One cannot, and probably should not, write about Pinter without facing his similarity to Kafka and his acknowledged indebtedness to him. In the course of telling stories which are apparently objective and up to a point even pretend to be realistic, both writers tap subjective concerns, many of which go back to infancy. Both deal with experiences which at first glance seem commonplace, even paltry, but which turn out to be battles for high stakes, sanity, for example, or sometimes life itself. Both share a conviction that the essential aspects of experience are ambiguous if not unknowable, yet both write simply and lucidly. Both achieve drama and poetry, without too many departures from colloquial speech and material that may appear to lack depth. Pinter is the more colloquial of the two, in part of course because he is a dramatist but also because a larger proportion of his characters are inarticulate or barely articulate and he has a sure ear for the diction of these characters, including their vulgarisms, neologisms, and slang.

Another similarity is too important to ignore: both men are preoccupied with our fears—our anxieties really—rather than our hopes. This is even more true of Pinter than of Kafka, one of whose two great

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novels is concerned with man's aspirations and strivings. Curiously, we are less likely to become aware of this preoccupation with anxiety than we are with one of its qualities, its abstractness. It is this abstractness which gives almost any situation in a Pinter play the effect of ambiguity, but this word is here scarcely adequate. In addition to permitting the viewer or reader to interpret the presented situation in an almost infinite number of ways, the abstractness provides a mold into which each reader can pour his own expressive content, in particular his free-floating anxieties, the kind which are intolerable precisely because they can be mobilized by so many different things. A further advantage of the abstractness is that the anxieties do not have to be specified even as one reexperiences them and tries to cope with them. The word "overdetermined" is also inadequate to describe a work which evokes this kind of response: it conveys a work's openness to multiple interpretations but not its power to impel a reader to become a covert coauthor. Whatever name one gives this quality, it does much to explain both the breadth and intensity of the appeal of Pinter's plays. In The Angry Theatre John Russell Taylor writes: "The ambiguity . . . not only creates an unnerving atmosphere of doubt and uncertainty, but also helps to generalize and universalize the fears and tensions to which Pinter's characters are subject." It achieves this effect of generalizing and universalizing, paradoxically, by permitting the reader to individualize the content.

Some of Pinter's borrowing from The Trial in The Birthday Party must have been deliberate. Like The Trial, the play opens on the hero's birthday and it ends with two men taking him away—but the next day, not a year less a day later—perhaps to put him to death. Here a difference between Kafka and Pinter asserts itself. We know that K. is put to death; we witness his execution. We expect that Goldberg and McCann, who in effect abduct Stanley, are going to exploit him in some way for their own purposes—and we feel that they would not balk at murder. But we are not certain about either of these things and can only surmise what their exact plan is. Are they going to kill Stanley as a way of getting hold of some money he possesses, perhaps without being aware of it? Do they plan to put him in a corrupt and run-down rest home, where he will have scant chance of recovering, in order to divert some income to which he is entitled to their own pockets? Or do they have some quite different plan or motive for taking him away? We do

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not know. A Pinter play is like a Thematic Apperception Test. On the basis of scanty, obscure, and ambiguous evidence—a picture in the case of a TAT, puzzling dialogue and hazy glimpses of more puzzling people in the case of the play—we must decide the exact nature of the story being told: in this way also we are put in the author’s chair. And specifying the story being told, we find, is just a warmup for the more arduous task of deciphering its meaning.

Like Kafka, Pinter is apparently candid. The setting of The Birthday Party is a shabby living room in a seaside town in England, a room too appallingly real to question. Both the shabby woman who takes care of this establishment, Meg, a woman in her sixties, and her husband, Petey, a deck chair attendant, seem firmly, indeed inescapably, moored in the world of everyday being. Both speak about commonplace in a dreary, flat, usually hackneyed way. Despite these reassuring indications, before long we find that we are in a strange world, a world where there are no signposts, where nothing is clearly defined. In some respects Pinter’s plays are more continuously puzzling than Kafka’s stories. In the end there is no significant difference: eventually in Kafka also one thing melts into another and everything dissolves into mystery and uncertainty. But provisionally Kafka may develop a character or a place with great solidity. Pinter weaves more loosely. He carefully—determinedly, it sometimes appears—leaves everything vague and fluid. Situations never assume a definite shape; either their outlines are left hazy and obscure or we are given two flatly contradictory versions of something and never told which one (if either) is correct. The development of the situations is no less enigmatic. We seldom feel that we have a sure grasp of the “whatness,” much less the significance, of the happenings in a Pinter play. Of course, much of this holds for Kafka also. The similarities between the two writers are more important than the differences. And one feels that the similarities were there to begin with, that the British Jewish dramatist apprehended reality in very much the same way that the Central European Jewish novelist did and that Pinter, however unconsciously, was searching for someone like Kafka. If this is so, his appropriation of Kafka was not a matter of emulation but of seizing upon something helpful in defining and rendering his own vision of the human situation. This may explain the fact that, clear as the debt to Kafka is, not even The Birthday Party, Pinter’s first full-length play, seems derivative. It is like Kafka but different. It bears Pinter’s special stamp and, we feel certain, expresses his own vision.

It seems peculiarly difficult to specify the meaning of The Birthday
Party primarily or largely in psychological terms. In this respect it differs both from most of Pinter's other plays and Kafka's stories. In The Birthday Party Pinter appears to be using psychological devices to make some melancholy comments on our society. A social reading will come to grips with more facets of the story and explain the play more comprehensively, I believe, than any of the interpretations advanced thus far.

From one point of view the play's six characters constitute a micro-cosm of society. In particular, they mirror the fundamental economic division in society, the division between exploiters and exploited. Goldberg and McCann are of course the exploiters—symbols both of the anonymous forces that control life and the managers, operators, and decision makers who understand those forces well enough to use them for their own ends. The reference is chiefly to economic forces, but the men's purposiveness, authority, and strength are vaguely enough defined to symbolize power in any form or area.

Despite—or because of—the kempt facade under which the power lies hidden, it is as cruel and remorseless as that of any primeval despot. Goldberg's bromides and moral platitudes help make him menacing: we feel defenseless before him because he has appropriated the decencies on which we thought we could rely for protection and perverted them to his own purposes—thus our pity and fear for Stanley, the borderline psychotic who in one day's harassment Goldberg and McCann are able to drag over the line, in all probability irreversibly. Without pity, but with some vague apprehension, we observe that the cruelty of the exploiters is not confined to the exploited group. When McCann shows the slightest trace of insubordination, Goldberg makes him say "Uncle." Dog eats dog.

At a still deeper level Goldberg and McCann may be responded to as surrogates for or agents of the father—the male who has first claim on the mother and seems almost omnipotent to a little boy, hence is

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3 It may be significant that Dr. Abraham Franzblau, who advanced a perceptive psychological interpretation of The Homecoming, was far less successful in my judgment in discussing The Birthday Party. See the Saturday Review, 8 Apr. 1967, and 28 Oct. 1967. One of the three interpretations of the play Esslin advances in The Peopled Wound is also psychological: "The Birthday Party might also be seen as an image, a metaphor for the process of growing up, of expulsion from the warm, cozy world of childhood" (p. 84). This interpretation is invalidated, I believe, by the fact that at the end of the play Stanley is psychotic and the captive of the two men who have destroyed his sanity. There is little prospect that he will regain his sanity, much less grow up.
hated, envied, and feared. The evidence for this is inferential but persuasive. Before Goldberg and McCann appear, we learn that Stanley regarded the “they” who blocked his second concert as agents of retribution for his failure to invite his father to his first concert, and this supposition is significant whether the concerts were pure fantasy or had some basis in reality. Moreover, from the time Meg mentions the fact that she is expecting two new roomers, we see that Stanley fears them. It seems reasonable to suppose that a feeling that the newcomers are also emissaries of the father is the ultimate source of this fear—and of the hostility which quickly manifests itself once the men appear.

Pinter’s constellation of the exploited provides if anything a sadder commentary on our society. As we have seen, one member of the group is completely unqualified for life: by his entire pattern of behavior Stanley is pleading nolo contendere. Meg is not much more competent or effective. Intellectually, she is a cretin, either illiterate or not up to the strain of reading. She is disregarded and treated contemptuously by her husband, Petey, and hardly seems to notice much less contest this. She thinks she has been well served if her husband descends to read her a juicy item or two from the tabloid he always carries to hide in. Still, she feels his lack of love. Her libidinized though mainly maternal love for Stanley is born, we feel, of her desperate loneliness and lack of love. The exploited, Pinter is saying, for all their economic and emotional poverty are sometimes capable of giving. Even though Stanley is not all there and grumbles a great deal, he is aware of Meg’s love and, in one of the most moving moments of the play, shows that he returns it.

Lulu, the girl next door but hardly the cleanly girl next door of American movies and situation comedies, is also capable of love. Lulu is Sex, she has been around, she is clearly there to satisfy sexual needs and to have her own needs satisfied. It might seem that she could be placed with the exploiters as well as with the exploited, and during the birthday party which climaxes the play she pairs off with Goldberg. But even the sexual practices to which he introduces her do not corrupt her, and we feel that nothing can. While she is far more sensual—and real—than Dostoevsky’s Sonia, she shares her impregnable innocence. Her limitations must be noted, but they are in a sense, if not her virtues, her defenses against corruption. She is not much brighter than Meg; perhaps by the time she is as old as Meg she will be equally dull. She is not interested in, and probably not capable of understanding, anything which is even slightly abstract. But in part because she is simpleminded, she refuses to notice that Stanley is ill. With the slightest encouragement,
we feel, she could love him. She is kind to him, helpless as he is, until
the party, when, lacking even the ability to discriminate immediately
between good man and bad, she responds to Goldberg. But once she
knows him, revulsion follows swiftly. Lulu will not join the exploiters
unless she becomes corrupted and she will not become corrupted. She
sleeps with Goldberg, but we feel sure she will not stay with him.

At first meeting, Petey, who completes the exploited group, is far
from prepossessing. He is without love, warmth, or purpose. He teaches
us the saddening lesson that there is exploitation among the exploited
as well as among the exploiters. In Act One, the furtiveness with which
he transfers his earnings from one place to another suggests that he tells
his wife no more than is good for her, gives her as little as possible, and
stows away the rest for himself. And just as Meg retreats from life into
infantile narcissistic daydreams, he, though better endowed, retreats
from it into the meaningless but distracting jumble of his newspaper.

Nevertheless, in certain respects Petey is at the “desirable” end of
the spectrum among the exploited group. (To be sure, it is a narrow
spectrum.) He is the most alert representative of the group Goldberg
and McCann must deal with and manipulate. Moreover, he possesses a
measure of courage. He stands up to Goldberg and protests his appropri-
ating control of Stanley. Goldberg quiets his first objection by assuring
him that arrangements have been made to take Stanley to a doctor.
When Petey intervenes again, just as Goldberg and McCann are pre-
paring to leave with Stanley, Goldberg uses a variant of this same “don’t
you worry” formula. In addition, he puts down a bill that one feels is
more than ample to cover his and McCann’s overnight stay. After some
hesitation Petey pockets the bill, as his previous handling of money
made us expect he would, and his resistance subsides.4 The exploited,
Pinter seems to be saying, accept their place in the pecking order without
serious fuss. Those with a will to power do not experience too much
difficulty either in seizing or remaining at the controls.

Meg has given Stanley a birthday present, which is lovingly
wrapped. It turns out to be a toy drum—bought, she tries to explain, to

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4 Both this business about the bill and the earlier business about the stealth
with which Petey handles his own money are evidently additions made before or
There is no reference to them in the Grove Press edition of the play. To ascertain
whether these changes and additions represented second thoughts of Pinter's or
in any case had been approved by him, I wrote him a note of inquiry, to which
make up for his not having access to a piano. Though nothing which is told us about the characters is firmly established, it seems reasonably certain that at one point Stanley at least felt that he was a promising pianist. The drum is a well-intentioned but stupid present. If one does not have time to foresee the effects it will have on Stanley, as soon as they appear one feels one should have foreseen them. Stanley puts the drum around his neck and begins to beat on it rhythmically, perhaps wanting to show his appreciation to Meg and taking pleasure in once again making music. But bitterness overcomes him: soon he is beating on the drum angrily, vindictively. Music turns into cacophony as the first act curtain falls.

That evening there is a party, presumably to celebrate Stanley's birthday, though it is still not certain that it is his birthday and he steadfastly denies it. A party means fun and games, and the group decides to play blindman's buff. No selection could have been more apposite for symbolizing the cruelty inflicted upon Stanley during the "party" without provoking the attention of Meg and Lulu, much less any remonstrance from them. Only Petey is absent and this seems appropriate:

he was kind enough to reply. Mr. Pinter has no memory "of Petey handling his money with stealth in Act One." And he feels that Petey's ultimate acceptance of the money Goldberg throws on the table as he leaves does nothing to characterize him. "I think your memory has misled you in your reference to the passing of money from Goldberg to Petey in the third act. It was intended in no way to be a reassurance or bribe. Actually I introduced this piece of business myself when I directed the play at the Aldwych in 1964 (I think!). What actually happens or should have happened was this: Goldberg makes his point about Monty to Petey and Petey falls silent, as always. Goldberg then simply places a bill or two onto the table, as a final courteous insult, if you like. Petey does nothing. The action continues. After they have all gone Petey, on his return to the table, automatically puts the money into his pocket. There's no point in his leaving it lying around. What has taken place is merely an added punctuation to the action. It has no further significance in my view—I mean to be applied to the character of Petey."

With all respect to Mr. Pinter, I must add that after seeing the bit of business about money in Act One I could not help thinking that the money Goldberg left was immediately perceived to be more than enough to cover the overnight stay of himself and his hatchet man and thus that bribery, as well as reassurances and threat, helped to overcome Petey's resistance to his "guests" taking Stanley with them. The "intentional fallacy" is not at issue here. My reaction to the significance of the money exchange in Act Three, which I assume was shared by some members of the audience, was born of the earlier bit of business about money evidently added by the director or producer.
he is neither totally blind nor, except with Meg in certain areas, interested in deceiving others.

We have already seen Goldberg and McCann treat Stanley with the utmost cruelty, subjecting him to a tattoo of questions and crazy accusations and insults which eventually make him scream in rage, terror, and helplessness. Now when Stanley is blindfolded, McCann deliberately snaps the frame of his glasses and then puts the drum before him so that he steps on it, stumbling and breaking it. At intervals Goldberg and Lulu embrace and kiss, quite openly. We are not surprised when Stanley breaks down completely. Nor are we surprised at the first indication of this—he tries to strangle Meg. We have seen that he is too easily irritated by her stupidity and slovenliness and at some level have even sensed the underlying source of his hostility: his fear of the way Meg satisfies his desire to be infantilized. Unconsciously he must realize that her babying reinforces his reluctance to resume life as an adult. His act gives Goldberg and McCann the excuse they have been looking for to also use physical force to subjugate him.

An unexplained blackout now occurs. McCann shines his torch, but it is knocked out of his hand, probably by Stanley. While Goldberg and McCann look for the torch, Stanley “picks up LULU and places her on the table” (stage direction). Shortly afterwards McCann finds his torch and “shines it on the table and STANLEY.” The next sentence in the stage direction which ends Act Two reads: “LULU is lying spread-eagled on the table, STANLEY bent over her.” Even a critic as astute as Martin Esslin is misled by this description—in particular, I suspect, by the word “spread-eagled”—and refers to Stanley’s action as an attempt at rape. But surely Stanley’s treatment of Lulu is fueled chiefly by anger and jealousy arising from her behavior with Goldberg. Stanley may also be trying to show Lulu and himself, and possibly the other three people present, that he could be a good sexual partner also, perhaps a better one than Goldberg. But a spectator or reader has good reason to view such a claim with mistrust. It seems possible that Stanley is impotent. His Act One rejection of Lulu’s invitation to go on a picnic with her provides firmer evidence that he is probably too shy to make a sexual advance to a woman, much less attempt rape. Moreover, anyone who had empathized with Stanley during the torment which is the party as he experiences it must sense that he is at low ebb and feels little inclination for sex. What lies under your dreary social occasions, Pinter seems to

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5 The Peopled Wound, p. 77.
sounds.

Eventually McCann does fetch Stanley, who is now clean-shaven and probably subjected to that night, but the next morning the brutal McCann is loath to return to Stanley’s room and even Goldberg is edgy. Eventually McCann does fetch Stanley, who is now clean-shaven and dressed for departure. Once again Goldberg and McCann subject him to an unendurable rapid-fire verbal barrage. But it is superfluous. Stanley’s will to resist has vanished and he can only make meaningless sounds.

_The Birthday Party_ does not promise Stanley, or any of the rest of us, a happy year or a happy life. The ending of the play provides no catharsis for the pity and fear it has aroused. It is more depressing than the ending of _The Trial_, largely because the conclusion of the play does not terminate our thinking about Stanley. This is not to minimize the grimness of the ending of _The Trial_. It will be recalled that K. suffers a cruel death at the hands of the two executioners he awaits on the eve of his thirty-first birthday, though he has had no notice of their coming: while the hands of one of the men are at K.’s throat, “the other thrust the knife deep into his heart and turned it there twice.” But Kafka does much to soften this ending. He has prepared us throughout the novel for the probability that K. will ultimately surrender to his guilt and become reconciled to the need for punishment. Moreover, K. is reminded of his guilt in the concluding scene: he glimpses Fraulein Burstner, though it “was not quite certain that it was she.” It does not matter: K. acquiesces to the sentence of death. The ceremonial quality of the scene and the pervasive suggestion that it is a subjective experience also help to make the scene palatable.

So does the relative definiteness of the ending. In contrast, the ending of _The Birthday Party_ is provisional. Since Stanley has been pushed over the line into psychosis and is completely at the mercy of the men who inflicted this injury, no happy ending is conceivable, but

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7 Ibid., p. 282.
the involved reader or spectator is likely to extrapolate and supply some ending, or endings. Since whatever particulars he supplies are the work of his imagination, they are likely to be especially vivid and moving. No matter what shape the ending takes, it is likely to be hard to accept.

Amazingly, inexplicably, *The Birthday Party* does not suffer seriously from the failure to supply any information or use of form which would reconcile readers or viewers to what lies ahead for Stanley. To the contrary, for a long time the play—in particular, the ending and the surmises the reader or viewer supplies to round out the ending—has continued to haunt anyone whom *The Birthday Party* has put under its distinctive spell.

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