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The Caretaker: Challenges and Confrontations

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Abstract:

The Caretaker is a subversive play that demythologises many of an audiences assumptions and values. Pinter makes the audience experience paranoia and feelings of menace and by disrupting conventions of social behaviour and ignoring traditional dramatic realist protocol, Pinter confronts and challenges the values and assumptions of an audience. The play produces a loss of faith in language to unproblematically represent realities in the world and a loss of faith in humanity to know what reality is. The constant silences and pauses within characters conversation makes clear the sub-text of all human interaction. Pinter himself said that one way of looking at speech is to say it is a constant stratagem to cover silence this view and the presentation of this view within the play would be very disturbing to an audience, as it disrupts the traditional notions that language, the basis of all human interaction is one-layered and can be defined, classified and understood. The speech patterns of characters within The Caretaker helps to present the existential viewpoint of problems of identity and classification.

Keywords: Existential, Demythologise, Subversive, Menace, Silence, Pause, Confrontation,

The Caretaker A Play can be confrontational, challenging and disturbing to the values and assumptions of an audience. Discuss with close reference to The Caretaker. The Caretaker, written by the British playwright Harold Pinter in the late 1950s and early 1960s disrupts the audiences perceptions of existence and their understandings of it. The play deconstructs perceived notions and conceptions of reality, and disturbs the audiences perception of their own identity and place within a world which is primarily concerned with the search and need for identity. Pinter was clearly influenced by the fashionable philosophic review of human condition that was prominent in the 1950s and 1960s existentialism. The play attacks the notion that there are no absolute truths or realities. Pinter is therefore concerned with what exists as unknown and intangible to humanity. His theatre interrogates the truth of nature and realities of language and demonstrates that much of what the audience regards as fact is fiction as he explores the

uncertainty of human existence. When an audience of the 1960s went to the theatre, it can generally be assumed that they had preconceived ideas about what they expected and what they are going to gain from the theatrical experience.

The traditional attitudes towards theatre and the conventions of realist drama are disrupted by Pinter. This confronts the assumptions and values of the audience, an experience which would be disconcerting and frightening to many. Pinter divorces and exposes society's codes, institutions and human relations. Throughout the play the audience is rarely comfortable. This disruption is established from the outset of the play when Mick, a character who at this stage of the play the audience knows nothing about, sits on the bed and stares at the audience in silence for thirty seconds. Traditionally in realist drama such as Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* characters use simple exposition through language and non-verbal elements to the audience and enlighten them on what is happening on the stage and the results and reasons for and behind actions. Pinter disrupts this tradition and this in itself would have been a disturbing phenomena to the conservative audiences of post-war Britain.

Mick's arrival on stage generates unease within the audience and the tension would only increase as Pinter provides the audience with no explanation for him being there. Mick leaves the stage in a state of maintained silence, hence the first images presented in the play confront many of the assumptions of a traditional theatrical experience. Mick is alone in the room, sitting on the bed. He wears a leather jacket. He slowly looks about the room, looking at each object in turn. He looks up at the ceiling, and stares at the bucket. Silence for thirty seconds. Mick turns his head. He stands, moves silently to the door, goes out, and closes the door quietly. It is not until the Act two that this character becomes known to the audience as Mick. This deferral of information is quite confrontational as it opposes accepted and naturalised preconceptions of power and right. Mick's position on the bed and his costuming - wearing a leather jacket places him in the traditionally accepted position of power. However this idea is problematised when Mick leaves the room and Aston enters with the key, thus demonstrating the illusory and ambiguous nature of power. Mick not re-entering until later in the play confronts traditional notion that as he was introduced first, he is in a position of power.

The opening scene defamiliarises the Audience with traditional notions of power and establishes a precedent for the remainder of the play. Pinter does not adhere to the accepted use of dramatic conventions. There is no traditional relation of character histories within the opening scenes and

lack of revelation is maintained throughout the play as relatively little is exposed about the characters backgrounds. This makes events within the room conditional phenomena, which are dependent on the individuals involved and what the audience is able to interpret. Pinter denies meaning in traditional places of discovery and appears to provide it by means and in situations that are not socially acceptable or considered as being the norm. An example of this is the obvious exposition in Aston's long monologue about his time within a mental institution. The discussion of such topics with practically a complete stranger and in social conversation definitely oversteps the mark of social acceptability. The discussion of such topics is would be very disturbing and confrontational to the original audience and modern audiences. Pinter is able to create realisation of the inadequacies of the rules that govern polite behaviour. This monologue disrupts the traditional notions of good and evil, and in effect reverses these roles. Within this speech, Aston presents a doctor in negative images, and this figure who is traditionally seen as the wielder of power, status and security is presented as an repressive agent of an oppressive institution who uses physical and brutal means to deal with patients. Aston's monologue serves to shock the audience as he talks about something that the conservative society was not open with, oversteps the mark of acceptability. Hence the audience would have been confronted with ideas that were previously ignored or swept under the carpet, ideas that to many would be quite disturbing;

ASTON: Then one day they took me to a hospital, right outside London. They got me there. I didn't want to go. Anyway I tried to get out quite a few time. But it wasn't very easy. They asked me questions, in there. Got me in and asked me all sorts of questions. Well, I told them when they wanted to know what my thoughts were. Hmmnn. Then one day this man, the doctor, I suppose the head one, he was quite a man of distinction.

Astona's monologue also disrupts the audiences concept of civil rights. In a democratic nation it is generally expected that what people are thinking is their right. However this passage suggests that this notion is not true as Aston was forced to reveal his thoughts. This is a very disturbing idea, as it demonstrates that powerful institutions are able to force individuals into submission and minimise their individuality. Especially after World War Two the presentation of such ideas would be particularly disturbing as after this war the rights of a individual were strongly valued to a greater extent to ever before.

The Caretaker discusses the illusory nature of security and challenges the audiences traditional notions of safety and the home as a place of refuge. Davies refusal to be caretaker because he could be buggered as easy as that if he opened the door is clearly juxtaposed with the scene where Davies is pursued by an electrolux controlled by Mick. The original Audiences of the late 1950s and 1960s would have been only too well aware of the terror and fear that was generated by the knock at the door, because of the possibility of bearing bad news as a result of World War Two. Hence this idea of the home as not being a secure refuge may have been very disturbing to the audiences of this time, and this coupled with the idea that the apparently mundane holds elements of power and hazard would have threatened many audiences values and assumptions;

ASTON: You see, what we could do, we could I could fit a bell at the bottom, outside the front door, with "Caretaker" on it. And you could answer any queries.

DAVIES: Oh, I don't know about that.

ASTON: Why not?

DAVIES: Well, I mean, you don't know who might come up them front steps, do you? I got to be a bit careful.

A few minutes later Suddenly the electrolux starts to hum. A figure moves with it, guiding it. The nozzle moves along the floor after Davies, who skips, dives away from it and falls, breathlessly Before Pinter and other existential playwrights, language was used primarily to provide the audience with a means of understanding, by which they were able to come away with some knowledge and insight at the end of the play. Within The Caretaker, language is not used in this way, instead its use is extended to being a weapon and a form of interrogation, not only of characters within the play but also to interrogate the values of the largely conservative post-war Britain. It exposes the use of our language to construct fictions about our lives and for the purpose of self-deception. The play produces a loss of faith in language to unproblematically represent realities in the world and a loss of faith in humanity to know what reality is. The constant silences and pauses within characters conversation makes clear the sub-text of all human interaction. Pinter himself said that one way of looking at speech is to say it is a constant stratagem to cover silence this view and the presentation of this view within the play would be very disturbing to an audience, as it disrupts the traditional notions that language, the basis of all human interaction is one-layered and can be defined, classified and understood. The speech patterns of characters within The Caretaker helps to present the existential viewpoint of problems

of identity and classification. Davies frequent rhetorical questions pose the key existential questions of the uncertainty of existence. The character of Mick does not subscribe to society's conventional codes. His verbal gymnastics and the punctuation of verbal interrogation with polite social conversation decontextualises ordinary conversation. After attacking Davies, Mick says;

MICK: You sleep here last night?

DAVIES: Yes MICK: Sleep Well?

DAVIES: Yes. MICK: I am awfully glad. It's awfully nice to meet you.

Pinter uses language as a shield, to mask truths and present perceived realities and to evade or disclose revelation. Traditionally language was not used in such ways and the deviation from the traditional and conservative by Pinter creates the need within the audience to reassess and reposition themselves in terms of the language that they use and the meanings it does or can possibly generate. Action is frequently deferred within the play, and at the end of *The Caretaker* there is no resolution or revelation and instead the audience is left with limited insight and knowledge. Instead existence has been problematised, leaving many of the audience disturbed and unsure of their own identity and the structure of society. This deferral of action is primarily indicated by Davies and Aston. The prime example of this is in Davies constant references to his planned trip to Sidcup and in Aston's references to the shed that he is planning to build. Through the representation of these possible future activities, it appears that it gives purpose to their current actions and to some extent a reason for living. It allows these characters to suggest that they are in fact worthwhile human beings with a purpose and a life. Pinter suggests through this deferral of actions that people's lives hold no worthwhile meaning and ultimately there is nothing gained at the point of death. *The Caretaker* is a subversive play that demythologises many of an audiences assumptions and values. Pinter makes the audience experience paranoia and feelings of menace and by disrupting conventions of social behaviour and ignoring traditional dramatic realist protocol, Pinter confronts and challenges the values and assumptions of an audience. He successfully deconstructs notions of power and security, and problematises the conservative belief that there are in fact absolute truths and realities.

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