The Birthday Party

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HAROLD PINTER

Harold Pinter was raised in London, the only son of Jewish parents of Polish origin. After the German bombardment of the city in 1940 and '41, the Pinters fled London, an experience that the playwright's biographer claims profoundly affected his later work. In 1948, Pinter attended the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art for just two terms before leaving to work as a professional actor touring the United Kingdom. After several years of doing this, he began to write plays in the mid-fifties, eventually penning *The Room*, which premiered as his first piece in 1957. Only a year later, he produced his first full-length play, *The Birthday Party*, and though it originally confounded audiences, it was well-reviewed and has gone down in history as a successful and influential work. Since then, he established himself as one of the critical writers associated with the Theatre of the Absurd, and eventually won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2005. He died of liver cancer three years later, shortly after acting in a production of Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Since *The Birthday Party* is intentionally set in an isolated and self-contained world, the play itself doesn't reference any specific historical events. Rather, Pinter focuses on charting the deterioration of an individual in isolation while also showing the dangers of giving oneself over to people like Goldberg and McCann, who have come to collect Stanley on behalf of an unnamed "organization." This plot enables Pinter to subtly comment on the hysteria that besieged the United States during the 1950s—a hysteria that came to be known as McCarthyism. This term refers to the republican senator Joseph McCarthy, who incited widespread fear in the US regarding the possibility of communist subversion, despite the fact that there was little evidence suggesting this might happen. As such, Goldberg and McCann's insistence upon taking Stanley away for an unspecified crime echoes the accusations of treason that ran rampant throughout the '50s.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Because of its engagement with the notion of guilt as ever-present and seemingly inherent to the human condition, *The Birthday Party* is similar to Kafka's unfinished novel, *The Trial*, which examines the ways in which its protagonist, Joseph K., gets swept up in a vague accusation and subsequent persecution. Similarly, *The Birthday Party* also owes tribute to the Biblical book of Genesis, which traces guilt and transgression all the way back to Adam and Eve and their failure to adhere to God's command, which ultimately gave birth to the idea of original sin and, thus, atonement. Lastly, the play bears similarities to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, which—like *The Birthday Party*—refuses to fully reveal its characters' backstories and motivations, instead reveling in absurdity and meaninglessness.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Birthday Party
- **When Published:** *The Birthday Party* was published in 1957 and premiered in 1958.
- **Literary Period:** Modernism, Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Drama, "Comedy of Menace," Theatre of the Absurd
- **Setting:** A rundown boarding house in a coastal English resort town
- **Climax:** Stanley has a mental breakdown at his own birthday party, revealing dark and violent predilections.
- **Antagonist:** From Stanley's perspective, Goldberg and McCann are the antagonists of *The Birthday Party*, but some readers or audience members might reasonably argue that Stanley himself is the true antagonist.

EXTRA CREDIT

The Handmaid's Tale. Harold Pinter wrote the screenplay for the 1990 film adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Delayed Success. Despite the fact that *The Birthday Party* was well-reviewed and has been hailed as one of Pinter's most influential plays, it was considered a failure when it made its debut in London, where it remained in theaters for only one week.

PLOT SUMMARY

Stanley Webber is the only guest staying in Meg and Petey Boles's boarding house in a coastal resort town in England, where he has been holed up for the past year and has essentially no contact with the outside world. One morning, Meg and Petey sit at the breakfast table and make small talk. As Petey reads the newspaper, Meg repeatedly asks him if he's enjoying his cornflakes and fried toast. Before long, she remarks that Stanley should be downstairs by now. She then decides to "fetch" him, finally drawing him from his room and getting him to the breakfast table, where she presents him with

cornflakes and fried toast.

After Petey leaves for work, Stanley tells Meg she's a "bad wife" for not giving her husband a fresh cup of tea. This conversation eventually turns into a back-and-forth in which Meg fluctuates between acting like Stanley's caretaker and his lover. They switch between flirting and arguing until Meg mentions that two new guests will be arriving soon. "What are you talking about?" Stanley asks, unsettled, and Meg tells him that Petey encountered two men on the beach the night before. "Two gentlemen asked Petey if they could come and stay for a couple of nights. I'm expecting them," she says, but Stanley claims he doesn't believe her, since no one has ever visited the boarding house the whole time he's been a resident.

Changing the topic, Stanley says, "When you address yourself to me, do you ever ask yourself who exactly you are talking to?" Then he groans and puts his head in his hands, but Meg fails to understand his question, instead asking if he enjoyed his breakfast. She says she used to like watching him play piano when he used to play as a professional. Urging him to get out of the house, she suggests that he get a job playing at the pier, and he unconvincingly insists that he's been offered a job playing at a night club in Berlin. As he explains this prospect, he adds that he would actually travel the world. Talking about his past life as a professional musician, he says, "I've played the piano all over the world. All over the country." Then he describes a concert he played where celebrated for his performance and his "unique touch," though when he went to give a second concert, the performance hall was locked. "They pulled a fast one," he says.

A knock sounds on the door, and Meg goes offstage to answer it, having a whispered conversation in which a voice says, "What shall I do with it?" Without identifying what "it" is, Meg gives this person instructions and then goes on her way. At this point, the person ventures into the living room. Her name is Lulu, and she's carrying a parcel, which she sets down on the sideboard and tells Stanley that he's "not to touch it." They then have a conversation about how "stuffy" it is inside, and Lulu encourages Stanley to go outside. Stanley lies and says that he went to the ocean early that morning, but Lulu hands him a compact mirror and points out that he doesn't look like a man who has been outside in a long time. Looking at himself, Stanley is visibly stricken, suddenly withdrawing from his reflection. He then asks Lulu if she'd like to "go away" with him, but when she asks where they'd go, he simply says, "Nowhere," and when she asks if he'd like to go for a walk, he says, "I can't at the moment." Lulu departs.

When the two new guests finally knock on the boarding house's door, Stanley turns out the light and quickly exits before they come inside. Their names are Goldberg and McCann, and they talk about the "job" they have to do. Goldberg is clearly the boss, and he tells McCann that their task is "quite distinct" from their "previous work." It all depends, he upholds, on the "attitude" of their "subject." At this point, Meg enters and introduces herself, telling Goldberg and McCann about Stanley and saying that today is his birthday. Insisting that they refrain from mentioning anything, she says that they will have a party tonight in Stanley's honor, and Goldberg expresses thanks for being invited. She then shows them to their room, and when she returns, Stanley is in the living room.

Stanley asks Meg about Goldberg and McCann, pressing her for details until she cuts him off and gives him his birthday present—the package Lulu placed on the sideboard. It is a small **drum**. Slinging it around his neck, Stanley walks around the living room table beating the drum, much to Meg's satisfaction. As he keeps circling the table, though, his drumming becomes increasingly erratic, until the beat is "savage and possessed."

That evening, Stanley meets McCann in the living room. Suspicious of this newcomer, he tries to discern why he's come to the boarding house and begins asking questions about Goldberg, whom he hasn't met yet. "Has he told you anything? Do you know what you're here for?" he says, but McCann denies that he knows what Stanley's talking about, instead focusing on Stanley's birthday party until Goldberg himself enters and introduces himself. Desperate to keep Goldberg and McCann from staying in the house, Stanley pretends he's the manager and tells them there's no room, but they don't listen to him, instead insisting that he sit down. When they finally force him into a chair, they start asking him strange questions, which become increasingly inscrutable. They ask why he came to the boarding house in the first place, whether or not he properly stirs his headache medication, and when he last took a bath. They then accuse him of betraying "the organization," though they never specify what organization they're referring to. Later in the conversation, they ask why he killed his wife, and he says that he doesn't *have* a wife, but they hardly listen, moving on to ask if he recognizes "an external force." "What?" Stanley replies, but they don't make themselves clear, instead pushing on and asking him—among other things—if the number 846 is "possible or necessary." Finally, in response to a question about whether the chicken or the egg came first, Stanley screams, and their conversation is interrupted by the sound of a drumbeat as Meg enters wearing her evening dress and playing Stanley's drum.

Before long, Lulu arrives and Stanley's party begins without Petey, who's unable to attend. Pouring drinks, Goldberg suggests that Meg make a toast to Stanley. When she does, Goldberg and McCann turn out the lights and shine a flashlight in Stanley's face. In her toast, Meg hardly says anything about Stanley himself, instead focusing on how happy she is to be having a party in her home. Despite the impersonality of this speech, Goldberg upholds that he's quite moved by Meg's words, and then he delivers his own toast. Next the group decides to play a game, though Stanley himself has yet to say a word, still reeling from Goldberg and McCann's strange interrogation.

Producing a blindfold, the group decides to play "blind man's buff," a game in which one person has a scarf tied over their eyes and tries to find the other players, who are scattered throughout the room. As the game progresses, Goldberg and Lulu fondle one another while McCann and Meg flirt and Stanley stands catatonic on his own. When it's Stanley's turn to play the blind man, McCann puts the drum in his way and his foot breaks through it. Dragging the instrument on his foot, he falls over and Meg makes a noise. When he rises, he advances toward her, and then the lights suddenly cut out and he begins to strangle her. After great commotion, the others separate him from her, but he slips away. Then everyone hears Lulu scream and fall to the floor, having fainted as Stanley approaches. In silence, Stanley lifts her onto the table, and when McCann finally finds the flashlight, the audience sees that Stanley is about to rape Lulu. Goldberg and McCann wrest him away and back him against the wall as he lets out a psychopathic laugh before the curtain closes.

When the curtain opens again, it is the next morning and Meg and Petey are having breakfast as if nothing has happened. Meg claims to not remember anything about the party and focuses on serving breakfast, but there aren't any cornflakes. Finding the broken drum on the floor, she hits it and says, "It still makes a noise." She remarks that Stanley should be awake because he's going to miss breakfast, and Petey says, "There isn't any breakfast," to which she responds, "Yes, but he doesn't know that." She tells Petey she went upstairs to check on Stanley, but McCann and Goldberg were in his room having an intense conversation with him. She then leaves the house to get food for lunch, and Goldberg comes downstairs and talks about the party to Petey, who asks him "what came over" Stanley. "Nervous breakdown," Goldberg says. He then explains that these kinds of breakdowns sometimes brew "day by day" before erupting, though for some people there are no warning signs because their spiraling mental health is a "foregone conclusion."

When Stanley finally comes downstairs, he's completely incapable of speaking. As he spews gibberish, Goldberg tells Petey that he and McCann are taking him to a doctor, though it's clear from his tone that this isn't the case. Petey is suspicious, but he finds himself unable to do anything as they escort Stanley out the door. When they turn to go, Petey calls after them, saying, "Stan, don't let them tell you what to do!" When Meg returns, Petey tells her that Stanley is still asleep upstairs, and she says he'll be late for breakfast. She then talks about how "lovely" the party was the night before, insisting that everyone told her she was "the belle of the ball." "Oh, it's true," she says, though nobody actually told her this. After a slight pause, she says, "I know I was," and then the curtain falls.

CHARACTERS

Stanley Webber – A man who has been living for the past year in Meg and Petey Boles's boarding house. Stanley is reclusive and unkempt, wearing filthy old pants and a pajama top. If Meg didn't go out of her way each morning to make sure he ate breakfast and drank his tea, it seems he would never leave the comfort of his bedroom. This is perhaps because he has come to this seaside town in order to hide from his past life, although Pinter never clarifies what Stanley is running from. All the same, he leads an isolated existence, refusing to venture beyond the boarding house and claiming that he'd have "nowhere" to go even if he *did* leave. Having become accustomed to this kind of solitude, Stanley is distraught when Goldberg and McCann come to the boarding house and start interrogating him, making him feel guilty despite the fact that they never actually reveal what he's done. Unfortunately, Meg and Petey hardly notice the effect these newcomers have on Stanley, even when he finally has a mental breakdown as a result of their tormenting. At the same time, the darkness Goldberg and McCann bring out in Stanley is shocking, as he eventually tries to strangle Meg and rape Lulu (one of his acquaintances). As such, Pinter portrays him as someone who has either always been dangerous, or who has been pushed to the edge by Goldberg and McCann's psychological games. Indeed, by the end the play, Stanley is completely unhinged, finding himself incapable of communicating or standing up for himself, which is why he allows Goldberg and McCann to escort him out of the boarding house and away from his sequestered life.

Meg Boles – Along with her husband, Petey, Meg is one of proprietors of the boarding house in which Stanley lives. What Meg lacks in intelligence, she tries to make up for in fastidiousness, constantly trying to please her guests and establish routines that will impose order on the boarding house. Her connection to Stanley is particularly bizarre, as she treats him both maternally and romantically, forever scolding him to eat his breakfast while also making potentially sexual remarks about their relationship. What's most interesting about Meg, though, is that she devotes herself to order and routine even when it doesn't make sense to enforce these everyday practices. For example, when she runs out of cornflakes one morning, she still insists that Stanley should come downstairs to eat breakfast, caring more about going through her habitual motions than acting in accordance with reality. This is the same kind of naivete that makes it hard for her to see that Goldberg and McCann, when they arrive, are intent upon psychologically torturing Stanley. Instead of recognizing their malicious motives, she simply focuses on throwing Stanley a birthday party (though he tells her it's not his birthday). What's more, on the morning after the party, she acts as if nothing extraordinary has happened, even though

Stanley tried to strangle her and then tried to rape Lulu. Knowing how important it is to her to maintain order and routine, Petey tells her at the end of the play that Stanley is still upstairs sleeping when—in reality—Goldberg and McCann have taken him away for good.

Petey Boles – Meg's husband, and the co-proprietor of the boarding house in which Stanley lives. Petey is an affable man whose presence is rather minor in his own home, since he spends most of his time working at the nearby beach, where he puts out chairs for the public. Attuned to his wife's eccentricities, Petey has no problem indulging Meg's obsession with order and routine. When, for example, she talks about the same topics every morning, he simply goes along, agreeing that Stanley should come downstairs so that he isn't late for breakfast. In fact, he even has this conversation with Meg at the end of the play, when Stanley is no longer in the house because McCann and Goldberg have taken him away. Despite the fact that he's not very present, Petey is perhaps the only character in *The Birthday Party* who worries about Stanley after McCann and Goldberg psychologically torment him. In fact, he's the only person who *notices* a change in Stanley at all, as made evident by the fact that he tries to stand up for him and, when this fails, yells, "Stan, don't let them tell you what to do!"

Goldberg – A charming, swift-talking man who arrives at Meg and Petey's boarding house with his associate, McCann, with the intention of locating Stanley Webber. Goldberg introduces himself as Nat, but he frequently refers to himself as "Simey" while telling stories. Confusingly, he also calls himself "Benny" at one point, suggesting that his past is just as jumbled and inscrutable as Stanley's. In fact, these two men seem to know one another, though when Stanley asks McCann if either he or Goldberg have spent time in Maidenhead, McCann upholds that they haven't. Nonetheless, Goldberg later references the same Maidenhead tea shop that Stanley has already talked about, suggesting that he is indeed from the same town. Regardless of whether or not they hail from the same place, though, talking about the past is something Goldberg does quite often, speaking wistfully about old acquaintances and relatives and telling his listeners about the life advice he received from these people. This, it seems, is what Goldberg wants most: to be the kind of person who's full of wisdom. Unfortunately, though, he himself has very little to offer in the way of life advice, and this is something that upsets him. Still, he's smooth and socially confident, as made evident by the fact that he easily wins over Meg by complimenting her dress. He also gains the affection of Lulu, with whom he flirts during Stanley's birthday party. The next morning, they have a frank conversation in which she lampoons him for having sex with her without intending to begin a relationship. However, Goldberg has other matters on his mind, focusing first and foremost on psychologically disturbing Stanley and taking him away from the boarding house.

McCann – Goldberg's associate. An Irishman who takes orders from Goldberg, McCann doesn't know why he has been assigned to locate Stanley Webber and remove him from Meg and Petey's boarding house. Nonetheless, he carries out his duties, acting as Goldberg's muscle and helping him to psychologically unhinge Stanley. Like the other characters in *The Birthday Party*, McCann has a confusing past, such that it's difficult to know what kind of life he has actually led until now. Nonetheless, Goldberg tells Lulu in Act III that McCann is a recently unfrocked priest, prompting McCann to pressure her into confessing her sins (though she runs away before doing so). And yet, McCann is perhaps more sensitive than he appears, considering that he seems troubled by his final interactions with Stanley. Indeed, when Goldberg asks for an update on Stanley's mental state the day after the calamitous birthday party, McCann says, "I'm not going up there again," insisting that he won't return to Stanley's room because of the fact that he (Stanley) has gone completely quiet—a fact that seems to unnerve him. Still, whether or not he empathizes with Stanley, McCann doesn't hesitate to help Goldberg remove him from the house at the end of the scene, carting him away despite Petey's protests.

Lulu – A young woman who visits Meg and Petey's boarding house. Before McCann and Goldberg arrive, she tells Stanley that he ought to go outside for some air, prompting him to invite her to run away with him. When she asks where they'd go, though, he simply says, "Nowhere," and then declines her invitation to go on a walk. Later, Lulu comes to Stanley's birthday party and flirts with Goldberg, telling him that she has always liked older men and that he looks like the first man she ever loved. During the game of "blind man's buff," she and Goldberg continue flirting and fondling one another. When Stanley plays the blind man, though, the party takes a dark turn and, when the lights cut out, he approaches Lulu and attempts to rape her. Thankfully, Goldberg and McCann stop him, and Lulu and Goldberg presumably continue their romantic evening, as made evident by the conversation they have the following morning, when she accuses him of having sex with her without having any intention of starting a relationship. "You taught me things a girl shouldn't know before she's been married at least three times!" she laments, but Goldberg only says that now she's "a jump ahead." With this, McCann enters and tries to get her to confess her sins, an attempt that drives her out of the boarding house.

Monty – A man who never appears in the play. In conversation with Petey in the final act, Goldberg tells Petey that he and McCann will take Stanley to see Monty, who he leads Petey to believe is a doctor, though this seems doubtful, considering that he talks about Monty in an ominous and purposefully vague way.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

AMBIGUITY, MEANINGLESSNESS, AND ABSURDITY

Very few details are straightforward or verifiable in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, a play about a spontaneous birthday party that quickly turns dark. In fact, most of what the characters present as fact is later contradicted or ignored. For instance, personal histories are frequently ambiguous, as characters like Goldberg and Stanley Webber tell conflicting stories about their own pasts. Indeed, there is so much flexibility in *The Birthday Party* that even the names of certain characters sometimes change. And yet, nobody in the play seems to notice or care about these fluctuations. Rather, the play simply moves on as if these details are arbitrary, failing to adhere to the conventions most authors employ in order to firmly ground the audience in the world of the story. Indeed, Pinter isn't interested in making sure his viewers understand the exact details of his narrative. Instead, he intentionally destabilizes the audience's understanding of his characters and their motivations, obscures what is happening in the plot, and manipulates the dialogue so that it's often difficult to understand a conversation's underlying structure. In this way, he encourages the audience to simply experience each moment on an emotional level, forcing them to take cues from the interactions between the actors rather than the scaffolding of any kind of overarching plot or meaning. In other words, Pinter uses ambiguity and even nonsense to elicit a visceral response from his audience, one that has more to do with the *feeling* of the play than anything else. Oddly enough, this ends up representing the characters and their emotions better than any kind of standard expository technique.

Throughout the play, the simplest details are often the most ambiguous. Personal histories are especially fraught in this regard, as made evident by Goldberg's ever-changing assertions about his profession. At one point, for instance, he tells Meg to spin around in her evening dress, praising how she looks and claiming that he knows about fashion because he "used to be in the business." Then, later in that very same scene, he references toiling in a "greenhouse" (though it's unclear whether or not he worked as a professional gardener). Later still, he boasts to Lulu—whom he's clearly attracted to—that he once delivered a "lecture at the Ethical Hall," presenting himself as some kind of public intellectual. What's more, even his name changes depending on the story he's telling. Although he introduces himself as Nat, he refers to himself as Simey when telling stories about his mother or his late wife, and in one instance he calls himself Benny. He even gives McCann a different name in a conversation in the play's final act. "Anyway, Dermot's with [Stanley] at the moment," Goldberg says (referring to McCann), and when Petey says, "Dermot?" he merely replies, "Yes." Shortly thereafter, Petey takes Goldberg's lead and also calls McCann "Dermot," but Goldberg says, "Who?" The fact that Goldberg can't even remember the name by which he called McCann only moments earlier suggests that he thinks such details are fluid and unimportant. Understandably, Petey is confused by this sudden change, and this confusion represents just how little he knows about the people staying in his boarding house. In turn, Pinter invites the audience to feel Petey's bewilderment alongside him.

Pinter's audience is subject to even more nonsense when Goldberg and McCann interrogate Stanley before throwing him a birthday party. Sitting him in a chair and bombarding him with foreboding questions that are unrelated and have seemingly no bearing on the play's plot, Goldberg eventually barks, "Is the number 846 possible or necessary?" Stanley answers by saying, "Neither," and Goldberg responds by telling him this is wrong and then repeating the question. Eventually, Goldberg declares: "It's only necessarily necessary!" He then launches into a dizzying explanation that makes very little sense. McCann says, "Right!" when his partner finishes this ridiculous explanation, and then Goldberg adds, "Right? Of course right! We're right and you're wrong, Webber, all along the line!" In this moment, it becomes clear that Pinter doesn't expect the audience to understand what Goldberg and McCann are talking about. He does, however, want the audience to understand and experience firsthand the feeling of disorientation that Goldberg and McCann's words inspire in Stanley. Through increasingly absurd questions, they completely unhinge Stanley, who finally screams when they ask him to tell them if the chicken or the egg came first—a mundane and unanswerable question that reinforces the idea that Pinter cares first and foremost about enabling the audience to empathize with Stanley's confusion.

Pinter's decision to destabilize the expository details of *The Birthday Party* while giving privilege to ludicrous notions makes sense when one considers the fact that he is one of the first playwrights to produce work in a genre known as the Theatre of the Absurd. This genre is, according to *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*, "theater that seeks to represent the absurdity of human existence in a meaningless universe." By rendering his characters' backstories and personal details difficult to understand, Pinter puts audience members in the position of having to accept that these kinds of details are "meaningless," at least in the context of the play itself. What's left, then, are the ways in which the characters interact with one another. During the actual birthday party, for example, McCann and Meg have a conversation while Goldberg and Lulu have their own

discussion, but there's very little in the way of true give-and-take. Instead, everyone but Stanley simply lists off memories, telling each other about their childhoods or repeating anecdotes about their lives without fully establishing why they're telling such stories. And all the while, Stanley sits in utter silence at his own birthday party. This, it seems, is what Pinter is most interested in establishing: the ways in which Stanley exists in a "meaningless universe." By flooding the plot with non-sequiturs and contradictions, he makes his characters' lives seem unimportant and random, manufacturing a nonsensical environment so that the audience can better understand Stanley's estranged perspective. Simply put, then, the lack of exposition in *The Birthday Party* becomes expository in and of itself, since it ultimately helps audience members relate to the protagonist.

GUILT AND TRANSGRESSION

Throughout *The Birthday Party*, Pinter portrays Stanley as a character saddled with guilt. Indeed, he casts Stanley as a man with a potentially unsavory past, one he's eager to leave behind by moving into Petey and Meg's boarding house. Unfortunately, he's unable to escape his previous life when Goldberg and McCann arrive at the boarding house and hold him accountable for whatever it is they think he's done. Interestingly enough, though, they never make clear why he deserves the psychological torture to which they subject him. Instead, they cite numerous outlandish offenses—so many that it begins to seem unlikely that he has actually transgressed at all. Nevertheless, there's no denying that Stanley's behavior becomes increasingly suspicious as Goldberg and McCann interrogate him. In fact, even their presence in the boarding house causes him to behave like someone who has a guilty conscience. In this way, Pinter insinuates that the mere suggestion of guilt is often enough to make a person feel as if they have transgressed. Even more importantly, Stanley eventually *does* fall from innocence by attempting to strangle Meg and rape Lulu after Goldberg and McCann accuse him of multiple crimes. As such, their accusations become self-fulfilling prophecies, ultimately suggesting that guilt has the power to completely unhinge a person regardless of whether or not they have committed any actual wrongdoing.

Pinter doesn't provide many details about Stanley's life, but it's clear he's wary of encountering people from his past. Indeed, before Goldberg and McCann even accuse him of anything, he is guarded and suspicious of them—a fact that suggests he already has a guilty conscience. During his first conversation with McCann, Stanley goes out of his way to insist that before living in the boarding house he led a calm and peaceful life. "You know what?" he says. "To look at me, I bet you wouldn't think I'd led such a quiet life." He thus acknowledges that he doesn't seem like the kind of person who would lead a "quiet life," indicating that he thinks McCann suspects him of living in some kind of transgressive way. As such, he tries to defend himself before anyone has even accused him of anything. Several moments later, when he and McCann start talking about Goldberg, Stanley says, "Has he told you anything? Do you know what you're here for? Tell me. You needn't be frightened of me." At this point, it's obvious that McCann and Goldberg's presence has thrown Stanley into agitation and worry. What's *not* obvious, though, is why this is the case. Pinter never clarifies this point, instead choosing to let audience members keep trying to figure out whether or not Stanley deserves the psychological torture to which McCann and Goldberg eventually subject him.

When Goldberg and McCann finally force Stanley into a chair and bombard him with questions and accusations, they fixate on small things that shouldn't merit guilt. For example, when Goldberg asks why he originally came to this boarding house, Stanley replies by saying that his "feet hurt." Goldberg then asks why he stayed, and Stanley says that he had a headache. "Did you take anything for it?" Goldberg demands, and when Stanley says yes, he asks him what brand of "fruit salts" he used, proceeding to inquire whether or not Stanley "stir[red] properly." "Did they fizz?" he asks, and Stanley says, "Now, now, wait, you—" Cutting him off, Goldberg barks, "Did they fizz? Did they fizz or didn't they fizz?" Of course, it's completely arbitrary whether or not Stanley's "fruit salts" "fizzed" when he stirred them. And yet, Goldberg poses his questions as if these are dire matters. What's more, Stanley goes along with this notion, getting worked up over silly questions. In fact, he acts guilty, as if his failure to make his headache medication fizz is enough to condemn him for eternity. The absurdity of this moment is worth noting, because it proposes a kind of universal sense of shame that truly anyone could experience. After all, if Stanley is morally condemned for failing to properly stir his "fruit salts," then seemingly *everyone* could be accused of having transgressed. Still, Stanley plays into this narrative, clearly accepting the idea that he is inherently guilty. As such, Pinter shows how easily people can slip into guilt and embrace the idea that they've acted wrongly, even if they haven't been accused of anything that requires true repentance.

Throughout the course of their interrogation, Goldberg and McCann accuse Stanley of both severe and mundane transgressions. They ask him why he killed his wife ("What wife?" Stanley asks), whether or not he prays, and why he picks his nose. Because they make so many accusations—and because these accusations are so varied—their entire line of inquiry comes to seem pointless. Indeed, it's evident that they don't care *what* Stanley has done, but rather that he accept his own guiltiness. Unfortunately, Stanley does more than simply accept this idea. In fact, Goldberg and McCann's accusations affect him so profoundly that he actually *does* transgress by attempting to strangle Meg and rape Lulu during his birthday

party. Whether or not he was guilty before Goldberg and McCann arrived, he has now actually acted like a psychopathic criminal by putting Lulu on the kitchen table and, when everyone stops him from raping her, laughing manically in the darkness, his face lit with a flashlight. Of course, this act doesn't clarify anything about Stanley's morality before he came to the boarding house, but it does suggest that Goldberg and McCann's treatment has driven him to do something he wouldn't otherwise (after all, he has lived for a year in the boarding house without incident). In this way, Pinter demonstrates the detrimental, self-perpetuating effects of accepting oneself as an immoral, person. Although all humans may feel guilty from time to time, a person ought to avoid fully embracing him- or herself as inherently corrupt, as this attitude only invites further misbehavior.

ORDER, CHAOS, AND SANITY

In *The Birthday Party*, Meg adheres to a strict daily routine, one that imposes a pattern not only onto her own life, but onto the entire boarding house. In fact, she devotes herself so wholeheartedly to establishing this sense of order that she forces others—like Stanley—to play along. For Stanley, this commitment to order is perhaps stabilizing, considering that he only starts to go crazy once Goldberg and McCann disrupt the regimented world of the boarding house. What's strange, though, is that Meg's commitment to order keeps her from seeing the changes taking place in her home. Indeed, she focuses on her daily patterns so intently that she fails to recognize the existential and subtle forms of chaos that are disrupting the sense of order she's supposedly imposing upon the household; she simply continues her routines despite the fact that they no longer support any kind of true stability. Stanley, on the other hand, recognizes the chaos that has seized the boarding house, but then everyone around him considers him crazy. Through this contrast, Pinter challenges the notion that a commitment to order is an indication of sanity. By showing the ways in which Meg ignores the chaos surrounding her, Pinter demonstrates that sometimes implementing order for the sake of order is just as insane as plunging into disordered mayhem.

In the first scene of *The Birthday Party*, it is already clear that Meg has established a routine that she scrupulously upholds. She insists that Petey sit at the breakfast table and eat cornflakes, all the while expressing her discomfort with the fact that Stanley hasn't come downstairs yet. "I always take him up his cup of tea," she says. When Petey asks if Stanley drank the tea, she says, "I made him. I stood there till he did." Of course, forcing Stanley to drink his tea in his bedroom after waking him up is rather intrusive, but this is how committed Meg is to implementing her routines. Her fastidiousness is important to keep in mind as the play progresses, as it sheds light on the bizarre behavior she exhibits once Goldberg and McCann's presence begins to derail the prevailing sense of order. Indeed, the morning after they arrive, she runs out of cornflakes. This, it seems, is Pinter's way of signaling to the audience the profound impact these two men have had on the boarding house. Having emphasized Meg's obsession with feeding her husband and Stanley, Pinter now shows the audience that things have changed. And though the audience no doubt detects this alteration to Meg's routine, she herself tries to ignore the change, instead choosing to move forward as she always does. "[Stanley] should be up," she says to Petey. "He's late for his breakfast." Petey says, "There isn't any breakfast," to which she says, "Yes, but he doesn't know that." In this way, she stubbornly refuses to adjust, insisting upon upholding her normal routines even though the present circumstances render them pointless.

Pinter also makes Meg's love of order evident when she buys Stanley a small **drum** for his birthday. Though he tries to tell her it's not actually his birthday, she focuses only on the fact that she's enacting a yearly ritual by giving him a gift. "This isn't my birthday, Meg," he says. "Of course it is," she replies. "Open your present." This interaction suggests that Meg cares less about reality than she cares about having the chance to adhere to the ceremonial tradition of gift giving. What's more, the present itself denotes her fondness of order—after all, rhythm is made up of patterns and repetition, which are appealing to Meg because she tries so hard to lead a structured life.

Stanley's birthday party erupts into total chaos, as Goldberg and McCann taunt him until he lashes out, tries to strangle Meg, and attempts to rape Lulu. It's easy to see that this is not the kind of evening that normally takes place in the boarding house, but Meg remains unable to see or admit this; the next morning, she claims to not remember anything about the party. Of course, this is perhaps because she was drinking, but still, one would think she'd remember that Stanley tried to strangle her. As such, the audience intuits that she's once again striving to adhere to her typical routine by casting aside any consideration that might upend her sense of order. She even picks up Stanley's broken drum and, instead of telling Petey how it got destroyed the previous night, says, "It still makes a noise." Once again, then, she denies all signs of disruption and disorder, instead concentrating on the ways in which things have remained the same. What's more, Petey understands how badly his wife needs to believe that nothing has changed, so he tells her that Stanley is upstairs sleeping when, in reality, McCann and Goldberg have taken him away for good. By doing this, he gives her the opportunity to once more pantomime her way through her usual morning routine. In turn, Pinter presents her ignorant bliss as a form of insanity in and of itself. Although Meg doesn't lash out like Stanley, there's no denying that her unyielding devotion to order is delusional and maladjusted. In this way, Pinter warns the audience against thinking that madness only presents itself in outlandish and stereotypical ways. Insanity, he intimates, can manifest itself in utterly banal

circumstances, too.

ISOLATION, FREEDOM, AND INDEPENDENCE

In *The Birthday Party*, Stanley Webber lives for a year in isolation in order to hide from his past. As he holes up in Meg and Petey's boarding house, he presumably enables himself to lead the life he wants without having to reckon with whatever it is he did that forced him to disappear in the first place. However, Pinter spotlights the detrimental effects of isolation on Stanley's quality of life, going out of his way to emphasize the extent to which this man is an unhappy hermit who might as well give himself over to his fate, since his current existence doesn't even afford him the kind of freedom or independence that he's supposedly protecting by going into hiding. Indeed, by the time Goldberg and McCann are finished with him, he stops resisting and agrees to leave, most likely because he has finally accepted that it's impossible to lead a fulfilling life in isolation. At the same time, he leaves the boarding house in silence, no doubt destined for a life that is no more interactive or communal than the one he's established in Meg and Petey's home. As such, Pinter suggests that isolation not only negatively influences a person's life in the present, but also has adverse effects on their ability to move forward and forge a life of freedom and personal agency.

Goldberg and McCann go out of their way to accentuate the extent of Stanley's isolation. This, it seems, is how they intend to bring him to his wit's end. At his birthday party, they insist that he sit in the middle of the room with the lights off as someone shines a flashlight in his face. In this configuration, they prompt Meg to give a speech in his honor. "Well," she begins, "it's very, very nice to be here tonight, in my house, and I want to propose a toast to Stanley, because it's his birthday, and he's lived here for a long while now, and he's my Stanley now. And I think he's a good boy, although sometimes he's bad. And he's the only Stanley I know, and I know him better than all the world, although he doesn't think so." After she concludes, Goldberg exclaims that she has delivered a "beautiful" and touching speech. However, it's worth noting that she hardly says anything of note about Stanley as an individual. Rather, her supposedly kind words mainly have to do with herself, and then she toasts to Stanley "because it's his birthday." But it *isn't* his birthday. What's more, she says that Stanley is "the only Stanley [she] know[s]," a phrase that is less of a compliment than it is a plain fact that has nothing to do with Stanley himself. In these ways, her speech only shows him that no one in the boarding house truly knows or cares about him—after all, Meg is supposedly the person he's closest to in this context, and even she can't say anything meaningful about him.

As if these vapid remarks aren't enough to show Stanley's loneliness, he's forced to sit with a flashlight shining in his face while everyone stares at him. In turn, he feels singled out and isolated even as his so-called friends celebrate him. Indeed, by turning the lights out and spotlighting Stanley, Goldberg and McCann heighten his sense of aloneness. This is clearly intentional, as Goldberg follows Meg's toast by saying, "Lucky is the man who's at the receiving end [of a toast], that's what I say. How can I put it to you? We all wander on our tod through this world. It's a lonely pillow to kip on." Even though he's supposedly celebrating Stanley by saying nice things about him, he states that life is "a lonely pillow to kip on," a sentiment that only further accentuates the fact that Stanley is on his own.

Despite the fact that Stanley hasn't left the boarding house for a year, it's evident that he's aware of the negative aspects of living in isolation. For instance, in the play's first act, Lulu enters the kitchen to deliver a package, at which point she insists that Stanley could "do with" some air. "Me? I was in the sea at half past six," he lies. When he asks if she believes him, she hands him a small mirror and says, "Do you want to have a look at your face? […] Don't you ever go out?" Upon looking at himself, Stanley "withdraws," an indication that recognizes the negative effect isolation has had on him. This is why he then asks Lulu to "go away" with him. When she asks where they'd go, though, he balks, saying, "Nowhere. Still, we could go." Having remained sequestered in the boarding house for so long, he's unable to even fully envision what it would be like to leave, especially alongside another person. Lulu again asks where they could go, and he says, "Nowhere. There's nowhere to go. So we could just go. It wouldn't matter." In this moment, Pinter suggests that isolation has rendered Stanley incapable of making simple decisions, instead making him feel as if life beyond the walls of the boarding house doesn't matter. In a strange way, though, this is a liberating idea—although Stanley says that "there's nowhere to go," he also says that this means he can "just go" anywhere. Unfortunately, though, this idea of freedom is so vague that he finds himself unable to act on it, and when Lulu asks one more time if he'd like to go out for a walk, he says, "I can't at the moment."

The morning after Goldberg and McCann finally push Stanley over the edge, he stops speaking altogether. Instead of using words, he makes guttural noises, saying, "Uh-gug…uh-gug…eeehhh-gag." As such, he inhabits a new form of isolation, forgoing communication altogether. Shortly thereafter, Goldberg and McCann take him away. Finally, then, Stanley leaves his life of isolation, but there's no indication that this is liberating, since he isn't leaving of his own volition. What's more, it seems unlikely that he's headed toward a better life, one in which he actually has the freedom to interact with people and live out of hiding. Petey, for his part, seems to pick up on this fact as McCann and Goldberg take him away. "Stan, don't let them tell you what to do!" he yells, urging him to stand up for himself and assert his independence. However, Stanley has lived for too long in isolation to be able to exercise this kind of agency, and so he merely retreats into the distance, resigning

himself to his fate. In turn, Pinter confirms that isolation renders people incapable of seizing their independence and functioning as free-thinking individuals.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

STANLEY'S DRUM

The drum that Meg gives to Stanley for his birthday is a clear representation of her fondness for order. When Stanley first unwraps the gift, she urges him to play it, encouraging him as he slings it around his neck and marches in circles about the table, rhythmically banging the drum as he goes. Unsurprisingly, she is delighted to hear him tapping out a beat, since rhythm is made up of patterns and repetitions, and requires the player to enact a sense of control. As such, the drum itself comes to stand for the ways in which the characters in *The Birthday Party* either adhere to or diverge from the order that Meg wants so badly to institute. As Stanley continues to play, the rhythm grows increasingly erratic until, much to Meg's horror, he beats the instrument in a "savage" and "possessed" manner. In this way, the drum serves as an early indication that the boarding house's seemingly controlled environment is about to descend into chaos.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Samuel French edition of *The Birthday Party* published in 2011.

Act One Quotes

MEG. [...] I'm going to call that boy.

PETEY. Didn't you take him up his cup of tea?

MEG. I always take him up his cup of tea. But that was a long time ago.

PETEY. Did he drink it?

MEG. I made him. I stood there till he did. I'm going to call him.

Related Characters: Petey Boles, Meg Boles (speaker), Stanley Webber

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation between Meg and Petey takes place at the beginning of the play, before Stanley has come downstairs for breakfast. In the middle of discussing the weather and the day's news, Meg interrupts her husband to say that she's going to "call" Stanley, and this interruption shows audience members the extent to which she fixates not only on Stanley and his whereabouts, but also on upholding the boarding house's daily routine. When Petey asks if she brought Stanley tea, she assures him that she "always take[s] him up his cup of tea." In turn, the audience sees how committed she is to adhering to the tasks she "always" makes sure to do. In fact, this commitment is perhaps more of an obsession, given that Meg says she stood in front of Stanley to make sure he actually drank his tea.

MEG. What are the cornflakes like, Stan?

STANLEY. Horrible.

MEG. Those flakes? Those lovely flakes? You're a liar, a little liar. They're refreshing. It says so. For people when they get up late.

STANLEY. The milk's off.

MEG. It's not. Petey ate his, didn't you, Petey?

PETEY. That's right.

MEG. There you are then.

STANLEY. (*Pushes away his plate.*) All right, I'll go on to the second course.

MEG. He hasn't finished the first course and he wants to go on to the second course!

Related Characters: Petey Boles, Stanley Webber, Meg Boles (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

During this exchange, Meg engages eagerly with Stanley regarding whether or not he has found the breakfast she made him satisfactory. Of course, it's worth noting that she didn't truly *make* him breakfast, since she only served him cornflakes—a meal that requires very little in the way of preparation. As such, it's clear that what she's most interested in is the order and routine of feeding Stanley, which is why she fails to notice that she has served him sour

milk. Indeed, she can't believe that Stanley doesn't like eating his breakfast, saying, "Those flakes? Those lovely flakes? You're a liar, a little liar. They're refreshing. It says so." For Meg, cornflakes are unimpeachably good because they help her run the boarding house, enabling her to concentrate on putting food on the table without having to truly cook. When Stanley says they taste "horrible," then, she sees it as an affront not only to her role as a boarding house proprietor, but also to her sense of domestic order. And because Stanley isn't adhering to Meg's breakfast routine, she can't even fathom the idea that he "hasn't finished the first course" but "wants to go on to the second," which would only further destabilize her strict conception of how each morning should progress.

STANLEY. Who gave you the right to take away my tea?

MEG. You wouldn't drink it.

STANLEY. (*He stares at her. Quietly.*) Who do you think you're talking to?

MEG. (*Uncertainly.*) What?

[...]

STANLEY. [...] Tell me, Mrs. Boles, when you address yourself to me, do you ever ask yourself who exactly you are talking to? Eh? (*Silence. He groans, his trunk falls forward, his head falls into his hands on the table.*)

MEG. (*In a small voice.*) Didn't you enjoy your breakfast, Stan?

Related Characters: Stanley Webber, Meg Boles (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Stanley criticizes Meg for taking away his tea. However, his harsh words are somewhat unfair, considering that—as she herself points out—he has already said he won't "drink it" (earlier in the scene, he insists that it is over-steeped). Oddly enough, this incident with the tea inspires a strong sense of vanity in Stanley, prompting him to ask, "Who do you think you're talking to?" Although this question seems fairly straightforward—a run-of-the-mill aggressive comment that one might utter during an argument—Stanley proceeds by strangely alluding to the fact that he is in hiding. "When you address yourself to me," he says, "do you ever ask yourself who exactly you are talking to?" In this moment, his question seems to hint at the fact that Meg doesn't really know him at all. He is no longer simply saying something vain in the heat of an argument, but rather forcing Meg to acknowledge that he's a relative stranger to her even though he's been living in the boarding house for so long. Indeed, no one—not even the audience—knows much about his previous life, since the play makes Stanley's backstory ambiguous and vague. And because she doesn't know how to answer Stanley's question, Meg proceeds by talking about what she knows best: the routine of breakfast, which gives her a sense of order and control in the midst of this confusing conversation.

MEG. Have you played the piano in those places before?

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

MEG. A concert?

STANLEY. (*Reflectively.*) Yes. It was a good one, too. They were all there that night. Every single one of them. It was a great success. Yes. A concert. At Lower Edmonton.

Related Characters: Stanley Webber, Meg Boles (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Meg has just told Stanley that she wishes he would play the piano again, suggesting that he could get a job playing at the nearby pier. In response, he tells her that he has been offered a job as a traveling musician, and when she asks if he has played in the cities he claims the job would take him to (Berlin, Athens, Constantinople, etc.), he says, "Played the piano? I've played the piano all over the world." However, after this boisterous statement, he adjusts his claim, suggesting that he has only played "all over the country." Then, once he's said this, he adds, "I once gave a concert." It's worth noting the way he revises his original statement, as the changes he makes to his initial claim that he's "played the piano all over the world" once more obscure his past, making it hard for audience members to grasp what's true and what's a lie. As he continues, the ambiguity surrounding his personal history only increases, as he references an unspecified group of people when he says, "They were all there. Every single one of them." Yet again, then, Pinter provides the audience with almost no reliable information at all, forcing viewers to simply accept the

vague and contradictory stories Stanley tells.

STANLEY. (*To himself.*) 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 pyjama jacket.*) A fast one. They pulled a fast one. I'd like to know who was responsible for that. […] All right, Jack, I can take a tip. They want me to crawl down on my bended knees. Well I can take a tip…any day of the week. (*He replaces his glasses, then looks at* MEG.) Look at her. You're just an old piece of rock cake, aren't you? (*He crosses to her and looks down at her.*) That's what you are, aren't you?

Related Characters: Stanley Webber (speaker), Meg Boles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

After Meg asks him if he's played the piano in other countries, Stanley loses himself in this monologue about his experience as a concert pianist. However, his story is difficult to fully understand and somewhat self-indulgent, as Stanley makes no effort whatsoever to explain to Meg the details she would need in order to follow along. In turn, the play puts the audience in the same position as Meg, left to piece together a disarrayed narrative with the shambles that Stanley presents. To make things even more difficult, Stanley characteristically contradicts himself as he goes along, saying—for example—that his father "nearly came down" to hear his concert, but then admitting that he doesn't *actually* know if this was the case, saying that he only "dropped him a card." Then even this statement is negated when he says that he "lost" his father's address, meaning that he must not have given him a card at all. Without clarifying any of this, Stanley simply proceeds by talking about an unspecified group of people who "carved him up" by locking him out of the performance hall before his next concert.

What's interesting about this moment is that it is one of the only times throughout *The Birthday Party* that Pinter provides anything in the way of backstory for Stanley. And yet, the backstory itself is nearly incomprehensible. What's more, even if this story about the concert hall is true, it doesn't explain why Stanley has run away from his previous life to live in the boarding house, nor does it hint at what specific crimes he has committed (the ones for which Goldberg and McCann want so badly to punish him). Pinter floods the play with superfluous details that only further confound his viewers, ultimately refusing to explain his characters' motivations and thus encouraging audience members to stop thinking along the lines of conventional storytelling.

STANLEY. (*Abruptly.*) How would you like to go away with me?

LULU. Where?

STANLEY. Nowhere. Still, we could go.

LULU. But where could we go?

STANLEY. Nowhere. There's nowhere to go. So we could just go. It wouldn't matter.

LULU. We might as well stay here.

STANLEY. No. It's no good here.

LULU. Well, where else is there?

STANLEY. Nowhere.

LULU. Well, that's a charming proposal. (*Pause.*) Do you have to wear those glasses?

STANLEY. Yes.

LULU. So you're not coming out for a walk?

STANLEY. I can't at the moment.

LULU. You're a bit of a washout, aren't you?

Related Characters: Lulu, Stanley Webber (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, audiences see the negative effect isolation has had on Stanley. As he tries to convince Lulu to "go away" with him, Stanley reveals just how discontent he is with his current life. Despite the fact that he has been staying in the boarding house for quite some time, he clearly doesn't like

the existence he's leading, as made evident by his statement, "It's no good here." Unfortunately, though, the time he's spent hiding out in isolation has ruined him for the world, rendering him unable to think of a single destination he might want to visit. This is why he says, "There's nowhere to go." Nevertheless, he tries to put a positive spin on his predicament by suggesting that having "nowhere" to go actually gives him the freedom to leave. Lulu, however, sees the flaws in this reasoning, recognizing that Stanley isn't making much sense. After all, having "nowhere to go" clearly won't inspire Stanley to leave the boarding house—if anything, his inability to even imagine living in the outside world only inhibits him and curtails his sense of freedom. Unsurprisingly, then, he declines her invitation to go "out for a walk," unable to leave the house even for a short time, let alone for good.

MCCANN. This job—no, listen—this job, is it going to be like anything we've ever done before?

[…]

GOLDBERG. 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 myself. Satisfied?

MCCANN. Sure. Thank you, Nat.

Related Characters: McCann, Goldberg (speaker), Stanley Webber

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

During this conversation, McCann plies Goldberg for details about the "job" they've been hired to carry out. The fact that he himself doesn't know much about their "assignment" aligns with the play's overall interest in exploring the ways people behave when they don't fully understand what's going on. This, of course, is the same experience that the audience undergoes while watching the play, since the viewers don't have any more information than McCann, who also doesn't know much about what he's doing at the boarding house. Unsurprisingly, Goldberg answers McCann's question without providing any helpful details about the specifics of their "assignment." Rather comedically, he says that their job *might* "approximate in points of procedure to some of [McCann's] other activities"—activities about which the audience knows nothing. In turn, Goldberg provides an answer while withholding all pertinent information. Funnily enough, McCann agrees that these superficial details leave him feeling "satisfied," whereas the audience is left to grapple with the essential meaninglessness of what Goldberg has just said.

MEG. […] He once gave a concert. […] (*Falteringly.*) In…a big hall. His father gave him champagne. But then they locked the place up and he couldn't get out. The caretaker had gone home. So he had to wait until 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 he came down here.

GOLDBERG. Really?

MEG. Oh, yes. Straight down.

Related Characters: Goldberg, Meg Boles (speaker), Stanley Webber

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Meg attempts to retell Stanley's story about giving a concert. However, her version of the story is more of a reinterpretation than it is a faithful retelling. She tells Goldberg that Stanley got locked *inside* of the concert hall when, in his version at least, he really was locked *outside* of the building. What's more, Meg insists that everyone was "very grateful" to him and that Stanley took money from them as a "tip," but Stanley originally said that he *could* "take a tip," ultimately trying to say that he understood the implication that the people who locked him out of the concert hall were trying to "carve him up," as he put it.

Given the play's interest in offering contradictory information, especially regarding a person's past, it is difficult to determine whether Meg is confused about the details of Stanley's story, or if she is perhaps telling the truth and *Stanley* is the one who has offered an inaccurate version of his own past. Of course, Meg isn't necessarily the most stable character in the play, so it's reasonable to assume that the tale she tells about Stanley's career as a pianist is riddled with confusion. However, Stanley also proves

himself to be quite unstable, and so it's not unreasonable to think that he's the one making a mistake—or that they both are.

Act Two Quotes

STANLEY. You're here on a short stay?

MCCANN. That's right.

STANLEY. You'll find it very bracing.

MCCANN. Do you find it bracing?

STANLEY. Me? No. But you will. [...] I like it here, but I'll be moving soon. Back home. I'll stay there too, this time. No place like home. (*He laughs.*) I wouldn't have left, but business calls. Business called, and I had to leave for a bit. You know how it is.

MCCANN. You in business?

STANLEY. 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—play records, that's about all. Everything delivered to the door. Then I started a little 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. Don't you agree? I lived so quietly. You can only appreciate what you've had when things change. That's what they say, isn't it?

Related Characters: McCann, Stanley Webber (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

Stanley and McCann speak for the first time here. On his guard, Stanley asks McCann questions about the nature of his "stay," seemingly trying to discern whether or not this stranger's presence in the boarding house has anything to do with him. When McCann turns his questions around on him, though, Stanley responds with ambiguous answers that are often contradictory. For instance, he says that he originally came to the boarding house because "business called," but when McCann asks if he's "in business," he says, "No." And yet, he then adds, "I think I'll give it up," implying that he *is* "in business." At this point, he launches into an explanation not only of his personal finances, but also of his way of life. "I lived so quietly," he says.

What's perhaps most noteworthy about this passage is that McCann asks Stanley seemingly harmless questions, but Stanley responds with long, self-conscious answers. Indeed, he talks about his past life as if trying to prove just how "quietly" he lived. In turn, the audience intuits that he is trying to preemptively deny some kind of accusation, though McCann hasn't yet done anything to suggest that he thinks Stanley deserves punishment. It thus becomes clear that Stanley has a guilty conscience that emerges even as he tries to speak ambiguously about his life.

You know what? To look at me, I bet you wouldn't think I'd led such a quiet life. The lines on my face, eh? It's the drink. Been drinking a bit down here. But what I mean is...you know how it is...away from your own...all wrong, of course...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 have changed, but I'm still the same man that I always was. I mean, you wouldn't think, to look at me, really...I mean, not really, that I was the sort of bloke to—to cause any trouble, would you? (MCCANN *looks at him.*) Do you know what I mean?

Related Characters: Stanley Webber (speaker), McCann

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

As Stanley delivers this monologue about how "quiet" his life used to be before he moved to the boarding house, the audience senses that he's trying especially hard to convince McCann that he isn't the kind of person who would "cause any trouble." Indeed, he goes out of his way to emphasize the fact that he has always stuck to himself, despite the way he looks now. When he says that he's "been drinking a bit" while staying at the boarding house, he admits that his life of isolation has taken a toll on him, ultimately affecting his health. "I'll be all right when I get back," he says, suggesting that he plans to leave the boarding house and return to his regular life. This, however, seems unlikely, given the fact that he previously told Lulu that there is "nowhere" to go. After all, he can't even bring himself to leave the boarding house for a walk, so it seems quite unlikely that he will actually return to his supposedly placid life. The mere fact that he says this to McCann, then, suggests that he is quite afraid of what this man has come to do to him.

GOLDBERG. You stink of sin.

MCCAN. I can smell it.

GOLDBERG. Do you recognise an external force?

STANLEY. What?

GOLDBERG. Do you recognise an external force?

MCCAN. That's the question!

GOLDBERG. Do you recognise an external force, responsible for you, suffering for you?

STANLEY. (*Starting up.*) It's late.

GOLDBERG. (*Pushes him down.*) Late! Late enough! When did you last pray?

MCCAN. He's sweating!

GOLDBERG. When did you last pray?

Related Characters: Stanley Webber, McCann, Goldberg (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange takes place as Goldberg and McCann force Stanley to sit in a chair and subsequently bombard him with questions. As their interrogation progresses, the things they ask him become increasingly strange and nonsensical, often pressing Stanley to confess to committing banal acts. In this moment, though, they focus on the idea that Stanley is a sinner who refuses to "recognise" a superior being. "Do you recognise an external force?" Goldberg demands, trying to get Stanley to admit he's a Godless man. Later in the play, Goldberg says—albeit in an offhanded way—that McCann is a recently "unfrocked" priest. If this is truly the case, then it makes sense that they want to know about the last time Stanley prayed. However, even if McCann isn't religious, his and Goldberg's line of questioning still makes a certain kind of sense. After all, they are working on the assumption that Stanley has transgressed in some egregious way. As such, the theological language that comes along with the notion of sin perfectly aligns with their goal of tricking Stanley into confessing his guilt. In this way, Pinter manages to provide a new lens through which to examine the idea of guilt, though he also allows Goldberg and McCann's accusations to remain ambiguous and haunting.

GOLDBERG. Is the number 846 possible or necessary?

STANLEY. Neither.

GOLDBERG. Wrong! Is the number 846 possible or necessary?

STANLEY. Both.

GOLDBERG. Wrong! It's necessary but not possible.

STANLEY. Both.

GOLDBERG. Wrong! Why do you think the number 846 is necessarily possible?

STANLEY. Must be.

GOLDBERG. Wrong! It's only necessarily necessary! We admit possibility only after we grant necessity. It is possible because necessary but by no means necessary through possibility. The possibility can only be assumed after the proof of necessity.

MCCANN. Right!

GOLDBERG. Right? Of course right! We're right and you're wrong, Webber, all along the line.

Related Characters: Stanley Webber, McCann, Goldberg (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

As Goldberg and McCann interrogate Stanley, Goldberg poses a strange question: "Is the number 846 possible or necessary?" At first glance, this is just as incomprehensible as some of his and McCann's earlier questions, which have to do with (variously) why the chicken crossed the road, why Stanley killed his nonexistent wife, and what kind of headache medicine he takes. However, the basis of this particular question is a bit more complex than it seems at first. In an attempt to prove the existence of God, Thomas Aquinas outlined what's known as "The Argument from Necessity," which is a philosophical notion that—boiled down—says that everything in existence depends upon a single being (a "necessary being"). Simply put, this argument makes a distinction between "possibility" and "necessity," ultimately asserting that something is "necessary" if it can never exist in any other way (for instance, 2 + 2 is *necessarily* 4 because the numbers will never add up to anything else). What's more, because all things in existence might cease to exist at some point (and might even cease to exist all at once, given an infinite amount of time), Aquinas argues that God (a *necessary being*) must therefore *be*; otherwise, there would be nothing to keep everything from vanishing into nonexistence.

Needless to say, Pinter is drawing on complex ideas. However, he couches these ideas into only a few short lines of dialogue, and applies Thomas Aquinas's "Argument from Necessity" to the number 846—something that has no bearing on the existence of God or, for that matter, *The Birthday Party* itself. Even moments of potential intellectual prowess are void of true meaning in the play, inviting the audience to reach for profundity while simultaneously escaping interpretation altogether.

❝ Well—it's very, very nice to be here tonight, in my house, and I want to propose a toast to Stanley, because it's his birthday, and he's lived here for a long while now, and he's my Stanley now. And I think he's a good boy, although sometimes he's bad. (*An appreciative laugh from* GOLDBERG.) And he's the only Stanley I know, and I know him better than all the world, although he doesn't think so. (*"Hear—hear" from* GOLDBERG.) Well, I could cry because I'm so happy, having him here and not gone away, on his birthday, and there isn't anything I wouldn't do for him, and all you good people here tonight…(*She sobs and sits above table.*)

Related Characters: Meg Boles (speaker), Stanley Webber, Goldberg

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Meg toasts Stanley, attempting to celebrate him despite the fact that he claims it isn't his birthday. Interestingly enough, her speech has little to do with Stanley as an individual, instead centering on her own preoccupations. When, for example, she says that it's' "very, very nice to be here tonight, in [her] house," it becomes clear that she's first and foremost excited to be hosting a party—something she doesn't get to do very often, judging by the fact that Stanley has been the only person staying in her house for quite a long time. Even when she *does* turn her attention to Stanley, she merely states facts about him, failing to speak with substance about who he is or what he likes. "He's lived here for a long while now," she says, as if this is something he should be proud of when, in reality, it's something *she's* proud of. Indeed, she's "so happy" to be having this party for Stanley that she says she "could cry," and then does start crying. By showcasing Meg's inability to speak meaningfully about Stanley, the play emphasizes just how isolated and estranged Stanley is from the people who claim to know him best.

Act Three Quotes

❝ Well, Mr. Boles, it can happen in all sorts of ways. A friend of mine was telling me about it only the other day. We'd both been concerned with another case—not entirely similar, of course, but…quite alike, quite alike. (*He pauses. Crosses to the window seat.*) Anyway, he was telling me, you see, this friend of mine, 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's no guarantee how it's going to happen. But with certain people…it's a foregone conclusion.

Related Characters: Goldberg (speaker), Stanley Webber, Petey Boles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

Goldberg speaks these words to Petey, trying to explain why Stanley has had a nervous breakdown. When he says that he and his friend were "concerned with another case" that was similar to Stanley's situation, the audience might remember that Goldberg told McCann that their assignment might resemble certain other jobs they've been asked to carry out. As such, the play hints at the fact that this is perhaps not the first time Goldberg and McCann have driven a person past the edge of sanity. However, Goldberg claims that some people are simply predisposed to nervous breakdowns, upholding that it can happen "day by day" or "all at once." By framing Stanley's psychotic break as a "foregone conclusion," Goldberg absolves himself of responsibility, enabling himself to avoid feeling guilty for what he's done.

> All my life I've said the same. Play up, play up, and play the game. Honour thy father and thy Mother. All along the line. Follow the line, the line, McCann, and you can't go wrong. 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, I'm telling you, follow my line? Follow my mental? Learn by heart. Never write down a thing. No. And don't go too near the water. And you'll find—that 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. He sits in armchair.*) Sit down, McCann, sit here where I can look at you. (McCann *sits on the footstool. Intensely, with growing certainty.*) My father said to me, Benny, Benny, he said, come here. He was dying. I knelt down. By him day and night. Who else was there? Forgive, Benny, he said, and let live. Yes, Dad. Go home to your wife. I will, Dad. Keep an eye open for low-lives, for schnorrers and for layabouts. He didn't mention names. I lost my life in the service of others, he said, I'm not ashamed. 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!

Related Characters: Goldberg (speaker), McCann

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

Goldberg here delivers a long monologue to McCann in which he attempts to give him life advice, trying rather desperately to pinpoint the source of his own personal success. However, he finds it difficult to articulate any kind of wisdom, perhaps because the only things he has to say are nothing more than well-worn clichés. Worse, these clichés don't add up to anything, as he bounces from one empty aphorism to another, saying, "Play up, play up, and play the game," and then adding, "Honour thy father and thy Mother," without providing any kind of transition between the two statements. Of course, it's easy to see that these sentiments have nothing to do with one another, but Goldberg seems to live his life according to this strange brand of nonsense. As a result, he finds it impossible to express his overall worldview, failing each time he begins the sentence, "Because I believe that the world…"

Despite Goldberg's desperation in this moment, his confusion and the meaninglessness of his advice makes perfect sense, as they both suggest that he doesn't actually believe in *anything*. All he has done in *The Birthday Party* is wreak havoc on the boarding house by disrupting its sense of order and driving Stanley crazy. And since Pinter never reveals *why* Goldberg and McCann have done what they've done, it stands to reason that Goldberg might also feel lost in the ambiguity of his own life. Instead of continuing to come up with what he "believes" about the world, then, he reverts to his old habit of waxing poetic about the past, content to repeat his father's life lessons, all of which are as vapid as his own.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT ONE

One morning, Petey Boles enters the living room of the boarding house that he owns with his wife, Meg. As he sits at the table and begins to read the newspaper, Meg calls from another room, saying, "Is that you, Petey? Petey, is that you? Petey?" When she peers out through the hatch that leads to the kitchen, she looks directly at her husband and asks, "Are you back?" Petey confirms that he has indeed returned from the beach, where he works as a deck-chair attendant, and Meg gives him a bowl of cornflakes. Sitting with him at the table, she asks him to tell her what it's like outside and what's happening in the news, making idle chit-chat.

When Meg asks Petey if he's "back" from work, it becomes clear that she dislikes ambiguity. After all, she feels the need to confirm that Petey is home even though she's looking at him, as if she can't trust herself to come to conclusions about reality. As such, Pinter shows the audience that Meg is a strange, eccentric character who is perhaps a bit slow when it comes to interpreting the things taking place around her. He also intimates that The Birthday Party *is a play interested in examining how people comprehend otherwise ordinary or unremarkable occurrences. Everything, it seems, is subject to uncertainty and needs confirmation.*

"Is Stanley up yet?" Meg asks, and Petey says that he doesn't know. "I haven't seen him down yet," Meg says, to which Petey responds, "Well then, he can't be up." As such, Meg concludes that he must still be sleeping and shifts the topic of conversation by asking Petey what time he went out in the morning. "Same time as usual," he answers. "Was it dark?" she asks. "No, it was light," he replies. Beginning to weave as she sits at the table, Meg points out that sometimes Petey leaves in the morning and it's still dark, but he reminds her that this only happens in the winter, when the sun rises later in the morning. After a moment, Meg asks if Petey enjoyed his cornflakes, and when he says he did, she jumps up and fetches him a helping of fried bread, proud to have made it for him.

From the very beginning of The Birthday Party, *Pinter invites audience members to observe the way Meg perceives the world. Rather than looking outside for herself, she asks her husband what it's like beyond the walls of the boarding house, suggesting that she doesn't go out very often. This is an important thing to keep in mind, as her sheltered and naïve worldview is indicative of the play's interest in isolation and solitude.*

"Oh, Meg, two men came up to me on the beach last night," Petey says. "They wanted to know if we could put them up for a couple of nights." In response, Meg says, "Put them up? Here?" She then triumphantly suggests that the strangers must have heard about their boarding house because the house is "on the list." Getting to his point, Petey tells his wife that these two men will most likely arrive at some point in the day, and Meg tells him that she already has a room ready. She then decides to wake Stanley, and Petey asks if she already took him his cup of tea. "I always take him up his cup of tea," she says. "But that was a long time ago." When Petey asks if Stanley drank the tea, she says, "I made him. I stood there till he did."

Here Meg's commitment to upholding order and routine becomes especially apparent. After all, she not only seems to obsess over whether or not Stanley has risen yet, but also admits that she "always" takes him a cup of tea. What's more, she says that she forced *Stanley to drink this tea, implying that he didn't even want it but that she is so devoted to following patterns that she won't let him deviate from their morning ritual. This, it seems, is the only kind of agency she has in her life.*

Calling out, Meg warns Stanley that she's coming to get him, and then she goes upstairs and the audience hears "shouts from Stanley" and "wild laughter from Meg." When Stanley finally enters the living room, he is "unshaven" and wearing a "pyjama jacket" and glasses. He declares that he hasn't slept at all, and Meg says, "Too tired to eat your breakfast, I suppose?" She pours him a bowl of cornflakes and tells him to eat them "like a good boy." As he does so, he asks Petey, "What's it like out today?" Interrupting their conversation about the weather, Meg says, "What are the cornflakes like, Stan?" "Horrible," he replies, claiming that the milk is sour. "It's not," Meg insists. "Petey ate his, didn't you, Petey?" Nonetheless, Stanley pushes the cereal away and asks for the "second course."

Like Meg, Stanley asks Petey to tell him about the outside world. This is because he too has become accustomed to a sheltered, isolated life, as made evident by his shoddy, unkempt appearance. Unlike Meg, though, he doesn't seem quite as concerned with order. In fact, her devotion to upholding the boarding house's daily routines seems to bother him, though it's worth noting that he more or less goes along with her patterns, obliging when she forces him to drink tea and begrudgingly coming downstairs when she tells him to do so.

Meg tells Stanley she isn't going to give him the second course, but he threatens to "go down to one of those smart hotels on the front." At this, Meg jumps up and gives him his fried bread, all the while saying that he wouldn't be able to get a "better breakfast" at a hotel. As she bickers with Stanley, Petey rises and says he's going to return to work, and when Meg tries to stop him because he hasn't had his tea yet, he waves her off, saying it doesn't matter. Then, when Stanley and Meg are alone, Stanley calls her a "bad wife" because she didn't make her husband a cup of tea. "You mind your own business," she says in response. "You won't find many better wives than me, I can tell you. I keep a very nice house and I keep it clean."

Although Meg and Stanley have an odd relationship, they have clearly developed a certain co-dependency. Stanley needs Meg to make him go through the motions of everyday life, while Meg needs Stanley because otherwise she wouldn't have anyone to care for—after all, Petey clearly doesn't care whether or not his wife makes him tea or breakfast. The reason Meg needs someone to care for in the first place is because the majority of her life takes place in the boarding house, which she's proud to run. She depends on residents like Stanley to validate the work she puts into keeping order.

Stanley laughs at Meg for claiming that she keeps a "clean" house. "Yes!" she insists. "And this house is very well known, for a very good boarding house for visitors." Laughing, Stanley points out that Meg hasn't had any "visitors" other than him the entire time he has lived in her house. Changing the subject, she asks Stanley what he thinks of the fried bread, and he calls it "succulent." "You shouldn't say that word to a married woman," she says, and this statement incites a strange back and forth in which Meg playfully calls Stanley "bad," ruffles his hair, and brings him tea. "I don't know what I'd do without you," he mumbles, and she says that he doesn't "deserve" the kindness she gives him. However, they then start arguing about whether or not the tea is over-steeped, and he calls her a "succulent old washing bag."

Stanley and Meg's co-dependent relationship becomes more apparent during this back and forth, especially since Stanley says, "I don't know what I'd do without you." Since he is her only boarder—and since Meg is so proud of running "a very good boarding house"—it's clear that she too relies upon him. This dynamic also has certain sexual overtones, though Pinter only hints at this by staging a conversation about the word "succulent," which bears vaguely erotic connotations. At the same time, it seems that Stanley doesn't want to be too closely tied to Meg, and so he diminishes the sexual tension running between them by calling her an "old washing bag" (albeit a "succulent" one). As such, their relationship remains ambiguous.

After several moments of dusting the sideboard and table, Meg turns to Stanley and asks, "Am I really succulent?" In turn, Stanley assures her that he'd rather have her than "a cold in the nose." This delights Meg, but Stanley doesn't take notice, instead crossing the room, collapsing in the armchair, and telling her she should clean the house because it's a "pigsty." Plus, he says, she should sweep his room and put up new wallpaper. "I need a new room!" he concludes, but Meg comes over and sits on the side of the chair. Petting his arm, she says, "Oh, Stan, that's a lovely room. I've had some lovely afternoons in that room." Hearing this, Stanley "recoils" from her touch in "disgust." Nonetheless, she flirtatiously tickles him even as he tells her to "get away."

Again, Stanley and Meg's relationship emerges as complicated and rather unfathomable. On the one hand, they depend upon each other to alleviate their sense of isolation and to imbue their lives with a semblance of order. On the other hand, Stanley is hesitant to fully embrace Meg in a romantic way, "recoiling" from her touch and responding to her affection with "disgust." This reaction most likely has to do with the fact that he actually likes isolation. Although the audience doesn't yet know anything about his past, it seems clear that he is in this boarding house because he wants to cut himself off from the world.

"Are you going out?" Meg asks. "Not with you," Stanley says, and then she says she's going shopping and that he'll be lonely by himself. "Without your old Meg. I've got to get things in for the two gentlemen," she says. At this, Stanley raises his head. "What two gentlemen," he asks, and she informs him that she's expecting guests. "Two gentlemen asked Petey if they could come and stay for a couple of nights. I'm expecting them," she explains. "I don't believe it," Stanley replies, but Meg insists this is the truth. Advancing upon her, he says, "You're saying it on purpose." He then asks when Petey saw these men and who, exactly, they are, but Meg tells him she doesn't know. "Here?" he continues. "They wanted to come here?" Once again, Meg confirms that this is the case, and after a troubled moment, Stanley says, "They won't come."

Considering that Stanley actively wants to lead an isolated life, it's unsurprising that he dislikes the idea of new guests arriving in the boarding house. However, his response to Meg shows a certain amount of paranoia, as if he's afraid of the people who might show up. When he says, "You're saying it on purpose," he insinuates that Meg is going out of her way to upset him. In turn, Pinter shows the audience that Stanley is deeply troubled by the idea of newcomers at the boarding house. As a result, he invites the audience to wonder why, exactly, Stanley is so perturbed by this. It's natural to wonder—given his sudden alarm—if he's actively hiding from something or someone.

Having decided that the two new guests won't come, Stanley says, "Forget all about it. It's a false alarm. A false alarm." He then asks where his tea has gone, and Meg tells him she took it away because he said it was over-steeped. "Who gave you the right to take away my tea?" he asks. "You wouldn't drink it," she says, and then he tells her to come to him. "Come on," he says, gesturing for her to come closer. When she refuses, he says, "All right. I can ask it from here just as well. Tell me, Mrs. Boles, when you address yourself to me, do you ever ask yourself who exactly you are talking to? Eh?" When she fails to answer, he simply groans and "falls forward," leaning on the table with his head in his hands.

When Stanley criticizes Meg for taking his tea away, the audience begins to understand why she cares so much about routine and order. Although it's absurd that she forced him to drink tea earlier in the morning, it now makes sense—after all, he's suddenly condemning her for doing the opposite. On another note, when Stanley asks Meg if she ever asks herself "who exactly" she's speaking to when she "addresses" him, he infuses his own identity with ambiguity, lightly suggesting that she doesn't even know him. Pinter thus intimates that Stanley is perhaps running from a dark past.

Changing the subject, Meg asks, "When are you going to play the piano again? Like you used to? I used to like watching you play the piano. When are you going to play it again?" Stanley then points out that he *can't* play the piano because the boarding house doesn't have one. "I meant like when you were working," Meg says, pointing out that he could play at the nearby pier. "I've—er—I've been offered a job, as a matter of fact," he says, claiming that he's "considering" the prospect, which would take him to a night club in Berlin. "How long for?" Meg asks, and he says, "We won't stay in Berlin. Then we go to Athens."

Finally, Pinter gives the audience information about Stanley's past, making it clear that he used to be a professional piano player. However, this does little to clarify why Stanley has come to the boarding house. What's more, it's unclear why he no longer plays piano. Even the backstory Pinter provides about Stanley does very little to clear away the ambiguity surrounding his life, leaving the audience to continue trying to understand Stanley based only on his actions onstage.

Again, Meg asks how long Stanley would be away for if he accepted the job, but he doesn't pay attention, instead explaining that after Athens, he would travel to Constantinople, Zagreb, and Vladivostok. "It's a round-the-world tour," he finally suggests. "Have you played the piano in those places before?" Meg asks. "Played the piano? I've played the piano all over the world. All over the country." After a pause, he says, "I once gave a concert."

Given that Stanley won't even go outside to check the weather, it seems unlikely that he's actually considering traveling the world as a pianist. Indeed, it's rather obvious that he's stretching the truth in this moment, a fact that only adds to the ambiguity surrounding his life. When he says that he's played the piano "all over the world," he quickly corrects himself by admitting that he's only played "all over the country." Finally, he says that he "once" gave a concert, which is considerably less impressive than travelling the world as a concert pianist. In this way, Pinter continues to obfuscate the details of Stanley's life, compounding the confusion surrounding his past with lies and half-truths.

Elaborating, Stanley tells the story of the piano concert he gave, all the while using a tone that indicates he's talking mostly to himself: "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. 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. 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."

The details of Stanley's story are murky and tenuous. For instance, it takes him two sentences to determine why his father didn't come to the concert. It remains unclear whether or not this ambiguity arises because he can't remember what really happened or because he's making the story up as he goes along. Regardless, the tale ends with Stanley getting "carved up" by an unspecified "they," suggesting that he has enemies who want to harm him. This is perhaps why he has been living in isolation—to escape these foes. However, Pinter only hints at this idea, purposefully letting Stanley's backstory remain ambiguous so that the audience is forced to move through the play with a sense of incomprehension.

Stanley insists that the people who wanted him to play a second concert hoodwinked him. "They pulled a fast one," he upholds. "Well I can take a tip…any day of the week." He puts his glasses on—since he took them off during his monologue—and looks at Meg. "Look at her," he says. "You're just an old piece of rock cake, aren't you?" In response, she tells him not to go away again. "You stay here," she says. "You'll be better off. You stay with your old Meg. Aren't you feeling well this morning, Stan? Did you pay a visit this morning?" Upon hearing this, Stanley suddenly "stiffens" and looks meaningfully at Meg before telling her that someone is coming in a van to collect her. Thoroughly scaring her, he says that these people will put her in a wheelbarrow and take her away.

Pinter once again emphasizes the fact that both Stanley and Meg are averse to the idea of leaving the boarding house, and thus connected through their isolation. Pinter also continues to develop their odd co-dependency, especially when Meg asks Stanley if he's paid "a visit this morning" (a question about whether or not he has had a bowel movement). Once again, though, Stanley dislikes the level of intimacy he has with Meg, which is why he suddenly turns on her when she asks him this, purposefully trying to scare her by saying that someone is going to come collect her in a wheelbarrow.

Telling Meg about these mysterious people with the wheelbarrow, Stanley says, "And when the van stops they wheel it out, and they wheel it up the garden path, and then they knock at the front door." He tells her that "they're looking for someone," and she shouts, "No, they're not!" At this point, a knock on the door interrupts their conversation, and Meg bustles offstage, where she conducts a conversation in whispers with an unseen person. "Hullo, Mrs. Boles," says the new voice. "It's come." When this conversation concludes, Lulu walks into the living room with a parcel in her arms. Greeting Stanley, she tells him that she's going to leave the package on the sideboard and that he's "not to touch it."

Once more, Pinter infuses The Birthday Party *with ambiguity, this time presenting a mysterious package, which Lulu installs onstage without explanation. The fact that Stanley is "not to touch it" is especially intriguing, adding secrecy to the play's structure even if only in a superficial way. This, it seems, is what Pinter is most interested in: introducing elements to the story without providing enough information to enable the audience to fully make sense of what's going on. In turn, he forces viewers to simply surrender to the play and let it unfold on its own.*

Lulu remarks that the boarding house is "stuffy" and suggests that Stanley should get some air, but he insists that he went outside at "half past six." "I went right out to the head land and back before breakfast," he claims. "Don't you believe me." Taking out a compact mirror, Lulu hands it to him and says, "Do you want to have a look at your face?" Looking at his reflection, Stanley quickly withdraws. "You could do with a shave, do you know that? Don't you ever go out? I mean, what do you do, just sit around the house like this all day long?" she says. She then invites him to come outside with her for lunch, prompting him to go one step further by asking if she'd like to "go away" with him. "Where?" she asks. "Nowhere," he replies. "Still, we could go."

The fact that Stanley is shocked by his own reflection illustrates just how cooped up he has been. He hasn't even bothered to look at himself, let alone leave the house (despite what he tries to tell Lulu). However, he attempts to frame his isolation as a liberating thing, something that could inspire him to do seemingly anything. To do this, he suggests that he and Lulu should leave, upholding that they have "nowhere" to go and that this is the precise reason they can go somewhere in the first place. Under this interpretation, having "nowhere" to run to is actually a sign of freedom. In reality, of course, it's the opposite, since going nowhere means not leaving at all. Still, Stanley seems eager to convince Lulu—and himself—that his lack of direction and purpose is beneficial and liberating, rather than inhibiting and depressing.

"There's nowhere to go," Stanley continues. "So we could just go. It wouldn't matter." In response, Lulu says that they "might as well stay here," but Stanley upholds that "it's no good here." After a pause, Lulu asks if he's going to come for a walk with her, and he says, "I can't at the moment." Before leaving, Lulu says, "You're a bit of a washout, aren't you?"

Once again, Stanley tries to frame his own inability to leave as a liberating thing, thinking that he can go anywhere he wants because it doesn't "matter." He seems to be confusing the words nowhere *and* anywhere, *and this mistake indicates the effect isolation has had on him. After all, if he were to argue that he and Lulu could go* anywhere *because it doesn't matter where they go, his point would actually make sense—if it doesn't "matter," then there's nothing stopping them from traveling wherever they want. But to say that there is "nowhere" to go is to say that there are no options at all, and this is why he finds himself unable to even go outside with Lulu for a short walk. He is, the audience sees, bound to the boarding house.*

Lulu leaves, a knock sounds on the door, and Stanley exits as Goldberg and McCann enter carrying suitcases. "Is this it?" McCann asks, and Goldberg tells him not to worry. "Sit back, McCann," he says. "Relax. What's the matter with you? I bring you down for a few days to the seaside. Take a holiday. Do yourself a favour. Learn to relax, McCann, or you'll never get anywhere." In response, McCann says, "Ah sure, I do try, Nat," and Goldberg tells him that "the secret" to relaxing is focusing on breathing. He then launches into a story about when he was "an apprentice" who used to shadow his uncle, who used to live in Basingstoke and would take him "after lunch on Shabbuss" to sit on deck chairs and watch the tide. After a while, McCann interrupts Goldberg's nostalgic story to ask if he's sure they're in the correct house.

Right away, it's evident that Goldberg is prone to pontificating. Indeed, he likes to wax poetic about the past, offering life advice as McCann sits idly by and waits to talk about why they have come to the boarding house. This, it seems, is Goldberg's way of ordering the world. Whereas Meg focuses on making breakfast and tending to Stanley, Goldberg imposes order on his life by holding forth in a self-important way.

As Goldberg continues to reminisce about his uncle's advice, McCann grows increasingly worried that they haven't come to the right house. "What is it, McCann? You don't trust me like you did in the old days?" Goldberg finally says. McCann assures him that he does indeed trust him. "But why is it that before you do a job you're all over the place, and when you're doing the job you're as cool as a whistle?" Goldberg asks. He then assures McCann that when "they approached [him] to" take this job, he specifically asked for McCann as a partner. Flattered, McCann says this means a great deal "coming from a man of [Goldberg's] position," and Goldberg agrees that he does have quite the "position." "You've always been a true Christian," McCann says, to which, Goldberg says, "In a way."

Unsurprisingly, Pinter doesn't make it easy to understand the nature of Goldberg and McCann's relationship, nor does he provide much insight into their backstories. Indeed, the audience has no idea who Goldberg refers to when he says that "they" "approached" him to take this job. He also doesn't specify what Goldberg and McCann have come to do, and when McCann says, "You've always been a true Christian," it becomes unclear how well these two men actually know each other. After all, they talk as if they've been friends for a long time, but Goldberg has already revealed—by talking about how his uncle used to take him to watch the tide after lunch on "Shabbus"—that he is Jewish. As such, Pinter shrouds these men in ambiguity.

After complimenting Goldberg, McCann asks him if "this job" will be "like anything [they've] ever done before." In response, Goldberg says, "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."

Given the fact that Stanley is so wary of newcomers, it seems likely that he is the "subject" Goldberg is referring to. As a result, Pinter intimates that Stanley has reasons for hiding out in the boarding house, wanting to avoid something from his previous life. Nonetheless, the reasons for his isolation remain unspecified, as do the details of what Goldberg and McCann intend to do to him. In fact, even McCann doesn't know what they're going to do, and Goldberg's answer is vague and ambiguous, leaving McCann—and the audience—with very little information.

Meg enters the living room, and Goldberg tells her that he and McCann spoke to Petey about staying in the boarding house. "Very pleased to meet you," Meg says, and Goldberg returns the compliment. "That's very nice," Meg says, and Goldberg replies, "You're right, how often do you meet someone it's a pleasure to meet." Making small-talk, Goldberg asks about the boarding house, asking what Petey does for work and then asking her about the sole boarder, inquiring how long Stanley has been staying in the house and what he does for work. "He once gave a concert," Meg says. "In…a big hall. His father gave him champagne. But then they locked the place up and he couldn't get out. The caretaker had gone home. So he had to wait until the morning before he could get out. They were very grateful. And then they all wanted to give him a tip."

When Meg tells Stanley's story about playing a piano concert, she gets almost all of the details mixed up, as Pinter again reminds the audience that he's uninterested in creating reliable backstories. Instead, he allows the characters' pasts to fluctuate in an ambiguous way so that the only thing the audience can truly focus on is the present moment. What's more, he demonstrates the extent to which Meg herself is unreliable. By telling a completely different version of Stanley's story, she proves her inability to retain information, a fact that suggests she's too immersed in her own world—a world of order and isolation—to successfully absorb what happens around her.

Meg tells Goldberg and McCann that she wishes Stanley could play the piano tonight, since it's his birthday. "His birthday?" Goldberg asks. "Yes," she replies. "Today. But I'm not going to tell him until tonight." "Doesn't he know it's his birthday?" Goldberg asks, but Meg says, "He hasn't mentioned it." Thinking for a moment, Goldberg tells her that she ought to throw Stanley a party. She immediately takes to this idea, loving the thought of staging a celebration. Looking at his friend, Goldberg says, "What do you think of that, McCann? There's a gentleman living here. He's got a birthday today, and he's forgotten all about it. So we're going to remind him." Meg then declares that she'll wear her "party dress," which she hopes will look nice. "Madam," Goldberg says, "you'll look like a tulip." Charmed, Meg takes Goldberg and McCann upstairs to show them the bedroom they'll be sharing.

When Goldberg turns to McCann and says that they will "remind" Stanley that it's his birthday, his words take on an ominous, foreboding quality. A certain malice lurks in this phrase, as if Stanley's birthday party will be a perfect time to do whatever it is he and McCann have come to do. What's funny is that Stanley doesn't even know it's his birthday, a fact that once more reminds the audience that ambiguity governs the entirety of the play. In addition, the idea that Stanley has forgotten his own (supposed) birthday suggests that his life of isolation has taken a toll on his intellect, estranging him not only from the world, but also from himself.

After showing Goldberg and McCann their room, Meg comes downstairs again and speaks to Stanley in the living room. "Who are they?" he asks, pressing for details. He asks how long they'll stay, why they didn't come the night before, and why they've come in the first place. He then urges her to remember their names, and after she tells him Goldberg's name, she promises that they won't bother him. "I'll still bring you up your early morning tea," she promises. "You mustn't be sad today. It's your birthday." Looking up, Stanley insists that it *isn't* his birthday, but Meg only says, "It is. I've bought you a present."

Unable to surmise the real reason Stanley is upset about the arrival of Goldberg and McCann, Meg assumes that he's worried their presence will upset the boarding house's daily routine. As such, she promises that she'll still bring him his "early morning tea," completely failing to intuit Stanley's actual concerns (which, to be fair, Pinter doesn't make clear even to the audience). She clings to order and tradition, refusing to accept that it isn't Stanley's birthday because she's too excited by the idea of giving him a present—which is nothing more than a yearly routine—to believe him.

Meg hands Stanley the parcel that Lulu brought to the house. When he opens it, he sees that it's a small drum. "It's a **drum**," he says, confused. "A boy's drum." Happily, Meg tells him that she got him this because there's no piano for him to play. "Aren't you going to give me a kiss?" she asks, and he obliges by hesitantly kissing her on the cheek before drawing drumsticks from the package and looping the drum around his neck. Marching around the table in a circle, he begins beating the drum. "*Still beating it regularly, he begins to go round the table a second time,*" Pinter's stage note reads. "*Halfway round the beat becomes erratic, uncontrolled.* MEG *expresses dismay. He arrives at her chair, banging the drum, his face and the drumbeat now savage and possessed.*"

It makes sense for Meg to give Stanley a drum, since marching drums represent rhythm, repetition, and pattern: in other words, order. As such, she's immensely pleased when he starts to play, indulging her love of order. However, she's "dismayed" when he strays from the rhythm. Playing a "savage" beat, he manages to destroy all sense of order by plummeting into chaos, and the fact that his face looks "possessed" suggests that this deviation says something ominous about his sanity, as if something wild and erratic has overtaken him.

ACT TWO

That evening, McCann sits at the table and slowly tears a newspaper into "five equal strips" while Goldberg and Petey's voices drift in from outside. Stanley enters the living room and greets McCann. "Were you going out?" McCann asks, and Stanley says that he was indeed planning on doing so. "On your birthday?" McCann says. "Yes," replies Stanley. "Why not?" Trying to make him stay, McCann informs him that there will be a party for him. "Oh, really?" Stanley asks. "That's unfortunate." "Ah, no," McCann says. "It's very nice." All the same, Stanley asserts that he's not "in the mood for a party tonight" and that he plans to go out to "celebrate quietly" on his own. However, McCann is blocking the door and won't move. "The guests are expected," says McCann, explaining that the party will be an "honour" that Stanley won't want to miss.

McCann's pasttime of ripping newspapers represents the extent to which his—and Goldberg's—presence destabilizes the boarding house. Their arrival has disrupted the prevailing sense of order, a fact embodied by his slow, methodical destruction of the newspaper. On another note, it's strange that Stanley says he'd like to "celebrate" his birthday "quietly," considering that he has previously suggested that it's not his birthday at all. Once again, then, the details of The Birthday Party *are ambiguous and even contradictory, leaving the audience with very little in the way of reliable information.*

"Excuse me," Stanley says, moving to leave. However, McCann doesn't let him pass, saying, "Why don't you stay here?" Giving up, Stanley sits at the table and notes that he feels like he's met McCann before. "Ever been anywhere near Maidenhead?" he asks, but McCann says they've never met and that he hasn't been to Maidenhead. "There's a Fuller's teashop. I used to have my tea there," Stanley says. "And a Boots Library. I seem to connect you with the High Street." Still, McCann denies any connection, so Stanley starts talking about what it's like to live in this coastal town. "I like it here," he says, "but I'll be moving soon. Back home. I'll stay there too, this time. No place like home. I wouldn't have left, but business calls." When McCann asks if Stanley is "in business," he says, "No. I think I'll give it up."

Yet again, Stanley presents his past life in a confusing, contradictory manner. This time, he suggests that he came to the boarding house because of "business," but when McCann asks if he's "in business," he says, "No." However, he then adds, "I think I'll give it up," a phrase that implies that he is, in fact, "in business." Of course, he is perhaps purposefully contradicting himself in order to confuse McCann, but it's safe to assume that Pinter is also hoping to confound the audience by withholding the actual details of Stanley's life. In turn, viewers are left wondering what they actually know about the play's protagonist—an experience that not only mimics what it would be like to encounter Stanley in real life, but also reflects the ways in which Stanley's life of isolation has warped his sense of reality.

Stanley reiterates to McCann that he intends to return home, saying that he "used to live very quietly." He suggests that, though he doesn't look like someone who would lead "such a quiet life," this is only because he's been drinking a lot while living in the boarding house. Still, he insists he'll be "all right" when he goes home. Focusing on McCann, he asks why he came to the boarding house, saying that it's a "ridiculous house to pick on" because it's not actually a boarding house at all. Interjecting, McCann points out that Stanley seems rather "depressed for a man on his birthday," but Stanley maintains that it's not his birthday and calls Meg "crazy" for saying so. "That's a terrible thing to say," McCann responds.

It's worth noting that Stanley says he's been drinking too much while living in the boarding house, effectively confirming the detrimental effect this life of isolation has had on him. Furthermore, he once again contradicts himself, this time reverting to his original assertion that it isn't his birthday, ultimately reinforcing the sense of ambiguity that runs through the play. Lastly, by calling Meg "crazy," he alerts the audience to one of The Birthday Party*'s primary interests: exploring whether or not a person is sane.*

Stanley becomes visibly shaken by the fact that Goldberg and Petey are lurking outside. "You want to steady yourself," McCann says as Stanley rushes over to him and grabs his arm, saying, "Listen. You knew what I was talking about before, didn't you?" McCann simply sits down and insists that he doesn't know what Stanley's talking about. "It's a mistake!" Stanley says. "Don't you understand? [...] Has he told you anything? Do you know what you're here for? Tell me. You needn't be frightened of me. Or hasn't he told you?" McCann feigns ignorance, simply saying, "Told me what?" to which Stanley says, "I've explained to you, damn you, that all those years I lived in Basingstoke I never stepped outside the door."

Stanley becomes frantic and ridden with anxiety, as if he has a guilty conscience. His question, "Or hasn't he told you?" implies that he wants to know if Goldberg has told McCann something unsavory about him. Stanley also reveals that he used to live in Basingstoke—the same place that Goldberg talked about when he first arrived and told a story about his uncle. As such, the audience learns that McCann and Goldberg most likely do know Stanley, despite the fact that McCann has insisted otherwise. This is how Pinter wants the audience to receive information: by piecing it together and struggling to make sense of the play's ambiguity.

Recognizing that McCann is Irish, Stanley invites him to a nearby pub that serves Guinness, but Petey and Goldberg enter and interrupt their conversation. After introducing himself, Goldberg launches into a long description of his mother. "'Simey!' my old mum used to shout," he says at one point, and McCann says, "I thought your name was Nat." Explaining that his mother called him Simey, Goldberg asks Stanley to talk about his childhood, but Stanley doesn't respond. Filling the silence, Petey informs his guests that he has plans for the evening and won't be able to attend the birthday party. When he leaves (along with McCann, who goes to get alcohol), Stanley suddenly shouts, "Don't mess me about!" When Goldberg regards him, he claims to be the manager of the boarding house, saying, "I'm afraid there's been a mistake. We're booked out."

Pinter pushes the ambiguity of the play to a rather hilarious and absurd point, where even McCann gets confused about his own friend's identity. "I thought your name was Nat," he says, earnestly voicing what audience members are no doubt thinking to themselves. However, such details are unimportant in The Birthday Party *and are especially insignificant to Goldberg, who seemingly has no trouble shifting in and out of the past and present, all the while allowing the specifics of his life to fluctuate according to the conversation he's having. In this way, each character becomes estranged from everyone else in the play—no one can truly connect because they know nothing about one another.*

Goldberg ignores Stanley's assertion that the boarding house can't accommodate new guests, instead approaching him and saying, "I must congratulate you on your birthday." He says that he believes birthdays are "great occasion[s]" that are "taken too much for granted." To him, though, birth is a wonderful thing to celebrate. When McCann enters with an armful of bottles, Stanley tells him to get the alcohol out of his sight, but Goldberg simply tells him to sit down as McCann sets the bottles on the sideboard. "I have a responsibility toward the people in this house," Stanley says, refusing to sit. "They've been down here too long. They've lost their sense of smell. I haven't. And nobody's going to take advantage of them while I'm here." Again, though, Goldberg tells him to sit.

Stanley's anxiety in this scene comes to full fruition, as he pretends to be the manager of the boarding house, making it clear just how much he doesn't want to be around Goldberg and McCann. However, what remains unclear is whether Stanley is afraid of Goldberg and McCann because they are bad men, or if he's afraid of them because he himself has done something terrible and they're here to punish him. It's worth noting that Goldberg has told Stanley to sit down twice in a row; these commands hint at the fact that Goldberg and McCann are beginning to curtail Stanley's freedom by ordering him around.

Stanley refuses to sit, so Goldberg tells McCann to force him to do so. When Stanley holds his ground, McCann repeats the command: "Sit down." "Why?" Stanley asks. "You'd be more comfortable," he says. "So would you," Stanley points out. With this, McCann agrees to sit if Stanley will join him, but when he lowers himself into a chair, Stanley says, "Right. Now you've both had a rest you can get out!" Hearing this, McCann bolts out of the chair and says, "That's a dirty trick! I'll kick the shite out of him." Finally, after Goldberg yells at him to sit, Stanley takes a seat, at which point Goldberg and McCann close in on him, saying, "Webber, what were you doing yesterday?" Before he can answer, though, Goldberg says, "And the day before. What did you do the day before that?"

Once Goldberg and McCann finally succeed in forcing Stanley to sit, they begin to bombard him with questions. When they ask what Stanley was doing "yesterday," it begins to seem more and more likely that Stanley has indeed transgressed in some way. However, the fact that they don't wait for Stanley to respond—instead pushing on with their questions—indicates that they don't actually care what he has to say. In turn, their interrogation loses some of its meaning, so that they're simply going through the motions of questioning Stanley.

"Why are you always wasting everybody's time, Webber?" Goldberg asks, launching into a slew of questions that Stanley is hardly able to answer. He asks why Stanley bothers Meg, why he "behave[s] so badly," what he wore the previous week, and why he left "the organization." "Why did you betray us?" McCann chimes in. They then ask who Stanley thinks he is before inquiring as to when he came to the boarding house, where he came from, why he came, and why he stayed. "I had a headache!" Stanley answers. "Did you take anything for it?" Goldberg demands, and when Stanley confirms that he took "fruit salts," Goldberg says, "Enos or Andrews? [...] Did you stir properly? Did they fizz?" "Now, now, wait, you—" Stanley stammers, but Goldberg cuts him off, saying, "Did they fizz? Did they fizz or didn't they fizz?"

As Goldberg and McCann interrogate Stanley, their questions become not only more and more absurd, but more and more meaningless. It obviously doesn't matter what kind of "fruit salts" Stanley takes for headaches or whether or not he properly stirs this medication. And yet, Goldberg treats this question with the utmost seriousness, as if it's a matter of life and death. This makes the entire interrogation seem rather inconsequential. After all, if Goldberg and McCann think Stanley is guilty for failing to make his "fruit salts" fizz, then even the most banal actions can be considered sinful, meaning that everyone in the world should be condemned. Stanley also responds to these absurd questions as if they truly are serious, thereby validating the interrogation and confirming that he has a guilty conscience.

"You betrayed the organization," McCann says. "I know him!" In response, Stanley shouts that McCann doesn't know him, but McCann plucks his glasses off his face. When Stanley stands to retrieve them, McCann moves his chair so that Stanley has to feel his way to it once more. When he sits back down, Goldberg and McCann resume their absurd questions. "Why did you kill your wife?" Goldberg asks. "What wife?" Stanley says. "How did he kill her?" McCann chimes in. "How did you kill her?" asks Goldberg. "You throttled her," McCann asserts. "With arsenic," Goldberg adds. Switching tracks, Goldberg says, "Why did you never get married?" He then maintains that Stanley "skedaddled from the wedding." Moving on, he asks why Stanley changed his name. "I forgot the other one," Stanley answers.

Although some of their questions are silly and seemingly inconsequential, Goldberg and McCann do accuse Stanley of a number of heinous crimes. They also suggest that he has "betrayed the organization," though no one clarifies what organization they're referring to. Similarly, they contradict themselves when talking about Stanley's wife, simultaneously suggesting that he killed her and that he never got married in the first place. By rendering this interrogation a chaotic and ridiculous affair, Pinter shows the audience just how easy it is to force a person into guilt. In fact, the mere suggestion of guilt seems to be Goldberg and McCann's most powerful advantage, since they apparently don't care about the specific details of Stanley's supposed crime.

"You stink of sin," Goldberg says. "Do you recognise an external force?" Stanley doesn't understand the question, but Goldberg only repeats it, saying, "Do you recognise an external force, responsible for you, suffering for you?" Stanley tries to stand, but Goldberg pushes him back into the seat and says, "Is the number 846 possible or necessary?" Stanley says, "Neither," and Goldberg repeats the question, finally saying that 846 is "necessary but not possible." However, Goldberg then says, "It's only necessarily necessary! We admit possibility only after we grant necessity. It is possible because necessary but by no means necessary through possibility. The possibility can only be assumed after the proof of necessity." McCann, for his part, says, "Right!" "Right?" Goldberg adds. "Of course right! We're right and you're wrong, Webber, all along the line."

Here Pinter riffs on a heady theological argument laid out by Thomas Aquinas that draws upon modal logic, which interprets the words "possible" and "necessary" in nuanced ways. In this context, the word "necessary" is used to describe things that could never be different—in other words, 2 + 2 is necessarily *4 because the sum of those numbers will never create a different total. Thomas Aquinas proposed a theory of possibility and necessity that he claimed proved the existence of God. This theological connection makes sense given the context of this interrogation, considering that Goldberg tells Stanley he "stink[s] of sin," an accusation that again suggests he is guilty. When he says, "Do you recognise an external force, responsible for you, suffering for you?" he essentially calls into question whether or not Stanley believes in God, which is perhaps why he proceeds by referencing Thomas Aquinas's proof of God. However, what Goldberg then says about the possibility or necessity of 846 is essentially nonsensical. Even with an understanding of Aquinas's argument, it's highly unlikely audience members would be able to make sense of what Goldberg says, especially since he applies it not to God, but to a random number. Again, Pinter confounds his audience with meaninglessness.*

Finally, Goldberg and McCann ask Stanley to answer whether the chicken or the egg came first, and Stanley screams at this. "What makes you think you exist?" Goldberg asks after this yelp. "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's no juice in you. You're nothing but an odour!" Hearing this, Stanley peers up from the chair, in which he has curled up. Pausing, he suddenly kicks Goldberg in the stomach and stands up, but McCann grabs a chair and prepares to strike him with it. "Steady, McCann," Goldberg says. Before anything else can happen, the sound of a drumbeat fills the room as Meg enters wearing an evening dress and playing Stanley's **drum**.

More than anything, Goldberg's assertion that Stanley is "dead" is an acknowledgement of the negative effect isolation has had on him. "You can't live, you can't think, you can't love," Goldberg says, suggesting that the life Stanley has been leading in the boarding house has rendered him unable to function. And just when Stanley seems forced to face this fact, he lashes out, desperate to keep himself from coming to terms with the notion that he is essentially a broken person subsisting on nothing other than the weak semblance of order and sanity that Meg provides him. Given this sentiment, it's quite fitting that Meg herself enters at this moment, banging Stanley's drum—the very embodiment of this false sense of order.

Upon seeing Meg, Goldberg regales her with compliments. They then start pouring drinks, and Goldberg urges Meg to walk up and down the room, claiming he used to work in fashion and saying, "Let's have a look at you." As the group lifts their glasses for a toast, Goldberg urges Meg to deliver a few words about Stanley, who stands silently to the side. "Switch out the light and put on your torch," he says to McCann, ordering his associate to point the flashlight into Stanley's face while everyone else stands up and listens to Meg's speech.

As if they haven't already made it clear to Stanley how much his isolated life has negatively influenced him, Goldberg and McCann single him out by forcing him to sit obediently under the harsh glow of McCann's flashlight. In turn, the audience—and Stanley himself—feels just how alone he is, despite the fact that he's surrounded by people who claim to be his friends.

Standing there in the dark, Meg begins her toast. "Well," she says, "it's very, very nice to be here tonight, in my house, and I want to propose a toast to Stanley, because it's his birthday, and he's lived here for a long while now, and he's my Stanley now. And I think he's a good boy, although sometimes he's bad. And he's the only Stanley I know, and I know him better than all the world, although he doesn't think so." When she concludes her speech, she starts crying, and Goldberg pronounces her words "beautiful" and orders McCann to turn on the lights. At this point, Lulu slips in and meets Goldberg, who kisses her hand and immediately begins to flirt with her.

Although Goldberg says Meg's words are "beautiful," her speech makes it obvious that she doesn't truly know Stanley very well. After all, she mainly focuses on how happy she is "to be here tonight" in her own house, as if she's actually celebrating the fact that her boarding house finally has more than one tenant. Furthermore, she doesn't say anything about Stanley as a person, instead highlighting how long he's been staying in her house. Though Meg and Stanley appeared to be close in the play's first act, their relationship is superficial—a fact that only deepens Stanley's sense of isolation.

Instructing everyone to raise their glasses once more, Goldberg decides to toast Stanley. "Well," he says, "I want to say first that I've never been so touched to the heart as by the toast we've just heard. How often, in this day and age, do you come across real, true warmth? Once in a lifetime." Going on, he says that he is "knocked over by the sentiments" Meg has expressed. "We all wander on our tod through this world," he says to Stanley. "It's a lonely pillow to kip on." He then tells McCann to turn out the lights, and they all drink.

Like Meg's speech, Goldberg's toast only accentuates how utterly alone Stanley is, even surrounded by people who claim to care about him and who want to celebrate his birthday. By speaking so admiringly about Meg's speech—which was actually quite impersonal—Goldberg underhandedly emphasizes how pathetic her words were. What's more, he reminds Stanley that "we all wander on our tod through this world" ("on our tod" is Cockney slang for "on our own"), which he insists is "a lonely pillow to kip on." He is intentionally making Stanley feel alone and estranged from everyone else.

When the lights go on again, Meg and McCann fall into conversation while Goldberg and Lulu flirt with one another. As each pair converses, their sentences overlap in a strange cacophony, and Stanley simply sits in silence. Lulu tells Goldberg that she admired his speech, and he says that his "first chance to stand up and give a lecture was at the Ethical Hall, Bayswater." When she asks what the lecture was about, he says, "The Necessary and the Possible." He then tells her to sit on his lap, and as she does so, she asks if he has a wife. Goldberg tells her that he used to, launching into a story about his late wife who used to call him Simey.

Yet again, the details of Goldberg's past are difficult to discern, as he contradicts himself whenever he talks about his personal history. In this case, he presents himself as some kind of public intellectual or professor, though he recently told Meg that he used to work in fashion. He also again refers to himself as Simey, thereby destabilizing the audience's feeling that they even know who he is. Lastly, it's worth noting that Stanley sits in silence during his own birthday party, completely isolated as the other guests have private conversations.

While Goldberg and Lulu flirt—Lulu disclosing that she likes older men and that Goldberg looks like her first true love—Meg and McCann also become rather friendly. Reminiscing about their childhoods, they lose themselves in their memories without fully listening to one another. Finally, Meg suggests that they all play a game, and the group decides to play "blind man's bluff." Tying a scarf around Meg's eyes, Lulu explains to everyone that they can't move once the game starts. Meg, Lulu says, will walk around in her blindfold and try to touch one of the other players—if she succeeds, then that player is "it," and it will be his or her turn to play the blind man.

"Blind man's bluff" is a perfect representation of the isolation Stanley experiences in the boarding house. After all, the person who is "it" must wander blindly around a room while trying to find someone else, an act that embodies just how much Stanley is cut off from everyone around him.

Walking blindfolded through the living room, Meg finds McCann, who—when he plays the blind man—finds Stanley. All the while, Goldberg and Lulu fondle one another. As McCann blindfolds Stanley, he takes his glasses, breaks them, and backs away. He then places **the drum** in Stanley's path, causing the blinded man to step on it and break through the drumhead before falling to the floor. "Ohh!" Meg says, but Goldberg quickly shushes her. Getting back up, Stanley makes his way to Meg, reaches out, puts both hands around her neck, and starts to strangle her, at which point Goldberg and McCann rush over and force him to stop.

Considering that Stanley tries to strangle Meg right after he's been blindfolded and ridiculed in front of the entire party, it's reasonable to assume that this act of aggression arises from the experience of being forced to fully inhabit the depths of his own isolation. It's also worth keeping in mind that Goldberg and McCann bombarded him with a number of absurd and unanswerable questions directly before the party began, psychologically unhinging him and then acting as if nothing happened. In addition, McCann sets him up so that he breaks the drum, which represents perhaps the last vestige of order and sanity in the boarding house.

Just as Goldberg and McCann get Stanley to let go of Meg, the lights suddenly go out, leaving everyone in total darkness. "Where is he?" Goldberg says. Chaos ensues as McCann tries to find the flashlight, Goldberg barking at him the whole time until, suddenly, Lulu screams because Stanley is approaching her. "Who's that?" McCann asks, but Lulu has fainted, and Stanley has picked her up and laid her out on the table. Finally, McCann finds the flashlight and shines it on Stanley, who is bent over and preparing to rape Lulu. Wrestling him away, Goldberg and McCann push him against the wall, his face lit by the flashlight as he begins to laugh like a madman.

In keeping with the notion that order and sanity have been disrupted in the boarding house, Stanley begins to commit an egregious act. He has, it seems, finally broken. If he wasn't guilty before this moment, it's clear he has now become the sinful person Goldberg and McCann have always assumed him to be. What's interesting, though, is that the play never clarifies whether or not Stanley has always been like this, so it's possible to believe that Goldberg and McCann have changed him for the worse by treating him like a criminal.

ACT THREE

Sitting at the breakfast table the following morning, Meg informs Petey that she has run out of cornflakes and has nothing to feed him because Goldberg and McCann have eaten all the fried bread. Still, Petey sits and reads his newspaper as always, noting that Meg slept "like a log" the night before. "Oh, look," Meg says at one point, picking up Stanley's **drum**. "The drum's broken. Why is it broken?" Hitting it with her hand, she says, "It still makes a noise." She then adds, "It was probably broken in the party. I don't remember it being broken, though, in the party." Consoling herself, she points out that at least Stanley had the drum on his birthday, like she "wanted him to."

The fact that Meg doesn't remember the party is both significant and difficult to believe. Although she was certainly drinking, she didn't seem to so drunk that she wouldn't remember anything at all. Plus, it's unlikely she'd forget that Stanley tried to strangle her, even if she really had been drunk enough to not remember certain parts of the evening. Her amnesia seems intentional, as if she is purposefully banishing the memory of the party from her mind in order to go on with her daily routine.

Meg asks Petey if he's seen Stanley yet, and when he says he hasn't, she says, "Nor have I. That boy should be up. He's late for his breakfast." Petey points out that there *isn't* any breakfast, but she says, "Yes, but he doesn't know that." She has, she reveals, already been upstairs to give Stanley his tea, but McCann opened the door and informed her that "they were talking." "Do you think they know each other?" she asks Petey. "I think they're old friends." Looking out the window, she remarks that there's a car in the driveway and asks Petey if there's a wheelbarrow inside it, but he assures her the car only belongs to Goldberg—a fact that relieves her.

Meg cheerfully enacts her morning routine, which gives her a sense of order and calm. However, she is no longer in touch with reality, as the house has fallen into chaos and disarray but still she tries to move on as if nothing has happened. Even when it doesn't make sense (and isn't even possible), she insists that everyone must eat breakfast, blatantly refusing to accept reality. The play thus invites audience members to consider what qualifies as insanity, subtly suggesting that Meg's refusal to acknowledge chaos is perhaps as insane as Stanley's sudden breakdown the night before (though it's worth noting that Stanley's breakdown was violent and malicious, and thus ultimately more serious than Meg's understated madness).

Before Meg leaves to go shopping, Goldberg comes downstairs and says that Stanley will be along soon. Hearing this, Meg tells Petey to tell Stanley that she "won't be long," and then she exits. Turning to Goldberg, Petey asks if Stanley is "any better" this morning. In an unconvincing tone, Goldberg says, "Oh…a little better, I think a little better. Of course. I'm not really qualified to say, Mr. Boles." Going on, he says that a doctor would have more to say. "Anyway," he continues, "Dermot's with him at the moment. He's…keeping him company." Confused, Petey says, "Dermot?" "Yes," Goldberg says without explaining. He then posits that the birthday party was "too much" for Stanley, and when Petey asks what "came over him," he says Stanley had a nervous breakdown.

In this moment Petey proves that he is perhaps the only one in the entire play who actually cares about Stanley. The mere fact that he asks how Stanley is doing is proof enough of this, considering that Meg—who most likely does remember what happened the night before—can't even be bothered to stop pretending everything is okay (though this is perhaps a way of coping with the fact that Stanley tried to strangle her). On another note, when Goldberg refers to "Dermot," he's talking about McCann, since no one else is staying in the boarding house. Changing his associate's name is an incredibly confusing thing to do, and yet he doesn't pause to explain to Petey that he's talking about McCann, instead pushing on to consider Stanley's mental health in a somewhat callous manner.

Petey asks Goldberg what brought on Stanley's nervous breakdown, and Goldberg suggests that these kinds of things can happen in many different ways. "A friend of mine was telling me about it only the other day," he says, explaining 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." For some people, Goldberg maintains, these kinds of nervous breakdowns are "foregone conclusion[s]."

If one were to apply Goldberg's understanding of nervous breakdowns to Stanley's situation, it would be reasonable to consider that his life in isolation has contributed to the "day by day" degradation of his mental health. Living alone with nothing to do but follow Meg's strange routines, he has been building up a store of aggression that Goldberg and McCann released the night before by exploiting his guilty conscience.

Recounting his experience of the previous night, Petey says he came home to find the house completely dark because no one had put a shilling in the electricity meter. As such, he put a coin in the slot, but by the time he was inside, the party had already ended. "There was dead silence," he says to Goldberg. "Couldn't hear a thing. So I went upstairs and your friend—Dermot—met me on the landing. And he told me." "Who?" Goldberg asks. "Your friend—Dermot," Petey replies. He then asks if people can recover from nervous breakdowns, and Goldberg admits it's "conceivable" that Stanley might already have gotten over it. Nonetheless, Petey says he'll call a doctor if Stanley isn't better by lunchtime, but Goldberg tells him this won't be necessary.

The play's ambiguity is often frustrating and difficult to understand, but in this moment Goldberg's uncertainty becomes comic as well. After all, it was Goldberg himself who decided to call McCann "Dermot," and now he acts completely confused when Petey aligns with this sudden change. As such, he demonstrates that no one in The Birthday Party *is immune to the inscrutable ways that identities shift and stories change.*

When McCann comes downstairs with two suitcases, Goldberg says, "Well?" but McCann doesn't respond. Finally, when Goldberg pushes him, he says, "I'm not going up there again." This, he explains, is because Stanley has gone quiet. "He stopped all that…talking a while ago," he says, telling Goldberg that he can go up himself if he wants to find out when Stanley will be ready to leave. He also says that he gave back Stanley his broken glasses, which he apparently tried to fit into his eyes. When Petey overhears this and says they can tape them, though, Goldberg says, "No, no, that's all right, Mr. Boles. It'll keep him quiet for the time being, keep his mind off other things." He then says he and McCann will take Stanley to a man named Monty. "You're going to take him to a doctor?" Petey asks. "Sure, Monty," Goldberg replies.

McCann's hesitance to go back upstairs suggests that whatever is going on with Stanley's is difficult to witness. Although he and Goldberg were the ones to force him over the edge, McCann no longer wants to be around him, causing the audience to wonder why they psychologically unhinged Stanley in the first place. Petey, for his part, genuinely wants to help Stanley, but Goldberg has other plans, and when Petey asks if Monty is a doctor, Goldberg's response is unconvincing. "Sure, Monty," he says, failing to actually confirm anything about who Monty is or what he does. This ambiguity seems ominous.

Goldberg informs Petey that he and McCann will most likely leave before Meg returns. Accepting this, Petey goes to check on his garden as they wait for Stanley to come downstairs. Alone in the living room, Goldberg and McCann prepare to leave. As they speak to one another, McCann starts ripping newspaper, and this annoys Goldberg, who tells him to stop because he finds it "childish" and "pointless." Sitting down and leaning back in a chair, Goldberg closes his eyes and talks to McCann in a tired voice. "I don't know why, but I feel knocked out," he says. "I feel a bit…It's uncommon for me." Hearing this, McCann suggests they "get the thing done" so they can leave, but Goldberg says nothing. "Nat!" McCann says to Goldberg's slumped body. "Simey!" With a jolt, Goldberg's eyes open and he viciously tells McCann never to call him that.

McCann isn't the only one affected by what he's done to Stanley. Goldberg too appears troubled by the ordeal, though he finds himself incapable of articulating what he's feeling or why he's feeling it. McCann and Goldberg thus seem to feel at least a modicum of guilt, even though they supposedly did what they did to Stanley to punish him. This idea lies quite deep within the play, and Pinter never makes clear why McCann and Goldberg are suddenly so influenced by what they've done. The audience is once more forced to simply embrace the fact that a sense of meaninglessness lurks behind the play. By this point, it seems clear that there will be no resolution of the plot, and the characters' motivations will remain ambiguous and strange.

Goldberg tells McCann to look in his mouth, saying he wants his "opinion." As McCann peers into his mouth, he says, "You know what I mean?" Going on, Goldberg holds forth about how he's never lost a tooth, suggesting that he's risen to his "position" because he's "always been fit as a fiddle." "All my life I've said the same," he says. "Play up, play up, and play the game. Honour thy father and thy Mother. All along the line. Follow the line, the line, McCann, and you can't go wrong." He also asserts that he has always learned "by heart" and never written anything down.

When Goldberg says, "See what I mean?", the play leaves the audience to guess what he's talking about, since McCann doesn't respond. Then, piggy-backing off this ambiguity, Goldberg once more tells stories about his past. This time, though, he recites a number of clichéd phrases, all of which he presents as small pieces of advice—but none of these phrases are very profound, and the overall effect of delivering them one after the other merely makes them meaninglessness.

"And don't go too near the water," Goldberg tells McCann. "And you'll find—that 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 …" In this moment, Pinter notes that Goldberg is "lost." Having risen from his chair, he sits back down. "Sit down, McCann," he says, "sit here where I can look at you." Obeying, McCann sits on a footstool and listens. "My father said to me, Benny, Benny, he said, come here," says Goldberg. "He was dying. I knelt down. By him day and night. Who else was there? Forgive, Benny, he said, and let live." He then lists off a number of pieces of advice that his father gave him on his deathbed, all of which are cliché.

Goldberg's desire to have insightful things to say about life is clear in this scene, especially when he says, "Because I believe that the world…" The fact that he can't finish this sentence—and that he tries so "desperate[ly]" to do so—indicates how badly he wants to find meaning in life. Unfortunately, though, he can't come up with anything profound to say, so he reverts to regurgitating the clichéd aphorisms his father told him on his deathbed. It's also worth noting that his father calls him "Benny"—yet another name to add alongside "Nat" and "Simey."


"Work hard and play hard," Goldberg says, concluding a list of life lessons his father taught him while dying. "All the same, give me a blow," he adds, looking at McCann. "Blow in my mouth." Obliging this request, McCann stands, bends over, and blows into Goldberg's mouth. Refreshed, Goldberg asks for "one for the road," and McCann repeats the process until Goldberg "breathes deeply" and "shakes his head," at which point Lulu enters the living room, having come from upstairs.

By this point in the play, audience members most likely aren't surprised by Goldberg's strange request that McCann blow in his mouth. After all, it has already become clear that the play itself has very little in the way of an internal logic. Absurdity becomes the governing principle of the entire production, meaning there's no reason why Goldberg shouldn't *feel rejuvenated by McCann's hot breath in his mouth—an idea that in another play might need justification but, in* The Birthday Party *is just one of many oddities. Still, if one were to try to assign meaning to this action, it would be reasonable to say that McCann and Goldberg form a brief connection when McCann blows into Goldberg's mouth, thereby transcending their isolation.*


Sensing that Lulu wants to speak to Goldberg in private, McCann steps out. "I've had enough games," she says, and then accuses him of taking advantage of her. "You taught me things a girl shouldn't know before she's been married at least three times!" she says. "Now you're a jump ahead!" Goldberg replies. At this point, McCann enters and says, "Your sort, you spend too much time in bed." Advancing upon her, he says, "Confess!" "Confess what?" she asks, but he only tells her to get on her knees. Looking on, Goldberg says she might as well confess. "What, to him?" she asks. "He's only been unfrocked six months," he replies, as McCann hisses, "Kneel down, woman, and tell me the latest!" Moving toward the door, Lulu says she has "seen everything that's happened," insisting that she knows "what's going on." With this, she exits.

Once more, the play introduces information about a character's past without fully explaining its accompanying story or its full implications. In this instance, Goldberg says that McCann is a recently "unfrocked" priest, and though this seems unlikely, both he and McCann do seem obsessed with the ideas of sin, guilt, and atonement. In some sense they do act as religious figures, especially considering Goldberg's previous discussion of St. Thomas Aquinas's theological argument on possibility and necessity. Nonetheless, the play leaves this idea unresolved, allowing Lulu to escape without confession and, in doing so, letting the play remain ambiguous.


After Lulu leaves, McCann goes upstairs and fetches Stanley, who arrives dressed in "striped trousers, black jacket, and white collar" with a bowler hat in his hand. In his other hand he holds his broken glasses, and the audience sees that he is clean shaven. "How are you, Stan?" Goldberg asks. "He looks better, doesn't he?" McCann says. "Much better," Goldberg says. "A new man," McCann agrees. They then promise to buy him new glasses, but Stanley doesn't seem to register anything they're saying. "Between you and me, Stan, it's about time you had a new pair of glasses," Goldberg says, pointing out that he's been "cockeyed for years." "You're on the verge," he adds, promising that he and McCann will "save" him. He says that they'll do all sorts of things for him, making him rich and successful and happy.

Now that Stanley has had a nervous breakdown, Goldberg and McCann have molded him into a new person. On the surface, this new identity is an improvement, as evidenced by the fact that Stanley is no longer wearing dirty pants and a pajama shirt. Indeed, his clothing indicates that he has been rejuvenated and refreshed, but the fact that he doesn't respond to McCann or Goldberg suggests that his transformation is perhaps not as positive as it might seem.

"What's your opinion of such a prospect? Eh, Stanley," Goldberg asks. Concentrating hard, Stanley laboriously says, "Uh-gug … uh-gug … eeehhh-gag … Cahh … caahh …" Shuddering, he stops trying to speak. "Still the same old Stan," Goldberg says. "Come with us. Come on, boy." As they help him stand and make for the door, though, Petey enters and asks where they're taking him. "We're taking him to Monty," Goldberg says. "He can stay here," Petey replies, insisting that he and Meg can take care of him. Goldberg insists that Monty is the person Stanley needs, and then he puts the bowler hat on Stanley's head and moves toward the door. "Leave him alone!" Petey yells, but this only causes Goldberg and McCann to stop, turn, and say, "Why don't you come with us, Mr. Boles?"

Goldberg asks Stanley what he thinks of his and McCann's promises to make him rich and "save" him, but none of this means anything to Stanley, who has never wanted to do anything but while away his days in isolation (for better or for worse). Furthermore, when he tries to speak, it becomes painfully clear that Goldberg and McCann have certainly not helped him, but destroyed him instead. Petey recognizes this, which is why he tries to stop them from taking Stanley away. Unfortunately, Goldberg and McCann only offer to take Petey to Monty as well, implying that if he puts up a fight, they will force him to conform to their ways—just like they forced Stanley.

Goldberg tells Petey that there's "plenty of room in the car" for him, but Petey remains rooted where he stands. As Goldberg and McCann take Stanley out the door, Petey screams, "Stan, don't let them tell you what to do!" Listening to the car drive away, he goes to the table and picks up the newspaper, and the strips McCann cut all fall out.

When Petey tells Stanley not to let Goldberg and McCann tell him "what to do," he reminds the audience that these two men have forced Stanley to abide by their rules. Using Stanley's own guilt and sense of isolation against him, they bent him to their will, erasing whatever small amount of freedom and independence he had. Having destroyed the order of the boarding house, they then drive away as if nothing has happened, though the newspaper that McCann leaves behind is a reminder of the profound chaos they brought upon the house.

When Meg comes home, she doesn't know that Goldberg and McCann have taken Stanley. Sitting at the table, she asks if the two guests have already left, and Petey confirms that they have. "Oh, what a shame," she says. After a moment, she asks if Stanley has come downstairs yet for breakfast. "No…he's…" Petey begins. "Is he still in bed?" Meg asks. "Yes, he's…still asleep," Petey lies. "He'll be late for his breakfast," Meg complains, but her husband simply tells her to let Stanley sleep. "Wasn't it a lovely party last night?" she asks, and Petey reminds her that he wasn't there. "I was the belle of the ball," she tells him. "Were you?" he asks. "Oh, yes. They all said I was," she replies. "I bet you were, too," he says. "Oh, it's true. I was," she says. And then, after a pause, she adds, "I know I was."

By choosing not to tell Meg that Stanley has been taken away, Petey enables his wife to continue her daily routine. He clearly understands how important it is to her to maintain a sense of order and pattern. This kind of structure seems integral to her mental health, which is already rather compromised, considering that she won't even acknowledge that Stanley tried to strangle her the night before. In addition, she now tells Petey that everyone told her she was "the belle of the ball." The audience, though, knows that no one said this. As such, Pinter underhandedly confirms that Meg's grip on reality is compromised, therefore suggesting one final time that she is no more sane than Stanley himself, though her instability manifests itself in smaller, more quotidian ways.

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