

Harold Pinter

Applicant (1961)

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 [*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.

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 right 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; crawl 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? [...] [*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 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.

Harold Pinter (1930-2008) is one of the leading figures of the post-war revival of the British theatre. He was born in the East End of London into a Jewish working-class family. His adolescence was marked by experiences of prejudice and violence, and by the squalor of the East End. At the age of eighteen, he declared himself a conscientious objector on the grounds of his radical pacifism. He worked as a professional actor before becoming a playwright. He has since worked at a variety of dramatic forms, from full-length plays, to short one-act plays, TV plays and even screenplays for films. His plays present very **few characters, minimal action and frequently symbolic meaning**. Most of his works show an **interest in the nature of human beings, in the frightening awareness of how inexplicable the world is in its violence and unpredictability; and ordinary language itself is shown to be incapable of expressing the most acute experiences, leading only to forms of absurd non-communication, which may become grotesquely funny**. *Applicant* (1962) is an example of a very short sketch. As you can imagine from its length - only a few utterances have been deleted -, the sketch will concentrate on a **single situation** and there will be **no change of scene**.

Scene and Action

The action in the play is very simple. Mr Lamb is received for an **interview** and **dialogue quite obviously plays a major role**. The interview, however, does not develop along the expected lines and even includes two electroshocks. The first shock is apparently given as a test to determine his psychological suitability. The second is given for no explicit reason; possibly because he is still trying to apply logic. These are the only times when there is real physical action on the scene. The silence that follows can be judged in many ways, although it is certainly disturbing. Similarly the conclusion of the interview can be seen in different ways: it is most probably puzzling, but people may also find it amusing, just because there is this sudden **switch back to natural conversation**. Focus on the scene. **Props** (the objects needed for a stage production of the play) mentioned by stage directions and dialogue are: props suitable to represent the scene of an office, certainly a desk with drawers and a wall for the plug, papers (an application), chair, a high stool, electrodes, earphones. **Consider sound and light**. Apart from the piercing buzz-hum of the electroshock, you should notice the red light flashing on and off and the sequence of the drumbeat, cymbal bang, trombone chord and bass note. The red light opens the series of questions on women and the various musical instruments mark the crescendo of the questions and the **reduction of language to pure sound by substituting for lexical elements**. **Dialogue** The action is mostly based on the way the dialogue develops. The **formulas used for opening and closing** the conversation sound **very conventional** but as a matter of fact Miss Piffs does not give him time to answer, she does not seem to be listening most of the time and she builds up intolerably long series of questions by just varying a lexical item with a wide range of its paradigmatic alternatives. The **study of character** plays an important part in a play like this, which is all based on the contrast between two characters. Information about characters can be provided by their **name**, by the stage directions and the part they play in the dialogue. The stage directions define Miss Piffs as **the essence of efficiency**, but leave it to the director or to reader to imagine how exactly you can tell this from her appearance. Her name has **phonological traits** that recall her rapid questioning and her mechanical being. At the beginning of the interview she sounds professional, self-confident and

indifferent. She then becomes **inquisitive, rude and intrusive**. She **exploits her position of power for intruding upon the applicant's private life and self**, for delving into his sexual habits and personality problems.

As concerns Mr Lamb, his name suggests he is very **mild** and in fact he is. At the beginning he sounds willing to co-operate, willing to please, easy-going and fond of his job. He is only a bit frightened by the test.

In the second part of the interview he is still willing to co-operate; he **reacts quite naturally by trying to argue logically** about his answers and to explain and discuss rather than provide simple alternatives. He is most embarrassed by questions on women and sexual life.

Theme The sketch presents a familiar situation (a job interview) from an unusual angle: the **interviewer sounds somewhat like a psychiatrist** trying to delve into personality problems. The interviewer's intrusion in the private life of the individual is a form of **misuse of power**.

The theme involves the **various forms of violence** on the individual and the personality, **leading to silence, to the annihilation of the individual**.

Drama deals with a theme its own way: **it faces the audience with the situation directly. Pinter leaves absolutely no hope for a solution of the problem: he is more interested in exploring the way the individual is overwhelmed by authority than in denouncing the act of violence or finding political solutions for the problem.**

An important theme of the sketch is the **inability or unwillingness to communicate**. In fact, dialogue plays a central part: Miss Piffs asks questions without really wanting an answer; he is always trying to qualify his answers but never gets the time.