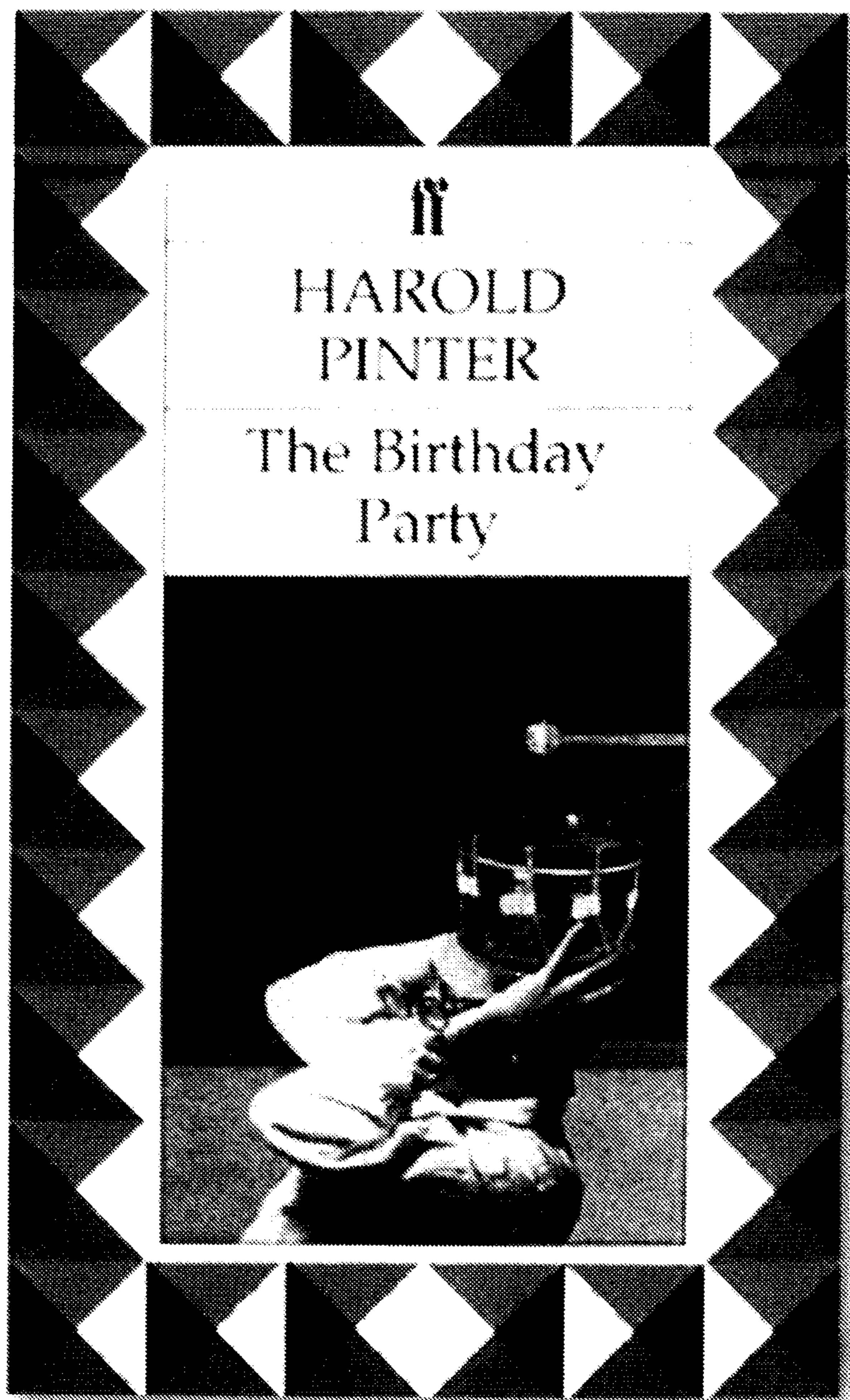
พินิจหนังสือ
BOOK REVIEW



The Birthday Party.

Pinter, H. (1991).
London: Faber and Faber.

Prapassaree Kramer
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The Nobel Prize awarded to Harold Pinter came as no surprise to the literary community; his status is unique, his presence is palpable. A few other living writers might have websites (like www.pinter.org) or academic journals (like Tampa University's *The Pinter Review*) devoted entirely to their life and work, but surely no others have had a genre of drama ("the comedy of menace," a phrase invented by the theatre critic Martin Esslin) specifically and exclusively applied to their works, or had an Oxford English Dictionary-certified adjective ("Pinteresque") coined after their names. The Pinteresque has even made its way into popular culture: the sitcom *Seinfeld* ran an episode

("The Betrayal") built around the backwards-chronology structure of Pinter's play *Betrayal,* and the comedy "news" program *The Daily Show,* when reporting on the Nobel Prizes, asserted that the announcement of Pinter's award "was followed by an awkward pause." Clearly, the comedians are assuming that their viewers have absorbed a few things about a Pinter play: that it is likely to involve strange reversals of expectations, psychological warfare among family and friends, and –perhaps most notoriously–moments of silence fraught with tense significance. In short, Pinter attracts the general public as well as academics and avid theatergoers. His plays appeal to highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow alike. Pinter's first full-length play, *The Birthday Party*, is still in many ways the most representative of his work and the best place to go to for an introduction to the Pinteresque or the "comedy of menace."[1]

When Pinter first came on the scene in the middle 1950s, critics were mystified, and *The Birthday Party* received an unfavorable response from its first reviewers (not unlike Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* when it first came out). Even the few favorable reviewers had difficulty "placing" the new dramatist, and tried at first to assimilate his work to the hot trends of the period. Since Pinter's first few plays take place in seedy small apartments, they were called "kitchen sink dramas"; i.e., they were compared to the work of contemporary playwrights like John Osborne and Arnold Wesker whose drama

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[1] In fact, Pinter writes on a variety of themes along with the comedy of menace. For example, he writes on love and betrayal in *Betrayal, The Collection* and *The Basement,* he writes on familial relationships in "The Family Voices" and *The Homecoming,* and fictionalizes a story from the casebook of psychologist Oliver Sacks in "A Kind of Alaska."

specialized in exposing the gritty underside of bourgeois English life. Such a categorization was inadequate and misleading, most obviously because Osborne's and Wesker's most famous plays are entirely naturalistic while Pinter's are not. Recognizing this, other critics saw essential similarities between Pinter and his predecessors such as Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco, and classified him as an absurdist. The influence of Beckett is undeniable, and some of Pinter's work does share some features of absurd drama: for example, characters who pursue apparently inexplicable goals through seemingly unmotivated actions, and dialogue which at times escapes the bounds of logic. The interrogation scene in *The Birthday Party* (which will be examined in more detail later) seems to be a striking example of "absurdist" banter. But while Ionesco's dialogue seems to point, in a resigned, comic fashion, to a general or metaphysical problem with the failure of language itself. Pinter's dialogue conveys a more pointedly distressing picture of our social situation. In Pinter, even the most disjointed and bizarre conversations–including the pauses and silences–are sites of power struggles, typically between unequal opponents, one of whom will be beaten down by the end. The absurd mixes with the sinister, thus the appropriateness of Esslin's famous phrase for Pinter, "the comedy of menace."

The plot of *The Birthday Party* can be summarized in a sentence: Stanley, who is supposedly a failed pianist, is taken away from a seaside boarding house by two mysterious strangers, Goldberg and McCann. A kidnapping is a well-worn plot device, but in this case Pinter discards all of the traditional elements of the mystery plot: we see nothing of the conspiracy, we do not know what makes the victim a target to the kidnappers, we don't know what they expect

to gain from the kidnapping (certainly not ransom money), we do not experience any physical struggles or rescue attempts, and indeed the victim and those closest to him seem to accept the abduction. This play encapsulates the essence of Pinteresque menace, which dramatizes the fear of being dispossessed by an agent from the outside world as the security of an individual inside a room is threatened by an unknown fear. The shape taken by the agent of menace changes from one play to another: two strangers in *The Birthday Party,* a blind black man in *The Room,* a match-seller in "A Slight Ache," or an old friend in *Old Times*. Because of Pinter's Jewish background, some readers view this motif as a fear conditioned by the holocaust, which Pinter learned of in his pre-teen years. However, it can be looked upon in a broader sense as well, as the fear we in the modern world experience in our condition of alienation and uncertainty. An aura of mystery always envelops our intruders, and they cannot be read exclusively as allegorical figures any more than can be taken as realistic characters.

The menace is dramatized through the inexplicable mystery and the sense of impending doom that shrouds the play. For example, Stanley intuitively anticipates the visit from Goldberg and McCann, seeming to realize that the visit of the intruders is inevitable. Similarly, Goldberg explains to McCann upon their arrival at the boarding house that he did not look at the address when they were searching for Stanley. The explanation creates a sinister, uncanny feeling for the readers who will have a sense that these two are predators seeking out their prey. In addition, no explanation is offered concerning the main event: the identity and motives of the intruders, Stanley's "crime," where Stanley is taken and what is

going to happen to him. The sense of mystery and impending doom which sets the reader on edge intensifies up to the climax. Stanley, the failed pianist, can be regarded as representative of artists and/or nonconformists. He refuses to adopt the bourgeois ethics of hard work and "responsibility." He does not clean himself, dress respectfully or go to work. Once he is brainwashed, however, and ready to be taken away by Goldberg and McCann, he wears a suit, tie and bowler hat, signifying his transformation into a "normal" member of society like millions of others. The intruders reduce Stanley to this state of submission not with physical force but by verbal means, through an "interrogation" which features exchanges such as these:

GOLDBERG: Is the number 846 possible or necessary ?
STANLEY: Neither.
GOLDBERG: Wrong ! Is the number 846 possible or necessary ?
STANLEY: Both.
GOLDBERG: Wrong ! It is necessary but not possible?
STANLEY: Both....

(and)

GOLDBERG: You verminate the sheet of your birth.
McCANN: What about the Albigensenist heresy?
GOLDBERG: Who watered the wicket in Melbourne?
McCANN: What about the blessed Oliver Plunkett?
GOLDBERG: Speak up, Webber. Why did the chicken cross the road?

Here the form and the content clash drastically (another trademark of Pinter 'comedy'). The dialogue is nonsensical, illogical and full of non-sequiturs. Read out of context, it is funny; it sounds like some nonsense riddle from Lewis Carroll. The situation and the manner of delivery, however, transform the nonsense into a sinister threat. We do not know, any more than Stanley does, what it means for a seemingly random number to be either "necessary" or "possible," let alone how to decide whether it is one or the other. We, like Stanley, might just possibly know what the Albigensenist heresy was, but have no time to gather any thoughts on the matter before the question about the history of Christian theology is replaced by another question about the history of international cricket. Like Stanley, we are disoriented, uncertain, vulnerable, reduced to shadow boxing. It is impossible for the subject of interrogation to anticipate any pattern to the questioning, to argue against blatant illogic or retaliate against a non sequitur. Goldberg and McCann, like interrogators everywhere, triumph precisely in their power to reduce their victims to such a state of helplessness. Language is power; even trivial riddles can be manipulated to become instruments of domination and torture. As in the novels of Kafka (to whom Pinter is often compared) the menace is more frightening because the accused is not certain of the crime he is accused of.

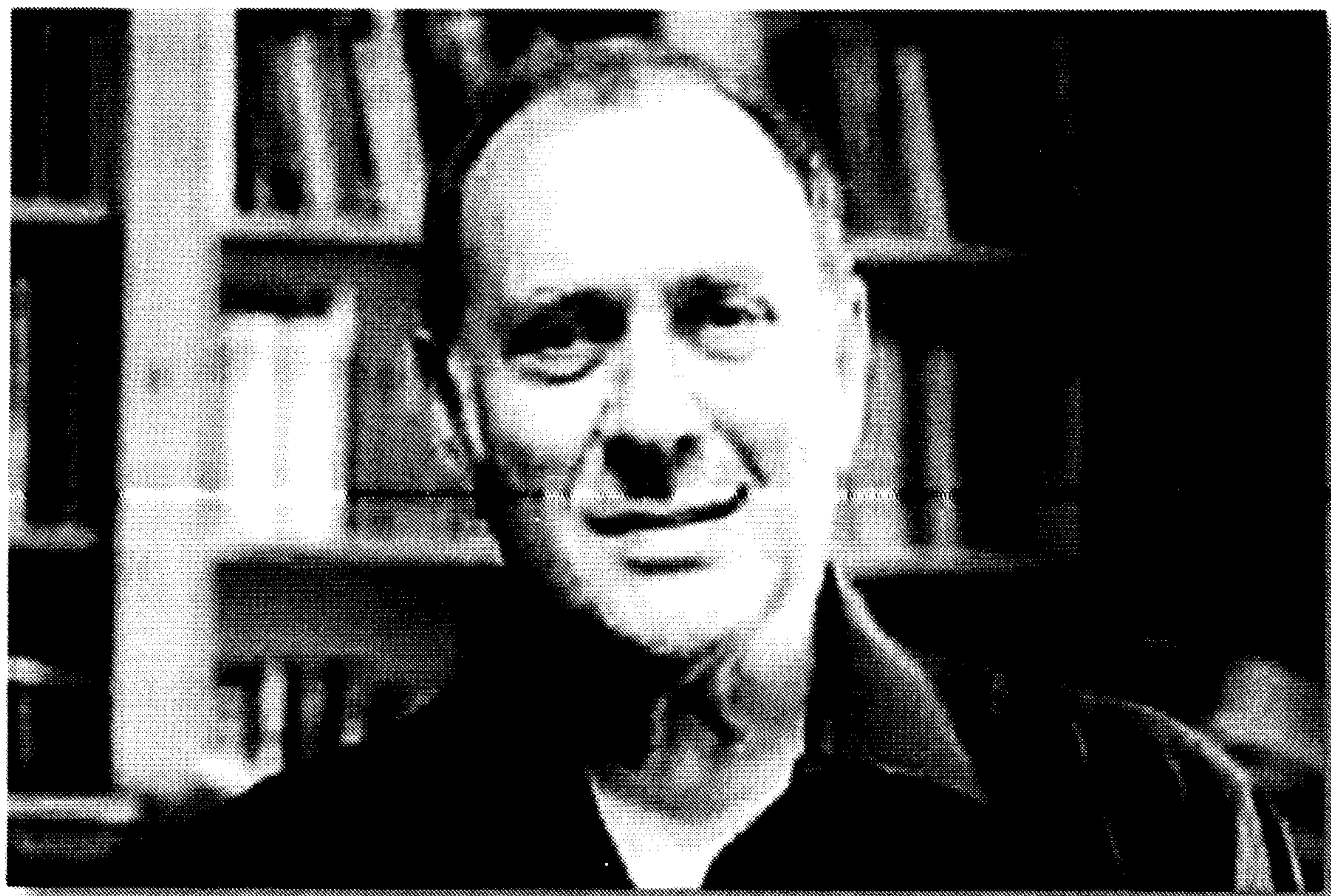
In the end, Stanley is dumfounded and deprived of speech. The investigation exemplifies the methods by which the organization or institution "takes care" of its "difficult" members, leaving no room for argument. The play's title, "The Birthday Party," turns into a piece of black humor; we see, instead of a celebration, a grotesque version of the initiation rite in which a non-conformist is broken down and

reemerges into a new life as a cog in the machine. The new identity of Stanley is symbolically conveyed through his clothes; he changes from crumpled-up pajamas to a respectable suit, tie and bowler hat like his torturers. They now belong to the same system, sharing the same identity. His deprivation of meaningful speech symbolizes his loss of identity and ability to express himself. The birthday signifies a rebirth into a new life which is something like a death in life.

Critics generally view Pinter's work after 1982 (see list below) as constituting his "political phase." This includes plays such as *Mountain Language* and *One for the Road* depicting violence and torture, especially in totalitarian situations. Pinter has in recent years also become much more outspoken as a critic of what he sees as American and British imperialism, particularly of the invasion of Iraq, and it was widely suspected that this factored into his Nobel (i.e., the committee may have wanted both to pay tribute to Pinter and send an anti-war message). When we consider the interrogation scene in *The Birthday Party,* however, we can already see an implicit protest against authoritarianism and its methods. The strangers with their suit and tie represent an organization and society that will take care of any dissenters, beating them down to submission. The fact that the characters in the scene (perhaps like the audience) do not understand or recognize the significance of what transpires should make the reader think in retrospect of how much they overlook the violence around them. Stanley's humiliation takes place under the nose of his "friendly" landlady, Meg, who in her self-centeredness is oblivious to Stanley's ordeal. Similarly, Lulu, a neighbour, is so excited and so preoccupied with Goldberg's flattery that she is blind to the violence in the living room. Pete, the landlord, is the only

person who realizes the damage that took place. However, as Yeats put it, "The best lack all conviction"; Pete is too ineffectual to make a difference.

Although Pinter is always reluctant to elucidate his plays, he once stated in an interview with Peter Wood, his director, that in *The Birthday Party* "the hierarchy, the Establishment, the arbiters, the socio-religious monsters arrive to effect alteration and censure upon a member of the club who has discarded responsibility." Pinter's interest in politics, I believe, starts here for the public to see.



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The Nobel Prize in Literature 2005
Harold Pinter

The Nobel Prize in Literature for 2005 is awarded to the English writer Harold Pinter, "who in his plays uncovers the precipice under everyday prattle and forces entry into oppression's closed rooms".
---Nobel Committee Press Release, 13 October 2005

"Harold Pinter: English playwright, who achieved international renown as one of the most complex and challenging post-World War II dramatists. His plays are noted for their use of understatement, small talk, reticence–and even silence–to convey the substance of a character's thought, which often lies several layers beneath, and contradicts, his speech. In 2005 he won the Nobel Prize for Literature."
--The Encyclopedia Brittanica

List of Harold Pinter's works

By The Associated Press (AP)

***The Room* (1957)**
The Birthday Party (1957)
The Dumb Waiter (1957)
A Slight Ache (1958)
The Hothouse (1958)
The Caretaker (1959)
A Night Out (1959)
***The Collection* (1961)**
The Lover (1962)
Tea Party (1964)
***The Homecoming* (1964)**
The Basement (1966)
Landscape (1967)
Silence (1968)
Old Times (1970)
Monologue (1972)
No Man's Land (1974)
***Betrayal* (1978)**
***Family Voices* (1980)**
Other Places (1982)
A Kind of Alaska (1982)
Victoria Station (1982)
One for the Road (1984)
Mountain Language (1988)
The New World Order (1991)
Party Time (1991)
Moonlight (1993)
Ashes to Ashes (1996)
Celebration (1999)
Remembrance of Things Past (2000)

*[Works in **bold** are mentioned in this article]*