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**The Theme of Allegiance and Meaninglessness of Life in  
Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker***



**Prashant Mandre**

**Research scholar**

**Karnatak University Dharwad**

**Karnataka, India**

**Email : sslcexamplanner.11@gmail.com**

**ABSTRACT**

The theatre of the Absurd is modern technique. The world Growing now days there is no value for relationships, values and Morals. When world War finished the people starts thinking about themselves. Everybody thinks only about themselves. The writes of that time start writing on the meaninglessness of life. The theatre of Absurd writes starts writing on allegiance, suppression, nothingness, isolation, greediness and meaninglessness. Absurd Plays typically represent human existence as nonsensical and often chaotic. Absurdist plays rarely follow a clear plot, and what action occurs serves only to heighten the sense that characters are mere victims of unknown, arbitrary forces beyond their control.

*The Caretaker* is written by Harold Pinter. In this play, Pinter describes about human condition and innocence. It is a absurd Play. Here we can find meaningless of life, allegiance, corruption and human desires.

**KEYWORDS**

Meaninglessness, Absurd, Nothingness, Caretaker, Suppression, Helplessness, Pinteresque

## RESEARCH PAPER

The term 'Theatre of the Absurd' is applied to a number of dramatic works which share the view that the human condition is essentially absurd by which is meant a lack of meaning in life. It is emerged out of the ashes of the destructive first-half of the twentieth century. Combining the growing claustrophobia of the modern age with the oppressive bureaucracy of fascistic police-states. It highlighted the meaninglessness and irrationality of human existence. Circularity and non-meaning are at the heart of this school of theatre. Man is seen as an isolated existence, who is cast into an alien universe. Human life is seen as possessing no truth and meaning and the idea of emptiness and nothingness is highlighted. Minimal setting, repetitive dialogue, the theme of the meaninglessness of life are the hallmarks of the theatre of the absurd.

Eugene Ionesco comments, “cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental root, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.” He says that people drowning in meaninglessness can only be grotesque, their suffering can only appear tragic by derision.

In his article *In For The Absurd* Michael Meredith writes that absurd realism:

“Is not against Realism or Humanism. It’s not Abstraction or Formal Logic or Positivism. It’s not art for art’s sake, and it’s not about heteronomy of life, of urbanism, of function. . . . Absurd Realism produces a space in which the search for meaning in something both vague and concrete is highly encouraged. No stable grid, no absolute datum. Language itself is in continual transformation and renegotiation through its use, misuse, and need for our strange construction of ontological relevance.” (p.9-14)

Absurd Plays typically represent human existence as nonsensical and often chaotic. Absurdist plays rarely follow a clear plot, and what action occurs serves only to heighten the sense that characters are mere victims of unknown, arbitrary forces beyond their control. Dialogue is often redundant, setting and passage of time within the play unclear, and characters express frustration with deep, philosophical questions, such as the meaning of life and death and the existence of the God.

Playwrights commonly associated with the Theatre of the Absurd include Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, Luigi Pirandello, Tom Stoppard and Edward Albee.

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*The Caretaker* is a play it has three acts by Harold Pinter. Although it was the sixth of his major works for stage and television, it describes problem elements of the confluence of power, allegiance, innocence, and corruption among two brothers and a tramp, became Pinter's first significant commercial success. It premiered at the Arts Theatre Club in London's West End on 27 April 1960 and transferred to the Duchess Theatre the following month, where it ran for 444 performances before departing London for Broadway. In 1964, a film version of the play based on Pinter's unpublished screenplay it was directed by Clive Donner. The movie starred Alan Bates as Mick and Donald Pleasence as Davies in their original stage roles, while Robert Shaw replaced Peter Woodthorpe as Aston. First published by both Encore Publishing and Eyre Methuen in 1960, *The Caretaker* remains one of Pinter's most celebrated and oft-performed plays.

In his 1960 book review of *The Caretaker*, fellow English playwright John Arden writes "Taken purely at its face value this play is a study of the unexpected strength of family ties against an intruder." As Arden states, family relationships are one of the main thematic concerns of the play.

Another prevalent theme is the characters inability to communicate productively with one another The play depends more on dialogue than on action; however, though there are fleeting moments in which each of them does seem to reach some understanding with the other, more often, they avoid communicating with one another as a result of their own psychological insecurities and self concerns.

As the characters also engage in deceiving one another and themselves, deception and self-deception are motifs, and certain deceptive phrases and self-deceptive strategies recur as refrains throughout the dialogue. Davies uses an assumed name and has convinced himself that he is really going to resolve his problems relating to his lack of identity papers, even though he appears too lazy to take any such responsibility for his own actions and blames his inaction on everyone but himself. Aston believes that his dream of building a shed will eventually reach fruition, despite his mental disability. Mick believes that his ambitions for a successful career outweigh his responsibility to care for his mentally damaged brother. In the end however all three men are deceiving themselves. Their lives may continue on beyond the end of the play just as they are at the beginning and throughout it. The deceit and isolation in the play lead to a world where time, place, identity, and language are ambiguous and fluid.

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.

Nothing much really happens in *The Caretaker*. There's no complex plot with surprising shifts, tantalizing twists or skeletons that leap out of cupboards. What actually happens is that a man called Aston brings an older man, Davies, back to his room in a house owned by his brother, Mick. Aston allows the older man, who seems to be homeless to stay in his room. As time progresses, Aston and Mick ask Davies to be the caretaker at the house, but things don't seem to work out as planned.

*The Caretaker* focuses 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 stumbling 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.

*The Caretaker* has been analyzed to death by academics intent on finding deeper meanings below the grimy veneer of the disheveled house where the action takes place. But Pinter's description of the play was simpler. 'It's about two brothers and a caretaker. Taken at face value, *'The Caretaker'* captures real, ordinary people simply interacting with each other. It's certainly because of its simplicity, but it's also about Pinter's extraordinary use of language. The characters talk in 'real' language not artificial stage talk. Unfinished sentences, repetition and odd-sounding phrases are all part of the Pinter dialogue package. That said, it's not quite as simple as that because Pinter employs a kind of poetic style that makes it much more than it seems.

In this version, Jonathan Pryce is a fox-like Davies who thinks he's cunning and sly, but is not sufficiently so to recognize which brother it is best to side with. Pryce interweaves a number of facets into this gem of a performance. For example, he pokes and points at the other two characters from a safe distance and uses the same pointing action as a means of emphasis and self-expression. Overall, Pryce has really got under the skin and into the bones of Davies, to produce a hugely compelling performance.

The brothers are both well defined and distinctive. Peter McDonald is the withdrawn Aston who puts his trust in the wrong people. But when he delivers his long soliloquy about being

given electro-shock therapy, he brings us near to tears – not just because of his description but in the almost matter of fact way in which he delivers it. A very moving and poignant passage in the play. On the other hand, Sam Spruell as the second brother, Mick, embodies simmering violence. He convinces us that, if we were to say something even slightly inappropriate, we would be on the wrong end of a raging inferno. But it never gets to that pitch because the violence apart from when Mick and Davies first meet is controlled.

The language and plot of *The Caretaker* blends Realism with the Theatre of the Absurd. In the Theatre of the Absurd language is used in a manner that heightens the audience's awareness of the language itself, often through repetition and circumventing dialogue.

The play has often been compared to *Waiting for Godot*, by Samuel Beckett, and other absurdist plays because of its apparent lack of plot and action.

The fluidity of the characters is explained by Ronald Knowles as follows: "Language, character, and being are here aspects of each other made manifest in speech and silence. Character is no longer the clearly perceived entity underlying clarity of articulation the objectification of a social and moral entelechy but something amorphous and contingent.

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Another prevalent theme is the characters' inability to communicate productively with one another. The play depends more on dialogue than on action; however, though there are fleeting moments in which each of them does seem to reach some understanding with the other, more often, they avoid communicating with one another as a result of their own psychological insecurities and self-concerns.

The theme of isolation appears to result from the characters' inability to communicate with one another, and the characters' own insularity seems to exacerbate their difficulty communicating with others.

As the characters also engage in deceiving one another and themselves, deception and self-deception are motifs, and certain deceptive phrases and self-deceptive strategies recur as refrains throughout the dialogue. Davies uses an assumed name and has convinced himself that he is really going to resolve his problems relating to his lack of identity papers, even though he appears too lazy to take any such responsibility for his own actions and blames his inaction on everyone but himself. Aston believes that his dream of building a shed will eventually reach fruition, despite his mental disability. Mick believes that his ambitions for a

successful career outweigh his responsibility to care for his mentally damaged brother. In the end however all three men are deceiving themselves. Their lives may continue on beyond the end of the play just as they are at the beginning and throughout it. The deceit and isolation in the play lead to a world where time, place, identity, and language are ambiguous and fluid.

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