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# THE RITE OF INITIATION IN PINTER'S THE BIRTHDAY PARTY

(TITLE)

BY

RICHARD C. SLOCUM

## THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1978
YEAR

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# THE RITE OF INITIATION
# IN PINTER'S *THE BIRTHDAY PARTY*

BY

RICHARD C. SLOCUM

B. S., Eastern Illinois University, 1972

ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in English at the Graduate School
of Eastern Illinois University

CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS
1978

## THE INITIATION RITE IN PINTER'S THE BIRTHDAY PARTY

The paper is an attempt to give full treatment to elements in Harold Pinter's The Birthday Party which suggest the rite of initiation practiced in primitive societies. A few critics have touched upon the subject of initiation in the play, but they fail to discuss it in detail.

Extensive comparisons are made between Charles Eckert's summary of initiation rituals and the actions and characters in the play. The initiate is isolated from society as a preliminary to the rite of initiation; Stanley is isolated in a seaside boarding house. The initiate is secluded in a dark and threatening place; Stanley sits alone during the party until forced into a game of blindman's buff. The initiate must endure ordeals or perform feats; Stanley endures the ordeal of blindman's buff. The initiate endures hazing (physical or mental harassment); Stanley endures an "Inquisition" at the hands of Goldberg and McCann. The initiate goes through a phase of instruction during the initiation rite; Stanley is instructed with a litany of the sacred cliches of his society. The initiate is marked as an adult by some sort of bodily mutilation; Stanley is clean-shaven for the first time in the play just before Goldberg and McCann take him

away. The initiate undergoes the rite of investiture, in which he is dressed in adult clothing; Stanley appears in a suit, carrying a bowler hat, just before being taken away. Anthropological material is used to support these parallels between the rite of initiation and the events in the play.

The second part of the paper details the organic connections between the initiatory imagery and other levels of meaning in the play. Images of birth and death are related symbolically to the rite of initiation. Details concerning family relationships (e.g. Stan and Meg's pseudo-incest) pertain to initiation. The theme of individual <u>vs</u>. society is related to initiation, complicated by the fact that Pinter portrays Goldberg and McCann as representatives of a corrupt, decadent society. The theme of man's place in the universe relates to initiation, which instructs man about his place in the universe. In Pinter's universe, man is blind and faces uncertainty and hostility.

The conclusion focuses on the contributions made by the initiatory imagery in the creation of an organically whole play. The initiatory elements support, or otherwise relate to, several thematic levels of the play, thus making an effective contribution to the whole.

# INTRODUCTION

Harold Pinter's _The Birthday Party_ contains a number of elements which suggest the initiation rituals practiced in primitive societies. Although the initiation motif is found in many works of literature, _The Birthday Party_ parallels, in detail, the initiation rite itself. The present paper is an attempt to give full treatment to those elements of the play--characters, actions, and objects--which suggest the rite of initiation, and to assess the contributions which the initiatory components make to the meaning and significance of the play.

The use of rituals as tools in the study of literature is an outgrowth of the field of myth criticism. The field is relatively new, and some of the excitement which it has engendered among critics is a result of the close relationship between myth and the very origin of literature. To quote John B. Vickery, who has edited an excellent collection of essays on myth criticism:

> . . . it [myth criticism] affords a unifying point of view which more nearly than any other derives from literature itself. Its key terms--myth and ritual--encompass that out of which literature emerged; therefore it is aligned with literature essentially, not accidentally, and in a way that social, political, philosophical, and religious concepts are not.[1]

Critical studies of Pinter which employ a ritual approach have met with some success. Katherine Burkman's study of ritual in Pinter's plays is a prime example. She explains her approach as follows:

> Pinter lends himself to ritual or mythical critical examination more than many of his contemporaries, partly because he focuses continually on the primitive qualities which lurk beneath the civilized veneer of modern life and erupt into that life, and partly because his determination to confront the mysterious, unsolvable regions of man's existence has led him into the realms of myth and ritual.[2]

She further justifies the ritual approach to Pinter by stressing the relationship between ritual and the origin of drama:

> . . . Pinter's characters lead him continually to the very rhythmic structures which have informed great dramatic works since drama's origin in primitive ritual. . . Pinter, then, as he consciously or unconsciously traces basic ritual patterns in his dramatic world, is reaching back over the centuries to archaic rhythms which have always dominated drama at its best.[3]

Burkman's study, in its discussion of The Birthday Party, refers to "the initiation into Monty's world,"[4] but never discusses in depth the parallels between initiation rituals and the action of the play. Another critic, Michael Kaufman, refers to The Birthday Party with the statement that "Pinter draws our attention to the irreconcilable falling off man's initiation into adulthood brings."[5] Despite these comments by critics, no study of the pervasive presence in The Birthday Party

of elements echoing the primitive rite of initiation has been made. The present paper is intended to be the first thorough study of the initiatory elements in Pinter's play.

## I. ELEMENTS OF THE INITIATION RITE IN THE BIRTHDAY PARTY

Charles Eckert's study of initiatory elements in the story of Telemachus includes a general summary of initiation rituals which will serve as introduction to our analysis of the parallels between those rites and The Birthday Party:

> Initiation rituals, usually called "puberty rituals" by ethnographers, are as widespread as rites concerned with crops or such major events as birth and death. The rites usually include killing an enemy or performing a sacrifice, or both; removal from the group to a hut, sacred ground, or unfrequented area; the endurance of ordeals and the performance of feats; instruction in the group myths, which include knowledge of origins, morality, the nature of deity, etc.; some rite of "marking" such as circumcision or scarification; and finally, investment with adult objects or clothing and a return to the group. The entire experience is extremely threatening because of the presence of the gods who usually "consume" or "kill" the initiates at some point in the rites so that they may return as those "reborn" to a higher status. The central symbolism of death and rebirth is well understood and often ingeniously elaborated. Boys are frequently removed secretly and at night, and the mothers are told that the gods have stolen them and may kill them. This helps effect a break with the maternal world, since the boys' "death" is to a large degree a death to childhood and effeminizing influence. . . The central rites of instruction give the boys the knowledge of the myths, moral codes and rituals-- a knowledge which defines man in his religious and social roles and makes him a complete and responsible adult.[6]

The situation confronting Stanley Webber in The Birthday Party is remarkably similar to the situation of the adolescent experiencing initiation. A preliminary

to the ritual is the isolation of the initiate from society. Eckert refers to the removal of the initiates to an "unfrequented area."[7] The seaside house of Meg and Petey is such an area, for it apparently does little business. Not only has he "hidden out. . . attempting to keep in isolation the individuality that remains to him,"[8] but he also apparently remains isolated in his room as much as possible. Lulu asks him, "Don't you ever go out? I mean, what do you do, just sit around the house like this all day long?"(pp. 26, 27)

Another similarity centers on the initiate's "seclusion in a dark and threatening place."[9] For Stanley, the living room of the lodging house becomes such a place. During his birthday celebration, the lights are turned off and McCann shines a flashlight in his face to intimidate him. When Stanley becomes "it" in the game of blindman's buff, McCann increases the intimidation by breaking Stanley's glasses and placing the drum in his path to trip him. Moreover, the person who is "it" in blindman's buff is "alienated and helpless."[10] Note that there are multiple levels of "darkness" in this scene: loss of eyeglasses, blind-folding, and loss of room lighting. Stanley's seclusion in this threatening environment is demonstrated by the fact that he sits by himself while the adults are involved in socializing and flirtation.

As part of the physical ritual of initiation, the initiate must endure ordeals or perform feats. The ordeal which Stanley endures is his birthday party; specifically, the ordeal centers around the game of blindman's buff. Although Meg and McCann are both "it" during the course of the game, Stanley is the central figure. The game seems to be manipulated by Goldberg and McCann with the intent to make Stanley "it." The actions of McCann already discussed in relation to the threatening environment (the breaking of Stan's glasses and the placement of the drum) contribute greatly to Stanley's ordeal.

Another important part of the ritual is the "hazing" or harassment of the initiate. The verbal brainwashing endured by Stanley is the closest parallel to hazing in The Birthday Party. Goldberg and McCann batter Stan to insensibility with a barrage of words intended to paralyze him with confusion and guilt. For example, they ask, "Why are you driving that old lady off her conk?" (p. 50) and "Why do you force that old man out to play chess?" (p. 50). These questions are designed to bring out guilt related to parent figures. The question "Why do you treat that young lady like a leper?" (p. 50) is intended to stir Stanley's guilt about his inability to relate to Lulu effectively.

Other questions asked by Goldberg and McCann in their hazing of Stanley seem designed to confuse, threaten, or degrade him. The words of Goldberg and McCann are like bullets, and Stanley is caught in the crossfire. The inquisition reaches an absurd level with the question based on a joke, "Why did the chicken cross the road?" (p. 54), abruptly followed by the paradoxical "Chicken? Egg? Which came first?" (p. 55). The ritualistic nature of the questioning is then underscored by the spectacle of Goldberg and McCann chanting in unison, "Which came first? Which came first? Which came first?" (p. 55). Stanley understandably screams, having been battered to the point of hysteria. Stanley's inquisitors conclude with threats of violence. McCann says, "Wake him up. Stick a needle in his eye." (p. 55). Goldberg says, "We can sterilize you"(p. 55). Stanley finally loses the power of speech, uttering animalistic cries in a violent confrontation with his tormentors. The battle ends suddenly with the entrance of Meg, for women are not supposed to witness initiatory hazing.

The initiate goes through a phase of instruction during the initiation ritual. Eckert refers to it as "a retelling of the myths which contain the knowledge without which one is not a man."[11] In _The Birthday Party_, Goldberg and McCann instruct Stanley in the

myths of modern society. They remind him of his shortcomings and tell him that what he needs to become a productive member of society may be found "Somewhere over the rainbow," "Where angels fear to tread" (p. 86). These phrases are cliches, of course, but they suggest instruction in group mythology. The recitation of a litany of cliches pertaining to modern society can be interpreted as a modern analog of the instruction in myth carried out in primitive initiation rituals.

Several key phrases in the "instruction" given to Stanley seem to epitomize the rite of initiation. Goldberg says, "We'll make a man of you," "You'll be re-orientated," and "You'll be a mensch" (p. 88). These phrases suggest the re-orientation of the initiate from the psychological outlook of a boy to that of a man.

Eckert's description of the instruction in group myths gives three categories: "knowledge of origins, morality, the nature of deity."[12] Many of the utterances of Goldberg and McCann in the "inquisition" scene are concerned with the same things. The puzzle of "Which came first?" concerns origins. Morality is the concern of several of the questions; an example is Goldberg's "When did you last pray?" (p. 53). The nature of deity is the emphasis of the question, repeated three times, "Do you recognize an external force?" (p. 53). On the

third repetition, the external force is further characterized as "responsible for you, suffering for you" (p. 53). Although these examples of instruction are from the part of the play which corresponds to ritual hazing, they nevertheless reinforce the examples from the instruction phase itself.

The next step after instruction is the rite of marking. The initiate is marked as an adult by some sort of bodily mutilation. In primitive society, the marking is usually circumcision or scarification. Stanley's marking is subtle, but effective: he appears in Act Three clean-shaven, for the first time in the play. In our culture, the first shaving of an adolescent beard is considered a sign of the transition to manhood. As such, it certainly qualifies as a "conspicuous mark of adult male status,"[13] which is how Eckert characterizes the rite of marking.

Closely related to the rite of marking is the rite of investiture, in which the initiate is outfitted with adult clothing. Stanley's appearance in Act Three reveals a change in his clothing. He appears "dressed in striped trousers, black jacket, and white collar" (p. 85). He also holds a bowler hat. These are adult vestments symbolizing the initiate's new adult status. Investiture is the last step in the actual physical initiation.

A practice which Eckert says is included in some initiation ceremonies does have parallels in the play, but is not really a part of the physical initiation. He says that the return of the initiate to society is accompanied by "a mock rejection of the mother or a mock or real tyrannizing of women in general, a practice that may also occur earlier in the ceremony."[14] The only parallels to this tyrannizing are indeed found earlier in the ceremony of Stanley's initiation than his return to society. Mock rejection of the mother is found in Act One. When Stanley's surrogate mother, Meg, tries to coax him to give her a cigarette, he rejects her tickling with an angry "Get away from me" (p. 20). Tyrannizing of women occurs in Act Two. During the game of blindman's buff, Stanley attempts to strangle Meg, but is pulled away from her by Goldberg and McCann. Then he goes after Lulu, who promptly screams and passes out. He puts her on the table, and is discovered crouched over her in the beam from McCann's flashlight. Some critics have called this a rape attempt; others disagree. At the very least, Lulu is at Stanley's mercy, and Stan's actions against Meg and Lulu may be construed as tyrannization of women.

The next steps after the physical initiation are the revelation of sacred objects and the ceremonial journey. The sudden appearance of Goldberg's car in Act Three

parallels the revelation of sacred objects. Stanley is being initiated into an industrialized society, after all, and a big car with "room in the front, and room in the back" (p. 73) is the perfect sacred object for such a society. The ceremonial journey is of course Stanley's trip to "Monty" in the sacred automobile driven by Goldberg.

Anthropological material concerning the rite of initiation can be helpful in corroborating the parallels between The Birthday Party and Eckert's discussion of the rite. For example, an anthropological study by Frank W. Young gives four components of the initiation rite:

1. Customary minimal social recognition (gift, party, change of name, etc.).

2. Personal dramatization (initiate is ceremonially dressed or adorned).

3. Organized social response (group dresses up and/or performs).

4. Affective social response (beating or severe hazing of initiates).[15]

These four components are clearly represented in the play. Stanley is given a gift (the toy drum) and a party (even though he denies that it is his birthday); he appears ceremonially dressed in a suit in Act Three;

his group dresses up for his party and performs in blindman's buff and social rituals; finally, he undergoes hazing at the hands of Goldberg and McCann. Young's study supports the earlier evidence relating the play to the initiation rite.

Another anthropological study, a monograph by Monika Vizedom, contains a discussion which is very reminiscent of the central conflict between Stanley and the team of Goldberg and McCann. "A rite of passage is also a ritual confrontation with authority, often that of seniors."[16] She goes on to quote from a study of a tribe called the Aranda by ethnographer Theodore Strehlow: "The novices soon learn to respect and even to fear the supreme power wielded by the old men of their clan on the initiation ground."[17] Note the parallel to Stanley's fear of the "supreme power" of Goldberg and McCann.

Vizedom also quotes Strehlow's comments on the behavior of an initiate after the ritual surgery known as subincision: "His blind obedience stands in striking contrast to the unbridled insolence and general unruliness of temper which characterized his behavior in the days of his childhood."[18] This contrast resembles the contrast between Stanley's insolence with Meg in Act One and his "brainwashed" behavior in Act Three.

Vizedom's monograph also discusses a study of the initiation rituals of a people called the Tikopia:

> The suppression of the individual, the disregard of his normal freedom of choice is important. . . at initiation, he must submit. He is taken in hand by his elders, treated by them as object, carried about, gripped in strong arms, and forced to undergo an operation from which he shrinks. His submission is taken for granted, and it would be strange if at this time he did not become aware of the power of traditional procedure, made manifest in the personalities of his social environment.[19]

This discussion parallels Stanley's submission to Goldberg and McCann, the "personalities of his social environment." That Goldberg and McCann represent the power of traditional procedure should be obvious from Goldberg's speech about "playing the game" (p. 80). One may find other evidence for the parallel between the rite of initiation and the play, merely by examining other anthropological material about initiation ceremonies.

An examination of the characters in *The Birthday Party* also reveals additional evidence of the parallels between the play and the rite of initiation. The central figure in initiation ceremonies is the adolescent who is undergoing the ceremonial transition to adulthood. If Stanley is a symbolic adolescent, a child one moment and an adult the next, then that may be used as indirect support for the hypothesis that the play parallels an initiation rite. A more detailed look at Stanley's behavior is in order.

Stanley's resemblance to an adolescent is revealed early in the play. In Act One, Meg calls him a boy and uses the diminutive nickname "Stanny" (p. 14). He exhibits adolescent rebelliousness when Meg gives him his breakfast (p. 15). He takes a childish delight in threatening Meg with "the van" (pp. 24, 25). His birthday gift is a toy drum, a present suitable only for a child. When he asks Meg, "when you address yourself to me, do you ever ask yourself who exactly you are talking to?" (p. 22), he demonstrates an adolescent's concern with his own identity. The tall tales about playing the piano in a "round the world tour" and a concert at which "They were all there that night" (p. 23) sound like adolescent boasting.

Other important figures in initiation are the parents of the initiate, represented in the play by Meg and Petey. That Meg and Petey are archetypal parents is even suggested by their names: "Meg" sounds like "egg"; "Petey" is obviously phallic. In a sense, Stanley has withdrawn from society and returned to the womb represented by the surrogate parents Meg and Petey. According to Martin Esslin, "that Meg, with her crushing combination of motherliness and senile eroticism, is a mother image seen from the viewpoint of an Oedipus complex needs no particular stress."[20]

If we consider Meg and Petey to be Stanley's surrogate parents, however, they must be isolated from him during his initiation. In primitive societies, an important feature of the rite of initiation is the separation of the initiate from his parents, for he must be torn away from dependence on his family. An adult member of society must be dependent only upon himself and upon the whole society. As anthropologist Yehudi Cohen has stated: "There is no more effective way to deflect a child's emotional dependence away from his nuclear family than to traumatize him and at the same time forbid him to turn to the well-established security and comfort of his family for protection."[21]

A look at the play quickly reveals that Stanley's parent figures are indeed isolated from him and unable to come to his aid during the initiatory ordeal. Petey is isolated by his absence during the ceremony as well as by his reluctance to become really involved with anything. As Lucina Gabbard puts it:

> There is one exclusion from the party--Petey. Petey reneged. He preferred to go out to a quiet game of chess. Petey has always reneged from life. . . he never came to the party--not to Meg's, not to Stanley's, not to life's[22]

Meg, on the other hand, is isolated from Stanley during the party by her ignorance of what is happening and by her self-indulgent socializing with McCann.

The brief mention of Stanley's real father supports the argument that Stan is isolated from parental figures. When Stan tells Meg about his concert, he says, "My father nearly came down to hear me. Well, I dropped him a card anyway. But I don't think he could make it" (p. 23). His real father is apparently not only isolated from him during the ceremony, but isolated and alienated from him permanently.

Other important individuals in the rite of initiation are the elders who perform the ceremony. The evidence that Goldberg and McCann represent the elders is extensive. Besides their association with the stages of initiation already discussed, there is also the fact that it is Goldberg who suggests giving Stanley a birthday party; it takes no great stretch of the imagination to see "birthday party" as a metaphor for "initiation ritual." Also, Goldberg and McCann resemble elders in that they represent the religious traditions of our society. Bernard Dukore says that "Goldberg and McCann represent Judaism and Catholicism, tradition and conformity."[23]

The evidence from the text of the play, along with the anthropological material, comprises a substantial body of direct and indirect support for the hypothesis that initiatory symbolism is an important part of <u>The Birthday Party</u>. As we shall see, the initiatory elements

are organically connected with other levels of meaning in the play. These organic connections reveal the true extent of the contribution which the initiatory symbolism makes to the depth of meaning in the play.

## II. INITIATORY ELEMENTS IN RELATION TO OTHER LEVELS OF MEANING IN *THE BIRTHDAY PARTY*

The initiatory elements in *The Birthday Party* do not exist in a vacuum, but are inter-related with other levels of meaning in the play. Exploring these inter-relationships is a formidable task because there are usually many layers of meaning in a Pinter play, and the more a Pinter play is studied, the more layers come to light. Some of the levels of meaning might be described as bivalent; that is, they may be taken at face value or they may be taken ironically. On the basis of number of levels of meaning and ironies of meaning, *The Birthday Party* is probably the most complex of Pinter's plays.

One layer of meaning concerns birth and death, both of which are of central importance to the rite of initiation. Eckert says the "central symbolism of death and rebirth is well understood and is often ingeniously elaborated."[24] The rite of initiation dramatizes the death of the initiate's child-self and the birth of his adult-self. The initiate undergoes a major change of status and a psychological reorientation, perhaps even a change of name; indeed, the change is so dramatic that death and rebirth are the most appropriate ritualistic metaphors for the process.

The Birthday Party has extensive imagery related to birth. Act One has barely begun when Petey mentions that "someone's just had a baby" (p. 11). When Meg learns that the baby in the newspaper story is a girl, she expresses disappointment and voices her preference for little boys. Perhaps her response relates to the fact that the rite of initiation is predominantly a male phenomenon. Female puberty rites are rare in primitive society and, where they do occur, less elaborate than male rites.

A more subtle reference to birth is Stanley's statement, "I was in the sea at half past six" (p. 26). Dr. Gabbard discusses the Freudian interpretation of the sea as a metaphor for the uterine waters.[25] The connection is obvious: the womb is a sort of "internalized sea" in which the fetus swims. Although later in the day Stanley denies that it is his birthday, his assertion that he was in the sea at 6:30 in the morning contradicts that denial. Symbolically, it is his day of birth.

In the party in Act Two, the broken membrane of the drum (effective on many symbolic levels) suggests the breaking of the membrane around the fetus which occurs at birth. Also, the stark image of Stanley bending over Lulu's spread-eagled body at the end of Act Two symbolizes Stanley's "birth" into adulthood, by subtly

suggesting a delivery from Lulu's womb. Charles Carpenter relates the image to birth, but from a different angle; he says that Stanley seeks to re-enter the womb.[26]

Some of Stanley's actions in Act Three suggest birth. He clenches and unclenches his eyes as if seeing for the first time and makes sounds as though trying to speak for the first time (p. 88). He makes infant sounds like "Caahh. . . caahh" (p. 89) and undergoes ambiguous movements which suggest an attempt to return to the fetal position or an infant bowel movement.

Death imagery is also present in the play. In Act One, Goldberg complains to McCann, "Everywhere you go these days it's like a funeral" (p. 30). His remark is of special interest in relation to Martin Esslin's comment that "Rites of initiation are also very often closely related to funeral rites."[27] A funeral, as a ritualization of death, has close ties with the rituals celebrating the symbolic death of the child during initiation.

In Act Two, Stanley is pronounced dead by Goldberg and McCann:

> MCCANN. You're dead.
> GOLDBERG. You're dead. You can't live,you can't think, you can't love. You're dead. . . (p. 55)

Goldberg refers to a funeral again in Act Two (p. 62), and the act ends in the funereal darkness which suggests the dark of the underworld and of the tomb.

In Act Three, Stanley's dark suit and the fact that he is taken away in a big car both suggest that he is a corpse. The solicitous attention paid to Stanley by Goldberg and McCann, as when they help him out of his chair and put his hat on his head (p. 90), suggests the care of undertakers for a corpse.

Some imagery relates both to death and birth. For example, in Act Two Goldberg makes a long speech (one of many) which embodies imagery of birth and death:

> 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? (p. 48)

The same darkness at the end of Act Two which suggests death could also suggest the twilight world of the womb. Death and rebirth of the initiate are thus effectively symbolized--the tomb and the womb.

In Act Three, Stanley's guttural sounds and contorted movements suggest death throes as much as they suggest the actions of an infant. Petey's final request on behalf of Stanley to "Let him . . . sleep" sounds like it could refer to a baby, or to a corpse (cf. "Rest in Peace"). Pinter's poetic ambiguity is particularly marked in relation to the birth and death imagery in The Birthday Party.

The psychoanalytic approach to Pinter provides us with one final connection between the birth-death imagery and the initiatory elements in the play. In the words of Dr. Gabbard:

> From the intrapsychic point of view, The Birthday Party shows life as a cycle of births and anxieties, punishments and deaths. The child is born into each successive stage, learns its fears, suffers its guilts, seeks its punishments, and through the death of some part of his inner self, he is born into the next stage. In this fashion, the birth and the fears, the punishments and deaths build on one another and who can say where the cycle begins. "Which came first? Chicken? Egg? Which came first?"[28]

Another level of meaning in the play concerns the relationships between parents and children. This level has obvious connections with the rite of initiation, which disrupts the relationship between parent and child in order to transform the child into an adult.

One problem of the parent-child relationship is the possibility that its intimacy may lead to incest. In primitive societies, the taboo against incest is virtually universal, and the initiation rite is one of a complex of behavior patterns intended to discourage or prevent incest.

One anthropological study which discusses the avoidance of incest divides puberty ceremonies into two stages. The first stage includes two separate conventions aimed at preventing incest. The first is extrusion--"the physical dislodgement of the child from

the household early in the first stage of puberty,"[29] that is, between the ages of eight and ten. The second custom included in the first stage of puberty ceremonies is brother-sister avoidance, intended to prevent sibling incest. The second stage of puberty ceremonies is the rite of initiation, which acts to prevent incest by giving the adolescent adult status and separating him from his parents.

The problem of incest is represented symbolically in The Birthday Party. There are certainly indications of "incest" between Stanley and his mother figure, Meg. In Act One, Meg plays the game of "One! Two! Three! I'm coming to get you!" (p. 14) as a mother would with a child. The shouts and laughter which ensue, however, and the fact that Meg "is panting and arranges her hair" (p. 14) when she returns suggest sexual play. Meg's remark about "lovely afternoons" in Stan's room (p. 19) implies afternoon sex with Stanley. When Meg tickles Stanley's neck to coax a cigarette from him, both innocent child play and incestuous sexual play are suggested.

It is interesting to note, in relation to incest, that Pinter parallels the Meg-Stanley relationship with a pseudo-incestuous relationship between Goldberg and Lulu. Goldberg is plainly a father-figure for Lulu. When he says, "Lulu, you're a big bouncy girl. Come and sit on my lap." (p. 61), he sounds like a father. His later seduction of Lulu is thus pseudo-incestuous.

Another theme in the play involving parent-child relationships concerns the protectiveness of parents toward children. The opportunity for parents to protect their children is reduced or eliminated by the initiation rite, for they are isolated and cannot protect the adolescent from his ordeal.

Martin Esslin says that the play can be seen as "a metaphor for the process of growing up, of expulsion from the warm, cosy world of childhood."[30] The protectiveness of parents gives rise to an idealized view of childhood as a time of perfect safety and security. Meg's reminiscence about her childhood exemplifies such an idealized view of childhood:

> My little room was pink. I had a pink carpet and pink curtains, and I had musical boxes all over the room. And they played me to sleep. And my father was a very big doctor. That's why I never had any complaints. I was cared for, and I had little sisters and brothers in other rooms, all different colors. (p. 63)

Her description is womb-like, suggesting an analogy between the trauma of birth, in which the infant is torn from the protection of the womb, and the trauma of initiation, in which the adolescent is torn from the protection of his parents. Ironically, the description suggests that she may be remembering childhood in an orphanage, but chooses to recall it as a normal, happy childhood.

Goldberg presents his own idealized picture of childhood:

> Childhood. Hot water bottles. Hot milk. Pancakes. Soap suds. What a life.

Like Meg's reminiscence, Goldberg's has a peculiar ring to it. Goldberg's idealized picture of childhood consists of empty words which, upon close examination, seem to be peculiar ones to associate with childhood.

Some of Ellen Schiff's comments on parent-child relationships in Pinter's plays are pertinent to the theme of protectiveness:

> A chapter of childhood that frequently plays a significant role in Pinter's plays is the evolving relationships of parents and children. At its most superficial level, this consideration appears through the attitudes adult characters bear toward parent figures. They appear as the unvanquishable protector. . . they appear as the source which typically inspires angry rebellion.[31]

Stanley's parent figures are not unvanquishable protectors. Meg tells Stanley:

> You stay here. 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? (p. 24)

Meg's lines reveal a superficial protectiveness toward Stanley, but her concern for him is forgotten during the party, swallowed up by her self-indulgent socializing.

Petey's protectiveness toward Stan is equally superficial. When Goldberg and McCann are taking Stan away, Petey shows his concern. He goes so far as to say, "Leave him alone!" (p. 90), but his protection ends when Goldberg insidiously invites him along. He lets

them take Stanley away, his only protest an ineffectual "Stan, don't let them tell you what to do!" (p. 90).

The "angry rebellion" inspired by parental figures is related to protectiveness, for the adolescent reaches a stage at which he resents the protectiveness of his parent figures. Thus, Stanley stiffens when Meg shows concern about his bowel habits by asking if he "paid a visit," and he shows his rebellion by bullying Meg (p. 24).

Another level of meaning in the play concerns the conflict between the individual and society. The needs of the individual conflict with the demands of society especially during initiation, which disregards the individual's needs and often his safety in order to traumatize him and "reprogram" him into an adult.

In Act One, Stanley faces the intrusion of society into his sheltered world. Goldberg and McCann may be seen as representatives of society. Bernard Dukore suggests as much when he calls Goldberg and McCann "two members of an unidentified organization," and says that "the organization is society, and they are organization men who must mold him into the collective pattern."[32] The appearance of these representatives of society at Stanley's womb-like place of residence instantly fills him with apprehension. When Meg mentions "two gentlemen," the subsequent dialogue reveals Stan's uneasiness:

> STANLEY. (He slowly raises his head. He speaks without turning.) What two gentlemen?
> MEG. I'm expecting visitors.
> STANLEY. (He turns.) What?
> MEG. You didn't know that, did you?
> STANLEY. What are you talking about?
> MEG. Two gentlemen asked Petey if they could come and stay for a couple of nights. I'm expecting them.
> STANLEY. I don't believe it. (pp. 20, 21)

The conversation continues, with Stanley becoming more and more agitated, until he finally ends it on a note of desperation:

> They won't come. Someone's taking the Michael. Forget all about it. It's a false alarm. A false alarm. Where's my tea? (p. 21)

Stanley's first meeting with Goldberg and McCann increases the tension. While talking to McCann, Stan becomes more and more agitated and the conversation tends more and more toward conflict. When McCann addresses Stan as "sir," Stanley says, "Listen. Don't call me sir" (p. 44). McCann counters with a warning, "Your cigarette is near that paper" (p. 44), referring to one of the strips McCann habitually tears from newspapers. McCann's warning suggests that some of society's restrictions are capricious or senseless. The conflict between Stanley and McCann erupts into violence when Stanley grips McCann's arm and McCann responds by hitting Stanley's arm (p. 45). Since McCann represents society, the scene is a graphic demonstration of the conflict between the individual and society, which can easily become violent.

At the end of Act Two, violence again erupts in the conflict between the individual and society. Stan carries the "tyrannizing of women" too far and almost strangles Meg. The representatives of society (Goldberg and McCann) converge upon him and, significantly, he reverts to childhood, giggling like a naughty child. Stanley repeatedly resists society's demand that he be initiated into adulthood. Michael Kaufman says that "the crisis in Pinter's plays arises when his characters realize that their own inner impulses are in irreconcilable conflict with the role society expects them to play."[33] His comment is especially pertinent to the crisis at the end of Act Two of The Birthday Party.

The layer of meaning which focuses on the conflict between the individual and society is "bivalent."[34] On the one hand, Stanley's resistance can be seen as an unreasonable attempt to fend off the natural and inevitable process of maturation (whether it is in the form of the rite of initiation or not). The inevitability of the process is underscored by Goldberg's remark that "If we hadn't come today we'd have come tomorrow" (p. 35), implying that he and McCann, as forces of maturation, would have eventually come into Stanley's life no matter what happened. On the other hand, if the society which attempts to initiate the individual into full membership is corrupt or decadent, then the individual should resist.

Pinter presents a picture of a corrupt society in conflict with the individual in The Birthday Party. Katherine Burkman, in discussing the rituals in the play, uses the term "resurrection" for Stanley's treatment at the hands of Goldberg and McCann, and then says that "the resurrection embodies all that is most precious to that civilization's corrupt emissaries, Goldberg and McCann."[35]

As we have already seen, the recitation of a litany of cliches by Goldberg and McCann parallels the myth-instruction of the rite of initiation. The emptiness of the catch-phrases with which Goldberg and McCann instruct Stanley reflects the emptiness of their society. Likewise, the traditions of this society have become empty, judging from Goldberg's "Play up, play up, and play the game. Honour thy father and thy mother. All along the line" (p. 80). The system of beliefs of Goldberg's society is most clearly revealed to be empty in this passage:

> 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.)

That Goldberg's words are empty is underscored visually when McCann blows into his mouth, refilling the windbag with air. The emptiness of social rituals is shown by the "blind man's buff" sequence, in which

socializing is dramatized as the groping in the dark of blind, confused people. Finally, when Stanley has been taken away, one feels certain that his fate will be an unpleasant one, yet Meg and Petey revert to the easy ritual of breakfast conversation. A society which hides its evils from itself by falling back on its safe day-to-day rituals is surely in decay.

Pinter uses an interesting technique to suggest the extremes to which a modern society can go in suppressing the individual. The technique employs the accumulation of separate, superficially unrelated events to form a thematic whole. Stanley threatens Meg with "the van" (p. 24), symbol of the power of a totalitarian state to come and take the individual away. Goldberg and McCann question Stanley, Inquisition-style, again suggesting the power of a totalitarian state over the individual. Goldberg and McCann locate Stanley in the dark by shining a beam of light on him, and the image of Stanley against the wall with the light on him suggests a concentration-camp prisoner caught in the act of escape. Taken together, these examples suggest the excess power over the individual which a modern society may have.

The commentary on modern society is subtly strengthened by the initiatory elements, which emphasize the primitive. A contrast is developed between primitive society and modern society. Each event in the play

which depicts a modern society has ritualistic undertones which suggest a primitive society, and the contrasting treatment of the individual in the two kinds of society is clearly delineated. A primitive society may hurt and intimidate the individual during the rite of initiation, but the harm to the individual is only part of a natural cycle intended to allow him to develop into a whole person. In contrast, Goldberg and McCann's society hurts and intimidates the individual in order to take away his individuality, to initiate him into a standardized society. As Bernard Dukore says in reference to the play, "Pinter paints a frightening picture of the individual pressured by the forces of society to the point wherein he loses his individuality and becomes a drugged member of the social machine."[36]

Dukore also points out another indication in the play of commentary on modern society--the corporate jargon used by Goldberg in Act One.[37] Asked by McCann about the job to be done, Goldberg replies, "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" (p. 32). Clearly, it is the "corporate society" which is indicted in the play, and the indictment is strengthened by the contrast of elements suggesting primitive society.

Another thematic level in the play concerns man's place in the universe. Stanley's fate means more than the persecution of one man in a lodging house; it symbolizes the fate of man in an uncertain universe. The rite of initiation pertains to this theme in that it instructs the initiate about his place in the universe. In The Birthday Party, Goldberg and McCann instruct Stanley about his place in the universe. They represent a society which is ostensibly based on a tradition which represents an ordered, ethical universe. Ruby Cohn identifies that tradition: "Their Jewish-Irish names and dialects suggest a vaudeville skit, and it is not long before we realize that that skit is the Judaeo-Christian tradition as it appears in our present civilization."[38]

The Judaeo-Christian tradition, then, seems to be the ethical basis of Goldberg and McCann's attempt to initiate Stanley. It seems to be, but there is inherent irony in the apparent ethical base from which Goldberg and McCann operate. Stanley's resistance against their actions implies a rejection of the tradition, corresponding to Twentieth Century man's loss of faith in the Judaeo-Christian ethical view of the universe. Several religious allusions in the play suggest a religious tradition in ruins. McCann sings a song the first line of which is, "Oh, the Garden of Eden has vanished, they

say" (p. 64), alluding to the Fall of Man, but also suggesting the fall of unquestioning belief in Christian tradition. Goldberg seems to affirm the tradition by referring to one of the Ten Commandments ("Honour thy father and thy mother" p. 80) and to "the good book" (p. 81), but suggests loss of faith by his inability to complete his statement, "Because I believe that the world . . ." (p. 80). Later, when McCann orders Lulu to confess and she turns to Goldberg for an explanation, she receives the comical reply, "He's only been unfrocked six months" (p. 85). An unfrocked priest epitomizes the religious disillusionment of the Twentieth Century. There is irony in the fact that Goldberg and McCann represent a religious tradition which is becoming irrelevant to the culture of which it is a part.

Another irony is that Goldberg and McCann instruct Stanley about his place in the ethical universe of Judaeo-Christian thought, but the events of the play refute the existence of a rational universe. In the Judaeo-Christian view, the universe is benevolent to man as long as he abides by its fixed rules, for the creator and ruler of the universe is a perfect, rational being. To Pinter's characters, however, the universe is, at best, indifferent to man, and its "rules" are chaotic and irrational. In such a universe, man lives in uncertainty; metaphorically, he is a blind man playing blind-man's buff.

One manifestation of the uncertainty of man's universe in the play is confusion of identity. Is Goldberg "Nat," "Simey," or "Benny?" Is McCann "Seamus" or "Dermot?" Is Goldberg's son "Emanuel," "Timmy," "Manny," or perhaps even "Stanny?" (The play contains teasing hints that Stanley might be Goldberg's son.) Who is "Monty," if he really exists? These questions are never resolved. Perhaps the whole play is based on mistaken identity--one gets the feeling that Goldberg and McCann have mistaken Stanley for someone else. Stanley himself says to McCann, "It's a mistake! Do you understand?" (p. 45). These cases of identity confusion reflect man's uncertainty about his identity in a chaotic universe.

We have already seen that blindness is a metaphor in the play for man's imperfect perception of his chaotic universe. In the party scene of Act Two, the stage becomes progressivey darker, suggesting man's growing awareness of his blindness in the universe. At first, the room lights are switched off, and there is a faint light outside the window. The lights come on and are switched off again, and the light outside is fainter. Stanley is blindfolded and, after he attacks Meg, the stage is plunged into total darkness. The audience shares in the confusion of the characters as they grope in the darkness for a flashlight, implying that everyone is "in the dark" about his fate in the universe.

# CONCLUSION

The aesthetic value of a work of drama is ultimately an individual judgment. A basic assumption of the present study is that aesthetic value is partly a matter of depth. That is, depth or complexity--as long as it is organic (i.e., not contrived, but a natural growth)--makes a work of drama pleasing. The more a play exercises the minds and emotions of its audience, the richer the experience seems. The Birthday Party exercises the intellect and emotions on many levels, enriching its aesthetic value. The elements which parallel the rite of initiation add one more level to the play; in that sense, they make a quantitative contribution to the quality of the play.

Vickery's introduction to Myth and Literature suggests a special kind of depth which the initiatory elements bring to the play: ". . . the ability of literature to move us profoundly is due to its mythic quality, to its possession of *mana*, the *numinous*, or the mystery in the face of which we feel an awed delight or terror at the world of man."[39] Suggestions of the primitive rite of initiation, and allied ritual elements in the play, draw one into the primitive world of magic and mystery suggested by the term "mana."

Katherine Burkman reveals another contribution of ritualistic elements in the play:

> My contention is that beneath the daily secular rituals which Pinter weaves into the texture of his plays--"the taking of a toast and tea"--beat the rhythms of ancient fertility rites, which form a significant counterpoint to the surface rituals of the plays and which often lend the dramas their shape and structure.[40]

Her observation is a revealing one, elucidating a contrapuntal tension which is part of the driving force of the play.

The most important contribution of the initiatory elements, however, is simply their support of the other levels of meaning. Martin Esslin's analysis of the interconnections of meaning in the play is excellent:

> As in all poetic imagery there is a deep and organic connection between the multiple planes on which the layers of ambiguity of the imagery operate. For example, the process of growing up is in itself an image, and a metaphor of dying: one incarnation of the self dies, to make room for another which is being born to take its place. Rites of initiation are also very often related to funeral rites. Equally, society driving an artist towards respectable work closely corresponds to the transition from childhood to the workaday world of the adult. All children can be seen as living for play and self-expression, and in that sense all children are artists. The process of growing up is one of losing the emotional range, the irresponsiblity and freedom of the artist.
>
> Thus on closer examination the different levels of approach will be seen merely as different aspects of the same immensely complex, immensely relevant, and immensely true poetic metaphor for a basic human situation, an existential archetype.[41]

The elements of the play which suggest the rite of initiation, then, fit into a network of poetic ambiguity and are essential to the organic unity of the play.

## NOTES

[1]John B. Vickery, ed., Introduction to Myth and Literature: Contemporary Theory and Practice (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. x.

[2]Katherine Burkman, The Dramatic World of Harold Pinter: Its Basis in Ritual (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1971), pp. 14-15.

[3]Ibid., p. 17.

[4]Ibid., p. 39.

[5]Michael Kaufman, "Actions That a Man Might Play: Pinter's The Birthday Party," Modern Drama, XVI (Sept., 1973), 177.

[6]Charles W. Eckert, "Initiatory Motifs in the Story of Telemachus," in Vickery, ed., Myth and Literature.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Bernard Dukore, "The Theatre of Harold Pinter," Tulane Drama Review, VI (March, 1962), 52.

[9]Eckert, p. 164.

[10]Kaufman, p. 169.

[11]Eckert, p. 164.

[12]Ibid., p. 162.

[13]Ibid., p. 164.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Frank W. Young, Initiation Ceremonies: A Cross-Cultural Study of Status Dramatization (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), p. 15.

[16]Monika Vizedom, Rites and Relationships: Rites of Passage and Contemporary Anthropology (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, Inc., 1976), p. 45.

[17]Vizedom, p. 45.

[18]*Ibid*., p. 46.

[19]*Ibid*.

[20]Martin Esslin, *The Peopled Wound: The Work of Harold Pinter* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1970), p. 84.

[21]Yehudi A. Cohen, *The Transition from Childhood to Adolescence: Cross-Cultural Studies of Initiation Ceremonies, Legal Systems, and Incest Taboos* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1964), p. 104.

[22]Lucina Gabbard, *The Dream Structure of Pinter's Plays: A Psychoanalytic Approach* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1976), p. 59.

[23]Dukore, p. 52.

[24]Eckert, p. 162.

[25]Gabbard, p. 49.

[26]Charles Carpenter, "'What Have I Seen, the Scum or the Essence?' Symbolic Fallout in Pinter's *Birthday Party*," *Modern Drama*, XVII (Dec., 1974), 396.

[27]Esslin, p. 86.

[28]Gabbard, p. 60.

[29]Cohen, p. 54.

[30]Esslin, p. 84.

[31]Ellen Schiff, "Pancakes and Soapsuds: A Study of Childishness in Pinter's Plays," *Modern Drama*, XVI (June, 1973), 99.

[32]Dukore, p. 52.

[33]Kaufman, p. 168.

[34]My adaptation of a chemistry term.

[35]Burkman, p. 35.

[36]Dukore, p. 51.

[37]*Ibid.*, p. 52.

[38]Ruby Cohn, "The World of Harold Pinter," *Tulane Drama Review*, VI (March, 1962), 63.

[39]Vickery, Introduction to *Myth and Literature*, p. ix.

[40]Burkman, p. 10.

[41]Esslin, p. 86.

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