CHAPTER TWO

LANGUAGE GAMES: MENACE MATERIALIZED

(THE ROOM AND THE BIRTHDAY PARTY)

Harold Pinter (1930-2008) has been one of the best British playwrights, who have been unanimously hailed as the precursor of postmodernism in the field of drama along with his senior European contemporaries, Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco. It would, however be more accurate to say that Pinter took over from where the absurd dramatists left, exploring a wider field, and where no one body of theory or categorization could be employed singularly to his work. It has always been a difficult task to define a playwright, who bore several tags. His work emerged as being slotted on multi dimensional levels. Yet what baffled the critics in the beginning was the non-definite definition of puzzling pieces of writings, which seemed as un-verifiable as they appeared ‘nonsensical’. It was only after some dust had settled down (concerning the clamour against him) that his early writings became slotted as ‘Comedies of Menace’, which included plays like The Room (his first play written in 1957), The Birthday Party, and The Slight Ache, to name a few. The term was coined first by David Compton in 1958, who used it in connection with The Birthday Party as it was a play that reflected (thematically) a mixed mood of being as comic as it seemed threateningly cruel.

Technically, Pinter worked with words, shaping them into a dense complex texture with astonishing élan and expertise. Quite rightly, Andrew Kennedy has attributed the title “Comedy of Mannerism” to his plays, in this respect. Pinter’s dramatic literary work has proved an interesting study of structural shaping in the compositional frame of his dialogue and textural verbal varieties and complexities of everyday speech. The tools applied by the dramatist include various stylistic features and verbal devices like patterns of syntax and rhythm, vernacular vocabulary, sounds leading to perception of verbal mode and tone, to the smallest details of precise subtleties. Even ellipses, pauses and silences have been used by the dramatist as rhythms and a mode of dramatic action.
Pinteresque—the paradox of wide acclaim, which was attributed to Pinter’s writings, is synonymous with everyday conversation, which is full of (to quote Ronald Hayman) “bad syntax, tautologies, pleonasms, repetitions, non-sequiturs and self-contradictions.” (1-2, Harold Pinter) It reveals its unique aspect in the adroit usage in a tightly controlled dialogue where “[e]very syllable, every inflection, the succession of long and short sounds, words and sentences are calculated to a nicety.” (2) Pinter’s virtuosity lies in his artful interweaving of narratives, which consequently produce disconcerting models of a complex nature of social exchange in the domains of varying scope and complexities. What we find in Pinter’s drama is essentially a postmodernistic fusion of several elemental generic modes (naturalism, expressionism, and the absurdist) and it becomes difficult to classify his plays under a single rubric.

Pinter’s innovation lies in capitalising on the non-smooth and non-logical aspects of real life conversation transforming the minimal colloquial to aesthetic expressiveness through, what Koestler in his The Act of Creation calls, the process of infolding:

The intention is ... to make [the message] more luminous by compelling the recipient to work it out by himself to reveal it. Hence the message must be handed to him in implied form- and implied means ‘folded in’. To make it unfold, he must fill in the gaps, complete the hint, and see through the symbolic disguise. (25, qtd. in Andrew Kennedy, Six Dramatists)

Pinter does this by neatly structuring and manipulating the vernacular till the extrapolative dynamics of the apparently banal becomes explicit through his handling of the idiom. Organising speech artistically, to produce a theatrical illusion of daily discourse, Pinter experiments to expose how a mass of dead and atrophied terminology when suffused with tension between the characters inarticulateness can create a highly charged atmosphere of menace. As Pinter himself puts it in his essay “Writing for the Theatre”: “The more acute the experience, the less articulate its expression.” (11, CW I)

The dramatist worked at creating patterns of dialogue based on everyday speech. His fragmentary narratives have a consistent rhythmic construction which produces a kind of symbolic charge which is absent in conventional realism. It is Pinter’s
innovative ability to exploit the energy produced out of such formalisations that gives birth to the underlying tension, the menace, and the absurd in his comedies.

In Pinter’s early ‘Comedies of Menace’ the ‘quasi-naturalism’ in the plays is so compellingly accurate that they can be termed as ‘hyper real’. One requires a keen sense of perception to decipher the modulations and modifications that the dramatist made from real life observations on which his early plays, *The Room* and *The Birthday Party* have been based. The two plays, that engender the theme of the menacing invasion and the fearful evasion, have been discussed in this chapter.

1.

For a first play, *The Room* (which was written within a span of four days) exhibits an astonishing mastery of dialogue. Martin Esslin comments about the play:

... each character[in the play] has his own style of speech and wittily observed vernacular with its rambling syntax and tautologies which is brilliantly modulated into intensity of poetic climax between Rose and Riley. (69, *Pinter the Playwright*)

Like in other early plays Pinter’s primary concern here is presenting a ‘situation’ that involves two (or three) people in a room and where the visual and the verbal together shape up thought into a potent build up of menace which leads to a shocking impact. In a programme brochure to a stage performance of the play Pinter warned:

Given a man in a room and he will sooner or later receive a visitor. A visitor entering the room will enter with intent.... A man in the room who receive a visit is likely to be illuminated or horrified by it.... however much it is expected the entrance when it comes is almost always unwelcome.(44, qtd. in *Pinter the Playwright*)

Pinter uses language like putty, to shape up his verbal-visual themes, which mostly concern ambiguous identity and motivation, difficulty of verification, contradictoriness and ambivalence. This shaping involves a montage technique in a textual sequence, using dramatic devices of *Commedia dell arte*, vaudeville, parody and pastiche, the conventional Greek stichomythia, extended soliloquy, misplaced literalism, bathos and also various other rhetorical and syntactic devices.
True to Pinter’s own words, his plays are “about what their title is about” and the central image in *The Room* is two people in a room (an image which becomes a recurrent motif in several of his plays that follow in his *oeuvre*). Pinter created dramatic suspense, using basic ingredients of “pure literary theatre” involving people, a door on the stage, and a poetic image of unidentified fear and expectation.

To begin, with examining the salient features to the play’s dramaturgy that helps shape up the theme, the stage set up is periodically realistic and evocatively detailed: a utilitarian drab and a murky refuge full of household furniture and crockery and warmed up with a fire in the fireplace. In contrast to the realistic details of the set up, Pinter de-familiarizes and deconstructs social realism by creating an ambiguity about characters identification and their environment.

Gradually in the course of the play, the realistic visual image of the room that has been projected on the proscenium undergoes a modification through use of verbal means by the landlord, Mr. Kidd with his lack of surety about the dimensions and the suggestively uncountable floors in the building in which the room is situated:

ROSE. How many floors you got in this house?

MR KIDD Floors (*he laughs*) Ah, we had a good few of them in old days.

ROSE. How many have you got now?

MR KIDD. Well, to tell you the truth, I don’t count them now. (108, *CW I*)

An atmosphere of menace is created by the suggestive infinity of a staircase that disappears into oblivion in the space above, which is an image of a Kafkaesque nightmare. This image is further enhanced during the course of the play when Mrs. Sands in her speech says:

... Anyway ... we came up and we went to the top. There was a door locked on the stairs. So there might have been another floor [s] ...” (117)

Pinter’s virtuosity thus, lies in his subtly gradual intensification of the atmosphere of menace through the application of hyper realistic demotic dialogue that proceeds forward like a musical theme, which builds up and reaches a crescendo in its
finally shocking elements. Since menace is the major theme of *The Room*, Pinter deliberately destroys clues that might lead to a rational appraisal of the play. In fact irrationality becomes his theme since it is synonymously suggestive of menace.

The purpose of the textual analysis here is to elucidate the technique that Pinter employed to shape up his theme. The tension inherent in the language dynamics has been handled so adroitly by the dramatist that even the most banal conversation is put through linguistic devices of rhythm and beat, pauses and silences in order to work dramatic wonders with the language.

Rose’s four page opening monologue is fraught with pleonasms, fragmentariness and banality of real life conversation which, (likewise) does not proceed with smoothness or logically. With speech alongside action in the stage directions, Pinter fuses the verbal with the visual to create, what can oxymoronically be referred to as fragmentary- spontaneity of the idiom:

ROSE. Here you are. This will keep the cold out

*She places bacon and eggs on a plate, turns off gas and takes the plate to the table.*

It’s very cold out; I can tell you, It’s murder

*She returns to the stove pours the water from the kettle into the teapot turns off the gas.... cuts slices of bread Bert begins to eat.*

That’s right you eat that. You’ll need it. You can tell it in here. Still the room keeps warm. It’s better than the basement anyway.

*She butters the bread*

I don’t know how they live down there. It’s asking for trouble. Go on. Eat it up. It’ll do you good.

..........................................................I’ve never seen who it is. Who is it? Who lives down there? I’ll have to ask. I mean you might as well know Best.

*Pause*

I think it’s changed hands since I was last there – I didn’t see who arrived in there...
She goes to the table and slices bread
I’ll have some cocoa on when you come back.

She goes to the window and settles the curtains
No this room is alright for me. When it is cold for instance.

She goes to the table.

What about the rasher? Was it alright? It was a good one. I know, but not as good as the last lot I got in.

She goes to the rocking chair and sits
Anyway I haven’t been out. I haven’t been so well.... Don’t worry Bert. You go. You won’t be long.

She rocks

It’s good you were up here, I can tell you. It’s good weren’t down there, in the basement. That’s no joke. Oh. I’ve left the tea. I’ve left the tea standing. (101-103)

The apparent spontaneity of the visual-verbal inconsistencies is a well designed shaping of the monologue by a playwright who spoke about this method in his speech on writing for the theatre in Bristol in 1962.

I play meticulous attention ... from the shape of a sentence to the overall structure of the play. This shaping is of first importance.... a double thing happens. You arrange and you listen following the clues you leave for yourself through the characters. And sometimes a balance is found where image can freely engender image and where you are able to keep your sights on the place where characters are silent and in hiding. It is in the silence that they are most evident to me. (14, CW 1)

Thus ‘shaping’ in Pinter’s plays produces an ever mounting tension and the need for the dialogue to express the ‘known’ and the ‘unspoken’. Pinter goads his audience to explore the ‘territory’ in between what is said and what is left unsaid (pauses and silence); to explore those attributes of language that arise from elusive and evasive obstructions and unwillingness of his characters in their speech, and to explore or lay
bare the subtext from beneath the “smokescreen” of language fortress that they erect around themselves.

In Rose’s opening monologue, there lie scattered, clues that have an implicit reference to darkness, insecurity, cold, fear and even death. Her constant jabbering creates a tension under which we can glimpse an equivocal and ambivalent relationship. As Sanjay Kumar put it “Mrs. Rose ... has to chatter all the way to keep the ball rolling between him (her husband) and her. The language employed is useful method of avoiding total silence.” (27, Language as Stratagem)

Rose’s constant prattle, interrupted only by her own fidgety movements and pauses, keep returning in an obsessive compulsive manner to the subject of the basement; something she obviously fears as a dark, unsettling and ominously claustrophobic place. Rose seems to reassure herself about the safety of her refuge by constantly comparing her “warm” room with the cold and damp basement. This she does while she keeps wrapping her cardigan around her, an action which reveals contradiction in her speech and behaviour.

Her constantly favourable reiterations about her room and its apparent safety suggest hints of her underlying suspicion about the place. She seems to be desperately trying to defend what she actually subconsciously wishes to reject:

If they ever ask you Bert, I am quite happy where I am. We’re quite, we’re all right. You’re happy up here. It’s not far up either when you come in from outside. And we’re not bothered and nobody bothers us. (103, CW I. emphasis mine)

In this instance Pinter makes the word ‘happy’ early on in the speech deconstruct itself with the use of word ‘bother’ in the end, rendering the ‘happiness’ she speaks of as doubtful. Again, she verges on desperation to make herself believe that what she thinks about the room is true. This Pinter affects by making her speech a parody of the persuasive advertising and marketing jargon:

It’s a good room. You’ve got a chance in a place like this. I look after you don’t I Bert? Like when they offered us the basement here I said no straight off.... No, you’ve got a window here, you can move yourself you can come home at night if you have to go out, you can do your job, you can come
home. You’re all right. And I’m here. You stand a chance.
(105, emphasis mine)

With the use of what is termed as ‘phatic’ speech and the repetitions along with a salesman’s jargon, Pinter makes apparent Rose’s desperation to ‘sell’ the place along with herself in it, favourably to her husband whose interest seems to be waning in her (a fact explicit in his lack of response to her wooing). Here Rose’s ‘surface lie’ defends a deeper lie since she obviously is not safe in the squalor of a hole: a mysterious nightmarishly gigantic building with a shadowy threat that lurks in the basement, a nutty landlord, and a taciturn dominant thug of a husband.

The repetitions of two “you have” and four “you can” in the frenetic speech reveals an underlying panic that becomes apparent when we see Rose moving towards the absurd with the argument “you can move yourself ”, “you can come home at night”-, “you can do your job”. (105) The speech rhythm developed through repetitions is syntactically ritualistic, which is in order to evoke a feeling of dignity. They spring from her need to create an image of a luxuriously beneficial haven, to lure her man back to her every time he goes out. This springs from an existential fear of being alone.

Her attempts to work on Bert’s psyche with words as her tools; coaxing him and making him believe that he needs her for his own good, is actually a desperate act to ensure his return back to her who she knows is ten years younger and thereby stronger than her is evident in her speech acts:

I don’t know whether you ought to go out. I mean you shouldn’t straight after you’re been laid up. Still don’t worry Bert. You go. (104)

and

Its good you weren’t down in the basement ... Those walls would have finished you off. (104)

also

Nice weak tea. Lovely weak tea Here you are. Drink it down. I’ll wait for mine. Anyway, I’ll have it a bit stronger. (104, emphasis mine)
are all suggestive of her rubbing it in, in no uncertain terms that he is dependent and she is stronger than him. She tries to please Bert by praising his driving skill. Pinter makes her hammer the ‘fact’ by making her use the device of tautological repetitiveness and pleonasms:

I know you can drive. I’m not saying you can’t drive. I mentioned to Mr. Kidd this morning that you’d be doing a run today. I told him you hadn’t been two grand, but I said, still, he’s a marvellous drive. I wouldn’t mind what time, where, nothing. Bert, you know how to drive I told him. (104)

Yet her words ring untrue. With a clue in a single statement “I told him you hadn’t been too grand” the structure of the praise build up earlier, tumbles down bathetically. It is such multi layered dimensionality, and the subversive and self contradictory aspect of Pinter’s speeches that lends them their insidious power, all achieved by his use of language dynamics from one words clue to another.

Language signifies pointers and movements both in its spoken and written forms. It is full of potential drama if punctuated with right inflection, pauses and silences and its vocal articulations and tonality. It is interesting to note that, during Rose’s extended monologue, Bert’s silence becomes a part of what can oxymoronically be called ‘silent speech’ as a metaphor. While Bert’s silence creates humour for the audience, it is also a cause of enhancing tension and insecurity in Rose. By juxtaposing Rose’s loquacity against Bert’s silence, Pinter dramatises desperation, in her jostling with speech in order to communicate with Bert (who stonewalls her with his with an adamant muteness) and her failure to do so. His taciturnity is actually a passive aggressive denial on his part, to second her opinion and also his mute refusal to respond to her xenophobic need for protection from the tenebrous forces, which she believes, lurk in the basement of the building. Pinter here creates a sense of irony in the growing vacuum of uncertainty, fear and darkness in the room—a vacuum enhanced by Bert’s silence. Thus the latent menace in Rose’s apparent gibberish stands exposed when Pinter counterpoints it with Bert’s silence. With the introduction of Mr. Kidd (the landlord) on the scene, Bert’s silence assumes a threatening quality. In his failure to respond to Mr. Kidd’s queries, Bert clearly reveals himself as a passive aggressive being.
The subtext in Rose’s speech becomes more regulated and noticeable when Pinter precedes or terminates it with a pause. The pauses illustrate not only a continuing thought process, but they also seek a response. At certain points, they have also been used to change the subject or signify the end of one movement and the beginning of another.

Pinter’s illustrative mode of expression is presentational which he actuates through sets of images and language patterns that are consummate with his thematic clusters. He achieves a fusion of speech acts with physical action or inaction, and the entire scenario of stage setting, lighting or body language is organized as either a thematic extension or contradictions. But the main structural principle is the use of language, and its shifting dynamics.

The interaction between Rose and Mr. Kidd exhibits a lack of co-ordination between the two speakers. Language as human discourse portrays another pattern here by becoming a vehicle of evading issues and of masking reality. As Guido Almansi puts it:

Pinter’s characters are often abject, stupid, vile, and aggressive; but they are always intelligent enough in their capacity as conscientious and persistent liars.... They are too cunning in their cowardice to be compared to noble animals. They are perverted in their action and speech; hence human. (qtd. in *Silence and Silencing*, Chittaranjan Misra)

Mr. Kidd who enters the room on the pretext of checking the pipes is questioned by Rose:

ROSE. It’s a shame you have to go out in this weather Mr. Kidd. Don’t you have a help?

MR KIDD. Eh?

ROSE. I thought you had a woman to help.

MR KIDD. I haven’t got any woman.

ROSE. I thought you had one when we first came in.

MR KIDD. No women here.
ROSE. Maybe I was thinking of someone else.

MR KIDD. Plenty of women round the corner. Not here thought oh no. Eh have I seen that before? (106, CW I)

Here Rose plays the invasive role and probes subtly, the darker involvements of the landlord. Mr. Kidd, on his part, offers a comical denial and skirts the issue with a *non sequitur* posing a counter question in the same breath. “Eh have I seen that before?” pointing to Rose’s rocking chair suggesting that she may have stolen it:

MR KIDD. I seem to have some remembrance of it.

ROSE. It’s just an old rocking chair.

MR KIDD. Was it here when you came?

ROSE. No I brought it myself.

MR KIDD. I could swear blind I have seen that before.

ROSE. Perhaps you have. (106)

The mutual attitude strikes one as non-trusting, and the language, though used unsparingly, reveals nothing. Mr. Kidd’s unwillingness to impart information is illustrated further when Rose slowly and obliquely broaches the subject of the basement.

ROSE. It must get a bit damp downstairs.

MR KIDD. Not as bad as upstairs.

ROSE. What about downstairs?

MR KIDD. Eh?

ROSE. What about downstairs?

MR KIDD. What about it?

ROSE. Must get a bit damp.

MR KIDD. A bit. Not as bad as upstairs though. (108)

Rose’s repeated prodding about the dark ‘downstairs’ or the basement yields no illuminating facts although very unobtrusively, the rhythm generated by the upstairs / downstairs exchange although comic, introduces the subject of staircase, which is the
fateful passage linking the room to the danger; of basement at one end and infinity or
death at the other. Mr. Kidd’s answer to Rose’s question about the number of floors in
the building introduces an image of a horrific menace.

ROSE. How many floors you got in this house?

MR KIDD. Floors *(He laughs).* Ah, we had a good few of them in the old
days.

ROSE. How many have you got now?

MR KIDD. Well, to tell you the truth, I don’t count them now. (108)

Without actual reference to either the Gothic or the supernatural Mr. Kidd’s
implication of an endless, ever growing staircase that seems to fade into oblivion in the
sky, produces surrealistic horror of the chiaroscuro technique usually applied in
Expressionist paintings. Mr. Kidd’s deliberate obfuscation of facts is menacing and
gives a new depth to the already sinister situation. Herein lies, Pinter’s innovative
ability to inter-fuse the Kafkaesque with the quasi-naturalistic speech. Mr. Kidd’s
elusive language continues with his uncalled for explanation as to why he couldn’t
count the floors, by his linking of the ‘rejection of countable’ to his sister’s death: “I
used to count them once...That was when my sister was alive”; a sister who “took
after [his] mum”, who in turn was ‘perhaps’ a Jewess: “I think my mum was a Jewess,
I wouldn’t be surprised to learn she was a Jewess.”. (109) Upon Rose’s further enquiry
about the cause of his sister’s death, Mr. Kidd evades the topic with yet another *non
sequitur*:

ROSE. What did your sister die of?

MR KIDD. Who?

ROSE. Your sister.

*Pause*

MR KIDD. I’ve made ends meet. (109)

Mr. Kidd’s stream of conscious like reverie which proceeds from the subject of
staircase and his sister’s death, to the possibility of his own mother being of Jewish
and therefore of a marginalized origin, is perhaps Pinter’s menacingly suggestive
pointer about Rose’s own origin, and thereby her hazardous predicament leading to her
impending death. Thus the Pinter menace slowly but surely grows and proceeds to enhance Rose’s already tormented state of dark forebodings and her existential fear.

After Bert’s departure, the ostensible safety of the sequestered room of Rose, Rose is once again ‘bothered’ by the intrusion of a young couple namely Mr. and Mrs. Sands. This is Pinter’s creation of yet another ‘situation’. The potentially young usurpers ready to oust the middle-aged couple is a very real threat. Rose becomes intensely wary, when she learns that the young couple is looking for a room in the building. As directed by the mysterious ‘voice’ in the basement, Mr. and Mrs. Sands land up at Rose’s doorstep. There ensues a confused conversation about the landlord’s identity after Rose invites them for a ‘warm up’ from the cold outside. The confusion between the identity of ‘Mr. Kidd’ and ‘Mr. Hudd’ creates a semantic ripple which, after a pause, drives Mrs. Sands to conclude that there may be two landlords. The pause here is a continuation of a thought process which makes one rationalize confusion by linking loose ends with possibilities. After yet another pause (during which his mind seems to over think towards the preposterous), Mr. Sands mutters: “That’ll be the day.” (113) With the ominous overtones of Mr. Sand’s statement, the theme shapes up and foregrounds a battlefield like situation between Rose’s two contenders: Bert and Riley.

The situation thus shaped by Pinter’s strategic use of language, introduces his famous theme of domination/subjugation. With various fragments of speeches that follow, Pinter portrays a contest of wills between the young Sands couple. This is his theatrical stratagem: of linking the local small scale with the larger scope of implication in the play. This Pinter affects through imaginatively orchestrated interaction between the three people present on the scene:

ROSE. Sit down here. You can get a good warm.

MRS SANDS. Thanks. She sits.

ROSE. Come over by the fire Mr. Sands.

MR SANDS. No, it’s all right. I’ll just stretch my legs.

MRS SANDS. Why? You haven’t been sitting down.

MR SANDS. What about it?
MRS SANDS. Why don’t you sit down?
MR SANDS. Why should I?
MRS SANDS. You must be cold.
MR SANDS. I’m not.
MRS SANDS. You must be. Bring over a chair and sit down.
MR SANDS. I’m all right standing up. Thanks.
MRS SANDS. You don’t look one thing or the other standing up.
MR SANDS. I’m quiet all right Clarrisa. (112)

In Pinter’s work generally, sitting down is equivalent to having allowed oneself to be subjugated. Therefore it is a metaphor of defeat. Mr. Sand’s refusal to sit despite his wife’s repeated insistence is an assertion of his will and a refusal to be subjugated. Pinter’s economical use of language is remarkable here. With the phrases ‘sitting down’ and ‘standing up’ he conjoins the subordinate and the superior respectively. The battle of assertive /aggressive is so ridiculous that it verges on the comical. During the course of conversation with Rose, Mr. Sands absentmindedly sits on a table, an action Mrs. Sands pointedly exclaims about:

MRS SANDS. You’re sitting down!
MR SANDS. (jumping up), Who is?
MRS SANDS. You were.
MR SANDS. Don’t be silly. I perched.
MRS SANDS. I saw you sit down.
MR SANDS. You did not see me sit down because I did not sit bloody well down.

I perched! (116)

Through the comic, yet aggressive denial of Mr. Sands of having sat down, Pinter builds up the tension which evokes a world of deeper subtext related to the politics of dominance / subservient in domestic relationship. Mr. and Mrs. Sands’ playing such verbal power games is a consciously orchestrated drama on Pinter’s part in order to illustrate a battle of wills that highlights the tension latent in Bert and Rose
relationship. It is possible, that through the Sands couple saga, Pinter affects a projection and externalization of the Bert-and-Rose-tension.

Enduring repeated snubs from her husband, Mrs. Sands finally slips into what may be termed as an ‘extended soliloquy’. This is one of Pinter’s devices of a dark parody of the lofty mode of an Elizabethan dramatic convention. With his extended soliloquies, Pinter applies techniques that demand a forceful exertion of language which becomes an image of a character in a tense combat, desperately seeking control of a situation and of self expression. When the tension between the characters escalates, one of the contestants resorts to this device, as does Mrs. Sands. After having been rebuffed five times by her husband, Mrs. Sands finally resorts to an unstoppable blathering:

MRS SAND. Yes, Mrs. Hudd, you see the thing is Mrs. Hudd, we’d heard they’d got a room to let here, so we thought we’d come along and have a look. Because we’re looking for a place you see, somewhere quiet and we know this district was quiet, and we passed the house a few months ago, but we thought we’d call of an evening, to catch the landlord, so we came along this evening. Well, when we got here we walked in the front door and it was very dark in the hall and there wasn’t anyone about. So we went down to the basement. Well, we got down there due to Toddy having such good eyesight really. Between you and me, I didn’t like the look of it much, I mean the feel, we couldn’t make much out, it smelt damp to me. Anyway, we went through a kind of partition, then there was another partition, and we couldn’t see where we were going, well, it seemed to me it got darker the more we went, the further we went in, I thought we must have come to the wrong house. So I stopped. And Toddy stopped ... (117)

Almost the entire speech seems to be devoted to informing about how the couple got into the house and came looking up for the landlord. The basic aim (of Mrs. Sands) seems to be of blocking Mr. Sand from speaking. The repetitions and rephrasing are just meaningless sounds that stretch the speech. Mrs. Sand makes language flow by the power of its own association. She tries to gain power over her husband through the massive flow of excessively exaggerated language; what Pinter calls “a torrent of speech”. The conjunctions ‘and’ and ‘but’ are used frequently within the speech, joining and expanding it with meaningless associations and parenthetical digressions, that reach them nowhere. Andrew Kennedy defines this ‘mannerism’ in Pinter’s work based on unnecessary details as “language that excels in playing internal variations on its own verbal themes.” (220, Dramatic Dialogue)
Although Mrs. Sand’s extended soliloquy leads to no meaningful resolution of her conflict with Mr. Sand; the speech is inflected with apparently innocuous references to darkness, inability to see, layers of partitions that hide – all a pointer towards mysterious forebodings regarding Rose’s loss of sight or even probable death up ahead.

In fact, Pinter has interspersed the entire play with subtle references to ‘blindness’ or ‘darkness’. When Rose asks Sands what it is like outside they reply:

MRS SANDS. Its very dark out.

MR SANDS. No darker than in.

MRS SANDS. He’s right there.

MR SANDS. It’s darker in than out for my money.

(113. CWI)

This exchange holds a subtle double entendre illustrating Rose’s own present situation. As it is, things are quite dark on the outside, but within Rose there lie hidden some darker secrets, on which Mr. Sand hints that he can take a bet. The tone of his speech starts sounding an alarm bell in Rose’s mind. Mrs. Sand claims of having had the ‘privilege’ of sighting a star in the sky that very evening upon entering the building. This was even before Mr. Sands saw “the first crack (of light)” upon entering the building, she says. Her triumphant claim of one-upmanship makes Mr. Sands react with what is called a ‘pungent interrogative’. “You saw what?” This is done to deliberately dent her moment of triumph. Not willing to be detracted, Mrs. Sands insists trying once again: “I think I did.” Mr. Sands’ repeated question comes as a warning now: “You think you saw what?”(113)This is met again with Mrs. Sands’ defiant “A Star.” Mr. Sands’ ‘Where’ (113) and ‘When’ (114) are encountered with equally confident “in the sky”(113) and “as we were coming down”(114) respectively. Mr. Sands tries to unsettle her confidence with an allegation that she is lying: “You didn’t see a star.”(114)Mrs. Sands unwilling to be defeated thus provokes him further with “Why not.”(114) to which Mr. Sands deadpans: “Because I’m telling you. I’m telling you, you didn’t see a star.” (114)
Mr. Sands’ last statement is a concealed threat verging on violence and assault. With a determined finality he seems to ‘crush’ Mrs. Sands’ revolutionary uprising. Through the course of this exchange Pinter establishes Mr. Sands as a violent brute thus making the menace magnify further. Now he turns his verbal assault on Rose when she interjects:

ROSE. Well, I think you’ll find Mr. Kidd about somewhere.

MR SANDS. He lives here does he?

ROSE. Of course he lives here.

MR SANDS. And you say he’s the landlord is he?

ROSE. Of course he is.

MR SANDS. Well say I wanted to get hold of him where would I find him?

ROSE. Well – I’m not sure.

MR SANDS. He lives here does he?

ROSE. Yes but I don’t know-

MR SANDS. You don’t know exactly where he hangs out.

ROSE. No, not exactly.

MR SANDS. But he does live here doesn’t he?

Pause

MRS SANDS. This is a very big house Toddy.

MR SANDS. Yes I know it is. But Mrs.Hudd seems to know Mr. Kidd very well. (114-115)

Mr. Sands’ last retort assumes a sinister overtone. After repeating twice “He lives here does he?” and a third insistent “But he does live here doesn’t he?” the emphasis on ‘does’ now, by having been placed earlier in the sentence, becomes more assertive and full of innuendo. Mr. Sands hints that Mrs.Hudd seems to know Mr. Kidd ‘very well’, thereby suggesting that she might be in a secret sexual liaison with the landlord. The thrice build up refrain leads to a positive dropping of a bombshell like allegation. Rose naturally reacts to this assault on her character emphatically:
No, I wouldn’t say that. As a matter of fact I don’t know him at all. We’re very quiet. We keep ourselves to ourselves. I never interfere. I mean why should I? We’re got our room. We don’t bother anyone else. That’s the way it should be. (115)

This speech is a typical example of Pinter’s use of ‘phatic’ evasions and also of his subtext. Rose seems to be telling Mr. Sand off by actually saying ‘Don’t try to interfere with my life and you are actually bothering me, which is very rude and unwelcome’.

Rose’s wariness of the couple’s intentions grows and she is now on guard but still unflustered. Even at a point in Mrs. Sands’ extended soliloquy, she jumps to nab a contradiction even in the flow of her speech:

MRS SANDS. ...and we were just coming down when you opened the door.

ROSE. You said you were going up.

MRS SANDS. What?

ROSE. You said you were going up before.

MRS SANDS. No, we were coming down.

ROSE. You didn’t say that before.

MRS SANDS. We’d been up.

MR SANDS. We’d been up. We were coming down. (117-118)

Mr. Sands comes to his wife’s rescue by his ambivalent interjection which mixes ‘up and ‘down’ together and creates ambiguity again in order to befuddle Rose’s sense of clarity. He now makes a final attack on Rose:

MR SANDS. The man in the basement said there was one. One room [vacant]. Number seven he said.

Pause

ROSE. That’s this room.

MR SANDS. We’d better go...

MRS SANDS. Well, thanks for the warm up...
ROSE. This room is occupied. (118)

Under Mr. Sand’s final hit, Rose begins to crack up. With their basic role (of exposing Rose’s mask) done, Pinter removes the couple from the scene with Rose’s frantic assertion of her territory echoing after them.

In the next situation we have two, much terrorised people who are almost hysterical; Mr. Kidd and Rose, who out of their extreme fear are befuddled, and talk at cross-purposes with each other. For a while, there is a complete breakdown of verbal plausibility resulting in dialogue collapse. Rose and Mr. Kidd virtually ‘pounce’ on each other, she, seeking to affirm her claim to her room—her safe haven which has recently been threatened by the potential usurpers; and he, trying to force her into seeing the mysteriously sinister stranger in the basement. This stranger is insistent upon meeting Rose when she is alone or when her husband is away, and won’t go away without the meeting her. The stranger’s odd behaviour terrorises Mr. Kidd to the verge of driving him “off [his] squiff ”(121) as he puts it. Mr. Kidd almost arm-twists Rose into trying to make her meet the stranger by warning her: “If you don’t see him now, there’ll be nothing else for it. He’ll come upon his own bat when your husband’s here, that’s what he’ll do.” (121) Under the pressure of the impending disaster that threatens to ensue, in case the two (Bert and the stranger) face each other, Rose is coerced into agreeing to meet the man from the basement.

In the last scene Pinter uses the technique of concretizing on stage an abstraction of existential fear and death, in the shape of the blind Negro named Riley. Riley is an overtly symbolic image that is semantically layered. His blackness and blindness are both suggestive of the Grim Reaper or the messenger of death. He brings for Rose the command to return to her father (heavenly Father?): “Your father wants you to come home.” (124) ‘Home’ here refers to the final heavenly abode, which probably means that she has to die.

Riley’s reference to Rose by the name Sal confirms her disguise under a new assumed English name: Rose. At first Rose hotly refutes being addressed by the name Sal but with her defences coming down, she soon acquiesces. Her original name is suggestive of her possible Jewish origin which was a community threatened by anti-
Semitic hatred and their resulting exterminations by Fascist regimes during and after World War II in Europe and England.

Here Pinter creates layers of association. By attributing the name Riley (which is Irish, and therefore of another subaltern breed); to the Negro (who is already marginalized by the colour of his skin); and linking his possible filial relationship with Rose, who has another name Sal (possibly Jewish), Pinter exposes Rose’s vulnerability from multiple angles.

Earlier, taking advantage of Riley’s blindness, Rose continues to keep up the pretence of belonging to a socially upwardly mobile class. She starts using speech frantically, rebuking Riley, in order to erect a wall of words around herself, building what Pinter calls “a verbal smokescreen.” Here Pinter creates a pastiche of stylized but clichéd haughty upper class jargon (conventionally used by them for reprimanding servants or beggars) in Rose’s reprimands, directed towards Riley:

1. “Enough is enough. You can take a liberty too far ...... you disturb my evening.”
2. “You’re all deaf and dumb and blind the lot of you. A bunch of cripples.”
3. “My buck. I get these creeps coming in, smelling up my room.”
4. “I wouldn’t know you to spit on, not from a mile off.”
5. “They come in here and stink the place out.”
6. “How did you know what my name was?”
7. “Spit it out or out you go.”
8. “You think I’m an easy touch don’t you? ... Get off out of it. I’ve had enough of this.” (122-124)

The image formed by such a collage technique is that of a frantic life or death fight. Especially the sentence “I get these creeps come in smelling up my room” is a metaphor of rats bringing in plague or ‘black death’. In spite of Rose’s prolonged blabbering, it is Riley who rules with his directly commanding and pithy statements:

1. “Come Home Sal.”
2. “Come now.”
3. “So now you’re here.”
4. “Sal”
5. “I want you to come home.”
6. “Now I see you.”
7. “So now.”
8. “Come home now Sal.” (124-125)

Under the terse stress of each one of his monosyllabic words every sound of Riley’s speech hits the mark and Rose’s exterior shell/mask begins to crumble and fall. With meticulous stylisation (both rhythmic and thematic), Pinter makes possible a rapid fire exchange that burns off Rose’s mask. Her own staccato replies; “Don’t call me that, “Don’t touch me, Not Sal, I can’t, No”, soon turn into “Yes, Yes”’. (124-125)

Riley’s final goading “So now” after a pause turns into “So, now”. The pause induces a vast difference of meaning to the same words used twice. In their use after the pause, with the punctuation (comma) introduced between ‘So’ and ‘now’ there is a stress on second word ‘now’ making it into a command delivered home to Rose an order she no longer can ignore and thereby she relents and obeys:

ROSE. I’ve been here.
RILEY. Yes.
ROSE. Long.
RILEY. Yes
ROSE. The day is a hump. I never go out.
RILEY. No.
ROSE. I’ve been here.
RILEY. Come home now, Sal. (125)

In this exchange Pinter parodies a catholic confession between a sinner and a priest. In this respect Riley’s role is that of a church priest usually called: ‘Father’. Also, earlier by making Riley utter two disparate statements Pinter deliberately affects an impressionistic blurring of identity verifiability:

RILEY. Your father wants you to come home.
and then
RILEY. I want you to come home. (124)

Pinter opens up a host of possibilities of interpretation of these statements. As he puts it elsewhere: “There are at least twenty-four different possible aspects of any
single statement, depending upon where you’re standing at the time or on what the weather is like.” (9, “Writing for the Theatre” CW1)

With her confessional exposure, Rose starts undergoing a surrealistic metamorphosis—turning back into one of her ‘kind’ symbolized by her beginning to turn blind like her kin, the blind Riley. In his stage directions, Pinter makes her emulate the actions of sensing with touch or those of an already blind person:

_She touches his eyes, the back of his head and his temples with her hands._

(125, CW1)

Bert’s sudden entry upon this scene is shocking. But what is more alarming for the audience is his speech which is most unexpected at the moment. His sudden euphoric outburst about his van’s praiseworthiness (which refers to, in feminine gender) is impassioned with erotic overtones:

BERT. I drove her down hard. Then I drove her back hard....
But I drove her. _Pause._ I spend her.... _Pause._ I caned her along.
She was good.... I use my hands like that. I get hold of her. I go where I go. She took me there she brought me back. (126)

Pinter’s ability to yoke metaphorical imagery with crude vernacular is remarkable here. That Bert had noticed Riley soon upon his entrance is evident in his speech suggestion that the van (which is a ‘she’ and therefore comparable with Rose) has been more faithful to him than his wife Rose: “There was no mixing it. Not with her. She was good. She went with me. She don’t mix it with me.” (126) Thus Bert has banished Rose from his affection, in favour of his love for his vehicle. After this, he turns his attention to Riley whom he toples with the armchair on which the blind Negro is sitting, with a single syllabic expulsion of hatred: “Lice!” He strikes him down knocking his head against the stove till Riley becomes inert. Bert then walks out, leaving Rose alone, clutching her eyes and muttering: “Can’t see. I can’t see – I can’t see”

The last stage direction of BLACKOUT illustrates her ultimate loss of sight and possible death like Riley’s. In this respect Ruby Cohn has aptly deduced about Pinter’s plays:
Pinter’s rooms, Parts of mysterious and infinite series, are like cells without a vista. At the opening curtain these rooms look naturalistic, meaning no more than the eye can contain. But by the end of each play, they become sealed containers, virtual coffins. (79, “The World of Harold Pinter”)

About the play The Room Martin Esslin remarks: “The poetic quality of such work springs precisely, from the multiplicity of possible approaches, the ambivalence and the ambiguity of images of which it is composed.” (72, Pinter the Playwright)

The dense texture of the play along with its shifting and overlapping multi-linear structure is due to several claims that the play is subject to, and where strands of emotions separate and coalesce dynamically. Still Pinter is able to strike a balance by framing the entire play between the two opening and the closing monologues. As Bernard Dukore puts it: “.... Rose’s monologue or the opening is balanced by Bert’s virtual monologue at the end.... Such connectives and symmetry are among Pinter’s dramaturgic trademark.” (28, Harold Pinter)

2.

About the post modern dramaturgy Andrew Kennedy remarks:

...drama has been and is being enriched by stylistic marks of language consciousness: the texture of dialogue can now be complex multi layered and ambiguous or polysemic without the risk...that the play will end up with the merely esoteric and in consequence undramatic language. (232, Six Dramatists)

This statement is applicable Pinter’s stylistic technique evident in most of his drama. It is a well known fact that Pinter’s dramatic mode is an offshoot of naturalism which ‘distils’ the dialogue to minimal speech—an oversimplification which is a subtle extension of Chekov’s mimetic style. In his building up an ethos of minimalism, Pinter, paradoxically, effects the shaping of his dialogue, (which he claims to have paid a meticulous attention to) and which sometimes foregrounds what appears as non-natural because of the dislocated encounters and verbal exchanges. Andrew Kennedy remarks about this ‘Pinter paradox’:

Perhaps the nearer the texture of a particular pattern of [Pinter’s] dialogue seems to come to the syntax and rhythm of everyday speech, the more audible becomes every deviation-- idiom focussed into idiocy, the question-and-
answer framework blurred into linguistics shadow boxing the verbal exchanges turning (turning as we listen) into verbal games people play. (220, Dramatic Dialogue)

Pinter defended these features of language in a speech which he delivered at Bristol in 1962 saying, “a character on stage who presents no convincing argument or information as to his past experience, his present behaviour or his aspirations, nor gives a comprehensive analysis of his motives is as worthy of attention as one who, alarmingly, can do all these things.” (11, CW 1) Pinter’s drama thereby focuses more on exposing, than on developing the trends employed by the conventional realistic playwrights. The dramatist, by creating a deliberate ambiguity and ambivalence, draws upon the audience/ reader’s deliberative and deductive power and capability to establish multi-layered plots and their variously possible themes. Randall Stevenson in his article “Harold Pinter—Innovator?” sees this as the most innovative device of Pinter’s drama which is, to be able to integrate into his plays: “one of the most characteristic devices of modernist fiction, the interpolation of character’s consciousness between audience and fictional world.” (40, You Never Heard Such Silence)

The Birthday Party, which is Pinter’s first full length play, opens with apparently banal exchange between an elderly couple, who run a dreary boarding house. In the setting Pinter includes mundane details of a breakfast scene with cornflakes and fried bread served by the woman Meg to her husband Petey with the comic relish—of the pretence of serving a gourmet course meal. The circumstance in this respect is similar to the opening scene of The Room where the wife serving breakfast to her silent husband, struggles to establish a linguistic link with the man who is involved in reading. The first scene of The Birthday Party opens with silent action. Petey enters the house with the newspaper, sits at the table and begins to read. After some moments, Meg’s voice is heard off stage, supposedly coming from the kitchen hatch near the table:

MEG. Is that you Petey?

Pause

MEG. Petey, is that you?
Meg’s solicitous efforts to draw Petey’s attention, which begin with her polite enquiry, turn into pointed address and after a pause, goes on to become an assertive challenge upon his failure to answer her once again. This dramatic effect is achieved with the use of merely nine words and two pauses. The pauses are of extreme significance here. The first one charges the atmosphere with expectancy and the second builds up the vacuum (which becomes evident) between the couple. The last word question “Petey?” becomes an insistent demand for response that Petey cannot ignore any longer. Petey’s refusal to answer earlier, and his apparent ‘hiding’ behind the newspaper is Pinter’s ironic illustration of seeking to break communication by the very medium of communication itself—the newspaper. Here Pinter’s use of newspaper as a prop is brilliantly paradoxical and economical. Thus with just nine verbal words, two pauses and a newspaper prop, Pinter subtly introduces the major theme of the play: invasion and evasion.

Petey’s lame but polite attempts to answer Meg keep running into a linguistic void. Yet this does not deter her from seeking him out with her barrage of random questions which he feels compelled to answer in a sustained and a ritualistic manner. The pattern of the dialogue with its rhythms and repetitions, parodies a catechistic questioning and answering pattern, which foregrounds the famous interrogation and prosecution scenes to come up later in the play. Whether by the repetitive comic dwelling upon the ‘nicety’ of the cornflakes and the newspaper, or in the comic exchange involving wordplay about Stanley (their tenant) being ‘up’ or ‘down’, Pinter’s ability to mesmerize the audience with rhythmic beats of the apparently non-informative dialogue is amazing.

In the following word play pattern, the language seems to be reduced to the base nonsensicality of a nursery rhyme:

Meg. Is Stanley up yet?

Petey. I don’t know. Is he?

Meg. I don’t know, I haven't seen him down yet.
PETEY. Well then, he can’t be up.

MEG. Haven’t you seen him down?(20)

The piece does in fact parody a famous nursery rhyme about the grand old Duke of York who had ten thousand men that he marched up and down the hill:

When they were up, they were up

When they were down, they were down

When they were only half way up

They were neither up nor down.

But unlike the nursery rhyme what is important with Pinter’s dialogue is its artistic minimal ‘shaping’ that makes it (to use one of Pinter’s own dialogue from his play *Old Times*) “susceptible to any amount of permutation”(44, *CW4*) paradigmatically to the subjectivity of the play’s themes. Pinter’s virtuosity to pack a considerable amount of information within small exchanges between the characters sets into motion the main action of the play. The amount of dramatic action in a short exchange regarding the cornflakes served by Meg to Petey is tremendous:

MEG. Are they nice?

PETEY. Very nice.

MEG. I thought they’d be nice. (21, *CW1*)

The dialogue is suggestively expository of a vain attempt to converse and of a wish to be congenial. What follows is a series of such fragmentary episodic set-piece exchanges between the couple, following the same manner of catechistic pattern where a variety of quotidian aspects are discussed alongside routine actions like serving of fried bread and tea and darning socks. Megs vain but unfailing attempts to keep the conversation going reveals a poignant expression of her desire to be appreciated and also a yearning to have a son; a fantasy she seems to live in her near Oedipal liaison with Stanley, the lodger in their boarding house. The transcriptions of the conversational commonplace in these exchanges are actually artistically organised
speech, which produces the theatrical illusion of reality. There runs an undercurrent of deeply intense thematic appropriateness in the apparent banality of the dialogue.

Unlike as in *The Room*, where the invasions from outside occur with a sudden unaware onslaught, in *The Birthday Party* Pinter has taken care early in the play, to keep the style hyper naturalistic by pre-informing the audience about the impending visit of the strangers within the course of the ongoing conversation between Meg and Petey:

**PETEY. (Turning to her) Oh, Meg, two men came up to me on the beach last night.**

**MEG. Two men?**

**PETEY. Yes. They wanted to know if we could put them up for a couple of nights.**

**MEG. Put them up? Here?**

**PETEY. Yes.**

**MEG. How many men?**

**PETEY. Two. (22)**

The phrase “two men” repeated three times in the exchange, and also their apparent urgency as to the purpose of their visit, which is evident in their night time approaching, is a virtual announcement of the duo’s presence’s dark invasion to follow. The subtle menace build-up follows in the next set-piece of apparently *non sequitur* from the previous banal talk which is theatrically equally effective:

**PETEY. There’s a new show coming to the Palace.**

.........................................................................................................................

**MEG. Stanley could have been in it, if it was on the pier.**

**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* (23)

Petey’s phrase “they just talk”, followed by a pause has a dark overtone. The image of ‘just talking’, which runs further into the pause, is like the interaction felt in the ‘theatre of the mind’ and which translates into an ominous image of “linguistic shadow boxing” (220, Kennedy, *Dramatic Dialogue*) and which foreshadows the third degree interrogation to come later. With the use of his famous pauses and ellipses, Pinter intensifies the felt dramatic action within the play.

As Martin Esslin says, Pinter’s plays are to be understood more emotionally and intuitively than logically. The pauses and silences lend his play an unusual classical quality which makes them the masterpieces that they are. Like the names of his characters, Pinter’s pauses and silences form an integral part of the structural framework in his plays; without which the plays would be reduced to just chic pieces of clichéd verbal exchanges.

At another level (as is the case of Pinter’s multi-layered dramatic dialogue) the same exchange can also be taken as Pinter’s implicit statement on his own dramaturgy: “This is a straight show/ What do you mean? / No dancing or singing/ What do they do then/ They just talk.” (22, emphasis mine). To quote Bernard Dukore:

Pinter’s characters just talk, but as the Clown in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* says ‘words are so grown false I am loathe to prove reason with them’(III, I). One can take little they say at face value. Pinter’s characters may contradict themselves, they may have more than one name; and what they say is open to several interpretations. (11, *Harold Pinter*)

According to Jennifer L Randisi, the structural framework of Pinter’s plays is a “verbal hologram . . . [which is] dependent upon the collaboration of different points of view. . . usually involv[ing] two or three people [where] two characters tend either to reverse roles or to fight to preserve them. . . .” (67, “Harold Pinter as Screenwriter”) The collaboration assumes three different forms: “saying makes it so (meaningful repetition); saying does not make it so (meaningless repetition) and
saying as aggression.” (69) Repetition in Meg’s and Petey’s exchanges assume a meaningful reassuring for Meg when the cornflakes are repeatedly called ‘very nice’ by Petey. Here saying makes nice by affirmation therefore, defines reality. But this is only for a while. The ‘reality’ deconstructs itself soon after, when Stanley, upon being asked the same question regarding the quality of the cornflakes, retorts that they are “horrible”. This is an example of Pinter’s inbuilt debunker of the verifiability of truth, which is, as in Derrida’s mode; ‘legible yet effaced’.

Stanley Webber is introduced in the play through Boles’ conversation and a comic mode where Meg shouts for a grown up man as one would summon a small child: “Stan! Stanny! (She listens) Stan! I’m coming up to fetch you if you don’t come down! I’m coming up! I’m going to count three! One! Two! Three! I’m coming to get you!” (23, CW1) The subtext of the passage reads as someone forcing Stanley to act against his will, which hints at Stanley’s actual fear of his co-humans forcing him to conform. Being the self exiled derelict that he is, he prefers his isolation to any kind of human company. Also, Meg’s words- I’m coming to get you- pre-echo a warning, which when taken retrospectively, tends to become a fore-threat to the dark conclusion of the play. Thus Pinter leaves clues even in the comic aspects of his text which can only come to light if the play is re-read or read backwards. We can see here that the sphere of action in the play is not just co-extensive but often tends to overlap on various levels.

The comic breakfast time ‘encounter’ scenes, first between Meg and Stanley and later Lulu and Stanley develop into an important ‘leitmotif’ within the play, of what Bernard F. Dukore calls “[an] attempt to make someone go where he does not wish to go”. (30, Harold Pinter) Meg wants Stanley to accompany him for shopping after the breakfast, and he refuses her. Soon after, Lulu urges him to go out with her for a picnic: “Come out and get a bit of air. You depress me looking like that... it’s lovely out. And I’ve got a few sandwiches.” (36, CW1) He refuses again. The repeated implorations to take him out are analogues employed by Pinter, that later metamorphose into the menacing and sinister ‘taking him out of himself’ by Goldberg and McCann, or force shifting him to ‘where he does not wish to go’ after inflicting a third degree ‘cathartic purge’ or castration upon him by the end of the play.
It is to be noted that much of the comedy employed by Pinter in the breakfast scene is either informational or thematically expositional. Stanley’s unkempt appearance and his rising up late from bed are all signs of a revolutionary break-off from the mundane social norms and rules, and his assertion of his individuation, which is so characteristic of an artist’s temperament, (which he is supposed to be). Juxtaposed with Petey’s sense of conformity to Meg’s bearings, Stanley’s ill-mannered disobedience spells his revolt against traditionally ritualistic social practices. Meg’s mollycoddling Stanley makes him react with irritation, which he expresses through his verbal abusage: he calls the cornflakes ‘horrible’, the milk ‘off’ the tea ‘gravy’ and ‘muck’, the house a ‘pigsty’ that ‘needs sweeping and papering’, and the old lady herself ‘a bad wife’ and ‘an old washing bag’. Notably this is the rebel’s disgust against the socially institutionalised rituals of suffocating parenting. Also, Meg’s teasing, stroking and tickling which verges on the Oedipal nauseate him, against which he recoils.

Meg’s babying Stanley adds to the process of his regression in the play which is symbolic of his being taken back to the stage of birth once again (hence the title). But first Pinter makes the theme of Stanley’s regression as self-imposed in the undercutting scene, where Stanley’s claims to be a world class pianist; then his claim dwindles pathetically to playing for the country and then to finally playing at a single concert, and that too at Edmonton, which is hardly a place of artistic activity:

STANLEY. ....Played the piano? I’ve played the piano all over the world. All over the country (Pause) I once gave a concert. (32)

This is followed by an extended soliloquy; beginning with an elevated discussion about the exquisite and the elite, it slowly leads to a bathetic decent—from the elevated to the commonplace distorting both the subject matter and the rhythmic flow with which the speech began:

STANLEY. I had a unique touch. Absolutely unique. They came up to me. They came up to me and said they were grateful. Champagne we had that night the lot. (Pause.) My father nearly came down to hear me. Well, I dropped him a card anyway. But I don’t think he could make it. No, I-- I lost the address, that was it. (Pause.) Yes. Lower Edmonton. Then after that, you know what they did? They carved me up. Carved me up. It was all arranged, it was all worked out. My next concert. Somewhere else it was. 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. (Takes off his glasses and wipes them on his pyjamas jacket.) A fast one. They pulled a fast one. I’d like to know who was responsible for that. (Bitterly) All right Jack, I can take a tip. They wanted me to crawl down on my bended knees. (He replaces his glasses, then looks at MEG.) Look at her. You’re just an old piece of rock cake aren’t you? (33)

Pinter here builds the speech which stretches by association and sometimes, obvious inventions, and which later takes a plunge bathetically for the deliberate purpose of reduction of both subject matter and form (from the social jargon of upper class artistic community to the lower class vernacular). This is symbolic of Stanley’s regression. First Stanley undercuts himself from being a world class artist to a national level pianist and further down to a one concert player. The image is further undercut by Meg’s reference to him as a roadside player (she mentions that she heard him playing on the pier). The undercutting reaches its basement, with Meg presenting him a toy’s drum for his supposed birthday. Thus Stanley very effectively reduces himself verbally and also aided by Meg’s symbolic prop, into a non-entity. The elevated pomposity of faking artist manqué is Stanley’s desperate attempt to gain control over his lost space—a position that he had tried building for himself in the artists’ milieu and which, for some reason, had failed. So he replaced it by another individualistic attempt of leading a dull sequestered life in the boarding house, a space which now seems shaken and exposed to an invasive threat again.

Further, Pinter makes use of a humorous device of ‘misplaced literalism’ to add to the anticlimactic underscoring of Stanley’s position. As Pinter has made obvious earlier, Meg is a selective listener. (Petey’s informing her about ‘two men’ having paid him a visit, and despite her repeating absentmindedly ‘two men?’ her attention perks up only after Petey suggests them as prospective lodgers. This makes her ask again “how many men?” Later again, upon being asked about the fried bread, when Stanley calls it ‘succulent’ she gets cross at first and then asks shyly “Am I really succulent?”) Therefore it is not surprising how through picking up words selectively from Stanley’s extended soliloquy, Meg volunteers information about Stanley when the two visiting men prompt her to do so:

MEG. He once gave a concert.

GOLDBERG. Oh? Where?
MEG. (*Falteringly*) In ... a big hall. His father gave him champagne. But then they locked up the place and he couldn’t get out. The caretaker had gone home. So he had to wait till the morning before he could get out. (*With confidence*) They were very grateful (*Pause*). And then they all wanted to give him a tip. And so he took the tip. And then he got a fast train and came down here. (42)

Here (what Pinter calls) “a double thing” happens. Meg’s ever-readiness to engage in conversation and to boost her self-importance as all-knowing about ‘My Stanley’ (as she calls him) produces a comic effect while, at the same time, it undercuts Stanley’s status to a that of a roadside artist.

In his discussion about Pinter’s unique style of structuring *The Birthday Party*, Andrew K. Kennedy remarks: “The ‘ordinary’ conversational opening and ending [of the play] are a frame for a connivance at the ‘extraordinary’ events in the house.” (179 *Six Dramatists*) Pinter’s control of the two kinds of styles (naturalistic-ordinary) and (absurdist-extraordinary) in the play, is made simultaneously possible through recurrent leitmotifs that develop from ‘ordinary’ into the ‘extraordinary’; from the banal to the sinister in increasingly alarming contexts. Taking the leitmotif “This house is on the list”; the statement has been repeated four times in the play, starting from being part of a casual exchange between the Boles:

MEG. Had they heard about us Petey?

PETEY. They must have done.

MEG. Yes, they must have done. They must have heard this was a very good boarding house. It is. *This house is on the list.* (22, *CWI*)

Next it moves into casual teasing between Meg and Stanley when he Stanley casts a doubt about the house being very well known for visitors:

MEG. Yes. And this house is very well known, for a very good boarding house for visitors.

STANLEY. Visitors? Do you know how many visitors you’ve had since I’ve been here?

MEG. How many?

STANLEY. One.

MEG. Who?
STANLEY. Me! I’m your visitor,

MEG. You’re a liar. This house is on the list. (26-27)

Then it re-appears as an answer to Stanley’s anxious questioning about the expected visitors: (‘What?’, ‘What are you talking about?’ ‘They wanted to come here? Why?’) To which Meg answers again: “This house is on the list.” (30) And the last time to Stanley’s panic filled remonstrations after the arrival of the visiting duo namely Goldberg and McCann:

STANLEY. Why here? Why not somewhere else?

MEG. This house is on the list. (44)

The fateful ‘List’ gradually is permutated with every utterance; from a simple fact of listing, to a reason of the house being open to visitors, to the list gradually and menacingly metamorphosing into a ‘black listing’, or worse, becoming a target or a ‘a hit list’. All this happens, as the undercurrent of anxiety, which builds up to an alarm, then a tension, and finally a foreboding of doom. Thus with Pinter’s plays, the undercurrent of the ‘double thing’ keeps moving below the surface movement of the play’s dialogue. Again we see how casual statements intensify into a frantically catechistic pithy duologue exchange pattern which foreshadows an underworld like cruelty of third degree, in the interrogation-cum-persecution scene that sounds similar in tone to the famous Spanish Inquisition.

Meg’s visitors, who can be termed as System Representatives, spell conformity to socio-religious and political and bureaucratic institutionalism, as it becomes evident from their speeches. They are out to restore ‘order’ to chaos (Stanley) by hook/discourse (Goldberg) or crook/force (McCann). Ruby Cohn points out “Their Jewish- Irish names and dialects suggests a vaudeville skit, and it is not long before we realize that the skit is the Judaeo- Christian tradition as it appears in our present civilisation.” (87, “The World of Harold Pinter”)

Meg’s information that it is Stanley’s birthday that day makes Goldberg deliberate for a while, and he soon decides to take the charge of throwing a party for Stanley. Here Pinter prepares a ground situation in the shape of an occasion, to build a foundation of a vaudeville like act which includes singing, dancing and playing – a
devise analogous to the traditional theatrical device of ‘a play within a play’. This is to construct the play’s central plot of ‘drawing [Stanley] out’ of his isolated existence or of his metaphoric dying as self-exiled and the following rebirth as re-conformed.

During the partying, McCann performs by singing lines from two songs. First, while filling up Meg’s glass he sings a line: “Glorio, Glorio to the bold Fenian men!”(70, CW1), which is a song about brave Irishmen reclaiming their land and property. By association, the song spells the two men’s own mission, which is to reclaim Stanley back to the society from his recluse. Then, before he sings the next song, McCann recites a prelude or introduction to it. “[The song is about] the night that poor Paddy was stretched and the boys they all paid him a visit’’. (71) This line has a sinister overtone and brings to the mind an image like Eliot’s “a patient (or here Stanley) etherised upon a table” (13, T S Eliot, Collected Poems) ready for some operation or probably a post-mortem by the ‘visiting boys’ (Goldberg and McCann). The song goes thus:

Oh, the Garden of Eden has vanished they say
But I know the lie of it still
Just turn to the left at the foot of Ben Clay
And stop when halfway to Coote Hill
It’s there you will find it, I know sure enough
And it’s whispering over to me,
Come back Paddy Reilly, to Bally- James- Duff
Come back Paddy Reilly to me. (71, CW1)

As we know, in Pinter’s plays the meaning is mostly revealed by association than by what is said directly. So by association, here the Garden of Eden signifies Stanley’s ‘idyllic’ hideout that has been finally exposed through ‘seeking directions’ by the visiting system-messengers who ‘whisper’ (sinisterly, like the Evil Whisperer/ Satan/ Snake) into the ears of ‘Paddy’ Reilly (Stanley, who leads flannelled or padded existence) to ‘come home’ or back to the System (Monty and all other co-associations (Bally-James-Duff)). It is significant to note here that while in The Room the Messenger Riley’s ‘come home’ signifies a call to return to Life after Death, the
‘come home’ in this context is a summon to return to the worldly or societal living with all its rules and regulations. Pinter makes the summons, thus implicitly served to Stanley, more ominous by the very next words that Lulu says to Goldberg: “You’re a dead image of the first man I ever loved.” (71, emphasis mine).

As Bernard Dukore points out, “Another analogy to play within play is playing; at the party the characters participate in a game of ‘blind man’s buff’.” (11, B. Dukore, Where Laughter Stops) As within the frame of the game Stanley is blinded doubly (first by removal of his glasses, and then with the blindfold) and then buffeted about; so is he pushed and pummelled by Goldberg and McCann within the frame of the play. Yet another ‘play’ within the play is the sexual foreplay that Lulu and Goldberg indulge in while playing the game, thus intensifying action for the impending ‘rape scene’ image that lights up on the stage. Herein lies Pinter’s technique of multi-layering the texture thus making it denser still.

Going back to the moments after Goldberg and McCann have gained an entry in the house – after her brief encounter with the two men, whom she puts up in the room upstairs, Meg returns to the hall where she finds Stanley waiting nervously for her, in order to find out about the identity of the visitors. After much prodding and jogging of her memory she is able to recollect and tell Goldberg’s name; the sound of which comes as a shock to Stanley, confirming his worst fears; and therefore making him sit still as if being turned to stone. When Meg’s efforts to revive him prove fruitless, she quickly hands him over the gift (a boy’s drum) in desperation, which she had had delivered to the house for his birthday, earlier. Stanley puts it round his neck and starts tapping it with drumsticks, first with a gentle regularity, which soon intensifies to becoming erratic and uncontrolled and continues till he starts banging on it, like a man possessed. The first Act concludes with this. The drum beating rhythm, which matches a primitive tribal custom practiced during ritualistic human sacrifice in the ancient times, is Pinter’s presentation of a non-verbal noise or what can be called ‘the language of the tribes’. The growing menace is enhanced here with the savage sound, which by association is linked to the implicit manhandling of Stanley later by threat-forcing him to sit; and then his erratic verbal fencing by the two men in the interrogation-allegation scene in second Act.
The primordial erratic drumbeat (disorderliness) at the end of Act One, is juxtaposed with the intensifying rhythm of the interrogation scene (orderliness and discipline) in Act II which in turn is Pinter’s parody of the ancient ritual of Initiation Catechism of question-answer testing. What we have in this scene is a pattern of questioning and accusing by Goldberg and McCann respectively, which turns more and more savage as pressure upon Stanley is induced through rhythmic intensification, and also by the paralysing spell of language leap-frogging from one mode to another: from realistic beat to aggressively fantastic and then savagely abstract. The cross-examination begins with reprimanding Stanley for being a nuisance (‘what were you doing yesterday?’; ‘...and the day before that?’, ‘why are you wasting everybody’s time?’ ‘why are you getting in everybody’s way?’) (57, CWT) It then proceeds to accusing him of betrayal and specific crimes. The accusations at times cancel themselves out by self-contradictions:

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.

GOLDBERG. Why did you never get married?

MCCANN. She was waiting at the porch.

GOLDBERG. You skeddadled from the wedding

MCCANN. You left her in the lurch.

GOLDBERG. You left her in the pudding club.

MCCANN. She was waiting at the church.

GOLDBERG. Webber why did you change your name? (59)
The pattern here is woven from within and along with the cross examination and verges on the absurd. Beginning with disconnected language of random cliché questioning, (‘Where were you yesterday?’ ‘Why are you wasting everybody’s time?’) (57), it goes on to imaginary questioning (‘Who watered the wicket at Melbourne?’ ‘What about the blessed Oliver Plunkett?’), and culminates in existential questions (‘Why did the chicken cross the road?’ ‘Which came first, the chicken or the egg?’). (61)

In the entire pattern of the speech, Pinter employs various technical dramatic and linguistic devices, which work together, along with the pauses and the gestures, and also the rapid delivery of the pithy speech, to create a meaning larger than the text itself. The punch lines with external forcefulness of the speech are to revoke Stanley’s dormant sense of responsibility towards his parents, his wife and society. This is perhaps to make him acknowledge the fellow beings of his society and his own breed and trade, his religion and the organization at large.

It is to be noticed, that during the interrogation, Pinter had kept the entire focus on the two interrogators, who face the audience, while Stanley’s face is hidden as his back is toward them. This is Pinter’s stagecraft technique to hide Stanley’s visible reaction in order to avoid breaking the strong impact of directness and forcefulness of the devilish duo’s speech and manner of their expression. This is another example of what Pinter has implicitly commented about his dramaturgy in one of his other plays (The Homecoming) when Ruth says:

My lips move. Why don’t you restrict . . . your observations to that? Perhaps the fact that they move is more significant . . . than the words which come through them. You must bear that . . . possibility . . . in mind (69, CW3)

With Pinter, the manner and style of uttering can be as communicative or significant, as any primary referential purpose of the words themselves that are spoken. What is interesting to note is that McCann answering most of the questions addressed to Stanley with a “he doesn’t know.”(61-62 CW1) The duo provides him no elbow room or edge to offer his own opinion. The Kafkaesque interrogatory sequence culminates with Goldberg pronouncing Stanley as bad as already dead and rotting: “You’re dead. You can’t live, you can’t think, you can’t love. You’re dead. You’re a plague gone bad. There is no juice in you. You are nothing but an odour.” (62)
According to Martin Esslin, the aim of the speech is to evoke “Stanley’s general feeling of guilt and express his tormentors’ general conviction that he deserves punishment:

The long list of venial and mortal sins, major and minor transgressions which is unleashed upon poor Stanley . . . covers the whole gamut of possible sources of guilt feeling, from embarrassment over social gaffes (picking one’s nose) collective national guilt feelings about crimes committed by one’s country (In Ireland for the Englishman Stanley Webber), minor lapses (such as eating too much toast) to major sins of lechery and, worst of all cheating at the national sport . . . . The proliferation . . . establishes . . . a structure of images which constitutes a set of variation on basic theme. (50-51 Language)

In this brilliantly contradictory and disjointed speech, Pinter’s amazing feat is the stylistic constant of the catechistic mannerism that he sustains throughout. On the surface plane the medleys of the forceful barrage results in frazzling Stanley’s nerves which makes him let out a piercing scream and attack his offenders in retaliation.

Pinter has filled almost the entire The Birthday Party with Goldberg’s variously stylized speeches that produce an effective heightening in the play. The dramatist makes him mouth parodies of various sets of jargons and stylized verbal instances that include a host of idiomatic and idiosyncratic phrases, for example Goldberg’s ministrations to a visibly nervous McCann upon their arrival:

The secret is breathing. Take my tip. It’s a well known fact. Breathe in, breathe out, take a chance let yourself go, what can you lose? Look at me. When I was an apprentice yet, McCann, my Uncle Barney used to take me to the seaside, regular as clockwork. Brighton, Canvey Island, Rottingdean—Uncle Barney wasn’t particular. After lunch on Shabbuss we’d go and sit on a couple of deck chairs—you know the ones with canopies—we’d have a little paddle. We watched the tide coming in and going out . . . golden days, believe me, McCann . . . . (37 CW1)

The yoking of clichés here is like an act of a semi-educated Jewish trader who loves relating tales in the leisurely detailed manner of a raconteur and with what Andrew Kennedy calls--“a flair for flannelling [so characteristic of] the sinister complacencies of the successful Head of the Family or Business. So highly individual language is used [by Pinter] to expose the way elements in our language compel conformity.” (181 Six Dramatists) Juxtaposed to Goldberg’s laid back attitude is his henchman McCann’s shiftiness, which makes him, enquire repeatedly from Goldberg, about the
nature of the ‘job at hand’. In his answer to McCann, Pinter makes Goldberg parody a corporate meeting jargon which matches his appearance too (well suited and booted with a briefcase in hand):

The main issue is a singular issue and quite distinct from your previous work. Certain elements however, might well approximate in points of procedure to some of your other activities. All is dependent on the attitude of our subject. At all events, McCann, I can assure you that the assignment will be carried out and the mission accomplished with no excessive aggravation to you or to myself. Satisfied? (40 CWI)

Most of Goldberg’s farcical exaggerated praise about his youth (“I’d tip my hat to the toddlers . . . I’d give a helping hand to a couple of stray dogs . . . Everything came natural.”)(53) are like verbal workouts in preparation for the black ritual of the parodied ‘Spanish Inquisition’ just before the eventful birthday party.

At the party Pinter’s meta-narration turns to making Goldberg issue directions for the black parody of the toasting event which one can associate with third degree like atmosphere. Here Pinter parodies Militarism with an authoritative charge-taking jargon:

GOLDBERG. Switch out the light and put on your torch. (MCCANN goes to the door, switches off the light, comes back, shines the torch on MEG. Outside the window there is still a faint light) Not on the lady, on the gentleman! You must shine it on the birthday boy. (MCCANN shines the torch on Stanley’s face). Now Mrs. Boles It’s all yours.

MEG. Isn’t the light in his eyes? (64-65)

The deliberate darkening of the room; the shining of torchlight into Stanley’s eyes in order to blind his vision, all point out to the impending torture to be inflicted on the victim. On another level, the same speech can also be taken as Pinter’s parody of behind the theatre- scene, of stage directing.

Meg’s extended soliloquy of her toasting speech is an emotional snivel with nothing to say; and is taken up by Goldberg’s farcical paean in praise of her meaningless words. His florid speech delivery follows an epideictic pattern employing various rhetorical devices like the Rhetorical question (“How often in this day and age do you come across real true warmth?”)(66); Alliteration (“Tonight . . .
we’ve known a great fortune. We’ve heard a lady extend sum total of her devotion in
all it’s pride plume and peacock, to a member of her living race”) (66) and Chiasmus
(“Lucky is the man, who’s at the receiving end, that’s what I say”) Pause.(66) The
pedantry soon runs into Bathos after a pause which is comic (“(Pause).How can I put
it to you? We all wander on our tod through this world. It’s a lonely pillow to kip
on.”) (66) Then into an ironically sinister and suggestive statement addressed directly
to Stanley: “I’m sure you’ve never been a prouder man than you are today, Mazaltov!
And may we only meet at Simchahas!” (66)

Goldberg’s semi-literate speech is highly admired by Lulu and she praises him,
which again leads him into a farcical rodomontade:

GOLDBERG. Well my first chance to stand up and give a lecture was at
Ethical Hall, Bayswater. A wonderful Opportunity—I’ll never forget it. They
were all there that night—Charlotte Street was empty. Of course that’s a good
while ago.

LULU. What did you speak about?

GOLDBERG. The Necessary and the Possible. It went like a bomb. Since then
I always speak at weddings. (67)

There is a bathetic fall again from giving a philosophical lecture to delivering
speeches of honour at weddings. Goldberg’s stylized patterned loquacity almost
always falls into the arbitrary. As Andrew Kennedy comments, “Goldberg’s
speeches, when left alone with McCann. . . seem to have little function apart from
‘creating a scene’ reinforcing Goldberg’s cultural bankruptcy. . . through making him
mouth a medley of slogans—Judaic, British and miscellaneous culture- props. . .”
(181, Six Dramatists) Kennedy calls his speeches “a verbal and rhythmic bravura act”
(181). This is in particular reference to his speech in Act Three when left alone with
McCann. The speech seems just a maudlin mixture of platitudinous parody of
contemporary hollowness of Judaeo-Christian heritage (a reminder of Eliot’s Hollow
Men):

You know what? I’ve never lost a tooth. Not since the day I was born.
Nothing’s changed (he gets up). That’s why I have reached my position
McCann. Because I’ve always been as fit as a fiddle. All my life I’ve said the
same. Play up, play up, play the game. Honour thy father and they mother. All
along the line. Follow the line, the line McCann, and you can’t go wrong.

81
What do you think, I’m a self made man? No! I sat where I was told to sit. I kept my eye on the ball. School? Don’t talk to me about school. Top in all subjects. And for why? Because I’m telling you, telling you, follow my line? Follow my mental? Learn by heart. Never write down a thing. And don’t go near the water. And you’ll find-- what I say is true.

Because I believe that the world . . . (Vacant) . . .

Because I believe that the world . . . (Desperate) . . .

BECAUSE I BELIEVE THAT THE WORLD . . . (Lost) (87-88 CW1)

The interweaving of Biblical traditions, success formulae, culture prop and Polonial blather (‘go home to your wife’, ‘keep an eye open for low-lifes for schnorrers and for layabouts’, ‘Do your duty and keep your observations’, ‘Always bid good morning to the neighbours’. ‘Never, never forget your family for they are the rock the constitution and the core.’, ‘Work hard and play hard’) (88) are all hints to more fundamental fact that “Nothing’s Changed”(87) an involuntary and subconscious statement that he makes in the beginning which makes him run into vacant, desperate and lost existentialist angst. Yet he recovers soon enough with, as the stage directions put it, (intensely and with growing certainty) and kneeling down while facing McCann says gently:

Seamus—who came before your father? His father. And who came before him? Before him? . . . (Vacant—triumphant.) Who came before your father’s father but your father’s father’s mother! Your great-gran-granny.[ Eve / Virgin Mother Mary]

Silence. He slowly rises. (88)

With the Silence after ‘great-gran-granny’ comes the Nirvana; his reconfirmation of Faith in his religious roots. This makes him rise again slowly (virtually and figuratively) and he continues: “And this is why I’ve reached my position McCann. Because I’ve always been as fit as a fiddle. My motto, work hard and play hard.” (88) Thus he attributes his ‘position’ to his Belief, a word (‘position’) he had played on earlier in Act One, to establish the fact of his esteemed placement within the System. He sure does work hard and play hard to make the Existential Truth conform to his Belief.

The sudden discovery of the shakiness of his so called staunch establishment foundations flusters him despite his quick recovery, and he becomes breathless with
shock and orders McCann (The defrocked priest) to blow the breath of life into his mouth once, and then another time fora reserve: ‘One for the Road’.

Contrary to what Andrew Kennedy feels about the speech being a “verbal and rhythmic bravura act” running from “logorrhoea into vacancy” without having much function; this seems like a reiteration of Goldberg’s entire learning, which he ‘chants’ (like some religious chanting) with theatrical artifice and rising tempo, ever now and again to reinforce it through ‘en-chanting’ self-hypnosis. This happens when he finds his faith in danger or his belief shaken whenever he is alone and his defences are down.

Stanley’s own extended soliloquies, when he first encounters McCann at the beginning of Act Two, are stylized anguished ‘verbal smokescreen’ where, as Pinter puts it “a torrent of language is being used to keep the other (smokescreen/mask) in place”:

“I’ll be moving soon. Back home. I’ll stay there too this time. No place like home (helaughs nervously) I wouldn’t have left but business calls . . . No I think I’ll give it up. I’ve got a small private income you see. I think I’ll give it up. Don’t like being away from home. I used to live very quietly—played records, that’s about all. Everything delivered to the door. Then I started a small private business, in a small way, and it compelled me to come down here—kept me longer than I expected. You never get used to living in someone else’s house.

You know what? To look at me, I bet you wouldn’t think I led such a quiet life. The lines on my face eh? It’s the drink. Been drinking a bit down here . . . I’ll be all right when I get back . . . but what I mean is, the way some people look at me you’d think I was a different person. I suppose I’ve changed, but I’m still the same man I always was. I mean, you wouldn’t think . . . that I was the sort of bloke to—to cause any trouble would you? (50)

Here Stanley employs phatic phrases like ‘you know’, ‘I bet’, ‘I mean’, ‘you see’ to sound casually nonchalant and natural and active on the surface while the subtext aims at clarifying his ‘action of inaction’. His extensive use of such phrases makes his speech colloquial. This is an important aspect of Pinter’s style on which he self-referentially commented in his play The Lover: “to hear your command of contemporary phraseology, your delicate use of the very latest idiomatic expression so
subtly employed.” (187 CW2) This hyper realistic quality of Pinter’s language sets him apart from the contemporary playwrights of his time.

Stanley’s several attempts to escape from his tormentors meet a dead end and he is forced to sit down before the deadly inquisition scene, where he is given no edge way to express or defend himself. This leads to a reduction of his speech ability, and his attempt to utter a protest culminates in a scream. After ‘robbing’ of his speech thus, Goldberg and McCann prepare for the ostensibly cheerful toasting of the ‘birthday boy’. This they do by setting up a third degree like atmosphere, for nudging Stanley back to the same frame of mind that had been so effectively imposed on him before the Party. At the Party, an undercurrent of menace and bewilderment is adroitly created by Pinter, first by gradually constructing a confused cross-talk between Meg, McCann, Lulu and Goldberg which turns more and more grotesquely erratic:

GOLDBERG. Were you a nice girl?
LULU. I was
MEG. I don’t know if he went to Ireland.
GOLDBERG. Maybe I played piggyback with you.
LULU. Maybe you did.
MEG. He didn’t take me.
MCCANN. I know a place in Roscrea. Mother Nolan’s.
MEG. There was a night light in my room when I was a little girl
MCCANN. One time I stayed there all night with the boys singing and drinking all night.
MEG. And my nanny used to sit up with me and sing songs to me. (70 CW1)

The buzz of talk at cross-purposes with each other grows more and more absurd and nonsensical, with Stanley (and audience) watching them as horrified and mute spectators. Later again (to repeat) the menace is enhanced through implicit and subtle means of the double-entendre songs that Pinter makes McCann sing pointedly for Stanley’s (and audience’s) ears. And yet again, by making the characters play a game
about blinding (a torture tortuously imposed by Goldberg’s stooge on Stanley by
covering his eyes and snapping his glasses). The events at the party aim at poignantly
riling Stanley up, thus provoking and pushing him to the edge to attempt committing
brutish criminal acts; first by trying to throttle Meg, and then of raping the
unconscious Lulu. Here Pinter employs his devise of deliberately debunking clarity by
stage direction of a sudden BLACKOUT. The voices of characters emerging from the
darkened stage—of the frantic search for McCann’s torch that has been knocked from
his hand, and Lulu’s panic filled cries in protest of some kind of attack or molestation,
which results in her falling—creates a pandemonium in the darkness. All this creates
an intensely charged atmosphere which is highlighted by the fall of a pin-drop
Silence. Then with the sudden emergence of a sustained rat-a-tat of drumbeat (which
matches an increased heartbeat), and of Lulu’s whimpers followed by her piercing
scream, the shock effect is instantaneous. During the frenetic search for Lulu which
ensues, McCann finds his torch and shines it on the table, suddenly illuminating an
atrocious image of an unconscious Lulu spread eagled on the table, and on whom
Stanley bends over, apparently in an attempt to rape. Interestingly, the very torch that
was used as a blinding prop earlier in the play by Pinter, has now been used in the
opposite sense: as an illuminating device—a brilliant example of Pinter’s economical
use of a single stage prop for multiple, and even opposing purposes.

Stanley, caught red-handed thus, is immediately incriminated and is rendered
liable for punishment at the hands of so called custodians of the System. With the
charges of him being a prospective criminal (made at the previous inquisition) proven
against him, the agents of the police converge upon him in order to arrest him even as
he moves back giggling all the while in a terrorised breakdown, only to be stalled by
the wall behind him. Thus Pinter’s adeptly contrived pattern, through fusion and
flexibility of pluralistic dramatic and linguistic devices and styles and also through
rising action, drives Act Two to its climactic conclusion.

The final Act Three opens with the repetitiously mundane and ritualistic ‘habit
trap’ of action after what seems like a virtual end of the play. There are a number of
ritualistic and verbal parallels drawn in this Act from the first Act; which can be
technically called as Pinter’s ‘self-parodying’. The Act begins with a similar verbal
patterns and rhythms as the first Act began with:
MEG. Is that you Stan (Pause) Stanny?

PETEY. Yes?

MEG. Is that you?

PETEY. It’s me.

MEG. (Appearing at the hatch) Oh, It’s you . . . . (77)

Paradoxically, the point of similarity here with the opening lines of Act One, highlights their striking difference. Whereas in Act One, Meg pointedly identifies her husband Petey, here she mistakes him for someone else (Stanley). Also, whereas in Act One she has a lot of food (sustenance) to offer to both Petey and Stanley, in the last act she has nothing left to offer them—the food already having been consumed by the invaders Goldberg and McCann. Although the gambit of Stanley being ‘up’ and ‘down’ is repeated here too, the previous humour is replaced by menacing suspense. Meg, as usual takes the cup of tea upstairs for Stanley, but is stalled from entering his room by McCann in his doorway.

In Act One when Meg informs Stanley about the impending visit of two men, there is a comic ‘in-turn’ teasing by Stanley when he playfully menaces Meg about an impending visit by a hearse van with a wheelbarrow in it, expected at their doorstep looking for a particular person (suggesting her being carried away as a corpse). This is an ominously ironic fateful foreshadowing, as we learn later. In Act Three, when Meg prepares to go shopping for food, she sees a large car parked at their doorway. An imaginary sequence from the first Act almost materializes in Act Three where, by association, the scene acquires a sinister meaning:

MEG. Did you see what is outside this morning?

PETEY. What?

MEG. That big car.

PETEY. Yes.

MEG. It wasn’t there yesterday. Did you . . . did you have a look inside it?

PETEY. I had a peep.

MEG. (Coming down tensely, and whispering) Is there anything in it?
PETEY. In it?

MEG. Well... I mean... is there... a wheelbarrow in it?

PETEY. A wheelbarrow? ... I didn’t see one... what would Mr Goldberg want with a wheelbarrow? (79)

Also Pinter flips the scene in a masterly ironic manner, which signifies a 'change', when the unkempt unshaven scruffy look of a confident Stanley from the first Act is replaced by a well shaven and suited and booted gentlemanly look of a broken Stanley in the last. McCann’s nervous tearing up of the newspaper into five strips in the first Act that signifies the suggestive drawing of a blueprint for the whole 'job at hand' into five stages ((i) Stanley’s interrogation, (ii) his symbolic blinding, (iii) McCann’s suggestively leading singing, (iv) Stanley’s commitment of ‘crime’, and (v) his final torture and castration) is juxtaposed by his triumphant tearing up of the next day’s paper similarly, that suggest the five stages of successful “carving up” of Stanley. Pinter seems to be picking up loose threads from the first Act for a parenthetic wrapping up of the play in the last Act. Thus, after having wrought a cataclysmic change by using chaos as a catalyst agent, Pinter folds up the play with the repetition of the mundane daily rituals, which are an ironic message: [that]the show must go on. The newspaper as a prop has again been used by Pinter brilliantly in varying senses.

But before they leave, the agents of the System (the parents/ the priests/ the professors/ the politicians) have some explaining to do about what happened and why. Petey’s subtle query about Stanley’s present crippled state is met with a sharp answer from the chief carver Goldberg:

PETEY. What came over him?

GOLDBERG. (Sharply) What came over him? Breakdown Mr Boles. Pure and Simple, Nervous breakdown.

PETEY. But what brought it on so suddenly?

GOLDBERG. (Rising and moving upstage) Well, Mr Boles it can happen in all sorts of ways. A Friend of mine was telling me [. . .] that sometimes it happens gradual—day by day it grows and grows and grows... day by day. And then other times it happens all at once. Poof! Like that! The nerves
break. There is no guarantee how it’s going to happen, but with certain people . . . it’s a foregone conclusion. (82)

The portentous overtones about an (Stanley’s?) impending death make Petey enquire in desperation; “They get over it sometimes don’t they?” to which Goldberg replies that there may be a possible ‘recovery’ which is ‘conceivable’. These words are suggestive of abortion/death and re-conception/rebirth. Goldberg’s words echo Petey’s twice repeated reassurance to Meg earlier, (when she distresses over the prematurely broken membrane of the symbolic womb like drum that she gifts Stanley) by saying,” You can always get another one” (78)

There is another one of Pinter’s brief self-parody in the final act of the interrogation-allegation scene from the first act, when an angry betrayed Lulu and a mocking remorseless Goldberg juggle with words; and also in a caricature of a confession scene that the defrocked priest McCann seeks to forcefully draw out of Lulu, before she flees from the scene.

Stanley is then brought back on the stage in a vegetative state; neatly shaved and in a ‘dark well cut suit and a white collar’ and seated on a chair. After virtually peeling off his skin with a retributive force, the System Agents serve him with his reincarnation itinerary list. Here, Pinter employs the ancient technique of Greek stichomythia which is “Dialogue in alternate lines—a verbal parrying accompanied by antithesis and repetitive pattern.” (OED) This rhythmic Duologue exchange produces a ritualistic minimal ‘chant effect’ of hypnotising. This continues through seventy three rapid exchanges of pithy statements alternately by the duo.

This ‘re-initiating’ process involves wooing Stanley with new glasses (“out of our own pockets”) changing into reproachful (“You can’t see straight”, “You’ve been cockeyed”) then intensifies into allegations (“You’ve gone bad to worse”, “worse than worse”) and drop down in softening tone to (“You need a long convalescence”, “A change of air”); then rising back again to a threat of hellish torture (“where angels fear to tread”). The tone changes to calling him sick (“You’re in a rut”, “You look anaemic”. “Rheumatic”, “Myopic”, “Epileptic”, “You’re on the verge”, “You’re a dead duck”) and then to presenting themselves as his saviours/Messiah (“But we shall save you”, “From a worse Fate”, “True”,

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“Undeniable”, “From now on we’ll be the hub of your wheel”). After this comes the list of Perks and Institutionalized caring ( “We’ll renew your season tickets”, “We’ll take tuppence off your morning tea”, “We’ll give you a discount on all inflammable goods”, “We’ll watch you”, “Advise you”, “Give you proper care and treatment”, “Let you use the bar club” . . . ) The list continues thus with a promise of sports vestment, free passes, luxurious food, Medicaid, gymnasium, church attendance help and a host of random products which involve anything and everything from bed, bath and beyond. (Quotes: 92-93 CWI)

The lure then turns to describing his re-orientation and re-grooming process (“We’ll make a man of you” {strong/ courageous/ determined/ stable}, “And a woman” {soft/ loyal/ loving / family oriented}) and turns to painting a pretty picture of success ( “You’ll be rich”, “You’ll be adjusted”, “You’ll be our pride and joy”, “You’ll be a mensch”, “You’ll be a success”, “You’ll be integrated”, “You’ll give orders”, “You’ll make decisions”, “You’ll be a magnate”, “A statesman”, “You’ll own yachts”, “Animals”, “Animals”). (Quotes: 93-94) With the final repetition of the word ‘animals’ Pinter affects a bathetic breakup of the hypnotic flow with a double beat, which is followed by a Silence that marks the end of the list. The rhythmic beat, that begins with ‘You’ve, You’re and You need’, goes on to change with ‘We’ll’ (let you, give you, advise you) before finally changing tune to ‘You’ll’ (become) integrated, successful, a magnate, A statesman owning ‘yachts’ and ‘Animals’ (Human slaves?)

Upon serving the list, Goldberg asks Stanley his opinion about the whole thing. But all Stanley can do is look at him myopically without his glasses, clenching and unclenching his eyes. To elicit some kind of answer out of him the honcho McCann hits Stanley’s Achilles Heel by calling him “Sir”: “What’s your opinion sir? Of this prospect sir?” (95) (It is to be noted that in Act One Stanley reacted violently to McCann’s calling him ‘sir’ once). The word has the desired effect; Stanley’s hands clutch his broken glasses and begin to tremble before he emits a gurgling sound from his throat: “Uh- gug . . . uh-gug . . . eeehhhh-gag . . . (on the breath) Caahh . . . Caahh . . . ”(95)Then with a shudder his head drops and he becomes still. Here Pinter, by implication makes a horrific suggestion that they may have severed or castrated his
tongue; this time outrageously and completely robbing him off his speech and or associatively silencing his rebellious remonstrations forever.

The prosecutors-inquisitors-judges then carry him off to “Monty” (Purgatory? Mortuary?) In spite of Petey’s repeated protests, even as he shouts after them in a broken voice with a last vestige of hope: “Stan, don’t let them tell you what to do!” (96) Pinter ends the play with an automaton of daily rituals that seem to be playing themselves out with walk-and-talk the latter of which is (to use Pinter’s own words), “platitudinous trite and meaningless” spoken in set- pieces separated by pauses that once again build up a vacuum.

Meg’s final words are no wiser than those at the opening of the play. She bubbles once again (although with tragic irony and inaccuracy): “I was the belle of the ball . . . They said I was . . . Oh, it’s true I was . . . I know I was.” (97)

WORKS CITED:


