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## Harold Pinter's the Caretaker as an absurd play and the view on life in Srimad Bhagavad Gita

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### Abstract

This study presents the absurdity of life in *The Caretaker* by Harold Pinter. His comedies are known as the comedies of menace. He has viewed that he had not composed those plays with a particular purpose and philosophy. His characters are filled with vitality in his plays. He rejected the naturalistic tradition of Henrik Ibsen. *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* reveals that the making of the world is perishable. Man's body is made of five elements; earth, water, air, fire, and sky.

**Keywords:** Absurdism in Pinter's plays comedy of menace, a sense of isolation, insecurity, alienation, fear, and insecurity, the characters in the play are mick, Davies, and aston, the existential anxiety of modern man for which one struggles, *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*, perishable

### Introduction

Harold Pinter was greatly influenced by the Theatre of Absurd. Although he is treated differently and regarded as a realist. His characters are filled with life and vitality. They seem realistic and Pinter's definition of characters is very difficult. Pinter rejected the naturalistic tradition of Henrik Ibsen in the 19<sup>th</sup> century which was fully formed and knowable. In the plays of Pinter, we find the absence of clear detail about the motivation of the characters. *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* presents that the making of the world is perishable. Man's body is made of five elements; earth, water, air, fire, and sky.

Heiney and Downs had interpreted his ideas regarding absurd play. They commented, "*Absurdist drama goes much further; the place is reduced (even choicest objects are fewer and tend to be more trivial) and dialogue or language is minimized, made absurd, close to being eliminated...*" Contemporary European Literature of the Western World, by Donald Heiney & Lenthal N. Downs, Barron's Educational Series, Inc., Woodbury, New York, page 296, \*1

Modern man is throughout the realm of existential anxiety. It seems the main concern in *The Caretaker* by Harold Pinter. All three characters Davies, Aston, and Mick are marked by their lack of positive identity and to an extent by their clinging reliance on physical objects. They are lonely and isolated and unable to communicate effectively. This lasting impression in *The Caretaker* is a common picture of 1950s urban England. It is very important to say that the audiences are not introduced to the characters by way of a formal exposition in the play. The audiences know nothing more about Aston than Davies does here. The proper reason for Davies's arrival is also unknown or if he will build his shed. Audiences also see Mick from the same perspective as Davies in *The Caretaker*. Davies seems as a remarkable example of confused and indefinite identity – this is the condition in which man lives for the entire part of life. Davies is quite unable to understand his past. He appears to have no family, and his very name is uncertain. He is also unaware of his future. The repeated mention of 'papers' in *Sidcup* emphasizes the real predicament of Davies – he is constantly defined in terms of possessions and objects which cumulatively presents the limits of his existence in this world.

The same views had been presented by the other playwrights in the *Theatre of the Absurd*. The world is entirely dark and gloomy. Everything is unknown here – past, present, and future, too. We are here indeed in an irremediable exile. The world is explained by reasoning – it is faulty – it is also very familiar.

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It is suddenly deprived of worldly charms known as illusions in different Scriptures. This is the world where man feels like a stranger and for his identity, he longs forever. Heiney and Downs had interpreted his ideas regarding absurd play. They commented, “*But in the universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile because he is deprived of memories of a lost land as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity.*” Contemporary European Literature of the Western World, by Donald Heiney & Lenthel N. Downs, Barron’s Educational Series, Inc., Woodbury, New York, page 294-95, \*1

Man's life is meaningless. Man is totally cut off from transcendental, metaphysical, and religious roots and is lost – his past home is unknown and the future is also unknown. His presence is in exile. He tries to be identified and for this, he performs a different action. But finally, his entire actions become meaningless – he leaves this world senseless and with his departure from this world his entire actions become meaningless.

Heiney and Downs had interpreted his ideas regarding absurd play. The Theatre of the Absurd presents, “*Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.*” Contemporary European Literature of the Western World, by Donald Heiney & Lenthel N. Downs, Barron’s Educational Series, Inc., Woodbury, New York, page 295, \*1

The Theatre of the Absurd mainly presents that the world is Godless, loveless, and joyless. Man passed his life in expectations, but his expectations are never fulfilled. One can say that expectations are joys. The life of man is meaningless. He is in this world in irremediable exile. He does not know his past home – the present is also unknown, and the same is the condition of the future. Man is alienated in this world, and he is isolated, and he has an unending sense of alienation. On the other hand, *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* primarily presents that the making of the world is perishable. Man’s body is made of five elements; earth, water, air, fire, and sky. Thus, his body is also perishable. Although his soul is immortal, this scripture also shows that God is supreme, and He is the creator of man. Everything is under His control. Thus, the basic difference between the Absurdist Philosophy in English drama and *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* is that the Absurdist Philosophy presents that there is no God, while *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* presents that the Supreme power is responsible for the death and birth of man. Followings are some examples from *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*:

yasmāt kṣharam atīto ’ham akṣharād api chottamaḥ  
ato ’smi loke vede cha prathitaḥ puruṣhottamaḥ, \*2

(Literal translation of *Srimad Bhagavad-Gita*, Chapter 15, Verse 18, *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* by Swami Ramsukhdas, Gita Prakashan, 1998, Gorakhpur, page 719)

*Srimad Bhagavad Gita* also presents a view of the world. It shows that worldly things are perishable. God says that He is transcendental and He is celebrated, both in Vedas and the *Smritis*, as the Supreme. In this verse, God reveals that the world is perishable. Thus, life is meaningless which has been portrayed in the Theatre of the Absurd.

mamaivānśho jīva-loke jīva-bhūtaḥ sanātanaḥ  
manaḥ-ṣhaṣṭhānīndriyāṇi prakṛiti-sthāni karṣhati, \*2

(Literal translation of *Srimad Bhagavad-Gita*, Chapter 15, Verse 7, *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* by Swami Ramsukhdas, Gita Prakashan, 1998, Gorakhpur, page 697)

*Srimad Bhagavad Gita* also presents that the embodied souls in this material world are only God’s eternal fragmental parts. Furthermore, it says that the soul is also bound by material nature. The fragmental parts are struggling with the six senses including the mind. Obviously, these lines show that our body is perishable and bound by material nature which is perishable. The same ideas regarding life have been revealed in absurd plays. Thus, life is meaningless which leads to a sense of alienation, loneliness, and isolation.

bhūmir-āpo ’nalo vāyuḥ kham mano buddhir eva cha  
ahankāra itīyaṁ me bhinnā prakṛitir aṣṭadhā, \*2

(Literal translation of *Srimad Bhagavad-Gita*, Chapter 7, Verse 4, *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* by Swami Ramsukhdas, Gita Prakashan, 1998, Gorakhpur, page 371)

Our body is made of four elements. Furthermore, *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* reveals that earth, water, fire, air, space, mind, intellect, and ego are eight components of God’s material energy. The energy which the material world composes is complex and fathomless. This scripture shows that matter is part of God’s energy and is known as *Prakṛiti*. It is divided into eight parts: earth, water, fire, air, space, mind, intellect, and ego.

mayādhyakṣheṇa prakṛitiḥ sūyate sa-charācharam  
hetunānena kaunteya jagad viparivartate, \*2

(Literal translation of *Srimad Bhagavad-Gita*, Chapter 9, Verse 10, *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* by Swami Ramsukhdas, Gita Prakashan, 1998, Gorakhpur, page 457)

In this verse, *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* reveals that this material energy brings into being all animate and inanimate forms working under God’s direction. This is why the material world undergoes the changes of creation, maintenance, and dissolution – for the maintenance of the cycle. God does not directly engage in the work of creating life, but God’s several energies and souls appointed by Him for the purpose of giving life do it under His dominion. God is also referred to as the creator because all energies work under Him.

prakṛitiṁ puruṣhaṁ chaiva viddhy anādī ubhāv api  
vikārānś cha guṇānś chaiva viddhi prakṛiti-  
sambhavān, \*2

(Literal translation of *Srimad Bhagavad-Gita*, Chapter 13, Verse 19, *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* by Swami Ramsukhdas, Gita Prakashan, 1998, Gorakhpur, page 636)

*Srimad Bhagavad Gita* also reveals that material nature and individual souls are both beginning-less. They all are also transformations of the body and the three modes of nature are produced by the material energy. This is an illusion in

which all human beings live and finally all lead to death. Death is the award of life which is welcomed by humans.

The modern age is the age of interrogation when traditional values are denied. Different experiments are launched in different spheres of life and letters. A sense of isolation, alienation, insecurity, and despair has been haunting the sensitive souls like ghosts. Most of the experiments in modern drama are the result of despair and isolation. Surrealism, Dadaism, the grotesque, Existentialism, and the theatre of the absurd are the expressions of the frustrated men in this dim and dry world of woes and sorrows. Men are crying for light in the dark of night. There are different forms of drama but the dramas of Pinter are known as the 'Comedy of Menace'. This term was first coined by David Compton in 1957 in the sub-title of his play 'The Lunatic View'. This term was later applied by Harold Pinter in his plays. His comedies create menace which is a mingling of two things 'comic' and 'fear'. This is a type of comedy that frightens and causes pain. Thus, the comedy of menace is a play in which the laughter of the audience in some sense of all situations is accompanied or immediately followed by a feeling of impending disaster – that may also proceed from a feeling of uncertainty and insecurity – and fear overwhelms the play like mist.

*The Caretaker* premiered at the Arts Theatre Club in London's West End on 27 April 1960 and transferred to the Duchess Theatre the following month. The play is very elusive concerning finding meaning in it which seems to challenge the critical intelligence of the reader and the audience. The overwhelming obscurity and complexity in it lead to varying interpretations. It has been commented upon as possessing elements of many kinds, such as realism, comedy tragedy, naturalism, absurdism, and existentialism. Thus, Pinter is not an absolute absurdist.

*The Caretaker* has explicitly the existential anxiety of modern man for which one struggles and finally leads to eternal loss that is called death without option, information, will, future home, and identity. Three characters, Davies, Aston, and Mick, in the play, are self-oriented, lonely, and isolated. The existential dilemma of the characters is underlined by their lack of positive identity and to an extent by their clinging reliance on physical objects in the world. All three are lonely and isolated and unable to communicate effectively. This impression of the play of these characters in a violent and unsupportive environment is a bleak comment on then England.

Davies is indeed a remarkable example of a confused and uncertain identity as reflected in *The Caretaker*. The play reveals that Davies was unable to acknowledge where he was born – he seems to have no family – his very name is uncertain – he has nowhere to live – and he has no defined future for which all human beings wish to know. His repeated mention of 'papers' in Sidcup' emphasizes his real predicament. Thus, he is constantly defined in terms of possessions and objects which cumulatively, expose the limits of his existence. Another character Aston is always associated with objects. Thus, all human beings always try to show possession over objects for identity, but in vain.

The discussion between Davies and Aston brings out the confusion in Davies, while Aston is trying to be helped by Davies. But Davies is not sure about himself, he is in a state of confusion. His mind jumps from shoes to a bootmaker in Aston to work in Luton to Blacks in the neighbourhood.

There is also a conflict of illusion in *The Caretaker*, and every character in the play carries his illusion that land meaning to his lies. Aston has pathetic dreams of building a hut in the garden. Mick has also the fantasy of turning his dilapidated slum into a luxury flat to live in – and Davies has his dream of papers in the Sidcup that will testify to his identity. All of these dreams and fantasies show the illusion that overwhelms all mankind and without coming out from this stage all human beings pass away – enter a world that is quite unknown. *The Caretaker* is a play revealing the sense of insecurity, possessiveness, and search for identity. The breaking of the Buddha statue symbolises that the play does not reach a calm peaceful point and the play ends on a precarious note.

*The Caretaker* reflects the absurdity of life. Davies can't overpower him, both physically and psychologically, and lacks the wit, intelligence, and powers of communication and invention that Mick has. But Davies' behaviour towards his benefactor Aston is unforgivable. The tragedy of Davies reaches the climax at the very end when Davies is almost on his knees before Aston, after having been dismissed by both brothers. In the meantime, his pleadings are very poignant.

In *The Caretaker*, Pinter presents that life is also very humorous and comic. Mick plays tricks on him relentlessly and he is never able to get it right. When Mick pretends to confide in him about Aston, Davies is quite oblivious to the applicability of the joke on him. We find that comedy arises in the following conversation due to Davies' lack of understanding of Mick's intentions.

In *The Caretaker*, we find a homeless wanderer struggling to find a place in a home. It is just because of Davies's inherent weakness that he fails to settle in the room. He turns against his benefactor Aston and plays him off against his brother Mick. That is indeed original sin as revealed in the scriptures. Esslin remarks that Mick plays the role of the proverbial serpent in this re-enactment of Adam's expulsion from paradise. Esslin also finds some contemporary significance in *The Caretaker*. Davies is full of race hatred, and he hates the Greeks, the Poles, the Blacks, etc. When one morning, Aston charges him with making noises in sleep, he replies that the noises were being made by the Blacks living next door. Thus, he is bitter, weak, and constantly deceiving others as well as himself. Pinter shows socially realistic ideas. Davies seems as a symptom of a disease in society. Davies' reaction is a threat to social peace.

In *The Caretaker*, artistic impulse coexists and also opposes material impulse in two brothers Mick and Aston. Mick is a businessman and he sees things in terms of benefits and losses. He is the first one to find that Davies is a clever and roguish fellow. Aston seems in some sense a man of an artistic personality which compels him to bring order out of chaos. The conformity with the system and society reduces him to sober respectability. In *The Caretaker*, Aston stands for the deeper emotional aspects, and Mick for the outward aspects of the same personality.

In *The Caretaker*, Davies has no knowledge of other people and this also leads to a comic response. He fails to follow exactly what is being said to him. When he is told that other rooms in the house are 'out of commission', his reply is not proper. He replies, "Get away". When he is told about the statue of Buddha, he also fails to understand and replies improperly. He says, "Get on". The same is the condition when Aston says to him that his groaning in the night be due

to an unfamiliar bed. Mick replies, “*There is nothing unfamiliar about me with beds. I slept in beds*”. Thus, it is obvious that all of the actions of man are without knowledge. We fulfil our activities for our recognition and all this ends with the end of our lives – all end with meaninglessness.

Furthermore, *The Caretaker* deals with the sufferings and misfortunes of ordinary persons in their life. The common experience of common people is also a great source of tragedy in this play. All the characters in this play are to an extent alienated from society. The ending of the play certainly carries weight and emotional impact that might reasonably approximate tragic feelings. They are surrounded by the feeling of alienation. The play also reveals the weight of psychological pressures and social expectations that oppress and crush the identity of an individual. In *The Caretaker*, the playwright presents human suffering through characters, who are deeply affected by factors beyond their command. Human beings are survived with a degree of courage in the face of circumstances to live in, which are very oppressive. Misfortunately, man has to live and survive in the same tragic state of circumstances.

Aston is a tragic figure in *The Caretaker*, who was betrayed by his mother and despite all of his protestation, he was sent to the mental hospital where he underwent electric shock treatment. This treatment weakened him forever – if not physically but definitely psychologically. After an electric shock to him, he lost his vigour. He also lost his enthusiasm and faith in people and society. Most remarkably, he did not turn hostile to the people. Rather, he is seen as more humane and sympathetic toward people who suffered. That was the reason why he rescued Davies from a fight and seeing his miserable condition, offers him a place, things, and a job as a caretaker, too. Despite this, Aston is betrayed by Davies who tries to take benefit of Aston's magnanimity. It must be hard for Aston. When Davies ill-treats Aston, he asks Davies to leave his home. Thus, Aston is essentially a good human being who struggles a lot. He suffers too much.

Davies is responsible for Aston's eviction at the end of *The Caretaker*. He has been offered help and security by Aston, but out of ignorance, selfishness, and aggression. He possesses some anti-social characteristics and has been living as an outcast. He is fearful of all authority. But he shows determination and spirit. Davies is on the back foot when he deals with Mick. He is unable to overpower others in a physical and psychological manner. Davies lacks wit, intelligence, and power of communication and invention which Mick possesses. It is very remarkable that their behaviour of Davies toward his benefactor Aston is unforgettable. The tragedy of Davies in the play reaches its peak when is almost on his knees before Aston, after having been discharged by both brothers.

Mick is also in a tragic state, but better to care for himself than for Aston and Davies. He is also a disturbed person like other twos. He is obsessed and worried about his brother and he expresses his frustration in violence against Davies, and eventually, the statue of Buddha.

Obviously, all three characters, Aston, Davies, and Mick lonely and isolated and they are unable to communicate effectively. They feel alienated in man's unsympathetic, violent and unsupportive environment that is in a sense, a comment on the human existence in this cosmos. This shows the contemporary society of England.

In *The Caretaker*, Davies is also a father figure. Mick and Aston symbolise the two sons of the old father. Davies' rejection and expulsion by his sons give poignancy to his play. In bringing Davies home, Aston is said to be expressing a yearning for a human relationship with a father figure, but he fails. False politeness is the tactic that all sons take towards their parents in the entire world. The event of sons charging their father out of the house is reflective of the disturbing relationships among the close family members that are witnessed in modern society. It also shows the cold, calculative and callous attitude of the people toward their own near and dear ones. We all witness such events in modern society in any part of life.

Thus, absurdism is a quite philosophical term. Later, it became a literary term that presents that the efforts of mankind to find the meaning of life or rational explanation in the universe ultimately fail and this failure leads to absurdism. *The Caretaker* is very elusive with regards to finding meaning in it which seems to challenge the critical intelligence of the reader and the audience.

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