



The Caretaker

Harold Pinter
(1960)

PLOT

The Caretaker is about **two brothers**: Mick, a man in his twenties, and Aston, a man in his early thirties. **The third character is Davies, an old tramp** who is rescued by Aston from a fight in a café where he had been working as an odd-job man.

In Act I Aston welcomes Davies in his room in a derelict house in West London and offers him a bed for the night, a pair of shoes and some money. **Davies tells Aston that he is waiting for the weather to improve to go to Sidcup where he can get the papers that confirm his identity.** Aston leaves and suddenly Mick appears and knocks Davies to the floor.

In Act II Mick tells Davies **that he is the owner of the house where Aston lives, he offers him a job as a caretaker and asks him to redecorate the house.** Davies hesitates because of the work this might imply. In the morning Aston wakes Davies so that he can leave for Sidcup, but the tramp complains about the bad weather and the draught from the window, which becomes an excuse for not going out. Aston delivers a long monologue in which he tells him about his experience in a mental hospital where he underwent electric shock treatment.

In Act III Aston gives Davies a pair of shoes to replace the sandals he is wearing. While sleeping, Davies groans and is woken by Aston who cannot stand the noise. Davies reacts badly and threatens Aston with a return to the hospital. Aston replies quietly that he wants Davies to leave. **Davies asks Mick for help but he says he would help him only if he proves as good a decorator as he claims. Davies admits that he is not.** Mick smashes a statue of Buddha which is on the gas stove, gives Davies a half-crown for his 'caretaking' and leaves. Davies tries in vain to regain Aston's trust, he simply does not respond.

SETTING

The play relies on the basic **naturalistic rules of time, place and action.** The story takes place in **one room** crammed with odd objects. The setting is clearly described: it is **working-class urban West London in the late 1950s.** The action follows the consequences of Davies's introduction into the room. Realistic details are a striking feature: the room is filled with junk, all easily identifiable and the characters use these objects for dramatic purposes. This focus on the details of the room increases the importance of the room itself which becomes the object of Davies's ambition and his downfall.

CHARACTERS

Pinter portrayed the **old tramp Davies** in a **vivid and unsentimental way.** After living many years in the street, he has developed anti-social characteristics: he is not able to keep a job or to form significant relationships, he is aggressive, resentful and he stinks. **His surviving depends on physical needs:** getting a good pair of shoes, a shirt, some soap, a cup of tea. He is confused about the details of his past. It is possible that he had a wife, his name is Welsh but his speech is not. His 'papers' in Sidcup are a mystery, he believes they are the solution to his problems but does not do any effort to get them. He is finally defeated because his aggressive attitude and self-obsession prevent him from reaching an understanding with other people.

Aston and Mick are more **mysterious characters.** Mick never explains what he has in mind. He seems to be concerned with his brother's health and to be jealous of Davies. His intelligence is evident in the flexible way he uses language. **Aston** is the only character to offer a long account of his past through the long monologue about **his experience in a mental hospital.** His brother has provided him with a place to live in and to redecorate and he has decided to start by building a work-shed in the garden. The room is full of objects which may be useful to him. His behaviour shows that he no longer trusts his family and society but is beginning to make a sort of recovery. In Davies he sees someone who is worse off than himself and offers him hospitality but when Davies threatens him with a return to the mental institution, he rejects him.

STYLE

Two aspects of the play's language are important: the **actual idiom and style of speech used by the working-class characters,** and how they use it for their personal advantage. In the dialogues the characters are seldom on the same wavelength and their **inability to communicate** is emphasised by the last stage direction – *Long silence, Curtain.* – which shows that there is nothing left to say. Davies uses ungrammatical, hesitant speech and avoids answering any direct question; Mick uses language as a weapon, his questions are double-edged. Mick's monologues are jazz-like improvisations drawn from his own imagination while Davies's long speeches tend to be emotional and revolve around a single word or idea. Aston's long speech is a reflection of his perception of events, it adds another dimension to the theme of 'identity' and the play's recognition that 'knowing' other people is virtually impossible.



Key idea	The play contains both comic and tragic elements. Comedy is related to Davies's appearance and language, and occasionally to Mick. The tragic element lies in the description of characters surviving in the face of oppressive circumstances beyond their control. Davies is a cut off, Aston has become a recluse after the forced electric shock treatment and Mick is also a disturbed individual.	All three are lonely and unable to communicate effectively, however much they try. The failure of the characters to relate successfully is an absurdist element, just as their lack of positive identity and their clinging reliance on physical objects. Mick's and Aston's motives are never explained, while Davies cannot acknowledge where he was born, his name is uncertain, he has nowhere to live and no defined future.
Comic and tragic elements		

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 READ the texts about *The Caretaker* and note down

- where the story is set and who the characters are;
- what Davies is like;
- why Mick and Aston are more mysterious characters;
- the most important features of the play's language;
- what characterises each character's speech;
- what kind of elements combine in the play.

T131 Looking for a room

Two men enter the room: Aston, a man in his early thirties and Davies, an old tramp. Aston has just rescued Davies from a fight in a café where he was working, but had refused to take out a bucket. Aston is in charge of the whole house but lives in one room where he welcomes Davies.

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Act I

DAVIES [*following*] Yes, well say I had! Even if I had! Even if I was supposed to take out the bucket¹, who was this git² to come up and give me orders? We got the same **standing**. He's not my boss. He's nothing superior to me.

ASTON What was he, a Greek?

5 **DAVIES** Not him, he was a Scotch. He was a Scotchman.
[*ASTON goes back to his bed with the toaster and starts to unscrew the plug*³.
DAVIES follows him.]

You got an eye of him⁴, did you?

ASTON Yes.

DAVIES I told him what to do with his bucket. Didn't I? You heard. Look here, I said, I'm an old man, I said, where I was brought up we had some idea how to talk to old
10 people with the proper respect, we was brought up with the right ideas, if I had a few years off me I'd... I'd break you in half. That was after the guvnor give me the bullet⁵. Making too much **commotion**, he says. Commotion, me! Look here, I said to him, I got my rights. I told him that. I might have been on the road but nobody's got more rights than I have. Let's have a bit of fair play, I said. Anyway, he give me
15 the bullet.

[*He sits in the chair.*]

That's the sort of place.

[*Pause*]

DAVIES If you hadn't come out and stopped that Scotch git I'd be inside the hospital now. I'd have cracked my head on that pavement if he'd have landed. I'll get him. One night I'll get him. When I find myself around that direction.

[*ASTON crosses to the plug box to get another plug.*]

- 1 bucket. Secchio.
- 2 git. Imbecille.
- 3 to unscrew the plug. A svitare la spina.
- 4 You got an eye of him. Lo hai visto bene.
- 5 the guvnor give me the bullet. Il padrone mi aveva sbattuto fuori.



- 20 I wouldn't mind so much but I left all my **belongings** in that place, in the back room there. All of them, the lot there was, you see, in this bag. Every lousy blasted bit⁶ of all my bleeding belongings I left down there now. In the rush of it I bet he's having a poke⁷ around in it now this very moment.
- ASTON I'll pop down⁸ sometime and pick them up for you.
[ASTON goes back to his bed and starts to fix the plug on the toaster]
- 25 DAVIES Anyway, I'm obliged to you, letting me... letting me have a bit of a rest, like... for a few minutes [He looks about.] This your room?
- ASTON Yes.
[...]
- DAVIES You got more rooms then, have you?
- 30 ASTON Where?
- DAVIES I mean, along the **landing** here... up the landing there.
- ASTON They're out of commission⁹.
- DAVIES Get away¹⁰.
- ASTON They need a lot of doing to.
[Slight pause]
- 35 DAVIES What about downstairs?
- ASTON That's closed up. Needs **seeing to**... The floors...
[Pause]
- DAVIES I was lucky you come into that **caff**. I might have been done by that Scotch git. I been left for dead more than once.
[Pause]
- I noticed that there was someone was living in the house next door.
- 40 ASTON What?
- DAVIES [gesturing] I noticed. ...
- ASTON Yes. There's people living all along the road.
- DAVIES Yes, I noticed the curtains pulled down there next door as we came along.
- ASTON They're neighbours.
[Pause]
- 45 DAVIES This your house then, is it?
[Pause]
- ASTON I'm in charge¹¹.
- DAVIES You the landlord, are you?
[He puts a pipe in his mouth and puffs without lighting it.]
- Yes, I noticed them heavy curtains pulled across next door as we came along. I noticed them heavy big curtains right across the window down there. I thought there must be someone living there.
- 50 ASTON Family of Indians live there.
- DAVIES Blacks?
- ASTON I don't see much of them.
- DAVIES Blacks, eh? [DAVIES stands and moves about.] Well you've got some **knick-**
- 55 **knacks** here all right, I'll say that. I don't bite a bare room¹². [ASTON joins DAVIES upstage centre.] I'll tell you what, mate, you haven't got a **spare** pair of shoes?
- ASTON Shoes?
[ASTON moves downstage right.]
- DAVIES Them bastards at the monastery let me down¹³ again.
- ASTON [going to his bed] Where?
- 60 DAVIES Down in Luton. Monastery down at Luton. ... I got a mate at Shepherd's Bush, you see. ...
- ASTON [looking under his bed] I might have a pair.
- DAVIES I got this mate at Shepherd's Bush. In the convenience¹⁴. Well, he was in the convenience. Run about¹⁵ the best convenience they had. [He watches ASTON.] Run about the best one. Always slipped me¹⁶ a bit of soap, any time I went in there. Very

- 6 lousy blasted bit. Fottuta schifosa cosa.
- 7 I bet he's having a poke. Scommetto che sta frugando.
- 8 I'll pop down. Faccio un salto io.
- 9 They're out of commission. Sono inabitabili.
- 10 Get away. Ma dai.
- 11 I'm in charge. Me ne occupo.
- 12 I don't bite a bare room. Non accetto una stanza vuota.
- 13 let me down. Mi hanno fregato.
- 14 In the convenience. Nei cessi.
- 15 Run about. Lavorava nei.
- 16 slipped me. Mi sganciava.



good soap. They have to have the best soap. I was never without a piece of soap, whenever I happened to be knocking about¹⁷ the Shepherd's Bush area.

ASTON [*emerging from under the bed with shoes*] Pair of brown.

70 DAVIES He's gone now. Went. He was the one who put me on to¹⁸ this monastery. Just the other side of Luton. He'd heard they give away shoes.

ASTON You've got to have a good pair of shoes.

DAVIES Shoes? It's life and death to me. I had to go all the way to Luton in these.

ASTON What happened when you got there, then?

[Pause]

DAVIES I used to know a bootmaker in Acton. He was a good mate to me.

[Pause]

75 You know what that bastard monk said to me?

[Pause]

How many more Blacks you got around here then?

ASTON What?

DAVIES You got any more Blacks around here?

ASTON [*holding out the shoes*] See if these are any good.

80 DAVIES You know what that bastard monk said to me? [*He looks over the shoes.*] I think those'd be a bit small.

ASTON Would they?

DAVIES No, they don't look the right size.

ASTON Not bad **trim**.

85 DAVIES Can't wear shoes that don't fit. Nothing worse. [...]

ASTON Try these.

[*DAVIES takes the shoes, takes off his sandals and tries them on.*]

DAVIES Not a bad pair of shoes. [*He trudges round¹⁹ the room.*] They're strong, all right. Yes. Not a bad shape of shoe. This leather's hardy²⁰, en't? Very hardy. Some bloke²¹ tried to flog me some suede²² the other day. I wouldn't wear them. Can't
90 beat leather, for wear²³. Suede goes off, it creases, it stains²⁴ for life in five minutes. You can't beat leather. Yes. Good shoe this.

ASTON Good.

[*DAVIES waggles²⁵ his feet.*]

DAVIES Don't fit though.

ASTON Oh?

95 DAVIES No. I got a very **broad** foot.

ASTON Mmnn.

DAVIES These are too pointed, you see.

ASTON Ah.

DAVIES They'd cripple me²⁶ in a week. I mean these ones I got on, they're no good but
100 at least they're comfortable. Not much cop²⁷, but I mean they don't hurt. [*He takes them and gives them back.*] Thanks anyway, mister.

ASTON I'll see what I can look out for you.

DAVIES Good luck. I can't go on like this. Can't get from one place to another. And have to be moving about, you see, try to get fixed up²⁸.

105 ASTON Where you going to go?

DAVIES Oh, I got one or two things in mind. I'm waiting for the weather to break.

[Pause]

ASTON [*attending to the toaster*] Would... would you like to sleep here?

DAVIES Here?

ASTON You can sleep here if you like.

110 DAVIES Here? Oh, I don't know about that.

[Pause]

How long for?

ASTON Till you... get yourself fixed up.

17 I happened ... about. Mi capitava di passare dalle parti di.

18 put me on to. Mi ha detto di.

19 He trudges round. Si trascina per.

20 hardy. Resistente.

21 bloke. Tizio.

22 flog me some suede. Rifilarmi del camoscio.

23 for wear. A lungo andare.

24 Suede ... stains. Il camoscio si consuma, fa le pieghe, si macchia.

25 waggles. Agita in aria.

26 They'd cripple me. Mi renderebbero zoppo.

27 Not much cop. Non un gran che.

28 get fixed up. Sistemarmi.



- DAVIES [Sitting] Ay well, that...
- ASTON Get yourself sorted out...
- 115 DAVIES Oh, I'll be fixed up... pretty soon now...
- [Pause]
- Where would I sleep?
- ASTON Here. The other rooms would... would be no good to you.
- DAVIES [rising, looking about] Here? Where?
- ASTON [rising, pointing upstage right] There's a bed behind all that.
- 120 DAVIES Oh, I see. Well, that's handy²⁹. Well, that's... I tell you what, I might do that... just till I get myself sorted out. You got enough furniture here.
- ASTON I picked it up. Just keeping it here for the time being. Thought it might come in handy.
- DAVIES This gas stove work, do it?
- 125 ASTON No.
- DAVIES What do you do for a cup of tea?
- ASTON Nothing.
- DAVIES That's a bit rough³⁰. [DAVIES observes the planks³¹.] You building something?
- ASTON I might build a shed³² out the back.
- 130 DAVIES Carpenter, eh? [He turns to the lawn-mower³³.] Got a lawn?
- ASTON Have a look.
- [ASTON lifts the sack at the window. They look out.]
- DAVIES Looks a bit thick.
- ASTON Overgrown.
- DAVIES What's that, a pond?
- 135 ASTON Yes.
- DAVIES What you got, fish?
- ASTON No. There isn't anything in there.
- [Pause] [...]
- DAVIES [with great feeling] If only the weather would break! Then I'd be able to get down to Sidcup!
- 140 ASTON Sidcup?
- DAVIES The weather's so blasted bloody³⁴ awful, how can I get down to Sidcup in these shoes?
- ASTON Why do you want to get down to Sidcup?
- DAVIES I got my papers there!
- [Pause]
- 145 ASTON Your what?
- DAVIES I got my papers there!
- [Pause]
- ASTON What are they doing at Sidcup?
- DAVIES A man I know has got them. I left them with him. You see? They prove who I am! I can't move without them papers. They tell you who I am. You see! I'm stuck³⁵ without them.
- 150 ASTON Why's that?
- DAVIES You see, what it is, you see, I changed my name! Years ago. I been going around under an assumed name! That's not my real name.
- ASTON What name you been going under?
- 155 DAVIES Jenkins. Bernard Jenkins. That's my name. That's the name I'm known, anyway.
- [...]
- ASTON What's your real name, then?
- DAVIES Davies. Mac Davies. That was before I changed my name.

- 29 handy. Comodo.
30 rough. Dura.
31 planks. Assi.
32 shed. Capanno.
33 lawn-mower. Tosaerba.
34 blasted bloody. Maledettamente.
35 I'm stuck. Sono perso.

**LITERARY COMPETENCE****> VOCABULARY**

1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their meaning.

- 1 redecorating
- 2 condition
- 3 fuss, confusion
- 4 small items used for ornament
- 5 rank, status
- 6 café
- 7 level floor between flights of stairs
- 8 wide
- 9 possessions
- 10 kept in reserve

> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 READ the text again and note down

- where the scene takes place;
- who the characters on stage are;
- how they met;
- why Davies was sacked;
- what he left behind;
- whether Aston owns the house;
- what Davies noticed as they came along;
- what worries him about the neighbourhood;
- what he asks Aston for;
- Aston's offer to Davies;
- what Aston's plans are;
- where Davies wants to go and why.

> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

3 LIST the topics Aston and Davies speak about in the dialogue. Do they follow a logical pattern? Who utters most of the talking?

4 PROVIDE examples of the kind of language used by the characters.

5 FOCUS on Aston's replies to Davies. What are they like? What impression do you get of him?

6 EXPLAIN how the breaks in fluent speech are marked on the page. What is their function?

7 JUSTIFY this statement with reference to the text: 'both characters seem obsessed with something or someone'.

8 SAY how the question of individual identity is developed in the text.

9 TRACE the comic elements in the scene.

10 FIND the symbolical images and discuss their possible meaning.



➤ COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS BETWEEN TEXT AND CONTEXT

11 DISCUSS. Pinter's plays were regarded as original, fresh and disturbing. What was new about them?

12 DISCUSS. What elements typical of Pinter's work do you find in *The Caretaker*?

13 DISCUSS critic Kenneth Tynan's statement in his review of *The Caretaker*: 'Mr Pinter is a superb manipulator of language, which he sees not as a bridge that brings people together but as a barrier that keeps them apart.'

➤ COMPETENCE: PRODUCING A WRITTEN TEXT ON A GIVEN SUBJECT

14 WRITE a 10/12-line paragraph to draw a comparison between Pinter and Beckett (→ 7.17) as regards plot, setting, characterisation, language and themes.