

# Birthday Party

HAROLD PINTER

## AUTHOR

Harold Pinter was born on October 10, 1930, in Hackney, a section of metropolitan London, England. His father, Hyman, and his mother, Frances Mann, were descended from Sephardic Jews from Portugal, who had, around 1900, migrated to England after an interim residence in Hungary. The family, relatively poor, lived very frugally, like the other working-class families in the area.

In 1949, while he continued to write non-dramatic works as Harold Pinta, he launched a career as professional actor. His first work was as a bit actor for the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) Home Service radio, from which, in 1951, he moved up to a role in Shakespeare's Henry viii a production of BBC's Third Programme. He also resumed formal training at the Central School of Speech and Drama. Thereafter, under the stage name David Baron, he acted with Shakespearean and other repertory companies in both England and Ireland. On tour, he met and worked with the actress Vivien Merchant, whom he married on September 14, 1956. The pair struggled to make ends meet, and Pinter was forced to assume a variety of odd jobs, including stints as a dance-hall bouncer or "chucker," a dishwasher, a caretaker, and a salesman

Pinter's first foray into play writing came in 1957, when a friend asked him to write a piece for production at Bristol University. The result was *The Room*, a one-act play that earned the favorable notice of critic Harold Hobson and revealed Pinter's unique talent and technique. The work was not professionally produced until after *The Birthday Party* opened and floundered in 1958, but it was Hobson's review of *The Room*'s university production that brought Pinter to the attention of the young, new-wave producer Michael Codron, who decided to stage *The Birthday Party*.



# BIRTHDAY PARTY

The Birthday Party, was the playwright's first commercially-produced, full-length play. He began writing the work after acting in a theatrical tour, during which, in Eastbourne, England, he had lived in "filthy insane digs." There he became acquainted with "a great bulging scrag of a woman" and a man who stayed in the seedy place. The flophouse became the model for the rundown boarding house of the play and the woman and her tenant the models, respectively, for the characters of Meg Boles and Stanley Webber.


# PLOT

The Birthday Party opens in the living-dining area of a seedy rooming house at an unnamed seaside resort in England. Petey and Meg Boles, the proprietors, converse while she prepares his breakfast and he reads the newspaper. Their talk is inane, centering on their tenant, Stanley Webber. Petey also tells her of two strangers who might come to rent a room.

Meg decides to wake Stanley for breakfast and goes to his room. Unshaven and half dressed, Stanley comes downstairs and sits at the table to eat. After Petey goes off to work, Stanley teases Meg about her “succulent” fried bread, but when she becomes affectionate, he gets irritated and complains that her tea is “muck” and the place is a “pigsty.”


Meg tells Stanley about the two men who may be new tenants. At first he is worried but then shrugs the information off as a “false alarm.” Meg fends off his insistence that she obey him, getting him to speak of his musical career. He tells her that once,





after a piano concert, he had been “carved” up by persecutors identified only as “they.” He then scares her by saying that the strangers will soon arrive, bringing a wheelbarrow in a van, looking to haul *her* away.


After Meg leaves to shop, Lulu enters with a package. She airs out the room, then sits at the table and chides Stanley for his unkempt appearance and anti-social behavior. He rejects her offer of going out, and she concludes that he is “a bit of a washout.” When she leaves, Stanley goes to the kitchen to wash his face. Through the hatch separating the two rooms, he spies Goldberg and McCann entering through the backdoor and slips off. Goldberg advises McCann to relax and speaks of his family ties and his partnership with McCann, who responds as if Goldberg were his mentor



McCann, still uneasy, asks whether their current job will be the same as their previous ones, and Goldberg reassures him with official-sounding double talk.

Meg returns, carrying some parcels. Politely and affably, Goldberg introduces himself and McCann, then begins asking after Stanley. She says that it is Stanley's birthday, prompting Goldberg to insist that they have a party. Delighted, Meg leads the two men upstairs to their room.


Stanley returns just before Meg comes back. He grills her about the men, trying to find out if she knows who they are. He also denies that it is his birthday, but he accepts her present, left by Lulu on the sideboard. It is a toy drum. He straps it on his neck, then marches around banging on it. Just before the curtain, his beating becomes erratic and finally "savage and possessed."




It is evening of the same day. McCann, at the living room table, methodically tears Petey's newspaper into strips. Stanley enters and begins a polite conversation. When McCann mentions the birthday party, Stanley insists that he wants to celebrate alone, but McCann says that, as the guest of honor, Stanley cannot skip out on it.

When Stanley tries to leave, McCann blocks his path. Stanley angers him by picking up one of the strips of paper. McCann, now even more intimidating, contradicts Stanley's claim that they had met before. Unnerved, Stanley starts speaking of his plans to return home, asserting that he is the same man he was, despite his heavy drinking. Frustrated in his attempts to find out why McCann and Goldberg have intruded, he grows almost frantic. He finally grabs McCann by the arm, saying that what he has told him was a mistake. McCann observes that Stanley is in a bad state and that he is "flabbergasted" by Stanley's behavior. Stanley then speaks of his admiration for the Irish.






Goldberg enters with Petey, prompting a new round of introductions. Goldberg talks about his youth, confessing that he was then called “Simey,” while Petey explains that it is his chess night and that he will miss the party. When he and McCann exit, Stanley tries to convince Goldberg to pack up and leave, but Goldberg simply talks about celebrating life, implying that late risers, like Stanley, miss out on a lot. Stanley cuts him off and orders him to get out, but Goldberg does not budge. McCann reenters, and he and Goldberg order Stanley to sit down. Stanley repeatedly refuses until McCann threatens physical violence. The two intruders then begin interrogating Stanley with rapid-fire questions that range from the accusatory to the ridiculous. When they tell Stanley that he is dead, he screams and tries to fight back by kicking Goldberg in the stomach and threatening McCann with a chair, but they all suddenly revert to civility when Meg enters beating on the toy drum. She is dressed for the party, and preens under Goldberg’s complements about her looks. She fetches glasses for toasting Stanley, and, prompted by Goldberg, McCann turns out the lights and shines his flashlight on Stanley’s face while Meg toasts “the birthday boy.



With the lights back on, Lulu arrives and the celebration begins in earnest. Goldberg insists that Stanley sit down and then begins a meandering, sentimental speech. McCann turns out the lights and once more shines his flashlight in Stanley's face. When the lights are on again, Goldberg entices Lulu to sit on his lap while Meg tries to get Stanley to dance. Rejected, Meg settles for dancing by herself. While Lulu flirts with Goldberg, Meg breaks into a nostalgic reverie about her girlhood room, after which McCann talks of his heritage and sings an Irish ballad.

The characters then start playing blind man's bluff. When it is Stanley's turn to be the blind man, McCann takes his glasses from him and deliberately breaks them. He also makes Stanley trip over the toy drum, which catches on Stanley's foot. Stanley drags the drum around, then finds Meg and begins choking her. As McCann and Goldberg rush to interfere, the lights go out again. In the confusion, McCann once more shines his flashlight, but Goldberg knocks it to the floor. In the dark, Stanley picks up Lulu and deposits her, spread eagle, on the table. McCann finds the flashlight and shines it at Stanley, who appears on verge of sexually assaulting Lulu. Stanley backs away, giggling uncontrollably, and as the others advance towards him, the curtain falls.



It is early the next morning. As before, Petey sits at the table reading the newspaper. Through the hatch, Meg explains that Goldberg and McCann had eaten all the breakfast food. She enters to pour Petey some tea and spots Stanley's present, broken and discarded in the fireplace. She plans to fetch Stanley down, observing that she had gone up earlier and found him talking to McCann. Meg asks Petey about Goldberg's car and the suspicious wheelbarrow, which, he tells her, does not exist.

As Meg prepares to go shopping, Goldberg enters. She asks after Stanley and then about Goldberg's car, which he praises for its ample room. She leaves, and Petey inquires about Stanley's health. Goldberg tells him that Stanley had suffered a sudden, unexpected mental breakdown. Petey, growing suspicious, says that if Stanley does not improve, he will fetch a doctor, but Goldberg assures him that things are under control.

# CHARACTERS

- **Benny**

See Nat Goldberg

- **Meg Boles**

Petey's wife, Meg Boles is a good-natured woman in her sixties. If only from a lack of any reference to offspring of her own, it is implied that she and Petey are childless, thus she fills a void in her life by turning the Boles's boarding-house tenant, Stanley Webber, into a kind of surrogate child. She insists on calling him "boy" and mothering him.

- **Petey Boles**

Like his wife, Petey Boles is in his sixties. He is a deck-chair attendant at the unidentified seaside resort where he and Meg own their boarding house, which, although it is "on the list," has seen much better days.

- **Nat Goldberg**

Nat Goldberg, in his fifties, is the older of the two strangers who come to interrogate and intimidate Stanley before taking him away. He is a suave character, a gentleman in appearance and demeanor.

- **Lulu** Described as a “girl in her twenties,” Lulu is a neighbor who first appears carrying Stanley’s birthday present, the toy drum and drum sticks that Meg had bought for him.
- **Dermont McCann**

McCann, in his thirties, is Goldberg’s younger associate. Unlike Goldberg, who reveals a Jewish heritage, McCann is an immoral Irish Catholic, possibly a defrocked priest. Like Goldberg, he exercises careful self control, a quality which contributes to the sinister impression of both men new observations.

- **Simey**
- **Stanley Webber**

Until his nemeses Goldberg and McCann appear, Stanley is the only lodger at the Boles’ rundown seaside boarding house.



# THEMES

- **Absurdity**

As in many absurdist works, *The Birthday Party* is full of disjointed information that defies

- **Alienation and Loneliness**

Stanley has isolated himself from society, with only the vaguest of explanations offered as to why. What is clear is that he has “dropped out” of everyday life. He is the sole lodger in the Boles’ boarding house. He has forgone any efforts to make himself presentable, remaining depressed and sullen, half-dressed, unkempt, and unwilling to leave the womb-like comfort of his rundown digs.

- **Apathy and Passivity**

Although anger and even violence break through Stanley’s apathy at key moments, he generally appears to have given up on life. His apathy is apparent in his slovenliness. He remains unshaven, unwashed, and half dressed. He is unwilling to venture out, although he talks about dreams. He is, as Lulu says, “a bit of a washout.”

- **Doubt and Ambiguity**

In the sense that it conveys doubt and ambiguity, *The Birthday Party* is built on words that confuse more often than they clarify. Things that the audience or reader thinks are revealed by one snatch of dialogue may be contradicted or rendered illogical in the next, making it impossible to separate allegations from truth and fact from fiction

- **Guilt and Innocence**

Although Goldberg and McCann's verbal assaults on Stanley defy any easy interpretation, it is clear that Stanley is somehow vulnerable, that their accusations do wound him, and that there is guilt to expose and sins to expiate.

## **Language and Meaning**

A concern of absurdist is their belief that language, rather than facilitate, may prevent genuine human communication. Meaning is more likely to be conveyed not by what is being said but by its subtext, what is left unsaid or the manner in which it is said

- **Violence and Cruelty**

At various points in the play, aggression gives way to verbal cruelty or physical violence, both actual and implied.

- **Irony**

The Birthday Party has some ironic elements. There are, for example, ironic discrepancies in character, especially in Goldberg's case.

- **Historical context**

In the late-1950s, when Pinter wrote *The Birthday Party*, the developed nations of the world were deeply mired in a cold war that pitted the communist powers of the Soviet Union and Red China against the free-world nations, including both the United States and the United Kingdom.



Thank you