

# 40. Harold Pinter

## Harold Pinter *Applicant* (1961)



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A very short but memorable play, *Applicant* contains all the typical features of a Pinter play and a Pinteresque use of language.

*An office. LAMB, a young man, eager<sup>1</sup>, cheerful, enthusiastic, is striding<sup>2</sup> nervously, alone. The door opens. MISS PIFFS comes in. She is the essence of efficiency.*

- PIFFS Ah, good morning.  
LAMB Oh, good morning, miss.  
5 PIFFS Are you Mr. Lamb?  
LAMB That's right.  
PIFFS [*studying a sheet of paper*] Yes. You're applying for this vacant post, aren't you?  
LAMB I am actually, yes.  
PIFFS Are you a physicist<sup>3</sup>?  
10 LAMB Oh yes, indeed. It's my whole life.  
PIFFS [*languidly*] Good. Now our procedure is, that before we discuss the applicant's qualifications, we like to subject him to a little test to determine his psychological suitability. You've no objection?  
LAMB Oh, good heavens, no.  
15 PIFFS Jolly good.

*MISS PIFFS has taken some objects out of a drawer and goes to LAMB. She places a chair for him.*

- PIFFS Please sit down. [*He sits.*] Can I fit these to your palms?  
LAMB [*affably*] What are they?  
PIFFS Electrodes.  
20 LAMB Oh yes, of course. Funny little things. [*She attaches them to his palms.*]  
PIFFS Now the earphones. [*She attaches earphones to his head.*]  
LAMB I say how amusing.  
PIFFS Now I plug in<sup>4</sup>. [*She plugs in to the wall.*]  
LAMB [*a trifle nervously*] Plug in, do you? Oh yes, of course. Yes you'd have to, wouldn't you?  
25 [*MISS PIFFS perches on a high stool<sup>5</sup> and looks down on LAMB.*]. This helps to determine my... my suitability does it?  
PIFFS Unquestionably. Now relax. Just relax. Don't think about a thing.

1. **eager:** impatient  
2. **striding:** walking in long steps  
3. **physicist:** it. *fisico*

4. **plug in:** it. *inserisco la spina*  
5. **perches on high stool:** it. *si siede come se fosse appollaiata*

- LAMB No.  
PIFFS Relax completely. Rela-a-a-x. Quite relaxed?
- 30 LAMB *nods*<sup>6</sup>. MISS PIFFS *presses a button on the side of her stool. A piercing high pitched buzz-hum<sup>7</sup> is heard. LAMB jolts<sup>8</sup> rigid. His hands go to his earphones. He is propelled<sup>9</sup> from the chair. He tries to crawl under the chair. MISS PIFFS watches, impassive. The noise stops. LAMB peeps out from under the chair, crawls out, stands, twitches<sup>10</sup>, emits a short chuckle<sup>11</sup> and collapses in the chair.*
- PIFFS Would you say you were an excitable person?
- 35 LAMB Not – not unduly<sup>12</sup>, no. Of course, I –  
PIFFS Would you say you were a moody<sup>13</sup> person?  
LAMB Moody? No, I wouldn't say I was moody – well, sometimes occasionally I –  
PIFFS Do you ever get fits of depression?  
LAMB Well, I wouldn't call them depression exactly –
- 40 PIFFS Do you often do things you regret in the morning?  
LAMB Regret? Things I regret? Well, it depends what you mean by often, really – I mean when you say often –  
PIFFS Are you often puzzled by women?  
LAMB Women?
- 45 PIFFS Men.  
LAMB Men? Well, I was just going to answer the question about women –  
PIFFS Do you often feel puzzled?  
LAMB Puzzled?  
PIFFS By women.
- 50 LAMB Women?  
PIFFS Men.  
LAMB Oh, now just a minute, I... Look, do you want separate answers or a joint answer?  
PIFFS After your day's work do you ever feel tired? Edgy<sup>14</sup>? Fretty<sup>15</sup>? Irritable? At a loose end<sup>16</sup>? Morose<sup>17</sup>? Frustrated? Morbid<sup>18</sup>? Unable to concentrate? Unable to sleep?
- 55 Unable to eat? Unable to remain seated? Unable to remain upright? Lustful<sup>19</sup>? Indolent? On heat? Randy<sup>20</sup>? Full of desire? Full of energy? Full of dread? Drained<sup>21</sup>? of energy, of dread? of desire? [*Pause*].  
LAMB [thinking] Well, it's difficult to say really...  
PIFFS Are you a good mixer?
- 60 LAMB Well, you've touched on quite an interesting point there –  
PIFFS Do you suffer from eczema, listlessness<sup>22</sup>, or falling coat?  
LAMB Er...  
PIFFS Are you virgo intacta?  
LAMB I beg your pardon?
- 65 PIFFS Are you virgo intacta?

6. **nods**: to move one's head up and down to show agreement

7. **piercing ... buzz-hum**: it. *un ronzio lacerante e acuto*

8. **jolts**: moves suddenly

9. **propelled**: it. *sbalzato*

10. **twitches**: it. *si contrae*

11. **emits a short chuckle**: laughs briefly

12. **unduly**: excessively

13. **moody**: it. *lunatico*

14. **Edgy**: Nervous

15. **Fretty**: Anxious, worried

16. **At a loose end**: it. *Indeciso*

17. **Morose**: Unhappy and bad-tempered

18. **Morbid**: it. *Morboso*

19. **Lustful**: it. *Libidinoso*

20. **Randy**: it. *Lascivo*

21. **Drained**: Exhausted

22. **listlessness**: it. *apatia*

LAMB Oh, I say, that's rather embarrassing. I mean – in front of a lady –

PIFFS Are you virgo intacta?

LAMB Yes. I am, actually. I'll make no secret of it.

PIFFS Have you always been virgo intacta?

70 LAMB Oh yes, always. Always.

PIFFS From the word go?

LAMB Go? Oh, yes. from the word go.

PIFFS Do women frighten you?

75 *She presses a button on the other side of her stool. The stage is plunged into redness which flashes on and off in time with her questions.*

PIFFS [*building*]. Their clothes? Their shoes? Their voices? Their laughter? Their stares? Their way of walking? Their way of sitting? Their way of smiling? Their way of talking? Their mouths? Their hands? Their feet? Their shins<sup>23</sup>? Their thighs? Their knees? Their eyes? Their [*drumbeat*]. Their [*drumbeat*]. Their [*Cymbal bang*<sup>24</sup>]. Their [*Trombone chord*]. Their [*Bass note*].

80 LAMB [*in a high voice*] Well it depends what you mean really –

*The light still flashes. She presses the other button and the piercing buzz-hum is heard again. LAMB's hands go to his earphones. He is propelled from the chair, falls, rolls, crawls, totters<sup>25</sup> and collapses. Silence. He lies face upwards. MISS PIFFS looks at him and then walks to LAMB and bends over him.*

85 PIFFS Thanks you very much, Mr. Lamb, We'll let you know.

23. shins: it. *tibie*

24. Cymbal bang: it. *Colpo di piatti*

25. totters: walks unsteadily



Edward Hopper, *Nighthawks* (1942).

## Harold Pinter

### *Last to Go* (1959)



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A room or a small place where the characters are shut or casually meet is the central image of many plays by Pinter. Inside this room the characters are gradually involved in verbal exchanges that may have double results: they may either radically change the characters' personality and relationships or simply unveil the impossibility of real communication and mutual comprehension. Therefore, Pinter's use of language is extremely accurate. 'Pinteresque' is the adjective coined to describe the peculiarity of his language. His characters are actually unable to listen, and often misunderstand each other; they cross talk, because they 'evade' communication, rather than making an effort to communicate. What makes his plays **absurdist**, therefore, is this lack – or denial – of communication. His characters fill the void of their miserable life with ambiguous silences: it is the **unsaid** which is more important than what is said, it is the many pauses scattered in his plays which arouse expectations and fear, comic pauses and misunderstandings. They become ritual repetitions and slowly build a threatening atmosphere, a sense of deep uneasiness. The words used in his plays are ordinary, common, core English words often used in a way similar to Beckett's language, as the characters follow a circular pattern in their speech. The most common dramatic strategies he uses are:

- silence;
- surprising reactions;
- indifference;
- lies;
- counterattacks.

The play below was published in 1961.

*This is a sketch showing a banal interchange in a coffee stall.*

*A coffee stall<sup>1</sup>. A BARMAN and an old NEWSPAPER SELLER. The BARMAN leans on his counter, the OLD MAN stands with tea.  
Silence.*

- MAN You was a bit busier earlier.
- 5 BARMAN Ah.
- MAN Round about ten.
- BARMAN Ten, was it?
- MAN About ten.  
*Pause.*
- 10 I passed by here about ten.
- BARMAN Oh yes?
- MAN I noticed you were doing a bit of trade.  
*Pause.*
- BARMAN Yes, trade was very brisk<sup>2</sup> here about ten.
- 15 MAN Yes, I noticed.  
*Pause.*
- I sold my last one about Ten. Yes, about nine forty-five.
- BARMAN Sold your last then, did you?
- MAN Yes, my last 'Evening News'<sup>3</sup> it was. Went about twenty to ten.  
*Pause.*
- 20 BARMAN 'Evening News', was it?
- MAN Yes.  
*Pause.*
- Sometimes it's the 'Star'<sup>4</sup> is the last to go.
- 25 BARMAN Ah.
- MAN Or the... *whatsisname*<sup>5</sup>.
- BARMAN 'Standard'.
- MAN Yes.  
*Pause.*
- 30 All I had left tonight was the 'Evening News'.  
*Pause.*
- BARMAN Then that went, did it?
- MAN Yes.  
*Pause.*
- 35 Like a shot.  
*Pause.*
- BARMAN You didn't have any left, eh?
- MAN No. Not after I sold that one.  
*Pause.*
- 40 BARMAN It was after that you must have come by here then, was it?
- MAN Yes, I come by here after that, see, after I packed up.
- BARMAN You didn't stop here though, did you?
- MAN When?
- BARMAN I mean, you didn't stop here and have a cup of tea then, did you?
- 45 MAN What, about ten?

1. a coffee stall: a small open-fronted bar in the street  
2. brisk: active  
3. 'Evening News': a newspaper

4. 'Star': a popular news paper  
5. *whatsisname*: it. *come si chiama*

- BARMAN Yes.  
 MAN No, I went up to Victoria<sup>6</sup>.  
 BARMAN No, I thought I didn't see you.  
 MAN I had to go up to Victoria.  
 50 *Pause.*  
 BARMAN Yes, trade was very brisk here about then.  
*Pause.*  
 MAN I went to see if I could get hold of George.  
 BARMAN Who?  
 55 MAN George.  
*Pause.*  
 BARMAN George who?  
 MAN George... whatisname.  
 BARMAN Oh.  
 60 *Pause.*  
 Did you get hold of him?  
 MAN No. No, I couldn't get hold of him. I couldn't locate him.  
 BARMAN He's not about much<sup>7</sup> now, is he?  
*Pause.*  
 65 MAN When did you last see him then?  
 BARMAN Oh, I haven't seen him for years.  
 MAN No, nor me.  
*Pause.*  
 BARMAN Used to suffer very bad from arthritis.  
 70 MAN Arthritis?  
 BARMAN Yes.  
 MAN He never suffered from arthritis.  
 BARMAN Surrered very bad.  
*Pause.*  
 75 MAN Not when I knew him.  
*Pause.*  
 BARMAN I think I must have left the area.  
*Pause.*  
 MAN Yes, it was the 'Evening News' was the last to go tonight.  
 80 BARMAN Not always the last though, is it, though?  
 MAN No. Oh no. I mean sometimes it's the 'News'.  
 Other times it's one of the others. No way of telling beforehand. Until you've got  
 your last one left, of course. Then you can tell which one it's going to be.  
 BARMAN Yes.  
 85 *Pause.*  
 MAN Oh yes.  
*Pause.*  
 I think he must have left the area.

6. **Victoria:** Victoria Station

7. **He's not about much:** *it. Non si vede molto*