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Functions of Menace: A Comparison of The Room and The Birthday Party

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FUNCTIONS OF MENACE: A COMPARISON OF

THE ROOM AND THE BIRTHDAY PARTY

(TITLE)

BY

LEE R. MARTIN

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
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1979

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FUNCTIONS OF MENACE;
A COMPARISON OF THE ROOM
AND THE BIRTHDAY PARTY

BY

LEE R. MARTIN

B. A. in English, Eastern Illinois University, 1978

ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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FUNCTIONS OF MENACE:
A COMPARISON OF THE ROOM AND THE BIRTHDAY PARTY.

An atmosphere of menace surrounds the action of Harold Pinter's plays, The Room and The Birthday Party. Several critics seem to agree that the menace originates in the outer world and threatens to intrude upon the security of a room, where people attempt to hide. But the menace may also originate within the room--from the inner world and not the outer. The Room illustrates how a character deals with a menace that is within, while The Birthday Party deals with agents of menace from the outer world.

Rose Hudd, in The Room, is dissociated from the outer world against her will, but refuses to acknowledge her situation. In order to avoid admitting that the menace is contained within her room, she displaces her fears onto that which is outside the room. The repetition of her references to the outer world and to the basement emphasizes their menacing nature. Rose's words concerning the outside paint a picture of an insensitive, desolate and cruel world, and she constantly compares the warmth and light of her room to the cold, damp basement. Rose's preoccupation with the outer world and the basement suggests that she is struggling to maintain the denial that the true menace is contained within her room.

In that room--the importance of which is underscored by the title--Rose is subservient to Bert's physical and mental needs. Her servility is her only function in life, which breeds a sense of emptiness--a meaninglessness that is subtly presented through contrasts provided by members of the outside world who visit Rose.

During the scenes with Mr. Kidd and the Sands, there are subtle hints that Rose desires to return to the outer world, and it is Riley who affords her the opportunity to do so. At first, Rose perceives Riley to be the menace she has feared, projecting Bert's autocratic dependence and violence onto Riley. But Riley gently prods Rose into confessing that her isolation is stifling her, as she forsakes her denial mechanisms.

At the end of the play, it is Bert who surfaces as the destructive force, for his behavior clearly marks him as the menace. With a violent beating, he destroys Riley and Rose's chance for escape. Bert undermines Rose's existence through passive control. He controls his van in the same manner, and when he speaks of his van in the final scene, Bert seems to be warning Rose that she will not escape his dominance. The Room ends with Rose being pushed even further into a meaningless existence.

On the other hand, the agents of menace in The Birthday Party are acknowledged by Stanley, but they also succeed in undermining his existence. In this play, the agents of menace do not threaten to keep Stanley trapped in isolation. Instead, Goldberg and McCann remove him from a stagnant condition which he is reluctant to leave.

Stanley's isolation, like Rose's, offers him little purpose in his life. He has little contact with the outside world, and consequently dwindles to a state of inactivity. Stanley is satisfied to remain within the house, and as a mark of his passive existence, becomes dependent on Meg to satisfy his needs. Meg's maternalizing reinforces Stanley's reluctance to leave the house.

Goldberg and McCann gain control of Stanley and his fate seems

to rest in their hands. Their purpose is to remove Stanley from isolation, which they succeed in doing. There seems to be three alternatives for Stanley once he leaves the house. There is a strong suggestion that Goldberg and McCann will kill him, but there is also the slight possibility that they will return him to society. A return to society could mean the acceptance of the trite social conformity Goldberg represents, which would be a spiritual death for Stanley. But possibly Stanley could re-adjust and become a functioning member of society. Oddly enough, though, either of these possibilities will be an improvement over Stanley's present existence. A life in the outside world, even though shallow like Goldberg's, will be less empty than the stagnation Stanley is being removed from.

The Room and The Birthday Party seem to suggest that the threat of menace is omnipresent, originating from both within and outside a room. In both plays, the agents of menace succeed in their goals. Bert pushes Rose deeper into a meaningless existence, and Goldberg and McCann remove Stanley from stagnation. The basic difference between these agents of menace is that while Bert forces Rose into a more hopeless situation, Goldberg and McCann force Stanley into an improved existence. The menace in The Room is destructive. But the menace in The Birthday Party, although terrifying, may well be constructive.

FUNCTIONS OF MENACE:
A COMPARISON OF THE ROOM AND THE BIRTHDAY PARTY

The Room and The Birthday Party by Harold Pinter are often termed "comedies of menace." Pinter himself says of these plays, "they are funny to the point when the absurdity of the characters' predicaments becomes frightening, horrifying, pathetic, and tragic."¹ And Martin Esslin elaborates on this when he says, "much of the laughter that accompanies his [Pinter's] plays up to that point where they cease to be funny is already the laughter of precaution against the panic, the whistling in the dark of people who are trying to protect themselves against the menace, the horror, which lies at the core of the action they are witnessing."² Beneath the comedy of these plays is the terror felt--a horror that is present but cannot be articulated. An atmosphere of menace surrounds the action of The Room and The Birthday Party, and its origin is not always certain. Esslin suggests that the menace arises from the opaqueness, uncertainty and precariousness of the human condition itself.³ Several critics seem to agree that the menace lurks in the outer world and threatens to intrude upon the security of a room, where the people try to hide. Steven Gale speaks of this constant threat of invasion, saying that it is this threat that produces the feeling of menace.⁴ According to Esslin, the menace is contained in the realization that the door to a room could open at any time and that someone or something could walk in.⁵ But the menace can also originate within the room--from the inner world and not the outer. The Room illustrates how a person deals with a menace that is within, while

The Birthday Party deals with agents of menace from the outer world. It is difficult to define the menace in Pinter's plays, but as Arnold Hinchliffe says, "the potency of menace derives from an inability to define its source or reason even though it is all pervasive. If it can be categorized, it is simply the constant threat to the individual personality, a vague enough category to keep it alive."⁶

The threat of menace is basic to both The Room and The Birthday Party, but the details of that menace provide a contrast between the two plays. Both Rose Hudd, in The Room, and Stanley Webber, in The Birthday Party, are terrified of the menace. Rose displaces the fear she feels, but Stanley does not. They both live in an isolated state that offers little purpose to their lives. Rose wishes to escape her servile entrapment, but Stanley struggles to remain secluded. It is the respective agents of menace who succeed in destroying these desires. Bert keeps Rose imprisoned, while Goldberg and McCann remove Stanley from his seaside retreat.

Rose, in The Room, is dissociated from the outer world against her will, but refuses to acknowledge her situation. She displaces her fears onto the outside world, until the end of the play when there is a suggestion that Rose realizes that Bert is the menace who has kept her isolated in a servile and meaningless existence and who has destroyed her chance for escape.

In order to avoid acknowledging that the menace is contained within, Rose displaces her fears onto that which is outside her room. The repetition of her references to the outside world and the basement emphasizes their menacing nature. Her words concern-

ing the outside paint a picture of an insensitive, desolate and cruel world. It is cold and dark outside Rose's warm and lighted room, and she constantly refers to that cold. At one point she says, "Just now I looked out the window. It was enough for me. There wasn't a soul about. Can you hear the wind?"⁷ In Rose's mind, there is a menace lurking in the wind, the ice, and the desolate cold, about which she is very much concerned. She constantly looks out the window, but never sees anything. The last time she looks out before Mr. Kidd enters, she says, "It's quiet. Be coming on for dark. There's no one about" (p. 104). There is a subtle fear contained in Rose's references to the weather conditions. At the beginning of the play she says to Bert, "It's very cold out, I can tell you. It's murder" (p. 101). Taken at face value, the words "it's murder" seem to be merely a figure of speech. But when considering Rose's more than casual concern with the outside world, these words take on an added meaning. In Rose's mind, there is indeed murder lurking outside her room. These are the words of a woman who feels the horror and immediate threat of menace. Rose lives in terror, a terror she cannot accept and must cope with by displacing it. She constantly compares the warmth of her room to the damp, dark basement, which also assumes menacing qualities. One of her first lines is, "Still, the room keeps warm. It's better than the basement, anyway" (p. 101). There is nothing unusual in this comparison until Rose's extraordinary interest in the basement is considered. Rose repeatedly condemns the basement. "I wouldn't like to live in that basement," she says to Bert. "Did you ever see the walls? They were running" (p. 102). Rose's preoccupation with the base-

ment suggests a fear of some unnamed danger. In the opening scene, Rose expresses her curiosity about the occupants of the basement three separate times. "Whoever it is, they're taking a big chance," (p. 103) is her conclusion; consequently, the basement becomes an endangerment. Rose suggests the perils of living in the basement when she tells Bert, who is just recovering from an illness, "It's good you were up here, I can tell you. It's good you weren't down there, in the basement. That's no joke" (p. 103). Moments later she warns Bert with ominous undertones, "Those walls would have finished you off" (p. 103). Steven Gale points out that the basement is described in images that suggest "a sense of dark, dank filth and decay infested with vermin, which is Pinter's picture of the menace which haunts the Hudds."⁸ Rose does paint such a picture of what is outside her room, but her obsession with doing so suggests that what she fears does not lurk outside. Rose is struggling to maintain the denial that the true menace is contained within her room.

In that room--the importance of which is underscored by the title--Rose is entrapped in a servile relationship, where she must be subservient to Bert's physical and mental needs. It is through this relationship that Rose feels the threat of menace. In the room, her function is to cater to Bert, and beneath the surface of her service is the fear that she will not perform satisfactorily. As the play opens, Rose is engaged in her duty of satisfying Bert's physical needs. In a scene that suggests a slave-to-master relationship, Rose serves Bert his meal. She cuts his bread and also butters it. Bert almost seems to be helpless, as Rose pours his milk and tea and slices more bread for him when

he needs it. During this scene, Rose does not eat with Bert, but tells him she will have some tea later. She is like a hand-maiden who does not dare to eat until her master has finished. But Rose is always close at hand in case Bert should require her service. She brings food to the table and then sits in a rocking chair away from the table. During her service there is a suggestion of fear and anxiety. At one point she asks Bert apprehensively, "What about the rasher? Was it all right? It was a good one, I know, but not as good as the last lot I got in. It's the weather" (p. 102). Her concern with the quality of the food suggests a fear of Bert. The food must be satisfactory, and if it is not, Rose has a ready excuse, the weather. Rose also shows a concern for Bert's comfort. She tries to convince Bert not to go out on his run by speaking of the fire she will make for him. "You could sit by the fire," Rose says. "That's what you like, Bert, of an evening" (p. 103). After accepting the fact that Bert is going out, Rose tells him she will have some hot cocoa for him when he returns. Always there is the fear that she will offend Bert, which often prompts her to bolster his ego. Rose speaks of the icy roads and then, fearing that Bert has misinterpreted her, quickly adds, "Oh, I know you can drive. I'm not saying you can't drive. I mentioned to Mr. Kidd this morning that you'd be doing a run today. I told him you hadn't been too grand, but I said, still, he's a marvellous driver. I wouldn't mind what time, where, nothing, Bert. You know how to drive. I told him" (p. 104). Throughout the opening scene, Bert is silent, giving no indication whether he is satisfied with Rose's service. This causes Rose great anxiety, and at one point she

assures Bert that she is doing her job. She says, "I look after you, don't I, Bert? Like when they offered us the basement here I said no straight off. I knew that'd be no good. The ceiling right on top of you. No, you've got a window here, you can move yourself, you can come home at night, if you have to go out, you can do your job, you can come home, you're all right. And I'm here. You stand a chance" (p. 105). Rose's servility is her only function in life, which breeds a sense of emptiness that Rose struggles to deny.

The meaninglessness of Rose's life is subtly presented through contrasts provided by members of the outside world who visit Rose. In the scenes with Mr. Kidd and the Sands, Rose's restricted existence is contrasted with their fluidity. Also contained in these scenes are subtle hints that Rose is dissatisfied with her situation and desires to escape. Mr. Kidd provides a sharp contrast to Rose. He is a functioning member of the outer world, and while Rose is inactive, Kidd is active. Kidd has been checking the pipes in the building, which provides a definite purpose in his life--to take care of the house. He has even been out in the cold, going "to the corner for a few necessary items" (p. 106). Kidd exemplifies the freedom refused to Rose. After Kidd speaks of being up early, Rose utters, "I don't get up early in this weather. I can take my time. I take my time" (p. 107). It is possible that Rose is unconsciously speaking of her empty existence. She has no reason to get out of bed in the morning, since all she has before her is servility. Rose knows that her entire day will take place in her room. Yet Rose seems to welcome contact with other people, suggesting a desire to rejoin the out-

er world. Three times she asks Kidd to sit down, seemingly anxious to converse with him. Later when Rose opens the door to find the Sands standing on the landing, she invites them in to "have a warm" (p. 112). The Sands also contrast with Rose. They, like Kidd, are active, having been out in the cold looking for an apartment. During the scene with the Sands, there is, beneath the absurd dialogue, a portrait of Rose reaching out to the outer world. Following a brief interchange concerning the identity of the landlord, there is a pause; and then Rose asks, "What's it like out?" (p. 113). It is difficult to accept this inquiry at face value, since Rose has already expressed complete awareness of the weather conditions. Examining the dialogue that follows suggests that Rose's question pertains to what it is like to be free in the outer world. The Sands deliberate on Rose's question,

Mrs. Sands: It's very dark out.
Mr. Sands: No darker than in.
Mrs. Sands: He's right there.
Mr. Sands: It's darker in than out,
for my money.

(p. 113)

The conclusion they reach, that a lighted room is darker than a winter night, suggests that they are discussing more than inside and outside. If "in" represents Rose's isolation, and "out" is freedom in the outer world, then naturally an existence in humanity would be a brighter prospect. Rose, immediately following this discussion, blurts out, "I never go out at night. We stay in" (p. 113). Again there is the suggestion that Rose desires to escape her imprisonment. Her words do not fit in with the flow of the conversation, and they seem to be the unconscious workings of Rose's mind. Rose refuses to admit the reality of her situation, and therefore any pleas for help would appear subtly

rather than boldly.

Later the scene with Riley shows Rose struggling to continue her denial, but finally he brings her to a brief realization that there is no meaning in her life. When Riley first enters, Rose continues her denial and projection by perceiving him to be the agent of menace, though he presents none of the characteristics of such an agent. When Rose views Riley as someone demanding her subservience, she projects Bert's autocratic dependence onto him. Observing Riley's blindness, Rose says angrily, "You're all deaf and dumb and blind, the lot of you. A bunch of cripples" (p. 123). Rose is threatened by an emotional cripple, Bert; and so Bert's demanding nature influences her conception of all agents of menace. They are people whom she must faithfully serve, at the sacrifice of her own existence. "Oh, these customers," she says to Riley. "They come in here and stink the place out. After a handout. I know all about it" (p. 123). Rose's projection continues when she accuses Riley of violence. She accuses him of forcing his way into her room, whereas actually he requested permission to enter. For Riley is not at all aggressive. As a matter of fact, it is his tenderness that finally breaks through Rose's denials and projections. Riley says to Rose, "I want you to come home," (p. 124) which Arlene Sykes sees as a request that Rose become less isolated, involving herself in the circle of humanity she has been kept from.⁹ Riley gently prods Rose into confessing that her isolation is stifling her,

Riley: I want you to come home.
Rose: No.
Riley: With me.
Rose: I can't.
Riley: I've waited to see you.

Rose: Yes.
Riley: Now I see you.
Rose: Yes.
Riley: Sal.
Rose: Not that.
Riley: So, now. So, now.
Rose: I've been here.
Riley: Yes.
Rose: Long.
Riley: Yes.
Rose: The day is a hump. I never
go out.

(p. 125)

At this point, Rose forsakes her denial and confesses that each day is a hill she must climb, an obstacle to cross over, a hump that stands between her and a return to humanity. There is even a possibility that Rose is finally acknowledging that Bert is the menace that threatens to keep her isolated.

At the end of the play, it is Bert who surfaces as the destructive force, for his behavior clearly marks him as the menace. John Pesta points out that the agent of menace in Pinter's plays usually undermines the existence of other characters either actively or passively.¹⁰ Bert does both. His violence, the violence that Rose had projected onto Riley, finally appears when Bert returns home. With a violent beating he destroys Riley, which Sykes sees as an aggressive response to the threat Riley poses in his attempt to remove Rose from isolation.¹¹ Pesta offers a similar critical judgement when he terms Riley an usurper who threatens Bert's possession.¹² Earlier, Bert had foreshadowed this violence when he spoke of bumping a car with his van during his trip. The van turns out to be a symbol for Rose, and Bert's treatment of it illustrates his passive destruction of her. Bert controls his van the same way he controls Rose. Several references to the van are easily applied to Rose. Early

in the play, Mr. Kidd speaks of the way Bert manipulates his van and the way he "wraps her up" for the cold. Bert wraps Rose up by keeping her isolated, and when he speaks of his van at the end of the play, he seems to be warning Rose that she will not escape those wraps. Bert says,

I caned her along. She was good. Then I got back. . .I had all my way. There again and back. They shoved out of it. I kept on the straight. There was no mixing it. Not with her. She was good. She went with me. She don't mix it with me. I use my hand. Like that. I get hold of her. I go where I go. She took me there. She brought me back.

(p. 126)

The sexual undertones of this speech illustrate another form of Bert's cruelty to Rose--his displacement of affection onto the van. The only emotional relationship Bert has is with his van, about which he is very vocal. This contrasts with his stoney silence toward Rose. Not only does Rose have little contact with the outer world, but she has no emotional relationship with her husband. Rose makes one final attempt to deny the fact that Bert has nullified her chance for escape and has pushed her even further into a meaningless existence. She refuses to look at Bert's violent beating of Riley, covering her eyes and crying, "Can't see. I can't see. I can't see" (p. 126). Several critics offer the judgement that Rose actually goes blind at the end of the play, but when considering the nature of her empty relationship with Bert, it seems likely that Rose is resorting to denial. The only time that Rose has forsaken her denial occurs when she believes that Riley will return her to the outer world. But now, she has this opportunity destroyed, and again she cannot face the hope-

less condition of her meaningless existence.

On the other hand, the agents of menace in The Birthday Party are acknowledged by Stanley, but they also succeed in undermining his existence. In this play, the agents of menace do not threaten to keep Stanley trapped in isolation. Instead, Goldberg and McCann remove him from a stagnant condition which he is reluctant to leave.

Stanley, unlike Rose, does not attempt to displace his fear of the menace but does try to deny that the menace will come. Through an exhibition of paranoid behavior and a suspicion of outsiders, Stanley illustrates his direct fear of anyone who threatens to intrude on his isolation. Stanley's reactions when Meg first mentions the two gentlemen who plan to come to the house epitomizes his fears. Pinter's stage direction at that point makes it clear that Stanley is horrified at the thought of outsiders: "A pause. Stanley slowly raises his head. He speaks without turning" (p. 30). The dialogue that follows between Meg and Stanley illustrates both his paranoia and his denial:

Stanley: What two gentlemen?
Meg: I'm expecting visitors.
Stanley: What?
Meg: You didn't know that,
did you?
Stanley: What are you talking about?
Meg: Two gentlemen asked Petey if
they could come here and stay
for a couple of nights. I'm
expecting them.
Stanley: I don't believe it.
Meg: It's true.
Stanley: You're saying it on purpose.
Meg: Petey told me this morning.
Stanley: When was this? When did he
see them?
Meg: Last night.
Stanley: Who are they?
Meg: I don't know.

Stanley: Didn't he tell you their names?
Meg: No.
Stanley: Here? They wanted to come here?
Meg: Yes, they did.
Stanley: Why?
Meg: This house is on the list.
Stanley: But who are they?
Meg: You'll see when they come.
Stanley: They won't come. Why didn't they come last night if they were coming?
Meg: Perhaps they couldn't find the place in the dark. It's not easy to find in the dark.
Stanley: They won't come. Someone's taking the Michael. Forget all about it. It's a false alarm. A false alarm.
(p. 29-31)

Stanley exhibits a more than casual concern with the two gentlemen who are coming, which is a manifestation of the threat they represent. Stanley's paranoia constantly reappears during Act I. He is extremely suspicious of outsiders. When Lulu knocks, "Stanley sidles to the door and listens" (p. 34). Later when Goldberg and McCann enter, Stanley slinks out the back door, avoiding contact with them. Act I ends with Stanley questioning Meg about the identity of the two men, and he desperately prods her into remembering Goldberg's name. As soon as he learns the name, Stanley is stunned, slowly sitting at the table and not responding to Meg's questions. It is evident that Stanley feels the threat of the menace pressing down upon him. The agents of menace have arrived and Stanley cannot deny it.

Although Stanley is threatened like Rose, he reacts differently. Whereas Rose acquiesced in the presence of Bert, Stanley initially confronts the agents of menace. At the outset, Stanley tries to convince the agents of menace that there is no reason

for them to be there. Stanley seems to be aware that Goldberg and McCann have come to remove him from the house, and at the beginning of Act II he speaks of his plans to vacate the premises shortly. He tells McCann, "I like it here, but I'll be moving soon. Back home. I'll stay there too, this time. No place like home" (p. 50). Stanley tries to convince McCann that he is dissatisfied with his situation in the house and says, "I think I'll give it up. Don't like being away from home. . . .You never get used to living in someone else's house" (p. 50). Stanley offers excuses for his isolation, but McCann is unyielding. Stanley says he has been there on business, a situation that he could not control, and that he will be all right once he returns to his home. But Stanley's diplomatic efforts to expel Goldberg and McCann fail, so he tries to be forceful. He tells Goldberg, "I'm afraid there's been a mistake. We're booked out. Your room is taken. Mrs. Boles forgot to tell you. You'll have to find somewhere else" (p. 54). Goldberg remains calm during Stanley's displays of temper. As Stanley's desperation mounts and his attempts to expel Goldberg and McCann become more forceful, he tells Goldberg to "get out" (p. 55) and finally hits him in the stomach in an overt show of force. But all of Stanley's efforts fail, and Goldberg and McCann retain control of the situation. Especially relaxed is Goldberg, which contrasts to Stanley's frenzied conduct. Goldberg even submits to Stanley's childish game of I'll-sit-down-if-you-sit-down. The agents of menace appear confident, having successfully invaded Stanley's isolation.

Stanley's isolation, like Rose's offers him little purpose in his life. He has little contact with the outside world, and

consequently dwindles to a state of inactivity. When Stanley makes his first entrance, he is unshaven and still in his pajamas. Stanley, with no motivation for neatness, lounges around the house in a slovenly condition. Lulu points this out to him in Act I when she says, "Do you want to have a look at your face? 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?" (p. 35). Stanley side-steps Lulu's blunt inquiry with a glib remark. He is satisfied to remain within the house, which throws him into idleness. As a mark of his passive existence, Stanley becomes dependent on Meg to satisfy his physical and mental needs. Simon O. Lesser suggests that Meg "satisfies his desire to be infantilized."¹³ Stanley does seem to have an unconscious desire to regress to a child-like status, and Meg fulfills this desire with her maternalizing. In Act I, when Meg thinks it is time Stanley got out of bed, she calls him pet names as she shouts upstairs, "Stan! Stanny! Stan! I'm coming up to fetch you if you don't come down! I'm coming up! I'm going to count three! One! Two! Three! I'm coming to get you!" (p. 23). Meg rushes up the stairs and forces Stanley out of bed, probably a ritual he depends on, just as he depends on her to fix his meals, clean his room, and mitigate his fears. Meg assures Stanley that he should stay in the house, reinforcing his desire to do so. In Act I, after Stanley relates his bitter experience of being locked out of the concert hall, Meg says, "Don't you go away again, Stan. You stay here. You'll be better off. You stay with your old Meg" (p. 33). Meg is a mother figure comforting her baby, telling him everything will be all right, and deluding him with a false security. James

Hollis interprets Meg's maternalizing as a protection around Stanley,¹⁴ but Meg is actually a negative force who unknowingly pushes Stanley deeper into dormancy. As Esslin says, "Stanley is dependent on Meg, who stifles him with her motherliness."¹⁵ Meg's reinforcement of Stanley's desire to remain in isolation is completed at the end of Act I when she gives him the toy drum. Esslin says that Meg has now "succeeded in making him regress to the status of a little boy, a child."¹⁶ At this point Stanley presents himself as the "bit of a washout" (p. 36) Lulu accuses him of being earlier in Act I. "Washout" seems to be the exact term to describe Stanley and his stagnation. As Rolf Fjelde says, "In essence, Stanley is wholly alone, without sustaining work, detached from society; and in this extremity, under a facade of alternately truculent and despairing self-assertion, he is seriously vulnerable."¹⁷

Stanley is indeed vulnerable to Goldberg and McCann, who submit him to a grueling cross examination that destroys his illusions. Stanley's present existence, which is meaningless and directionless, is destroyed by Goldberg and McCann, as they prepare to remove him from the house. Meg's mothering has made Stanley feel that he is a member of the Boles family. Goldberg destroys that illusion. He says to Stanley, "Why are you wasting everybody's time, Webber? Why are you getting in everybody's way?" (p. 57). Goldberg portrays Stanley as being a malignant lump, inert within the boarding house. He blames Stanley for Meg's scatter-brained nature when he says, "I'm telling you, Webber. You're a washout. Why are you getting on everybody's wick? Why are you driving that old lady off her conk?" (p. 57). Goldberg also suggests that Stanley is not wanted by the Boles when he

says, "Why do you behave so badly, Webber? Why do you force that old man out to play chess?" (p. 57). Goldberg gives Stanley the reality of his life: Stanley is a misfit, a burden--unproductive in his isolation. He is inert, as Goldberg suggests when he says, "Webber, what were you doing yesterday? . . . And the day before. What did you do the day before?" (p. 57). Stanley has no answer for Goldberg's question because he has done nothing since coming to the boarding house. His idleness has reached the point where Stanley is not even concerned with personal cleanliness. Goldberg mentions these things to Stanley, slapping him in the face with the reality of his condition. Goldberg also mentions the social conventions Stanley has rejected because of his isolation. He asks Stanley, "When did you last pray?" (p. 60), "Why did you never get married?" (p. 59), and "What's your trade?" (p. 61). During the questioning, Stanley either gives no answers or responds with inanities. Stanley cannot answer the questions because he has no religious faith, wife, or job. His isolated retreat from society has made him unconfoming. During the actual birthday celebration at the end of Act II, Stanley is silent, almost a non-entity, suggesting that he is fulfilling the reality of Goldberg's assertions. When he finally does become active, there are hints that Stanley is willing to reject his present existence. He steps into the toy drum, signaling a breaking away from Meg's maternal bonds. Moments later, Stanley attempts to strangle Meg, trying to suffocate that which has been stifling him. Nevertheless, Act II ends with Goldberg and McCann converging on Stanley. The menace is now fully upon Stanley, and the only remaining question is what his fate will be.

Perhaps that fate is illustrated by Goldberg, who epitomizes the conforming man. Throughout the play, Goldberg speaks of social conformity in trite generalizations, suggesting that his moralizing is no more than the unthinking words of a man who has never questioned society's dictates. In Act III Goldberg speaks of his lifelong adherence to social expectations when he says,

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. And don't go too near the water.

(p. 87-8)

This speech illustrates Goldberg's unquestioning acceptance of what he has been told. He has been trained to respect the family unit, something he accuses Stanley of not doing. In Act II, McCann calls Stanley a "mother defiler"; and Goldberg says to him, "you verminate the sheet of your birth" (p. 61). Stanley later admits that he has put his mother in a sanatorium, which is an overt rejection of Goldberg's social doctrine. Goldberg speaks of following the line, which seemingly represents his blind allegiance to social conformity. Stanley has violated this conformity, and Goldberg tells him in Act II, "We're right and you're wrong, Webber, all along the line" (p. 61). Goldberg has gleaned an attitude toward life from the teachings of society, and he expounds a trite testimony of it in Act II when he says,

What a thing to celebrate--birth! Like getting up in the morning. Marvellous!

Some people don't like the idea of getting up in the morning. I've heard them. Getting up in the morning, they say, what is it? Your skin's crabby, you need a shave, your eyes are full of muck, your mouth is like a boghouse, the palms of your hands are full of sweat, your nose is clogged up, your feet stink, what are you but a corpse waiting to be washed? Whenever I hear that point of view I feel cheerful. Because I know what it is to wake up with the sun shining, to the sound of the lawnmower, all the little birds, the smell of the grass, church bells, tomato juice--

(p. 55)

Stanley's life does not parallel Goldberg's sentimental testimony. Stanley does not wake up to joyful sounds, but to Meg's maternalizing. He does not have tomato juice, but lukewarm tea. Goldberg's description of the decrepid "corpse waiting to be washed" may be applied to Stanley. According to the guidelines of society, Stanley is dead because he does not follow those standards. This is the way Goldberg perceives Stanley when he tells him, "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!" (p. 62). It is evident that Stanley does not measure up to Goldberg's social testimonies, and this becomes a possible motivation for the removal of Stanley.

Although it is mere speculation to say exactly what Goldberg and McCann's intentions are for Stanley, there seems to be three distinct possibilities. There is a strong suggestion that they intend to kill Stanley, but there is the slight possibility that they will return him to society. Forced to accept social conformity, Stanley could experience a spiritual death, or he could readjust and become a functioning member of the outside world. There is evidence in the play to suggest that Stanley has betray-

ed some sort of organization, and it is possible that Goldberg and McCann are henchmen sent to remove him with the intention of killing him. Goldberg and McCann exhibit sinister behavior during the play and several times they seem bent on gaining revenge for Stanley's betrayal. Physical destruction is a very eminent motive for Stanley's removal, but there is also the prospect of a spiritual death prompted by forced social conformity. A small exchange between Goldberg and Meg when he enters in Act III suggests that Goldberg has tried to pattern Stanley after himself:

Goldberg: A reception committee.
Meg: Oh, I thought it was Stanley.
Goldberg: You find a resemblance?
Meg: Oh no. You look quite different.
Goldberg: Different build of course. (p. 80)

Goldberg seems to be hoping that there will be a similarity between Stanley and himself. When Meg asks if Stanley is coming down, Goldberg answers, "Down? Of course he's coming down. On a lovely sunny day like this he shouldn't come down? He'll be up and about in no time" (p. 80). Goldberg's words bring to mind his trite testimony in Act II on the joys of getting up in the morning. It seems that Goldberg plans to make Stanley into a social conformist like himself. When Stanley enters in Act III, he is dressed in a suit, clean-shaven, carrying his broken glasses, and unable to speak. This is a loaded image, operating on many levels of interpretation. Esslin suggests that Stanley is representative of a corpse,¹⁸ which may symbolize either a physical or spiritual death. There is also the possibility that Stanley's neat appearance is symbolic of his resurrection from stagnation. Stanley seems to have been prepared for a return to society and

Goldberg and McCann are ready to help him further. Their final words to Stanley contain references to aiding Stanley's re-adjustment:

Goldberg: From now on, we'll be the hub
of your wheel.
McCann: We'll renew your season ticket.
Goldberg: We'll take tuppence off your
morning tea.
McCann: We'll give you a discount on all
inflammable goods.
Goldberg: We'll watch over you.
McCann: Advise you.
Goldberg: Give you proper care and treatment.
McCann: Let you use the club bar.
Goldberg: Keep you a table reserved.
McCann: Help you acknowledge the fast days.
Goldberg: Bake you cakes.
McCann: Help you kneel on kneeling days.
Goldberg: Give you a free pass.
McCann: Take you for constitutionals.
Goldberg: Give you hot tips.

(p. 92-3)

Goldberg and McCann's words are similiar to the trite generalizations Goldberg has spouted earlier, which suggests that Stanley's return to society will mean an acceptance of trivial rituals.

Goldberg and McCann continue to speak of their plans for Stanley:

Goldberg: We'll make a man of you.
McCann: And a woman.
Goldberg: You'll be re-orientated.
McCann: You'll be rich.
Goldberg: You'll be adjusted.
McCann: You'll be our pride and joy.
Goldberg: You'll be a mensch.
McCann: You'll be a success.
Goldberg: You'll be integrated.
McCann: You'll give orders.
Goldberg: You'll make decisions.
McCann: You'll be a magnate.
Goldberg: A statesman.
McCann: You'll own yachts.

(p. 93-4)

Again, Goldberg and McCann speak in clichés, suggesting that Stanley's existence in society will be as empty and as conforming

as Goldberg's. Perhaps, in fact, Stanley's reluctance to leave the boarding house has been motivated in part by an awareness of the emptiness of social conformity. If this is true, then Stanley's perception of social conformity is negative, and he views life in society as a threat. But in Goldberg's mind, social conformity is essential to a productive life. Oddly enough, though, either existence will be an improvement over Stanley's present situation, and a physical death will not be any worse. A life in the outside world, even though shallow like Goldberg's, will be less empty than the stagnation Stanley is being removed from. And certainly it is evident that Stanley would not have voluntarily left the boarding house, but rather, with the aid of Meg's maternalizing, would have regressed further into inertia.

Stanley is not allowed to remain in isolation because the agents of menace prevent it. Rose Hudd does not escape her isolation, again due to the efforts of an agent of menace. Rose and Stanley then illustrate the desperation of people who are driven to the very brink of their existence as they attempt to cope with the menace. Rose chooses to deny the identity of the menace by displacing her fears, while Stanley makes a weak attempt to confront that which threatens him. Esslin suggests that Pinter's characters are at the decisive points in their lives where they must confront themselves. The starting point of this confrontation, according to Esslin, is the awareness of the threat of non-being.¹⁹ Rose, for a brief moment is aware of her empty existence, but Stanley displays his inertia throughout the play. It is the agents of menace that destroy this awareness. Bert nullifies Rose's chance for escape and throws her back into isolation.

Stanley's awareness of the possibility of non-being is never conscious enough to motivate him to leave the house, so Goldberg and McCann must forcefully remove him. The respective agents of menace terrorize both Stanley and Rose, who have little hope of protecting themselves. The Room and The Birthday Party seem to suggest that the menace is omnipresent, originating from both within and outside a room. In both plays, the agents of menace succeed in their goals. Bert pushes Rose deeper into a meaningless existence, and Goldberg and McCann remove Stanley from stagnation. The basic difference between these agents of menace is that while Bert forces Rose into a more hopeless situation, Goldberg and McCann force Stanley into an improved existence. The menace in The Room is destructive. But the menace in The Birthday Party, although terrifying, may well be constructive.

¹Martin Esslin, The Peopled Wound: The Work of Harold Pinter (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1970), p. 46.

²Esslin, p. 46.

³Esslin, p. 46.

⁴Steven Gale, Thematic Change in the Stage Plays of Harold Pinter (University of Southern California, Ph.D., 1970), p. 2.

⁵Esslin, p. 66.

⁶Arnold P. Hinchliffe, Harold Pinter (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1967), p. 40.

⁷Harold Pinter Complete Works: One (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1977), p. 101. All subsequent quotations from The Room and The Birthday Party are derived from this source.

⁸Gale, p. 33.

⁹Arlene Sykes, Harold Pinter (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1970), p. 13.

¹⁰John Pesta, "Pinter's Usurpers," in Pinter: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Arthur Ganz (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), p. 123.

¹¹Sykes, p. 13.

¹²Pesta, p. 124.

¹³Simon O. Lesser, "Reflections on Pinter's The Birthday Party," Contemporary Literature, 13 (Winter 1972), 34-43.

¹⁴James R. Hollis, Harold Pinter: The Poetics of Silence (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970), p. 32.

¹⁵Esslin, p. 74.

¹⁶Esslin, p. 76.

¹⁷Rolf Fjelde, "Plotting Pinter's Progress," in A Casebook on Harold Pinter's The Homecoming, ed. John Lahr (New York: Grove Press, 1971), p. 90.

¹⁸Esslin, p. 84.

¹⁹Esslin, p. 27.

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