UNIT 13: HAROLD PINTER: *THE BIRTHDAY PARTY* II

UNIT STRUCTURE

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13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- discuss the themes pertaining to the play *The Birthday Party*
- analyse the major characters in the play
- learn about the style and language employed by Pinter
- read into the critical reception of Pinter's work
- gain a critical insight on how to approach an absurd play
- appreciate the nuances and complexities of absurd drama
- discover a new approach in reading absurd plays

13.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit is a continuation of the previous unit on Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party,* and moves from a close reading of the text towards a more critical reading on the multiple aspects of the play such as the themes, characters, style and language used and the critical reception of Pinter's works.In *Pinter the Playwright* (2000) Martin Esslin discusses Pinter's perspectives on the mysteries and multiplicities of the human world and the

human mind that does not necessarily reveal their meanings through language.This is precisely owing to the difficulty of encompassing the inexplicable, uncertain and unknowable through words or language. He mentions one such letter that Pinter had received from a lady with her request to Pinter to explain the meaning of his play *The Birthday Party* in view of the three major questions that troubled her. Her letter to Pinter read as follows:

"Dear Sir, I would be obliged if you could kindly explain to me the meaning of your play The Birthday Party. These are the points I do not understand: 1. Who were the two men? 2. Where did Stanley come from? 3. Were they all supposed to be normal? You will appreciate tht without the answers to my questions I cannot fully understand your play." (29)

In Pinter's reply to the lady he is said to have written the following:

"Dear Madam, I would be obliged if you would kindly explain to me the meaning of your letter. These are the points which I do not understand: 1.Who are you? 2. Where do you come from? 3. Are you supposed to be normal? You will appreciate that without the answers to your questions I cannot fully understand your letter." (30)

Therefore, you will be much clearer in your approach to the play, if you consider Pinter's reply to the questions of the unknown lady, much like whom we all face difficulties in comprehending absurd plays.

13.3 MAJOR CHARACTERS

In his speech at the Seventh National Festival in Bristol in 1962, Pinter talks of his characters saying: "My characters tell me so much and no more, with reference to their experience, their aspirations, their motives, their history. Between my lack of biographical data about them and the ambiguity of what they say there lies a territory which is not only worthy of exploration but which it is compulsory to explore."To introduce you to the six characters in the play: Meg and Petey Boles are the couple in their sixties who home is also a boarding house for visitors; Stanley a man in his late thirties is a long-time boarder with the Boles; Lulu is a young girl in her twenties whois an acquaintance of the Boles; and the two gentleman

Goldberg (in his fifties) and McCann (in his thirties) are the new visitors who arrive from a secret organisation. Let us now unravel and try to explore some of the defining traits and characteristics of these six characters in the play.

Meg:

Meg in the play is an affectionate and caring old woman who takes care of the household and the regular needs of her husband Petey and their long-time boarder Stanley. She is fond of him and loves him like the son she could never have and also in some ways like a secret lover. At times her nature is child-like and at other times she is also the motherly or matronly figure. She longs for attention and compliments which is why she takes everyone's feed-back on anything she does or any effort she makes.

Her emotional and affectionate side is best revealed in the birthday party when she raises a toast to Stanley, in which she gives a moving speech. She also comes across as a jolly natured woman who loves to sing, dance and laugh her heart out. In one instance she talks of not having laughed in a long time and therefore enjoying herself completely in the party. We do not know much about her, except that as a child, her father was to take her to Ireland once but had gone away, all by himself and moreover, she had no idea if he had really gone to Ireland. Her father was a doctor who made sure that she was cared for.In her conversation, she reveals how as a little girl, she had had a night light in her room and how a nanny sat up with her and sang for her. Her little room was of a pink colourwith pink carpets curtains and musical boxes all over the room. Her other siblings had rooms of different colours each.

Although, she is blamed of being a bad wife by Stanley, yet she disagrees with him saying she was the best caretaker around the house. She does not receive any such fuss or complaints from her own husband who simply lets her be her on her own. No matter, how much she is hurt by Stanley, she seems to take it all sportingly and instead tries to appease his ego at all times. She is even kind and hospitable to her guests, the two gentlemen and provides for everyone in her home. But she also comes across as absent-minded lady who at times, seems to be unaware of what

is happening around her, particularly at the end of the play when Petey is taken away by the two gentlemen.

Petey:

Petey in the play is a calm and composed character who does not have any fuss, pretence or involvement with the other characters in the play. He comes across as a caring man and seems to give his wife some space for an instance, when Meg has a splitting headache after the birthday party, he asks her to go out for shopping and get some air to do her some good. He is even absent from the birthday party of which he is the last to know of. And he opts out of the birthday party as he has a chess-night to attend. The game of chess is also a game which requires acumen, tact and patience which one can associate with him. Petey works as a deck-chair attendant at the promenade and is self-contained doing his own work. He reads the morning newspapers, shares tit-bits of news with Meg, enquires about Stanley like a father, has no complaint about his breakfast and leaves for work in time. Peteyis much formal and polite as a gentleman by nature. He is much detached from the happenings in his house and does not seem to interfere or object the hosting of a party.

At the end of the play, his opinion is not taken into account when Goldberg decides to take Stanley away for treatment and although Petey requests Goldberg not to take Stanley away, it goes unheard. The only time that he expresses his opinion is in a morning discussion with Meg who mentions about a new show in town called ‘The Palace’, a play in which the characters only talk and there is no dancing or singing and at this Petey expresses his preference of such “straight play”- a play of only words.

Stanley:

Stanley is a long time boarder in Meg and Petey’s boarding house with a room upstairs. The couple is very loving towards him and even more affectionate towards him is Meg, who fondly calls him ‘Stanney’. His first appearance is that of an unshaven and unkempt man, in his pyjama jacket and glasses. It is also quite different from his appearance in the last act of the play, in which he is clean-shaven and in neat clothes. Stanley is late-riser and Meg takes him his tea in the morning. In the absence of Petey,

Stanley behaves in a very unpleasant manner and bosses around Meg. The learner will certainly notice the tone in which he talks to her. For an instance, when Meg takes him a half-filled cup of tea in the morning, he charges her saying, "who gave you the right to take away my tea?" and he even orders her around by saying, "who do you think you are talking to?" (21)

It is almost as if the reins of Meg's emotions are in his hands (as revealed in the first act itself) but Meg is very tolerant of him. Stanley threatens to leave if she did not provide him proper services, accuses her of being a bad wife to Petey, never offers help or his company when she requests him and worse, he calls her names with complete disregard to her or her feelings. But again he also has compulsively desires her presence, wanting her to be around even as he expresses ingratitude for her care and doting affection.

He is a pianist who had played in the pier and who had won accolades for his sweeping performances but something cuts his career short. He is very touchy on this subject of his past and even quips at Meg at the mere mention of his old concerts, saying, "You are an old piece of rock cake, aren't you?" He seems to reject the world that had rejected him first and lives in a constant unknown fear of being found out and of being cornered (particularly in act two) after he discovers that Petey had met two gentlemen who had enquired for room in their boarding house. He appears as a sort of depressed figure throughout the play, stuck at home, never going out, scared of meeting people, unkempt in appearance, morose on his birthday celebration and finally suffering a nervous breakdown. He is a difficult character to comprehend as he is complex in his demeanour, his attitude and in dealing with truth.

Lulu:

Lulu is a young girl in her twenties and an acquaintance of Meg and Petey, She has a total dislike for Stanley but is quickly taken by Goldberg's personality whom she meets in the birthday party. She is easily carried away by Goldberg's flattery and seduction and even raises no objection to his physical liberties with her in the party. To her, Goldberg seems like "the dead image of the first man" she had ever loved and she also discloses her liking for older men. In her conversation, she also reveals that she had had

a “pure relation” with her first lover “Eddie” and was now excited after having met Goldberg. But it is only later that she is furious and angered that Goldberg had selfish motives and had taken certain liberties with her only to satisfy his sexual appetite. She is a feminine presence who is young and attractive but is also presented as vulnerable to preying men like Goldberg.

Goldberg:

Goldberg is a proud gentleman who often refers to his Uncle Barney from whom he supposedly had learnt the ways of life and drew constant inspiration. He often comes across as a flatterer particularly with the ladies in the play. For an instance when Meg wants to show him the way upstairs, he compliments her saying: “With a tulip? It’s a pleasure.” (33). From his conversation we learn that his old mother would call him “Simey” and often cook his favourite “gefilte fish” for him (43). But he would not have anyone call him ‘Gold’ (as Meg tries calling him) or by any other shortened form of his name. He reminisces his childhood days and talks of his old memories when he would spend time with a girl who had a sweet voice like a nightingale and a Sunday school teacher like a true gentleman. He also talks of having been in the fashion or apparel business earlier. Further, in his dialogues he reveals what his father had spoken to him on his death-bed asking him to be kind to neighbours and never forget his family and to observe his duties. If there was any difficulty or problem his Uncle Barney would stand him in good stead.

But Goldberg is not an easy character to comprehend and often comes across as a complex figure. One of the main characteristics of Goldberg is that he lectures and talks too much and is even proud of his oratorial skills. As he talks a lot, he ends up revealing more of himself than the others. He is also a boastful man and believes: “That’s the sort of man I am. Not size but quality” (Act II pg. 56) and considers himself as ‘fit as a fiddle’. His motto was: ‘Work hard, play hard. Not a day’s illness”. Also he is very conceited and in an instance when he sends McCann to buy drinks for the birthday party, he tells him to do nothing except mention his name at the shop.

In the party we find him at his worst, when he drunk, flirts and even takes liberties with Lulu. This is when his gentlemanly air vanishes and his

immorality is exposed. Having received praises for his long winding speech at the party particularly by the ladies, he tries to charm Lulu and win her confidence. Without realising,he comes across as a lecherous man by openly asking Lulu to sit on his lap saying: "Lulu, you're a big bouncy girl. Come and sit on my lap" (58). He wishes to kiss Lulu, suggesting all bygone things be left aside. To mention another instance,when he compliments Meg and asks her not to be shy, he indecently slaps her bottom at the same time which is very much unlike a gentleman.

Although, he talks of the rarity of love and bonhomie that is seen in people like Meg and appreciates other good things or qualities, yet he himself proves to be bad example with his ungentlemanly ways. When Stanley suffers a nervous breakdown, Goldberg seems to be least bothered to even call in a doctor. He is a figure who prefers to boss around and orchestrate everything his way, which is why he even decides to take Stanley away without anyone's prior knowledge or even consent.

McCann :

McCann is almost the opposite of Goldberg and to a certain degree maintains his self-composure. He appears to be gentle, does not talk much and reveals nothing of his past or about himself. Early in the play Stanley warns him that Goldberg might take the better of him and make a fool of him all the while, on the pretext of bringing him for a holiday. But, McCann helplessly plays the bound accomplice to Goldberg by listening to all that he says and following all his orders. He is also capable of being brutal at times and also being very mean, as in the instance when he secretly breaks Stanley's spectacles frame. One of the meaningless activities that he is seen to be involved in is his cutting of Petey's newspapers into long strips which he does not allow anyone to even touch. Although, he talks very less in comparison to Goldberg and hardly reveals any of his thoughts, opinions or motives, he has a habit of asking a lot of questions to Goldberg almost tiring him out.

Here, it is to be noted that both Goldberg. who is a Jew and McCann who is Irish belong to a secret organisation and arrive at the boarding house with a secret mission after having searched the entire town for Stanley. You

will be interested to know that Pinter had also penned a poem titled “A View of the Party” in 1958 in which he chiefly described the characters of Goldberg and McCann.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Briefly mention the names and describe the six characters in the play.

Q 2: What was Petey’s profession? Why did he not attend the party?

Q 3: What do you learn from Goldberg’s conversation about his past?

Q 4: What is Goldberg’s motto in life?

Q 5: Why do we find Goldberg at his worst in the birthday party?

Q 6: Name the poem which described that described the characters of Goldberg and McCann.

13.4 MAJOR THEMES

The following are the important thematic aspects of the play *The Birthday Party.*

Theatre of Absurd: The Theatre of Absurd or New Theatre Movement had originally started in Paris in the late 1950s before it was adopted as an *avant garde* practice among other European playwrights. Has it ever occurred to you that life is defined by the meaning we ascribe to it? And the moment we withdraw our definitions of life, it ceases to have meaning. To live and to exist are two different categories in which the ‘life’ we live is coloured by our subjective definitions of hopes, desires, goals and endeavours whereas our ‘existence’ is a plain objective fact or reality. Sometimes the thoughts of meaninglessness of life and existence do lead to a sense of existential despair. This is what existentialist thinkers probe into and where the element of absurd comes in. Only ‘silence’ is left when everything stops making sense, turns meaningless, illogical,

incomprehensible and incommunicable. And the Absurd thinkers precisely tried to present these possibilities through their works.

Also it is interesting to note how in Paris, existential philosophy which was propounded by the French philosopher John Paul Sarte had a considerable influence on the Theatre of Absurd. The surrealist movement led by the surreal painters Salvador Dali, Max Ernst, Jean Arp among others had a considerable influence on the absurdists. Surrealism was a modernist movement which dealt with elements of reality in dreams or fantasy and engaged in the quest for meaning. The Theatre of Absurd was defined by the works of Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Alejo Jadorowsky, Friedrich Durrenmatt, Fernando Arrabal, Boris Vian, Jean Tardieu, and Edward Albee among others. The term 'absurd' was first coined by Martin Esslin in his *Theatre of the Absurd* (1960) to define the plays and dramatic works that dealt with the questions of truth, reality and existence. The leading British 'Absurdists' were Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, N. F. Simpson, James Saunders and David Campton. Their works contained the influence of the existential although it did not necessarily mean that an absurd dramatist followed or conformed to existentialism. In his *Theatre of the Absurd*, Esslin considered Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet and Harold Pinter as the leading dramatists who had defined the New Movement with their radical works.

It is suggested that at some point you should try reading Beckett's famous play *Waiting for Godot* (1954) in which you will certainly find yourself grappling with the ideas of meaninglessness and absurdity through the tragic-comic situation of the two main characters Vladimir and Estragon in the play. Similarly, in Pinter's *The Birthday Party* there is an element of mystery and absurdity in the two characters Goldberg and McCann, who are engaged in creating absurd situations, meaningless jargon and undefined motives. Throughout the play we find Stanley suffering from loneliness, undefined fears or phobias, disturbing doubts and a complete sense of existential despair resulting in a nervous breakdown. Absurd plays deal with the complex aspects of reality, existence and meaning which is why they sometimes call for an alternate reading.

Postmodern Influences: The context of the postmodern has radically altered modern critical perspectives. The ideas of postmodernism was said to have developed from the radical and revisionist French critical theory of the 1960s. The intellectual postmodernist thinkers first began with the questions of 'reality' and how reality was structured with concrete ideas. The famous philosopher of the 19th century, Friedrich Nietzsche had declared that the idea of certainty was impossible. Similarly, the French critics Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault questioned the fixity of structured ideas and the foundations of traditional beliefs.

The postmodernists held that reality can never be totalistic and was rather fragmented with alternate or multiple possibilities. This is where Derrida's critical ideas of deconstruction comes in with regard to the crumbling of structures and even structured language. Language which shaped reality engaged in multiple possibilities (of meaning) through its wild abandon of word play. Meaning had now multiple avatars, each 'different' from the other and each in a state of 'deferral' that is impossible to pin down to its final meaning. Thus the idea of postmodern is chiefly defined by the loss of certainty and the questioning of traditional assumptions of reality. Also, Jean Francois Lyotard in his rejection of structured foundations had examined the idea of truth and its representation. Austin Quigley discusses how plot-patterns in the plays of Pinter's do not cohere to a linear structure and are multi-linear in terms of their development, denouement (sudden ending) and circularity.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: When did the Theatre of Absurd originally develop?

Q 8: Name the school of philosophy which influenced the Theatre of the Absurd to a great extent.

Q 9: Name some of the Surrealist painters. What do you understand by the term surrealism?

Q 10: Who had first coined the term 'absurd'? Whom did he consider as the leading dramatists who defined the New Movement in the theatre?
Q 11: Briefly discuss the context of postmodernism in a simplified way.

13.5 NARRATIVE STYLE

Pinter talks of his delight and conflict in his experience of creating, omitting and sorting out of words on pages; words which are regularly written and spoken by others, which rotate in a cycle of repetitive ideas, appear as terminologies no more in use, as inabilities of expressions and at times as a meaningless mass. Pinter who was radical in his approach to the art of drama believed that a playwright or dramatist can never claim to know everything about his creations. He does not impose language on his characters through forceful dialogues and instead maintains a respectful relation with them, by letting them articulate and develop on their own. He believes that such an approach does not hamper the development of his play, nor do the characters given their freedom turn anarchic because in the end he is the one to select and arrange what will be staged and what will be not. At times it is the silent, mysterious and hidden aspects of developing characters that interests Pinter. It is most challenging for a dramatist when words fall short of expression or are resistant as Martin Esslin notes "Silence, thus is, for Pinter, an essential, an integral part and often the climax of his use of language" (37).

The unarticulated thoughts or motives of characters in the form of 'oblique' dialogues or in other words as pauses and doted ellipses was common in the works of Anton Chekhov. And Pinter seems to draw and develop such use of oblique dialogues in his absurd plays through gaps and one word or monosyllabic dialogues and his use of ambiguous words (words that do not possess one fixed meaning). This is one reason that some critics have often called his the "theatre of non-communication" (39). At the same time critics like Esslin consider that Pinter's is a "theatre of language" and that "words, in Pinter's plays become weapons of dominance and

subservience, silences explode, nuances of vocabulary strip human beings to the skin" (39). Pinter had a developed ear for words and this is one reason that we find various ways of words some of them being verbose utterances, repetitions and words empty of meaning which can be considered completely nonsensical. These are also present in the entire text of *The Birthday Party* with examples of Goldberg's long-winding lectures, repetitive questions or phrases and out-of-the-blue or out of context utterances devoid of sense and meanings.

Pinter also draws from Bertolt Brecht who held that the use of language should be reflected in appropriate gestures or movements. There is an element of the dramatic in Pinter's characters who engage in a war of words and by which the one who articulates the best gains dominance over the rest. This also helps in carrying forward the dramatic action of his plays. The learner will notice that in *The Birthday Party* Goldberg throws around his weight with his long-winding speeches and Stanley who is unable to articulate or even respond to the set of confusing questions is completely dominated by Goldberg and McCann.

Peter Raby discusses an interesting feature of Pinter's plays which take place just about anywhere whether in a room or a house, in a city or seaside town, suburbia or countryside. To cite a few examples, *The Birthday Party* takes place in a boarding house in a seaside town, *The Dumb Waiter* takes place in a basement room or *The Caretaker* takes place in a room.

In his contemporary use of the elements of the tragic-comedy play, the comedy in his plays reaches a saturation point when things suddenly turn absurd, meaningless, tragic and pathetic. David Jones who was also Pinter's close friend had considerable influence on the critics with his opinion that he was a great comic writer. If we relate this to *The Birthday Party*, this is most certainly evident in the second act of the play when Stanley's birthday party turns into a disaster in many ways and after which he himself suffers a nervous breakdown. To Pinter reality is not something that is plain and given as we know it but rather mysterious and layered with multiple perspectives. And thus, even his works are open to multiple analyses of the readers or spectators. His early manuscript titled "A Note on Shakespeare"

he in a way discusses the creative role of a dramatist. Esslin rightly notes that "For out of the wound of existential anguish springs the playwright's effort to come to terms with the world and its mystery" (46).



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 12: Name the critic who asserted that Pinter's was a theatre of communication as against the opinion of other critics

Q 13: What does Pinter draw from Bertolt Brecht in his use of language?

Q 14: What is the interesting feature that Peter Raby discusses in relation to Pinter's plays?

13.6 CRITICAL RECEPTION

Peter Raby in his Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter* (2009) discusses Pinter contributions to the world of theatre and the critical acclaim that he had received in his lifetime as a dramatist. Austin Quigley notes that Pinter through his work made a statement "that his plays do not have to be about anything, for anything, or against anything outside themselves" (13). Pinter came up with his own set of creations as a playwright, an actor, director and even a screen writer. His early works were readily accepted in the academic circles but were examined with reservation by the theatre critics. The staging of his play *The Birthday Party* in 1958 had left critics baffled because in his time his had emerged as a radical form of writing.

By the 1960s, Pinter had achieved wide success and was often compared to the post-war dramatists also known as the Angry Young Men (chiefly John Osbourne, Arnold Wesker and John Arden) who dealt with social realism and at other times compared to absurd dramatists like Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco. Particularly, his early works were categorised as absurd plays and Ronald Knowles also discusses how reviewers associated *The Birthday Party* with elements of the absurd. Pinter

considered Beckett as one of the greatest contemporary writers and he read and translated Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in the year 1955 in Ireland where he had worked as an actor and later watched the play performed in London. It was also the contribution of Martin Esslin in his *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1980) that he came to be regarded as a British Absurdist although this is in no way to suggest that he was not a versatile playwright experimenting with different traditions and forms.

While Pinter's work had a distinct appeal of its own, they were often experimental, in which strands of his work were compared to Anton Chekhov's theatricality of language and characterisation; August Strindberg's use of 'silence technique'; Luigi Pirandello's 'humourism'; and the two leading modernistsT. S. Eliot's and James Joyce for whom he held great admiration. Although Pinter was very vocal on political issues of his time, he always played the 'pacifist' right from the days when he had refused to serve any kind of war politics. He did not even conform to the contemporary trend of political theatre that continued from the 1950s to the 1970s because he believed that art had to move beyond politics.

In relation to Pinter's play *The Birthday Party* which was staged in London in 1958, it found no favour with the critics who widely rejected the play and caused its production to be struck off within a week's time. At a time when his plays were reviewed as 'puzzling', only the theatre critic, Harold Hobson had recognised Pinter's true talent. In a review published on 25 May 1958 published in *The Sunday Times* Hobson wrote "Mr .Pinter and The Birthday Party, despite their experience last week, will be heard of again. Make a note of their names" and which like a prophecy had indeed come true. For the reviewers to really take note of Pinter's enigmatic works, it was only a gradual development. It took six years after the rejection of *The Birthday Party* in London for him to receive the acknowledgement of his originality and promising talent by the same set of critics.

Pinter was a playwright and an international figure known for his radical plays and productions. He had received several prestigious awards and recognitions such as the David Cohen British Literature Prize in 1995, the Laurence Olivier Award for lifetime achievement in theatre in 1996, the

Franz Kafka Award and Wilfred Owen Award for Poetry in 2005 as a successful lyric poet. Pinter was also the recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2005.

Pinter had indeed brought a New Movement in the theatre of arts and as Esslin notes, had established "a place in the mainstream of the great tradition of British and World Drama"(274).You will be interested to know about the kind of interest that is still vibrant in intellectual circles such as the Pinter Society in the United States, the Pinter Conferences, Pinter Festivals and Pinter Studies etc. Pinter's plays has always been challenging for critics Peter Hall talks of the word 'pinteresque' which has come to distinctly characterise the dramatic style and the works of Harold Pinter.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 15: Why did the staging of Pinter's *Birthday Party* leave the critics baffled?

Q 16: Name the leading post-war dramatists known as the Angry Young Men?

Q 17: When was Pinter's play *The Birthday Party* first staged in London?

Q 18: How many years after the initial rejection of the staging of *The Birthday Party,*was Pinter's work truly recognised by critics?

Q 19: Name the drama critic who differed in opinion from the other critics and had recognised Pinter's true talent.

Q 20: What has the word 'pinteresque' come to define?



13.7 LET US SUM UP

After having gone through the text of the play *The Birthday Party* along with the supplemented discussions on the themes and characters, the learner will be able to read the play with a more informed approach. The discussion on the style and language of Pinter and the critical reception of his works will also provide you with various critical insights. Thus, a thorough

reading of the text along with the detailed explanation in the unit will enable you to appreciate the nuances and complexities of absurd drama and discover how it can also be a reading pleasure.



13.8 FURTHER READING

1) Esslin, Martin. (2000) *Pinter: The Playwright*. London: Metheun Drama.

2) Pinter, Harold (1991) *The Birthday Party*. London: Faber and Faber

3) Raby, Peter. (2009) *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter.* (Second Edition) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

13.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q 1: The six characters in the play: Meg and Petey Boles are the couple in their sixties who home is also a boarding house for visitors; Stanley a man in his late thirties is a long-time boarder with the Boles; Lulu is a young girl in her twenties who is an acquaintance of the Boles; and the two gentleman Goldberg (in his fifties) and McCann (in his thirties) are the new visitors who arrive from a secret organisation.

Ans to Q 2: Petey was as a deck-chair attendant at the promenade. He had to attend a night of chess playing at the chess club.

Ans to Q 3: From his conversation we learn that his old mother would call him “Simey” and often cook his favourite “gefilte fish” for him (43). But he would not have anyone call him ‘Gold’ (as Meg tries calling him) or by any other shortened form of his name. He reminisces his childhood days and talks of his old memories when he would spend time with a girl who had a sweet voice like a nightingale and a Sunday school teacher like a true gentleman. He also talks of having been in the fashion or apparel business earlier. Further, in his dialogues he reveals what his father had spoken to him on his death-bed asking

him to be kind to neighbours and never forget his family and to observe his duties. If there was any difficulty or problem his Uncle Barney would stand him in good stead.

Ans to Q 4: Goldberg's motto was: 'Work hard, play hard. Not a day's illness".

Ans to Q 5: In the party we find him at his worst, when he drunk, flirts and even takes liberties with Lulu. This is when his gentlemanly air vanishes and his immorality is exposed. Having received praises for his long winding speech at the party particularly by the ladies, he tries to charm Lulu and win her confidence. Without realising, he comes across as a lecherous man by openly asking Lulu to sit on his lap saying: "Lulu, you're a big bouncy girl. Come and sit on my lap" (58). He wishes to kiss Lulu, suggesting all bygone things be left aside. To mention another instance, when he compliments Meg and asks her not to be shy, he indecently slaps her bottom at the same time which is very much unlike a gentleman.

Ans to Q 6: Pinter had penned a poem titled "A View of the Party" in 1958 in which he chiefly described the characters of Goldberg and McCann.

Ans to Q 7: Martin Esslin

Ans to Q 8: The Theatre of Absurd or New Theatre Movement had originally started in Paris in the late 1950s before it was adopted as an *avant garde* practice among other European playwrights.

Ans to Q 9: Existential philosophy which was propounded by the French philosopher John Paul Sarte had a considerable influence on the Theatre of Absurd.

Ans to Q 10: The surrealist movement led by the surreal painters Salvador Dali, Max Ernst, Jean Arp among others had a considerable influence on the absurdists. Surrealism was a modernist movement which dealt with elements of reality in dreams or fantasy and engaged in the quest for meaning.

Ans to Q 11: The term 'absurd' was first coined by Martin Esslin in his *Theatre of the Absurd* (1960) to define the plays and dramatic works that dealt with the questions of truth, reality and existence. Esslin considered Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugene Ionesco, Jean

Genet and Harold Pinter as the leading dramatists who had defined the New Movement with their radical works.

Ans to Q 12: The context of the postmodern has radically altered modern critical perspectives. The ideas of postmodernism is said to have developed from the radical and revisionist French critical theory of the 1960s. The intellectual postmodernist thinkers first began with the questions of 'reality' and how reality was structured with concrete ideas. The famous philosopher of the 19th century, Friedrich Nietzsche had declared that the idea of certainty was impossible. Similarly, the French critics Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault questioned the fixity of structured ideas and the foundations of traditional beliefs.

Ans to Q 13: Pinter also draws from Bertolt Brecht who held that the use of language should be reflected in appropriate gestures or movements. There is an element of the dramatic in Pinter's characters who engage in a war of words and by which the one who articulates the best gains dominance over the rest. This also helps in carrying forward the dramatic action of his plays. For an instance in *The Birthday Party* Goldberg throws around his weight with his long-winding speeches and Stanley who is unable to articulate or even respond to the set of confusing questions is completely dominated by Goldberg and McCann.

Ans to Q 14: Peter Raby discusses an interesting feature of Pinter's plays which take place just about anywhere whether in a room or a house, in a city or seaside town, suburbia or countryside. For an example, *The Birthday Party* takes place in a boarding house in a seaside town, *The Dumb Waiter* takes place in a basement room or *The Caretaker* takes place in a room.

Ans to Q 15: The staging of his play *The Birthday Party* in 1958 had left critics baffled because in his time his had emerged as a radical form of writing.

Ans to Q 16: The post-war dramatists also known as the Angry Young Men were chiefly the dramatists John Osbourne, Arnold Wesker and John

Arden.

Ans to Q 17: Pinter's play *The Birthday Party* which was staged in London in 1958.

Ans to Q 18: It took six years after the rejection of *The Birthday Party* in London for him to receive the acknowledgement of his originality and promising talent by the same set of critics.

Ans to Q 19: At a time when his plays were reviewed as 'puzzling', only the theatre critic, Harold Hobson had recognised Pinter's true talent. In a review published on 25 May 1958 published in *The Sunday Times* Hobson wrote "Mr .Pinter and The Birthday Party, despite their experience last week, will be heard of again. Make a note of their names" and which like a prophecy had indeed come true.

Ans to Q 20: The word 'pinteresque' has come to distinctly characterise the dramatic style and the works of Harold Pinter.



13.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Discuss the main themes that emerge from *The Birthday Party*.

Q2. Draw the character sketches of the male characters in *The Birthday Party.*

Q3. Discuss the relation between Meg and Stanley in *The Birthday Party*.

Q4. Describe the characters of Goldberg and McCann?

Q5. What are the defining characteristics of the language employed by Pinter that define his works?

Q6. Discuss the reception of *The Birthday Party* in London in 1958 and the gradual change in the perception of the critics.

Q7. Explain how was Harold Pinter compared and contrasted to the leading dramatists of his time.