

The roles of Goldberg and McCann
in Pinter's play *The Birthday Party*
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The roles of Goldberg and McCann in Pinter's well-known play *The Birthday Party* are of high significance to all aspects of the play, and in this essay I will be discussing these two unique and intricately complicated characters. In Pinter dialogue, we cannot be sure of the motives behind the actions of any characters. When characters speak they might not be relating to us true facts from the past, but fabricating or recreating the past to please the present. McCann and Goldberg are the most mysterious characters in the play, and we are presented with many ambiguities concerning origins and motives. Unfortunately, close examination confuses everything by revealing further contradictions, making them more fascinating, but essentially unexplainable. In this essay, I will attempt to look at the contradictory aspects of the pair, and explain how I feel these are significant to the play.

The characters McCann and Goldberg enter the play unexplained, and are important figures before they even appear physically on the stage. The other characters discussing and reacting to them reveals much about their own selves as well as the presences of McCann and Goldberg. Meg uses these figures initially to subtly threaten Stanley, and as a form of self gratification

"This house is on the list." (pg.30).

STANLEY But who are they?

MEG You'll see when they come.

STANLEY (decisively) they won't come

MEG why not?

STANLEY (quickly) I tell you they won't come. Why didn't they come last night, if they were coming.

To Stanley these figures bring on an identity crisis, and he poses the rhetorical question - "Who do you think you are talking to." This reaction to the presences can be taken in

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different ways, but we can assume that the insecure Stanley is afraid of change, change that will upset the delicate balance of his existence. There is always the chance that Stanley knows these figures are after him, but Stanley's fear could be aimed at anything outside his little world. when Stanley refers to his past, particularly in his ramblings on page 32/33, he refers to a "they" -

THEY came up to me

THEY were all there that night

THEY wanted me to crawl on bended knee

McCann and Goldberg could easily be a personification of "THEY", as Stanley's fear would suggest. In essence, McCann and Goldberg could be anything from door to door salesman to men escaped from an asylum or religious freaks.

Stanley soon uses the presences of the pair to threaten Meg.

STANLEY They're looking for someone. A certain person.

MEG (hoarsely) No, they're not!

STANLEY Shall I tell you who they're looking for?

MEG No! (pg.34)

Whether or not Stanley or Meg realize it, he is referring to the fact that McCann and Goldberg are going to take him away.

When looked at on the surface, McCann and Goldberg present immediate interest. Their names obviously refer to character types, which is proven true in the first and second acts of the play. They are almost stereotypical opposites. Goldberg having a typically Jewish name is presented as a business-orientated, fast talking family man. McCann with a typical Irish name is represented as having a repressed Irish upbringing. From the beginning, Goldberg is self-confident, and McCann his servant, requiring constant assurance about the future. In this respect the characters seem to exploit their differences. McCann exploits Goldberg's self confidence, while Goldberg exploits McCann's desire for assurance and to be the servant. They don't mind being together.

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MEG Oh, I've put you both together. Do you mind being both together-?

GOLDBERG I don't mind. Do you mind McCann?

McCANN No.

It is important to note now that these "roles" taken by the characters McCann and Goldberg do not remain constant throughout the play, in fact one of the most significant aspects of the characters is their gradual disintegration as characters and as a "team". This will be discussed further on.

McCann and Goldberg create a frightening image when working together as a team in the play. As mentioned, they don't mind being together and seem to be able to exploit the differences in their opposite. They work well together, and one seems to know what the other is doing, even when the other is out of the room. This teamwork is reflected both in their language and their actions. When they are in conversation alone, they seem to copy what the other has said previously.

McCANN Is this it?

GOLDBERG This is it.

McCANN Are you sure?

GOLDBERG Sure I'm sure. (pg. 37)

During the action of the play, McCann tends to stand in the doorway physically blocking the exit of Stanley, while Goldberg esconces himself on the other members of the household, giving Stanley nowhere to turn.

The two major "interrogations" of Stanley which occur in the second and third acts of the play can be compared to the duets between Didi and Gogo in Beckett's *Waiting For Godot*. One phrase spoken by one of the characters excites the other and he adds his own response, and it continues like an opera aria duet. In *Waiting For Godot* these speeches indicate that the characters are working together to make some sense of their existence. In *The Birthday Party* the power created by these duets is quite intense and has an overwhelming effect on Stanley. The importance of the speeches is related to the excitement of the participants rather than the meaning of the words. Below are comparable speeches from the two plays.

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ESTRAGON It's the rope.

VLADIMIR It's the rubbing.

ESTRAGON It's inevitable.

VLADIMIR It's the knot.

ESTRAGON It's the chafing,

(pg 25 .)

McCANN The fingerstall

GOLDBERG The abdomen belt.

McCANN The ear plugs.

GOLDBERG The baby powder.

(pg. 93)

Pinter leaves many hints that McCann and Goldberg work as such a closely knit team, ruthlessly on a quest to find and alter Stanley. On page 41 Goldberg inquires about the other inhabitants of the house, and even asks if the guest is a man, suggesting that they are searching for someone. Also on page 43 after Goldberg has suggested they hold a party for Stanley, he says something that would relate directly to the function of the pair.

GOLDBERG We'll bring him out of himself.

One of the mysteries of the play is how McCann and Goldberg know things that happen on stage while they are off it. As with all Pinter mysteries, they remain unexplained, suggesting that we can't: possibly come to an understanding of human characters by examining them for a couple of hours onstage. It is also important to note that everything that happens in a Pinter play doesn't necessarily happen on stage. In his play *The Caretaker* the two brothers Mick and Aston seem to share lines. It is not explained or even suggested whether this is through coincidence or action offstage. In *The Birthday Party* the coincidences are bizarre and unexplainable, lending a malign omnipotence to the pair. Goldberg in the first interrogation of Stanley says the following line:

GOLDBERG Why do you treat that young lady like a leper? (pg.57)

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Goldberg must be referring to Lulu, as it is the only young female Stanley has encountered during the action of the play, but Goldberg doesn't actually meet Lulu until later in the second act. Earlier in the play, when Stanley and McCann are alone together, Stanley seems to connect McCann with the past .

STANLEY I've got a feeling we've met before.

McCANN No. We haven't.

STANLEY There's a Fuller's teashop. I used to have tea there

McCANN I don't know it.

STANLEY And a Boots library. I seem to connect you
with the High Street.

(pg. 49)

Later in act two during the birthday party, Goldberg is discussing his past and mentions "tea in Fuller's" and "library books from Boots." This is interesting in two respects because it either gives the pair omnipotence or suggests a shared past, shared by McCann, Goldberg and Stanley.

The idea of a shared past brings in further thoughts about the origins of McCann and Goldberg. Ben and Gus, the only two characters in Pinter's play *The Dumb Waiter* have many parallels with McCann and Goldberg in relation to their background. At the beginning of *The Birthday Party*. Goldberg discusses with McCann the fact that they are working on a "job".

GOLDBERG You know what I said when this job came up. I mean naturally they approached me to take care of it. And you know who I asked for?

(pg. 39)

In *The Dumb Waiter* a similar situation is presented. Ben and Gus, who work always as a team, discuss the job they will have to do - which is to assassinate someone.

GUS I hope it won't be a long job, this one.

BEN (pityingly) You mutt. Do you think we're the only branch of this organization?

(pg . 131 and pg . 147)

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The idea of this "organization" is important and is mentioned both by McCann and Goldberg in *The Birthday Party*.

McCANN You betrayed the organization.

GOLDBERG You betrayed the breed.

(pg. 62)

In *The Dumb Waiter* Ben and Gus are represented as the "little men" caught in an Orwellian social world, continuing to do the inhuman jobs they do without question. In the end it seems the organization, in a bizarre role reversal involving a ghostly dumb waiter, is having Ben assassinate Gus, which exaggerates their "little man" status. This relates straight back to McCann and Goldberg, who seem to be controlled by a larger organization. Their status as "little men" makes itself apparent as they begin to disintegrate as a team. They are not the ones in control after all. This horrific social world presented by Pinter is very well expressed in Peter Currell Brown's novel *Small creep's Day*. It is an extended social metaphor, with people working in an immense factory, making parts for a machine whose totality is unknown to anyone because of the factory's size. Nobody seems to really care what they are making. When one man goes in search of the machine and discovers the truth, he is made to question his pathetic existence, and the pathetic existence of mankind as a whole.

The Birthday Party, like Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, has a strong cyclical element. *Waiting for Godot* is a two act four character play. Both acts are basically the same, having the main characters, Vladimir and Estragon discussing their predicament in waiting for Godot. The cyclical element makes itself apparent when the other two characters (Pozzo and Lucky) move across the stage, encountering Didi and Gogo on their journey. This happens in both acts, except in the second act one of the characters is blind, and they move at a slower speed. They are caught in a cyclical trap. Like Stanley in *The Birthday Party*, they become weaker and have less energy the longer they strive for what they perceive is their goal. All this searching and in Stanley's case - hiding, is getting them nowhere, in fact it is gradually usurping their powers. The thought that McCann and Goldberg are not really in control of the situation and in fact are as lost as all the other characters, is an important contrast in the play. The ideas of an overpowering "organization" and an omnipotent cyclical force begin to

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converge.

McCann and Goldberg are caught in the cyclical trap as well, although this doesn't make itself clear until the third act. Pinter gives hints of this cyclical influence early on in the play.

GOLDBERG if we hadn't come today we'd have come tomorrow. (pg. 42)

This cyclical inevitability is an important image - that the cycle will come full circle and Stanley will have to pay the price (for what? another important mystery), no matter how he tries to escape it.

The blackout that completes act two is an important event in the disintegration of the roles of McCann and Goldberg. This "nightmare" section of the play, which plunges all the characters into darkness, is important because no one, except for Petey who wasn't at the party, appears to know why it happens. For the first time in the play, all the characters are seen as equal, each as lost in their own insecurities and fears as the other. In act three which reverts to an altered reality, the blackout is revealed by Petey as being less horrific than it really was - all it needed was a shilling in the meter box. These anticlimaxes characterize the third act and are especially important when discussing McCann and Goldberg's disintegration. When we find out that only McCann has spent the night with Stanley, and hear them losing control of themselves, much of the omnipotent menace built up in act two is reduced.

One of the main issues discussed by Pinter in *The Birthday Party* is that of identity, and the insecurity people have over knowing exactly who they are and what their purpose is. In his play *The Caretaker*, it is also seen as an important issue, and the tramp Davies who talks constantly of the papers that prove who he is, revolves between two names, Davies and Jenkins. This is taken to an extreme in *The Birthday Party*. Goldberg, in the first two acts of his play, seems to be so sure of his past. If his speeches are examined closely they reveal themselves to be a series of clichés.

GOLDBERG Pure? She wasn't a Sunday school teacher for nothing. Anyway, I'd leave her with a little kiss on the cheek - I never took liberties - we weren't like the young men these days in those clays. We knew the meaning of respect. . . Humming away I'd be, past the children's playground. I'd tip my hat to the toddlers, I'd give a helping hand to a couple of

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stray dogs, everything came natural.

(pg. 53)

The clichés are very unrealistic and do not suggest in any way that this is really Goldberg's pasty. He proves he is having identity problems early on in the play when he refers to himself using a different name ("Simey! my old mum used to shout, 'quick before it gets cold'." (pg. 53). Goldberg can be likened to Lucky in *Waiting for Godot* who when asked to think spews forth a continuous series of literary clichés. They are both trapped by the restrictions language puts on them.*' McCann also takes on a variety of roles in the play. At one point Goldberg refers to McCann as Dermot when talking to Petey. When Petey mentions this name to Goldberg, Goldberg appears ignorant of knowing such a person, and only on pressure admits his mistake.

PETEY So I went upstairs and your friend - Dermot - met me on the landing. And he told me.

GOLDBERG (sharply) Who?

PETEY Your friend - Dermot.

GOLDBERG (heavily) Dermot. Yes. (he sits.)

At the end of the play we find McCann was a defrocked priest. This is interesting because at one point he mistakes Goldberg for "Judas" (pg. 62). In act three Goldberg becomes more insecure about his identity, and if you call him by the wrong name, it affects him deeply.

McCANN Simey!

GOLDBERG (murderously) Don't call me that! (he seizes McCann by the throat) NEVER CALL ME THAT!

The Goldberg McCann team makes an obvious disintegration in act three. During a discussion between the pair, listened in by Petey, Goldberg is shown to be losing confidence in himself while McCann seems to be becoming independent and having more authority.

GOLDBERG What's what (McCann does not answer) McCANN (turning to look at Goldberg grimly) I'm not going up there again. (pg. 83)

When Petey reveals he has been listening to this private conversation, they are united again as a team and Goldberg becomes the authoritative character again. Finally, Goldberg completely loses control and has a breakdown. It is momentary as he manages to build himself a new

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self, with a new (but familiar) series of clichés - he even gives himself a new name.

GOLDBERG (Intensely, with growing certainty) My father said to me, Benny, Benny, he said, come here. He was dying... Forgive Benny, he said, and let live. Yes, Dad. Go home to your wife. I will. Dad. Keep an eye out for low-lives, for schnorrers and for layabouts... Always bid good morning to the neighbour... Never, never forget your family, for they are the rock, the constitution and the core!

(pg. 88)

The bizarre image of McCann blowing in Goldberg's mouth (like blowing up a deflated beachball) ends his breakdown and brings him to an apparent recovery. We can assume that this delicate balance will not keep Goldberg secure for very long. The displacement and confusion of the pair reminds me strongly of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. The two left-overs from Shakespeare try desperately to assert an independence over the roles imposed on them by the play, but they have nothing else but what the play has given them. You can't assert an independent self if you don't have one.

The roles cast on McCann and Goldberg by the omnipotent "organization" leaves them lost and grappling, searching for some constant role to cling to, but feeling impelled to complete the "job" they have been given. Goldberg doesn't find it all surprising when Lulu says he reminds her of her first love, suggesting that he is used to different roles.

LULU (To Goldberg) You're the dead image of the first man I ever loved.

GOLDBERG It goes without saying.

The many roles played by McCann and Goldberg during the play have great significance to the play. Whether they are perceived as grim reaper like visitors whose arrival is expected and dreaded, or lost souls trapped in a horrific social cycle, caught in the endless deep dark pit of the Pinter world -grappling to retain some sense of identity, these- are important creations. During the action of the play, they seem to have considerable power' over the other characters, but in reality, they have no power of their own at all and are not in control. In creating these characters Pinter reveals himself as a humanist who is very concerned about the fate of humanity, showing us that language is betraying us and placing absurd roles on people.

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Religion, nationalism, culture and politics combine to create the bastard Lucky, Goldberg, McCann and people like them.

“All my life I've said the same,
Play up, play up and play the game.”

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