

The Caretaker

Harold Pinter

Harold Pinter: Biographical Sketch

Harold Pinter was born on October 10, 1930 to Jewish parents at Hackney, a working-class neighbourhood in London. It was a difficult time for Jews in England. Hitler's rise to power had begun and the fascism he championed had its British sympathisers. In 1939, Britain entered World War II. During the Blitz, Hitler's intense bombing of London, Pinter, like many other young people, was evacuated to the countryside, which was considered safer. Later, Pinter returned to London and experienced the terror of the Blitz first hand. After the war, difficulties for the British Jews continued; they were attacked in the streets. Pinter later recalled his own involvement in a number of altercations.

Background and Parentage

Pinter's father was a tailor, who owned a house on the Clapton side of Hackney Downs. Pinter spent the first nine years of his life there. He has described his environment thus:

I lived in a brick house on Thistle Ways Road, near Clapton Pond, which had a few ducts in it. It was a working-class area—some big, run-down Victorian houses and a soap factory with a terrible smell and a lot of railway yards. And shops, it had a lot of shops. But down the road a bit from the house there was a river, the Lee River, which is tributary of the Thames, and if you go up the river two miles you find yourself in a marsh. And near a filthy canal as well. There is a terrible factory of some kind, with an enormous dirty chimney, that shows things down to this canal.

Pinter's father worked hard, sometimes twelve hours a day, to ward off financial insecurity. Eventually, however, he lost his business and had to work for someone else. Pinter never forgot this grim situation early in life, and his writing reflects it. For instance, it is Hackney that provides the characters in his plays with their ambitions, hopes, desires and frustrations. The attitudes and occupations of the people, infuse his work. In the Hackney of Pinter's youth were the dichotomies which have made their way into his plays: the brooding sense of danger under the surface calm, the sense of unreal gentility, the cockney intermingled with ordinary speech. The disturbing events of the 1930s and World War II with their latent violence, actual violence and retribution left an indelible mark on his psyche. They find an echo in *The Birthday Party* and other plays.

Pinter has described his experience of the evacuation of Jews during the bombing of London thus:

I went to a castle in Cornwall owned by a Mrs. Williams—with twenty-four other boys. It had marvellous grounds. And it was on the sea. It looked out on the English Channel and it had kitchen gardens. All that. But it wasn't quite so idyllic as it sounds, because I was quite a morose little boy. My parents came down occasionally from London. It was over five hundred miles there and back, and I don't know how they made it. It was terribly expensive and they had no money. I came home after a year or so, and then I went away again, this time with my mother, to a place closer to London.

Experience of a Flying Bomb

Pinter has recorded his first experience of a flying bomb when he returned to London in 1944. There were times when he saw the garden behind his home in London in flames. The house, however, escaped damage. But the family had to evacuate several times from their London home. "Every time we evacuated," he writes, "I took my cricket bat with me." Cricket had become for the young Pinter a symbol of continuity and peace at a time of change, turmoil and mass murder of his people in Germany.

Pinter attended the Hackney Grammar School, where he led an active, vigorous life. His passion for cricket made him captain of the school team. He never lost interest in the game, which became for him a symbol of security and tranquillity. In his plays, there are allusions to the game.

School Life

At school, Pinter played football, besides cricket; he ran races; wrote verse; and he acted. His education at Hackney Down Grammar brought him into a lively minded group of energetic and intellectually adventurous teachers and fellow students in which both theatre and anti-fascism seem to have been important influences. Against this stimulating background, however, there was a reality of the threat of anti-Semitic violence in London in the post-war years. Both the intensity of his theatrical voice and the menace that stalks and indeed characterises his early plays owe something to this environment. In 1948, he received a grant to study at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art but soon dropped out. Shortly afterwards, he started reading the works of the Samuel Beckett (*Waiting for Godot*), who exercised a great influence on his work. In 1949 he was twice fined for refusing National (Military) Service, an early indication of Pinter's determined oppositionalism, which has marked his statements over the years as well as characterising the subject matter of many of his plays.

Early Literary Attempts

At the age of sixteen Pinter wrote an essay on James Joyce having gone *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*. He described *Portrait* as "typical Joyce, startlingly honest, true and forthright", and as a work of great lyrical beauty. Of *Ulysses*, he wrote that "this enormous work stands supreme among 20th century literature." Pinter also contributed to the school magazine and took an active part in the debating society.

Career as an Actor

Pinter's major school activities included acting which he was to take up professionally after leaving school. He played a leading part in *Macbeth* (1947) and *Romeo and Juliet* (1948). His performance in *Macbeth* was thus:

Word-perfect, full-voiced Pinter took the tragic hero through all the stages of temptation, hesitation, concentration, damnation. He gave us both Macbeth's conflicts, inner and outer, mental and military, with vigour, insight and remarkable acting resources.

As *Macbeth*, perhaps Pinter was acting out personal fears and nightmares. In *Romeo and Juliet* as Romeo, he acted out the role of victim in a world beyond his control. Fight and pursuit, strength and soft lyricism, day dream and reality—these fill Pinter's early life and form the basis of his work.

In 1950 a literary magazine, *Poetry London* published two poems by Pinter. He also now started efforts to obtain work as an actor. He got a couple of roles in radio features and, then in 1951, became a professional actor for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). In September

1951, he joined McMaster's touring theatrical company in Ireland and toured Ireland for a few months. He wrote:

Ireland wasn't gold always, but it was golden sometimes and in 1951, it was, all in all, a golden age for me and others.

Pinter met actress Vivien Merchant in 1953. In the same year he became friendly with actor Elvin Owen, who afterwards emerged as an important dramatist. In 1956, Pinter married Vivien Merchant. A son, Daniel, was born to them in 1958. The same year the family took up residence in London. Pinter and Vivien were divorced in 1980, and she died in 1982. She had performed in many of his works: although he did not write parts specifically for her, "she has ... proved to be very good in my plays" (he said in 1971), because she had what he called "a wonderful instinct for [the] roles". Since their partnership ended he has not written a good play, indeed no play of any length or substance: his great period extends from 1960, when *The Caretaker* was produced to 1978, the year when *Betrayal* was put on. *Betrayal*, a play about marital infidelity, contained the first major female role not created for Vivien Merchant, and this happened to coincide with public knowledge that Pinter had left his wife for another person. Future biographers will no doubt either confirm or invalidate the assumption made by audiences at the time that the two events were connected; but rather that Pinter's greatness as a dramatist rests on the production of the last eighteen years or so he spent under the influence of the wife-muse Vivien Merchant.

Pinter the Playwright

However, the phenomenon of Pinter the playwright soon began to make itself evident. First, *The Room* was produced by the Bristol University Drama Department in May 1957. The notoriously catastrophic first London production of *The Birthday Party* took place in May 1958 at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith. This London opening followed a short but reasonably successful provincial run, but the London reviews were almost universally dreadful. The one exception was Harold Hobson's review in *The Sunday Times*, which only appeared after the decision had been taken to close the show after one week. A combination of the positive impact of Hobson's review, and a reaction against the crucifyingly negative tone of the other reviews of *The Birthday Party* contributed to a change in Pinter's fortunes from 1958 onwards. Over the next two years, revivals of *The Birthday Party* and *The Room* took place, *The Dumb Waiter* had its first production (in Germany in 1959), and the first production of *The Caretaker* in April 1960 was enthusiastically received.

From the start of the 1960s, then, Pinter's career as a playwright had taken off, though his other careers as actor and director—not to mention poet and polemicist—had continued in parallel.

The Comedy of Menace

Pinter is widely regarded as one of the two or three most important Anglophone playwrights of the second half of the 20th century, and is probably the subject of more academic commentary than any other living playwright. He is credited with the invention of a new dramatic style known as "the comedy of menace", and his name has been adopted as descriptive of a type of theatre under the blanket term "Pinteresque". Pinteresque theatre has often been described as belonging to the theatre of the absurd, although it is more accurately considered *sui generis*. It is a kind of psychological drama in which supposedly secure space is contested by characters who may or may not be the embodiment of each other's fears, insecurities or latent sexuality. Pinter's oeuvre is heterogeneous, however, and only a minority of his own plays—almost all dating from the early part of his career—can be said to conform to the characteristics of the Pinteresque. In the main, these can be identified by the presence in the title of an initial definite article, although the flexibility of the term means that this cannot be invoked as a "rule". Of these plays, *The Birthday*

Party (1958), *The Caretaker* (1960) and *The Homecoming* (1965) are probably the most highly regarded, frequently revived, and most often included in the curricula of English Departments. In many quarters this early phase is regarded as having largely come to a close with *No Man's Land* (1975). Some critics identify a more lyrical second phase of his work as existing alongside and subsequent to the first phase, characterised by *Landscape and Silence* (both 1969), before a third, more overtly political style became evident in plays such as *One for the Road* (1984) and *Mountain Language* (1988). Among Pinter's later plays, *Ashes to Ashes* (1996) represents a successful marriage of the first and third of these phases.

Non-communication

Pinter is celebrated for possessing an ear for everyday speech. Instead of merely reproducing such speech, however, Pinter shapes it and makes poetry out of it. As he does so, he imbues this language with a deep meaning, which can be read as representing two fundamental facets of the human condition. The first of these is the inevitability of non-communication. Many of Pinter's characters, while exchanging remarks apparently on a common topic, and using mutually comprehensible vocabulary, are revealed as experiencing a profound failure to communicate with one another. The second is our capacity to fail to say certain things to one another: this unspoken substance comes across as a raw animal struggle for power. Personal violence rather than public politics is a theme that runs through the early plays. Typically, these power struggles and feats of non-communication take place in enclosed spaces, detached from the real world. Pinter's most characteristic stage represents a shabby retreat, vulnerable to the arrival of an alien, threatening presence. His is the theatre of sad boarding-houses and strangely unlocated rooms. In much of the more overtly political work of his later years, however, more clues are given, as the source of the violence that hovers in the wings of most of his plays is transferred from the interior lumber-room of the psyche to the exterior world of totalitarian politics.

Themes of Early Plays: Vulnerability and Linguistic Failure

The themes of frangible identity, uncertain menace and vulnerable space can be traced in the major plays. For example, *The Room* is set in the archetypal Pinteresque unlocated interior. Occupying it are Rose and Bert, role-playing the strong, silent husband being ministered to by his attentive chattering wife. Rose's room is her safeguard, and, following Bert's departure on an unspecified mission, *The Room's* vulnerability is exposed as it is serially invaded by characters who pose an increasing threat to Rose's security, culminating in Riley, a blind black man. Bert returns to *The Room*, and assaults Riley, perhaps killing him, whereupon the blindness transfers itself to Rose, and the play ends with her cry "Can't see. I can't see. I can't see." The uncertainty of quite what it is that we are seeing, especially in terms of causes and effects, is reprised in *The Birthday Party*, probably Pinter's most famous play. Here, the characteristically seedy space represented on stage is a seaside boarding house, run by a comically scatty woman, Meg, and her husband Petey, and initially catering to only one boarder, Stanley. The space is invaded by Goldberg and McCann, respectively a Jew and an Irishman, who, it becomes clear, have arrived to seize and possess Stanley's persona. Numerous different readings of *The Birthday Party* are possible. Goldberg and McCann may be the agents of some conventionally totalitarian state or of a criminal organisation, come to reclaim one of their own or to squash an opponent. Given the visual clues of Stanley's blinding and laming, however, it seems more convincing to regard Goldberg and McCann as agents of a society determined to restore Stanley to sexual orthodoxy from an Oedipal byway into which he has strayed, with Meg as an Eastbourne Jocasta. *The Birthday Party* is also a great exemplar of Pinter's light comic touch, as he highlights the sheer futility of many of the exchanges that go to make up our quotidian conversation.

Both the themes of linguistic failure and the vulnerability of space return in *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Caretaker*. Ben and Gus, in *The Dumb Waiter*, engage in the orthodox ritualised exchanges of tabloid news and football, until Gus questions Ben's use of the idiom "light the kettle". But it is Gus's unorthodoxy, and the squalid violence of the men's calling that is exposed as the play proceeds. In the mean time, the seclusion of *The Room* that the two men occupy is increasingly interrupted by demands sent down in *The Dumb Waiter* that occupies the middle of the upstage. The play ends with Gus's punishment for allowing himself to stray from the ritualised obedience and violence of their everyday lives.

Personal Power and Occupation of Space

In *The Caretaker*, personal power and the occupation of space are contested between Davies, the old tramp who is seeking to insinuate himself into *The Room* in which the psychiatrically damaged Aston lives, Aston's brother Mick. Davies embodies the wheedling incompetence of a man who has spent too much of his life assuming that he is being done down—a retreat into a psychological space equivalent to the seedy and vulnerable physical spaces portrayed in some of the other major plays. His refusal to expose any aspect of his personality to outside scrutiny has rendered him incapable; it seems, of engaging with his own reality, or of conversing in any terms other than those of evasion. Pathos is evident in the characters of Aston and his apparently powerful brother, Mick, as they fantasise about transforming their seedy and chaotic flat into some palatial apartment. In the end, it is Davies's attempts to exploit what he perceives as differences between the brothers that causes his expulsion from this Eden. The power struggles and seedy interiors of Pinter's early plays are given perrons their most engaging and traumatic outing in *The Homecoming*. Here Pinter engages with gender politics as well, however, which gives *The Homecoming* a socio-theatrical significance all of its own. The play is concerned with the return of Teddy, a professor of philosophy at an American college, to the North London house occupied by his father, uncle and brothers, all of whom seem to operate on the fringes of working-class society. Teddy is accompanied by his wife, Ruth, who then finds herself at the centre of a series of Pinteresque power-struggles. Gradually, attempts by the men to dominate Ruth are turned by her to her advantage, and she emerges as probably the most powerful figure in the play. At the end, Teddy has left the house, and a tableau on stage has Ruth seated at its centre, apparently willing to become a prostitute while role-playing the maternal figure at the middle of the house. Around her, the men—apart from the inscrutable and powerful Lenny—lie or kneel, beseeching her favour.

Some commentators in the past have sought to characterise Pinter as being obsessed with pauses in his plays, as a result of which the pauses have acquired a significance that Pinter himself has tried to moderate. What is true is that Pinter writes pauses of varying lengths into his dialogue, a characteristic which he shares with other playwrights. Some of these pauses can be exploited to great effect, and one such occurs in *The Homecoming*. Max, the pater familias in decline, has a sinister past relationship with his sons evoked when his eldest son Lenny says: "You used to tuck me up in bed every night. He tucked you up, too, didn't he, Joey?" *Pause* "He used to like tucking up his sons." If ever Pinter used a pause to powerful effect, it is this pause. It heightens the suggestiveness of Lenny's last line, with its possible overtones of sexual abuse.

Later Plays

In the later plays, Pinter overtly examines the threat that the powerful exert over the less powerful. The oppressors in *Mountain Language* both are and are not the Turkish Government, and their victims both are and are not the Kurds. The ambiguity, however, is much less than in, for example, *The Birthday Party*, and the result is that the play is given a political burden which both concretises its impact and distances it. *Mountain Language* presents a powerful image, however, of the suffering imposed by authoritarian regimes out of their paranoia. *One for the*

Road is a shorter play, less polemical than *Mountain Language*, but with powerful imagery, conveyed in a deceptively simple form. In a series of dialogues with the head of the secret police, Nicolas, it becomes apparent that dissidents Victor, Gila, and their seven-year-old son Nicky have respectively been tortured, raped and killed. Throughout, Nicolas does the vast majority of the talking, and through this his own neediness becomes apparent. The kind of violence depicted in these plays is explored further in *Ashes to Ashes*. Here, however, Pinter returns to the linguistic disjointedness of the earlier plays, and—perhaps by those means—to a level of ambiguity that makes for a variety of interpretations of the play. At the heart of the play, however, is a disconcerting identity between violence and sexuality. Rebecca, in conversation with Devlin, describes what seems to have been sexual intimidation or torture at the hands of someone in the same mould as Nicolas in *One for the Road*. Gradually Devlin assumes the identity of this torturer, and the nature of the sexual intimidation is called into question in a way that is reminiscent of a similar trick played by Pinter on his audience in *The Lover* (1962). This time, however, the play concludes with a shattering recollection from Rebecca that evokes the concentration camps of Nazi Germany. Perhaps *Ashes to Ashes* continues a move away from the more overtly political themes of *Mountain Language* and *One for the Road*—a move that had started with *Moonlight* (1993). In *Celebration* (2000), Pinter uses the setting of an expensive restaurant to counterpoise the vulgar materialism, sexism and barely suppressed violence of the principal diners with the waiter's comic elegy for the passing of 20th-century culture. While this is not exactly a return to comedy of menace or the classic Pinteresque, it does constitute social comedy and commentary of a high order.

Setting of Major Plays

Pinter's major plays are usually set in a single room, where occupants are threatened by forces or people whose precise intentions neither the characters nor the audience can define. Often they are engaged in a struggle for survival or identity. "Pinter's dialogue is as tightly—perhaps more tightly—controlled than verse," Martin Esslin writes in *The People Wound* (1970). "Every syllable, every inflection, the succession of long and short sounds, words and sentences, is calculated to nicety. And precisely the repetitiousness, the discontinuity, the circularity of ordinary vernacular speech are here used as formal elements with which the poet can compose his linguistic ballet." Pinter refuses to provide rational justifications for action but offers existential glimpses of bizarre or terrible moments in people's lives. In *Monologue* (1973) and *No Man's Land* (1975) the character use words as their weapons in their struggles, not only for survival for sanity.

Aston: *You said you wanted me to get you up.*

Davies: *What for?*

Aston: *You said you were thinking of going to Sidcup.*

Davies: *Ay, that'd be a good thing, if I got here.*

Aston: *Doesn't look like much of a day.*

Davies: *Ay, well, that's shot it, en't it?*

Pinter's great strengths, then, lie in his ability to evoke the fears that lie at various levels of our individual psyches. These range from the quite explicit terrors of political oppression in a play like *Mountain Language* to quiet evoked by the arrival of Riley in *The Room*. The ambiguity of his play, coupled with Pinter's extraordinary demolition of conventional linguistic use and abuse, leaves a sense that his plays are bringing to the fore things that we have known but have chosen to forget. The universalism of the fears that he conjures up couple with the sheer brilliance of his theatricality and his sense of comedy to justify the position that he holds at the apex of theatrical

reputation. His plays have been translated and produced in numerous different countries, the best known of them being among the most often revived of any living playwright in the world.

Human Rights Issues

Since the overthrow of Chile's President Allende in 1973, Pinter has been active in human rights issues, but his opinions have often been controversial. During the Kosovo crisis in 1999, Pinter condemned NATO'S intervention and said it will "only aggravate the misery and the horror and devastate the country". In 2001 Pinter joined The International Committee to Defend against Humanity. In January 2002 Pinter was diagnosed with cancer of the oesophagus. In his speech to an anti-war meeting at the House of Commons in November 2002 Pinter joined the worldwide debate over the so-called "preventive war" against Iraq: "Bush has said: 'We will not allow the world's worst weapons to remain in the hands of the world's worst leaders.' Quite right. Look in the mirror chum. That's you." In February 2005 Pinter announced in an interview that he has decided to abandon his career as a playwright and put all his energy into politics. "I've written 29 plays. Isn't that enough?"

Pinter as a Playwright

That Pinter is the greatest British playwright since Shaw cannot be seriously doubted. Like Shaw's, his surname has been turned into an adjective in his own lifetime: "His work is so singular that the world 'Pinteresque' has entered the language to describe those situations fraught with menacing ambiguity which are the hallmark of his plays."

The play which first brought Pinteresque ambiguity to the public's attention was *The Birthday Party*, but it was a spectacular flop when it was put on in London in May 1958 after a brief provincial try-out in Cambridge. Any apparent ambiguity resolved itself once one realised that Pinter was Jewish. As a Jew-Sinclair pointed out—Pinter was acutely conscious of the reality of persecution, so Stanley is duly persecuted in the play. Sinclair Goldberg was doing as the persecutor of the Gentile Stanley: should it not rather, I wondered innocently, have been the other way round? It was only much later that I realised how characteristic Sinclair's near 'explanation' of the play was of much Pinter criticism: a flawed solution to a puzzle which existed only in the critic's mind.

For Pinter is at once a more mysterious and a more straightforward person than is commonly realised. In many respects he is "a very traditional dramatist...[whose] plays are conceived for an orthodox proscenium stage; they are conventionally based on speech and dialogue with only a marginal inference of physical action", and the text is fully written out, leaving no scope whatever for improvisation, a theatrical fad which Pinter views with distaste. His settings are concrete, firmly located in time and place (mid-century London for the most part), and the social milieu is precisely defined (British middle or lower-middle class society, exclusively). His mentors are Chekhov, Pirandello and Beckett, all dead masters, avant-grade perhaps in their own day, but established classics of the stage now. Moreover, much of his dialogue is straight out of Noel Coward, who was hardly avant-grade when alive; and that most conservative of institutions, the British stand-up comic, provides him with the inspiration for much of his patter. Ken Dodd, for example:

I had a marvellous childhood, yes, a marvellous childhood. We never stopped laughing, my brother and sister, my mother and father. We were a very funny, very laughter-conscious sort of family. My father was probably the funniest man that I have ever known. He was a very, very funny man.

The professional comedian's patter which Pinter steeped himself in when he trod the boards of seaside theatres in the 1950s, with its repetitions and reformulations within a severely restricted lexis and range of idea, is here exemplified by one of its greatest living practitioners, the hugely successful Ken Dodd. But the interesting thing about this quotation from the self-styled King of the Diddymen is that it comes not from a live act but from an interview. As the interviewer Russell Miller points out, the protestation about Dodd's childhood does not ring quite true: "behind the facade of the ebullient, fast-talking comedian, the 'master of mirth', [is] and enigmatic, lonely, vulnerable, almost tragic figure, still living in the ramshackle house where he was born, measuring his success by bundles of money hoarded in the attic...." Almost a Pinter character, in fact.

Pinter's Mental Universe

Moreover, Pinter's mental universe seems largely innocent of Marx and Freud, let alone of Lacan, Derrida, Irigaray or of other currently fashionable *mattres a penser* of whom he has probable never heard. In this too he is very British: "I'm not a theorist," he unashamedly confessed as long ago as 1962 to an audience of students, and he has frequently repeated the disclaimer in interviews since. But this anti-theorist is not anti-intellectual: far from it. He discovered Beckett long before the great Irishman became culturally respectable. He adapted Proust to the screen without hope or prospect of seeing the film made (*The Proust Screenplay*, 1978). He read and was moved by the study of Oliver Sacks MD on *encephalitis lethargica*, a kind of sleeping sickness, and in 1982 wrote *A Kind of Alaska* about it. And if Pinter is a close reader of Noel Coward, he is an equally devoted student of Franz Kafka, so that his well-made plays à la Coward are just as nightmarish as the labyrinthine rat-runs of the unquiet mind explored so obsessively by the God-tormented genius of Prague.

It is this extraordinary amalgam of Coward and Kafka which characterises Pinter's best work. He not only has, like Coward, a finely-tuned ear for what people actually say—a prerequisite in any competent writer for the stage—he also picks up what is not being said, in other works the Kafkaesque dimension of social intercourse. "So often," he points out, "below the word spoken, is the thing is being said," and he goes on: "we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid,... what takes place is a continual evasion, desperate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves." This makes Pinter's plays hyper-realistic, to borrow a term from art criticism, where it is applied to works that copy reality so effectively that they can be confused with it (an example would be the life-size figure of male cleaner in the Milwaukee Museum of Modern Art). "We have to react to Pinter play more as we have to react to real life than as we do with conventional drama," writes Anthony Suter; "the audience is forced to see a total area of experience and, as in life, to have only exterior signs of behaviour (language in all its forms) as interpretative guide-lines." This is the source of the famous 'menace' which is universally recognised as Pinter's hallmark: what we hear spoken is bound to sound threatening if we simultaneously intuit a subtext which fails to square with what is explicitly state. The *locus classicus* of this is the well-known moment in *The Caretaker* when Aston says that he cannot drink Guinness from a thick mug, whereas what really troubles him is the fear that he will be recalled to mental hospital to undergo electroconvulsive therapy once again.

Power Struggles

The "desperate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves" which Pinter concentrates on his drama are not mere verbal skirmishes: they frequently become "strategic campaigns in the battle for positions", in the struggle for 'dominance and subservience' which...is a repeated theme in his plays". In *The Caretaker*, the intruder Davies is outmanoeuvred by Mick and expelled from the relative Eden of the house into the house into the inhospitable winter weather outside; in *Night School* Walter forces his aunt's lodger Sally to go so that he may recover his bedroom. No

wonder Pinter cannot see "anything very strange" about these plays, which he considers "very straightforward and simple". "What goes on in my plays is realistic," he adds, even if "what I'm doing is not realism." True enough. All human relationships in Pinter are based on power struggles, be they the individual's struggle to appropriate or hold on to a loved one as in *The Caretaker* (Mick loves his brother Aston; Davies represents a threat to the stability of the relationship), the couple's struggle to exclude rivals/outside as in *Old Times* (where the couple could be lesbian—Kate/ Anna—just as much as it could be the married pair), or the clan's struggle to close ranks, as in *The Homecoming*. A particularly insistent theme is that of male solidarity against women: in *The Lover* Max says to Sarah of her husband, "After all, he's a man, like me. We're both men. You're just a bloody woman," and in *Betrayal* Robert, who married Emma for conventional reasons, actually dislikes women, whom he sees as a threat to male supremacy, and chooses instead to privilege his relationship with her lover Jerry, whom he dominates: he makes sure that it is *this* union which will survive what he sees as a wilful female's attempt to spite him by taking his friends as her lovers. The cards are laid on the table when Robert launches on a "brutally honest" tirade about male intimacy in the squash courts, a good example of the "mug of Guinness" kind of transparent metaphor alluded to earlier.

Language—as in this example—is used to dominate other people. There is little physical violence in Pinter's plays. Instead, characters browbeat others through linguistic fluency. Once again, the *locus classicus* is to be found in *The Caretaker*, where Mick uses the clichés of the glossy magazine home-decorating column to attack Davies at his most vulnerable point, his sensitivity over his vagrant status.

Likewise, the articulate Lenny outflanks the reticent Teddy in *The Homecoming* and detaches his wife Ruth from him; Anna comes close to taking Kate away from Deeley in *Old Times*; Hirst outguns Spooner in the decisive verbal engagement in the second act of *No Man's Land*; and Robert defeats Emma in the battle of the sexes in *Betrayal* through his linguistic dominance of Jerry. It is in these verbal tussles that Pinter's music-hall humour is used to best effect, from the funny if coarse "to put the old tin lid on it, you stink from arse-hole to breakfast time", to the groan-provoking rhyme "I killed a man with my own hands, a six foot ten lascar from Madagascar... Alaska? Madagascar!"

The sense of menace is reinforced too by the palpable feeling of suspense Pinter's best plays generate through the use of fades and blackouts. The structure of *The Caretaker* is articulated around sudden extinction of the lights, and the same device is used at the end of the first act of *No Man's Land*. This is what Pinter meant when he said that what goes on in his plays is realistic, but what he is doing is not realism. In looking more closely at the way non-realistic devices like startling blackouts contribute to the heightened realism which is Pinter's hallmark, one should concentrate on the stage plays of his mature 'Vivien Merchant period', although it needs to be borne in mind that Pinter has written more for radio, television and cinema than for the theatre; nevertheless, his finest as well as his most substantial works (*The Caretaker*, *The Homecoming*, *Old Times* and *Betrayal*) were written for the live medium.

Old Times in No Man's Land

In *The Caretaker* (1960), a grim nightmare (complete with gallows humour) of a play, three people, all to a greater or lesser extent sick in mind, feed off each other's psychological inadequacies. Aston is recovering, slowly and painfully, from electroshock treatment. His way of coming to terms with this is to stress that he likes working with his hands. He fantasises about getting the shed up in the garden (after clearing the ground, since it is completely overgrown) so that he can start work on renovating the house. To that end he compulsively accumulates junk, most of it useless, in *The Room*. Pinter says he always starts with a room and then peoples it with appropriate characters. Soon Aston adds to his collection a new acquisition: this time it is a human

being, a tramp whom he has rescued in a punch—up at the all-night cafe where Davies is employed. Aston is pathetic and gentle, and it is not long before Davies starts taking advantage of him, especially as he imagines that he has an ally in Aston's vicious brother Mick. But, like most cunning people, Davies is in certain key respects obtuse, and so fails to pick up the signals of complicity between the brothers (such as the famous "faint smile" which they exchange). When he attempts to play the one off against the other he alienates his benefactor, and the play ends on a note of great sadness when the gentle Aston turns his back on Davies and forces him to leave. "Thank God they got rid of the bastard" was Pinter's revealing comment to the actor Donald Pleasance at rehearsal, and yet the play is so finely balanced that the audience feels sorry for the foul-mouthed racist who every night suffers from troubled dreams.

It is evident from this summary that the story of the play is perfectly plausible: an outsider is invited in, fails to get on with the occupant, and is asked to leave. The decor is realistic too, even down to the gas-stove which worries Davies so much because he thinks it can come on accidentally. The use of lighting (from the unobtrusive fade-down when Aston is confiding in Davies about the hallucinations which resulted in his hospitalisation, to the sudden blackouts used to indicate nightfall in the middle of each act) is a non-naturalistic device which has however become such a common feature of theatrical shorthand—as well as being widely used in film and television—that its artificiality is no longer remarked. Such visual clichés do not undermine the naturalism; at most they reinforce the theatricality.

Contemporary Reality

So firmly rooted in contemporary reality is Pinter's dramaturgy that a critic has been led to suggest, perfectly seriously, that *The Caretaker* "could be read as a social, or even a political satire" on the grounds that "Harold Pinter, due both to his experiences as a member of an unpopular ethnic minority and his desire for integration, was more receptive than most to the ambivalent attitudes that the vast majority of British people were only just beginning to discover in themselves" as the first violent clashes in Nottingham and Netting Hill drew their attention to the issue of race. Without going that far, Pinter's relevance is noticed in this way. The 'rootedness' of his best plays becomes, indeed, more evident with the passage of time. A recent revival of *The Homecoming* (1965) highlighted the fact that "this most cruel of family plays" shows "a Jewish family closing ranks against a *shicksa* (dismissive term for a female Gentile) being brought into the household by the returning successful son" and drew attention to the vein of Jewish comedy that runs through the play, particularly in Max's eulogy of his dead wife at the beginning of Act II. According to Pinter, the play is straightforwardly "about love and lack of love" by which it may imply mean the love binding the Jewish family together and the lack of it cementing the relationship between Ruth and Teddy, which helps explain why the family manages to detach her from him so easily. It is a black comedy constructed along traditional lines: the setting is homely and familiar (a living room complete with sideboard and radiogram) and the action is continuous, Act I taking place before lunch and Act II after it, the (unseen) meal in the interval representing temporary reconciliation and calm before the final struggle in which the details of the deal—that the *shicksa* shall operate as a call-girl in their employ—are worked out between Ruth and the family to the exclusion of Teddy, who is sent home to America empty-handed. Although this comedy is a lot coarser and less whimsical than Noel Coward, it really is not all that different in essence from *Private Lives*.

Naturalism of Cinematic Kind

Naturalism of a more cinematic kind—and we are reminded that Pinter has written ably for the screen, beginning with his fine script for Joseph Losey's masterpiece *The Servant* (1962)—marks *Old Times* (1971). The three characters are all on stage at the outset, but Anna is not involved in the * action for ten minutes or so; she stands, dimly lit, looking out of the window

while Kate and Deeley discuss her imminent visit, particularly the dinner they plan to serve her. She then moves centrestage and begins reminiscing about the past as Kate pours coffee and Deeley offers brandy. This jump-cut erasing the meal itself would seem perfectly natural in the cinema. Once again, too, the setting is naturalistic: a converted farmhouse in the country of the sort which the British professional classes began to move into in increasing numbers in the late 1960s. If Harold Pinter is not a reader of the glossy magazine *Homes and Gardens* he has an uncanny nose for the trendy and the modish in home decoration, as can be seen from Mick's DIY fantasies in *The Caretaker*, and Deeley's converted farmhouse sounds a tellingly authentic note in this play, especially as there is one-upmanship between him and Anna over her obviously much more luxurious villa above Taormina.

Film construction, particularly the use of short scenes (like 'takes'), is brilliantly used in *Betrayal* (1978), the other 'triangle' play, although this time the suggestion of a lesbian past between two women is replaced by more conventional adultery between a wife and her husband's best friend. What redeems the play from banality is the 'reverse' construction: we start with *The Lovers* meeting in one of their old pub haunts in order finally to bury their liaison ("It's all over," says Emma) and then we move progressively, through all stages of the affair, *backwards* in time to *The Lovers*' first embrace with the "husband...at the other side of the[e] door nearly ten years earlier. The device is brilliantly effective in rendering both the misery and the ecstasy of illicit love, set against a backdrop of the London of publishers and literary agents sketched in convincingly and with great economy of means. As so often in Pinter, this is a play about loneliness, about love, and about male friendship which goes deeper than love. Of the Sam Spiegel movie version, which he wrote and David Jones directed, with Jeremy Irons brilliantly incarnating *The Lover*, and Patricia Hodge and Emma who bore a disturbing physical resemblance to (the by then dead) Vivien Merchant, Pinter suggested that the theme was "various different kinds of *Betrayal*", that it was a story in which all three characters betray one another in separate ways.

Since *Betrayal*, Pinter has not written anything nearly as good. About his embarrassing attempts at political drama—*One for the Road* (1984), about torture in Turkish prisons, and *Mountain Language* (1988), a playlet about a people (the Kurds) forbidden to use their mother tongue—the less said the better. Noting that "something essential went from his work in the 1980s," Benedict Nightingale put the problem of Pinter's latest plays in these terms: "Subtext has become text. Fear, suspicion and anger are out in the open. Troubling strangers and sinister intruders have turned into sadistic policemen and nasty prison guards. Subtle, amorphous dangers have become obvious, political ones, with the result that the 'comedies of menace' and the 'dramas of paranoia'—the post-1960 masterpieces, in other words—"have given way to propaganda for Amnesty International: worthy, no doubt, but far less original." Nevertheless, Nightingale praised Pinter for having in the past "found such striking ways of dramatising some of the deepest human dreads and desires". "As Hirst says in *No Man's Land*," I'll drink to that."

The Landscape of Silence

In a tone of mild exasperation, the critic Nigel Andrew recently asked of the characters in a radio adaptation of *Betrayal*: "Why, come to that can they never finish a sentence, or answer a question, or say what they mean?" This was a surprising question to ask in 1990. A competent undergraduate, set a practical criticism exercise consisting of almost any dozen pages chosen at random, could have told him that Pinter's characters do finish sentences, answer questions, and even say what they mean, provided that the sentences are devoid of emotive charge, the questions uninquisitive, and the avowals of no personal significance. As soon as sentences look like getting them into deep water, they abandon them; and once they are asked a question which they prefer not to answer, they pretend not to have heard it and reply instead to a different one; and when saying what they mean would be to say what they really mean, they take refuge in irrelevance and

evasion. (One is entitled to wonder what circles Nigel Andrew moves in: has he never had to deal with a salesman who cannot be pinned down to a delivery date, or a mechanic who is incapable of answering a straight question about a fault in the clutch?) As Almansi and Henderson put it, "One has to reach into the subtext of the unspoken" with Pinter in the same way as one does with Chekhov, "for rarely is there the comfort of stated unequivocal fact" (though they imply that no intelligent spectator has difficulty 'reading' the subtext, completing the unfinished sentences, answering the evaded questions, or divining the concealed meaning).

Such cunning on the part of the characters notwithstanding, there 'invariably' does come a moment when a player says something 'irrevocable', something which "he in fact means", and this can then "never be taken back". Examples of this "snatched truth among lies" would be Davies blurting out that he thinks Aston is off his head, Teddy admitting it was he who stole Lenny's cheese roll, thus bringing the unspoken struggle with his brother out in the open, or Emma breaking it to Robert that she and Jerry are lovers. Often a character tests out the reception his/her idea will receive and then repeats the word to hold on to the common ground when it is agreed with; and Pinter is always careful to listen to the particular 'voice' of a character, so that he does not put words into his or her mouth which the character would be unlikely to say. It is incorrect of some critics to suggest that all Pinter's people use the same kind of 'Pinterspeak'. Davies the tramp speaks ungrammatically, for instance, while Teddy the philosophy professor does not; Teddy's father-in-law Max, a retired butcher, has a working-class voice, whereas Anna in *Old Times* talks exactly like the ex-secretary-who-has-married-well that she is. Similarly, Pinter's famous silences are never incomprehensible, arbitrary pauses but rather moments when words can no longer disguise the real thought or emotion being experienced. They are, not infrequently, moments of real reckoning. One of the most dramatic silences is found right at the end of *The Caretaker* when Aston refuses to allow Davies to stay. Such a powerful rejection could not have been achieved through words.

No critic fails to note that Pinter's language is at once "banal and bizarre", "pitched somewhere between the comic and the creepy", and the science of linguistics has ways of describing what he does. 'Illocution' is the technical term used to refer to what is communicated unsaid, that is, the extra meaning conveyed over and above the overt linguistic message (example: "It's very hot in here, isn't it?"; is a way of asking "Would you mind if we opened the window?"): and 'implication' is the implied meaning over and above the purely linguistic message (example: "You weren't born in a barn" is a way of saying "Shut the door"). Illocution and implication explain many of Pinter's finest touches, such as the astonishing casualness of Ruth's farewell to her husband. "Don't become a stranger", where the context turns a polite cliché into a shocking cruelty.

Pinter is a realistic, even a naturalistic writer. In the field of language, where at first he seems so strange, he is careful to stick to the concrete and familiar. Here is a Blackburn tramp, Frank Bennett, talking to Jeremy Seabrook:

From fourteen to seventeen I was buried twice in Clifton pit. I was buried there twice. So I joined the Army for twelve years, and I went all over the world, every country you can mention. I fought for my country and I was a prisoner of war in Italy, in Syria, and I met the best people in the world when I was taken prisoner. I escaped out of the camp, and I come back, and my friend shot himself, a fellow called Tommy Aspic, he shot himself, definitely... [M]y buddy Tommy, one of the best pals in the world, and I'm a real professional—machine-guns, anything. The Germans wanted to kill us, but I killed them, and that was it. And I 'll kill any German that comes on this foreign country, England, because I've fought for it, and I'll die for it again, and I'll say this, and I'll say it again, on my life:...I'm an Englishman, I'm

Frankie Bennett, definite, a real tough sergeant...I'm the toughest, roughest boy in the world.

The repetitions are characteristic of Davies's speech, as are the disingenuous evasions (the 'friend' mentioned was probably a homosexual lover), the xenophobia, and the pathetic boastfulness (like Davies, Bennett deludes himself that he is 'tough'). Obviously Pinter shapes and edits what his characters say, whereas Seabrook the sociologist does not; but otherwise Pinter is faithful to the words contemporary British actually speak.

After a truly great playwright drama is never quite the same again. "Pinter's outrage has become the norm of respectability," and what made *The Birthday Party* a commercial flop in 1958 has become virtually *de rigueur* in British theatre today. The 'Pinteresque' (words of great banality concealing menace) has become as much part of our cultural consciousness as the 'Kafkaesque' (often used to describe the citizen's impotence in the face of bureaucracy), the 'Proustian' (buried memories resurrected by a chance sight or smell) or the 'Beckettian' (mind and body out of sync). Only the literary genius has this power to so alter our perception of the world, and Pinter is probably a genius. And his masterpieces are: *The Birthday Party*, *The Caretaker*, *The Homecoming* and *No Man's Land*.

A Critique of Pinter's Major Plays

THREE ONE-ACT PLAYS

1. THE ROOM (1957)

Pinter's first play has the basic situation that recurs in his subsequent work—that of a room, a room with a door and the cold and hostile world outside the door.

The other basic ingredients of Pinter's play are also there—a couple, the man large, brutal and about fifty, and the woman who is older than the man, sixty, motherly and sentimental. The man just sits there, reads the newspaper and allows himself to be fed and looked after. And he hardly utters a word. Rose, the woman, seems to be married to the man, Bert Hudd, though that is not certain. Rose certainly seems very anxious to please Bert and to make herself as useful and agreeable to him as possible, though he shows no reaction whatever. Pinter has created an atmosphere of ambiguity and uncertainty around his characters.

Danger is inherent in a warm room surrounded by a hostile world. And likewise, a couple—a man and a woman—where the woman wants to give love and the man does not accept her gift, must be dangerous also. The woman is fighting to maintain the relationship, but the man remains cold. Rose constantly refers to the cosiness and warmth of *The Room*, as against the dampness and obscurity of the basement flat that had, at first, been offered to them. Again and again, she asks herself whether there are any tenants still living in the basement and she congratulates herself on living on the first floor. Bert, who drives a van, still has a delivery to make and has to go out in the cold winter evening. He remains silent even when Mr. Kidd, an older man, who is hard of hearing and whom Rose treats as the landlord though he seems to be no more than *The Caretaker*, enters *The Room*.

Rose tries to question Mr. Kidd about the tenants down in the basement. But he does not answer her questions, perhaps because he is dead or perhaps for some other, sinister, reason. Mr. Kidd talks in a foolish manner which, however, creates an atmosphere of menace and of uncertainty. He then leaves. So does Bert after a while. Rose is now alone. She is about to put the dustbin outside the door but, when she opens the door, she is terrified to find a young man and a young girl standing outside; she is shocked to see them.

Atmosphere of Menace

The atmosphere of menace is here further developed. It seems at first that Rose's terror would prove baseless, but the young couple is only looking for some accommodation. They want to see the landlord and ask him if there is any room available. The young woman, Mrs. Sands, tells Rose that they had gone down to the basement to look for the landlord and they had learnt from a man there that room number seven was available. They had not been able to see the man who was perhaps sitting a partition in the basement. Rose is surprised. She tells Mrs. Sands that she is occupying room number seven. She vehemently denies that her room is going to become vacant.

Mr. and Mrs. Sand leave and Mr. Kidd returns, this time in a state of great excitement. He informs Rose that for the last many days he has been pestered by an intruder, who doesn't give him a moment's peace and who wants to talk to Rose. The intruder, a man, is lying in the basement and refuses to move from there without seeing Rose. He wants to see Rose in the absence of her husband. Rose tells Mr. Kidd that he should ask the man to come quickly before Bert returns. Mr. Kidd leaves, and again Rose is left alone. This time again the door has become the important point of suspense and tense expectations.

Brutal Ending

The door opens and a blind negro, Riley, enters. Rose reacts to him with all the symptoms of disgust, fear, and even racial hatred. But Riley says that he is a messenger for Rose from her father. He addresses Rose as 'Sal' and tells her that her father wants her to come back home. Rose, who had initially reacted to Riley's entry, now softens. She tells Riley that her life here is almost intolerable.

Bert comes back at this moment. He speaks for the first time in the play, telling Rose that he had driven his van at a furious speed. Seeing Riley in *The Room* he is enraged and attacks him, banging Riley's head against the gas stove until Riley lies motionless on the floor. Rose is shocked; she clutches her eyes. She has gone blind. The play ends on this note. The suddenness of the brutal ending has a tremendous impact as it comes as a complete surprise.

Allegorical Implications

The relationship between the brutal husband and his sentimental wife, who is tormented by dark foreboding and existential fears, is perfectly realistic. Rose and Bert are subtly contrasted with Mr. and Mrs. Sands, the young couple, who are looking for a room. The relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Sands also shows signs of tension between an intelligent woman and a lazy and a dull man who dominates her by sheer brutality. The blind negro, on the other hand, who has been lying in the basement for days and who has brought a message for Rose from her past, is clearly a symbol or an allegory. He has been lying down and he clearly had a premonition of the future. He must, therefore, be a being from this world. He may be a dead man or a messenger of death, perhaps Rose's own dead father. His blackness and his blindness reinforce these allegorical implications. The blindness which strikes Rose at the end of the play is also symbolic; it signifies the end of her relationship with Bert, but perhaps it is more than that—it signifies her own death. Mr. Kidd's character combines the realistic and the symbolic elements even more effectively. *The Room* is a remarkable first play; the dialogue is masterly and effective; each character has his own individual style of speech.

2. THE DUMB WAITER (1959)

The Dumb Waiter uses the same situation as *The Room*. Again, we are in an enclosed room enclosed by a dark, mysterious world outside. Again, the people in *The Room* are watching, in a state of terrible suspense, a door which is sure to open. Moreover, in the case, we are, from quite early in the play, made aware that whoever enters by the door will have to die because the two

men in *The Room*, Ben and Gus, are professional murderers. They are employees of a mysterious organisation which sends them, from time to time, on mission of violence and murder.

At first, the two men are merely told the name of the town and the address to which they have to call. They are to stay there and await further instructions. When the instructions arrive, they are to liquidate the victim and go back as quickly as they can. Back at the base, they are to wait for the next phone call with the next address for the next murder.

Suspense and Fear

Ben and Gus are now looking at the door, waiting for the victim to walk into the trap. Of course, they do not know the identity of the victim. This leads to suspense and creates fear in the audience.

Now comes a surprise. The two men are watching the door, which seems to be the only way into *The Room*. But there is another opening into the dark, menacing, outside world. Neither the men in *The Room* nor the audience have, so far, noticed that, between the two beds on which Ben and Gus are sitting, there is a panelled opening.

Suddenly the panelling is pulled up. It reveals that the basement room in which the men are sitting must originally have been the kitchen of a restaurant because, behind it, there is a dumb waiter. The two men are waiting for their victim in a totally uninhabited house. The question is: for whom is *The Dumb Waiter* working? Moreover, in the tray which comes down, the two killers find chits of paper and orders for various food items. Eventually, it turns out that the man to be murdered is Gus, one of the two killers! Ben has received the order to kill his companion. The two men face each other as the curtain falls. The question whether Ben will kill Gus remains unanswered.

Symbolic Interpretation

The play is quite symbolic. The supernatural power operating in the play symbolises the subconscious motivation of the characters who, in themselves, are drawn with extreme realism. Ben and Gus are Cockneys; they have most convincingly been characterised by their use of language. They operate in a world the working of which they do not comprehend. They merely have to carry out instructions which come from above. They are totally insecure; each has a feeling of guilt; and each suffers from boredom that comes from doing things which seem to have no meaning.

The play depicts the process of alienation to which human beings are subjected in a highly organised industrial society, which denies to the individual of low intelligence and limited insight any real understanding of its working. It depicts the frustration that such a process leads to and the violence into which this frustration is bound to erupt. Ultimately, the play seems to convey a complex existential situation through its emotional tone. The failure on the part of Gus and Ben to understand the working of their organisation, their irritation and frustration finds its expression in the dialogue that bristles with their difficulties of communication. Again and again, they become entangled in linguistic knots which they are unable to resolve. The famous exchange about whether one should say "I'll light the kettle" or "I'll light the gas" is just one among such funny and revealing passages. Ben says that current form of speaking is to say, "light the kettle", while Gus insists that the correct form is: "light the gas".

3. A KIND OF ALASKA (1982)

This one-act play conveys profound insights into the nature of time and the self without the use of extravagant language and without resorting to any areas of uncertainty. It has been inspired by a medical book, *Awakening*, written by a physician, Oliver Sacks, who based it on his personal experiences at New York's Mount Carmel Hospital. He had witnessed the awakening, from some

forty years of catatonic lethargia, of a large number of patients who had been victims of a mysterious disease, called *encephalitis lethargica*, which had swept Europe and the United States in the 1920s in an epidemic form. Patients suffering from this disease had been almost completely cut off from the world of consciousness until the discovery of a wonder drug, called L-DOPA, suddenly opened up the possibility of these patients returning to a fully conscious and active life. Oliver Sacks' book contains twenty detailed case histories of such patients, some of whom succeeded in regaining their full consciousness, while others failed.

Catatonic Lethargia

A Kind of Alaska is an imaginative recreation of such a case of awakening. The case has been wholly invented by Pinter; the setting has been transferred from America to England. The patient in the play is a woman, Deborah. She had fallen into a catatonic state at the age of sixteen, and is now in her mid-forties. She is waking up to what appears a room in a hospital. Hornby, the doctor in his sixties, sits by her side. He has been treating her.

A Kind of Alaska describes Deborah's gradual and painful realisation that she has lost almost thirty years of her life. At the beginning of her recovery she has the reactions and personalities of a teenage girl in the 1930s. When her sister Pauline enters *The Room*, Deborah does not recognise her. She takes her for some old aunt she has never met before. Deborah warns that her mother is dead, that her father has gone blind and that he is being looked after by the third, elder, sister, Estelle. Deborah also learns that Hornby, the doctor by her bedside, had married her younger sister Pauline, but he had been devoting most of his time and attention to Deborah.

Gradually, Deborah begins to feel the weight of these twenty-nine years, which she has lost, descending upon her. She begins to remember what she felt like in the years after catatonic lethargia. She recalls having seen a vast series of halls with enormous interior windows resembling walls and looking like mirrors. She visualises herself lying in bed and people bending over her and speaking to her to make some inquiries. The play ends with Deborah accepting the new reality. "I think I have the matter in proportion," she says, and then, after a pause, she adds, "Thank you."

Here Pinter's choice of a subject has enabled him to write a play with powerful intimations of themes which had been haunting him—time, the self, memory and the nature of reality. In this play he has not even resorted to the manipulation of chronological sequence which enabled him, in *Betrayal*, to combine outward realism with philosophical depth. The language of *A Kind of Alaska* subtly captures the girlish tones of a teenager's frozen self and its gradual transition to resigned maturity without any of the more extravagant linguistic devices of his earlier play, or even of *Family Voices*.

FOUR FULL-LENGTH PLAYS

1. THE BIRTHDAY PARTY (1958)

The Birthday Party was Pinter's first full-length play. Most reviewers dismissed the play as a futile effort and did not find it funny enough. They compared it to solving "a crossword puzzle where every vertical clue is designed to put you off the horizontal." They found it obscure with the half-gibberish and lunatic savings of his characters who are unable to explain their actions, thoughts or feelings. A reviewer said:

The first Act sounds an offbeat note of madness; in the second, the note has risen to a sort of delirium; and the third Act studiously refrains from the slightest hint of what the other two may have been about.

However, one reviewer, Harold Hobson, publicly acknowledged that Pinter "possesses the most original, disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London." He compared the

unfavourable reviews of *The Birthday Party* to the initial reactions to the works of John Osborne (*Look Back in Anger*) and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, who were later recognised as throughout the world "as the most important dramatists who use the English tongue...The early Shaw got bad notices; Ibsen got scandalous notices. Mr. Pinter is not only in good company, he is in the very best company." Hobson found *The Birthday Party* 'absorbing' and 'witty'; its characters 'fascinating': "The plot, which consists, with all kinds of verbal arabesques and echoing explorations of memory and fancy, of the springing of a trap, is first-rate: The whole play has the same atmosphere of delicious impalpable and hair-raising terror which makes *The Turn of the Screw* (by Henry James) one of the best stories in the world...It is exactly in this vagueness that its spine-chilling quality lies. Mr. Pinter and *The Birthday Party*, despite their experience last week, will be heard of again. Make a note of their name." Hobson's prophecy turned out to be true. *The Birthday Party* has been recognised to be a great play.

Origin

In a letter to a friend, Pinter has recorded the circumstances which served as a stimulus to him for the writing of this play. He was on one occasion staying in a hired lodging in Eastbourne, a seaside town. He found the lodging filthy and the landlady disgusting. The whole atmosphere of the play seemed to him repulsive: "I have filthy insane digs, a great bulging scrag of a woman with breasts rolling at her belly, an obscene household, cats, dogs, filth, tea, stainers, mess, bullocks, talk, chat, rubbish shit scratch dung poison, infantility..." he wrote. Pinter's experience of the lodgings proved to be the origin of *The Birthday Party*—"Now this woman was Meg in the play, and there was a fellow staying there in Eastbourne on the coast. The whole thing remained with me, and three years later (in 1957), I wrote the play."

ACT I

The play opens with a conversation between a couple, Meg and Petey, both in their sixties. It is quite inconsequential and superfluous as Meg asks her husband whether their lodger, Stanley, has not yet come downstairs for his breakfast, Stanley Webber is a man in his late thirties and he has been staying as lodger for about a year. Meg is in charge of the boarding house, while her husband, Petey, works as a deck-chair attendant on the sea beach. Meg has become fond of Stanley; she feels happy while taking a cup of tea to him in his room upstairs. She is also proud of her boarding house, which, she claims, is on the approved list of boarding houses. Meg's concern for Stanley shows that, while she looks after Stanley in a motherly way, she has a desire to become his mistress, even though Stanley's manner of talking to her is brusque.

Meg recalls the day when Stanley used to play the piano on the pier to entertain the sea bathers. But, now for some time past, he has been out of work; he hardly ever goes out of doors. Meg urges Stanley to start playing the piano again, but Stanley replies that he does not have a piano of his own, but he has been offered a very good job as a pianist and that soon he would be leaving Meg's boarding house to join a concert party that is expected to tour all the big cities of Europe.

Stanley expresses his dissatisfaction not only with the breakfast served but with *The Room* which he is occupying and the whole set-up of the boarding house. He refers to the establishment as 'a pigsty' and says that his room needs sweeping. Getting into an amorous mood, Meg says that she has had some lovely afternoons in that room, implying perhaps that she has been carrying on some sort of flirtation with Stanley. She now informs Stanley that two visitors are expected to come to the boarding house. This perturbs Stanley. He asks Meg who the two visitors are and why they are coming to the boarding house. Meg explains that the two men met Petey on the beach the previous night and were looking for accommodation in the town. Meg, however, wishes that Stanley does not leave her boarding house; he should continue to stay there.

Stanley gives Meg an account of a successful solo concert he had given on one occasion in the London locality of lowerEdmonton. But the record concert turned out to be a complete fiasco because some people had turned hostile to him. However,Stanley does not quite explain why people had turned against him so that the second concert could not held.

Premonition of Death

Stanley gives Meg a brief account of some people who would be coming that day in van and bringing with them a wheel-barrow in which they would take away a dead-body from the boarding house. Meg feels nervous when she hears this. She is scared that those people might be bringing a wheel-barrow in order to carry her own dead-body away from the boarding house.

Lulu, Meg's next-door neighbour, now comes to see her. A young girl, Lulu is carrying a parcel. As Meg is leaving the boarding house to do a bit of shopping, she asks Lulu to put the parcel on the sideboard of the living room. When Meg is gone, Lulu enters into a conversation with Stanely. She offers to go out of doors with him for some sort of a picnic. But Stanley shows no interest in Lulu, who leaves, calling him a 'washout'.

The two expected visitors now arrive at the boarding house. On seeing the strangers,Stanley slips out through the back door. The two men enter the boarding house and make themselves quite comfortable. They are Goldberg, a Jew in his fifties, and McCann, an Irishman in his thirties. McCann addresses Goldberg by his first name, Nat. Goldberg compliments McCann on being a very competent man and McCann thanks Goldberg for the favours he has done to him in the past. It seems that the two men have come there to accomplish some mission and that they have been sent by some organisation that they are serving. McCann is feeling somewhat nervous about the kind of job he and Goldberg are expected to accomplish. Goldberg, however, tries to soothe his feelings by assuring him that even though the job be hazardous, they have no reason to fear because it would not in any way harm them personally.

Stanley's Birthday Party

Meg now returns from her shopping. She enters into a conversation with Goldberg and McCann. They ask her all sorts of questions about her present lodger, Stanley Webber, who has been staying there for a year or so. When Meg informs that it isStanley's birthday today, Goldberg suggests that they should all celebrate the occasion and host a party for Stanley. He promises to make all the necessary arrangements. Meg is delighted at the idea of the party; she would put on her party dress for the occasion. It is also agreed that Lulu would also be invited to the party.

The two men are escorted upstairs, to*The Room* which has been assigned to them.Stanley comes back and asks Meg about those two men, but she can provide precious little information to him. She then tellsStanley about *The Birthday Party* and that she has brought a present for him. Stanley is somehow not aware that it is his birthday today. Meg then opens the parcel that Lulu had placed on the sideboard. She takes out a drum from the parcel and tells Stanley that if is her birthday present to him. It is a boy's drum, a kind of toy-drum. Stanley puts the drum around his neck and begins to play on it with the two drum-sticks. At first, he plays on the drum gently and in slow rhythm. Then he begins to go round the table, playing on the drum in the same regular manner. Suddenly, the beating of the drum becomes irregular and loud. Then he begins to bang the drum-sticks with great force, without any rhythm. He is now beating the drum in a savage manner as if he were under the influence of some evil spirit.

ACT II

On the evening of the same day, McCann is alone in *The Room*. Stanley had gone out to avoid the two visitors. When he returns McCann starts speaking to him in a friendly way. He

tells Stanley that a birthday party has been arranged for him that night. Stanley, who has been apprehensive about the purpose and the motive of the two visitors, denies that it is his birthday today; in fact, his birthday will fall next month. He tells McCann that he is in no mood for the party and that he would just be going out again. In his opinion, a birthday party is merely an occasion to get drunk. He asks McCann about the guests at the party and is told that Lulu and McCann's companion, Goldberg, would be the other guests.

Stanley has a feeling that he has met McCann earlier. McCann tells him that he is there on a short holiday with his companion. Stanley informs him that they have chosen the wrong boarding house because the lady of the house (Meg) is not in her right mind at all. He invites McCann to accompany him to a pub for a glass of beer.

But just then Petey and Goldberg enter. Petey introduces Stanley to Goldberg, but says that he would not be able to join *The Birthday Party* because he is already committed to play chess with his friends in the club. He leaves Goldberg starts a conversation with Stanley even though Stanley is not interested; he wants to have nothing to do with Goldberg and McCann. Stanley now pretends to be the manager of the boarding house. He tells them that there is no room available and that *The Room* given to them by Meg was by sheer mistake. They should go out and look for some other accommodation. Seeing the bottles of liquor arranged for *The Birthday Party*, Stanley tells them that the boarding house does not have a licence to serve drinks or to permit drinking.

Stanley Interrogated

Goldberg and McCann are, however, in no mood to leave and Stanley warns them against starting any kind of trouble. Their attitude towards Stanley now becomes menacing. McCann threatens to kick Stanley if he remains obdurate. The two men ask Stanley to sit down, but he refuses. A heated exchange follows between Stanley and the two visitors.

Goldberg and McCann now start interrogating Stanley. This interrogation is based on all kinds of charges and accusations that the two men can bring against Stanley, with Stanley either giving irrelevant answers or no answers at all. They ask him why he shuns Lulu as if she were a leper and why he has left the 'organisation', and why he has 'betrayed' them. They accuse him of playing a dirty game. They call him a 'fake'. Goldberg asks McCann to snatch Stanley's glasses, and Stanley has to clutch the chair in order not to stumble and fall down. McCann accuses Stanley of having killed his wife. Stanley can merely mumble "What wife?". Goldberg then asks Stanley why he has never got married. The questions continue and a desperate Stanley kicks Goldberg in the stomach. McCann picks up a chair and is about to hit Stanley when Goldberg stops him. The many questions that the two men ask Stanley are not related to one another; there is no logic behind these questions; some of the questions are contradictory; and they are of a kind no one can make a head or tail of.

Meg appears on the scene and the two men, who were on the verge of hitting Stanley, now pretend as if nothing unusual had happened. Goldberg compliments Meg on her pretty party dress. The bottles of whiskey are opened and liquor is served to everyone. Meg makes a sentimental speech about Stanley. Just then Lulu arrives. Goldberg introduces himself to her as Nat Goldberg and Lulu is given a drink. Everybody drinks to Stanley's health and wishes him a happy birthday.

Terror Strikes

Meg gets into a reminiscent mood under the influence of whiskey. Her father was a very big doctor who took her to Ireland when she was a little girl. McCann sings a patriotic song about the beauty of his native Ireland; he feels homesick and wants to return to his country.

Lulu has all the time been flirting with Goldberg: "I've always liked older men. They can soothe you." She tells him that he closely remembers the first man she fell in love with.

Meg now suggests that they should play a game, and they play the blind man's buff. McCann removes Stanley's glasses before blindfolding him. McCann has put one of the drums Meg had given to Stanley as birthday present in his way. Stanley keeps moving with the drum clinging to his foot. He happens to move towards Meg. He lays his hands upon her and begins to strangle her. Goldberg and McCann come forward and push Stanley away from Meg.

Suddenly, the electric lights go out. There is blackout in *The Room*. McCann lights his torch but it falls from his hands and *The Room* is again plunged into darkness. Stanley moves towards Lulu in the darkness. Lulu screams and faints. Everybody is in a state of confusion mingled with terror. When McCann finds his torch after some time and lights it, Lulu is found lying spread-eagled on the table, with Stanley bending over her. As soon as the light of the torch falls on Stanley, he begins to giggle. Goldberg and McCann move towards him, but he moves away and stands with his back against the wall. Goldberg and McCann pounce upon Stanley.

How Goldberg and McCann deal with Stanley after seizing him is not depicted on the stage, nor described. But from what happens subsequently, we can imagine that the two men have dealt with Stanley in the most brutal and inhuman manner.

ACT III

Next morning, Petey is reading his newspaper as usual. Meg nurses a headache because of her excessive drinking the previous night. She tells her husband that she has no cornflakes and no bread in the house. She can, therefore, serve no breakfast to him or to Stanley. She finds the drum she had given as a birthday present to Stanley broken. The sight of the broken drum saddens her. But Petey tells her that she can always buy another drum for Stanley. Meg replies that she would soon be going out to do it. But when she opens the door to go out, she stops suddenly and turns to Petey. She asks him about the big black car parked outside. Petey says that the car belongs to Goldberg. She asks him whether there is a wheel-barrow in the car. Petey replies that there is no reason why there should be a wheel-barrow in the car. Meg is greatly relieved to learn that.

As Meg is about to go out, Goldberg comes from upstairs and tells her that she makes a very nice cup of tea. Meg asks him whether Stanley is also coming downstairs. Goldberg replies that on a lovely sunny day Stanley would certainly come downstairs also. When Meg is gone, Petey asks Goldberg how Stanley is feeling as his condition last night was pitiable. Goldberg replies that only a qualified doctor can tell exactly how Stanley is feeling. The birthday celebration proved too much for Stanley and he had a nervous breakdown. Petey is worried. He says that if Stanley does not recover by lunch-time, he would go and fetch a doctor. Goldberg asks him not to bother as Stanley has already been taken care of.

McCann and Goldberg Shaken

A nervous McCann now comes downstairs. He tells Goldberg that he would not go up to Stanley's room any more. He however, says that Stanley is now quiet and he is not talking. Goldberg asks McCann if Stanley is ready to leave. McCann asks Goldberg to go upstairs and find this out for himself. Petey now goes into the garden to take a look at his peas.

Goldberg also appears shaken, like McCann. He tells McCann that it is unusual for him to experience such a feeling of uneasiness. McCann happens to address Goldberg as Simey. This infuriates Goldberg who tells him, "Never call me that." He does not want the name by which his mother and his wife used to call him used to call him should be used by anybody else. He tells McCann that he follows certain principles in life and that he is a self-made man.

Lulu appears and she accuses Goldberg of having seduced her the previous night. But both Goldberg and McCann make fun of her and Lulu leaves.

Stanley Brainwashed

Stanley comes downstairs. He is completely changed in appearance; he is well-dressed and clean-shaven. He holds his broken spectacles in his hand. But his smart appearance is deceptive because he seems to have suffered considerable damage to his mind. He stares blankly on the floor as Goldberg and McCann subject him to another brainwashing exercise. Speaking alternately, the two men overwhelm with a shower of statements, making all kinds of promises and ensuring a golden future for him. Stanley, however, does not react to all this. His mental faculties seem to have been paralysed and he can only produce gurgling sounds from his throat.

Petey now comes back. He is surprised to see the two men trying to take Stanley with them. Goldberg tells him that they are taking Stanley to Monty because he needs special treatment. When Petey suggests that Stanley stay where he is, Goldberg menacingly says that Petey should also go with him. Petey realises his helplessness at this. He encouragingly tells Stanley, "Stan don't let them tell you what to do." Goldberg and McCann leave, taking Stanley with them. Petey only stares at the departing figures.

The sound of a car starting is heard. Petey picks up the newspaper and begins to read it. Meg returns. She asks Petey whether the two men have gone and whether they would be back for lunch. No, replies Petey. Meg does not know that Goldberg and McCann have taken Stanley with them. Petey does not want to shock his wife by telling her this. He tells her that Stanley is still asleep. "Let him sleep," he says.

Meg is cheerful. She tells Petey that last night's birthday party was a successful one and that he should have been there to share the fun and excitement. Everyone at the party had agreed that she was "the belle of the ball".

Vagueness and Obscurity

The vagueness and obscurity of the play has made the critics interpret *The Birthday Party* in several ways. One interpretation is that it presents an image of man's fear of being driven out from his warm place of refuge on earth. Another is that the play is a metaphor for growing up. Yet another view regards Stanley, the central character, as an artist whom society claims back from a comfortable bohemian existence and who is compelled by society to conform to its own standards of conduct and behaviour. Still another view is that Goldberg and McCann represent parts of Stanley's own sub-conscious mind.

The most appropriate label for this play would be "the comedy of menace". Throughout the play we are kept amused, and yet throughout the play we find ourselves on the brink of terror. Some indefinable and vague fear keeps us on our edge. We feel uneasy all the time even when we are laughing or smiling with amusement.

The deliberate vagueness on Pinter's part remains his hallmark and is integral to the effect of his plays. Nevertheless, *The Birthday Party* represents in no uncertain terms Pinter's grip on larger dramatic forms than those found in his shorter plays. Instead of two major characters, as in the one-act plays, we have six characters in *The Birthday Party*. Instead of one act lasting perhaps forty-five minutes, we have here three acts lasting for a total of two hours or more. Instead of types, as in shorter plays, we have here living beings for whom we can feel compassion and sympathy that human beings evoke in real life.

Ronald Hayman says, "The impact (of *The Birthday Party*) is enormous, with moments of terror and violence on the stage that are the best Pinter has contrived, while the structure is the

most impressive he has yet achieved. The parts all contribute to the whole, and the comedy blends well with the serious statements. The mystification is there, as always, but it does not interfere with the precision and clarity of the pattern."

2. THE CARETAKER (1960)

The Caretaker was the first of Pinter's plays to bring him artistic and commercial-success as well as national recognition. Opening on April 27, 1960, at the Arts Theatre in London, *The Caretaker* was an immediate hit with audiences as well as critics, receiving mostly favourable reviews. In addition, *The Caretaker* received the Evening Standard Award for Best Play of 1960. In the many years since its first production, the play has continued to be the recipient of critical praise. It has been adapted for television as well as film and has seen numerous revivals all over the world, including at least one production with an all-female cast.

Origins

The real-world origins of the play lie in Pinter's acquaintance with two brothers who lived together, one of whom brought an old tramp to the house for a brief stay. At the time, Pinter himself had very little money and so identified somewhat with the tramp, with whom he occasionally spoke. Artistically, *The Caretaker* is clearly influenced in both style and subject-matter by Samuel Beckett's 1955 classic *Waiting for Godot*, in which two tramps wait endlessly for someone they know only as Godot to come and give meaning and purpose to their lives.

Through the story of the two brothers and the tramp, *The Caretaker* deals with the distance between reality and fantasy, family relationships, and the struggle for power. It also touches on the subjects of mental illness and the plight of the indigent. Pinter uses elements of both comedy and tragedy to create a play that elicits complex reactions in the audience. The complexity of the play, Pinter's masterful use of dialogue, and the depth and perception shown in Pinter's themes all contribute to *The Caretaker's* consideration as a modern masterpiece.

The Caretaker is a three-act play with three characters—Mick, Aston and Davies. Mick and Aston are brothers. Mick, the younger of the two, is in his late twenties; he is a successful businessman of some kind though we can never be quite sure about the truth of what is said about a character in a play by Pinter. Mick owns a small van and seems to be buying and selling properties. For his elder brother, Aston (who is in his early thirties), Mick has bought an old, neglected house in a western suburb of London. Only one room in the house is habitable. Aston has, rather vaguely, been entrusted with the task of getting the old house repaired and renovated. In the mean time, the one habitable room in the house is cluttered up with old furniture and other junk which Aston has been accumulating. Even this room has a leaking ceiling. Aston is slow, awkward man, who constantly fiddles with screw-drivers and handsaws. But he is good-natured and ready to help his fellow human beings.

ACT I

The play opens with Aston bringing in Davies, an old tramp, whom he has saved from being beaten up in a brawl in a cafe. Davies tells him that he had been working as cleaner in that cafe and in the quarrel that had taken place he had refused to remove a bucket of rubbish, which was not his duty to remove. Davies, it seems, only insists on doing job proper to his position in life. But he is also full of race-hatred. He rails against the Greeks, the Poles, the Blacks, the Indians, etc. Moreover, he is bitter, weak and constantly deceiving others as well as himself. For example, he tells Aston that his real name is not Davies but Jenkins and that he has an insurance card name in the name of Jenkins. Yet, when he is further questioned, he says that Davies is his real name. In order to get his papers, Davies has to go to Sidcup, but to make to that place he would need good shoes. And good shoes are difficult to obtain without enough money.

Aston feels sorry for the old man and invites him to stay with him in his room for a few days until he gets a new job somewhere. He gets a second bed ready for Davies, who can hardly believe his good luck.

Aston Trusts Davies

The next morning Aston mildly complains that Davies had been talking in his sleep. Davies hotly denies it and attributes the noise to the Blacks living next door. Aston goes out, leaving *The Room* in Davies's charge. Davies is surprised that he is being allowed to remain alone in the house and that he has been trusted with whatever is there in *The Room*. Aston even gives the second key to Davies. But Davies is frightened by the electric fire and the old gas stove.

When Davies is left alone in *The Room*, Pinter has already established, out of Davies' lack of self-confidence and his nervousness, about the menace of these objects, and atmosphere of threat, mystery and horror. At this moment, Mike, the younger brother, walks into *The Room* and frightens Davies out of this wits by suddenly seizing him from behind and treating him as if he were a burglar. Mike's action is brutal intrusion into Davies' privacy.

ACT II

Mick cross-examines Davies rapidly, alternating between harshness and politeness. He seizes Davies's trousers and has become very threatening again. Aston returns and Mick's attitude immediately changes to one of a matter-of-fact inquiry about the house. Davies's presence in *The Room* is apparently forgotten.

It is Aston who draws Davies back into the conversation by telling him that he has got Davies' bag from the cafe, where he had left it the night before. There follows another bout of teasing by Mick, who grabs the bag repeatedly so that it rapidly passes from one character to another in an endless round. Then, as mysteriously as he had come, Mick goes away again.

Davies asks Aston who the man was, and Aston informs him that it was his brother. Davies says that the man is "a bit of a joker". With almost motherly affection, Aston gives to Davies a number of things he has brought for him. Even the bag, it really turns out, is not Davies'; somebody else had taken away Davies' bag from the cafe, and Aston has brought another bag for him from some second-hand stall.

Davies The Caretaker

Aston is happy to have someone to look after. He goes so far as to offer the homeless tramp a permanent home. He says that Davies could look after the place and keep it clean. Davies can hardly believe his good fortune. But, at the same time, his timid nature comes to the fore and his acceptance of the offer is vague and half-hearted. What would happen if people who are after him came to the door and rang the bell and he, as *The Caretaker*, had to go and open it?

Davies goes out for a short while. When he returns to *The Room*, he tries to switch on the light but it doesn't work. A sudden loud and strange noise puts him into a state of extreme fear. Mick, who is using a vacuum cleaner had plugged it into the socket meant for the lamp, leading to the sudden noise and darkness. When the light is on again, Davies is discovered trying to defend himself with a knife in his hand. He is ready to strike any attacker. But Mick has now become polite and considerate to Davies. He complains to Davies about his brother Aston's laziness. He also offers Davies the position of *The Caretaker* of the home. Davies is surprised. He feels uncertain as to which of the two brothers is the actual owner of the house. Then, recognising the obvious superiority of the younger brother, Davies decides that he should try to please Mick and get into his good books. He starts speaking ill of his benefactor, Aston, who had brought him to the house.

There is growing tension between Aston and Davies. Davies cannot sleep by the open window and complains about the rain coming in while Aston requires fresh air to sleep. Then obviously, from a deep longing to communicate, Aston begins to tell Davies the story of his life.

There was a time when Aston was as nimble and as vocal as his brother. Indeed, he used to talk too much and he used to have hallucinations. He had been taken to a mental hospital. A doctor had informed him that he would have to be treated for his mental illness and that would require electric shocks. But Aston had refused the treatment. The doctor had, however, obtained the permission of Aston's mother, and Aston was subjected to shock treatment. That is how, Aston explains to Davies, he has become slow and unable to work.

ACT III

Davies cannot resist the temptation of taking advantage of Aston's confession. Learning that Aston has been to a mental hospital and that he has admitted to his own inadequacy, Davies is thrilled to treat his benefactor like a superior dealing with an inferior. Instead of sympathising with the plight of the person who has come to his rescue, Davies is now exhilarated. He sides with Mick and acts as his friend, and he treats Aston as a lunatic.

Mick speaks to Davies about his dream of transforming the neglected house into a luxurious residence. Mick would like the place to be decorated and transformed into something wonderful. Thinking that he has been appointed caretaker of the house by Mick, Davies complains to Mick about Aston. He asks Mick to inform Aston that from now on Davies will be in charge of the place. But Mick, who has been cleverly tempting the old man to reveal his true nature, goes away saying, "Yes. May be I will."

Aston returns. He has at last got hold of a pair of shoes for Davies. But Davies starts finding fault with the shoes. In fact, Davies has no longer any intention of going to Sidcup.

A Hostile Davies

In the night when Aston complains about Davies' talking in his sleep and making noises, Davies reacts with anger. Acting as the dominant partner, he pulls out his knife and threatens Aston. Aston suggests that the time has come when Davies should find some other place to live. Davies retaliates by announcing that he has been put in charge of the house and that it is Aston who might have to leave. Aston merely puts Davies's things into his bag and hands it over to him. Davies has no choice but to leave. But he feels certain that he will come back.

The same evening Davies returns and in the absence of Aston and denounces Aston to Mick. Mick appears to be listening sympathetically but when Davies goes so far as to suggest that Aston should be sent back to the mental hospital, Mick's attitude changes abruptly. He now treats Davies as an impostor; he calls Davies a wild animal and barbarian. In anger, Mick picks up and smashes the figure of Buddha, which is one of Aston's favourite pieces in *The Room*. Davies becomes speechless with astonishment.

Aston returns. The two brothers look at each other. Both are smiling faintly. Mick then leaves *The Room*. Aston sees the broken pieces of Buddha's figure, then goes to his bed and begins to work on his electric plug.

Davies makes a feeble attempt to regain Aston's favour, but Aston is adamant. The play closes with Davies desperately pleading for shelter in *The Room*, while Aston stands silently by the window with his back turned to him. Davies's voice sticks in his throat.

Davies the Manipulator

In *The Caretaker* none of the characters can be trusted to speak the truth. All are, to some extent, deceptive, twisting reality in order to manipulate one another and to delude themselves. The character who is the most deceptive is probably Davies. From the beginning, it is clear that he is a liar, first attempting to win Aston's respect by pretending to a past that rings false. "I've had dinner with the best," he says. He also calls everything he says into question when he admits to having used a false name; the audience cannot even be sure that his true name is Davies. Davies's talk of the future is also filled with lies and fantasy and serves two purposes—to manipulate Aston and Mick and to bolster his own self-esteem. He speaks of getting even with the man whom he says attacked him: "One night I'll get him. When I find myself in that direction."

The first production of *The Caretaker* at the Arts Theatre in London on April 27, 1960, met with an enthusiastic audience response. In his book, *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter*, biographer Michael Billington quoted the Daily Herald's description of the play's reception: "Tumultuous chaos. Twelve curtain calls. And then, when the lights went up, the whole audience rose to applaud the author who sat beaming in the circle." Early reactions from the critics were positive as well. Billington noted that the News Chronicle's critic wrote, "This is the best play in London." Michael Scott, in his book *Harold Pinter: The Birthday Party, The Caretaker, The Homecoming*, quoted critic Charles Marowitz: "*The Caretaker*, Pinter's latest play, is a national masterpiece." Indeed the play was recognised as such by others; it received the *Evening Standard* Award for Best Play of 1960. *The Caretaker* was also adapted as a film in 1964.

3. THE HOMECOMING (1965)

The Homecoming shocks its audiences not only by the casual and matter-of-fact way in which it talks of sex and prostitution, but also, and even more, by the apparently inexplicable motivations of its main characters. Why should a woman, the mother of three children and the wife of an American college professor, calmly accept an offer to have herself set up as prostitute; how could a husband not only consent to such an arrangement but actually put the proposition to his wife? Is Pinter merely out to shock for the sake of shock? Alternatively, those who admired the play's obvious theatrical effectiveness, with its sudden surprises and unexpected turns, defended it as being a cluster of symbolic images and poetic metaphors which should, therefore, not be subjected to excessive scrutiny on counts of verisimilitude and realistic credibility. Martin Esslin considers *The Homecoming* "a poetic image of a basic human situation" that can also stand up to the most meticulous examination as a piece of realistic theatre, and that, indeed, "its achievement is the perfect fusion of extreme realism with the quality of an archetypal dream image of wish fulfilment."

Controversial Story

The story of this play is simple but sensational. Max, a seventy-year-old retired butcher, shares his old house somewhere in the industrial area of London with two of his three sons. They are Lenny and Joey. Joey, who is the youngest of the three, is an amateur boxer who hopes to become a professional. In the meantime, he holds a job with a demolition company. He is slow of speech and clumsy, while Lenny is intelligent and smart. Lenny's occupation is not quite clear. Max's brother Sam, a hire-car driver, is the fourth man living in the house.

Max talks a good deal about his late wife, Jessie. He also talks a good deal about his lifelong friend MacGregor, now dead. The sons, especially Lenny, treat their father badly. The old man acts as a housewife and cook; he also has to listen a great deal of criticism of his cooking. In turn,

he is extremely rude to his brother Sam. A great mystery seems to surround the now dead wife of Max and the mother of his three sons, Jessie.

ACT I

The time is night. The inmates of the house have gone to bed. But two intruders stand at the threshold of *The Room*. They are Teddy, Max's eldest son, and his wife Ruth. Teddy is a professor of philosophy at a college in America. He has been visiting Italy along with his wife. On their way back, they have decided to visit the house where Teddy was born and to introduce Ruth to his family whom she has never met before. Teddy still has a key to the front door, and that is how he has been able to get in with Ruth without ringing the door bell. He does not want to wake up anyone.

Teddy goes upstairs and finds his old room empty. He wants Ruth to go up and get some sleep, but she wants to stay awake and perhaps go out for a walk. Teddy goes upstairs and gives Ruth the front door key. Ruth goes out for a walk.

Casual Meetings

Lenny, who has not been able to sleep, happens to meet Teddy. But the meeting of the two brothers after six years is very casual. Teddy goes into his room while Lenny sits downstairs smoking.

Ruth comes back. The meeting between Lenny and Ruth (whose identity Lenny doesn't know yet) is also very casual. Lenny inquires who she is and what has brought her into the house in the middle of the night. Ruth replies that she is his brother Teddy's wife, but Lenny doesn't react at all. He merely seeks her advice about his insomnia. Later, he makes it clear that he does not really believe that she is Teddy's wife. He asks her whether he can hold her hand by telling her a long and frightening story about a lady who had propositioned him and whom he could have killed, but whom he had beaten up brutally. The lady was diseased. Ruth does not react to this story of violence. But the story implies that Lenny is, in some way, connected with the world of prostitutes and gangsters.

Atmosphere of Mystery and Violence

The atmosphere of mystery deepens when Lenny tells her another story about how he had given a heavy blow to an old woman who had asked his help in moving a heavy washing just because she herself had shown no sign of giving him a helping hand. Both the stories describe Lenny's acts of violence against women.

Ruth doesn't quite believe Lenny, but she understands something. A battle of words develops between the two when Lenny suggests that he should relieve her of an ashtray by her side and of the glass she is drinking from. When he insists on taking the glass from her, Ruth replies: "If you take the glass, I'll take you." Lenny asks if she is making some kind of a proposal to him. Ruth laughs, drains the glass and merely says: "Oh, I was thirsty."

The noise of their altercation awakens Max. He comes down and asks Lenny what is going on. Lenny does not disclose the presence of Teddy or his wife. He maintains that he has been sleepwalking. Finally, he turns on his father and asks him, "It's a question I have been meaning to ask you for some time. That night, the night you got me, that night with Mum, what was it like?" Max is furious. He curses Lenny: "You'll drown in your own blood," and goes back upstairs.

Next morning, when Teddy and Ruth come downstairs, Max is upset that he has not been informed of their arrival. Without knowing who Ruth is, he asks Teddy: "Who asked you to bring tarts in here?.....I've never had a whore under this roof before. Ever since your mother died. My word of honour. Take that disease away from me. Get her away from me." Without paying any attention to Teddy's pleas that Ruth is his wife, Max orders Joey to turn them out. When Joey apologises to Teddy, saying that Max is an old man, Max hits Joe violently. Max is about to collapse from exertion. When Sam tries to come to his aid Max hits him also over the head with his stick. With Joey and Max on the floor and Sam holding his head, Lenny, who has now appeared on the scene, and Teddy face each other in silence.

Max's mood now changes. He asks Ruth if she is a mother. When she replies that she has three children, he is pacified. He even offers Teddy a warm cuddle, saying that Teddy still loves his father.

ACT II

The same afternoon, Max prepares lunch for the whole family. He is flattered by Ruth's approval of his cooking. He then begins to reminisce about his late wife, Jessie, and what she had done for the family. But in the same breath, he refers to her as a 'slut-bitch'.

Lenny begins to tease Teddy about his philosophy. He asks Teddy to comment on the nature of reality. Teddy refuses to answer, but Ruth suddenly intervenes, saying. "Look at me, I move my leg. That's all it is. But I wear underwear with moves with me. It captures your attention. Perhaps you misinterpret. The action is simple. It's a leg moving." Teddy gets up, feeling alarmed. Sam has already gone for work. Max, Joey and Lenny also leave. Teddy and Ruth are the only ones left behind. Teddy suggests that they should go back to America immediately. But Ruth does not show any enthusiasm. Teddy goes upstairs to pack.

Ruth Refuses to Leave

Lenny returns. He and Ruth start talking. She tells Lenny that before she married Teddy and went to America, she used to be a model and that she had been once photographed nude by the side of a lake. Teddy comes downstairs with the luggage and tells Ruth that they should leave. But Lenny suggests a dance before they leave. Lenny and Ruth dance, and he kisses her.

Max and Joey return from the gymnasium, where Joey has been training. When Joe sees Ruth kissing Lenny, he exclaims, "Christ, she is wide open. She's a tart." Saying this, Joey takes Ruth from Lenny's arms, sits down on the sofa, embraces and kisses her. But Max is indifferent. Far from criticising Ruth, he praises her beauty and grace when Joe and Ruth roll off the sofa on the floor. Max tells Teddy that he has always liked him the most among his three sons.

The Cost of Maintaining Ruth

Ruth now demands something to eat and to drink; she has become bossy and demanding. She herself now starts teasing Teddy about his philosophy. Joey spends the afternoon with Ruth upstairs. When he comes down, Lenny asks him how he has got on with Ruth, but Joey tells him that he did not go all the way. Lenny is angry; he start scolding Teddy for having a wife who is tantalising. Teddy indifferently replies that perhaps Joey hasn't got the right touch. Max and Sam are also informed that Ruth has proved merely to be a tantalising kind of woman. Max is upset. He asks Ruth if she had merely tantalised his son Joey. He suggests that Ruth should stay on in the house. When Teddy asks how they would bear the additional cost of her staying there, it is suggested that each of them should contribute a little from his wages towards the cost of maintaining Ruth.

It now turns out that Lenny is, in fact, a professional pimp for a number of women in Soho. He says that Ruth could work part-time there—not more than four hours a night. He asks Teddy to recommend Ruth to the American professors planning to visit England. Teddy's objection is dismissed by Max, who says that the health service in England is there to look after people.

ACT III

Ruth's Conditions

Ruth now comes downstairs and it is her own husband who puts the proposition to her. She seems pleased with the idea but lays down conditions, saying that she would need at least three rooms and a bathroom, a personal maid servant and some money for clothes and furnishing at the very start. Lenny agrees to all these conditions.

Just then, Sam who has been a witness to the going-on all along blurts out that on one occasion Max's friend MacGregor had Jessie at the back of his cab when he (Sam) was driving along. After saying this, Sam collapses. At first, they think that he is dead but he is still breathing.

They leave him lying there. While Ruth calmly concludes the bargain. Teddy is now about to leave alone for America. When he is going, he asks her whether she would change her mind. Ruth now calls him Eddie, a name she has not used for him before, and tells him "Don't become a stranger." Teddy goes away.

Ruth sits, relaxed, in a chair. Sam lies motionless on the floor. Joey goes to Ruth's chair and kneels before her. She touches his head and he puts it in her lap. In a state of agitation, Max says, "I am too old, I suppose. She thinks I'm an old man. I'm not such an old man."

Ruth remains silent. Max becomes more and more pleading, more and more insistent. Evidently, he, too, is sexually attracted towards his daughter-in-law. He falls to his knees and crawls towards Ruth, saying all the way that he is not such an old man and begging for a kiss. Ruth is silent and unresponsive. She keeps stroking Joey's head while Lenny stands watching. Evidently, all the men in the family want Ruth as their mistress.

Shock Value

The Homecoming shocks the audience, first by the manner in which sex and prostitution have been discussed and second, by the strange and inexplicable motivations of its main characters. As do most of Pinter's plays, *The Homecoming* also exists on another level. Its real action is a metaphor for human desires and aspirations. It represents a myth, a dream image, a projection of archetypal fears and wishes. The play deals with both the themes of *Oedipus* by Sophocles and *King Lear* by William Shakespeare—the theme of the son's desire for the sexual conquest of his mother in *Oedipus* and the desolation of old age in *King Lear*. Ruth is a mother-figure. Just like Jessie, she has three sons, Lenny and Joey are complementary: Lenny is slick and fast; Joey is slow and strong. They act as one: Lenny arouses Ruth and then passes her on to Joey without the least hesitation. Similarly, Max, the father, and Teddy, the eldest son, could be viewed as two aspects of the father-figure. At the end of the play, Max and Teddy have been defeated while Lenny and Joey are victorious.

The final image of *The Homecoming* is the elimination of Lenny's and Joey's Oedipal dreams: their mother, young and beautiful, has become available to them as a sexual partner, a whore, while the defeated father cringes on the floor pleading for some scrapes of her sexual favours. As for Ruth, she sees herself as an object of passive desire. That is the significance of her speech about

herself as a moving object in response to the discussion about the real nature of a table. Having failed in her marriage, Ruth is in a state of existential despair, which is understandable and which motivates her behaviour. She has tried to fight her own nature and she has been defeated by it. She now yields to it and surrenders herself without any thought of the consequences.

The Caretaker: Introduction

The Caretaker was first produced in London in 1960. It was presented at the Lyceum Theatre, New York City, on October 4, 1962.

Cast

(In Order of Appearance)

Mick, a man in his late twenties.

Davies, an old man.

Aston, a man in his early thirties.

Act I

Scene 1: A night in winter

Scene 2: The following morning

Act II

Scene 1: A few seconds later

Scene 2: Later that night

Scene 3: The following morning

Act III

Scene 1: Afternoon. Two weeks later.

Scene 2: That night

Scene 3: Later

The action of the play takes place in a house in West London

Setting

The Caretaker is set in a single room, a dismal space full of assorted junk and with one window half covered by a sack. Among the objects in *The Room* are paint buckets, a lawn-mower, suitcases, a rolled-up carpet, a pile of old newspapers, and a statue of the Buddha atop a gas stove that does not work. A bucket, used to catch water from the leaking roof, hangs from the ceiling. *The Room* has so much junk in it that it seems more a storage area than a place to live. *The Room* stores not only useless junk but, metaphorically, useless people such as Aston, who can no

longer have a real life in the outside world, and briefly Davies, who, in a sense, is just another useless thing that Aston has picked up and brought back to *The Room*.

With its collection of junk, its leaky ceiling, and its window with a sack instead of curtains, *The Room* is the antitheses of the kind pictured in home and garden magazines, which are parodied in the play.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The years following victory in World War II were a time of hardship in Britain. A 1947 fuel crisis left many without heat, and food shortages resulted in the continuation of wartime rationing well into the late-1940s. These years also saw a serious housing shortage. During the war, when construction of housing had ceased, two hundred thousand houses were completely destroyed and half a million more required extensive repairs. Some Britons saw hope for the future in Socialism, and the late-1940s saw the development of the Welfare State, which placed responsibility for the relief of the poor on the government, in 1946, the National Insurance Act and the National Health Service Act were passed, providing insurance and medical care to the poor. The National Assistance Act was developed to provide a safety net for the poor. Many believed that new government policies would end poverty altogether.

Such optimistic assessments, however, were soon proven false.

SUMMARY

In its review of the *The Caretaker*, universally hailed as "an important work of theatrical art," *The New York Times*, summarised the play as under:

"An old bum receives shelter in a cluttered room of an abandoned house. His samaritan is a gentie young man whose kindness is so casual that he seems almost indifferent. Dirty, tattered, unkempt, itching and scratching, the tramp is by turns wheedling, truculent and full of bravado...

"He speaks the proud lingo of those who have untold resources awaiting them at near-by havens. He pronounces his meager phrases with the exaggerated precision of one unaccustomed to being needed. He flails a fist into a palm or into the air with the belligerence of a fighter no one will ever corner. He associates himself with fastidious practices like soap as if they were his daily habit. He is very funny—at first. But the laughter shades increasingly into pity. Like a cornered animal, he cannot believe that anyone means to be kind to him...

"He hates foreigners. He trusts no one, and fears everyone. He alienates the two brothers who separately have offered him a job as caretaker of the premises. Their offers and the job itself become themes with subtle overtones. Aston, the samaritan, lives in personal and emotional isolation, tinkering with gadgets and dreaming of building a shed out in the yard. And Mick, who carries on like a man of affairs, inhabits a dream world that resembles an extrovert's nightmares. Mr. Pinter has been vehement in his assertions that his play is no more than the story it tells. But he cannot prevent his audience from finding in it a modern parable of derisive scorn and bitter sorrow!

Summary

The play takes place in one room of a house in West London during the 1950s. It is winter. The play begins with Mick sitting on a bed in the room, but when he hears a door open and shut somewhere offstage, he leaves. Aston, his brother, and Davies, an old tramp, enter.

Aston has helped Davies in a fight at the cafe where he was working an odd job. Aston offers Davies clothes, shoes, and a place to stay the night. Davies is loud and opinionated, complaining about the "blacks" and people of other races. Aston, by contrast, is reserved, shy, and speaks haltingly. Davies accepts Aston's offer, and says he will have to go down to Sidcup to get his papers, which will confirm who he is.

The next morning Aston tells Davies that he was being loud in his sleep, a statement that Davies strenuously rejects. Aston prepares to go out, and tells Davies he can stay there. The tramp says he will try to find a job. After Aston is gone, Mick enters and engages Davies in a silent tussle. He asks Davies what his game is.

Mick asks Davies strange questions and discourses on random topics, discombobulating the older man. He finally says that Davies can rent the room if he wants. Aston returns with a bag of Davies's belongings. Mick leaves. The bag turns out not to be Davies', and he is annoyed. Aston asks Davies if he wants to be the caretaker of the place; he, in turn, is supposed to be decorating the landing and turning it into a real flat for his brother. Davies is wary at first because the job might entail real work, but he agrees.

Later Davies is in the room and Mick uses the vacuum cleaner in the dark to frighten Davies. Adopting a more casual manner, he asks Davies if he wants to be caretaker. Davies asks who really is in charge of the place, and Mick deceives him. He asks Davies for references, and Davies promises to go to Sidcup to get them.

The next morning Davies prolongs his decision to go out, blaming bad weather. Aston tells him about how he used to hallucinate and was placed in a mental facility and given electroshock treatment against his will. His thoughts are slower now, and he wishes he could find the man who put the pincers to his head. All he wants to do, though, is build the shed in the garden.

Two weeks later, Davies is full of complaints about Aston, delivering them to Mick. One night Aston wakes Davies to make him stop making noise in his sleep, and Davies explodes, mocking him for his shock treatment. Aston quietly says he is not working out and ought to leave. Davies curses him and says he will talk to Mick about it.

Davies speaks with Mick and argues that Aston should be evicted. Mick pretends to agree with him for a bit, and then starts to ask Davies about his claim that he is an expert interior decorator. Befuddled at this claim he did not make, Davies tries to correct Mick. At one point he calls Aston nutty, which causes Mick to order him to leave. He gives Davies money to pay him out for his services.

Aston enters, and both brothers are faintly smiling. Mick leaves, and Davies tries to plead with Aston again. He grows more and more desperate, wheedling and promising to be better. All Aston says is that Davies makes too much noise. The curtain descends on Davies' protestations.

Character List

Aston

The older brother of Mick, Aston appears shy, reserved, and slow. He speaks haltingly and has trouble finishing projects. He reveals that when younger he was subject hallucinations, and then, against his will, was put into a mental facility and given electroshock treatment. He confesses he has difficulty ordering his thoughts. He is also very compassionate, offering Davies a place to stay and a job. He is finally pushed to his limits when Davies mocks his treatment and "make[s] too much noise" (60). He has a good relationship with Mick, although they do not speak to each other.

Davies

Davies is an itinerant and a tramp. After a fight at his cafe job, he is brought by Aston to the room where he is offered the caretaker position by both Aston and Mick. Davies is loud, confident, arrogant, and full of himself. He has a martyr complex, believing that everyone else, particularly other races, is out to get him. His identity is questionable, as his papers have been at Sidcup for a long time. He eventually alienates Aston with his irritability, laziness, and mean-spiritedness, and is forced out of the room.

Mick

The younger brother of Aston, Mick is rather mysterious and complex. He cares deeply for his brother and deftly deceives Davies. He is intelligent and ambitious, and talks frequently about his projects and desires to expand. He lives outside the room but resents Davies's entrance into it. While he admits to getting frustrated with Aston, his dream is to fix up flat and live there with him.

Themes

Isolation

The characters in the play are profoundly isolated from one another. They orbit their own personal universes and cannot quite maintain deep, meaningful relationships with others. Communication is fractured or impossible; they misunderstand each other and remain in their private, personal worlds. Furthermore, they are not engaged with society; they are isolated from the world outside, finding it hostile or confusing. The room in the play acts as a shelter or a womb; within here they expect to be safe, which explains why, to Mick and Aston, Davies must leave, and why Davies finds it so terrifying that he cannot stay.

Race and National Origin

Pinter's characters live in a time and place when race and national origin matter: after WWII and the end of the imperial age, borders became porous, and citizens of Southeast Asia, India, and Africa made their way to European countries to settle. The result was, unsurprisingly, suspicion and prejudice. Race and national origin were of central importance in order to determine who deserved what from society and the government. Davies manifests the contemporary obsession with the hierarchy of race, denigrating "Poles, Greeks, Blacks, the lot of them, all them aliens," (6) while asserting his own rights. Aston and Mick are not racist like Davies, but still query him about his birthplace and, in

Mick's case, tell stories about people's identifying factors like where they live and travel to. Overall, the play evinces the unease of racial tensions in 1950s London.

Communication

Communication is not something that comes easily to the three characters. They find it hard to truly listen, or to answer direct questions. They speak slowly or not at all, or, in Davies' case, are full of sound and fury but have nothing meaningful or objectively truthful to say. Their communication styles are influenced by their social class and their treatment by society; Aston is slow and thoughtful as a result of his treatment, Davies is loud and boastful to cover up his lack of a place in the world. Mick uses language to his advantage -to manipulate Davies -but finds it hard to articulate the pressures he feels. They are isolated and oppressed, and are unable to use language to communicate fully with each other.

Absurdity

The Caretaker takes place in a world characterized by absurdity. Life has no meaning or meta-narrative; it is fragmented, chaotic, confusing, and hostile. The individual cannot rely on others, or society, or God, or even themselves to find meaning or value. The characters are isolated, lonely, and oppressed by forces outside their control. Desires they possess or choices they make seem to be wholly unconnected to the outcome. They seem adrift from history, both collective and personal. All that Mick and Aston can hope for is for things to remain more or less the same, and all Davies can hope for is another small respite from the gnawing emptiness of his life.

Social Class

The issues of race and national origin seem much more prevalent than social class in the text, but that is only because they are discussed so openly. Social class on the other hand is a much subtler theme, and one that the audience/reader must consider in order to understand the revolutionary impact of Pinter's play (the lower classes were not often fodder for high drama) and the motivations of the characters. All three of them are oppressed by dint of their class, which means that they are privy to external authorities and controls that strip their autonomy from them. They are trying to eke out a living, and, in Davies' case, are completely untethered from the mechanisms of society that would allow him to fend for himself. He has no job, no papers, and has let his personality ossify into one characterized by martyrdom, prejudice, and misplaced self-regard. Aston's lower-class status made him a victim of medical authorities, and Mick cannot get ahead in his plans to better his life. Overall, the characters exemplify the beliefs, values, and behaviors of those deemed by society to be worthy of little regard.

Family

Family relationships are significant in the play, but are depicted in a myriad of ways. Family can sometimes be detrimental, and representative of the larger absurdity and meaninglessness of life -Aston's mother allows her son to be given the electroshock treatment, and Davies' family is absent (whether or not it was he who rejected his wife or he is leaving part of the story out, he is still completely alone). Family can also be a burden, as Mick understands because he has to put up with his brother's slowness and ineptitude. However, the largely silent relationship between Mick and Aston is the closest the play comes to offering meaning and purpose. Mick and Aston care for each other; Mick sees them living in the house together, and is (mostly) indulgent of Aston's behavior. He resents Davies but does not want to hurt or annoy his brother, so he uses subtler means to oust the tramp. By the

end of the play the slight smile exchanged between the brothers indicates that they fully understand and appreciate each other; it is a small gesture but one pregnant with meaning.

Identity

Mick, Aston, and Davies are certainly memorable characters, but they do not possess fully-fledged identities. In fact, Pinter suggests that modern life so beats down a person that they are unable to maintain a sense of self. Aston was rendered pliable and meek due to electroshock treatment, and Davies has two names and goes without his identifying papers. He does not remember where he was born, and seems almost afraid to pursue answers to these questions, as if he were afraid to find out he really has no identity. Mick tries desperately to live out his ambitions, but is pulled in different directions by the claims on his attention. The characters are defined more in terms of their relationships to different objects rather than their actual characteristics or motivations: Davies is obsessed with shoes and his knife, Aston has his Buddha and the broken plug, and the brothers closely heed the bucket. Pinter reveals very little of their history or anything else about them, which is intended to call attention to their lack of fixed, unified identities.

The Caretaker: Critical Appreciation

The Caretaker was first produced in London in 1960 and was Harold Pinter's first major success as a dramatist. It has three characters, the brothers Aston and Mick and the tramp Davies. Aston, who it is revealed has suffered from mental illness and undergone electric shock treatment, invites Davies into his house after rescuing him when he's about to be beaten up. Mick, a builder and sadistic type, who has difficulty communicating with his brother, appears to resent this intrusion and virtually terrorises Davies.

However, Davies is eventually invited to take up the position of caretaker, but his selfish and inconsiderate behavior towards Aston leads to his being told by him to go. An attempt to gain the support of Mick fails and the play ends with Davies appealing to Aston to be allowed to stay, an appeal that looks doomed to fail. The play resembles other Pinter dramas in which conflict is created by outsider figures—for example, Teddy in *The Homecoming* and Spooner in *No Man's Land*—gaining entry into another's home, trying to establish themselves, but eventually being forced to leave.

Theatre of the Absurd

Pinter has been associated with the "theatre of the absurd" and through this is a play that destabilises such fundamental elements of dramatic structure as plot, character and the conventions governing the use of language, it does not do so in as radical a way as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, in which famously nothing happens twice. Whereas Beckett's drama virtually discards conventional dramatic forms and theatrical devices, Pinter, in *The Caretaker* at least, does not completely reject them. There is something that resembles a plot, through one might find it puzzling, and there are characters who have some connection with reality even though it might be difficult to understand their actions and motivations.

Use of Language

Pinter's major dramatic innovation was in his use of language. A standard response to his drama has been to say it is about "the breakdown in communication". However in conventional drama what is striking is how amazingly effective language is as a means of communication. In

contrast to his Pinter's characters often speak in broken sentences, utter non-sequiturs, repeat themselves, pause for no apparent reason, don't listen to what is said to them or appear to understand it. It could be argued this is a break with the artificiality of conventional dramatic language in favour of realism. Yet realism is insufficient as an explanation of Pinter's language. At certain points the language becomes highly stylised. The play may expose the artificiality of speech and plot in conventional drama but it's doubtful that it does so in the interests of dramatic realism as such.

Perhaps the key to having some grasp of how *The Caretaker* works is to focus on the relation between language, meaning and psychology. In Pinter's drama meaning is not necessarily revealed in the words a character uses. It is thus not enough to say, "What do these words mean?" Rather one should ask questions like: "Why does this character say this at this time" or "What is the character's motive for saying this?" or "What are the underlying interests that govern this speech or exchange?" This severs the conventional relationship between language and meaning. For example, there is a particularly fractured exchange between Davies and Aston in the scene in the second act after Aston suggests to Davies that he might be caretaker. Looking at the language in conventional semantic terms might lead to the conclusion that it exemplifies only bumbling inarticulacy. Yet if one looks beyond the semantics of language in orthodox linguistic terms in order to consider the question of possible motivation the exchange is open to interpretation: Davies does not want to commit himself to taking the job of caretaker that Aston apparently offers him; he's playing for time; he can't understand why anyone should want to do him a good turn; if he says yes he's worried he may fall into the trap. In this play, therefore, the language the characters use does not necessarily have any direct relationship to what they might mean. Also, in Pinter's drama, language use can't be easily separated from the question of power as virtually all relationships are depicted as power struggles of one sort or another.

Lack of Coherent Plot

A feature of innovative modern drama is its refusal to present the audience with a coherent plot that makes sense of the action. *The Caretaker* doesn't open with Davies and Aston. The first person we see is Mick, whom we later learn is Aston's brother and who is sitting on the bed, but as soon as he hears voices he gets up and leaves. We are given no information as to why he behaves in this way. Nor do we know why Aston invites Davies in and later offers him the job of caretaker. If one takes an absurdist view of the play, associating Pinter with such dramatists as Beckett and Ionesco, then there may be no explanation for such happenings. Alternatively the audience is being challenged to interpret events in the same way that it is being challenged to interpret language. One can't be sure one's interpretation is the right one, but at least the action is open to interpretation, unlike most absurdist drama. Does Mick's leaving before Aston enters *The Room* indicate something about the nature of their relationship? Though Aston and Mick are brothers they don't seem capable of communicating. Could this be connected with why Aston invites Davies to be caretaker? The possibility that there might be answers to such questions is a factor in keeping the audience involved in the action of the play and this, no doubt, contributed to the play's appeal to a wider audience and thus to its success on both sides of the Atlantic despite its dramatic innovations.

Humour

Another reason, however, for the play's popular success was its humour. Davies is a great, if unconscious, comic character, clearly he is someone who has been continually rejected and abused, and he is able to hang onto any vestiges of dignity only by over-compensating to a ludicrous extent. Thus he is never to blame; it is always the other person. To feel any sense of self-esteem he must see himself always as superior to others, which accounts for his racism and denigration of virtually everybody with whom he comes into contact. The discontinuity between

his own elevated sense of himself and the fact that he's a complete social failure is intrinsically comic, as is apparent in his account of experiences such as his visit to the monastery to get a pair of shoes where he is told to "piss off" by a monk. Much of the humour of the play is generated by such discontinuities of register since one would not expect a monk to use this kind of colloquial language of abuse. The highly comic scenes between Davies and Mick are similarly based on discontinuities of register are not only comic; they can be used to exercise power. Mick can easily assert dominance over Davies and Mick are similarly based on discontinuities of register, as when Mick discusses his plans for the house in the exaggerated descriptive language of interior decorating magazines. However, these discontinuities of register are not only comic; they can be used to exercise power. Mick can easily assert dominance over Davies by switching to a register that Davies can't function in: "Of course, we'd have to come to man small financial agreement, mutually beneficial," or moving quickly from one register to another so that Davies is at a loss as to how to respond.

Davies The Caretaker

Possibly the most significant feature of the play at the level of event is that both brothers offer Davies the job of caretaker. Why should they do that, especially to someone like Davies? This question is not answered in the play, but this does not mean that it is necessarily unanswerable, only that any answer will be an interpretation. A possible interpretation could be founded on the fact that the brother can't communicate with each other: The one has mental problems which seem to have been exacerbated by his experience of electric shock treatment; the other appears able to function only in an aggressive dominating mode that is quite inappropriate for communicating with Aston. Yet both brothers are inextricably connected through their ownership of the house: they need to be able to cooperate if any progress is to be made in getting it into any kind of order. But since they can't exchange a meaningful word with each other nothing gets done. What is needed in such a situation is a mediator: a third party who can act as a go-between. In that context one can understand why they both offer Davies the job as caretaker. Mick's offer is the most surprising as initially he responds extremely aggressively to this intruder, but it is soon becomes clear that he can easily exercise domination and control over him and that he is therefore no threat.

Davies, however, does not appreciate that he should play a mediating role. Used to a world made up of the dominating and the dominated, he thinks he can play one brother off against the other. Convinced that Mick is the more powerful brother and never comfortable with Aston, to whom, as someone mentally damaged, he naturally feels superior, he aligns himself with Mick and believes that together they can drive out Aston. After having been offered the position of caretaker by Mick, Davies's relationship with Aston seriously deteriorates. Despite Aston's continual efforts to establish some kind of rapport with Davies for example, he provides a pair of shoes for him—Davies continues to create conflict with Aston tells him he'll have to go, Davies responds: "Not me, man! You!" indicating the delusion he is under that Mick wants to get rid of his brother. When Mick finds out about the breakdown of Davies's relationship with Aston, Davies is no longer of any use as a go-between and Mick ends his relationship with him, on the pretext that he was under the false impression that Davies was "a first-class experienced interior decorator". Davies faces the prospect of being expelled from his refuge and the two brothers of returning to their former state of non-communication and isolation.

Lonely, Isolated Lives

Though there is much in this play that one can't be sure about, what seems reasonably certain is that it was in the interests of all three characters to cooperate with each other. The alternative of all three living isolated lives seems unproductive and futile, yet they never the less fail to achieve that cooperation.

Could things have worked out otherwise? Or is the ending tragic in the sense that such an outcome was inevitable? For things to have worked out otherwise all the characters would have needed to change in order to exploit this opportunity to alter their situations. For Aston and Mick such change is particularly difficult for each seems to be governed by forces that are beyond their control, Aston by the effects of mental illness, Mick by a personality disorder that means he can operate only aggressively. Yet both of them do change to some degree: each reaches out to another person, namely Davies, by offering him the position of caretaker. It's doubtful if much more can be expected from them. Davies, however, does seem to have freedom to change on response to this opportunity to improve his situation. He is not restricted by mental or personality problem in the way that Aston and Mick seem to be. Yet though Davies has a theoretical freedom to change, the tragedy of the situation is that this freedom is only theoretical: Davies can't transcend the influences and circumstances that have shaped him. Experience has caused him to think of every situation in a narrow self-interested way. He can't reach out to the otherness of Aston; he has to categorise him in such a way as to ensure his own sense of superiority. Davies has been as irretrievably shaped by the circumstance of his life just as much as Aston and Mick are shaped by mental or personality factors. Audiences clearly have been able to relate to the situation the play dramatists, judging both by its popular success and by the continued success of new productions. Perhaps one reason why audiences relate to it is that one can identify with the Davies's theoretical freedom to become a different person and change his life; yet, at the same time one can also identify with the fact that the effects of the past are virtually inescapable, cancelling out that freedom to change. There is a perhaps a universality about that predicament which audiences consciously or unconsciously recognise.

Write a note on Pinter's characterisation in The Caretaker with special reference to Mick, Aston and Davies.

Pinter's treatment of his themes and characters is realistic. He endows his characters with life and vitality. They speak in a colloquial language like Aston and Mick, or in Cockney like Davies. That brings out their social and educational background. What is more, they do not have any past history. Pinter's characterisation differs sharply from the conventional method. For Ibsen the past histories of the characters are the soil in which the plot takes its roots. But for Pinter, the past histories of the characters, like their off-stage lives, are not so important. They give some account of their past lives during the play. However, the only facts which Pinter is concerned with are the facts of what is said and done on stage. But in Pinter's case whether what the character tells us about his past is true or false.

No Past History

Thus, none of Pinter's characters are defined by their past history because they are liable to distort it. Nor are they defined by their position in society which they are liable to misrepresent. They are also not defined by their physical appearance which is seldom described. Indeed, Pinter rarely gives any physical description of his characters. Only a few hints are given.

Very Few Characters

Pinter does not believe in the multiplicity of characters of a play. *The Caretaker* has just three characters—Mick, Aston and David. Each of them is essential to the pattern of the play, and there are no supernumeraries. But they are all convincingly drawn and are individuals in their own right.

MICK

Mick is Aston's younger brother. He is in his late twenties. He suffers from non-communication with his elder brother Aston and seeks the help of an intermediary, Davies, the tramp, to get across to Aston. And when he finds that Davies does not serve his purpose, he discards him even though he had earlier offered him *The Caretaker's* job in the house that he plans to burn the old, dilapidated house into.

Mick does not come face to face with Aston in the play even though he lives in the same room with him. He enters *The Room* in Aston's absence but leaves as soon as Aston comes.

All that we come to know about him is that Mick wears a leather jacket, he has a van of his own and he is some kind of construction business. We see him at the end of Act One Scene Two when he finds Davies rummaging through the junk in Aston's absence. Taking him to be a burglar, Mick seizes Davies's arm and forces it up his back. Davies screams. He swiftly forces him to the floor, with Davies struggling, grimacing, whimpering and staring. Mick signals him to be quiet. As Davies writhes in pain, Mick picks up his trousers, examines them and throws them at Davies.

Mick cross-examines him about his name and asks him whether he had slept in *The Room* the previous night. Then he starts a cat-and-mouse game with Davies. He is alternately warm and harsh. He gives long narratives about Davies (who gives out his name as Jenkins to him) about Davies resembling first, his uncle's brother, then having a funny kind of resemblance to a bloke I once knew in Shoreditch," and finally, accuse him of sleeping in his mother's' bed and "stinking the place out." He still considers Davies an intruder into the house and he calls him "a fibber" when Davies says that he was brought there by Aston. Finally, Mick tells him:

You are an old robber, there's no getting away from it. You're an old skate. You don't belong to a nice place like this. You're an old barbarian. Honest. You got no business wandering about in an unfurnished flat.

Mick tells Davies what he would charge him for living there. He starts a long spiel on the rent, various other charges and taxes in case Davies wants to stay there. He then asks Davies about his banker and solicitor so that he can draw up the agreement. Aston enters and he offers to tar the roof where it leaks to make the place habitable.

Mick has grandiose plans for renovating the place and when, Aston hands over the bag he has brought for Davies, Mick grabs it and starts tossing it about. This exasperates Davies. Mick warns him.

Watch your step, sonny '....You're knocking at the door when no one's at home. Don't push it too hard. You come busting into a private house, laying your hands on anything you can lay your hands on. Don't overstep the mark, son.

Davies tells Aston that his brother is "a bit of a joker" and that "he tends to see the funny side of things".

A Prankster

In their next encounter, when Davies comes to *The Room* at night, there is no light. He tries to light a match to find his way through the junk when the match box falls on the floor. Mick, who has been using the electrolux in the dark by plugging it into the light socket, kicks the match box

and scares Davies. He finds that his knife to defend himself only to find that Mick has been trying to scare him again.

Mick tells Davies that he had been doing spring cleaning in his brother's absence: "We take it in turns, once a fortnight, my brother and me, to give the place a thorough going over. I was working late tonight, I only just got here. But I thought I better get on with it, as it's my turn." And then he mischievously tells Davies: "It's not that I actually live here. I don't. As a matter of fact, I live somewhere else." And he invites a grateful Davies to his place some time for drinks and some music after he has apologised to him for giving him "a start". He pretends to be impressed when Davies tells him that he can only be purchased so far and no further. He offers Davies a sandwich as a gesture of friendship and grills him about Aston. "You're my brother's friend, aren't you?" But when Davies is diffident about answering the question. Mick is quick to take offence: "Don't you find him friendly then?"

Mick seeks Davies' advice by telling him that his brother doesn't like to work. "He's just shy of it. Very shy of it...If you got an older brother you want to push him on, you want to see him make his way. Can't have him idle, he's only doing himself harm. That's what I say...He's supposed to be doing a little job for me....I keep him here to do a little job for me...I keep him here to do a little job...but I don't know...I'm coming to the conclusion he's a slow worker., ..What would your advice be?"

Feeling that he has gained Mick's confidence, Davies tells him that Aston is "a bit of a funny bloke." But Mick stops him by saying that he is getting hypercritical about his brother, which puts Davies on the defensive. Mick then offers him the job of caretaker of the house (which Aston had also made to him earlier) because "you look a capable sort of man to me." He asks Davies whether he has been in "the services" and wants references before he can appoint Davies as caretaker, "just to satisfy my solicitor".

Seeks Davies's Advice

Davies feels that he has won Mick's confidence. He starts being offensive to Aston as Mick, is the landlord of the place and he has got "the deed to prove it". He suggests certain alterations in *The Room* to Mick and starts making demands. He complains against Aston to Mick and his unresponsive attitude, while Mick is planning to turn the place into a penthouse. "It wouldn't be a flat it'd be a palace." Mick wants Davies to have a chat with Aston about getting down to work and dispose of all the junk that he has collected. But Davies tells him, "He's no friend of mine. You don't know whether you are with him. I mean, with a bloke like you, you know where you are...I means you got your own ways....You may have some funny ways... You're straight forward.....But with him, you don't know what he's up to half the time! He's got no feeling!" Davies suggests that Mick should himself talk to Aston since he is his brother.

Davies then starts insulting Aston till Aston shows him the door and asks him to leave the house.

Confident that he has Mick on his side, Davies returns with him. He apparently sympathises with Davies on his plight but when Davies continues complaining against Aston, Mick loses his cool: "You saying my brother hasn't got any sense?" He says that he can't ask Aston to leave even though he is the landlord of the place. "On the other hand, he's the sitting tenant." He has to be given proper notice. When Davies refers to Aston's past mental illness and tells Mick that Aston should be sent to where he came from, i.e., the mental hospital, Mick is offended. Tongue-in-cheek, he asks for Davies's credentials as an interior decorator before he can start "doing up the place." But when Davies says that he doesn't possess any, Mick turns on him. Davies compounds his anger by calling Aston "nutty." Mick is now furious: "Nutty? Who's nutty?...Did you call my brother nutty? My brother. That's a bit of....that's a bit of an impertinent thing to say, isn't

it?...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... Most of what you say is lies. You're violent, you're erratic, and 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 stink from arse-hole to breakfast time."

Mick, like Aston had done earlier, kicks Davies out of *The Room* and returns to his old non-communicative stance with Aston, both the brothers inhabiting worlds of their own.

ASTON

Aston, in his early thirties, is Mick's brother. He seems quite generous, as is indicated by his rescuing Davies from a potential brawl and later bringing the old tramp into his own house. Once he brings Davies home, Aston continues to come for him, giving him tolerance attempting to find shoes for him, giving him tobacco attempting to find shoes for him giving him money and even replacing Davies's bag when it is stolen. Unlike Mick, Aston is gentle and calm, enduring Davies continual complaints about all that he is offered.

Stay in Mental Hospital

At the end of the second act, Aston reveals what may be at the root of his exceedingly calm nature. Some time before he reached adulthood, he was committed for a time to a mental institution, where he received involuntary electroshock therapy. When in the hospital, Aston says, he counted on his mother to deny permission for the treatments. When she did not, he attempted to escape and, when that failed, he physically fought those who attempted to subject him to electric shocks.

When we see him now, he has brought home an old tramp and provided him shelter in his room. That the tramp is noisy, finicky, demanding and ungrateful is not Aston's concern. He tries to make Davies comfortable in the other bed in the junk-filled room, only to be disturbed by the noises Davies makes in his sleep. Otherwise, Aston is non-interfering; he keeps thinking with a plug or sandpapering a plank because he wishes to build a shed outside. That probably explains why he is always on the lookout for tools and appliances that might be of help to him.

Wary of Human Company

Ever since his experience in the mental hospital following his talking to people (his "hallucinations"), Aston has been wary of human company. He tells Davis about his recent experience with a woman and wonders what she was up to:

You know, I was sitting in a cafe the other day. I happened to be sitting at the same table as this woman. Well, we started to... we started to pick up a bit of a conversation. I don't know... about her holiday, it was, where she'd been. She'd been down to the south coast. I can't remember where long. Anyway, we were just sitting there, having this bit of a conversation...then suddenly she put her hand over to mine...and she said, how would you like me to have a look at your body?...To come out with it just like that, in the middle of this conversation. Struck me as a bit odd.

Aston does not communicate much with his younger brother Mick, who is worried about him. He tells Davies that Aston is shy of work and seeks his advice as an intermediary. Taking him as a friend, both the brothers, separately, offer a job as caretaker of the place of Davies. But then Davies turns against Aston and starts playing one brother against the other, with the result that both of them ask him to leave. Their interaction is minimal and they are lost in their own worlds.

His adolescent experiences, when he used to go to a café opposite the house, have left a deep and lasting impact on Aston. (Incidentally, he came across Davies in the cafe, too). In his soliloquy at the end of the second act, he recounts them:

I used to go there quite a bit. Oh, years ago now. But I stopped. I used to like that place. Spent quite a bit of time in there. That was before I went away. Just before, I think that...place had a lot to do with it.

Aston used to talk to the people there.

They were all a good bit older than me. But they always used to listen... thought they understood what I said. I mean I used to talk to them. I talked too much. That was my mistake. They same in the factory. Standing there, or in the breaks, I used to...talked about things. And these men, they used to listen, whenever I...had anything to say. It was all right. The trouble was, I used to have kind of hallucinations, they...I used to get the feeling that I could see things...very clearly...everything was so clear... everything...everything used to be so quiet...all this... quiet... and... this clear sight...it was...but may be I was wrong. Anyway, someone must have said something. I didn't know anything about it. And...some kind of lie must have got around. And this lie went around. I thought people started being funny in that café. The factory, I couldn't understand it. Then one day they took me to a hospital, right outside London.

Aston was obviously disillusioned with human company and the need to communicate with anyone. The situation was further compounded by his mother who readily gave permission for the electroshock treatment to the hospital authorities since Aston was a minor at that time. He escaped. But

The trouble was...my thought...had become very slow...I couldn't think at all...I...I couldn't...get...my thought...together...uuhh...I could...never quite get it...together. The trouble was, I couldn't hear what people were saying. I couldn't look to the right or the left, I had to look straight, because if I turned my head around... I couldn't keep... upright. And I had these headaches. I used to sit in my room. That was when I lived with my mother. And my brother, he was younger than me. And I laid everything out, in order, in my room, all the things I knew were mine, but I didn't die. The thing is, I should have been dead. I should have died. Anyway, I feel much better now. But I don't talk to people now, I steer clear of places like that café. I don't talk to anyone...like that...I want to build that shed out in the garden.

Despite Davies's pleas, Aston kicks him out of the house when he finds him meddlesome and tale-carrier to his brother. He doesn't want to change his present world and obsession with the building of the shed outside. He would much rather prefer to brood alone and thinker with the various appliances he has collected in his room than have someone as noisy and grumbling as Davies stay with him in the same room, communicating only whatever is essential with his younger brother, Mick. Aston wants his own space and he wouldn't trade it for anything else in the world.

As Michael Billington remarked in his book *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter*, "Power is the theme: dominate or be dominated." Pinter shows, Billington continues, "that-life is a series of negotiations for advantage in which everything comes into play." Indeed, in *The Caretaker*, this often seems to be the case. Davies tries to play Aston and Mick against each other as he struggles to establish a foothold in *The Room*. Mick maintains power over Davies by physical as well as verbal assaults. And at the end of the play, Aston exerts his power by forcing Davies to leave; the struggle for power is indeed the dominating theme in the play.

DAVIES

Davies, an old tramp, is the protagonist in *The Caretaker*. His portrayal, says Ruby Cohen, is "a bitter commentary on the human condition". In their attitudes towards the old man, the human derelict, the two brothers present only surfaces contrasts. Mick begins by knocking him down, whereas Aston, instead of allowing him to die in despair, rescues him, shares his room with him and opens up home to him. Both the brothers name the old man as caretaker, offer him a kind of scrutiny, which they both subsequently withdraw. Mick turns his back on the old man for failing to fulfil a role to which he never aspired, but Aston rejects him for what he is cantankerous, self-deluded and desperate.

Of all Pinter's plays, *The Caretaker* makes the most bitter commentary on the human condition; instead of allowing an old man to die beaten in a pub brawl, "the System" wisest on tantalising him with faint hope, thereby immeasurably increasing his final desperate anguish. There is perhaps a pun contained in the title: *The Caretaker* is twisted into taker on of care, for care is the human destiny.

Davies-Aston Relationship

The Davies-Aston relationship begins with Aston apparently in command of the situation as both hos and rescuer of the itinerant Davies. His calm, quiet acceptance of the uneasy guest seems a natural posture of superiority, and Davies at first accepts it as such. As both guest and rescued, Davies, in contrast to Aston, is noisy, repetitive and insecure. The evident aim of his early initiatives is to locate a potential common ground and probably one that will be seen his degree of dependency in the relationship. Ironically, his insecurity is increased by the very means that he adopts to diminish it. The fact that it is he, and not Aston, who feels compelled to talk undermines his position at the same time that his verbal manoeuvres seek to strengthen it.

Davies: *Sit down' Huh... I haven't had a good sit down....I haven 'I had a proper sit down... well, I could tell you...*

Aston: (placing the chair): *Here you are.*

Davies: *Ten minutes off for a tea-break in the middle of the night in that place and I couldn't find a seal, not one. All them Greeks had it, Poles, Greeks, Blacks, the lot of them, all them aliens had it. And they had me working there...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. When he come at me tonight. I told him. (Pause.)*

Aston: *Take a seat.*

That Davies should invoke in rapid succession a sense of injury, a major prejudice, and a defiant self-reliance gives us a quick resume of the potential roles he might adopt relative to Aston. That Aston ignores all there...providing sympathy for the first, reinforcement for the second, nor admiration for the third gives us an immediate indication of the likelihood of their success.

Incoherent Speech

Aston's seeming refusal to encourage any of Davies's tentative roles provides Davies with major problems. In the face of Aston's taciturnity he is forced to thresh around desperately for some means of altering the situation. It soon becomes apparent that his large supply of words is not matched by a similar supply of verbal strategies. As the conversation progresses he simply resorts to repeated use of the tactics implicit in his first speech. Appeals to Aston's sympathy and to his prejudices recur repeatedly, though Davies is smart enough to defend himself against becoming a victim of the kinds of prejudice to which he feels vulnerable.

All them toe-rags, mate, got the manners of pigs, I might have been on the food a few years but you can take it from me I'm clean. I keep myself up. That's why I left my wife. Fortnight after I married her, no, not so much as that, no more than a week. I took the lid off a saucepan, you know what was in pan. A pile of her underclothing, unwashed. The pan for vegetables, it was. The vegetable pan. That's when I left her and I haven't seen her since.

As he finishes speaking he finds himself to face to face with a "statue of Buddha standing on the gas stove". The mutual incompatibility of the stone face and that of the tramp comments directly on the success of these efforts to manipulate Aston's attitudes and concerns. The silent inscrutable Buddha, incongruously perched on the gas stove, is as much beyond Davies's comprehension as the taciturn Aston surrounded by the diverse objects collected in his room.

Efforts at Self-Reliance

Davies's other category of approaches involves attempts to assert a degree of independence from Aston. But his efforts to create an image of self-reliance are even less successful than his previous moves and not entirely compatible with them. His appeals for sympathy for his age and health mingle uneasily with assertions that he intends revenge for his misuse at the café: "I'll get him. One night I'll get him. When I find myself around that direction." The strength of this commitment is clearly undermined by Davies's vague reference to when it will occur and by his admission that this would not be his primary reason for going there.

In spite of these repeated failures, Davies's stock of variations on his manoeuvres is not yet exhausted. Indeed he has yet to play his trump card. Unsuccessful as the heroic survivor of the café incident, unsung as the virtuous rejecter of an unhygienic wife, and un-sympathised with as a downtrodden, exploited old man, he invokes a new image of one on the verge of self-sufficiency and success. The tack is circuitous, involving shoes, the weather, a false name, and papers that will "prove everything". But, in essence, the theme is that of a journey to Sidcup which will solve all problems and structure his life anew. Once the journey is made all difficulties will disappear, and Davies will once more be a man to be reckoned with.

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.

Aston: *How long's he had them?*

Davies: *What?*

Aston: *How long's he had them?*

Davies: *Oh, must be...it was in the war...must be...about near on fifteen years ago.*

But this manoeuvre, too, is thwarted by Aston's reactions to it. Clearly, Davies does not match his emphasis on the importance of the journey with a similar commitment to getting there. The time lag he admits to makes nonsense of the value he places on the journey, as Aston's puzzlement is evident. Once again the haphazard dialogue is matched revealingly with an item of junk that is eminently visible but obliquely connected to its surroundings.

Abuses Aston's Kindness and Generosity

At this point, Aston's contribution to the 'conversation' seems rather unfriendly, to say the least. Whatever Davies does to try to improve the connection between himself and Aston is neutralised by his inability to elicit from Aston the responses he needs. To Davies it seems that Aston's posture of quiet superiority is a consistent strategic imperviousness to his needs and wiles.

But Aston's behaviour seems peculiarly inconsistent. His apparent unconcern for Davies's psychological needs is sharply contrasted with an evident concern for his physical needs. Aston's initial generosity toward Davies in the café is extended by offers of cigarettes, shoes and money, and by a willingness to go and retrieve Davies's belongings for him. This inconsistency, this apparent lack of connection between two aspects of Aston's behaviour, is another manifestation of juxtaposed but unclearly linked data in the play. But its effect on the relationship is by no means unclear; this inconsistency disorients Davies and maintains his subservience as effectively as Mick's later inconsistent conversation. As this section progresses, however, it gradually becomes apparent that Aston's efforts (unlike Mick's) are not deliberately aimed at this goal. Indeed, it is very difficult at this point to perceive a deliberate aim in any of Aston's behavior. It does seem clear, however, that he does not share Davies's urgent need for a verbally explicit rapport.

The problem the audience has in understanding Aston is obviously shared by Davies. Sensing the failure of his efforts to impose on Aston any of the relationship roles he has in mind, Davies eventually switches to trying to draw out of Aston information that might guide him to more successful manoeuvres. Feeding him topics dealing with *The Room* and its contents, Davies once more finds himself making little headway:

Davies: *You got any more rooms then, have you?*

Aston: *Where?*

Davies: *I mean, along the landing here...up the landing there...*

Aston: *They're out of commission.*

Davies: *Get away.*

Aston: *They need a lot of doing to.*

(Slight Pause.)

Davies: *What about downstairs?*

Aston: *That's closed up. Needs seeing to...The floors... (Pause.)*

Aston's Reticence

Aston's unwillingness to discuss any of these more neutral topics suggests that his reluctance to converse with Davies is motivated by something more than mere resistance to Davies's wiles; the reluctance seems to proceed from a general antipathy toward any kind of conversation. But, paradoxically, he is not entirely unwilling to talk. While evasive about the house and his legal relationship to it, he does venture the information that he "might build" a shed in the back garden. This willingness to talk is further indicated by a sudden longer statement on the drinking of Guinness—a topic that he discusses with a seriousness that does little to calm the puzzled, uneasy Davies.

I went into the pub the other day. Ordered a Guinness. They gave it to me in a thick mug. I sat down but I couldn't drink it. I can't drink Guinness from a thick mug. I only like it out of a thin glass. I had a few sips but I couldn't finish it.

This relates to nothing previously discussed, and whatever significance it has for Aston is not shared by Davies, who resorts to a quick change of subject.

The short speech is undoubtedly odd, but the kind of oddity it represents provides the first clear indication of the basic difficulty confronting the pair. If Davies fails to respond to or follow up on this topic because he is unable to locate its significance, perhaps this is also the reason for

Aston's similar reactions to Davies's conversation topics. The speech itself, while specifying nothing precisely undermines Davies's operating assumption that Aston's taciturnity is simply a manifestation of superiority and disinterest. Such an assumption has already been brought into question by Aston's non-verbal generosity to Davies, and this speech suggests that Aston, in spite of his general silence, also has a need to talk. The section ends with Aston, as he has done extensively during this opening scene, devoting his attention to a faulty plug on an old electric toaster. His persistent concern for this faulty connection characterises the activity of the opening section: potential links between the characters remain uncertain because the means of establishing appropriate connections has gone awry.

Davies: *I used to know a bootmaker in Action. He was a good mate to me.*(Pause)

You know what that bastard monk said to me? (Pause) How many more Blacks you got around here then?

Plays One Brother Against the Other

That is when Davies turns to Mick, who plays a cat-and-mouse game with him. Davies tries to play one brother against the other in order to keep a roof over his head. He has been out on the road most of his life and he would like to cling to the crumbs he is offered. But his efforts are futile. Mick calls him "a fibber" who stinks the place out and Aston, in spite of all his earlier generosity, turns his back upon him. Davies's final image that we have, despite his desperate, pitiable condition is that of an old tramp who is ungrateful, self-deluded and cantankerous as he finally pleads with Aston:

But... lost... look...listen...listen here ...I mean....what am I going to do?... What shall I do?... Where am I going to go?...Listen...If I got down...If I was to...get my papers... would you...would you let... would you... if I got down...got my....

Q. 2. Write a note on the World of Harold Pinter.

Answer

Each of Harold Pinter's [first] four plays ends in the virtual annihilation of an individual. In Pinter's first play, *The Room*, after a blind Negro is kicked into inertness, the heroine, Rose, is suddenly stricken with blindness. In *The Dump Waiter*, the curtain falls as Gus and his prospective murderer stare at each other. Stanley Webber, the hero of *The Birthday Party*, is taken from his refuge for 'special treatment'. In *The Caretaker*, the final curtain falls on an old man's fragmentary (and unheeded) pleas to remain in his refuge.

Influences of Kafka and Beckett

As Pinter focusses more sharply on the wriggle for existence, each of his successive hero-victims seems more vulnerable than the last. Villain assaults victim in a telling and murderous idiom. Although Pinter's first two plays are in one act, and the second two in three acts, each

successive drama seems to begin closer to its own end, highlighting the final throes of the hero-victims.

But who are they—these nondescript villains and victims, acting out their dramas in dilapidated rooms? Victims emerge from a vague past to go their ineluctable destruction. Villains are messengers from mysterious organisations—as in the works of Kafka or Beckett.

If Pinter has repeatedly been named as Beckett's heir on the English stage, it is because the characters of both lead lives of complex and unquiet desperation—a desperation expressed with extreme economy of theatrical resources. The clutter of our world is mocked by the stinginess of the stage-worlds of Beckett and Pinter. Sets, props, characters and language are stripped by both playwrights to what one is tempted to call their essence.

However, Pinter is not only Beckett's spiritual son. He is at least a cousin of the Angry Young Englishmen of his generation, for Pinter's anger, like theirs, is directed vitriolically against the System. But his System cannot be reduced to a welfare state, red-brick universities and marriage above one's class. Of all the Angries, John Wain approaches closest to Pinter's intention when he states that the artist's function "is always to humanise the society he is living in, to assert the importance of humanity in the teeth of whatever is currently trying to annihilate that importance". Pinter's assertion, however, takes a negative form; it is by his bitter dramas of dehumanization that he implies "the importance of humanity." The religion and society which have traditionally structured human morality, are, Pinter's plays, the immoral agents that destroy the individual.

Like Osborne, Pinter looks back in anger; like Beckett, Pinter looks forward to nothing (not even Godot). Pinter has created his own distinctive and dramatic version of Man vs. the System. Situation him between Beckett and The Angries is only, a first approximation of his achievement.

House as Metaphor

The house as human dwelling is a metaphor at least as old as the Bible, and on the stage that house is most easily reduced to a room (e.g., *Graham Greene's Living Room*, *Beckett's Endgame*). Pinter's rooms are stuffy, non-specific cubes, whose atmosphere grows steadily more stale and more tense. The titular Room of his first play is "A room in a large house"; in *The Dumb Waiter*, we descend to "a basement room"; in *The Birthday Party*, we have "The living room of a house in a seaside town", and, in *The Caretaker*, it is simply "A room". Unlike the tree and road of Godot, which suggest vegetation and distance; or the shelter of Endgame, which looks out on earth and sea; unlike the realistic "one-room flat...at the top of a large Victorian house" of *Look Back in Anger*, Pinter's rooms, parts of mysterious and in fine series, are like cells without a vista. At the opening curtain, these rooms look naturalistic, meaning no more than the eye can contain. But by the end of each play, they become sealed containers, virtual coffins.

Within each Pinter room, the props seem to be realistically functional and only in retrospect do they acquire symbolic significance. Consider, for example, Pinter's treatment of such crucial details as food and clothing, in comparison with the casual realism of Osborne, or the frank symbolism of Beckett. The various preparations for tea in *Look Back in Anger* seem to be paralleled by the prosaic coca, tea, bread, sandwiches, crackers of Pinter's plays; in sharp contrast is the farcical and stylized carrot-turnip-radish 'business' of *Godot*. So too, three men grabbing for an old man's bag in *The Caretaker* has few of the symbolic overtones of the slapstick juggling of derbies in *Godot*.

Symbolic Significance of Shoes

It is, however, in their respective use of that innocuous prop, a pair of shoes, that the different symbolic techniques of Beckett and Pinter are in most graphic evidence. Earlier in *Godot*, Vladimir establishes shoes as a metaphysical symbol: "There's man all over for you,

blaming on his boots the faults of his feet." At the end of *Godot*, it is by virtue of being barefoot that Estragon admits he has always compared himself to Christ. In Pinter's *Caretaker*, the old man keeps trying on different shoes that might enable him to get on the road to Sidcup, where he claims to have left his identity papers. Each pair of shoes is rejected for specific misfit—"a bit small", "too pointed", "no laces"—before the curtain lines of the play: "they're all right...if I was to...get my papers...would you...would you let...would you...if I got down...and got my..." The finality of the fragments indicates that no shoes can ever fit, that the journey to Sidcup cannot be made. Thus, the symbolic significance of the shoes is instantaneous with Beckett, cumulative with Pinter.

Characters as Symbols

Most crucial to an understanding of Pinter's theatre is the symbolism of his characters. For all their initially realistic appearance, their cumulative impact embraces the whole of humanity. In so generalising, Pinter extends the meaning of his characters beyond such particulars as Osborne treats; nevertheless, he does not achieve the metaphysical scope upon which Beckett insists, from his opening lines: "Nothing to be done".

Pinter's defenseless victims are a middle-aged wife, man who asks too many questions, an ex-pianist, a broken old man. Ruthlessly robbed of any distinction, they come to portray the human condition. And Pinter's villains, initially as unprepossessing as the victims, gradually reveal their insidious significance through some of the most skilful dialogue on the English stage today. For it is language that betrays the villains—more pat, more cliché-ridden, with more brute power than that of their victims.

Brilliant Dialogue

Even hostile critics have commented on the brilliance of Pinter's dialogue, and it is in the lines of his villains that he achieves precise dramatic timing and economical manipulation of commonplaces. Representatives of the System, Pinter's villains give direct expression to its dogma. In the plays of Osborne and Beckett, which also implicitly attack the System, the oppressive forces are presented through the words of their victims.

Jimmy Porter of Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* garbs the System in contemporary corporate metaphors:

Jimmy Porter:*the Economic of the Supernatural. It's all a simple matter of payments and penalties...Reason and progress, the old firm, is selling out. Everyone get out while the going's good. Those forgotten shares you had in the old traditions, the old beliefs are going up—up and up and up. There's going to be a changeover. A new Board of Directors, who are going to see that the dividends are always attractive, and that they go to the right people. Sell out everything you've got; all those stock in the old, free inquiry. The Big Crash is coming, you can't escape it, so get in on the ground floor with Helena and her friends while there's still time. And there isn't much of it left. Tell me, what could be more gilt-edged than the next world! It's a capital, gain, and its all yours.*

Vladimir and Estragon, at the beginning of Beckett's *Godot*, describe the invisible deity figure in trivial human terms:

Vladimir: *Let's wait and see what he says.*

Estragon: *Who?*

Vladimir: *Godot.*

Estragon: *Good idea.*

Vladimir: *Let's wait till we know exactly how we stand*

Estragon: *On the other hand it might be better to strike the iron before it freezes.*

Vladimir: *I'm curious to hear what he has to offer. Then we'll take it or leave it.*

Estragon: *What exactly did we ask him for?....And what did he reply ?*

Vladimir: *That he'd see.*

Estragon: *That he couldn't promise anything.*

Vladimir: *That he'd have to think it over.*

Estragon: *In the quiet of his home.*

Vladimir: *Consult his family.*

Estragon: *His friends.*

Vladimir: *His agents.*

Estragon: *His correspondents.*

Vladimir: *His books.*

Estragon: *His bank account..... Where do we come in?*

Vladimir: *Come in?*

Estragon: *Take your time.'*

Vladimir: *Come in? On our hands and knees.*

In Pinter's Birthday Party, Goldberg and McCann express the System by echoing modern commonplaces of social success. Pinter damns them with their own deadly cliches.

Goldberg: *Between you and me. Stan, it's about time you had a new pair of glasses.*

Mccann: *You can't see straight.*

Goldberg: *It's true. You've been cockeyed for years.*

Mccann: *Now you're even more cockeyed.*

Goldberg: *He's right. You've gone from bad to worse.*

Mccann: *Worse than worse.*

Goldberg: *You need a long convalescence.*

Mccann: *A change of air.*

Goldberg: *Somewhere over the rainbow*

Mccann: *Where angels fear to tread....*

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.*

Goldberg: *Animals.*

Mccann: *Animals.*

In comparing the three excerpts, we note that Osborne's sustained metaphors are almost lyrical with rebellion, but both Beckett and Pinter resort to pithy stichomythia. Although the passages are typical of the technique of each play the respective tonal differences depend upon the dramatic structure. Osborne's satiric hostility recurs through *Look Back in Anger*, but Beckett's attitude towards *Godot* is ambivalent. The quoted excerpt occurs early in the play, when the tramps, in spite of their pathetic plight, can still attempt to define the System in familiar human terms. But by the end of the drama, man and deity are poignantly reduced to their compulsive, impossible, problematical inter-relationship; "in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear," says Vladimir. "We are waiting for Godot to come."

In the Pinter's play, the messengers of the System glibly mouth its pat phrases—increasingly pointed as the dehumanisation of the victim progresses. In the quoted excerpt, which occurs towards the end of the drama, the seemingly irrelevant conclusion, 'Animals', corrosively climaxes the process...

Commentary on the Human Situation

Although Mick is slang for Irish, it is not clear in *The Caretaker* that Pinter is again designation the Christian tradition by an Irish name. Rather, the two brothers jointly seen to symbolise the family compatibility between a religious 'heritage and contemporary values. Thus, it is the elder, conventionally dressed Aston who is a carpenter, with its evocation of Christ, and it is the leather-jacketed Mick who is in the building trade and owns a motorized van. It is Mick who destroys a statue of Buddha, and who has grandiose schemes for redecorating the house. Aston's projects are humblers; he has been restored to competence by modern treatments for mental deviates; before the end of the play, he does manage to tar the roof of *The Room*, so it no longer leaks. Although Mick is presumably the owner and Aston the inhabitant of the house, the possession is finally left in doubt. As Mick explains, "So what it is, it's a fine legal point, that's what it is."

In their attitudes towards the old man, the human derelict, the two brothers present only surface contrasts. Mick begins by knocking him down, whereas Aston, instead of allowing him to die in despair, rescues him, shares his room with him, and opens up hope to him. Both the brothers name the old man as caretaker, offer him kind of scrutiny, which they both subsequently withdraw. Mick turns his back on the old man for failing to fulfill a role to which he never aspired, but Aston rejects him for what he is—deluded, and desperate.

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. There is perhaps a pun contained in the title: *The Caretaker* is twisted into a taker on of care, for care is the human destiny.

Pinter's drama savagely indicts a System which sports maudlin physical comfort, vulgar brand names, and vicious vestiges of a religious tradition. Pinter's villains descend from motorized vans to close in on their victims in stuffy, shabby rooms. The System they represent is as stuffy and shabby; one cannot, as in Osborne's realistic dramas, marry into it, or sneak into it, or even rave against it in self-expressive anger. The essence of the Pinter victim is his final sputtering helplessness.

Although Pinter's God-surrogates are as invisible as Godot, there is no ambiguity about their message. They send henchmen not to bless but to curse, not to redeem but to annihilate. As compared to the long, dull wait for Godot, Pinter's victims are more swiftly stricken with a deadly weapon—the most brilliant and brutal stylisation of contemporary cliché on the English stage today.

Comment on The Caretaker as a play wholly concerned with gesture and movement more than action or dialogue.

According to John Russell Brown, the beginning of *The Caretaker* is defined wholly by movement, not a work is spoken in the first episode:

Mick is alone in The Room, sitting on the bed. He wears a leather jacket.

Silence.

He slowly looks about The Room looking at each object in turn. He looks up at the ceiling, and stares at the bucket. Ceasing, he sits quite still, expressionless, looking out front.

Silence for thirty seconds.

The best way to appreciate what Pinter is requiring from his actor is for the reader to perform the actions for himself. Look at many individual objects 'in turn'. Do this at first with ordinary speed, and then fulfill the direction to do it 'slowly'. Remember that the process is completed by looking up—at the bucket that 'hangs from the ceiling'. This conclusion of motion results in silence during which the actor must be 'quite still, expressionless, looking out front'. Small purposive gestures, taken 'in turn' as if in accordance with the specific order of routine, lead to less, not

greater, physical statement. If the reader gives sufficient time to this enactment, he will realize the actor's necessity of discovering how to cease movement so completely: it is a silent change of engagement, requiring a change of purpose and of consciousness. Is Mick satisfied with what he sees, and therefore has nothing to do but wait for something of greater importance? But if so, why is he 'expressionless'? Is he uninterested in the outcome, or unable to imagine it? Is he consciously choosing to be inexpressive, as a trick or game, or as a training exercise? Does it imply strength or weakness?

Thirty seconds is an appreciable time for the silence to be held, so that when the drama takes a new turn from a direction outside Mick's gaze, it will sharpen attention in the audience.

Silence for thirty seconds.

A door bangs. Muffled voices are heard.

Mick turns his head. He stands, moves silently to the door, goes out, and closes the door quietly.

Silence.

Voices are heard again. They draw nearer, and stop. The door opens. Aston and Davies enter, Aston first, Davies following, shambling, breathing heavily.

Mick's privacy is disturbed, but he acknowledges this only by moving his head: he displays almost the smallest possible reaction. In contrast to the door banging outside, he moves 'silently' and closes the door after him 'quietly'. In effect, this is an answer to a challenge coming from outside *The Room*. But the audience having followed the sequence of Mick's behaviour, will still wait for a confrontation as he goes out the door. Pinter has prepared this expectation, but he thwarts it, for the stage-direction calls for another 'Silence' not a greeting. At the point 'voices are heard again' coming nearer and then stopping. All eyes will be on the door as it opens: but two entirely new figures now enter. They are physically contrasted, for the second is 'shambling, breathing heavily'. Neither betrays any sign that they have not the man who has just left.

Perhaps the audience will not consciously ask whether Mick has gone, and why, nor who he was, for now their attention is held by the new contrasting pair. The one in the lead is silent like Mick, but showing purposive action as he 'breathing heavily': he will therefore draw more attention and will be seen to do what Mick had done for the direction concludes: 'Davies looks about *The Room*'. The repetition is with a difference, for he does not look at individual objects 'in turn'.

Repetitions and Contrasts

By refusing all clearly audible words, by arranging repetitions and contrasts, by encouraging expectation of a meeting and then disappointing it, and, in the figure of Mick who has now left the stage, by requiring unexpected actions, each less expressive or less dynamic than normal. Pinter has forced the audience to look closely. He has repaid them with a questioning involvement that will be the greater and more unsettling with every point they catch.

Having gained visual attention, Pinter now sustains it by words in support. The two figures are heard (as they have been seen) in relationship to *The Room* and to each other.

Aston: *Sit down.*

Davies: *Thanks. (Looking about) Uuh...*

Aston: *Just a minute.*

(Aston looks around for a chair, sees one lying on its side by the rolled carpet at the fireplace and starts to get it out.)

Davies: *Sit down? Huh... I haven't had a good sit down....I haven't had a proper sit Down....well. I couldn't tell you...*

Aston *(Placing the chair): Here you are.*

Davies: *Ten minutes off for a tea-break in the middle of the night in that place and I couldn't find a seat, not one. All them Greeks had it, Poles, Greeks, Blacks, the lot of them, all them aliens had it. And they had me working there.... they had me working...*

(Aston sits on the bed, takes out a tobacco tin and papers, and begins to roll himself a cigarette. Davies watches him.)

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. When he come at me tonight I told him. (Pause.)

Aston: *Take a seat.*

Davies: *Yes, but what I got to do first, you see, what I got to do. I got to loosen myself up, you see what I mean? I could have got done in down there.*

The suggestion that Davies should 'Sit down' provokes 'Thanks', but also a repetition of 'looking about' together with an inarticulate 'Uuh...'. Aston interprets this as looking for a chair and—looking 'around' with simple purpose—he gets a chair from the various piles of possessions that fill *The Room*. He places it, with 'Here you are', but Davies does not sit down; he talks of the need for a 'sit down', but he does not make the expected movement. Instead, he changes the subject of talk which makes the physical refusal still more noticeable. Aston sits on a bed, making no difficulty of being seated, and at once is silent, concentrating his attention on rolling a cigarette, a physical activity that is small in scale and has a very narrow focus of attention. In effect, Aston cuts himself off from Davies, but now 'Davies watches him.'

Until this moment, Pinter has held attention on Davies's refusal to accept the offered (and desired) comfort, on his unease, and lack of physical purpose beyond suspicion of *The Room* and then of Aston, but he now gives him a decisive physical action, accompanied by a loud but incoherent cry:

(Davies exclaims loudly, punches downward with closed fist, turns his back to Aston and stares at the 'wall. Pause. Aston lights a cigarette.)

Aston: *You want to roll yourself one of these?*

Davies *(turning): What ? No, no, I never smoke a cigarette. (Pause. He comes forward.) I'll tell you what, though I'll have a bit of that tobacco therefor my pipe, if you like.*

Within Davies there was, from the beginning of the scene, some kind of aggressive energy which is expressed only in his talk (with short, piled-up rhythm) and in small physical reactions of fear and suspicion. When an inescapable offer of comfort is made, he resists until the last possible moment, but then he recalls the fight that has just taken place, and the need for self-defence, and the violence comes to the surface in the punch and cry, and the turn away from Aston.

Aston's response to the sudden activity is almost as unexpected. He must have been concentrating on rolling his cigarette with such intensive purpose that Davies's violence does not

distract him. (Later in the play he repeatedly takes pride in bring good 'with his hands'.) He proceeds to light his cigarette and follows his earlier purpose by making another offer to his visitor. Davies now turns and, after a refusal and a pause, 'comes forward' with a counter-suggest!on and an acceptance.

Incomplete Unbalanced Gestures

An actor who needs to give coherence and believability to his part will have prepared for Davies's violent outburst or Aston's concentration on his cigarette. All the earlier movements and gestures will have been made in an incomplete, or unbalanced way, so that these developments were implicit in them, through tensions or 'shadow movements' too small to be noticed by any but the most observant and trained in the audience. When the strong gestures come at last, they will thus be credible and inevitable, made with the authority that springs from the expression of a hitherto suppressed truth. This delayed assurance is a part of the performances that will be responded to by the audience, even if they do not consciously notice or identify it.

After the acceptance of the tobacco, Davies and Aston talk more extensively. At one point, Davies 'shambles across *The Room*'; but even when he comes 'face to face' with the Buddha sitting incongruously, and thus questioningly, on the gas-stove, he simply 'looks at it and turns'. Soon he is 'Coming closer' to Aston again, now in a boasting vein. When he finishes his speech, which seems to demand some sort of response in acknowledgement of Daview's rights. Aston simply says 'Uh', and then 'crosses down right, to get the electric toaster'. Nothing in the dialogue explains, or even refers to this action, nor to the unscrewing of the plug, the fetching of another, and the refixing that follows. Aston continues 'poking' into the plug, through various diversions, until the end of the first episode of the play. When Davies goes to bed and the 'Lights fade out', Aston is still sitting with the plug and screwdriver in his hand. His only verbal acknowledgement of all this activity is just before the end, when, in answer to Davies's inquiry whether he is getting in bed, he says 'I'm mending this plug' and Davies 'looks at him and then at the gas stove'. The activity with the toaster is thus given great prominence: the audience is forced to notice it and to observe its import once to Aston. The actor must enact it so that it is a recurring, continuous and, often, overriding concern. The particular posture, the small, 'probing' gestures, and the intensely focused concentration of Aston's attention, will make their verbally unheralded effect. When verbal explanation does come, it will seem insufficient: there is still no answer to why he is mending the plug at this time, with this persistence.

Two kinds of statement are being made here through gesture and movement. One concerns an individual's moltivation, the other the relationship between two figures and between them and *The Room*. The statements are co-existent, but not even the individual statements can be fully appreciated from this extract alone. Davies's violence is a preparation for the two occasions when he draws a knife, once in self-defence and once in aggression, both much later in the play. Together these gestures sustain the underlying danger of his apparently pliant and shifty nature. Aston's cigarette-rolling and lighting prepares for his attention to the toaster and its plugs, and together these all look forward to his talk about an electric fire and to his repeated returns to the toaster. This involvement is never wholly explained, but it is significant that it stops once he has rejected Davies from his room the second time and is determined to get 'busy' with the shed in the garden; then he turns his back on both Davies and the toaster in order to look out of the window to the garden where the shed will be built. In some way, the toaster seems to be connected with Aston's interest in Davies, a defense against him and, possibly, consciously or unconsciously, an attack.

Aston's Soliloquy

In a long speech at the end of Act II, noticeably without action or gesture, Aston speaks of being forced to have shock treatment in a mental hospital. He says that he had had to be quiet for

a time after his escape, talking to no one so that he could lay everything 'out in order'. In hospital, he says, they had brought some electrical appliances round to him:

They looked like big pincers, with wires on, the wires were attached to a little machine. It was electric. They used to hold the man down, and this chief....the chief doctor, used to fit the pincers, something like earphones, he used to fit them on either side of the man's skull.

In short, when he was being cared for in hospital, he was treated as he now treats his toaster.

In some way Aston associates his electrical appliance with revenge—I've often thought of going back and trying to find the man who did that to me'—and with 'taking care' of Davies. This, perhaps, is why he broke his self-confessed rules, did not 'steer clear of places like that café, and did talk to a stranger, one who was already being attached. Behind the apparently trivial gestures of the first episode of the play, a conscious or subconscious intention to murder seems to be implied in the small tensions and half-hidden impulses created by the actor to account for his strange actions and to give cohesion to his role. There are other correspondences between this hospital speech and unexplained, activity that Aston makes in the presence of Davies: why did he have a sheet and pillow ready for his visitor's bed. Why make him don a white coat as caretaker, one that hung ready by his bed? Why have a glaring light over Davies's bed? Why wake him up and examine his face? All these actions are paralleled by what Aston says, or infers, had happened in the hospital. Through the emphasis of oddity and repetition, and through surprising interplay with words, Aston's silent activity will catch the audience's attention, perhaps without them being able to pinpoint or name them as the source of their apprehension for the safety of Davies and of Aston.

Mick's Gestures

In shorter compass, Mick also has gestures in this first episode that must be given precise meaning by an actor. Only a sense of committal to some unspoken purpose will explain his stealthy exit, his lack of surprise, his stillness. Does he expect Aston to find a victim? Does he 'take care' of his brother, by allowing him to 'take care' of himself by finding an unknown victim? An actor will need to know, for it is far harder, if not impossible, to act such details without some sustaining 'through line' of intention and some cohesive purpose and 'natural effort disposition'. Again, the 'meaning' of these gestures depends on Mick's role as a whole. In his last appearance in the play, when he has smashed his brother's Buddha, crying 'THAT'S WHAT I WANT', and has passionately asserted that he has his other worries, he denies interest in the house and Aston:

I'm not worried about this house. I'm not interested. My brother can worry about it. I'm not bothered. I thought I was doing him a favour, letting him live here. He's got his own ideas. Let him have them. I'm going to chuck it in.

Again, 'A door bangs' and in the ensuing silence neither Mick nor Davies moves.

(Aston comes in. He closes the door, move into The Room and faces Mick. They look at each other. Both are smiling, faintly.)

Here is the confrontation missing in the first episode, and together they silently express complicity and satisfaction. Mick is about to speak, but leaves instead, and then:

(Aston leaves the door open, crosses behind Davies, sees the broken Buddha, and looks at the pieces for a moment. He then goes to his bed, takes off his overcoat, sits, takes the screwdriver and plug and pokes the plug.)

Significant changes are that Aston leaves the door open, that he ignores the Buddha, which he had been pleased to get hold of, moves straight to the plug, and does not bother to speak to either Davies or Mick. The relationships between the brothers are clearly revalued by this resumption of silence and this assumption of independence. Within Mick's first, unsmiling silence there must have been the possibility of this other relationship. If the last one is to be true, some tensions must have been contained in the first, waiting to be resolved, or else tensions must develop, so that, even after his 'passionate' outburst. Mick is under some constraint as he leaves Aston in possession.

Silent Passages

Pinter is aware that physical performance expresses inner conflicts and resolutions. He insists that the verbal drama yield at times to silent passages where the audience is forced to look, and so to perceive impulses and reactions that would be adhered out of all recognition or just proportion had they been expressed in words. If this physical language is seldom precise, that is one of its strengths, for many of the deepest and most irresistible human impulses are not easily limited or defined: it is these motivations that Pinter wishes to explore and show in his plays. The inter-play between physical and verbal drama, whether by contrast or correspondence, strengthens expressions of the indefinable, gives it associations and enforces attention.

Write a note on Pinter's use of dialogue in his plays, with special reference to *The Caretaker*.

In his use of dialogue, Pinter captures the mannerisms, repetitions, abruptness, disjointed speech and other peculiarities of the characters that inhabit his world. Most of the time, it sounds like tape-recorded speech. Pinter's craft is tightly controlled. Every syllable, every inflection, the succession of long and short sounds, words and sentences—all bit into a well-wrought pattern.

Language as a Vehicle and Instrument of Dramatic Action

Pinter uses language in a most dramatic way as a vehicle and instrument of dramatic action. Words become weapons in the mouths of Pinter's characters. The one who gets hold of the more accurate expression establishes dominance over his partner; his victim of aggression can be defeated by language which comes too thick and fast, or by language which is too nonsensical to be comprehended. This happens, above all, to Stanley in *The Birthday Party*. Stanley is subjected to a process of brainwashing through a flood of incomprehensible questions and assertions fired at him by the two terrorists.

The precision, economy and control that Pinter exercises over the language of his dialogue firmly link him to the tradition of contemporary British high-comedy. Noel Coward has ranked Pinter as the one among the "new wave of British dramatists" whose craftsmanship in the use of language he admires. On the one hand, Pinter can be linked to Kafka and Beckett, on the other he can be related to Oscar Wilde and Noel Coward. This double aspect of Pinter's language is highly characteristic of his originality, his ability to work on a multiplicity of different levels. "Insofar as his play are firmly rooted in real speech and situation, Pinter appears to be naturalistic; and he was, in fact, originally characterized as a member of the social realist 'kitchen sink' school. Insofar as he avoids motivation and questions the very nature of reality, his plays can be seen as structures

of poetic images of an unverifiable and therefore dreamlike world between fantasy and nightmare. Insofar as his observation of linguistic quirks is extremely sharp, his dialogue must be considered to be one of the most realistic representatives of the genuine vernacular of the mid-twentieth century; but because the real speech of real people is to a large extent composed of solecism and tautology, it can also be compared to nonsense poetry and the literature of the absurd," says Neol Coward.

From one angle of vision, Pinter's world of inhibited, inarticulate characters, surrounding themselves with irrational anxieties, is grotesque and comic; from another point of view, this world will appear pitiable and tragic. This kind of ambivalence, or multivalence, Pinter might argue, is in itself a realistic trait; for reality itself is equally ineluctable.

Pinter's characters do not often talk explicitly about a situation. For instance, in the final scene of *The Birthday Party*, Meg knows, deep down, that Stanley is gone, but she cannot and will not admit it to herself while Petey is too inarticulate to offer any consolation.

Meg: *I was the belle of the ball.*

Aetey: *Were you?*

Meg: *Oh yes. They all said I was.*

Petey: *I bet you -were, too.*

Meg: *Oh, it's true. I was.*

Pause

Meg: *I know I was.*

Four times Meg repeats that she was the belle of the ball—the disastrous party through which her substitute son was destroyed and taken away from her. It is quite clear that she does not, in fact, want to say anything about the impression she made at the party. She is, in fact, merely trying to hang on to the illusion that everything is still as it was, and that disastrous party was not a disaster but the success she had hoped for. The fourfold repetition of the statement does not derive from any desire to say the same thing four times; it is merely a sign of the desperateness of her attempt not to let the realization of the disaster down on her. Similarly, Petey's affirmation that the statement is true has merely the function of expressing his sympathy for his wife, and his inability to do anything toward making her acknowledge or realize the true position. Thus, the dramatic effect of this moving, brilliantly economical and can use passage of dialogue is entirely due to the complete contradiction between the words that are spoken and the emotional and psychological action which underlies them. Here the language has almost totally lost its rhetorical and informative element and has fully merged into the dramatic action. It is this element of action, the interaction between the characters, their reactions to each other which constitute the truly dramatic element in stage dialogue. In Pinter's drama, the dialogue is, ultimately, a form of action.

"Music Hall Monologue"

Peter Davison calls the dialogue in *The Caretaker* "the Music Hall Monologue" and reproduces two extracts. The first one deals particularly with people and their relationships; it is logically related to the concerns, and to the dramatic pattern, of the play as a whole. The first is when Mick compares Davies to his uncle's brother who was always on the move till he married a Chinaman and went to Jamaica. Then, he suddenly pauses and asks Davies; "I hope you slept well last night." There is obviously no connection between the two statements, but Mick launches on his monologue while he is sizing up Davies; he is just marking time through this diversion.

The second passage from *The Caretaker* makes use of legal jargon, rather after the manner of Arthur Roberts. The subject-matter and technique are relevant to whole play. Later, Davies is to feel, even more pointedly, the 'malignant' justice of the law, as he feels it when Mick explains Aston's rights to *The Room*.

Pinter's Favourite Linguistic and Stylistic Devices

Pinter's favourite linguistic and stylistic devices are not verbal absurdities to be ridiculed. These devices do, in fact, illuminate the mental processes which lie behind the ill-chosen or nonsensical words. In each case superficially similar quicks of language may serve quite different dramatic functions. Davies resorts to this often, especially at the end of the play:

*But... but...look...listen here...I mean what...I mean... what am I going to do?...
What shall I do?... Where am I going to go?...*

Talking about his ex-wife's slovenliness, Davies mentions the saucepans in which he found some of her underclothing. He repeats himself, saying: "*The pan for vegetables, it was. The pan...*"

Here the repetition serves a completely different purpose. It shows us the inarticulate man's struggle to find the correct word.

In Pinter's world, personal inadequacy expresses itself in an inadequacy in coping with and using language. The inability to communicate and to communicate in correct terms is felt by the characters as a mark of inferiority. The ability to communicate "is regarded by the characters as a part of civilisation, and even as a basis to claim to being human. The loser in a contest about words and their meaning loses his claim to live. Power, the power over life and death, derives from the ability to make one's opponent accept the meaning of words chosen by the dominant partner. When Davies ventures to remark that Aston, Mick's brother, is "a bit of a funny bloke", Mick stares at him in indignant amusement:

Mick: *Funny? Why?*

Davies: *Well....He's funny.*

Mick: *What's funny about him?*

Pause

Davies: *Not liking work.*

MICK: *What's funny about that?*

Davies: *Nothing.*

Pause

Mick: *I don't call it funny.*

Davies: *Nor me.*

Davies's surrender is both object and complete. A disagreement about the meaning of a term has become a fundamental existential contest of wills. Words, thus, are of vital importance.

Pause and Silence

Behind the apparently random rendering of the colloquial language in Pinter's play, there lies a rigorous economy of mean. Each word is sential to the total structure and decisively contributes to the ultimate, overall effect aimed at. That is why silences play such a large and essential part in

Pinter's dialogue. Pinter uses two different terms for punctuation of his dialogue by passages without speech: *Pause* and *Silence*. Indeed, silence is an essential, integral part, and often the climax, of his use of language.

There is silence when Mick is alone in *The Room* at the beginning of *The Caretaker* before there are "muffled voices" of Aston and Davies. There is silence, again as Davies enters the dark room and tries to light a match while Mick is already there "sparing cleaning" *The Room* with the Electrolux and, finally, there is "long silence" as Davies pleads with Aston at the end of the play: "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..."

Pinter has been accused of a mannerism of silence or an excessive use of long pauses. But the silences and pauses in his work are simply a part of his creed as a craftsman. They are the highly personal way of experiencing, and reacting to the world around him. And, indeed, if we try to listen attentively and closely to the real speech of people, we shall find that there are more silences and longer pauses, than those generally allowed in the traditional dramas. Besides, there is a definite purpose behind the silences and pauses in Pinter's plays. When Pinter indicates a "pause", he wants us to understand that intense thought processes are continuing and that unspoken tensions are mounting; and when he indicates a "silence", it is a sign at the end of a movement and the beginning of another, as between the movements of a symphony.

According to Andrew Kennedy, "In *The Caretaker*...a language of lived encounter is created out of the fragmented speech of two inarticulate persons: Aston and Davies set against the sadistically elaborate jargon—speeches of Mick. To that extent, *The Caretaker* is Pinter's most valuable achievement in unified 'listening' and 'shaping', in fusing the human abstract attributes of dramatic language".

Discuss The Caretaker as "a comedy of menace".

The initial review of Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker* generally followed a pattern: the brilliance of the actors was celebrated and the questions of influence, primarily Beckett's, were linked to discussions of the relationship between the comic and serious elements in the play.

Interpretations of the 'meaning' varied from the literal to the fully allegorical, by way of generalized abstract tags. Subsequent academic criticism, deriving from textual study rather than stage performance, has early always followed the serio-tragical-symbolical-abstract line—what we might call Modern Man in Search of His Insurance Cards, or, I stink. Therefore I am. The comedy of *The Caretaker* is not a dispensable palliative. To discuss 'meaning without taking this into account is to distort the play as a whole and devalue its achievement. The combination of the comic and the serious, laughter and silence, is often deeply disturbing for art audience: but only in confronting it can we begin to understand the play.

For one member of the audience, at least, the relationship between the comic and the serious elements was unacceptable. Leonard Russell, the Sunday Times book reviewer, recorded his impressions of a performance at the Duchess Theatre in an open letter to Harold Pinter:

I will go so far as to admit that I found it a strangely menacing and disturbing evening. It was also a highly puzzling evening; and here I refer not to the play but to the behaviour of the audience. On the evening I was present a large majority had no doubt at all that your special contribution to the theatre is to take a heart-breaking themes and treat it facially. Gales of happy, persistent, and, it seemed to me, totally indiscriminate laughter greeted a play which I take to be, for all its

funny moments, a tragic reading of life. May, I ask this question—are you yourself happy with the atmosphere of rollicking good fun?

Pinter's reply is such crucial importance for an understanding of the play:

*Your question is not an easy one to answer. Certainly I laughed myself while writing *The Caretaker*, but not all the time, not 'indiscriminately'. An element of the absurd is, I think, one of the features of the play, but at the same time I did not intend it to be merely a laughable force. If there hadn't been other issues at stake the play would not have been written. Audience reaction can't be regulated, and no one would want it to be; nor is it easy to analyse. But where the comic and tragic (for want of a better word) are closely interwoven, certain members of an audience will always give emphasis to the comic as opposed to the other, for by so doing they rationalize the other out of existence. On most evenings at the Duchess there is a sensible balance of laughter and silence. Where, though, this indiscriminate mirth is found. I feel it represents a cheerful patronage of the characters on the part of the merry-makers, and thus participating is avoided. This laughter is in fact a mode of precaution, a smoke-screen, a refusal to accept what is happening as recognizable (which I think it is) and instead to view the actors (a) as actors always and not as characters and (b) as chimpanzees. From this kind of neasy jollification I must, of course, dissociate myself, though I do think you were unfortunate in your choice of evening. As far as I'm concerned, *The Caretaker* is funny, up to a point. Beyond that point it ceases to be funny, and it was because of that point that I wrote it.*

Pinter's letter is an essential starting point for discussion of the play. Adequate criticism must be based on a recognition of both the comic and 'tragic' elements compounded in the paralleled process of stage performance and audience response. Out emotional reaction of laughter or silence complements what happens on stage. Both actors and audience create a structure of feeling that the play has in its 'living moment', as Pinter puts it. The 'point' where *The Caretaker* 'ceases to be funny' must be found within the movement of the play itself and within the emotional complex of our 'participation'. In order to do so, I wasn't to focus not so much on the physical structure which is relatively straight forward but rather on the structure of feeling, the emotional rhythm of laughter and silence which culminates in the arrested tension of both. Rather than follow the tendency to generalise from paraphrase and thereby lose the essential drama, one must examine certain passages in order to bring out the deeply sensitive psychological insight that lies behind Pinter's plain statement.

Deeply Sensitive Psychological Insight

When the curtain rises, Mick shares the activity of the audience. 'He slowly looks about *The Room* looking at each object in turn. He looks up at the ceiling, and stares at the bucket. Then he brazenly separates himself from the audience. 'Ceasing, he sits quite still, expressionless, looking out front. Silence for thirty seconds.' Mick then leaves upon hearing 'muffled voices'. This silent enigma is in dramatic contrast to the end of the play. At the outset Mick, in effect, rejects the audience by walking offstage after a protracted silence, while at the close it is Davies who is left onstage rejected by the audience insofar as we recognize that he must go. But this formal, inverted symmetry is recognised retrospectively. Mick's silence and departure stays as a qualm, leaving a question behind the laughter that is immediate.

Aston's opening invitation to Davies to 'sit down' is manifestly frustrated by the evident disorder of the attic. As Aston sorts out a chair, Davies breaks into the first of so many complaints:

'Sit down? Huh... I haven't had a good sit down...I haven't had a proper sit down...well, I couldn't tell you... Ten minutes off for a tea-break in the middle of the night in that place and I can't find a seat, not one. All those Greeks had it, Poles, Greeks, Blacks, the lot of them, all them aliens had it. And they had me working there... they had me working...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. When he come at me tonight I told him...

Davies's categorical discriminations ('sit down...good sit down...proper sit down') express the degree of deprivation that he feels he has suffered. His present gratitude is deflected and finally demolished by recrimination directed at the immediate past. An aggrieved sense of active and collective discourtesy by default is magnified to a major injustice; it is as if the merely adventitious revealed the latent injustice of victimization as a permanent condition of the world. As so often in comedy a mundane occurrence is given an unwarrantedly inflated significance. Davies's bigotry, aggravated by constitutional self-righteous defensiveness, evidently distorts whatever really happened, and as a consequence we laugh rather than sympathize. The insistent repetition inadvertently suggest that, on the one hand, it is both the multi-racial conditions of work and work itself that has pained Davies, and on the other that his appeal is in part determined by a bit of tobacco coming his way: as Aston *begins to roll himself a cigarette*. Davies *watches* him. This initial comedy continues to develop in the ever widening gap between the intentions of Davies's speech and its effect on the audience.

Davies's Tramp like Appearance and Mannerisms

Even before he speaks Davies's tramp-like appearance has prompted a certain predisposition in the audience. Socially, tramps are at an 'inferior' extreme, and their condition precludes a normative response by definition. Reactions to tramps are nearly always compounded of fear, distaste, embarrassment, seeming indifference, or a degree of sympathy arising from unconscious self-reproach at our own well-being. Whatever feeling predominates depends upon the tramp's behaviour on a scale from abasement to aggression. Abasement invites individual, summary charity as a token of Society's larger responsibility for victims of circumstance. Aggression (like Davies's), though frightening on actual encounter, ultimately prompts laughter in the dramatic representation of self-determined viciousness. The transformation of the actual into the dramatic, the street into the theatre, the individual into audience, brings with it the laughter of relief.

Before taking a seat, winded by climbing the stairs, Davies must loosen himself up. He *exclaims loudly, punches downward with closed fist* crying, "I could have got done in down there." There is no book and Davies's evidently exaggerated claim is undermined even further by comic colloquialism. The stance of retrospective pugilism suggests a purely mimetic valour. It is clear that the combination of self-assertion and self-deception creates for Davies a fiction to live by. But although the imperatives of his existence have confounded fiction and fact, the distinction is evident to the audience throughout. Aston immediately offers Davies a roll-up but he replies: "What? No, no. I never smoke a cigarette... I'll tell you what, though, I'll have bit of that tobacco there for my pipe, if you like...That's kind of you, mister. Just enough to fill my pipe, that's all. I had a tin, only...only a while ago. But it was knocked off. It was knocked off on the Great West Road." Davies's refusal of the roll-up is reinforced by a categorical statement similar to the earlier example which expresses both the certainty of negative choice and yet an alternative possibility in the suggestion of a latent discrimination. His initial question—"What?"—is a response to Aston's putative motive and means; Davies is rejecting what he feels may be charity but offering to accept Aston's tobacco in terms of his own positive preference for the more socially acceptable pipe, all the time leaving the actual decision to Aston. Davies's acknowledged indebtedness is modified by the subsequent etiquette. His self-conscious moderation forestalls any charge of excess, establishing his action as a gentle manly custom rather than revealing a condition of

permanent dependence. The closing anecdote is intended to alter the action of giving and receiving into a form of indirect restitution. A similar rationalisation takes place later in the act when Davies accepts 'a few bob' from Aston: "Thank you, thank you, good luck. I just happen to find myself a bit short. You see, I got nothing for all that week's work I did last week." That's the position, that's what it is. Though retrospective criticism of this nature articulates the ironies of Davies's gesture and utterance, the immediacy of the audience's experience registers this emotively, responding to the comic moment which is immediately fulfilled when Aston fails to corroborate Davies's revision of his misfortune. "You heard me tell him, didn't you?" Davies asks, Aston replies "I saw him have a go at you", forcing him to attempt to draw sympathy by reference to age, "Go at me? You wouldn't grumble. The filthy skate an old man like me." But here Davies's aggressive demotic ironically pre-empts the response he seeks, while the claim that breathlessly follows—"I've had dinner with the best"—incites the broadest laughter with its blatant improbability. Aston, with a neutral imperturbability that promotes our laughter even further, refuses to comply and calmly repeats himself, "Yes, I saw him have a go at you." Davies's only recourse is to recall his persona! standards to bolster his present judgments:

"All them toe-rags, mate, got the manners of pigs. I might have been on the road a few years but you can take it from me I'm clean. I keep myself up. That's why I left my wife. Fortnight after I married her, no, not so much as that, no more than a week, I took the lid off a saucepan, you know what was in it? A pile of her underclothing, unwashed. The pan for vegetables, it was. The vegetable pan. That's when I left her and I haven't seen her since."

Davies has no apparent sense that such demonstrative probity is so farcically disproportionate that it cancels what it claims. Following Davies's earlier revision of events, this exaggeration suggests that what we hear is a ludicrous distortion of whatever may have happened. The indiscriminately vulgar language of the opening—"All them toe-rags, mate, got the manners of pigs"—burlesques the posture of arbiter of decorum which it protects. Immediately following this, Davies describes the row in the cafe'. While claiming 'proper respect' due to 'an old man', if a few years younger he would break in half 'that Scotch git'. All the socially regulative values Davies claims—dignity, respect, propriety, decorum—are confounded by the language and gesture of a caricatured ethic more appropriate to an anti-social 'wild animal', as Mick later describes him. In short Davies's comic character is founded on a total travesty of the mode of being to which he aspires. The pathos of his deprivation is made comic with the citation of a public lavatory attendant as a promoter of a personal hygiene. Vast significance is given to the quotidian—"Shoes? It's life and death to me, man," Davies's scale of values inverts the normative values of the audience, accustomed to more abstract priorities, which remain unquestioned since Davies cannot be taken seriously. We 'reason not the need' when it is rendered in comic picaresque.

Elaborating on his need for footwear, Davies launches into the celebrated tale of the quest to the Luton monastery. A 'bastard monk', the representative of a holy order, warns the suppliant, if you don't piss off...I'll kick you all the way to the gate. As Davies expands on his misfortunes, mounting audience laughter accompanies each incident, culminating in applause at the close of the story. And with applause action is temporarily suspended. For a few crucial seconds the actor is divorced on the character as the audience celebrates a comic performance. The reality of whatever happened in Luton is subverted by characteristically jaundiced aggression which is transferred to the monk, dramatically evoking laughter rather than sympathy. Therefore, Davies as a credible being struggles not only with Aston and Mick, but with the theatrically formalised predisposition of the audience, a predisposition to see Davies as a type, a brilliantly embodied 'act', at best a tramp, but hardly an individual. Shortly after the Luton story, the anecdote of Sidecup and the 'papers' consolidates this.

Davies insists that the Side up papers "prove who I am...They tell you who I am", but we know he will never collect those chimerical documents of fifteen years ago. Lack of shoes, or bad weather, or something else will always intervene. His re-assumption of a past bureaucratic identity could not alter what he is. It is being a tramp which has shaped his body and soul, and not the fact that he is called Bernard Jenkins rather than Mac Davies. Every utterance and every gesture he makes denote a class rather than an individual, dialect subsumes idiolect. Davies is finally no more than his language and appearance—and this is how Mick encounters him at the end of the first act.

Mick's Insight

It is as if throughout most of Act I Mick has been listening in, since he shows an uncanny insight into Davies's character. In this sense Mick is almost a representative of the audience, knowing, sardonically, as much as they know. On the other hand Mick knows his Davieses as he knows his London, but he expresses it indirectly in terms of Aston's behaviour:

Mick: *He doesn't work.*

(Pause)

Davies: *Go on!*

Mick: *No, he just doesn't like work, that's his trouble.*

Davies: *Ay.*

Mick: *He's just shy of it. Very shy of it*

Davies: *I know that sort.*

Mick: *You know the type.*

At the end of Act: Mick immediately recognises Davies's work-shy 'type', and his first words, "What's the game?" are really the later statement, "I know what you want," put in the form of a question.

Comic Relief

It has been shown by Peter Davison that Mick's first two speeches derive in form from the traditional music-hall monologue. As such, alongwith something like the bag-passing game, they border on the farcical. But there is more to them than this. In laughing at the combination of the ludicrous, the grotesque and the improbable, the audience joins Mick in laughing at Davies. In other words, Mick provides the relief of a new comic perspective which enlists the audience on its side. At this point the verbal slapstick seems almost innocuous:

You remind me of my uncle's brother. He was always on the move, that man. Never without his passport. Had an eye for the girls. Very much your build. Bit of an athlete. Long-jump specialist. He had a habit of demonstrating different run-ups in the drawing-room round about Christmas time. Had a penchant for nuts. That's what it was. Nothing else but a penchant. Couldn't eat enough of them. Peanuts, walnuts, brazil nuts, monkey nuts, wouldn't touch a piece of fruit cake. Had a marvelous stop-watch. Picked it up in Hong Kong. The day after they chucked him out of the Salvation Army. Used to go in number four for Beckenham Reserves. That was before he got his Gold Medal. Had a funny habit of carrying his fiddle on his back. Like a papoose. I think there was a bit of the red Indian in him. To be honest, I've often thought that may be it was the other way round. I mean that my

uncle was his brother and may be he was my uncle. But I never called him uncle. As a matter of fact I called him Sid. My mother called him Sid too. It was a funny business. Your spilling image he was. Married a Chinaman and went to Jamaica'.

In spite of its seeming inconsequentiality this speech manifestly says a lot about Davies, Mick and Aston on a naturalistic and psychological level. Mick's sardonic delivery expresses at once both discursive doubt and impatience with the conversation game and a sadistic playfulness. The verbal barrage parallels the earlier arm-twisting: verbal intimidation follows physical domination. Mick is equally dexterous at both. What Mick is really saying behind the formal obliquity of his narrative is this—I recognized your sort, a tramp ('always on the move'), with your story of 'papers' ('never without his passport'), your ridiculous physical posturing ('Bit of an athlete'), thrown out of a monastery ('they chucked him out of the Salvation Army') of questionable background ('a bit of the Red Indian in him'), now mixed up with my brother ('I've never made out of how he came to be my uncle's brother'), why don't you clear off ('married a Chinaman and went to Jamaica'). But at the same time Mick is deflecting a suppressed view of his own brother that is forced into his mind by the fact of Davies's presence: my brother ('You remind me of my uncle's brother') has picked up this nut ('had a penchant or nuts'), he must be nutty as a fruit cake ('wouldn't touch a piece of fruit cake'). Mick's feelings only emerge eventually by way of his surrogate; Davies whose exclamation 'He's nutty!' enables Mick to savour the suppressed, emotionally forbidden, work: 'Nutty?' Who's nutty? (*Pause*). Did you call my brother nutty? My brother.

Mick's second speech is also something more than an exercise in intimidation. It is a comically indirect way of elaborating on what is implicit: the foreignness of Davies. The indigenous Mick ironically compares the indigent Davies with a fellow Londoner. Mick's irony is sharpened by his reflection on the sense of difference felt by a working-class North Londoner for those from south of the Thames. "When I got to know him I found out he was brought up in Putney. That didn't make any difference to me." The 'bloke', after all, 'was born in the Caledonian Road, just before you get to the Nag's Head'. Mick's North London references are to neighboring localities linked by bus routes at the centre of which is the 'block's old mum... still living at the Angel'. Mick evokes neighbourhood, pub and home—the self-advertisement of a particular kind of Londoner 'recognising an outsider and reminding him of the fact.

By contrast, Davies lonely wandering existence is reflected by sporadic, peripheral references to places outside of London proper (Sidcup, Luton, Watford, Wembley) and to past friends: "I used to know a bookmaker in Acton. He was a good mate to me." Whereas Mick's two speeches are littered with familial terms (uncle, brother, mother, cousin). Davies's anecdotes suggest that over the years, in all of London between Luton and Sidcup, only two encounters have ever led to friendship—and both friendships of a dubious kind. The style and delivery of Mick's speeches suggest the amateur comedian at home in pub, club or family; Davies is only a solitary tramp stranded somewhere on the Great West Road or the North Circular, an anomaly. But all these serious undertones are checked by a sense of game. Mick's interrogation of Davies is deliberately punctured by straight music-hall cross-talk:

Mick: *That's my bed*

Davies: *What about that, then*

Mick: *That's my mother's bed.*

Davies: *Well she wasn't in it last night!*

Even when Mick rounds on Davies in this third long speech. "You're stinking the place out. You're an old robber, there's no getting away from it. You're an old skate....."—the serious force of his charges is tempered, firstly by his appropriation of Davies's language ('filthy skate', and secondly,

by an extended parody of the conditions of tenancy and purchase. Between an outline of costs and recommendation of Aston as decorator. Mick threatens "Otherwise I've got a van outside, I can run you to the police station in five minutes, have you in for trespassing, loitering with intent, daylight robbery, filching, thieving and stinking the place out". Amusing to the audience, this exaggeration is frightening to Davies since the language parallels his own exaggerated sense of persecution. The ludicrous magnification of the obligations, commitments and penalties of legal responsibility in buying a house is a humorous reminder to the audience of an often exhaustingly protracted business, but to Davies it is a manifestation of a bureaucratic world that excludes him. Mick makes the point in his repeated final question "Who do your bank with?" This complex verbal humour is accentuated by the visual comedy. Throughout the act Davies has been on stage without his trousers, in his long pants, and Mick emphasizes the fact by flicking Davies's trousers in his face—'several times'. This is then followed, almost immediately, by one of the oldest plays in the slapstick repertoire, the bag-passing game with its knockabout sequence reversal. Threat and menace are conflated in Mick's speeches and the bag-passing game is almost wholly funny (but not merely funny, since the same symbolises the way in which Davies himself passes from brother to brother). Then, with the terrifying attack in darkness and the succeeding revelation that it is Mick merely 'spring cleaning' with an electrolux, violence and laughter are powerfully juxtaposed.

Thus Pinter exploits different kinds of comedy in a cumulative and structured way: comedy of character is established in Act I and then extended by music-hall monologue and broad farce in Act II. Comedy of language, gesture and action is then allowed to build up to the moment when it is dramatically arrested by Aston's long, painful account of treatment in a mental hospital, and the events leading up to it. Aston's speech has always been recognized as a major moment in the movement of the play, but its full significance has not been adequately discussed.

Aston's Behaviour

John Russell Brown has pointed out the correspondences between Aston's hospital treatment and his present behaviour. He underwent electrical treatment and now fiddles obsessively with electrical equipment: he has a white coat, a pillow and a sheet at the ready: the uncovered light bulb glares down; he stares smilingly over Davies in bed. Brown also points out that Aston did go back to place like the café and did talk to strangers again—namely Davies—and suggests that the impetus for this was two-fold. Aston is haunted by revenge and somehow sees his own role as a 'caretaker' of Davies. These are all important points, but need to be taken further.

Aston refers to the 'piles of papers' he was shown as medical evidence: Davies refers to the 'piles of papers' kept in the attic. Aston says that the window of his hospital room was barred; the indications are that the attic window was kept open even before Davies's malodorous entry. Aston spent five hours sawing at the bars, and is now preoccupied with saws, ostensibly to carry out the building work. He recognises that in café and factory he 'talked too much', and his long speech is a chilling reminder that he still does.

What does all this add up to? Surely the commonly accepted notion of Aston's 'charity' in taking in Davies is called a question here. Rather than a disinterested act deriving from an impulse or conviction of moral duty and thus a token of his social rehabilitation it is part of the irreparable damage brought about by his sufferings. Aston's 'charity' is a way of simultaneously vindicating himself and impugning those who have harmed him. Davies is there in the attic because of Aston's psychology, not because of his ethics: Aston sees. Davies as a version of himself.

Aston's recollections of the glass of Guinness and the lady in the café indicate his continuing disorientation. Both these speeches occur after pauses and have no relation to what precedes them and both after pauses and have no relation to what precedes them, and both contrast forcefully with Aston's previous reticence. As conversational gambits they are disastrously bizarre; it is

almost as if of an interior monologue has suddenly come to the surface. The preoccupation of Aston and Davies are psychological treadmills imprisoning each in his mutually exclusive world. For Aston to work on the house he needs to clear the garden for a shed. To build the shed on the house he needs to clear the garden for a saw bench, is needed for the shed. Davies, to sort himself out needs his papers at Sidcup. To get to Sidcup he needs good shoes, to get good shoes he needs, money, to get money he needs his papers to sort himself out...

Both minds have been numbed by the different experiences of being on the road and being in a mental hospital: both are reduced to a preoccupation with the physical function of hands and feet. With Aston's speech the laughter ceases. And there is no 'caretaker' for them. The audience is silenced and confounded as the darkness grows.

Comic Tableau

As Act III opens, and before anything is said, Davies is seen in a comic tableau, pipe in hand and incongruously garbed in a smoking jacket. Here, after the strain of confronting the nature of Aston's being, we are at last allowed the relief of laughter. But when Davies speaks, although his concerns seem much the same (the gas stove, blacks, shoes, etc.) his continual reference to Aston compromise and complicate our response. At this point as subjective coefficient of guilt rises in us, deriving in part from our former complicity with Mick (now more evidently working on his strategy of expulsion) and in part from laughing at Aston's expense. Whereas earlier Davies seemed self-determining and thus responsible for what he is, he now seems more like a plaything being used by Mick for certain questionable ends.

The serious and the comic are now much more, forcefully counter pointed. Mick's dry-mock is still there ("You must come up and have a drink something. Listen to some Tchaikovsky" and Davies's procrastination, although now invidiously ungrateful, is still lightened to pure comedy ("the only way to keep a pair of shoes on, if you haven't got no laces, is to tighten the foot, see?" But Davies's response to Mick's evocation of a penthouse 'palace'—"What about me?"—gives voice to the inevitable question at the heart of the situation. Mick's "All this junk here, it's no good to anyone", is much less casual than it seems. Davies as, part of the 'junk', will obviously have to go, and we recognise it.

Mick obliquely incites Davies's verbal attack on Aston by giving voice to what the tramp has felt from the outset. Davies's real feelings in surveying the attic are compromised by the fact that Aston has rescued him. As a consequence Davies says the opposite of what he feels:

Davies: *This your room?*

Aston: *Yes.*

Davies: *You got a good bit of stuff here.*

Aston: *Yes.*

Davies: *Must be worth a few bob, this... put it all together.*

(Pause)

There's enough of it.

Aston: *There's a good bit of it, all right.*

Davies: *You sleep here, do you?*

Aston: *Yes.*

Davies: *What, in that?*

Similarly, Mick's pointed summary not only places Davies as part of the rubbish and simultaneously predisposed him to attack Aston, but gives utterance to that protracted stare at the opening of the play: "All this junk here, it's no good to anyone. It's just a lot of old iron, that's all...Clobber."

Davies' Opportunistic Nastiness

Davies echoes this in his viciously prolonged attack on Aston as an "irresponsible lunatic,...all this junk I got to sleep with...this lousy filthy hole." Davies's contemptible vilification is emotionally complex for an audience. If it confirms our opinion, of Davies's opportunist nastiness and strengthen our impulse to reject him as wholly objectionable, at the same time it provides almost a release for our strained protective feelings towards Aston. The opening lines of the speech continue Davies's exaggerated sense of comic victimisation made ludicrous by disproportionate expectation: "It's getting so freezing in here I have to keep my trousers on to go to bed. I never done that before in my life. But that's what I got to do here. Just because you won't put in any bleeding heating!" We may derive a temporary sense of relief in what follows by intellectually assessing the circularity of Davies's charge—Aston is lunatic because he is irresponsible and irresponsible because he is lunatic—and even maintain our distance when Davies claim the friendship and kindred opinion of Mick. But this relief is completely shattered as Davies sadistically baits Aston with the prospect of renewed electrical treatment. As the emotion rises both in Davies and the audience it is, paradoxically, both undercut and heightened by localised London slang: "They'd take one look at all this junk I got to sleep with they'd know you were a creamer." Davies charges Aston with what, in all probability, has been levelled at him, 'acreamer'. It is almost funny as an unexpected synonym for the more current 'nutcase', but at the same time more insidiously mocking for Aston, since Davies uses the highly specific argot of Aston's own background. Yet even at this point we are tempted to laugh as Davies's expression gets more and more Welsh in self-righteous anger: "You want me to do all the dirty work all up and down them stairs just so I can sleep in this lousy filthy hole every night? Not me, boy. Not for your, boy." But the idioms that provoke laughter also arrest it: "You're up the creek! You're half off!" Our awareness of the possibility of this being true checks our natural tendency to respond humorously to figurative exaggeration. Davies's subsequent question 'Whoever saw you slip me a few bob?' Simultaneously recalls Aston's kindness in doing just that, and predisposes the audience to take up a defensive position, on Aston's behalf, against Davies's final callousness—"I never been inside a nuthouse!" Even here, the colloquially derisive reduction makes us want to laugh, as we have laughed at the peremptory idiom of Mick's attack on Davies. But as Davies draws his knife on ominous silence supervenes. This tableau recalls Davies' ineptitude in threatening Mick earlier, and Aston finally breaks the tension with a delayed understatement that is totally deflating: "I think it's about time you found somewhere else. I don't think we're hitting it off!"

This is precisely what Mick has been worming towards. He could have thrown Davies out whenever he liked, but he has waited two weeks for Aston to see through Davies's character. Mick has promoted the exposure in order that Aston will see and feel as he does. The usual interpretation of Mick and Aston's relationship—that there is an unspoken bond of brotherly love between them—is really rather naive and sentimental. Mick smashes the Buddha to pieces out of a frustrated rage that derives from his suppressed acknowledgement of the truth of Davies's previous accusation ("He's nutty"), and his subsequent passionate outburst is a wilful attempt to see Aston's condition in terms of his failure to decorate the house, rather than in terms of what lies beneath it. To have thrown Davies out would have been a tacit admission that Aston was a lunatic to have brought him there in the first place. (Perhaps Davies wasn't the first?)

Mick and Aston

In other words, Mick's obligation to his brother is formal rather than affective. Mick's character—tough, sardonic, worldly-wise—is similar to that of the people in the café and the factory who found Aston 'funny' and were instrumental in having him put away. Like his mother and the doctor, Mick wants Aston to "live like the others". He understands Davies so well because they both have a kind of bureaucratic view of the world. They both see human activity in terms of status conferred by institutions that regulate society (social security, solicitors, etc). Whereas the Buddha for Aston was an example of something 'well made', for Mick it embodies all that he cannot face in his brother—the inscrutable, the passive, and the alien. But, in tarring over the roof Aston is learning to take over of himself, in Mick's term. At the opening of the play the suspended bucker focuses for Mick his brother's condition as he understands it, and their only exchange in Act II concerns the problem of tarring over the leaking roof. As Act III opens, Davies contemplates Aston's silence in terms of his single activity of doing the job (ironically this anticipates his own expulsion). This small task signalises that Aston will comply with Mick's view of things, a complicity dramatized by the 'taint smile' they exchange towards the close. Mick smiles in recognition of what he sees as his rightness in paying off Davies, and Aston smiles back conceding the fact—his last words to Davies were "Get your stuff."

Davies must go, however plangent his appeal: "What am I going to do?...Where am I going to go." The pauses between each utterance are lengthened into the long silence of the final stage direction. Aston turns back to the window, remains still, his back to him, at the window, but we are faced with Davies's concrete questioning presence. We are forced here to confront not only what laughter has created but also what laughter has suppressed. The repetitions of Davies language echo those moments of comedy which are now stifled by the specter of destitution. Davies's need for material items has created moments of high comedy, but the serious moral implications of such subsistence culminate in those questions. The material, social and cultural privileges that presuppose our presence in the theatre are indices of the totality of Davies's deprivation. Throughout the play Davies has been the object of the solidarity of laughter, but now the audience itself is exposed in its own silence before him. The possibilities of food, shelter and warmth are now to be replaced by the possibilities of hunger, cold and exposure, intimation of which have been present all along ("I could have died on the road," Davies says at one point. Was this the substance of his nightmares?). The harsh regimen of the doss-house has been evoked earlier in Davies's hurried attempt to forestall what he knows must happen as the rule of each daybreak: "Don't you want me to get out...."

Rhythm of the Play

The points where the laughter spasmodically ceases are obvious enough in the rhythm of the play. These dramatic moments correspond psychologically to the point in each of us where conflicting impulses and vestigial atavism and ostensible civility meet. We experience in *The Caretaker* the Hobbesian triumph of superior of laughter over inferior objects and ludicrousness transforms the socially embarrassing. But beneath this is the self-protective impulse to remove what is psychologically painful. Just as children laugh at (and thus exorcise) the sight of physical deformity, so we react to Davies's warped morality—all the time expecting him to ask for our compassion. But Davies remains intransigent, he does not offer us the adult compromise of compassion. In our laughter there stirs an uneasy atavism which grows in proportion as Davies's nastiness increases. We cannot finally accept Davies on his own terms—as he is. He has to be either 'killed off' by our laughter, or transformed by the tragic dignity of self-awareness. Our emotional expectations are in part shaped by dramatic convention. Davies must be either contemptible or pitiful, a comic vice exposed in laughter, or, by token of some redemptive self-insight, an ultimately traffic figure. But he is actually neither, and this is what is almost too painful. In the theatre adult emotions are customarily channeled into a comforting species of self-protective compassion. Pinter refuses to provide this. Initially Pinter felt that there would have to

be a death at the end of the play, but it is clear that this would have only provided another kind of emotional release—and evasion. Pinter not only dropped this notion but in revision, chose to stress the ineluctable concrete actuality of Davies there, before us: resistant to allegory, abstraction, and moral formula. Here, in the long silence, no longer so much an audience as a disparate assembly of individuals which includes Davies, we are forced to confront the limits of our human response, the edges of emotional vulnerability, the barriers of social ordinance that join and divide us all. This is our 'participation', and this is where the 'point' of laughter and silence, as Pinter's letter reminds us, both begins and ends.