Two Variations on the Theme of *The Golden Bough*: 
Victim and Victor as Victim

*They give birth astride of a grave,*
*the light gleams an instant,*
*then it’s night once more.*

We often bemoan the loss to modern drama of the tragic hero. We seek in vain for that noble character whom Aristotle described, whose fall from great heights is balanced by his spiritual strength and growth, whose suffering is in excess of his deserts, but whose fall is due in part to his own character. This tragic hero, victim of the fates and of himself, carrying within him the seeds of his own doom and of his spiritual triumph, the Prometheus of Aeschylus, the Oedipus of Sophocles, the Hamlet of Shakespeare, has been replaced in modern drama by a series of victims of accident, society, or heredity, a series of little men whose fall is not far, whose dignity is questionable, and whose victories of insight are negligible.

Pinter, no less than Miller, Williams, Osborne, or Jo-
nesco, presents us with the little man, with the victim rather than the victim-victor of heroic stature. In *The Birthday Party*, Stanley is in hiding from the world that descends upon him in the form of Goldberg and McCann. They proceed to demolish what little sense of identity this has-been-if-ever artist has mustered up and taken with him into hiding. In *The Caretaker*, a self-deceiving tramp, who has mislaid his identity in Sidcup along with his papers, loses through his own machinations what small refuge from the misfortunes of his life he has temporarily been able to achieve. In *The Dumb Waiter*, a hired killer is to be executed for reasons beyond his powers of comprehension; and in *A Slight Ache*, an effete Edward is replaced in his own elegant home by a voiceless and smelly match-seller who doesn’t even sell matches. A play such as *Tea Party* would even seem to reverse the tragic rhythm as a man’s rise in the business world is paralleled with his gradual disintegration as a human being.

Pinter’s characters share with the characters of contemporary drama a lack of the redeeming sense of self which has permeated the truly tragic drama of the past. Modern drama, no less than ancient, is concerned with man’s salvation, his redemption from the finality of death; but as it reflects man’s loss of his sense of self, it reflects too his loss of a sense of order in the universe. The arbitrary nature of salvation baffles Vladimir in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, and he puzzles over the report by only one of the four evangelists that one of the two thieves crucified with Christ was saved. The nature of salvation, whether Godot will come, whether he indeed exists, is no clearer to Vladimir and Estragon than their own existence. “You’re sure you saw me, you won’t come and tell me to-morrow that you never saw me,” Vladimir pleads with the emissary from Godot, no surer of his own identity than of Godot’s identity or of the salvation which he seeks from Godot.

But if Pinter’s world also reflects a loss of sense of self
and if its surface reflects the arbitrary nature of events, its rhythms suggest an order beneath the surface that connects with the rhythms of ancient tragedy and comedy as well as with their ritual base. A close look at Pinter's characters reveals a curious ambiguity about their positions as victims. Stanley, in *The Birthday Party*, is victimized by two men who are themselves frightened, potential victims of the power they serve. And Stanley becomes more than a victim when he attempts to strangle his landlady Meg and rape the visiting Lulu. Gus, the killer in *The Dumb Waiter*, is frightened: the killer must be killed. Edward, replaced by the matchseller, is clearly victim, but we see him as well in the course of *A Slight Ache* as the terrible killer—of a wasp. Ruth is clearly both victim and victor in her final role as prostitute in *The Homecoming*, which closes on the ambiguous question of who will be most exploited in the new family arrangements. In almost all of Pinter's plays, then, an ambiguity exists about the nature of the victim. He may not be the heroic victim-victor of ancient tragedy whose victory is often won on the spiritual plane, but he does share with his ancient brethren the double role of victim and victor.

Frazer's *The Golden Bough* has as its central myth the plight of a victim-victor which may well serve to illuminate the nature of Pinter's characters and their relationship to the tragic and comic dramas from which they descend. The Golden Bough is a bough of the tree of Diana's sacred grove in Nemi, which, Frazer explains, was broken off by the contenders to the priesthood of Nemi. Such a contender to the priesthood succeeded to the office by slaying the old priest, and he in turn was slain by the next contender. Frazer describes in dramatic terms the uneasy rule of the victor-victim priest.

The post which he held by this precarious tenure carried with it the title of king; but surely no crowned head ever lay uneasier, or was visited by more evil dreams, than his. For
year in, year out, in summer and winter, in fair weather and in foul, he had to keep his lonely watch, and whenever he snatched a troubled slumber it was at the peril of his life.

The dreamy blue of Italian skies, the dappled shade of summer woods, and the sparkle of waves in the sun can have accorded but ill with that stern and sinister figure. Rather we picture to ourselves the scene as it may have been witnessed by a belated wayfarer on one of those wild autumn nights when the dead leaves are falling thick, and the winds seem to sing the dirge of the dying year.³

Frazer's entire book is an attempt to explain the priesthood of Nemi, to find the universal rhythms that he believed beat beneath the strange surface of the custom. Itself a quest for the meaning of the strange succession to the priesthood, the book takes as its central theme the "victory of fertility over the waste land."⁴ The priest-king of Nemi becomes the prototype of the succession of dying king-gods—Attis, Adonis, Dionysus, whose death and resurrection is celebrated in a vast variety of rituals that share a desire to preserve the god and his worshipers from death. In such rituals, as Gilbert Murray describes them, "the daiman is fought against and torn to pieces, announced as dead, wept for, collected and recognized, and revealed in his new divine light."⁵

The savage, Frazer notes, often regards his priest-king as a god. And since the death of such a man-god is unacceptable to him, he comes to believe that killing such a figure in his prime and transferring his soul to another will preserve that soul from death.⁶ If degeneration of the priest-king could be prevented, primitive man felt he could insure safety from degeneration for mankind, for cattle, and for crops as well.⁷ This sacrifice of the priest-king-god or of some substitute for him became associated in time with the sacrifice of a scapegoat, of one who could take upon him the sufferings and sins of the tribe.⁸ (The meaning in primitive religious ritual of "scapegoat" receives a precise interpretation in the Old Testament account in Leviticus
16 in connection with the Hebrew Day of Atonement. Here a sacrificial goat laden with the confessed iniquities of the children of Israel was sent into the wilderness to Azazel with the implication that sin was cast out of the borders of the people. The principle of the scapegoat has been extraordinarily potent in historical Judaism.) Sometimes the fertility ritual was enacted as an agon, or battle, between a new god and an old god—the battle, for example, between the contenders for the priesthood of Nemi with the reigning priest. At other times a single god was the focus of the ritual; his sacrifice and resurrection, which Murray has described, suggest the same meanings of renewal, the same victory over death, the same ridding of the tribe of its own sins, which may be heaped upon the dying god as scapegoat.

Pinter’s dramas may seem far from such questions of fertility ritual, of the sacrificing of god-kings to insure the continuance of life. Stanley, in The Birthday Party, is hardly the romantically described priest of Nemi, sword in hand, ready to defend his crown with his life. A strong parallel does exist, however; and Frazer’s description of the menaced priest becomes an illuminating image for Pinter’s dramatic world, especially for some of his earlier plays—The Room (1957), The Birthday Party (1957), The Dumb Waiter (1957), and A Slight Ache (1959), commonly referred to as comedies of menace—and his film, The Quiller Memorandum (1966).

The Birthday Party, for example, may be viewed as an agon between Stanley, who has challenged the reigning priest-king, and Monty, who has sent Goldberg and McCann to take care of the rebel. But Stanley is in hiding in The Birthday Party and must be forced into the play’s agon.

On another level of the play’s action Stanley is the sacrificed and resurrected god, the scapegoat king who is destroyed only to be reborn in the image of Monty. Here,
Stanley is a victim-victor; but since the entire action is shaped by Monty, even the resurrection gives the impression of victimization. Despite his double role of victim and victor in *The Birthday Party*, Stanley gives an overall impression of being a victim.

The name of Pinter's play, *The Birthday Party*, is in itself suggestive. Although Stanley emphatically denies that it is his birthday in the play, the celebration of his birth climaxes a drama that clearly leads the reluctant celebrant to his death, whether physical or spiritual. "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more." Such is the fate of Stanley whose birth and death occur figuratively within a twenty-four-hour period, and such is the fate of the lonely and menaced priest of Nemi guarding his Golden Bough.

Unlike the priest, however, Stanley is hiding out from life in Meg and Petey's seaside boarding house; he is even hiding from Meg and Petey. He is reluctant to come down to breakfast, to see the birth of a new day.

MEG: Is Stanley up yet?
PETEY: I don't know. Is he?
MEG: I don't know. I haven't seen him down yet.
PETEY: Well, then, he can't be up.
MEG: Haven't you seen him down?
PETEY: I've only just come in.
MEG: He must be still asleep. (P. 10)

This amusingly banal interchange helps to introduce us to the over-motherly, hovering, and dense Meg and her dumbly patient husband; but we also come to see Stanley as reluctant to live. When Meg complains of how he goes through his socks, Petey makes Stanley's main pastime clear. "Why? He's in bed half the week" (p. 12). And yet Stanley claims that he hasn't slept at all. "Oh, God, I'm tired" (p. 19), he complains, obviously irritated with the flirtatious and hovering Meg and immediately alarmed at
her announcement that two gentlemen may be coming to stay.

From the beginning of the play, Stanley behaves somewhat like a caged animal waiting for the slaughter. He attacks the breakfast of cornflakes, which Petey had listlessly praised when they were served to him by Meg as if they were a seven-course meal. Indeed, the daily rituals upon which Meg depends (one critic describes the breakfast with Petey as a litany with Meg as celebrant and Petey giving the responses) irritate and disgust Stanley, who is overwhelmed with a sense of despair at his deliberately caged-in existence.

**STANLEY:** How long has that tea been in the pot?
**MEG:** It's good tea. Good strong tea.
**STANLEY:** This isn't tea. It's gravy.
**MEG:** It's not.
**STANLEY:** Get out of it. You succulent old washing bag.
**MEG:** I am not! And it isn't your place to tell me if I am!
**STANLEY:** And it isn't your place to come into a man's bedroom and—wake him up. (Pp. 18-19)

Stanley's plight at the play's opening is well described by Dr. Franzblau:

The play really begins with Stanley's coming downstairs. This is birth—not his birth alone, but birth in general. Petey is the father image—remote, shadowy, uninvolved, never there, never communicating with Stanley, reading his newspaper and minding his beach chairs. Meg is the universal, clinging, infantilizing, seductive "Mom"—the kind of mother who produces the Stanleys of life. From her, Stanley gets only illicit pleasure, infinite coddling, meanness, poverty of mind and emotion.

No wonder that his eyes have an already-dead-when-born look in them, and he never knows who he is or how to face reality with courage or energy. He looks out at the world frightened, weaving fantasies of accomplishment which bring him no comfort, having no truths to rely on, no friends,
no road to travel. He knows only that he cannot accept the way of life of the Establishment—or blind his eyes with faith in God, man, or the future.11

Indeed, Stanley’s own father is as shadowy as Petey. “My father nearly came down to hear me’ (p. 23), Stanley explains to Meg as he describes his one successful concert as a pianist.

Then after that, you know what they did? They carved me up. 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. (P. 23)

Stanley’s story clearly foreshadows his role as the play’s victim. His one concert, a success with champagne, was followed by the concert at which they “carved” him up by plan, a comic version of the tragic fall, the reversal of fortune. And here, too, figurative reference is made to the actual carving up of the scapegoat, a fate which Stanley will once more undergo in the play’s action.

Shut out of life, silenced, carved up even before his “birth” in the play, Stanley’s wavering sense of identity tests itself mainly in his outbursts with Meg. Frightened by the prospect of the gentlemen visitors, Stanley in turn terrifies Meg with the possibility that she may be carted away by the gentlemen who carry a wheelbarrow in their van for the purpose.

Even afraid to go outside, Stanley contemplates escape with the visiting Lulu, but he knows such escape is impossible.

STANLEY: (abruptly). How would you like to go away with me?
LULU: Where.
STANLEY: Nowhere. Still, we could go.
LULU: But where could we go?
STANLEY: Nowhere. There's nowhere to go. So we could just go. It wouldn't matter. (P. 27)

The echoes from *Waiting for Godot* are significant. There is nowhere to go. Place and time have no meaning. "Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time!" Pozzo scolds Vladimir in Beckett's play.

It's abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? (Calmer.) They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more. (P. 57)

Time and space, however, have more meaning in *The Birthday Party*, in which the anguished waiting of Godot's world is replaced by a frightening sense of doom.

The sense of menace and doom in the play is partly expressed by Stanley's fear and partly by the constant patter of questions that are responded to with more questions rather than with answers.

STANLEY: No. Listen. (Urgently.) Has Meg had many guests staying in this house, besides me, I mean before me?
LULU: Besides you?
STANLEY (*impatiently*): Was she very busy, in the old days?
LULU: Why should she be?
STANLEY: What do you mean? This used to be a boarding house, didn't it?
LULU: Did it?
STANLEY: Didn't it?
LULU: Did it?
STANLEY: Didn't oh, skip it. (P. 28)

Juxtaposed with Stanley's anxiety about space, about where he is, is that of McCann, one of the two men who descend on the boarding house to take Stanley away. Gold-
berg, his co-worker and apparent supervisor, responds to McCann's questions either with clichés about himself as a family man, with questions rather than answers, or with doubletalk.

McCANN: Nat. How do we know this is the right house?
GOLDBERG: What?
McCANN: How do we know this is the right house?
GOLDBERG: What makes you think it's the wrong house?
McCANN: I didn't see a number on the gate.
GOLDBERG: I wasn't looking for a number. (P. 29)

No more satisfied than Stanley about where he is, McCann anxiously questions Goldberg about the nature of their job and receives a baffling answer with which he must be satisfied.

GOLDBERG: 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. All is dependent on the attitude of our subject. At all events, McCann, I can assure you that the assignment will be carried out and the mission accomplished with no excessive aggravation to you or myself. Satisfied?
McCANN: Sure. Thank you, Nat. (P. 32)

By the end of act 1, Stanley has been awakened, been born, and been terrified with a sense of his death. When Meg announces his birthday to him and tells him of the party planned by the ominous Goldberg, Stanley denies that it is his birthday and beats the toy drum that Meg gives him as a gift "because you haven't got a piano" (p. 38). Stanley's subsequent march around the table beating the drum becomes more erratic and uncontrolled as he goes, until he arrives at Meg's chair, "his face and the drumbeat now savage and possessed" (p. 39), and the curtain falls.
In the light of a ritual reading, the events of act 1 are less mystifying than mysterious. Beneath the veneer of the seedy seaside resort, the primitive cycle is re-enacted. Stanley becomes “savage and possessed,” his very being threatened by those to whom he would not at the moment of his brief victory as an artist “crawl down on bended knees” (p. 24). The counterpoint of secular and sacred ritual is clear as the daily ceremony of awakening is played against the sacred rite of sacrifice, and the scapegoat is made ready.

At the birthday party itself, the hunted and hunter are one. The rhythm is a familiar one and finds its prototype not only in the victim-victor priests of Nemi but also in the scapegoat king, Oedipus, whom Sophocles portrays striking out viciously and irrationally at Creon and Tiresias once he has sensed his double position as victor (the solver of the riddle, the king, the savior of his people) and victim (both the contaminator of his land and the scapegoat—the incestuous murderer who must be banished).

The ceremonial atmosphere is created by the ritualistic tearing by McCann of a piece of newspaper into five equal strips, a prelude to the spiritual tearing apart of Stanley at the party. As Stanley attempts to escape, McCann blocks his exit, warning his victim at intervals not to disturb the torn strips which he fingers. The reluctant celebrant is further menaced by the affable cliché-ridden Goldberg and the brutal, but singing, McCann. And if Stanley fails to escape from “the terrorism of our world, so often embodied in false bonhomie and bigoted brutality,” the horror of his plight is intensified by the unawareness of Meg. Meg’s nostalgic exchange of childhood reminiscences with the visiting men emphasizes the childlike nature of all the characters and underlines their separateness from each other, a comment both on man’s birth and his isolation.

Meg, who is incapable of recognizing evil, and hence incapable of helping, joins Lulu and Petey as “the home
folks’ who stand by and watch Stanley undergo his torment.” Indeed, Meg's self-centered ignorance makes her oblivious to Stanley as the hunted or hunter, and she lingers the next day on her role at the party as “belle of the ball.” The irony of the play, then, is based on the separateness of its strands, on Meg’s awareness only of the surface rituals, the birthday party, the toasts, the games, rather than the brutal sacrifice which takes place before her very eyes and which she cannot see. Her unawareness only underlines the ritual counterpoint for the audience, who feel it more intensely in the frustrating light of her appalling blindness.

If the celebration of Stanley’s birth progresses with all the weird logic of a nightmare, dream and ritual merge as the Hemingway-style killers move in on their prey. Richard Schechner writes:

The famous antiphonal speeches of McCann and Goldberg are “tough guy” talk converted into ritual by abstracting words and phrases that in themselves have no direct connection to the play's action. This litany continues for seventy-three lines. At the end of it, Stanley can no longer speak coherently.15

Edward Malpas, however, finds meaning in at least some of the seemingly senseless accusations of the tormentors. The climax of the interrogation reads:

McCANN: You betrayed our land.
GOLDBERG: You betray our breed.
McCANN: Who are you, Webber?
GOLDBERG: What makes you think you exist?
McCANN: You're dead.
GOLDBERG: You're dead. You can’t live, you can’t think, you can’t love. You're dead. You're a plague gone bad. There’s no juice in you. You’re nothing but an odour! (P. 55)

Malpas suggests that “the crimes of which Stanley is accused mirror the subjective sufferings of the tormentors,”16
the racial sufferings of Goldberg, and the national sufferings of McCann. Certainly the fact that Stanley is accused of every crime from picking his nose to killing his wife also suggests, in its tragi-comic way, the transfer of the sufferings and sins of the tribe onto a scapegoat. This role for Stanley has been foreshadowed by his story of being "carved up" in the past, and the psychological carving up within the scene is emphasized by McCann's ritual tearing of the newspaper, the shreds of which are all that is left of Stanley at the play's end.

Stanley's role as scapegoat clearly relates in some way to his defiance of the system and his betrayal of the organization. The play makes a bitterly ironic statement on the ritual sacrifice which merely rids the land of an ineffective nonconformist and allows the infusion through death of new life to a questionably brutal and empty system. Speaking of Stanley's fate, Franzblau writes:

His fate is shaped at the hands of the representatives of the Establishment—Goldberg (the Jacob prototype), the man of words and platitudinous pseudo-reason; and McCann (the Esau prototype), the man of brute, servile force who begs for his blessing. They break Stanley's eyeglasses, robbing him of all clarity, and hurl a barrage of questions at him, challenging every consolation—from the sublime (religion: Do you recognize an external force, responsible for you, suffering for you ?; or philosophy: Is the number 846 possible or necessary?) to the ridiculous (Why does the chicken cross the road?)—shattering every support. Stanley cannot attest his faith on any count. He has no escape from his cosmic perceptions or his resulting overwhelming depression. His insistence upon his integrity dooms him.17

Stanley, however, is not the only doomed person in the play. Although Goldberg and McCann verge on being stereotypes in the play—walking embodiments of the clichés they voice—the one-dimensional quality of their characters is not only disturbed by McCann's questions and obvious fear about the "job." The rich texture of Pin-
ter's dialogue reveals Goldberg no less than McCann as partially a suffering victim.

Goldberg's false pose as a man of sentiment is hilariously set forth in his birthday toast.

I believe in a good laugh, a day's fishing, a bit of gardening. I was very proud of my old greenhouse, made out of my own spit and faith. That's the sort of man I am. Not size but quality. A little Austin, tea in Fullers, a library book from Boots, and I'm satisfied. But just now, I say just now, the lady of the house said her piece and I for one am knocked over by the sentiments she expressed. Lucky is the man who's at the receiving end, that's what I say. (Pause.) How can I put it to you? We all wander on our tod through this world. It's a lonely pillow to kip on. Right! (P. 59)

Beneath the pose of the homey family man, however, Goldberg is not merely the man who Lulu complains taught her "things a girl shouldn't know before she's been married at least three times" (p. 84) and the brutal destroyer of Stanley. He is also the frightened and truly lonely victim of his own clichés who needs McCann to breathe in his mouth to give him the strength to go on. In act 3, just before they take Stanley away, Goldberg reveals his uneasiness and finally his despair.

GOLDBERG (interrupting): I don't know why, but I feel knocked out. I feel a bit

It's uncommon for me.

You know what? I've never lost a tooth. Not since the day I was born. Nothing's changed. (He gets up.) That's why I've reached my position, McCann. Because I've always been as fit as a fiddle. All my life I've said the same. Play up, play up, and play the game. Honour thy father and thy mother. All along the line. Follow the line, the line, McCann, and you can't go wrong. What do you think, I'm a self-made man? No! I sat where I was told to sit. I kept my eye on the ball. School? Don't talk to me about school. Top in all subjects. And for why? Because I'm telling you, I'm telling you, follow my line? Follow my mental? Learn
by heart. Never write down a thing. No. And don’t go too
near the water. 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.). (Pp. 79-80)

Here is T. S. Eliot’s hollow man incarnate and the rhythms
of his wasteland as well.

McCann, the defrocked priest of six months, also vaci­
lates between refusing to go upstairs to get Stanley and
insisting that he never refused. The victors are the victims
of their own system, frightened in their moment of triumph
as any priest of Nemi might have been who conquered his
foe, but as modern in their malaise as any Beckett tramp—
and perhaps even more lost.

Meg’s and Lulu’s captivation by the agents of Stanley’s
doom is part, too, of the structure of the dying-god ritual.
In such rituals the victorious god-king is almost inevitably
joined with a fertility goddess figure, even as Frazer be­
lieved the priest of Nemi was united with the goddess of
the grove whom he served.18 Hence Meg flirts with the
visitors and plays the role of the queen at the party, “the
belle of the ball,” and Lulu succumbs completely to the
spurious charms of Goldberg. No wonder Stanley attempts
to strangle Meg and rape Lulu at his party, during which
he battles for control. As the struggle for power is enacted
in the ritual celebration, Stanley naturally strikes out at
the deserting women.

That celebration is completed in The Birthday Party
when we are allowed to see not only the destruction of
Stanley but a glimpse of his resurrection as well, not only
the tearing asunder of the sacrificial god but the prospect
of what he will be when the pieces are put back together.
The two agents of “Monty” offer to fix Stanley’s broken
glasses and broken life, to give him new vision, to save him,
to “renew” his “season ticket.”
GOLDBERG: We'll take tuppence off your morning tea.
McCANN: We'll give you a discount on all inflammable goods.
GOLDBERG: We'll watch over you.
McCANN: Advise you.
GOLDBERG: Give you proper care and treatment.
McCANN: Let you use the club bar.
GOLDBERG: Keep a table reserved.
McCANN: Help you acknowledge the fast days.
GOLDBERG: Bake you cakes.
McCANN: Help you kneel on Kneeling days.
GOLDBERG: Give you a free pass.
McCANN: Take you for constitutionals.
GOLDBERG: Give you hot tips.
McCANN: We'll provide the skipping rope.
GOLDBERG: The vest and pants.
McCANN: The ointment.
GOLDBERG: The hot poultice. (P. 87)

Finally the men make clear the nature of the resurrection.

GOLDBERG: We'll make a man of you.
McCANN: And a woman.
GOLDBERG: You'll be re-orientated.
McCANN: You'll be rich.
GOLDBERG: You'll be adjusted.
McCANN: You'll be our pride and joy.
GOLDBERG: You'll be a mensch.
McCANN: You'll be a success.
GOLDBERG: You'll be integrated.
McCANN: You'll give orders.
GOLDBERG: You'll make decisions.
McCANN: You'll be a magnate.
GOLDBERG: A statesman.
McCANN: You'll own yachts.
Stanley greets this incantation of his new nonidentity with inarticulate mumblings. Clean-shaven, newly outfitted in striped trousers, black jacket, white collar, and bowler, he is marched off to Monty utterly unable to see or speak, but with the promise of new vision, new speech, new power, new godhead—the latest remade model of conformity. As McCann repeats Goldberg's "animals," he underlines the animalistic destruction of Stanley's humanity which he and Goldberg perpetrate in the name of civilization. The use of ritual is satirical here as well as structural. The resurrection embodies all that is most superficial in modern civilization, all that is most precious to that civilization's corrupt emissaries, Goldberg and McCann.

Stanley's meaningless croakings tend also to belie the promised resurrection, and one is left with the sense of a stillborn birth or the creation of a manikin monster of non-identity. The sacrificial rite at the center of the play does not leave its audience with that sense of renewal which gave mysterious pleasure to the audience at a Greek tragedy, but appears rather to parody those rituals which patterned tragic drama of old. The play stands, in part, as a bitterly comic comment on the ongoing cyclic nature of life, in which all that is most brutal and false in civilization is renewed at the expense of the most pathetic of rebels.

But Pinter does not rest in a merely comic or satirical vision. His play rather bears a strange resemblance to Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, and O'Neill's attitude toward tragedy in that play also curiously antedates Pinter's own.

There is a feeling around, or I'm mistaken, of fate—Kismet, the negative fate; not in the Greek sense. It's struck me as time goes on, how something funny, even farcical, can suddenly without any apparent reason, break up
into something gloomy and tragic. A sort of unfair non sequitur, as though events, as though life, were being manipulated just to confuse us. I think I'm aware of comedy more than I ever was before; a big kind of comedy that doesn't stay funny very long. I've made some use of it in *The Iceman.* The first act is hilarious comedy, *I think,* but then some people may not even laugh. At any rate, the comedy breaks up and the tragedy comes.  

Pinter's statement about comedy several years later echoes O'Neill's, even as his play follows in the paths of its ritual rhythms and poetic insights.

Everything is funny: the great earnestness is funny; even tragedy is funny. And *I think* what I try to do in my plays is to get this recognizable reality of the absurdity of what we do and how we behave and how we speak. The point about tragedy is that it is *no longer funny.* It is funny and then it becomes no longer funny.

This tragi-comic vision of both writers is manifested in the ritual counterpoint of the two dramas in which ritual birthday parties and cornflakes and rotgut rituals respectively are played out against sacrificial blood baths. Only the cowardly Petey in *The Birthday Party* and the equally craven drunken philosopher Larry in *The Iceman Cometh* share with the audience the full impact of the counterpoint. *The Birthday Party* does not, then, remain a parody of ritual alone; its comedy moves into a realm which Pinter defines as "no longer funny." But the play's realm is not fully tragic either, and Pinter's tragi-comic vision may hold a clue to a more complete understanding of the particular use of ritual in his play.

The monstrous nature of birth in Pinter's play becomes more than comic largely because of the spark of resistance in the cowardly Stanley and the spark of awareness in the cowardly Petey. Stanley suffers, and his suffering and Petey's awareness give the play some of its tragic impact and ritual meaning. When Petey senses the menace to
Stanley, he attempts to prevent McCann and Goldberg from taking him away. However, Goldberg's insidious invitation to join them dismays Petey, who is left with his newspaper and the fact of Stanley's destruction in McCann's strips of paper, which fall to the floor as he seeks to resume his former self-protective reading ritual. The play then becomes an agonized protest as we share with Petey and Stanley the reality of its menace, the daytime reality of its nightmare.

It becomes less than a tragedy, however, as we seek in vain the heroic victim-victor of old whose defeat or death becomes less significant than the dignity and insight gained in the course of his suffering. For despite Stanley's actions on two levels in the play as both victim and victor, the total impact one receives places him still as victim.

On one level, Stanley appears in his *agon* with Goldberg and McCann as victor and victim—the hunted in a game of blind man's buff, but the hunter who attacks Meg and Lulu. Like the priest of Nemi, Stanley is no sooner born than he turns murderous. (Roger Pierce suggests that Stanley assists at his own birth when he attempts to strangle Meg and that his attempted rape of Lulu is a direct result of his new life.) But unlike the priest-king, Stanley has not sought his role: rather, he is forced into life against his will. Hence, his victim-victor role in the *agon* still seems thrust upon him as victim.

Stanley's role as victim-victor on the play's other level emphasizes equally the victimized side of his character. At Monty's, as the carved-up god of old resurrected in new form, Stanley will become a puppet or manikin, not a man—and, hence, hardly a true god. Even Stanley as new god, then, projects the image of a victim. And the fact that Stanley's opponents in the *agon*, the battle between the old god and the new, are themselves frightened, potential victims of the god they serve, only emphasizes the total effect of man seen as victim in the play. The Golden Bough has lost
its meaning for victim and victor alike; it is not worth guarding.

Myth, as Mircea Eliade defines it, reveals a reality of sacred time distinct from the reality of profane time. "In short," Eliade explains, "myths reveal that the world, man, and life have a supernatural origin and history, and that this history is significant, precious, and exemplary." In his view, rituals allow one to participate in the deeper sacred reality of the myth. But Goldberg, no less than Stanley in The Birthday Party, has a failure of belief in the sacred reality of the mythical line he has chosen to follow and which he is forcing Stanley to follow. The ritual is enacted with all its tragic implications, but the myth is called into question. Stanley has merely been projected as a new god by the god of old who still reigns. The ritual is a lie.

J. E. Frisch suggests that Pinter "directly questions" in his dramas "the usual concepts of reality. He does this by working within a basically realistic frame of reference while simultaneously creating grave doubts about the reality of that frame of reference." But Pinter doesn't question the reality of Monty's world, which dominates the play, so much as he questions its validity as mythical reality, as sacred or worthy of ritual renewal. Stanley's brief defiance of the cycle in which he is forced to participate is suggestive of another reality, of the possibility of a return to a Promethean defiance of a tyrant god, a life-giving myth, a reality from some other mythical time that lurks in the memory of man.

Nelvin Vos, studying some victim-victor relationships in The Drama of Comedy, describes the comic hero as one who accepts his own finiteness, and the tragic hero as one who struggles against the conditions of that finitude. Like Eliade, Vos envisions time as either finite and profane or infinite and sacred. He suggests that the absurdist writers create victims who are "enmeshed neither in folly
nor in moral imperfection but in finitude itself." In Vos’s opinion, for example, Ionesco’s world looks mythical on the surface but is not.

The circular plot structure of plays such as The Bald Soprano and The Lesson appears to indicate a mythic and ritualistic understanding of time and meaning, at least formally similar to that of Thornton Wilder. But, in Ionesco’s theatre, cyclical time has lost all touch with a meaningful eternity and, instead, signifies a world of senseless anonymity and mechanism.

Pinter’s work, however, does not lack the interaction between the infinite and the finite which Vos suggests is needed for a true mythical structure and which Ionesco misses in the two plays indicated. Stanley’s defiance does not place him in the realm of the victim-victors whose suffering reconciles them with the universe and who assimilate death, but it allows him a fleeting moment of awareness of something other than the world of Goldberg and McCann. He has had one concert in which he displayed his “unique touch,” his one moment of self-expression and independence before he was locked out of the concert hall and locked out of life.

The play’s texture is indeed complex. On one level occur the daily rituals—the paper, the tea, the cornflakes; on another, the birth and death of Stanley, the sacrifice and the resurrection, the initiation into Monty’s world. On yet another level exist the questioning of the resurrection as valid, the denial of the validity of the cycle, the expectation and the awaiting of the new god. But in the meantime the wheel has turned.

The ritual sacrifice at the center of The Dumb Waiter is similar to that in The Birthday Party. McCann and Goldberg are seen at a closer angle in this one-act play, in which Pinter again on one level shows victim and victor as one and on another level portrays both victim and victor as victims.
In this farcical and terrifying drama two killers, Gus and Ben, await their victim and their orders in a windowless basement room. Again the ritual counterpoint operates as the killers’ daily rituals are juxtaposed with the sacrificial rite which it is their office to perform. The manner in which Ben enacts the newspaper-reading ceremony, however, reveals his unawareness of the counterpoint. His shocked comments on the brutalities in the paper reveal his unawareness of his own brutality.

**Ben:** Kaw.

*He picks up the paper.*

What about this? Listen to this:

*He refers to the paper.*

A man of eighty-seven wanted to cross the road. But there was a lot of traffic, see? He couldn’t see how he was going to squeeze through. So he crawled under a lorry.

**Gus:** He what?

**Ben:** He crawled under a lorry. A stationary lorry.

**Gus:** No?

**Ben:** The lorry started and ran over him.

**Gus:** Go on!

**Ben:** That’s what it says here.

**Gus:** Get away.

**Ben:** It’s enough to make you want to puke, isn’t it?

**Gus:** Who advised him to do a thing like that?

**Ben:** A man of eighty-seven crawling under a lorry!

**Gus:** It’s unbelievable.

**Ben:** It’s down here in black and white.

**Gus:** Incredible.\(^{30}\)

Ben has no inkling that his own activities in life are incredible, but Gus does have some awareness and concern about his own brutality. Tension mounts in the play as he begins to question Ben at length about the nature of the job.

**Ben:** What are you sitting on my bed for?

*Gus sits.*
What's the matter with you? You're always asking me questions. What's the matter with you?

Gus: Nothing.

Ben: You never used to ask me so many damn questions. What's come over you?

Gus: No, I was just wondering.

Ben: Stop wondering. You've got a job to do. Why don't you just do it and shut up. (P. 99)

Ben meets Gus's further questions with more questions rather than answers, a pattern familiar from *The Birthday Party*, and the ritual framework of the operation begins to break down. Gus is concerned because the lavatory doesn't flush properly, because there is no wireless as in the last place, because Ben stopped on the road for no apparent reason, because the sheets do not seem clean. Even the tea ceremony is disturbed in this drama when the gas goes out, preventing the men from having their accustomed cup of tea before each "job."

The ritual counterpoint in *The Dumb Waiter* is handled with great dexterity, the tension mounting with the comedy as the naturalistic surface interacts with its ritual undercurrents. Gus and Ben's hilarious argument over an expression, Gus's "put on the kettle" (p. 97) as opposed to Ben's "light the kettle" (p. 97), would merely be amusing if the voice from the dumb waiter did not take sides. But his instructions to the men to "light the kettle" (p. 112) favor the unquestioning Ben over the questioning Gus—a foreshadowing of the final judgment that is passed in the play on Gus.

The comic *agon* between the two men is interrupted, then, by the written demands of the dumb waiter for exotic food, demands that neither Ben nor Gus is able to meet with satisfaction. Walter Kerr believes that Pinter achieves his effect of terror in this play, as in his others, because the terror is nameless, the hostile force not identified. The orders for food, Kerr notes, are explicit, but the orderer remains mysterious.
Was the building formerly a restaurant, and this the kitchen? Inside the basement flat, which is real, this sort of realistic speculation can be indulged. But it cannot continue to have meaning once it is applied to the world outside the flat: there can really be no restaurant which would send down orders to a “former” kitchen. Speculation is cut off in mid-breath, is plainly useless.31

Kerr further suggests that the inexplicable demands of the unidentified voice are at the center of the play despite their narrative irrelevance because they contribute to the undefined angst that modern man suffers.32 In ritual terms, however, the intrusion of the voice’s demands into the play’s narrative is no intrusion, and the relationship of the men to its irrational presence and demands does more than spell out their undefined angst. Rather it tends to define the angst—to approach it with tragi-comic clarity.

Though the dumb waiter’s instructions are not immediately connected with the job at hand, Ben later receives his orders not only for food but for action from the voice. As Malpas suggests, “The dumb waiter is no longer Bacchanalian, hungry for exotic dishes; this is Poseidon, primatively hungry for the flesh, the flesh of Gus the sacrificial victim.”33 And the victim is not chosen at random; the narrative moves directly toward a revelation of Gus as necessary scapegoat.

Not only has Gus felt uneasy about his job and surroundings, as well as the whole system; he has also dared to question the very god he serves. “Wilson” is neglecting their needs, he complains, and the dumb waiter is demanding more than is reasonable to expect. Beginning with something the men can comprehend, “two braised steak and chips. Two sago puddings. Two tea without sugar” (p. 103), its demands become more exotic: “macaroni Pastitsio. Ormitho Macarounada” (p. 108). Finally, they are incomprehensible to the men. “One Bamboo Shoots, Water chestnuts and Chicken. One Char Siu and Beansprouts” (p. 110).
Ben insists on being polite, but Gus yells up the tube; and when complaints come down about the nature of their substitute offerings—milk, biscuits, Eccles cake—Gus is openly rebellious. "We send him up all we've got and he's not satisfied. No, honest, it's enough to make the cat laugh. Why did you send him up all that stuff? (Thoughtfully.) Why did I send it up?" (p. 113).

Like Stanley, once Gus begins to question the system, he must be removed. His doom has been foreshadowed from the play's opening, so that when he notices Ben's slip in the final ritual rehearsal of their projected movements in removing the next victim—"I haven't taken my gun out, according to you" (p. 115)—clearly Ben as well as Gus has sensed the identity of the victim before the orders arrive. The questioner, the thoughtful gunman, one who has confessed discomfort that their last victim was a woman, one who is disturbed by the demands of a god for more than he is able to give, must die if the system is to continue. A repetition of the opening newspaper ritual takes place, but this time Ben does not reveal any content to which Gus may respond. Gus's automatic responses, delivered with the increasing despair indicated in the stage directions, are a dramatic confirmation of his defeat.

*Ben:* Kaw!

He picks up the paper and looks at it.
Listen to this!

*Pause.*

What about that, eh?

*Pause.*

*Kaw!*

*Pause.*

Have you ever heard such a thing?

*Gus:* (dully.) Go on!

*Ben:* It's true.

*Gus:* Get away.

*Ben:* It's down here in black and white.

*Gus:* (very low.) Is that a fact?

*Ben:* Can you imagine it.
Gus: It's unbelievable.
Ben: It's enough to make you want to puke, isn't it?
Gus: (almost inaudible.) Incredible. (P. 119)

Ben, who has unconsciously guessed that Gus is the victim, is nevertheless significantly surprised when it turns out to be him. When his partner stumbles through the door "stripped of his jacket, waistcoat, tie, holster and revolver" (p. 121), ready for the sacrifice, the two men stare at each other in "a long silence," and the curtain falls. The absence of a shot clarifies for the audience the nature of that silent moment of recognition for Ben. Ben too has been unable to satisfy the demands of the dumb waiter. Surely his turn will come. The killer must be killed. Victim and victor are one. "The light gleams an instant."

As in The Birthday Party, the victim-victors of The Dumb Waiter serve a god or a system which all of them fear and some of them doubt. This god, in the form of "Monty," "Wilson," and the voice of the dumb waiter, stands aside from the characters as a force that controls the closed world of the windowless basement in The Dumb Waiter and the seaside rooming house in The Birthday Party. Hence, the victim-victors in these two plays are felt to be victims of an outside force, a menacing god whom they serve or fail to serve at their peril, whose ritual renewal they are forced to enact. Stanley's attempt to escape the cycle and Gus's questioning of it remain, at best, pathetic acts of defiance.

Some further insight into the role of Pinter's heroes as victim-victors, who are victims of some exterior power, may be gained by looking at the playwright's adaptation of Adam Hall's novel The Quiller Memorandum into a film. In this 1966 film, directed by Michael Anderson, Pinter takes a good but fairly conventional thriller and transforms it into an enigmatic study of power. By turning an English spy with a personal vendetta into an American spy with no
past or future that has any bearing on an extremely tense present, Pinter creates the script for a film that raises more questions than it answers and that leaves at least some of the "bad guys," totally defeated in the book, still very much at large.

The action of the book and film is set in West Berlin. Quiller is a secret agent assigned by the West to unmask the suspected leaders of a neo-Nazi organization or at least to discover their headquarters. (This identification of the "bad guys" as neo-Nazis was edited out of the film when shown in Germany by request of the German film industry's voluntary self-control organization.) Quiller's new boss Pol, head of Berlin Control, informs him that he must find the headquarters without signaling British headquarters to the enemy. He is in the gap between two hostile enemies, and the film shows Pol, played by Alec Guinness, illustrating Quiller's position by manipulating cakes on a table. Pol eats a currant at the scene's end, very much as if he were eating Quiller, his own man. One can understand the appeal for Pinter in this isolated hero playing out his position in a gap, unable to trust anybody.

But if the gap of the isolated hero is closed at the book's end, it remains painfully open in the film. Rather than the Bond-like crushing of the entire organization by Hall's hero with an added achievement of personal revenge, Pinter's hero pays a final visit to a girl who will continue teaching her neo-Nazi doctrines to the school children who lovingly surround her. "We got all of them," Quiller tells the girl with whom he has fallen in love, knowing full well that she is one of them. "Well, not all of them, perhaps" (p. 14), he adds. When Inge tells Quiller that he looks tired, that he works too hard, he replies ironically in kind, "Well, you too. I'm sure you could take things a little easier, you know" (p. 16). But the film closes on Inge's assurance that she has her work to do and, indeed, wants to do it. Beneath the banal exchange lurks her defiance. Quiller has been
cheated of both success and his girl. Pinter has characteristically refused a solution to the mystery; and his hero, at least in a figurative sense, is sacrificed—left on one level at least, in the threatened gap. A lesser work than *The Birthday Party* or *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Quiller Memorandum* is illuminating as a further exploration of man as the victim of forces which he cannot subdue, of man as victim even when he is victor.