

The Theme of Loneliness in Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*

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Abstract

It is generally known that the theme of loneliness is evident in Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker* (1959). The main characters of the play are often lonely either by an act of will, or rather due to some malign forces imposed on them.

The basic interest of this paper is to shed light on the theme of loneliness as reflected in Pinter's *The Caretaker*. Besides, the possibility to overcome one's lonely condition will be questioned as expressed through the situation of an old tramp and a mentally unbalanced man.

1. The Shaping of Pinter's Sensibility

Harold Pinter was born in Hackney, 1930, the only child of a Jewish family descended from a Hungarian or probably Portuguese origin. He was then brought up and educated in that bleak suburb of the East End of London which was at the time a good refuge for the Jewish People (Almansi and Henderson, 1983: 10). Pinter witnessed the Second World War with all its associated horror, but his life at home was completely undisturbed. At the age of eighteen, Pinter refused to be engaged in military service mainly because of his hostile attitude towards war and violence. It turned out that the young Pinter, as an objector of the National Service, underwent two trials but fortunately he was not imprisoned (Ibid).

However, Pinter's literary career could be accounted for in terms of two recognizable periods. The first started in 1949 when he joined the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. But the atmosphere there did not appeal to him. It was at his feigning a nervous breakdown that he left the Academy quite unpleasantly only to initiate a new career as a repertory actor (Ibid). During that period, Pinter had

different inclinations . It was beside being an actor and a director that Pinter wrote poetry, some of which was published in London magazines . The second period which marked the real turning point in Pinter's life , started in 1957 with Pinter's being acclaimed as a dramatist .The period was initiated with *The Room* , a play written in four acts at the request of a friend , to be followed by plays like *The Dumb_Waiter* , *The Birthday Party* and *A Slight Ache* .

As a dramatist , Pinter's name has been associated with the theatre of the absurd with the latter conscious abandoning the rational devices and its pessimistic attitude towards man and his purposeless position in the world (Holman , 1985 : 3) . Pinter has his own message to the world but he is not totally bothered to preach it through his characters . Indeed , everything in his plays is two-sided that once a question is raised , different explanations are there not to be reduced to formula . His plays then are characterized by a sense of horror and fear which is at once a reflection of the violence Pinter himself experienced , as a Jew in the most miserable streets of the working class suburbs. Likewise , there are similar echoes of the horror and misery caused by the outbreak of the Second World War and afterwards Depression .

Besides , a careful analysis of Pinter's Plays reveals that the "room" , being also a significant title of his first recognizable play , is almost a recurrent theme .The room ,being inhabited peacefully by some persons when all of a sudden the whole security of the room is threatened with the arrival of an intruder (Almansi Henderson , 1983 51) .Man's plea to occupy a room , in this concern , becomes rather a manifestation of his similar plea to gain a foothold in the world . No less important has been Pinter's concern with themes like man's loneliness , the crisis of losing one's identity and the lack of proper communication .

To sum up , Pinter's plays are many , the most recognizable to mention are : *Night School* , *The Collection* , *The Lover* , *Landscape* , *The Homecoming* , *Old Times* , *Monologue* , *No Man's Land* , *Betrayal* , *A kind of Alaska* and *Screen Plays* .

2. *The Caretaker* : An Introductory Note

Among Pinter's so – called comedies of menace , *The Caretaker* (1959) received great critical acclaim . It established Pinter's reputation as a magnificent dramatist both in Britain and the world . Its significance stems from that it has dealt with different themes which are equally serious other than to stimulate merely the audience's laughter . Pinter himself has made it clear that his play is not intended to be only a "laughable farce"(Esslin , 1970 : 280) . It is true that the play is funny up to a point beyond which it ceases to be funny when "the absurdity of the characters' predicament becomes frightening , horrifying , pathetic and tragic"(Ibid) . It is , in this concern , that the comic and tragic elements are amazingly mingled with an atmosphere of fear and horror so that when laughter is raised , the audience are fully aware of what might follow .

It seems useful then to argue that the play can not be fully classified as a comedy . Indeed , it turns out that comedy is only a second concern and hardly emerges as a recognizable theme. It is simply a means by which the dramatist conveys his other important themes . Thus , one can safely say that the play is only a tragi – comedy . This can be especially true if we consider Pinter's similar tragi – comic attitude towards man himself and his position in the world .It becomes , there fore , a characteristic of Pinter's plays , and of *The Caretaker* in particular that the most serious themes are treated in a mixed attitude which is half – comic and half tragic .

Whatever Pinter's attitude could be , *The Caretaker* remains one of his best to be read on different levels. Though the play is written in three acts in which three characters alone are involved , its impact is tremendous that critics could find much to be written about Pinter and his play .

3. Loneliness as Reflected in Pinter's *The Caretaker*

In the simplest terms , *The Caretaker* presents a human situation in which three characters are involved : two brothers and a tramp .It emerges that the older brother ,Aston has rescued an old tramp, Davies , out of a furious quarrel in a café where the latter is supposed to be a cleaner . Soon , Davies' loneliness is focused on .Davies ,in his sixties , is only an outcast , a vagabond without the

least sense of belonging . Indeed , he is not only deprived of a family , proper job and refuge , but also without a clear identity .Whereas his real name is “ *Davies . MacDavies*” (Act 1,20) he has been assuming another name , Jenkins .As a matter of fact , Davies is deprived of his social rights , as an individual , since he is not the man he pretends to be . Davies or Jenkins , thus , keeps on alluding to the journey once he will , perhaps he must take to Sidcup , only “ *to sort himself out* ” (Act 3, 65) . But this assumed journey is always hindered by his inadequacy to have a proper pair of shoes . Besides , the weather is never good enough to start (*Ibid*) .

Similarly , Davies’ account of a begging journey to a “ *Monastery down at Luton* ” (Act 1, 13) emphasizes his loneliness that he is friendless and in some despair . Equally pathetic is his apparent poverty , to beg for a pair of shoes and his subsequent depression of not being given any by monks. Davies’ complaint of the inhuman treatment , he has had there , to be “ *nothing better than a dog*” (*Ibid* , 15) exemplifies the hostility he has been encountered with . It is not surprising , therefore , that Davies is constantly conscious of his low social status and is sensitive to think of others as superior to him . Instantly he storms at the Scotchman , denouncing his authority to give him orders , that “ *he’s not my boss ... nothing superior to me* ” (*Ibid* , 10) . Likewise , Davies is no less conscious of his dirty outlook , which he tries desperately to cover up by claiming to have “ *had dinner with the best* ” (*Ibid* , 9) . Evidently , Davies’ statement is questionable but it could be only a helpless expression to hide his apparent inadequacy .

However , it turns out that Aston , a young man in his thirties , has saved him when he was likely to be put to death . Obviously Aston is gentle , good-hearted and apt for help . He reacts with sympathy to offer the old tramp what he desperately strives for : a refuge , bed , shoes , etc . A careful interpretation of the theme in question reveals a parallel between Aston’s situation and Davies’ . Indeed , both are equally lonely , though for different reasons , are no less desperate in their yearning for a proper companionship . Soon , it emerges that Aston is “ *mentally deranged* ” (Gascoigne , 1974 : 207) and could hardly achieve manual things. In this regard , Aston is

revealed as the one who has suffered . He is the one whose artistic inclinations and clear insights have been reduced to conformity . Indeed , there was a time when Aston was fully energetic , equally sensitive to look at things through the eyes of a promising artist (Esslin , 1968 : 282) . But that does not go for long . Society has persecuted Aston once by judging him mad , practicing science on his brain to render him normal (Brown , 1968 : 29) .

Unlike Davies who trusts nobody and rather “ remains cocooned within himself ” (Cowell , 1967 : 134) , Aston used to be quite open with people . He , thus , keeps on talking to them , perhaps to the degree of hallucination , thinking that they are lending a serious listening: “ *They [people in the factory] used to listen . I thought ...they understood what I said ... I talked too much .That was my mistake* ” (Act 2, 54) .

But , he has been paid the worst . The vague mentioning of Aston’s mother , in this concern , increases his misery . In his predicament , Aston appealed to his mother pleading for help , lest he should undergo a loathsome operation on his brain , but “*she signed their [psychiatrists’] forms giving them permission*”(Ibid) .In the absence of motherly care , Aston has been subjected to the horror of the mental hospital . It is true that the electric shock , he had there , has freed him from hallucination but left him as “*a slow worker* ” (Ibid , 49) and less witty to grasp things. Aston’s loneliness is due to all these hostile circumstances imposed on him : “ *But , I don ’t talk to people now . I steer clear of places like that café . I never go into them now . I don ’t talk to anyone like that* ” (Ibid , 57) .

As a matter of fact , Davies is the first person who has stimulated Aston’s positive interest since his horrible experience at the mental hospital . Simply , Aston likes Davies , despite the latter apparent dirtiness , and his companion . Davies , in turn , could hardly believe his good luck to be offered a refuge where the menace of the outside world is at bay . A further act of generosity is shown by Aston to offer him the job of a caretaker: “ *You could ... look after the place , if you liked ...you know , the stairs and the landing ... keep an eye on it* ” (Ibid , 42) .

In bringing Davies home and offering him a job , Aston is doing more than showing charity towards his fellow-human . On a large scale , this could be taken as an expression of his yearning for a genuine companionship , for a person who would perhaps look after him (Esslin , 1970 : 113) . Thus , by taking care of Davies , Aston has shown a similar interest to be cared for .

But , one is soon aware that Davies is rather irritating . He is the one who used to “groan” (Act 1, 22) and make noises at night that Aston is unable to sleep . Besides , his ill-nature and racial hatred soon manifest themselves . Obviously , Davies is filled with malice at the coloured people : “ Blacks , Greeks , the lots of them ” (Ibid , 8) . Thus , he is likely to attribute the blame to “ them blacks next door ” (Ibid , 23) for things he has been already accused of . His disgust at the coloured people is not only a statement of racial hatred . By blaming the black to be inferior , Davies is seen trying to divert attention lest it should be paid to his apparent inferiority, and an unpleasant outlook . (Brown,1968; 152) . Davies , on the other hand , is reluctant to accept Aston’s offer to be a caretaker . His lazy nature is soon at work that he is unable to subdue . He is further beset by some irrational fears of “ them blacks , next door ” (Act 1, 23) and other people who would perhaps come to check up on his real name and identity : “ they’d find out [that his real name is different] they’d have me in the neck ” (Ibid , 20) , once there is a bill to call a caretaker .

Whereas Davies could not subdue his lazy nature , Aston is trying , in his simple , perhaps , naïve way , to get a foothold in the world . On one level , this manifests itself in Aston’s constant efforts to bring a sense of order into his clumsy room by making it “habitable” (Esslin , 1970 : 115) . Actually , Aston’s room is in disorder , being filled with junks , some rubbish things and broken electric fittings . It seems that these materials have been collected over the years , for one reason or another , but presently they cease to be of use . This displays , in turn , the absurdist notion that man lives in a chaos . Every thing around is meaningless and definitely with out purpose . If Aston lives in a chaos , then his attempt to structure things round him recurs man’s everlasting struggle to bring a sense of harmony and order in to a world which has gone mad and chaotic . One could also see that

Aston's clumsy room serves to be a reflection of his own confused mentality (Ibid) . Aston's efforts to structure his room then parallel his similar attempts to overcome his perplexed mind by trying some manual works . clearly , through these attempts , Aston reveals an inner wish to regain harmony and acceptance , to be reconciled with the world which has deprived him of energy and wits :

“ So I decided to have a go at decorating it [the house] , so I came into this room and I started to collect wood for my shed ” (Act 2 , 40) .

The idea of building a shed , in this concern , is extremely important since it is strongly linked with Aston's dream of visualizing a rather purposeful life . It is worth mentioning here that Aston likes manual works . Repeatedly , he is seen meddling with the plug , trying to mend the leak in the roof but is hindered by his confused mentality . Similarly , Aston is given the task of converting the house into flats , but nothing tangible could be realized .. Though Aston does not lay it quite open , he could be in need of Davies to give him a hand in building his shed . Indeed , if Davies had been able to give Aston a hand ,both could have, no doubt , succeeded in realizing a genuine companionship they are in urgent need of . But , Davies is as shifty and undependable that his promise to help Aston is evidently unreliable .

Unluckily , Davies is given another chance to overcome his loneliness but he could not make use of it. Out of a yearning for a sympathetic companionship , Aston reveals to Davies the story he had at the mental hospital . Even though Aston keeps on complaining of Davies' unpleasant noises at night , he relates to him the horror he experienced at the hands of the psychiatrists . One could see that there is a hidden plea , on Aston's part , to strike sympathy and understanding . Indeed , if Davies had been able to react with sympathy , both could have overcome their loneliness . Both ,would be able , too , to strike a proper companionship . But , Davies' inability to show sympathy , to react with generosity is apparent . Besides , he is subject to his human weakness that he could not transcend feeling “ the superiority of the sane over the lunatic ”. (Esslin , 1970 : 107) . In this concern , Pinter makes use of lighting to

indicate the characters' failure of communication and their subsequent loneliness . It is true that during Aston's monologue, Davies and other objects in the room could be hardly recognized in the shadow (Act 2 , 54) . In other words , Davies who is dimly seen in the shadow does not receive much of the light . This could be seen as an indication of the passive role he has that no matter how hard Aston tries to communicate his panic , Davies is apparently unmoved (Ibid) . Instead of lending a sympathetic listening , thus , all Davies could see is that “ *Aston was talking to himself* ” (Act 3, 59) . In turn , the light is focused on Aston by the end of the monologue is suggestive of the idea that he is once more alone in his predicament that Davies is as detached and selfish .

Davies , too , is in no position to give a proper judgement of others . For instance , his fears of Aston smiling at him are illogical . Much to his misunderstanding , Davies could not realize Aston's gesture of tenderness , probably of friendship. Ironically , he trusts Mick , the younger brother , as a “ *straight forward* ” (ibid , 61) man whereas he is the one whom he must dreadly fear . Davies is , then , seen pleading with Mick to be given a clock : “ *I need a clock to tell the time ! How can I tell the time without a clock ? ... If you can't tell what time ... you don't know where you are* ” (ibid , 62) . One could see that Davies is doing more than testing Mick's hospitality . Indeed , there is an implied expression to communicate that he is lonely and desperate (Styron , 1968:246) . Davies' request , also , serves to be a revelation of his inner wish to make a rather purposeful life by being fixed up in time and place. (Ibid)

Soon ,we come to an awareness that Mick is not the one to be trusted .It is clear that the brothers are different in temperament , equally strange in behaviours . whereas Aston is gentle , Mick is violent . The latter words are at once an expression of threat mingled with humour . Another contrast could be realized , too , in relation to the two brothers . Indeed , whereas Aston is less energetic to do manual works , Mick is described to be a tradesman , fully acquainted with the various requirements of modern life . However , Mick's situation , as a prototype of the civilized man , implies an irony .

Behind the mask of civilized man Mick hides a sadistic nature which finds an outlet in tormenting the old tramp to reduce him to speechless horror (Cowell , 1967 : 134) . Mick is , thus , seen teasing Davies , in the dark , with a vacuum cleaner that the latter is on his guard , trying to protect himself with a knife . Apparently , the latter is unfamiliar with modern machines such as the vacuum cleaner. If Mick is sadistic , then Davies' violent reaction recurs man's primitive fears of the unknown and his subsequent cruelty to defend himself lest he would be attacked .

On the other hand , Mick is tricky scheming to lure the old tramp into a seeming security by offering him the job of a caretaker .His complaint of Aston's idle nature is also meant to trap Davies in away that reveals his true intentions . The latter , in turn , is aware of Mick's authority as the real possessor of the house . His selfishness then overcomes Aston's generosity .Davies could not help talking ill of Aston regardless of the fact that he is the one who has offered him the best he could . Davies is , thus , only a “ personification of human weakness ” (Esslin , 1968 : 279) that he could not avoid the temptation to be sided with one brother against the other .

The problem with Davies is that he is no longer satisfied with the refuge Aston has offered , but he seeks dominance . His vicious nature is soon at work that he is ready to attack Aston with his knife , to deny his noise-making at night . By doing so , Davies seems to be “ *a wild animal ... a barbarian* ” (Act 2 , 35) , who is ready to stab any attacker only to show that he has been put in charge by Mick . It is true that Davies does not deserve the charity shown by Aston . Indeed, he is not only selfish but also scheming to make advantages of Aston's story at the mental hospital in a way that taunts him : “ *They[psychiatrists] can put the pincers on your head again ... they'd have you fixed* ” (Act 3 , 66).It is worth mentioning here that Davies has committed grave errors which caused his final tragedy . By suggesting that Aston is mad whose best place is the mental hospital , Davies is revealed as a real menacing figure who threatens to dismiss Aston from his own house hold , to deprive him of his own place in the world (Esslin , 1970 : 115). Besides , Davies has gone further to denounce Aston's shed as “ *stinking* ” (Act 3, 68) and that it will

never see the light . As it has been already suggested , Aston's future shed is strongly linked with his own dream of achieving something useful with the hands . Indeed , if Davies' assumed journey to Sidcup is the essence of an otherwise empty existence , then Aston's shed is no less important to make his life rather purposeful . Obviously , an insult to Aston's shed means a deathblow to his whole existence . Thus , Aston's final break with Davies could be justified in the light of the indignation the latter shows at his shed .

Mick's anger , is also aroused to remind the old tramp that time has come when he must be on the move .Instantly Mick storms at Davies' reference to Aston's unbalanced mentality : “ *Did you call my brother nutty ? My brother* ” (Ibid) . It could be suggested , in this concern , that Mick is moved by the pricks of a sinful conscience for the role he might have in subjecting Aston to the mental hospital (Esslin , 1968 : 263) . He is no less moved , by some instinctive feelings , to defend his brother when necessity demands . In addition , Mick is revealed as the real threat for Davies' temporary refuge that he is likely to deny him responsibility treating him as an outsider :

*What a strange man you are , aren't you ? ...
Ever since you come into this house , there's
been
nothing but troubles ... Most of what you say is lies .
you're violent , ... erratic , you're just completely
unpredictable .*

(Act 3 , 73)

Mick's speech , in this sense , implies an irony . Indeed , his words do not only serve as a criticism of Davies' quarrelsome existence and abject unreliability but also a revelation of Mick's own violent nature and equally erratic, unpredictable schemes . (Taylor , 1963 : 299) .

Davies , then, is an outsider , not only in relation to society which has denied his existence and human rights , but also in relation to the two brothers . Even though the brothers are rarely seen talking , addressing each other only when it is necessary , they share understanding and sympathy . They are likely seen “ *smiling faintly*

at each other ” (Act 3, 75) and thus are united against Davies .Mick’s immediate rejection of Davies , however, is opened to different interpretations . On one level , Mick could be moved by an instinctive jealousy to see his brother showing a positive interest in an outsider (Taylor , 1963 : 301). He could be determined not to let an outsider be allowed into their house (Ibid) . Thus , the first thing Mick puts in mind is to get rid of Davies . Mick’s appearance, on the other hand , is perhaps meant to repay Davies for what he has already paid Aston ,for his lack of generosity and unreliability . Mick’s act of destroying the Buddha (Act 3 , 74) serves the discussion here . It emerges that Aston has conceived a strange delight in having the Buddha as a piece of ornament : “ *picked it up in a shop ... looked quite nice to me . Don’t know why ... yes , I was pleased when I got hold of this one . It’s very well-made* ” (Ibid ,71) .Aston , too ,has shown a similar interest to have Davies home in the hope that both would be able to strike a sympathetic companionship . On the one hand , Mick might show his rage against things Aston has already shown an interest in having . Perhaps , they look quite unnecessary for Mick whose mind is caught in luxurious dreams of flat-building and modern decoration . The Buddha , on the other hand , could be a representative of Davies and of Aston’s naïve interest to have them home (Esslin , 1970 : 116) . By unspoken rejection , Mick smashes the Buddha to communicate that Davies should be on the move . Mick’s act could be , further , a revelation of his own violent nature which though hiding itself behind the mask of a civilized man .

Originally ,Pinter thinks of a bloody action , a violent end the way the tramp is stabbed by the two brothers .Soon , he dismisses the idea that violence is quite inadequate . Davies is sentenced by rejection and its associated loneliness which is far more killing . Therefore , the only alternative given is that he “ must go in such a way as to produce a sense of complete separation and finality ” (Brown , 1968 : 153) .

Davies is seen desperately pleading for the room which was once his secure haven . Evidently , he is in no position to leave for “*where else he should go*” (Act 3 ,77) . His unwillingness to be on the move is put in a sharp contrast with the rather refrain – like mentioning of his

desire to go to Sidcup . Once more , his inadequacy manifests itself for , best to his knowledge , the moment he starts his journey , the whole illusion about himself will crumble to dust . In this sense , Davies is a reminder of Pinter's characters and their recurrent plea to defend their rooms lest they should face the hostile world outside . Basically , they are scared of what is going on outside their rooms since outside is:“ a world bearing upon them , which is frightening ... and outside is a world which is most inexplicable and frightening , curious and alarming ” (Esslin , 1968 : 266) . Typical , of this fear is the expression of Davies' desperate words , almost choked in his throat , with which the play is enclosed :“ *Listen [Aston] ... if I ... got down ... if I was to ... get my papers ... would you ... would you let ... if I got down ... and got my ...* ” (Act 3,78)

Though Aston is apparently unmoved by Davies' words , remains still his back to Davies at the window his situation is no less tragic . Aston has done what he thinks adequate to strike a companionship to overcome his loneliness ,but his humility receives the greatest hurt .His generosity is sentenced by Davies' selfishness and thus his deadly silence is justified .

4.Conclusion

To conclude , Pinter undertakes to show the inevitability of human loneliness . No matter how man tries , how shaky and desperate he tends to avoid , the more certain it is assured . A careful account of the theme in question , however , reveals that loneliness could be either the outcome of man's own short comings or rather imposed by some hostile circumstances conspiring against him .

The first explanation could be true in relation to Davies' situation . Incidentally , Davies has been rescued by Aston when he was terribly lonely . He could hardly believe his good luck to have things he has , for long , dreamed of . But , he could value these things once they are missing . Indeed , Davies has been given more than one chance to be reconciled with the world , to overcome his loneliness , but he couldn't make use of them . His tragedy is that he could not subdue man's inherent evil to react with humility and generosity . Even though , he has been paid with generosity and sympathy by

Aston , he could not overcome his human weakness to play off one brother against the other .

Aston , on the other hand , is doomed by loneliness for different reasons . The fault could be attributed to society which has sentenced his sensitivity and energy . Indeed , for all his clear insights and artistic inclinations , Aston has been reduced to conformity . He has been betrayed by his cruel mother , probably by his scheming brother ,to practise science on his brain . To overcome his lonely condition , Aston has done all he thinks adequate to strike a genuine companionship ,but is obviously betrayed by Davies . Aston's loneliness , in this concern , is not an act of will . Rather , it is imposed by hostile circumstances beyond his control . The only consolation Aston has , in his loneliness , is his brother . He could be compensated by having a brother , whom , though is repeatedly suspected , yet instantly moved to defend Aston .

After all , it seems ironical to think how desperate Aston and Davies have been in their yearning for a sympathetic companionship and how tragic their ends not to realize their target .

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