

THE BIRTHDAY PARTY

By Harold Pinter

"What's happened to the love, the bonhomie, the unashamed expression of affection of the day before yesterday, that our mums taught us in the nursery?" This statement not only reflects the idea of The Birthday Party, but it relates directly to our ordinary lives as human beings. Every person is faced, at some time in their life with a chance to re-evaluate life; to question their past, to look at the present and to hope for a better future. In The Birthday Party, the main character, Stanley, is given a chance to do just this. He is approached by two men who force him to examine his past and present by evaluating his decisions in life, and give him a chance to hope for a better future.

In order to uncover the idea of The Birthday Party, it is necessary to first search within the dramatic action of the principal character, Stanley Webber. Stanley represents mankind; the total existence of all human beings. Therefore, the result of his actions and those around him, reflect how not only Stanley sees himself, but how mankind sees itself. We learn that Stanley was once a pianist in a concert party on the pier, who left his job and came to live in the boarding house. He has been a resident for about a year. Stanley finally came to live here as a result of the concert hall shutting down and the lack of love between him and his parents. This is significant because it not only justifies Stanley's actions in the play, but it parallels society. Unfortunately when people run into trouble and are faced with disaster or grief, like death or divorce, or must deal with major changes in life, like losing a job, many people run away from that situation. People run away to avoid the situation, to find something better, or to hide from what is troubling them. In Stanley's case, he is running from betrayal and the lack of acceptance. He runs far away to a boarding house near the sea. A place where he can be secluded from others outside the house and nurtured by those inside. Yet when someone or something disrupts that sanctuary that you have created, you feel violated and threatened, which is what happens to Stanley through the course of the play.

Stanley is a person who is seeking help and yet won't accept it when it's offered. Stanley thinks he has his life in order and fails to understand why everyone wants him to remember his past. When approached by Mr. Goldberg, a new resident, Stanley says, "You don't bother me. To me, you're nothing but a dirty joke. But I have a responsibility towards the people in this house. And nobody's going to take advantage of them while I'm here." What Stanley really means is that he is not going to allow himself to be taken advantage of, yet he is the one with the low self image. Throughout the play the characters have inadvertently tried to get Stanley to look at himself as an individual, but he has ignored all efforts. Meg plays games with Stanley, trying to bring out the boy in him, but Stanley lashes out at her verbally. "Who do you think you're talking to? Tell me Meg, Mrs. Boles, when you address yourself to me, do you every ask yourself who exactly you are talking to? " Ironically, Stanley doesn't even know who he is. When Lulu meets Stanley for the first time, she takes out her compact and fixes her makeup. Then she offers it to Stanley saying, "Do you want to have a look at your face? Why don't you have a wash? You look terrible." Lulu is giving Stanley a chance to not just look at his physical features, but to look further within himself as well. Again Stanley refuses, "A wash wouldn't make any difference." Stanley's feeling of lost hope for himself is evident in this first polar attitude. The characters take another look at Stanley during his birthday party when Meg makes a toast to Stanley. Goldberg says, "Look at him. Just look at him." Everyone is looking but it is Stanley who must do the looking. Yet when he does do the looking, the soul-searching, he still is unable to fully understand the way he is and why. "To look at me, I bet you wouldn't think I'd led such a quiet life. The lines on my face, eh ...I'll be all right when I get back...but

what I mean is, the way some people look at me you'd think I was a different person. I suppose I have changed, but I'm still the same man that I always was. Do you know what I mean?"

The idea in The Birthday Party not only reflects the main character, but is a result of the actions of the remaining characters as well. The characters in the play all represent reality in one way or another and are a constant reminder to Stanley of his past since they are a reflection of his life. But Stanley is unable to deal with the reality they present to him, so he either ignores or attacks the person verbally or physically. Petey and Meg are the first characters introduced in The Birthday Party. They are the owners of the boarding house in which Stanley lives. Petey is an older man who stacks deck chairs for a living. He lives a very monotonous lifestyle, based on routine. Every morning he gets up, eats breakfast, reads the paper and goes to work. His job and lifestyle are not eccentric or creative. In relation to Stanley, Petey represents the typical work ethic. Mankind's number one goal is to get a job. The majority of our lives is spent preparing to get a job, finding a job, working and then continuing our education to become better at our jobs. We live in a society in which money is needed to survive. Unfortunately, many people work in no-end jobs just to have some money to get by. Petey's job is simple and passes his time well, whether he likes it or not. Stanley, once a pianist, left his job to live by the sea. For whatever reason Stanley left, he ran away. Like Stanley, many people leave jobs behind to find something else or to escape working all together. Stanley moved to the house to forget the bad memories associated with his job, and yet Petey is his constant reminder of what he left behind. Petey's dedication to his job is Stanley's constant reminder of his failure to keep his.

Meg, Petey's wife, represents the child in every person. Mankind spends its childhood trying to grow up fast, yet when grown, it tries so hard to be young again. Meg is an adult living a childlike life. She calls everyone by their nickname, as if they too were a child. She tries hard to get the attention of others, to be included and to feel special. Although she acts childlike at times, she also acts motherly towards others. These two ideas, that fact that Meg is childlike and that she is motherly, are the realities which face Stanley. Stanley came to the boarding house to escape his past and yet Meg is a daily reminder to him. That is why he is so condescending and arrogant to her. Stanley grew up to be a pianist and now he is not. He is nothing. His childhood is gone and as an adult he is lost. Stanley's father refused to accept his talents, and avoided Stanley's concerts. His mother was eventually put in a sanatorium, so his relationship with her also dwindled. This lack of a family structure was difficult for Stanley. So when Meg acts motherly to Stanley he obviously responds negatively. It is Stanley's way of again ignoring reality; the reality of what his life was and still is missing. Family problems are very evident in our world. Children are being raised in dysfunctional families ranging from divorce to alcoholism. Like Stanley, children who grow up and leave the dysfunctional family don't want to be reminded of what happened in the past, and yet it is daily reminder for Stanley.

Lulu, a neighbor, also represents reality for Stanley by reflecting his life which he once left behind. Lulu is a passionate character who wants to experience love. Unfortunately, she does not understand the difference between a sincere love and a violent love. All she wants is to be loved, and how she may get it is not always so important at first. This is apparent when she meets Mr. Goldberg. Lulu plays flirt games with Goldberg until it is evident that she and he have had a love affair, one in which was true and meaningful to her. Yet it is not until the end of the play that we learn that night was just a game. When Goldberg says he is leaving, Lulu gets very upset and hurt, realizing that she was used; "a passing fancy." During the course of the play she is again teased with the feeling of love, when someone begins touching her in the dark. She allows herself to be "taken" physically, in hopes of it being love. Then suddenly she realizes that it is not love but hate and that she is being raped. It is not surprising to discover that it is Stanley who is raping her. To

Stanley, Lulu is a reality which slaps him in the face. She represents love, which Stanley never had and he feels will never have. His father avoided him, his mother was locked up, and even the concert hall shut down. Everyone deserted him, so he deserted himself as well by leaving home and shutting himself off from the world. Something which many people do when they are lost and confused. Since Stanley felt the absence of love, he wanted someone else to also experience it as well. What better way than to rape Lulu. He not only takes advantage of her but he is destroying the one thing he never had; Lulu's desire to love and to be loved. This also relates to society as a whole, because every person wants to love and be loved. When we don't find that love, we tend to blame ourselves or others and hide behind closed doors. Those who have been hurt by love in our lives, want to build a wall around us so no one else can hurt us, or end up hurting others as we were once hurt. This is exactly what Stanley does to Lulu. Again he has avoided reality by destroying it, and in this case, destroying Lulu.

The final two characters of The Birthday Party are the most significant since they force Stanley to look at himself and face reality. Mr. McCann and Mr. Goldberg are the two forces which over-power Stanley and finally win out. At some point in everyone's life, they will be forced to re-evaluate their existence and their meaning here on earth. It may be due to a near-death experience which causes a person to look at their past and do some soul-searching. It may be due to divorce, loneliness, love and responsibility or the lack there of. What ever the fate, someone or something will cause people to change and to look at themselves. Mr. McCann and Mr. Goldberg are the very someone who cause Stanley to change. They represent fate, which has called upon Stanley. Goldberg explains, "If we hadn't come today we'd have come tomorrow. Still, I'm glad we came today." Fate occurs when we least expect it and is the determining cause of our actions. Now these two men have come to reform Stanley by making him face his fears of the past, come to terms with the present and hope for a better future. As Goldberg says, "We'll bring him out of himself." By enforcing respect, honesty, a strong work ethic, belief in family values, devotion to friends and neighbors, strong education values and trust for oneself, Goldberg believes he can change Stanley into a man.

So if Meg, Petey, and Lulu are reflections of Stanley's life, and Mr. McCann and Mr. Goldberg have come to remind Stanley of what he has forgotten, then when does it happen and how does it actually happens? It is not until McCann and Goldberg start talking to Stanley, that he begins to look at himself. Human beings have a unique way of avoiding situations until it is absolutely necessary or when something drastic happens and then reality is inevitable. The same holds true for Stanley. McCann and Goldberg start interrogating him slowly and carefully. But they know, that in order to get through to Stanley, they must be hard, strong, fast and threatening. At the being of the interrogation scene, Stanley is questioned about why he wants to forget his past, how he has hurt others, why he quit work and what is his identity. He can not give any answers, so they continue with more harsh questions; why did he kill his wife, why did he lock up his mother and why did he change his identity. At this point Stanley starts to break down realizing how terrible his life has been. McCann and Goldberg continue degrading him by saying, "You contaminate womankind", "You're dead", and "You stink of sin". Stanley can say nothing but scream when finally Meg walks in. From this first encounter with McCann and Goldberg, Stanley realizes how awful his life was and how lost he has been. Yet he is unable to control that strengthened hate for himself and uses it destructively by raping Lulu and trying to strangle Meg. It is not until the second interrogation scene that McCann and Goldberg bring hope and joy into Stanley's perspective. By this time Stanley has had time to evaluate his past and is ready to listen. McCann and Goldberg first give him a new set of glasses, as if a new world to look through. They explain this time that yes, he is in a rut, but they can save him, "from a worse fate", which would be dying and never given a chance to change things in his life. "From now on we'll be the hub of you wheel" They promise to re-orientate him to the world as a new

man and give him a chance to be somebody again. "You'll be rich, a success, make decisions, own yachts, be a statesman." When McCann and Goldberg finally ask Stanley for his opinion, Stanley does not know what to say. It is here that Stanley changes from a boy to a man, from a disease to a cure. Although he does not have an answer, it is what's not said, which is his final polar attitude. Stanley tries talking by saying, "Uh-gug...uh-gug...eeehhh-gag...Cahh... caahh..." Just the fact that Stanley is not talking back to anyone, that he is not hurting himself or another, and that he tried to talk, proves his willingness to succeed and change his life around. Stanley has gone to the extreme at this point, but it shows his ability to finally face reality, look towards hope and start putting his life back together. He's no longer washed up.

The title of the play is also symbolic of the inner meaning of The Birthday Party. A birthday comes only once a year and is a time of celebration. It is a time to remember the good times in the past and a chance to look toward hopefulness and cheer in the next year. A birthday is a celebration of life which ties in with the play's idea. Stanley has lived a life of solitude and loneliness. Now McCann and Goldberg have come to give Stanley a chance to reflect on his past life, face the realities which he has hid from and start a new life filled with hope. "There's a gentleman living here. He's got a birthday, and he's forgotten all about it. So we're going to remind him. We're going to give him a party." Just as Stanley has refused to acknowledge his birthday, so do so many people in the world. Why? So many of us look at birthdays as just another day older and treat it negatively. It is a time to reflect on the past and look toward the future. It's a time to be acknowledged for your achievements and a time to correct bad judgments made in the past. Goldberg said it best, "But a birthday, I always feel, is a great occasion, taken too much for granted these days. What a thing to celebrate - birth." It's a time to move on and that is exactly what Stanley does. With the help of McCann and Goldberg, Stanley realizes he can now face the past honestly and begin searching for a better tomorrow.

After examining the dramatic action of the characters and their relation to the principal character, studying the title of the play, and uncovering the philosophical statements, a final summary of the idea can be made about The Birthday Party. Mankind is in control of its destiny by the decisions it makes in life. When bad decisions are made, we often wish we had a second chance to turn our life around. Fate has called upon Stanley on this special day of celebration, his birthday, and has given him that second chance. The opportunity to face his fearful realities of the past and move on to a better, more hope filled life has come. The past is just that. It is gone. Let's enjoy the present and seek a bright future with many birthday celebrations of life to come.