately, if necessary, Stanley may have his legs amputated, requiring "crutches" which will be made available to him.

A masterly handling of dramatic dialogue has made the absurd situation of life funny to such an extent that laughter gradually stops and an acute sense of the meaninglessness of life pervades the entire dramatic canvas. In view of all this, we may agree with Dukore when he observes that "despite their surface naturalism his (Pinter's) plays had links to the ... Theatre of the Absurd." The dialogue in the interrogation scene shows that the sensation of metaphysical anguish when confronted by the absurdity of the human condition becomes the major theme of absurd drama. In Pinter form and content are thus consummately fused into one another. Pinter's dramaturgy as it is revealed in The Birthday Party clearly
seeks to provide the audience with direct experience and a sense of involvement which is hardly attainable by segregating the meaningful content from the form. Here the meaning inheres in the direct impact of what happens on the stage at the level of dramatic dialogue itself, and not in an explanatory character. The following passage illustrates the point:

Petey: This is a straight show.
Meg: What do you mean?
Petey: No dancing or singing.
Meg: What do they do then?
Petey: They just talk (Pause) (I, p.23).

In *The Birthday Party* characters just talk, but this talk cannot be taken at its face value. The utterances of the characters are open to divergent interpretations. This feature of Pinter's dialogue makes his plays different from the conventional plays. In the latter, characters use dialogue for their underhand strategy but reveal their real motives through monologues. In Pinter's plays, however, both dialogue and monologue deviate from the normal. His characters are unreliable both when they talk to themselves and to others.

It is important to note that the characters in *The Birthday Party* are deliberately inarticulate. They are as much unwilling as unable to communicate, being afraid of exposing themselves or opening themselves up. Petey, Meg, Stanley, Goldberg and McCann use words in order to
avoid being intelligible. It is, as Pinter says, "a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smokescreen", blocking their inner feelings. It is not really failure of communication as alleged by some critics. The fact is that Pinter's characters communicate, like most of us in real life, only too well in their silence, in what is not said. According to Pinter, what takes place in real life is a continual evasion, a desperate anxiety to keep ourselves to ourselves. Pinter does not say that language is incapable of establishing true communication between the homo sapiens. He only says that in life language is seldom used for the purpose of clear communication. In The Birthday Party, for example, the characters interact through their dialogue rather emotionally than logically. In the verbal assault of Goldberg & McCann on Stanley the violence of the emotion behind the words is more significant than their content. As Esslin points out, "What matters in most oral verbal contact therefore is more what people are doing to each other through it rather than the conceptual content of what they are saying.""46

The Birthday Party starts comically but gradually develops into psychological menace and physical violence, and this is done in terms of dramatic dialogue. Several passages, like the one given below, are apparently comic, but they tend to create an atmosphere of menace, evasion,
mystery, suspense:

McCann: Nat.
Goldberg: What?
McCann: He won't sit down.
Goldberg: Well, ask him.
McCann: I've asked him.
Goldberg: Ask him again.
McCann(to Stanley): Sit down.
Stanley: Why?
McCann: You'd be more comfortable.
Stanley: So would you (I, p.56).

From now on tension rapidly mounts. Despite several comic overtones, *The Birthday Party* is heavily charged with references to physical violence.

Dialogue in *The Birthday Party* shows that insecurity and fear create dramatic tensions, and account for many ambiguities, contradictions and character interrelationships. What happens creates an atmosphere of suspicion and fear. Characters evade issues and refuse to reveal themselves. Such evasion is brought forward through the application of a powerful dramatic language. It is not the characters' background that is of major dramatic concern, but their avoidance of revealing the same. Thus Goldberg himself tells Lulu jovially in Act II that his wife, who had a grand funeral, called him "Simey" (I, p.69). But no sooner has McCann called him by the same name in Act III than he flares up in rage:

McCann: ... Simey.
Goldberg: (opening his eyes, regarding McCann) What - ddd - you - call - me?
McCann : Who?

Goldberg : (murderously) Don't call me that. (He seizes McCann by the throat.) NEVER CALL ME THAT (I, p.86).

Pinter does not resolve the contradiction. To Lulu, an immediate acquaintance, Goldberg could use the name "Simey", by which his deceased wife used to call him, with no inhibition. But to his old associate and accomplice, McCann, the name might dig up some dead and buried, unwholesome reminiscences, as suggested by the word "funeral". What matters dramatically is that Goldberg is frightened. Thus Pinter maintains linguistic links to various scenes of The Birthday Party. Scattered throughout the play are references to accidents, deaths, blindness, violence and murder. Such connectives and symmetry may be said to be Pinter's sine qua non as a playwright. He maintains scenic balance through dramatic dialogue, and constructs plausible rather than rational links by which the playwright implies what he would not elucidate in the play.

Pinter's dialogue never draws a complete circle. His dramatic idioms do not provide realistic elucidations, answers or solutions. Disturbing questions arise in the minds of the audience who don't understand why characters visit one another, why they act as they do, why they are afraid themselves or why others fear them. Pinter's plays are often charged with "wilful obfuscation" by readers or reviewers who fail to get at their meaning.
Thus, in *The Birthday Party*, Pinter presents, through his dialogue, the true human trauma, namely that man does not know himself or cannot express his predicament. Here Pinter's dialogue becomes highly effective, merging the form perfectly with the content. The characters in *The Birthday Party* exchange words that emphasise the meaninglessness and purposelessness of life. Their apparently illogical, unmotivated utterances are based on real-life conversations. This linguistic absurdity reveals the absurdity of the basic human condition. Inadequacy of expression in the existential human situation is shown from several angles. The dialogue creates the dramatic tension due to conflict between the conformist social pretences and a character's sub-conscious desire that remains repressed.
Notes and References

All references to The Birthday Party are to Pinter Plays: One (London: Methuen, 1986). Page numbers have been cited parenthetically in the text.


2. Ibid., p.83.


4. Ibid., p.21.


10. Ibid., p. 12. Pinter says: "A play is not an essay.... The audience holds the paper. The play fills in the blanks."


30. Ibid., p.12.


38. Pinter's speech in Hamburg, West Germany, on being awarded the 1970 German Shakespeare Prize. Cited in *Pinter Plays: Four* (London: Methuen, 1984), pp.xii-xiii.

39. Ibid., p.xiii.

40. Ibid., p.xiii.


43. Ibid., p.15.

44. Ibid., p.14.


Pinter worked as an actor at Chesterfield Hippodrome, at the King's Theatre, Hammersmith; with Sir Donald Wolfit; with the Whitby S.P.A. Repertory Co.; with Huddersfield Repertory Co.; with Colchester Repertory Co.; with the Barry O'Brien Co. at the Palace Court, Bournemouth; with Philip Barrett's New Malvern Co. at the Pavilion, Torquay; with the Alexandra Repertory Co. at the Alexandra Theatre, Birmingham; with Fred Tripp's Co. at the Intimate Theatre, Palmers Green; at the Richmond Theatre, London; and at the Connaught Theatre, Worthing. He also worked with Anew McMaster in Ireland.

Pinter gradually withdrew from stage acting. On 19 September, 1960 he made his last appearance as David Baron at Cheltenham as Goldberg in The Birthday Party. His stage name he decided to assume in 1954 on the advice of his agent, as pointed out by Martin Esslin, Pinter: The Playwright, op.cit., p.18.