

# THEME OF LONELINESS AND ISOLATION IN THE CARETAKER BY HAROLD PINTER (1930-2008)

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## ABSTRACT:

*It is usually well-known that the theme of loneliness and isolation is clear in the play of "The Caretaker" by Harold Pinter in 1959. The chief characters of this work often feel lonely and isolated from each other whether by an action of their will or because of some harmful powers imposed against them. They are unable to preserve and keep deep and meaningful relations with others around them because they misunderstand one another and stay alone in their personal world. They are not social persons, and isolated from outdoors, fearing hostility or confusion. The room for them presents a shelter to be safe, which clarifies why Davies should leave according to Mick and Aston and why Davies is very terrified to remain.*

*The aim of this research is to highlight the theme of loneliness and isolation in Harold Pinter's play "The Caretaker" (1959).*

**Keywords:** *loneliness, isolation, room, society, tramp.*

## INTRODUCTION:

Deficiency of communication is an important feature in most Harold Pinter's plays. The crisis of communication in the characters' conducts, livings and conditions represent an obstacle in the way of understanding one another. Aston and Mick in "The Caretaker" are estranged brothers who reside in an isolated gloomy room and attempt to discover their nature and character by Davies, a man who symbolizes the society. The two brothers create a situation for themselves in a loneliness life, seek a friend to bear their life, yet paradoxically find only the bitter reality of their loneliness and isolation. The impressive destinies of the reality of their loneliness and isolation. The impressive destinies of the heroes of the play and their resulting alienation prove unavoidable in an

uncaring and antagonistic world (Brown and Harris, 1972).

The play "The Caretaker" consists of three acts and occurs in a two week time. The author makes a dramatic condition where three workers face one another. The story occurs in one room that belong to Mick who is near thirty, the family patriarch. He lives with his big brother "Aston" who is in his thirties and suffers from mental disorders due to an intensive electrical shock treatment in a psychiatric hospital. He meets Davies who is an old man in a near coffee shop where he saved him from a quarrel and offers him a bed to spend the night. Davies accepts the offer and attempts to grow a part of the family and be closer to Aston and Mick.

(<http://en.academicresearch.net/>)

**1. HAROLD PINTER THE AUTHOR:**

Harold Pinter was born in London Borough named Hackney in 1930. He was the sole child for a Jewish parents whose origin from Hungary or most likely Portugal. They raised and educated him in that isolated refuge area for the Jew. At his time, World War II was on with all its horrors and miseries, yet it did not affect his life at home. When he was eighteen, he rejected to join the military service due to his hostile stance toward war in general and brutality. Because of his rejection to join the army, he faced two trials, yet luckily he was not put into prison (Almansi and Henderson, 1983, p.10).

Nevertheless, he started his literary career in 1949 after joining the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, yet he left it soon because he did not like the atmosphere there, and then he started a new career as an actor and afterwards a director as well as a poet who wrote several poem published in magazines in London. In 1957, he began to write dramas, the first of which was his play "The Room" which he wrote at the will of his friend, and then other plays such as "The Dumb Waiter" (1957), "The Birthday Party" (1958) and "A Slight Ache" (Ibid).

His dramas were classified under the absurd theatre which was characterized with non-rational devices and pessimistic view toward human and their meaningless situation in the world (Holman, 1985, p.3).

It is obvious that his dramas have a message to the world, although he always tries to violate it via his play characters. Definitely, his dramas are two-sided in that once an issue or a question is posed or raised, it finds many different elucidations and justifications that cannot be diminished. In his plays, we see a sense of horror and fright as a result of the violence experienced by Harold Pinter being a Jew living in the most wretched lanes of London. Similarly, we also see similar reverberations of the horrors and melancholies World War II and the resulted depression (Ibrahim, 2005, p.175).

He also deals with other important themes such as loneliness and isolation, the crisis of identity and the deficiency of communication. The most important and familiar of his works are "The

Caretaker" (1959), "Night School" (1960), "The Collection" (1961), "The Lover" (1962), "Landscape" (1967), "The Homecoming" (1964), "Old Times" (1970), "Monologue" (1972), "No Man's Land" (1974), "Betrayal" (1978), "A kind of Alaska" (1982) and Screen Plays.

(<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/>)

**2. THE CARETAKER:**

"The Caretaker" was one of Pinter's menace comedies that received a wide approval from critics. It was the reason behind his fame and reputation as a brilliant dramatist all over the world. Its importance lies in its dealing with various themes evenly serious instead of motivating the laughs of the audience only. The author himself clarified that this play was not just for the purpose of mockery. The play's funniness extends to a degree beyond which it stops being funny at the time when the characters' dilemma absurdity grows scary, terrifying, wretched and tragic. It is a mixture of comic and tragic wonderfully merged with an atmosphere of scare and horror in that the audience laugh, they are completely conscious of what may follow (Esslin, 1970, p.280).

However, it looks helpful to say that the work is not entirely comedy and that the author used this means in order to convey and communicate other vital and significant themes as well. Despite the meaning behind which Pinter wrote this play, "The Caretaker" continues to be one of Pinter's best plays to read at various levels. Although it consists of three acts with three characters only, yet its influence is fabulous in that many critics found a lot to write whether about the play or about its author.

**3. LONELINESS AND ISOLATION IN "THE CARETAKER:"**

Simply, the play signifies a human condition where three characters are concerned, two brothers and an old tramp. It happens that Aston, the older brother, saves a tramp whose name is "Davies" from an irate fight in a coffee shop in which Davies is believed to work as a cleaner. He is lonely, in his sixties, an outsider, tramp, with no family or relatives,

no job, no shelter, and no clear identity. In fact, he has no social rights as a citizen at all, as he is not the man he claims to be when he denies his real name "Davies. MacDavies" (Pinter, 1973, Act I, p.20) and claims his name is "Jenkins". Hence, he continues to hint that he take a journey to Sidcup "to sort himself out" (Act III, p.65), which is constantly delayed at the pretext of not having suitable shoes and because of the bad weather (Ibrahim, 2005, p.176).

Likewise, his description of a pleading trip to a "Monastery down at Luton" (Act I, p.13) affirms his feeling and sense of loneliness and despair in that he has no friends. His poverty is obvious when he begs for a pair of shoes as well as his consequent despair and hopelessness because the priests did not give him anything and treated him in a merciless and inhuman way as if he was "nothing better than a dog" (Act I, p.15), demonstrating the hostility he was facing. Thus, Davies is aware of his inferior social class and does not want to think that others are higher or superior to him. He immediately becomes angry at the Scotchman, disapproving his authority to order him and saying "he's not my boss ... nothing superior to me" (Act I, p.10). he is also aware of his filthy appearance which he attempts hard to hide by pretending that he "had dinner with the best" (Act I, p.9). Obviously, he says what he says and pretends to be what he is not to conceal his evident inadequacy (Ibrahim, 2005, p. 177).

Still, it seems that Aston rescued him from a death about to occur. This is a proof on Aston's gentleness, good-heartedness and aptness as well as readiness to help. So, he responds with compassion and kindness to present the old man "Davies" what he badly needs, a shelter, bed, pair of shoes, food ... etc. A cautious explanation of the theme of loneliness discloses a similarity between Aston's and Davies' state of affairs. In fact, the two men are lonely even if for diverse reasons, and desperately longing for a suitable friendship. Yet after a short period of time, it is shown that Aston is mentally unbalanced and can barely do manual works, which reveals his suffering (Gascoigne, 1974, p.207).

He was full of energy, equally sensitive like Davies in looking at things with the eyes of a talented artist (Esslin, 1968, p.282). Yet, this thing did

not last for a long time because the society wronged and mistreated him once through judging him as crazy (Brown, 1968, p.29).

In a comparison between both men, we see Davies does not trust anybody and somewhat stays enveloped and isolated within himself, while Aston accustomed to be somewhat open with other people by talking to them, sometimes to the extent of hallucination, supposing they are paying him their attention, yet the opposite was happening (Cowell, 1967, p.134).

Moreover, the blurred mentioning of his mother in this matter adds to his depression. He, in his problem, resorted to his mother asking for her help in case a hateful surgical operation would be made for his brain, yet she right away signed the hospital forms to permit making the operation. He, in the absence of his mother and her care, was exposed to the mental hospital horror. Although the electric shock in the mental hospital liberated him from hallucination, it made him slow in energy, movement and understanding things. His sense of loneliness is rendered to all those aggressive situations enforced on him; therefore, he no more talks to people, he no more goes to places (Ibrahim, 2005, p.179).

Actually, Davies was the first one who enthused his positive attention ever since his horrifying incident at the hospital. We can say that Aston simply liked Davies despite his dirty appearance. Alternatively, Davies could barely believe the good chance in Aston's offering him a shelter in which the outside world menace is at control. There was also an additional action by Aston out of his generosity towards Davies, which was offering him the work of a caretaker, i.e. taking care of the place, the stairs and the corridor (<https://www.gradesaver.com/>).

In doing that to Davies, he is offering more things than mere charity. This thing shows and proves his yearning for a real companionship, his yearning for a person who will possibly take care of him. Hence, the taking care notion was mutual between them both because both of them lack that and need that (Esslin, 1970, p.113).

But soon it is shown that Davies is somewhat frustrating. He snorts and makes noises at

night while asleep, thus Aston cannot sleep because of that. In addition, he is ill-natured and hates other races, especially colored people, Blacks, Poles and Greeks. So, he possibly put the blame to the blacks next door (Pinter, 1973, Act I, p.23) for matters he is previously accused of or blamed for. His revulsion towards colored people is not merely a declaration of ethnic hatred, but a trial to divert the attention away from his evident inferiority and distasteful appearance (Brown, 1968, p.152).

Conversely, Davies is unenthusiastic to agree to Aston's suggestion to work as a caretaker in his house due to his idle nature in work and his inability to control this lazy nature for he has unreasonable fears of the blacks next door and other people who may come to examine his true name and identity, while Aston attempts in his naïve way to have a footing in this world which is proved by his continuous efforts to make a sense of order in his awkward room to be habitable (Esslin, 1970, p.115).

In fact, his room is messy and chaotic because it is full with junks, trash things and damaged electric fixtures which, as it seems, were gathered over many years in-one way or another or for several reasons, but now they are of no use or benefit. This thing signifies the idea of the absurd that human lives in anarchy where the surrounding is of no meaning and of no purpose. So, he tries to get order to his messy chaotic room and to get reason to his mad mind in order to feel some harmony in his life, signifying that the world has gone mad and chaotic and needs to be in order. His awkward room reflects his confused state of mind, wishing to reconcile with the world which was the reason of depriving him from mind and energy (Esslin, 1970, p.115).

It is noteworthy to mention that Aston prefers and inclines to manual labors. He frequently meddles with the electric plug in an attempt to fix the electric escape in the roof, yet his confused mental state hinders. Likewise, he has the mission of transforming their house into apartments, yet nothing is performed. Although he does not say it openly, he might need Davies to help him in constructing the shed. In fact, if Davies was capable to help Aston in this matter, both of them undoubtedly might have succeeded in making a real companionship that they

really and urgently need. However, Davies is deceitful and unreliable and his promise to give a hand to Aston is not true and cannot be trusted.

Davies is unfortunately offered other opportunity to defeat his feeling of loneliness, yet he did not exploit it. Aston discloses to Davies his story at the mental hospital in a desire to have a sympathetic companionship. Although Aston continues his complaint of the distasteful noises made by Davies at night, he tells him the fear and horror he had at psychiatrists' hands. It is obvious that Aston has a concealed appeal to beg understanding and sympathy. In fact, if Davies could respond with sympathy, they would conquer their feeling of loneliness. They would have a suitable companionship. Yet, it is obvious that Davies cannot exhibit sympathy or respond generously. In addition, he is subjugated to his own weaknesses as most humans do that he cannot surpass the feeling of supremacy of the rational over the mad (Esslin, 1970, p.107).

Also, Davies is not the right person to judge other people properly. His fears towards Aston's smiling to him, for instance, are unreasonable. His misunderstanding drives him not to understand Aston's signal of gentleness perhaps out of friendship. Paradoxically, he trusts Aston's younger brother "Mick" as being an uncomplicated and a frank person, while Mick is the person he should scare from. He is seen begging Mick to give him a watch to know the time because he can not tell the time with no watch and consequently he would not know where he is (Pinter, 1973, pp.61-62).

It is clear that Davies is trying to convey to Mick that he is lonely and hopeless. Shortly after this, we discover that Mick is not trustee which signifies that the two brothers differ in their nature, behavior and personality. While Aston is kind and tender, Mick is the opposite, violent and cruel. Mick uses words of threat mixed with humor. There is another difference between the two concerning Aston's being less active in manual works and Mick as a tradesman with complete knowledge of different necessities of modern life. Still, Mick's position as a civilized man entails a paradox (Styan, 1968, p.246).

Mick wears the mask of a civilized man, yet conceals an aggressive character which sees an

outlet in upsetting and torturing Davies into a wordless horror. Hence, Mick is found teasing the old tramp "Davies" in darkness with an electric vacuum in that Davies is alert, holding a knife to protect himself. It seems that Davies is not familiar with modern devices like the electric vacuum cleaner. But if Mick is aggressive and sadistic, then Davies' vicious response shows his primitive panics of unknown things and his consequent brutality to protect himself in case he is attacked (Cowell, 1967, p.134).

Conversely, Mick is wickedly planning to tempt Davies to be a security via proposing to him to work as a caretaker. His grievance of Aston's inactive character is intended as well to entrap Davies in this matter which exposes his real intentions. In turn, Davies is conscious of Mick's power being the true owner of the house. Then, Davies' selfishness surmounts the generosity of Aston. Despite the fact that Aston is the person who has given him the best he can afford, yet Davies talks ill of him. Consequently, Davies personifies man's weaknesses to the degree that he cannot evade the lure to take the side of one brother against the other (Esslin, 1968, p.279).

The trouble of Davies lies in his dissatisfaction with the shelter offered by Aston for he search for control. His fierce character is activated soon in that he is prepared to hit Aston with a knife so as to deny making noises at night. Davies, by doing this, appears to be as a wild animal or rather a barbarian (Pinter, 1973, Act 2, p.35), prepared to hit any attacker with a knife just to prove that he is now made responsible by Mick. Davies, as it seems, does not really deserve Aston's charity and generosity. Definitely, he is not just selfish and egotistic, but planning to make use of Aston's tale in the mental hospital as well in a teasing and mocking way in saying to him that the psychiatrists may lay the pincers on his head once more to fix him (Pinter, 1973, Act 3, p.66).

It is noteworthy to say that Davies makes serious mistakes resulting in his ultimate tragedy, when he hints that Aston is crazy and the mental hospital is the best place for him, which exposés Davies as a true intimidating character who threatens to send Aston away from his house and

family and to deny him his place in the world (Esslin, 1970, p.115).

In addition, Davies takes more freedom in criticizing Aston's shed as rotten and stinking and the light will never enter it (Pinter, 1973, Act 3, p.68). This future shed is powerfully associated with Aston's dream of making a useful thing with his hands. In fact, if Davies' unspecified trip to Sidcup represents the essence of a different empty existence, in that case Aston's, shed has the same importance in making his life quite purposeful. Apparently, Davies offense to Aston's shed denotes a fatal blow to his entire existence and presence. Accordingly, Aston's ultimate split with Davies may be justified and excused within the light of the Davies' resentment and offence to Aston's shed.

Also, Mick's rage is stimulated to jog Davies memory that it is the for him to leave. Mick immediately becomes angry when Davies points to Aston's unbalanced mentality, astonishing at Davies calling his brother Aston nutty (Pinter, 1973, Act 3, p.68).

In this respect, it seems that Mick is stimulated by his sinful conscience due to the part he has done in subjugating his brother Aston to the mental hospital. He is also motivated by certain innate feelings to defend and protect his brother at necessity. Moreover, Mick is the one who represents the true threat for Davies' impermanent shelter that he is expected to refuse taking his responsibility and treat him as a stranger (Esslin, 1968, p.263), by saying to him:

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

(Pinter, 1973, Act 3, p.73)

What Mick says about Davies in this respect entails sarcasm. In fact, what he says does not mean only criticism of Davies' argumentative presence and hopeless untrustworthiness, but rather an

exposure of Mick's aggressive character and regularly unpredictable, volatile schemes as well (Taylor, 1963, p.299).

In that case, Davies is a stranger not just to society which refuses and denies his existence, to both brothers as well. Although both brothers are hardly ever found chatting and dealing with one another when necessary, yet they have sympathy and understanding in common. They are possibly found faintly smiling at each other and therefore they are unified against the old tramp Davies (Pinter, 1973, Act 3, p.75).

However, Mick's instant refusal of Davies may be open to diverse explanations. At one hand, Mick may be motivated by an innate jealousy to observe his brother showing a constructive attention to a stranger. He may be resolute not to allow a stranger into their house. In consequence, he puts in mind first how to throw away Davies. On the other hand, Mick seems that he likely wants to reimburse Davies for what he pays Aston, for his non-generosity and untrustworthiness (Taylor, 1963, p.301).

Mick's destruction of Buddha (Pinter, 1973, Act 3, p.74) provides an example in this concern. It appears that Aston is delighted and pleased in holding Buddha as a decoration because it is a well-made piece (Ibid, p.71).

Moreover, Aston has a comparable interest in getting Davies into their house, wishing that they can both have a sympathetic companionship. Mick may exhibit his anger against matters interests Aston to have, because to Mick they possibly somewhat unnecessary for his mind is attracted to deluxe dreams of building flats and modern ornamentation. And, Buddha may represent Davies and of Aston's immature interest to have such a thing home. Yet, Mick destroys Buddha to convey his decision to kick out Davies from his house, which a proof on his violent nature hidden behind the disguise of a civilized person (Esslin, 1970, p.116).

Davies is judged by refusal and elimination and their related feeling of loneliness which is far more than killing. Thus, the only choice offered to him in this case is that he should go forever with no return, i.e. a complete separation and finality (Brown, 1968, p.153).

After Mick's decision, Davies badly pleads for the room he was given before to be his shelter. He obviously has no place to go to when he says where else he should go (Pinter, 1973, Act 3, p.77). His opposition to leave is a sharp paradox with his wish to leave for Sidcup. Again, his meagerness is shown, the minute he begins his trip, the entire fantasy about himself will collapse and turn to dust. Davies, in this respect, reminds us of the author's characters and their persistent petition to defend their rooms for fear that they may confront the aggressive outside world outside. On the whole, they fear what is happening outside their rooms as since the outside world is frightening, mysterious and terrifying, curious and shocking (Esslin, 1968, p.266).

A characteristic of this horror is Davies' hopeless words choking in his throat, the words closing the play "Listen, if I got down, if I was to get my papers, would you would you let, if I got down and got my..." (Pinter, 1973, Act 3, p.78)

While Aston is seemingly unaffected by the words of Davies, his condition is the same as Davies' tragedy. Aston has tried to do what is suitable to make a companionship to conquer his loneliness, yet his humbleness is greatly harmed and hurt, and his generosity is judged and eliminated by Davies' selfishness and egoism, and therefore his fatal silence is reasonable and justifiable.

#### 4. CONCLUSION:

From the abovementioned, we may conclude that the author confirms the inescapability of man's loneliness. However, a cautious explanation of the theme of loneliness discloses that loneliness may be the result of human's inadequacies or enforced by certain aggressive conditions schemed and combined against him.

The first explanation applies to Davies' state of affairs. He was saved by Aston when he was in trouble, alone and lonely. He did not believe his chance after Aston's offer of a shelter. Yet, he evaluates things when they are really absent and not present. In fact, he was given several opportunities to reconcile and merge with the world and conquer his feeling of loneliness, but he did not exploit them and

was unable to respond with humbleness and generosity, even if Aston treated him with generosity and sympathy because he was incapable to control his human weakness to play on both brothers and move one against the other.

In contrast, Aston was destined and ruined by loneliness due to various reasons, one of which was society which condemned his energy and sensitivity. In fact, despite his apparent insights and artistic tendencies, Aston was diminished to conventionality. His mother's cruelty and his brother Mick's scheme betrayed him when they put him in a mental hospital to make scientific experiences on his brain.

He did everything adequate to make a real companionship in order to defeat his loneliness, yet he was also betrayed by Davies. His feeling of loneliness was not willingly, but rather enforced by aggressive conditions out of control. In his loneliness, the only solace he had was his brother Mick who immediately defended him against Davies' attempt to move him against Aston.

Nevertheless, it looks sarcastic to imagine how hopeless Aston and Davies were in their longing for a sympathetic companionship, how they did not achieve their goal, and how tragic was their ends.

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