

Davies in *The Caretaker*: A Portrait of Survival

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ABSTRACT:

*One of the most distinctive features of Pinter's plays is that they neither give clear details about characters, nor about their motives. The existence of Pinter's characters is akin to non-existence, their presence is absence, and communication is a breakdown, a failure. Mac Davies in *The Caretaker* is such a character that can be analysed in multiple ways. This article, however, attempts to show Davies caught in a dialectical dilemma of being and not being. Classified by "Look" of other forces dominant in society, he struggles to retain his identity that only energises him to survive. It also argues that Davies' existential crisis is more than his sense of absurdity. The paper then concludes how Pinter, unlike other Absurdists, characterises Davies in order to show the primeval nothingness and emptiness, the essential loneliness and isolation of man in a harsh world.*

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Pinter's 'plays have inspired a vast amount of scholarly criticism and analysis which immediately suggests that there is a lot to be said about them, that they are significantly different from other people's work, and that they are open to a variety of interpretations' (Naismith 2). Stylistically, they are marked by theatrical pauses and silences and pregnant with provocative imageries and witty dialogues, and ornamented with ambiguity and irony. There is something new, original, fresh and uniquely disturbing in Pinter's dramaturgy though his plays are composed in an almost conventional style and manner.

The Caretaker, first produced at the Arts Theatre, London on April 27, 1960, was Pinter's first major success as a dramatist. It has been called 'a national masterpiece' in a review of its first London production (Marowitz 163). The play illuminates core failures in human relationships and dramatises not only how they fail but why they fail. It also reveals Pinter's most subtle and complex portrayal of power struggle. It is a play about human connection, friendship, loneliness, isolation, and distantly about love. Characters here battle for dominance or power in almost every line they speak. Pinter in this play shows that man's insatiable craving is to dominate his fellow man, and therefore all human relationships are based on a battle for dominance.

The Caretaker features three characters: the brothers Aston and Mick and an old tramp Davies. The elder brother, Aston, takes Davies in, after the latter has gotten involved in a fight and lost his job for his violent, prejudicial ways. Invited to stay and given a key, he sizes up the worth of some of Aston's meagre possessions, until he encounters the younger brother, Mick. Mick, although witty, intelligent, competent (he has his own business) and impressive, is as cruel and sadistic as his brother is kind to the old man. Mick believes that Davies has taken advantage of his elder brother's kindness, generosity and good nature. After a couple of encounters with this younger brother, Davies mistakenly comes to trust him. On the other hand, he fails to trust the one (Aston) who has proven his good will. When Aston confides to him, one night, that he has been to a mental hospital and received shock treatment, the old man uses this information as a weapon and, in an argument, pulls a knife on the kind Aston. Davies threatens Aston with his brother Mick's displeasure, but finds to his dismay that the bond of blood is stronger. Mick perplexes him with some technical requirements for the post of an interior decorator. Mick then breaks the statue of the Buddha that his brother loves and has set up in the room, and leaves. When

Aston returns and tells Davies that he must leave—for he makes too much noise—, the old man turns back cringing to Aston, professing undying loyalty, but is left begging to stay and in tears complaining about what will become of him.

Though a number of themes are generally discussed in commentaries on *The Caretaker*, 'it is painful and frustrating to coin definitions about the play' (Marowitz 164). However, with regard to the loneliness and isolation Davies, Aston and, to some extent Mick, suffer, the play can be seen as an authentic portrayal of the changing society of the 1950s in Britain where just after World War II, people felt isolated, frustrated and traumatised, having to live under the constant threats of insecurity and unstable social changes. Though Pinter always insisted that 'I don't think of themes when I'm writing', he is equally aware that 'theatre has always been a critical act, looking in a broad sense at the society in which we live...' (Quoted in Naismith 90). Therefore, he captures a glimpse of that society through the characterisation of Davies who is an outcast, pathetically rootless, lonely and isolated.

Pinter's major dramatic innovation here as elsewhere is in his use of language. A standard response to *The Caretaker* regarding its broken dialogues, pauses and silences (in the first page of the play there are three silences¹) has been to say that it is about 'the breakdown in communication' or 'the failure of communication'² (Pinter, C.W. 15). However, to Pinter, pauses and silences do not amount to a breakdown in communication and he believes that the contrary is true. He says:

'I think that we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is a continual evasion, desperate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves. Communication is too alarming. To enter into someone else's life is too frightening'. (Pinter, *Complete Works* 15)

Basically, *The Caretaker* is a character study of a querulous, bigoted, demanding old man who is heartless, ungrateful, dishonest, and who lies constantly and misjudges everyone around him. He even fails to estimate human relationships or friendship with others as well as gauge their true feelings and ideas, not only about him, but about each other (for example,

1. Piner, *The Caretaker*, p-1

2. Newton, Ken. *The Caretaker. The Literary Encyclopedia*. July 24, 2002. November 9, 2008. <<http://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=1345>>

Mick's ideas about Aston). He cares only for himself and is blindly heartless to Aston who took him in and provided the essentials for him. On certain occasions, he seems mad and blind: spiritually, morally and ethically. He is manipulative, merciless and violent attempting to manipulate and even terrorise Aston with a knife. When Aston confides to Davies his past traumatic experience in a mental hospital, Davies uses the information to wound and insult him and he even tells Aston to leave the room.

DAVIES. You! You better find somewhere else! (108)

However, a subtle analysis of his behaviour, manner and paranoia enables one to see the reason behind his apparent ungratefulness, dishonesty, cruelty, and rudeness. Helpless, torn and tormented, he is a sort of outcast who had been left to die on many occasions.

DAVIES. I been left for dead more than once. (10)

Sartre in Being and Nothingness describes the birth of the social in the "Look" of the other. He says—

'In making me an object for his projects, the other alienates me from myself, displaces me from the subject position (the position from which the world is defined in its meaning and value) and constitutes me *as* something. Concretely, what I am constituted "as" is a function of the other's project and not something that I can make myself be. I am constituted as a "Frenchman" in and through the hostility emanating from that German; I am constituted as a "man" in the resentment of that woman'³.

"Look" not only determines a class, but it also alienates an individual. When his subjectivity is invaded by the subjectivity of another (for instance, Mick), Davies becomes aware of being looked at. Classified, his alienation can be justified by the Marxist claim that 'it is not the consciousness of man that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness'⁴. Since he is classified as an item for someone's project, he becomes suspicious, retorting, cruel and manipulative. Therefore, though he sometimes is not in himself⁵, he does not forget to draw his knife when he is about to be attacked.

Davies desperately tries to cope with the barren, bleak world. His life has been at stake many times before; indeed, he has become so dependent that

3. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/>

4. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>

5. 'You get a bit out of your depth sometimes, don't you?' Printer, *The Caretaker*, p-71

he needs very basic things such as a pair of shoes⁶. In fact, he has been reduced to a state of misery.

DAVIES. I said, what do you think I am, a dog? Nothing better than a dog.

What do you think I am, a wild animal? (14, 15)

Davies fails to express his identity properly— sometimes he presents himself as Mac Davies, and sometimes as Bernard Jenkins. He is actually someone who always has to assume a false identity. Certainly, he can never be himself.

ASTON. What name have you been going under?

DAVIES. Jenkins, Bernard Jenkins. That's my name. That's the name

I'm known, anyway.

But afterwards he tells Aston: 'That's not my real name'.

ASTON. What's your real name, then?

DAVIES. Mac Davies. That was before I changed my name. (25)

Davies is an outsider; he has no place in family and society. He is a man without any valid papers and someone who has been kicked out from every job he has undertaken only to associate himself with society once more, though he is the victim of its rudeness. He boasts of sleeping in plenty of beds and having relations with girls though the claim seems hardly credible. He is always haunted by a fear— the fear of being thrown away and losing shelter. Characters like Davies in *The Caretaker* and Vladimir or Estragon in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* represent the bleak side of our existence. They have nothing but a strong urge to survive and somehow hope to survive in a world full of menace and violence.

DAVIES. There's nothing unfamiliar about me with beds. I slept in beds. I don't make noises just because I sleep in a bed.

I slept in plenty of beds. (31)

The extent of Davies' helplessness is difficult for one to imagine. Davies cannot sleep at all at night. He gets up frequently and is haunted by nightmares. Having been haunted by hallucinations or nightmares for a long time, he has become paranoid. Davies even groans and jabbers during his sleep. Aston complains: 'You were making groans. You were jabbering' (30).

6. Printer, *The Caretaker*, p-11-12

In Sartre's vision man is born into a kind of void, a mud. He has the liberty to remain in this mud and thus lead a passive, supine, submissive existence in a 'semi-conscious' state and in which he is scarcely aware of himself. However, he may come out of his subjective, passive situation (in which case he stands out from), become increasingly aware of himself and, possibly, experience *angoisse* (a species of metaphysical and moral anguish). If so, he would then have a sense of the absurdity of his predicament and suffer despair. The energy deriving from this awareness would enable him to 'drag himself out of the mud', and begin to exist. By exercising his power of choice he can give meaning to existence and the universe (Cuddon 317).

Davies somehow tries to relate to existence and give essence to his existence. He then wants to exist by doing or not doing, by being or not being; however, he seems to be more aware of making his own self; that is, becoming aware of his identity. Hence, he prides himself on other occasions for having dinner with famous persons: 'I've had dinner with the best.'⁷ Davies has some hope of getting things done; he is never without hope, even if it means a shambling survival. He lies saying that he is waiting for the weather to break so that he can get to Sidcup to fetch papers that will give him an identity and the right to live among civilised people.

DAVIES. If only I could get down to Sidcup! I've been waiting for the weather to break. He's got my papers, this man I left them with, it's got it all down there, I could prove everything. (26)

But he really does not want to go to Sidcup, for there is nothing for him there. In this regard Mick's estimation of his motives is worth quoting in full:

'What a strange man you are. Aren't you? You're really strange. Ever since you come into this house there's been nothing but trouble. Honest. I can take nothing you say at face value. Every word you speak is open to any number of different interpretations. Most of what you say is lies. You're violent, you're erratic, you're just completely unpredictable. You're nothing else but a wild animal, when you come down to it. You're a barbarian. And to put the old tin lid on it, you stank from arse-hole to breakfast time. □... □⁸ make a long speech about all the references you've got

7. Ibid. p-4

down at Sidcup, and what happens? I haven't noticed you go down to Sidcup to obtain them...'

(118,119)

Like a prehistoric mammal about to be extinct, Davies does his utmost to fight against any force opposing him in his attempt to ensure his survival in a harsh and cruel world. Stripped of all nonessentials, a pair of shoes is life and death to him (13). He has been forever looking for a permanent shelter where he can settle down. He wants to stay in Aston's room as he finds it to be as good a shelter as he has ever found:

DAVIES. Good luck. I can't go on like this. Can't get from one place to another. And I'll have to be moving about, you see, try to get fixed up.

(16)

Davies is ever complaining and is never satisfied with anything; a fear always lurks in his mind: 'You don't get much wind' (8). 'Gets very draughty' (9). He is a tramp who always shambles across the room⁸, which eventually implies his precarious state of mind. He is also a racist. Though he himself is an outsider, ironically he blames all foreigners, outsiders—Blacks, Greeks and Poles—for all the miseries and misfortunes he has faced in life:

'All them Blacks had it, Blacks, Greeks, Poles, the lot of them, that's what, doing me out of a seat, treating me like dirt'. (2)

As Sartre puts it—social reality is in perpetual conflict—an Hegelian dialectic in which, for ontological reasons, there is no state of mutual recognition⁹. Davies quarrels with people who try to cast him out; he fights for dominance which is, to him, merely a shelter, a mechanism for his survival.

During his stay at the house, Davies is invited to take up the position of caretaker; but his selfish and inconsiderate behaviour towards Aston leads to his eventual expulsion from it. His attempt to gain the support of Mick fails and the play ends with Davies appealing pathetically to Aston to be allowed to stay, but the appeal looks doomed to fail. Mick shrewdly sorts out Davies:

MICK: You're stinking the place out. You're an old robber, there's no

8. Pinter, *The Caretaker*, 11

9. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/>

getting away from it. You're an old skate.

You don't belong in a nice place like this. You're an old barbarian. ...

You get a bit out of your depth sometimes, don't you?

.....

You're a bloody imposter, mate? (114, 116)

Much of Davies' dialogue is funny, but the story of his life is also tragic in that it reminds us of man's existential crisis in a cosmic void where a force or system is ruthlessly lurking to fling him into the realm of nothingness. Perhaps, Davies would have everything if the world around him could be a bit more welcoming to him. His cry at the end of the play makes a mockery of a social system or an order which is unable to ensure the survival of a human being, albeit one accused of having all nonhuman attributes:

But... but... look... listen... listen here... I mean...

ASTON *turns back to the window.*

What am I going to do?

Pause.

.....

Listen... if I... got down... if I was to... get my papers... would you... would you let... would you... if I got down... and got my...

Long silence. 124, 125)

It has been said that 'of all Pinter's □early plays *The Caretaker* makes the most bitter commentary on the human condition; instead of allowing an old man to die beaten, the System insists on tantalising him with faint hope, thereby immeasurably increasing his final desperate anguish'(Cohn 119). The system is characteristic of a particular class or group as 'in a class society all beliefs are founded on class position' (Williams 55). Most of the systems stress the derivation of most human activity from an external cause: from God, from an abstracted nature or human nature.... (Ibid 206).

However, it must also be said that 'Davies is certainly in part responsible for his rejection at the end of the play. He has been offered security by Aston, but out of ignorance, selfishness and latent aggression he loses the opportunity and is cast out' (Naismith 100). It is also true that Davies has a number of anti-social characteristics, but the play does not omit to let us know that he is a survivor, someone who never loses hope. His identity may be elusive but he is unable to abide by a submissive role, he has a strong sense of individuality. Moreover, he shows a firm determination and spirit to live 'though living on the absolute fringe of society and fearful of all authorities' (ibid. 102).

The Caretaker is laden with comic humour and farcical elements. But 'the apparently bizarre or comic business in it should not be regarded as absurd' (ibid. 103). It is not meant to expose the meaninglessness of all actions as was the case in *Waiting for Godot*. Critics have opined that Pinter writes like other Absurdist and that his plays are versions of the Theatre of the Absurd preceded on the stage by the work of his great predecessor Beckett. One can, for example, find similarities between the farcical scenes of these two playwrights. The shoe episode of *The Caretaker* and *Waiting for Godot* are thus quite similar. However, while Beckett's play highlights religious emptiness and existential barrenness, Pinter is more conscious of showing an individual's ability to survive in the face of the stern reality of existence. He depicts man's determination to negotiate all the oppressive forces trying to undermine his identity. Besides, no action in *Waiting for Godot* leads anywhere ('nothing to be done'); in contrast *The Caretaker* has a definite plot leading to the doom of an individual who is no more than a fate-driven and sorrow-stricken personality stripped of all nonessentials and somehow only just conveying the very basic form of human existence.

In other words, unlike other absurdist playwrights e.g. Beckett, Ionesco and Genet, Pinter cannot be associated completely with 'the Theatre of the Absurd'. Pinter's use of some of their dramatic conventions in *The Caretaker* does not prove that he belongs to their group. *The Caretaker*, in fact, is not as radical a play as is Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, in which, 'famously, nothing happens twice' (Newton, unnumbered). In this regard, Naismith comments aptly:

'Harold Pinter is included in Esslin's book (as an absurdist playwright), but it is misleading to associate him closely with the other (absurdist) playwrights because he keeps very much to the tradition of surface naturalism and is committed to psychological realism, which the other Absurdist are not. Where Pinter can be regarded in this category, however, is in the existentialist definition of his characters' (102).

In short, through his manipulation of language (dialogues, pauses and silences) Pinter creates an environment in *The Caretaker* that cannot be said to be like that of *Waiting for Godot*. In addition, he shows that through the assertion of language one can dominate another. This can be seen in *The Birthday Party* when the two strangers question Stanley and in *The Caretaker* where Davies attempts to dominate Aston just as Mick tries to bully Davies. Such power play is characteristic of Pinter's plays.

Thus, Pinter in *The Caretaker* goes beyond the concept of the Theatre of the Absurd in the sense that he highlights more the existential predicament of characters. Through the characterisation of Davies, Pinter actually shows the primeval nothingness and emptiness, the essential aloneness and isolation of man in a harsh world. As Naismith puts it, '*The Caretaker* might be seen as presenting a very bleak vision of the isolation of mid-century urban man' (125). The play makes one aware of the ambiguities and realities of existence. *The Caretaker* is, in fact, a play underscoring the essential human predicament resulting from the dominance of a system that classifies society through its "Look" towards individuals.

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