

The Caretaker: Mystery or Mystification?

With the ever-increasing number of articles and full-length studies devoted to the works of Harold Pinter, it is with some trepidation that one envisages adding to the list. Susan Hollis Meritt's fairly recent study in fact looks not so much at the plays as at the criticism, both academic and professional, that the plays have engendered and includes a stern warning to anyone wanting to add to the already long list of publications.¹ This article will, therefore, have very modest ambitions. Our aim will not be to propose a new interpretation of *The Caretaker*, but rather to examine why this play (and, by implication, Pinter's other works, of course) seems to invite interpretations of different sorts. It should be stressed immediately that if the plays seem to invite such interpretation, the playwright has more often than not refused to go along with the various readings put forward: "I am not concerned with making general statements. I am not interested in theatre used simply as a means of self-expression on the part of people engaged in it. [...] I can sum up none of my plays. I can describe none of them except to say: That is what happened. That is what they say. That is what they did."² It is impossible to determine whether Pinter's refusal to be drawn into "explaining" his plays has discouraged or encouraged such activity. Although we need not let his remarks prevent us from looking at the plays differently, we should perhaps bear in mind what he says he is doing in his work.

In *The Caretaker*, the remarks made in an interview given about the film version of the play are useful insofar as they suggest the way Pinter views his characters' position in the "real" world: "What I'm very pleased about myself is that in the film, as opposed to the play, we see a real house and real snow outside, dirty snow

and the streets. [...] In the play, when people were confronted with just a set, a room and a door, they often assumed it was all taking place in limbo, in a vacuum, and the world outside hardly existed, or had existed at some point but was only half-remembered.”³ The references to the outside world, the world beyond the stage, provide us with a useful starting point because it is this aspect of Pinter’s work which has led to so much speculation. Some critics claim that the plays can be read as “a perfectly explicable series of events”,⁴ while others suggest that our desire to find plausible explanations is the source of misunderstanding: “these questions are impertinent. Because they are based on the old idea of realism.”⁵ What is it in the plays that leads to such divergence of opinion?

In the case of *The Caretaker* the need to look beyond the text to find reasons and explanations focusses essentially on the motivations of Aston and Mick and their relationship. Davies’s behaviour seems less “obscure”. While it is understandable for critics to want to clarify areas of doubt, tie up loose ends and account for the words and deeds of the characters, the underlying assumption is that the play, as it stands, is somehow incomplete or incoherent. This is all the more surprising as *The Caretaker* has enjoyed considerable success on the stage and as a text. Many of the interpretations are stimulating or even entertaining, but not completely convincing because one can always find another which “proves” the opposite.

This paper will not, therefore, offer another reading of *The Caretaker*, but instead try to suggest that the elements that give rise to some obscurity are the very elements that account for the powerful response the play has on an audience. We will attempt to argue that *The Caretaker* deliberately creates, maintains and only partially dispels mystery and we will look at how and why this is done.

From the very beginning the events and characters of the play are shrouded in mystery to some extent. Most plays can exploit the fact that the audience is literally and metaphorically in the dark when the curtain rises, taken from their familiar surroundings and thrust into a fictional world which they will only gradually be able to

understand. All plays require the audience to ask questions about this fictional world and its inhabitants. In a number of ways, Pinter prolongs this state of uncertainty through his choice of what to reveal to the audience and when. We can note that the first character we see on stage does not speak, but disappears off-stage again until the end of the act. Who he is, why he is there and what he wants are questions that the audience cannot begin to answer until much later although the characters on stage do not seem to be aware of his brief presence. The stage set itself is disorienting. The room is cluttered with a wide variety of objects which are familiar to the spectator but seem strange here because disconnected somehow from the "real" world. Normally functioning objects no longer function and, instead of blending into the fictional world, draw attention to themselves. Some objects, such as the disconnected gas stove or the shopping trolley, seem to call out for a symbolic interpretation. For the characters the objects are seen in different ways at different moments of the action. Davies's first reaction is to describe them as "a good bit of stuff" (p. 11).⁶

The character of Davies, who ostensibly is very anxious to prevent Aston knowing too much about his past, is actually easy to see through. Even the confused accounts of the different names he uses can be readily understood in terms of self-defence mechanisms. It is more difficult to account for Aston's failure to respond to Davies's attempts at conversation. This represents a far greater threat to the basic structure of theatre dialogue than Davies's awkward evasions. According to realistic conventions, dialogue on stage between characters is also directed at the spectators,⁷ providing them with help at identifying the characters and situation. The opening exchanges in this play do not allow us to do this insofar as many questions the audience might count on to provide useful information are evaded or provoke unexpected remarks. Aston's participation in the dialogue is so minimal that the audience has to rely increasingly on Davies for some light to be shed. The audience's faith in Davies's ability to get at the "truth" can be seen at

the end of the act when he starts to rummage in Aston's belongings. He seems to be mirroring the spectators' curiosity when he repeats: 'What's he got all these papers for?' (p. 28) However, we cannot fail to notice how Davies is likely to prove an unreliable source of information: "Unable to conceive of a generosity that does not have self-interest at the bottom of it, Davies sets out to defend himself by discovering, in advance, Aston's hidden motives and the obscure connections between these motives and the accumulation of junk that fills the room."⁸

Our curiosity, like Davies's, is not satisfied and we are made to share his terror when Mick, whose identity is not known to the audience, unexpectedly returns at the end of the act. The traditional three-act structure and the use of the curtain prolong this state of uncertainty. Pinter has insisted on the fact that the plays exploit the traditional stage and this is particularly true in his use of time and space. If Aston's reticence in the dialogue hinders the spectators' ability to account for his behaviour, Mick's loquacity also causes problems. Far from avoiding words, he seems to revel in them and produces a deluge of questions, affirmations, anecdotes and reminiscences which leave Davies and the audience reeling. There are ways of making sense of these outbursts, by linking them to his physical attacks on Davies, but Mick's use of language in the play is a source of confusion to the audience. We can notice that, as far as Mick is concerned, the spectator is not confused in the same way that Davies is, but this is not necessarily an advantage. Mick's use of jargon which builds up to ever more ludicrous climaxes seems to bear no relation to the situation on stage. What is the spectator to make of the fact that both the "friendly", silent brother and the talkative, "hostile" one make Davies the same offer?

To further complicate the situation, another shift is made when the normally reticent Aston decides to confide in the normally egotistical Davies. Although it might seem contradictory to evoke revelation while discussing the development of mystery, there are reasons why this "revelation" actually conceals more than it reveals.

Firstly, if Aston is ostensibly addressing Davies, it is not presented in this way on the stage. The light focusses on Aston and leaves Davies in the dark. The reasons for the revelation are also not clear. Many critics see the speech as a direct appeal to Davies's friendship, however this not the only interpretation possible. There is no reason to suppose that Aston is any more truthful than the other two characters, "[t]he pathos of Aston's speech is undeniable, but the experience itself, Pinter insists, is unverifiable. Aston's words may thus be construed as a Pinterian smokescreen, a type of verbal posturing that differs from Mick's jokes and Davies's boasts in quality but not in kind."⁹ In any case, the audience does not see what effects, if any, the speech has on Davies since Pinter once again makes use of the three-act structure and the curtain falls before Davies can say or do anything.

We have seen so far that mystery surrounds the identity and motives of the characters and that the dialogue fails to give the audience reliable, relevant and coherent information, at least as far as Aston and Mick are concerned. Further doubt is created about the relationship between the two brothers. Most of the time only two characters are on stage: Davies with one of the brothers. Whenever the second brother arrives, the first one leaves. On the one occasion when the three characters actually remain together on stage long enough for an exchange to take place, there is very little said to suggest what kind of relationship exists between them, since they discuss the leaking roof. The rest of the sequence focusses on Davies albeit in an indirect way. However, the absent brother is constantly referred to in the dialogue, once it has become apparent that Mick and Aston are brothers. The absent brother is an important element in Davies's strategy. He repeatedly tries to play one brother against the other without having any clear idea of the bonds that may or may not exist between them. For this reason at least we feel that he is bound to fail and that his expulsion from the room is inevitable even if we do not witness his departure. The audience's perception of events is limited to what can be seen and heard in the room.

Accounts of the past or the outside world cannot be taken as reliable and there is no suggestion of any future developments after Davies leaves. Harold Pinter makes no attempt to go beyond the limits of the stage, either in time or place, yet he does not refuse their existence. The fact that the events of the play so clearly coincide with the performance, so that Davies's arrival and departure frame the action, may help us to grasp why the play ends with so many questions left unanswered.

Not only are no concessions made to the audience's desire to go beyond the limits of the stage, but the play seems to make few concessions to their desire to know more than the characters. It is not surprising that many critics have come to the conclusion that Pinter is playing games with his audience, deliberately leading them up the garden path, but never into the garden: "Pinter's plays are post-modernist texts, rejecting all conciliatory blandishments of an audience, all friendly gestures towards readers ever so willing to suspend their disbelief. The plays are meant to create bafflement, irritation, fear, a general sense of impotence, feelings of helplessness, a seething resentment, an acrid hostility."¹⁰ This is of course a fairly accurate description of how the spectators feel at times during the play, but one may not be inclined to interpret such reactions as proof that Pinter is deliberately trying to fool us. Other interpretations are possible to account for the fact that while we feel unable to take what the characters say for granted, our attempts to look beyond the text are usually frustrated. We cannot, for want of space, try to define the various positions critics have adopted to the so-called "sub-text" in Pinter's plays. Susan Hollis Merritt has shown how such debates have often led to unnecessary clashes between critics. Suffice it to say that readers and spectators have found it helpful to approach the dialogue obliquely, concentrating on why the characters intervene in a particular way and at a particular moment rather than on what they actually say. Yet, it would be misleading to suggest that there are no answers to the questions.

Perhaps it is simply that the answers are not quite what the spectators or readers might expect.

Confronted with an opening dialogue between Aston and Davies that resembles in its disorder Aston's junk-filled room, the spectator will quickly relate Davies's erratic movements and awkward attempts at establishing contact with Aston to the vulnerability of his situation. On unknown territory with a stranger, he knows he has to play his cards right, but he does not yet know what the game is. Aston, by remaining quiet and still, does not provide any clues. The audience may not be in a position to determine if everything or even anything Davies says is true, but we can identify his predicament: "That Davies should invoke in rapid succession a sense of injury, a major prejudice, and a defiant self-reliance gives us a quick resume of the potential roles he might adopt relative to Aston. That Aston ignores all three, providing neither sympathy for the first, reinforcement for the second, nor admiration of the third gives us an immediate indication of the likelihood of their success."¹¹

The audience's ability to interpret Davies's words and deeds in terms of his desire to be allowed to stay in the room is at first reassuring since it seems to offer some kind of insight and temporarily at least satisfies the audience's need to be in the know. Fairly rapidly however, it will dawn on the spectator that this line of approach merely shifts the problem elsewhere since it does not help to uncover Aston's motives. Just as Davies's reactions are determined by his narrow perception of the situation, the spectators' perceptions are determined by Davies's. Other attitudes can be tried out. Aston's failure to respond to Davies verbally may be set against his encouragement of the latter through apparently friendly gestures: cigarettes, shoes and money are offered. The contradiction between physical acceptance and verbal rejection once noted cannot be resolved for the moment. The spectator pursuing this line of thought might also want to exploit other differences between the characters, noting Aston's attempts to fix appliances and Davies's fear of them.

Some consolation may be drawn from our ability to make such observations, but not many conclusions. Pinter allows the audience to feel superior to Davies in other ways. In many respects, he is a figure of fun and Pinter can exploit the incongruous side of his personality effectively. His appearance is at odds with his self-importance, his language contradicts his attempts at social and moral superiority: "All the socially regulative values Davies claims – dignity, respect, propriety, decorum – are confounded by the language and gesture of a caricatured ethic more appropriate to an anti-social 'wild animal', as Mick later describes him."¹² The first act provides a pattern of audience response which will be repeated in the next two acts. Elin Diamond describes the situation at the end of the act in the following way: "The audience is placed at the nexus of conflicting perspectives, forced to continually revise assumptions on the action."¹³ This description would also be apt to describe Davies's position throughout the play. The comic relief provided by Davies's antics does not last long since the arrival of Mick sparks off new questions and new uncertainty for Davies and the audience.

The opening sequences of Act II confirm Mick as a threat to Davies's position as he combines physical and verbal superiority. Once again Pinter allows the audience to distance itself from the terrified Davies through comedy. The farcical elements in the dialogue are reinforced by the fact that Davies has literally been caught with his trousers down. He is punished for his curiosity, whereas the audience, who shares Davies's desire to find out more about Aston, is given some kind of entertainment.¹⁴ Although it is Davies who is threatened here, we too surely feel as disoriented by the sheer unpredictability of Mick. His aggressive questioning can be justified by the context, but how do we account for the two longer speeches which seem to signal his desire to find common ground for a discussion with Davies? Mick's speech "ironically apes the exchanges of reminiscences between new acquaintances who want to break the ice between them by recalling mutual friends with a maximum of circumstantial detail."¹⁵ There have been interpre-

tations of both speeches ("You remind me of my uncle's brother etc." and "You know, believe it or not, you've got a funny kind of resemblance to a bloke I once knew in Shoreditch etc.") which seek to find logic in the apparent chaos of Mick's verbal displays of brilliance by linking the very strange people, places and events evoked to Davies's own position. Some of these interpretations are quite persuasive and yet in the theatre the audience would surely not have the time to reflect on any similarity between the mysterious adventures of the "uncle's brother" evoked by Mick and the baffled and helpless Davies on the stage.

The third and longest speech ("You're stinking the place out") introduces subtle differences between the audience's attitude and Davies'. The speech works through a series of shifts. If Mick starts out by referring to the here and now by insulting Davies, he gradually seems to disconnect from "reality" and starts making preposterous propositions, culminating in the totally inappropriate question: "Who do you bank with?" (p. 36) The audience recognizes how Mick's linguistic gymnastics work, enjoys the combination of different jargons and admires the virtuosity of the performance. As spectators, we are not only trying to make sense of the speaker's words, but also trying to assess their effect on the listener. Davies is merely receptive to the power displayed by Mick in his verbal assaults. Both the audience and Davies may end up with the same conclusion that Mick is the dominant character. It is not certain that the audience can actually put its linguistic superiority to much use here. The return of Aston puts an end to the supremacy of words. The interaction between the three characters sends out mixed signals. The apparently banal exchange about the leak shows the two brothers more or less on the same wavelength, since they keep picking up on each other's remarks. Davies is at first excluded from the discussion, but intervenes anyway, bringing the discussion to an end. It is as though he had sensed the danger and wanted to avoid being excluded. The sequence with the bag likewise reinforces our impression of the precariousness of Davies's situation. It

is significant that Davies is anxious to find out from Aston who actually owns the room (p. 40) in order to adapt his future strategy. His decision to accept Mick's offer rather than Aston's is therefore logical from his point of view.

The audience meanwhile has arrived at a very different conclusion. Mick's inconsistent behaviour and linguistic manipulation seem to spell trouble for the hapless Davies. Yet is there any reason why one character is to be trusted any more than another? Is it not possible to argue that just as Davies is trapped by interpreting Mick's words in the light of his own desire to stay in the room, the spectators are also trapped by their desire to interpret the situation in a way that suits their position?

Aston's long speech at the end of Act II, as we said earlier, constitutes an enigma of a different sort, since the spectators are left to draw their own conclusions. They may of course welcome the chance to show their skills at psychology, skills that Davies obviously lacks. Once Davies's presence is relegated to the background, the spectator can feel free to react to a wide range of issues instead of being submitted to Davies's one-track mind. In fact, knowing how to take Aston's confession is no easy matter. Looked at in isolation, the subject of his story and the subdued manner in which it is related lend credibility. The understated mood and simple words come as relief after the histrionics and jargon of Mick. The lighting also encourages the audience to trust in Aston, by excluding Davies. It is as though Aston were addressing them directly. Despite the fact that the play shows how dangerous it is to trust in language, the audience will probably go along with Aston's account insofar as it suits a psychological interpretation of the play. Aston's behaviour becomes much less opaque if we can attribute it to mental illness. To a certain extent, it relieves the tension.

By the time we hear Davies at the beginning of Act III conspiring with an ominously silent Mick to expel Aston and take his place, our moral superiority is complete and we can look forward to Davies's comeuppance. For once we feel that our

perception of the action is no longer tied to that of the disreputable and self-seeking tramp. Davies, however, is equally sure of himself, as we can see in the way he dominates the dialogue. We can marvel at his failure to see the writing on the wall, to notice that Mick excludes him from his penthouse reverie and makes no attempts to intervene in Davies's favour when Aston returns. Two short sequences that oppose Aston and Davies likewise confirm our favourable impressions of Aston. After first offering yet another pair of shoes to the ungrateful Davies, he later shows admirable restraint when Davies flings back in his face the information that had been offered apparently in confidence. The beautiful understatement of Aston's remark – "I don't think we're hitting it off" (p. 68) – never fails to get a laugh from the audience, although it could be argued that the object of the laughter is not clear. To further reinforce, if necessary, Aston's status at this point in the play, we see him display courage when Davies draws his knife.

As we prepare to enjoy witnessing Davies's punishment for choosing the "smooth-talking" Mick over the "sincere" Aston, we can notice how the play fails to conform to this formula. Instead of being reproached for his ingratitude, Davies finds himself accused of lying at the very moment when he refers to what we take to be the truth about Aston's stay in a mental hospital. His knowledge about Aston which was supposed to be his trumpcard only hastens his downfall. Mick's accusations in the speech beginning: "What a strange man you are." (p. 73) can neither be confirmed, nor denied because they are both true and false at the same time. Besides, Mick focusses essentially on Davies's claim to be an interior decorator, so that it would seem that he is being punished for something he did not do.

Our impressions of both Aston and Mick in Act III contradict the impressions we had in the previous acts. Mick shows signs of losing his authority and seems to smash the Buddha in frustration. Aston gains in power and prestige as the play comes to an end. Humiliated by Mick, Davies swallows his pride and tries to make

amends with Aston. The latter's absolute control of the situation can be seen in the way he replies to Davies's increasingly desperate suggestions. Most of Davies's arguments are simply ignored while direct questions are answered with a short sentence beginning with "No", followed up by a second argument beginning with "Anyway...". When Aston refuses to listen to Davies's suggestions and turns his back on him, Davies is forced to the extreme of asking Aston to tell him to leave as a means to get his presence acknowledged. The spectators share Davies's desperation to a certain extent. They, too, have misjudged the situation, have misinterpreted what they have seen and heard and have jumped to conclusions. There are parallels between Davies's sense that time is running out for him to save the situation, and the audience's impression that time is running out for them to make sense of it.

Ultimately, *The Caretaker* achieves its powerful effects by confronting two apparently contradictory points of view: Davies's and the spectator's. In the final moments of the play, we are compelled to share Davies's anguish. The realization that he is powerless to save the situation comes when his words have no effect any more. It is fitting that the play should stop when words no longer have any effect. Davies's despair comes from his failure to secure his position and the knowledge that he will have to go. The audience undergoes emotional upheaval too, but not for the same reasons. The play makes this possible by linking them to the character of Davies in different ways. Traditional identification does not occur, the character and his situation do not allow that. Identification requires the kind of shared experience that Pinter seems to reject. So the spectator is tied to Davies in a much more subtle and disturbing manner. At times we may not feel tied to such an unsavoury character, but the ties are there.

Firstly, our point of view in time and place are his. He arrives when we do and leaves, as we do at the end. In the opening sequences we share the same basic curiosity about the room and its owner. However, once Davies's motives are made clear, some

discrepancies between the preoccupations of the character and those of the spectators come to light. The spectator is given social, intellectual, linguistic and moral superiority and encouraged to laugh at Davies's expense, but our response to the play's events finally proves to be just as inappropriate as his. Our desire to unearth psychological motives, to make the play and its characters conform to our expectations leads us to make just as many unjustified assumptions as he does. Like Davies, we come to be wary of words, language appears deceptive and conversation a treacherous activity, but this does not seem to be the "point" of the play. *The Caretaker* shows that exchange is possible through language, the characters can impress, influence, frighten and deceive each other, but that this can only happen when a convergence of interests is perceived. Once this is withdrawn from Davies, he is isolated and words become pointless.

The play is, therefore, moving, not really because it shows an old man about to cast out into the street, not because it exposes the inadequacies of the spectators' judgement, or even because it highlights the inadequacies of language, but because it shows the vulnerability of all individuals, desperate to act in their best interest, but unable to see clearly where those best interests lie. Pinter does not really use mystery to make a point, it is not a means to an end. Rather, mystery is the point of the play. Pinter himself seems to suggest that it is dishonest to present human experience as something comprehensible and accessible: "I do so hate the because of drama ... Life is much more mysterious than plays make it out to be. And it is this mystery which fascinates me; what happens between the words, what happens when no words are spoken."¹⁶

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NOTES

- 1 Susan Hollis Merrit, *Pinter in Play*, Duke University Press, 1990.
- 2 From Pinter's acceptance speech of the Hamburg Shakespeare Prize, published in *Theatre Quarterly* I, n° 3, 1970.
- 3 "Filming *The Caretaker*", Interview with Harold Pinter and Clive Donner (the director) in *Transatlantic Review*, 13, June 1963.
- 4 Martin Esslin's interpretation of *The Homecoming* originally published in *The Peopled Wound*, 1972, would fall into this category.
- 5 John Arden's book-review, quoted in *Harold Pinter: A Casebook*, Michael Scott (ed), 1986.
- 6 This and all subsequent references to *The Caretaker* will be taken from the Faber edition, first published in 1977.
- 7 Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni, "Pour une approche pragmatique du dialogue théâtral ", *Pratiques*, n° 41, mars 1984, pp. 46-62.
- 8 Austin Quigley, *The Pinter Problem*, Princeton University Press, 1975, p. 127.
- 9 Elin Diamond, *Pinter's Comic Play*, Associated University Presses, 1985, p. 75.
- 10 Guido Almansi and Simon Henderson, *Harold Pinter*, Contemporary Writers, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and Christopher Bigsby, London: Methuen, 1983, p. 22.
- 11 Austin Quigley, p. 117.
- 12 Ronald Knowles, "*The Caretaker* and the 'point' of laughter", *Journal of Beckett Studies*, n° 5, Autumn 1975, p. 83-97.
- 13 Op. cit. p. 67.
- 14 The parallels between Mick's speech and music-hall routine have been drawn on a number of occasions, eg., Ronald Knowles, op. cit.
- 15 See Martin Esslin, *The Peopled Wound*, London: Methuen, 1972, p. 210.
- 16 Quoted by Arnold Hinchliffe, *Harold Pinter*, New York: Twayne, 1967.