

# Ambiguity in pinter's the caretaker essay



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When I saw *The Caretaker*, I told Pinter I knew what it meant, "It's about the God of the Old Testament, the God of the New, and Humanity, isn't it?"

Pinter replied, "No Terry, it's about a caretaker and two brothers". With this quote Terence Rattigan succinctly highlights the absolute ambiguity of Harold Pinter's *'The Caretaker'*; in this story of two brothers and an elderly derelict in close quarters, everything that is said and not said can be understood in all sorts of contradictory ways.

Rattigan saw three characters as the holy trinity made flesh, whilst critic Kenneth Tynan thought they represented the id, the ego and the superego; bringing to light the plethora of interpretations that have been made. *'The Caretaker'* does have certain apparent and comprehensible aspects, for example, we know which character is saying what. In plays such as Martin Crimp's *'Attempts on Her Life'*, the ambiguity lies in the lack of defined roles or delegated lines.

However, it is the genre, meaning and the characters themselves in *'The Caretaker'* which remain open to elucidation, hence everything within the play is certainly ambiguous to a degree. The play's fluid genre lends itself to a certain amount of ambiguity. Published and first performed in 1960, it has a thread of the Theatre of the Absurd woven through it, a designation for a style of theatre which evolved from the work of numerous playwrights in the mid twentieth century.

Martin Esslin, a Hungarian-born critic, coined the term "Theatre of the Absurd", referring to these plays which experimented with the expansive theme of absurdity. This seemed to be a manifestation of man's reaction to a

post-world war world that was viewed as having no or little meaning.

Because of the lack of plot and action within the narrative, and the erratic, illogical language, 'The Caretaker' earned its absurdist status, and is often compared to other plays such as Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot'.

However it is also play of mixed modes, both tragic and comic; it is a tragicomedy. Davies' and Mick's monologues add a comic element, and their interactions even imitate farce at times. Particularly so the first scene of Act Two, of which comparisons have been made between the 'hat and shoe' sequences in the aforementioned 'Waiting for Godot'.

Aston's climactic monologue, when he refers to his treatments in "that place", provides the tragic element. In addition, although the end of the play is somewhat ambiguous it appears that Aston and Mick are turning Davies, an old homeless man, out of what may be his last chance for shelter, mainly because of his - and their - inability to adjust to one another.

Pinter also blends realism with absurdism, in a seemingly contradicting manner, resulting in an unusual relationship between the two. Indeed, Pinter employs "realistic settings... colloquial dialogue... and the daily flow of the customary and habitual. (Kane) His writing seems totally free from either significance or coherence and it is thus that a similarity with real life occurs. Yet, while the work displays a surface liberally sprinkled with naturalistic details, they are so peculiarly and meticulously chosen that the overall effect is quite distorted. Director Phillip Breen argues that ambiguity is realism, and that the ambiguities and uncertainties of something like 'The Caretaker' go

back far beyond than twentieth century modernism: " I don't think Pinter's any more ambiguous than Shakespeare, for example.

One of the greatest stage characters ever committed to paper was Iago, and we never find out what motivates him. It's been a subject for reams of academic discourse. " And so, into which genre does ' *The Caretaker*' fall? Theatre of the Absurd? Farce? Realism? These terms are themselves flexible in their interpretation, and it is thus that a lack of the definite or the absolute continues to be brought to light. Furthermore, with ambiguity of genre comes ambiguity of meaning. What is the playwright trying to say? What message is Pinter trying to convey?

None, according to Pinter. But in claiming this, he has, by default, made a significant statement and attributed an accidental meaning to his work. Part of ' *The Caretaker*''s absence of clarity lies in the characterisation of the three men. The characters are not one-note, or even two or three, rather, as with all of Pinter's characters, one gets the feeling that there is a whole symphony of muddled identities going on inside. The characters delude each another and themselves, with deception and self-deception proving with common motifs.

This is particularly true of Davies: he pretends to be someone else and adopts the alias, " Bernard Jenkins". And yet, in response to separate inquiries by Aston and Mick, it appears that Davies' real name is " Mac Davies", and he is in fact not English, but Welsh. He attempts to conceal this fact throughout the play, and proclaims that he needs to " get down to

Sidcup" to fetch his identity "papers". This admission of his fake name raises suspicion over previously held claims.

He constantly boasts about the past: "I've had dinner with the best" and his talk of future also filled with fantasy and falsities, prompting the audience to wonder if Davies' is indeed even his real name. Davies is not, however, the sole offender of deceiving one's self, or those in proximity. Aston believes that his dream of building a shed will eventually be realised, in spite of his disability, whilst Mick believes that his ambitions for a career outweigh duty to care for his brother, and in the end, the trio are all deceiving themselves.

Their lives may continue on beyond the play's conclusion just as they were before and during. Subsequently, themes of deceit and isolation result in a world where time, place, identity, and language are fluid and ambiguous. Mick hits the nail neatly on the head when he says that "he can take nothing at face value". Language is another form that adopts an ambiguity in this increasingly nonfigurative work. A by-product, or perhaps the defining feature of, Theatre of the Absurd, Pinter's dialogues are uncertain, sometimes incoherent, often rambling, and prone to sudden, erratic shifts.

We are next quite sure of what the characters are inferring, or what subtext lies behind their disjointed speech. Interestingly, despite this stylised confusion, in 'The Language of Silence' Leslie Kane states that understatement is one of the most distinctive features of Pinter's writing, and "contributes to the impression of ambiguity and mystery". The final ambiguity to be touched upon is the play's circular structure: the beginning

resembles end in that Davis is still homeless, nothing changes, and actually there has been no plot evolution.

Hence the audience are left with a sense of inconclusion, and an uncertainty as to what they should gain from this, or what meaning they ought to glean.

But then, is that not exactly what Pinter wanted, or indeed aimed for?

Ambiguity of meaning and form appeared to be his goal, discarding traditional narratives, and experimenting with dialogue structures to create a play that was, in his words " futile". Yet, ironically, there is a sense of meaning behind deliberately setting out to make something meaningless. '

The Caretaker''s ambiguity offers more than this might initially infer.