

Harold Pinter was born in the East End of London in 1930. From 1949 — 60 he was a professional actor but since then has only occasionally appeared on the stage. His first play, *The Room*, was performed in 1957 and this was followed in 1958 by *The Birthday Party*. His steadily increasing reputation was established by such plays as *A Slight Ache* (1959), *The Caretaker* (1960), *The Homecoming* (1965) and *Betrayal* (1978). Pinter has great versatility: he has acted, directed, written sketches and one-act plays, plays for the theatre, television and radio as well as screenplays. Pinter's plays have been called 'comedies of menace'. By this is meant that whereas the atmosphere of his plays is menacing — we see people being destroyed by their own inner guilts and fears — the lines of the plays themselves are, nevertheless, often both comic and poetic. Through Pinter's skill, the most ordinary of everyday conversations are transformed into images of great intensity.

Pinter's sketches come from his early period of writing. In 1959 he contributed sketches to two revues. *One to Another* (with N. F. Simpson and John Mortimer) and *Pieces of Eight* (with Peter Cook and others). Applicant was published, along with four other sketches, in *A Slight Ache and Other Plays* which appeared in 1961.

THE SKETCH

Lamb comes for a job interview with Miss Piffs and finds it a very different experience from what he had expected,

CHARACTERS

Miss PIFFS: the interviewer

LAMB: the job applicant

APPLICANT (pp. 28-33)

An office. LAMB, a young man, eager, cheerful, enthusiastic, is striding nervously, alone. The door opens. MISS PIFFS comes in. She is the essence of efficiency.

PIFFS: Ah, good morning.

LAMB: Oh, good morning, miss.

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?

LAMB: Oh yes, indeed. It's my whole life.

PIFFS [*laughingly*]: 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.

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.*

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.

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?

MISS PIFFS *perches on a high stool 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.

LAMB: No.

PIFFS: Relax completely. Rela-a-a-x. Quite relaxed?

LAMB *nods.* MISS PIFFS *presses a button on the side of her stool. A piercing high pitched buzz-hum is heard. LAMB jolts rigid. * His hands go to his earphones. He is propelled 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, * emits a short chuckle and collapses in the chair.*

PIFFS: Would you say you were an excitable person?

LAMB: Not — not unduly, no. Of course, I —

PIFFS: Would you say you were a moody* 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 —

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?

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.

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? Fretty? Irritable?* At a loose end?* Morose?* Frustrated? Morbid? Unable to concentrate? Unable to sleep? Unable to eat? Unable to remain seated? Unable to remain upright? Lustful? Indolent?* On heat? Randy?* Full of desire? Full of energy? Full of dread? Drained? of energy, of dread? of desire?

Pause.

LAMB (*thinking*): Well, it's difficult to say really ...

PIFFS: Are you a good mixer?

LAMB: Well, you've touched on quite an interesting point there —

PIFFS: Do you suffer from eczema,* listlessness,* or falling coat?*

LAMB: Er . . .

PIFFS: Are you virgo intacta?*

LAMB: I beg your pardon?

PIFFS: Are you virgo intacta?

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?

LAMB: Oh yes, always. Always.

PIFFS: From the word go?

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

PIFFS: Do women frighten you?

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? Their thighs? Their knees? Their eyes? Their (Drumbeat). Their (Drumbeat). Their (Cymbal bang). Their (Trombone chord). Their (Bass note).

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 and collapses.*

Silence.

He lies face upwards. MISS PIFFS looks at Him then walks to LAMB and bends over him.

PIFFS: Thank you very much, Mr. Lamb. We'll let you know.

2. characterization: Miss Piffs
3. themes
4. language/genre

Glossary

The meanings given below are those which the words and phrases have as they occur in the sketch.

Page 29

languidly: without energy or emphasis.
palms: inner surface of the hands.
affably: pleasantly, in a friendly manner.
Electrodes: conductors through which electricity passes.

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a trifle: a little.
jolts rigid: moves suddenly and then becomes completely stiff.
impassive: without feeling or emotion.
twitches: experiences sudden movements of the body over which he has no control.
moody: easily depressed or unhappy.
fits: sudden attacks.
Edgy? Fretty? easily angered or upset.
Irritable:
At a loose end: with nothing to do.
Morose: depressed, unhappy.

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Indolent: lazy.
On heat? sexually excited.
Randy:
eczema: skin disease which produces red swellings.
listlessness: feeling of being without energy.
falling coat: loss of an animal's hair or fur (e.g. that of a dog or cat).
virgo intacta: without sexual experience (normally applied to a woman).
building: starting quietly but becoming more and more excited and dramatic.

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totters: moves in an unsteady way from side to side as though about to fall.

Questions

OUTLINE TO QUESTIONS

1. characterization: Lamb