

**THE QUEST OF IDENTITY: A STUDY OF THE CHARACTERS OF
STANLEY, GOLDBERG AND McCANN IN HAROLD PINTER'S
THE BIRTHDAY PARTY.**

By

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The embarrassment of every reader of Harold Pinter's The Birthday Party is total when he or she comes across characters like Stanley, Goldberg and McCann. Highlighting the incomprehensible nature of Pinter's characters, Martin Esslin reveals that when Pinter received a letter which read:

Dear Sir, I would be obliged if you would kindly explain to me the meaning of your play, The Birthday Party. These are the points which I do not understand: 1. Who are the two men? Where did Stanley come from? 3. Were they all supposed to be normal? You will appreciate that without the answers to my questions I cannot fully understand your play (Esslin, 1984:41).

Esslin goes on to tell us that Pinter is said to have replied as follows:

Dear Madam, I would be obliged if you would kindly explain to me the meaning of your letter. These are the points which I do not understand: 1. Who are you? 2. Where do you come from? 3. Are you supposed to be normal? You will appreciate that without the answers to your questions I cannot fully understand your letter (Ibid:41-2).

Pinter's reply does not help us to understand the identity of his three characters. His reply to the woman's question is ambivalent and leaves every reader of The Birthday Party wondering who the characters really are. It is the purpose of this paper to shed a flood of light on the characters of Stanley, Goldberg and McCann in the play mentioned above.

Before we examine the identity of Stanley, Goldberg and McCann in The Birthday Party, it will be proper to make a few remarks about Pinter's conception of characterization. Harold Pinter's view about characterization is that:

... in the novel, the omniscient narrator, the author who knew every motivation of his characters and freely told his readers about it, went out with Henry James. In drama, where the apparent absence of a narrator, the apparent objectivity of the action presented on the stage, has masked the problem, the omniscient author remained the rule even during the period of naturalism, when the theory underlying the practice of playwrights actually called for total objectivity (Ibid:43).

Pursuing Pinter's vision of characterization further, Martin Esslin tells us that Pinter rejects "this cocksureness of the playwrights, their claim to be in a position to know all about the characters and what makes them tick" (Ibid:43). Harold Pinter therefore concludes his view on characterization by asking this question: "How, in the present state of our knowledge of psychology and the complexity and hidden layers of the human mind, can anyone claim to know what motivated himself, let alone another human being? (Ibid:43)

Pinter Further questions:

We do not know, with any semblance of certainty, what motivates our own wives, parents,our children why then should we be furnished with a complete dossier about the motivation of any character we casually encounter on the stage? (Ibid: 43)

This is the stand of Pinter on characterization. This means that to understand the characters on Pinter's stage, we must lean on psychoanalysis for help. Having said this, we can now attempt a psychoanalytical analysis of the characters of Stanley, Goldberg and McCann.

THE IDENTITY OF STANLEY

Like the identity of Goldberg and McCann which puzzles any student who reads The Birthday Party, the identity of Stanley equally leaves many a reader of the play wondering who he is and why he is living with Petey and Meg. Before we attempt an analysis of Stanley's character, it will be proper for us to know who Petey and Meg are to him. In other words, what relationship exists between the couple (Petey and Meg) and Stanley? Is Stanley their guest or is there a deeper relationship hidden from us by Pinter?

PETEY AND MEG AS STANLEY'S FATHER FIGURE AND MOTHER FIGURE.

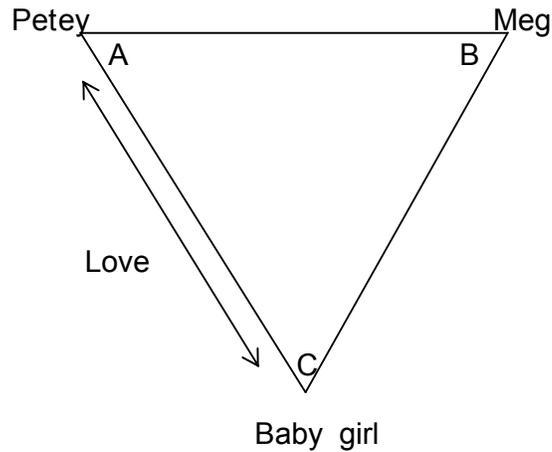
What strikes us when we read the The Birthday is that Meg's image as a mother figure emerges boldly in the play. Esslin equally shares this view when he states:

On another plane again, that of psychological archetypes, The Birthday Party might also be seen as an image, a metaphor for the process of growing up, of expulsion from the warm, cosy world of childhood. That Meg, with her crushing combination of motherliness and senile eroticism, is a mother - image seen from the view point of an oedipus complex needs no particular stress. (Ibid:88).

From the viewpoint of the oedipus complex, as Esslin has pointed out, Meg stands in proud array as "a mother - image". When the play opens, Petey and Meg who are a childless couple express their oedipal attitude in this dialogue.

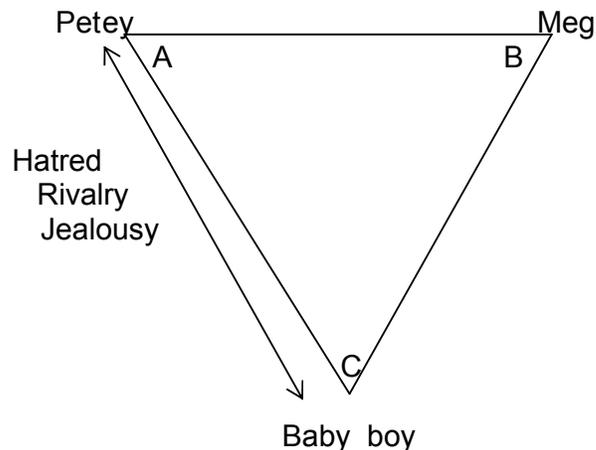
Meg: Oh (Pause),
What are you reading?
Petey: Someone's just had a baby.
Meg: Oh, they haven't! who?
Petey: Some girl.
Meg: Who, Petey, who?
Petey: I don't think you'd know her.
Meg: What's her name?
Petey: Lady Mary Splatt.
Meg: I don't know her.
Petey: No.
Meg: What is it?
Petey: (Studying the paper)
Er-a girl
Meg: Not a boy?
Petey: No.
Meg: Oh, what a shame. I'd be sorry.
I'd much rather have a Little boy.
Petey: A little girl's all right.
I'd much rather have a little girl
(Pinter, 1958:11)

An analysis of the views of Petey and Meg in the above dialogue will throw a flood of light on their relationship with Stanley who has lived with them for a year as a guest. When Petey tells Meg that “a little girl’s all right” he is expressing his oedipal longing for a baby girl instead of a baby boy who will supplant him. Petey’s unconscious desire for a baby girl can be represented on the oedipal triangle thus:



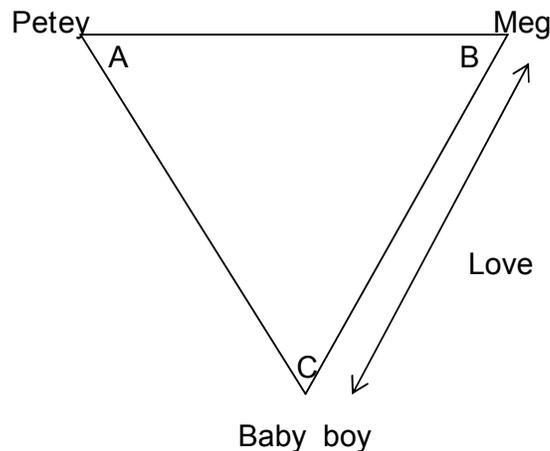
From this diagram, we can say that in choosing a baby girl, Petey expresses his unconscious craving for a would-be daughter who will become his love object. Sigmund Freud saves us the need of dismissing this point when he says that: “... with girls the wish to have a child by their father is equally constant, and this in spite of their being completely incapable of forming any clear idea of the means of fulfilling these wishes” (Freud, 1993:106). It is also important to add that Petey’s longing for a baby girl is motivated by his unconscious hatred of a baby boy.

That Petey’s desire for a baby girl is motivated by his unconscious fear of a baby boy cannot be denied. The oedipal triangle below externalizes Petey’s unconscious fear of a baby boy who will supplant him.

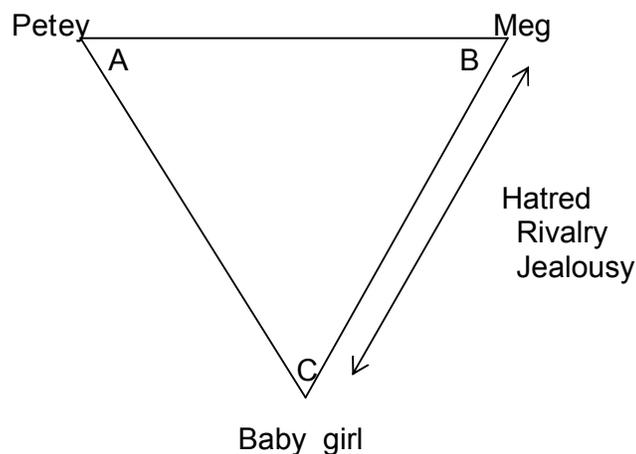


The oedipal triangle, as shown in AC, brings out the hatred, rivalry and jealousy that characterize father - son relationship. As we have pointed out, Petey's unconscious fear of a baby boy who will compete with him to possess Meg as a love object makes him stand out as a father figure.

Like Petey's choice of a baby girl, Meg's choice of a baby boy is revealing. When Meg tells Petey that "I'd much rather have a little boy" she is expressing her unconscious desire for a baby boy instead of a baby girl who will supplant her and possess Petey. Meg's unconscious desire or yearning for a baby boy, like Petey's can be represented on the oedipal diagram thus:



This diagram shows Meg's unconscious desire for her son as a love object. Sigmund Freud is united in opinion with this view in the sense that "with boys, the wish to beget a child from their mother is never absent" (Ibid:106). On the contrary, Meg's fear of a baby girl is due to the fact that she will supplant her. This diagram brings out the unhealthy relationship between mother and daughter. The triangle below will shed light on Meg's fear of a baby girl.



The current of hatred, rivalry and jealousy that flows between mother and daughter, as shown in BC of the oedipal triangle brings out Meg's unconscious fear of a baby girl. Stated differently, beneath Meg's longing for a baby boy is her unconscious fear that a baby girl will supplant her.

From what we have said above, Meg's choice of a baby boy gives her the image of a mother figure wanting to possess her son.

Emphasizing the hostility between mother and daughter further, Freud writes:

"The daughter finds in her mother the authority which restricts her will and which is entrusted with the task of imposing on her the renunciation of sexual freedom which society demands; in a few instances she even finds in her a competitor who struggles against being supplanted (Freud, 1991:323-4).

Elaborating this point further, Freud adds: ... A little girl looks on her mother as a person who interferes with her affectionate relation to her father and who occupies a position which she herself could well fill (Ibid:242).

Finally, on the relationship that parents attach to their children, Freud thinks that they:

... are frequently led in their preferences by differences of sex, so that the father will choose his daughter and the mother her son as a favourite, or, in case of a cooling off in marriage, as a substitute for a love object that has lost its value (Ibid:244).

What we have said above stands as eloquent proof that Petey and Meg are Stanley's father figure and mother figure respectively. With this in mind, we can now examine the identity of Stanley.

STANLEY AS A SON FIGURE

Considering Stanley as the son of Petey and Meg may not be convincing to many people. In this connection, this question is likely to be asked: How can Stanley who is a visitor be considered as the son of Petey and Meg? We should bear in mind that although Stanley appears as a visitor, a careful look through the lens of psychoanalysis will show that he is the son of Petey and Meg. Many psychoanalysts in their clinical experiences do come across grown ups like Stanley whose unconscious behaviour makes them look like a five or six-year-old child. Michael Franz Basch, a young

psychoanalyst is quick to point out his experience with a woman who showed sexual interest in him. Basch further tells us that his confusion was total when the woman offered herself to him. He states:

I quickly obtained an emergency consultation with one of my supervisors, convinced I had inadvertently derailed the analysis and quite at a loss about what I should do next. My consultant helped me to understand that what was happening was not an interference with the analysis but the emergence in the transference of some heretofore repressed wishes from childhood. To which I added, 'complicated, of course, by the reality that she is now a woman and not a little girl, and I am not her father but a man of about her age'. 'No', my supervisor said, 'the reality is that, though she is not aware of it yet while she is lying on the couch she is a little girl and you are her father'. What a properly managed analysis brings out is true, that is, the unconscious reality that governs a patient's life (Basch, 1988:302)

What arrests one's attention in the foregoing analysis is the interpretation of Basch's supervisor that "... while she is lying on the couch, she is a little girl and you are her father". In the same breath, we can say that while Stanley is in Petey and Meg's house, he is a little five or six-year-old boy and they are his parents (father and mother). In other words, Stanley behaves like a child because, to borrow the words of Basch, he transfers "... some heretofore repressed wishes from childhood" to Petey and Meg.

Apart from transferring his "repressed wishes from childhood" to his father figure and mother figure respectively, he is also regarded by them as their son. Stanley's attitude as a recalcitrant son who refuses to eat his breakfast forces Meg, the domineering mother figure to shout: "I'm going to count three! One! Two! Three! I'm coming to get you!" (The Birthday Party: 13). When Petey questions Meg further whether Stanley drank his tea in previous instances, she says: "I made him. I stood there till he did" (Ibid: 13). In yet another occasion when Stanley refuses to eat his food, the commanding mother figure says: "Now you eat boy. Go on" (Ibid: 14). All these instances show that Stanley has regressed from an adult position to the level of a child who has to be begged by his mother before he can eat his meal.

The view that Stanley is the son of Petey and Meg is also upheld by C.G. Jung in Psyche and Symbol. According to C.G. Jung, Stanley is "... a man living regressively, seeking his childhood and his mother, fleeing from a cold cruel world which denies him understanding" (Jung, 1959:10).

Stanley's lamentation in the passage below stands as eloquent proof that society, as Jung hints above, has indeed rejected him:

... They carved me up. It was all arranged, it was all worked out. My next concert. Somewhere else it was. In winter. I went down there to play. Then, when I got there, the hall was closed, the place was shuttered up not even a caretaker. They'd locked it up... A fast one. They pulled a fast one. I'd like to know who was responsible for that... They want me to crawl down on my bended knees... (The Birthday Party: 23).

Stanley's lamentation constitutes the loud cry of a child looking for love from a mother because "a cold cruel world...denies him understanding".

Calvin S. Hall in A Primer of Freudian Psychology also sheds enough light on Stanley's regression from an adult position to the oedipal level when he says that:

A young married woman who becomes anxious after her first quarrel with her husband may return to the security of her parents' home. A person who has been hurt by the world may shut himself up in a private dream world (Hall, 1954:95).

Like Stanley, Hamlet also regresses into a two-year-old child. Norman H. Holland, quoting Essler, pursues this point when he says that: "...Hamlet has regressed from an adult position to the oedipal level as a result of three shocks: his father's sudden death; his mother's hasty marriage; the ghost's revelations" (Holland, 1966:173).

The foregoing discussion demonstrates beyond doubt that Stanley is the son of Petey and Meg.

GOLDBERG AND McCANN AS STANLEY'S FATHER FIGURES

As we pointed out earlier, the identity of Goldberg and McCann is obscure. Martin Esslin (1984:85) raises a good point for discussion when he says that "Goldberg and McCann might, essentially be forces in the mind, thoughts". If we truly consider these two characters as "...forces in the mind, thoughts" then we are, in effect, saying that they play a major role in the development of the oedipal theme in The Birthday Party. In this regard, we can consider them as father figures. Before arrows of criticism begin to hit one's chest, let us remember that in projection "an internal impulse becomes a perception of the external world" (Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare: 15). In the light of this statement, we can say that if Goldberg is an externalization of

an internal impulse in Petey's mind about Stanley, then he splits or decomposes into another father figure called Goldberg. By the same token, if McCann is an externalization of an internal impulse in Petey's mind about Stanley, then he also splits or decomposes into another father figure called McCann. A few examples will lay this point to rest. Norman H. Holland's example to show how a person's internal wish can be acted out by another character is illuminating. He states:

... in Oedipus Rex, the hero's (axiomatic) wish to kill his father and marry his mother becomes the prediction of an oracle. In Hamlet, the villain acts out the hero's oedipal wish. In The Brothers Karamazov, the villain, not the hero, carries out part of the oedipal wish, namely, to kill his father (Ibid:15)

From what Norman H. Holland says above, it is evident that like the villain in Hamlet who acts out the hero's oedipal wish, like the villain in The Brothers Karamazov who carries out part of the hero's oedipal wish, Goldberg acts out Petey's tyrannical wish as a father to impose his authority on Stanley while McCann acts out Petey's wish to castrate or punish him for his oedipal crime.

Another illuminating example to show the splitting or projection of a character is given by Otto Rank in Shakespeare's Coriolanus. In this example, as Norman H. Holland points out in Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare, Otto Rank "... saw in Menenius an honoured father to coriolanus, and in Aufidius a hated father who ultimately causes the son to be killed" (Ibid: 157).

Arguing in the same vein, it can be concluded that Petey is an honoured or loving father while Goldberg and McCann turn out to be hated father figures who want Stanley to be punished for his oedipal guilt.

The third example to prove that in The Birthday Party, Petey splits into Goldberg and McCann is not far to seek. What Norman H. Holland says of Hamlet's father figures is true of Stanley. He states:

The play has three fathers and two father substitutes; each of them reflects a different fantasy about the father. The ghost is the idealized father; Polonius is the dotard; old Fortinbras is the murdered father; Claudius is the criminal father; Fortinbras' uncle is the sick, bedridden, impotent father (Ibid: 172).

In the light of the foregoing statement it can, as stressed earlier, be concluded that Goldberg and McCann reflect a different fantasy of the father.

Because Petey is chased out of his own house by Stanley to go out and play chess with the complicity of Meg, Goldberg and McCann must assert the tyrannical and castrating halves of Petey. In other words, because Petey is a weak or dotard father figure, his authoritative self is projected in Goldberg and McCann. This, in psychoanalytic terms, means that Goldberg and McCann are projections of unconscious aspects of Petey's personality.

From what has been said above, a person with an inquisitive frame of mind may ask: how can we prove that Goldberg and McCann are projections of Petey's tyrannical and castrating halves? There is enough evidence in the play to prove that Goldberg and McCann are the projections of Petey's authoritative halves. The first evidence emerges from this dialogue:

Petey: Oh, Meg, two men came up
To me on the beach last night.
Meg: Two men?
Petey: Yes. They wanted to know if we could put them up
for a couple of nights.
Meg: Put them up? Here?
Petey: Yes.
Meg: How many men?
Petey: Two.
Meg: What did you say?
Petey: Well, I said I didn't know. So they said they'd come round
to find out.
Meg: Are they coming?
Petey: Well, they said they would.
Meg: Had they heard of us, Petey?
Petey: They must have done (The Birthday Party: 12)

From this dialogue, it is certain that the visitors first approached Petey because they knew that he would lodge them. Meg presses Petey for his opinion in this matter by asking: "What did you say?" Meg expresses surprise when she is informed of the visit in these words: "put them up? Here?" Her reaction proves that if her opinion were sought by the two men, she would have refused to lodge them.

Like Meg, Stanley also expresses surprise when the news is broken to him. Consider what he tells Meg: "They won't come. Someone's taking the Michael. Forget all about it. It's a false alarm. A false alarm" (Ibid: 21). Why does Stanley consider the news of the arrival of Goldberg and McCann "a false alarm?" He probably does so because he fears that the visitors will prevent his incestuous ties with Meg. In conclusion, there is a hint that although Petey did not openly admit to Meg that he wanted to lodge the two visitors, he unconsciously wanted to house them so as to get Stanley under

their grip. More adequately stated, Goldberg and McCann who appear as visitors in the eyes of Meg and Stanley looking for accommodation are, in fact, projections of Petey's unconscious wish to punish his son.

The next example which proves that Petey splits into Goldberg and McCann because he wants to punish Stanley for his oedipal desire emerges clearly in this dialogue:

Stanley: Why are you down here?
McCann: A short holiday.
Stanley: This is a ridiculous house to pick on.
McCann: Why?
Stanley: Because it's not a boarding house. It never was.
McCann: Sure it is.
Stanley: Why did you choose this house?
McCann: You know, sir, you're a bit depressed for a man on his birthday (Ibid: 41).

While McCann's grip on Stanley is tightening, Goldberg and Petey are having a tête à tête in the garden. Although we do not hear what Goldberg and Petey are discussing, there is a hint that their conversation is centred on Stanley's unbecoming oedipal attitude. This point is reinforced by Stanley's castration anxiety expressed thus: "Where the hell are they? Why don't they come in? What are they doing out there?" (Ibid: 41). When Petey and Goldberg enter the house, this is what we hear:

Petey: Oh hullo Stan. You haven't met Stanley, have you, Mr. Goldberg?
Goldberg: I haven't had the pleasure.
Petey: Oh well, this is Mr. Goldberg, this is Mr. Webber.
Goldberg: Pleased to meet you.
Petey: We were just getting a bit of air in the garden (Ibid: 43).

After introducing Stanley to Goldberg, Petey tries to reassure him in these words: "We were just getting a bit of air in the garden". Petey's reassuring words constitute an attempt to exonerate himself from blame since in the eyes of Meg and Stanley, he is a weak or dotard father figure. The psychoanalytic relevance of this scene is that Meg and Stanley do not know that Goldberg is an externalization of Petey's repressed wish to punish his rival son. The credibility of this interpretation lies in Goldberg's response after Stanley is introduced to him. The words of Goldberg: "I was telling Mr. Boles about my old mum", act as a mirror for Stanley to reflect his own relationship with Meg, his old mother.

The examples cited above have, as it were, enabled us to take a penetrating look at Petey's mind to see his repressed hatred of Stanley Webber for daring to supplant him.

Another example to show that the three father figures are united in opinion to punish Stanley for his oedipal yearnings emerges in this dialogue:

Petey: (reading). You slept like a log last night.
Meg: Did I?
Petey: Dead out.
Meg: I have been tired. Oh, look. The drum's broken. Why is it broken?
Petey: I don't know.
Meg: It still makes a noise.
Petey: You can always get another one...
Meg: Have you seen him down yet? (Petey does not answer)
Petey: Petey.
Petey: What?
Meg: Have you seen him down?
Petey: Who?
Meg: Stanley.
Petey: No.
Meg: Nor have I. That boy should be up. He's late for his breakfast.
Petey: There isn't any breakfast.
Meg: Yes, but he doesn't know that, I'm going to call him.
Petey: (Quickly). No, don't do that, Meg. Let him sleep.
Meg: But you say he stays in bed too much.
Petey: Let him sleep... this morning. Leave him.
Meg: I've been up once, with his cup of tea. But Mr. McCann opened the door. He said they were talking. He said he'd made him one. He must have been up early. I don't know what they were talking about. I was surprised... Do you think, they are old friends... I didn't give him his tea. He'd already had one. I came down again and went on with my work. Then, after a bit they came down to breakfast. Stanley must have gone to sleep again.
Petey: When are you going to do your shopping, Meg?
Meg: Yes, I must. (collecting the bag). I've got a rotten headache (Ibid: 67-9)

This dialogue is fraught with intense meaning. Petey's statement: "You slept like a log last night", proves that he was aware of McCann and Goldberg's torture of Stanley. As the dialogue between them progresses, Meg queries:

“Have you seen him down yet? (Petey does not answer)”. Although Petey does not answer, as the stage directions indicate, it is evident that he is just trying to ignore her. When she squeezes him further for more information on Stanley, Petey becomes evasive in his answer and retorts: “who?” Pushed to the wall by Meg, Petey replies that he had not seen Stanley. When Meg tells Petey: “I’m going to call him” he, as the stage directions indicate, reacts quickly by saying: “No, don’t do that, Meg. Let him sleep”. As if this warning is not enough, he adds: “Let him sleep... this morning. Leave him”. From this dialogue, it can be concluded that it is only Meg who is in the dark concerning what is happening to Stanley. These words further reveal that the three father figures know what has happened to Stanley. When Meg further asks Petey: “... do you think they know each other?” Petey quickly changes the topic by asking her: “When are you going to do your shopping, Meg?” Meg falls in Petey’s trap and replies: “Yes, I must. (collecting her bag)”. Petey, up to this point, succeeds in keeping Meg in the dark because she goes to the market not knowing exactly what is happening to her beloved Stanley. This view is also stressed by Martin Esslin when he says that

Petey, who witnessed something of the tortures to which Stanley was being subjected upstairs in his room during the night, tries to keep her in the dark about the true state of her beloved lodger (Pinter the Playwright: 83).

In conclusion, the examples cited above are indicative that the three father figures are intimately aware that Stanley is a mother defiler and a father supplanter. Since Petey reveals himself in the play as a weak or dotard father figure by raising no finger of reproach against Stanley for his incestuous attitude, his authoritative and castrating halves must be acted out by Goldberg and McCann. In the light of this psychoanalytical analysis, a flood of light is shed on the characters of Stanley, Goldberg and McCann in The Birthday Party.

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