The Caretaker Study Guide

The Caretaker by Harold Pinter

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.

Contents

The Caretaker Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Introduction....3

Author Biography....4

Plot Summary....5

Act 1....8

Act 2....10

Act 3....12

Characters....14

Themes....16

Style....19

Historical Context....21

Critical Overview....23

Criticism....25

Critical Essay #1....26

Critical Essay #2....30

Critical Essay #3....33

Adaptations....36

Topics for Further Study....37

Compare and Contrast....38

What Do I Read Next?....39

Further Study....40

Bibliography....41

Copyright Information....42

Introduction

The Caretaker was the first of Pinter's plays to bring him artistic and commercial success as well as national recognition. Opening on April 27, 1960, at the Arts Theatre in London, *The Caretaker* was an immediate hit with audiences as well as critics, receiving mostly favorable reviews. In addition, *The Caretaker* received the *Evening Standard* Award for best play of 1960. In the many years since its first production, the play has continued to be the recipient of critical praise. It has been adapted for television as well as film and has seen numerous revivals all over the world, including at least one production with an all-female cast.

The real-world origins of the play lie in Pinter's acquaintance with two brothers who lived together, one of whom brought an old tramp to the house for a brief stay. At the time, Pinter himself had very little money and so identified somewhat with the tramp, with whom he occasionally spoke. Artistically, *The Caretaker* is clearly influenced in both style and subject matter by Samuel Beckett's 1955 classic *Waiting for Godot,* in which two tramps wait endlessly for someone they know only as Godot to come and give meaning and purpose to their lives.

Through the story of the two brothers and the tramp, *The Caretaker* deals with the distance between reality and fantasy, family relationships, and the struggle for power. It also touches on the subjects of mental illness and the plight of the indigent. Pinter uses elements of both comedy and tragedy to create a play that elicits complex reactions in the audience. The complexity of the play, Pinter's masterful use of dialogue, and the depth and perception shown in Pinter's themes all contribute to *The Caretaker's* consideration as a modern masterpiece.

Author Biography

On October 30, 1930, Harold Pinter was born to Jewish parents in Hackney, a working-class neighborhood in London. It was a difficult time for Jews in England. Hitler's rise to power had begun, and the fascism he championed had its British sympathizers. In 1939, Britain entered World War II; during the Blitz, Hitler's intense bombing of London, Pinter, like many young people, was evacuated to the countryside, which was considered safer. Later, Pinter returned to London and experienced the terror of the Blitz firsthand. After the war, difficulties for British Jews continued. Jews were attacked in the streets, and Pinter later recalled his own involvement in a number of altercations.

Pinter attended the Hackney Down Grammar School and, in 1948, received a grant to study at the Royal Academy of the Dramatic Arts but soon dropped out. Shortly afterwards, he started reading the works of Samuel Beckett (*Waiting for Godot*), who became a great influence on Pinter's work. In 1950, two of Pinter's own plays were published. That same year, he began working professionally as an actor, both in London and on tour. During this time he met the actress Vivien Merchant. The two were married in 1956, and their son Daniel was born in 1958. Pinter and Merchant were divorced in 1980, at which time Pinter married Lady Antonia Fraser.

In 1956, John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* ushered in a new period of British drama; the period was characterized by playwrights who came to be known as the "angry young men." Pinter's writing came to be identified with this group. In 1957, *The Room* became the first of Pinter's plays to be produced. That year he also wrote *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Birthday Party,* which was initially condemned by critics but has since come to be considered one of the most important plays of the twentieth century. In spite of the earlier critical failure of *The Birthday Party,* Pinter began to achieve a modest success, writing radio and television plays. In 1959, he wrote *The Caretaker*, which was produced in 1960; the play became Pinter's first critically successful play. It was also the first of Pinter's plays to be filmed. The playwright soon began adapting the work of other dramatists for film while continuing to write his own plays. His major works include *The Homecoming* (1965), *Old Times* (1971), and the screenplay for *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Later plays, such as *One for the Road* (1984) and *Mountain Language* (1988), reflect Pinter's growing interest in leftist politics. Many critics consider the newer more critical plays inferior to Pinter's earlier work, but even if such criticism has merit, his earlier work alone has been enough to establish Pinter as one of the great playwrights of the twentieth century.

Plot Summary

Act I

Act I opens in a room full of assorted objects, clearly best described as junk. These include an iron bed, paint buckets, numerous boxes, a toaster, a statue of Buddha, a kitchen sink, and a gas stove. A bucket for catching drips hangs from the ceiling. Mick, a man in his twenties, sits alone on the bed, slowly looking around the room, focusing on each object in turn. When the bang of a door is heard, followed by the sound of muffled voices, Mick leaves the room.

Aston, in his thirties, and Davies, an old tramp, enter the room. Aston tells Davies to sit and offers him a cigarette. Davies reveals that he has just been fired from his restaurant job for refusing to do work he considers beneath him. Aston begins working on fixing the toaster while Davies complains about "Poles, Greeks, Blacks, the lot of them," then mentions that he left the bag with his possessions in the restaurant. Davies questions Aston about the house, about how many rooms there are, about Aston's position. Aston replies that he is "in charge" of the house and that he is working on building a shed. Davies asks Aston about spare shoes, but when Aston finds some for him, Davies complains that they don't fit.

Aston gives Davies money and offers to let him stay in the room until he gets "sorted out." Davies says that he plans to go to Sidcup, "if only the weather would break," to get his papers, which he says "prove who I am." Davies finally goes to bed while Aston continues to work on the toaster. The lights fade out, indicating night, then come up again, showing that morning has arrived. Aston tells Davies he was making noises in his sleep, and Davies insists that it could not have been him, that it was probably "them Blacks." Aston says he is going to leave for a while, then surprises Davies by saying that he can stay alone in the room.

When Aston leaves, Davies immediately begins looking through the objects in the room. Mick comes in and is unnoticed by Davies until Mick seizes Davies's arm, forcing him down on the floor. Mick then lets go of Davies, sits down, and asks the old man, "What's the game?"

Act II

Act II opens a few seconds later. Mick starts questioning Davies in a hostile fashion, repeating many of the same questions over and over again. This confuses and frightens the tramp. Davies tells Mick that he was brought to the room by "the man who lives here," but Mick informs Davies that he is in fact the owner of the house and that unless Davies wants to rent the room, Mick can take him to the police. Aston then enters with a bag, which he says belongs to Davies, but Mick grabs the bag and keeps it from the tramp. Mick finally lets Davies have the bag, then leaves the room. Aston tells Davies

that Mick is his brother and that he himself is supposed to be decorating the house and plans to build a shed where he can do woodworking.

Aston asks Davies if he would like to stay on as caretaker, but Davies seems reluctant. The lights fade to blackout, then come up again dimly. Davies enters the room, but is unable to get the light on and stumbles about in the darkness. Suddenly Mick, already in the room, begins vacuuming, frightening Davies with the noise. Mick then takes the vacuum plug out of the socket and replaces the light bulb. Davies and Mick talk, and Mick tells Davies that he is impressed by him and that the two just "got off on the wrong foot."

Mick offers Davies a sandwich and, as the two eat together, Mick tells Davies that Aston's trouble is that he doesn't like work. Mick then offers Davies a job as caretaker, and Davies again seems reluctant to accept the position. Finally, however, he agrees. When Mick asks for references, however, Davies claims that his papers are all in Sidcup but that he will go there soon. The lights fade, then come back up, indicating another morning. Aston wakes Davies up, reminding Davies that he had planned to go to Sidcup that day. Davies says he wants to go out for tea. Aston tells him of a cafe nearby, then begins a long monologue, as the lights in the room fade so that only Aston can be seen clearly. Aston tells of how he used to talk to people in that cafe but that he talked too much. He began having hallucinations and was taken to a hospital, where a doctor proposed electroshock therapy.

Aston says that he was a minor at the time, so he knew the doctors could not perform electroshock without his mother's permission. Aston wrote his mother, asking her not to agree to the treatment, but she gave the doctors permission anyway. Aston tried to escape but was caught, and though he physically fought the doctors, he was forced to receive treatment. Ever since, his thoughts have been slow, and he tries to avoid talking to people. He speaks of wanting to find the man who "did that to me," but first, he tells Davies, he wants to build the shed in the garden.

Act III

Act III begins two weeks later. Mick and Davies are together in the room, and Davies is complaining about Aston, who, he says, will not give him a knife for his bread and refuses to keep the Blacks next door from coming into the house and using the lavatory. Davies says that he and Mick could "get this place going," and Mick offers a series of decorating ideas, using the words and images common in house and garden magazines□which seem like ludicrous fantasies for the house he owns.

Mick says that the house would be a palace, and that he and his brother would live in it. Davies asks what would happen to him. Mick ignores his question, and Davies continues to complain about Aston□ he will not give Davies a clock, and he wakes Davies up in the night. Mick then leaves, and Aston enters. He has another pair of shoes for Davies, but Davies complains that these shoes also don't fit. Davies then tells Aston that a man has offered him a job. He needs to go to Sidcup but the weather is

bad. The lights go out, and a dim light through the window reveals that Davies and Aston are both in bed. Aston switches on the light and wakes Davies, complaining that the tramp is making noises in his sleep. Davies begins insulting Aston, saying that he is not surprised that Aston was put in a mental institution. Davies complains about Aston's treatment of him, and tells Aston that he could be taken back to the hospital and given electroshock treatments again. Aston tells Davies that he needs to find another place to live. Davies tells Aston that Mick will "sort you out," that Davies has been offered a job. Davies then leaves.

The lights go out, then back up. It is early evening. Mick and Davies enter the room, Davies complaining about Aston to Mick, who first listens somewhat sympathetically, then tells Davies he can stay if he is as good an interior decorator as he says he is. When Davies denies being a professional decorator, Mick accuses him of falsely presenting himself. Davies says that Aston must have told Mick that Davies is a decoration. When Davies tells Mick that Aston is "nutty," he goes too far, and Mick begins insulting Davies, calling him a barbarian. Mick then picks up the Buddha and hurls it against the stove, breaking it. Aston comes in. Mick leaves, and Davies begins desperately pleading with Aston, attempting to work out a compromise so that he can stay in the room. Aston says that Davies must leave. Davies continues to beg Aston to let him stay, but Aston turns to the window, ignoring Davies. Finally, the two stand, silent for a moment, Aston still facing the window. The curtain falls.

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

The setting for this play is a single room cluttered by junk. The mess includes paint buckets, boxes, vases, a kitchen sink, and a gas stove that doesn't work, with the statue of the Buddha on top of it. A bucket hangs from the ceiling to catch drips when it rains. The room also has two beds. The house is being renovated and is unoccupied except for this room.

Aston, a man in his early thirties, lives here. He brings home an old tramp, Davies, who has been fired from a job he held for only a week. Davies was thrown out, because he refused to do the work required of him. He felt that he wasn't being treated in the way he deserved, which seems to be the story of his life. He never gets the respect he feels he deserves. Aston intervened between him and the employer, who was ready to hit Davies, and brought him to this cluttered room. Davies is very sensitive to the possibility that Blacks live next door.

Davies complains that he has left a bag of his belongings at the restaurant and that he needs a pair of shoes. He says that he went to a monastery to try to get a donation; but instead of giving him shoes, they gave him a meal and chased him off. Aston has a pair under his bed that he offers, but Davies complains that they don't fit. Aston promises to try to find him another pair.

Davies needs to get to Sidcup to get his papers. He says that his real name is Jenkins; Davies is an assumed name. He says he can't get his insurance card stamped, because he doesn't have his papers with his real name on them. There is some indication, later in the story, that he might have stolen the insurance card. Davies says that he has several.

Aston offers to let Davies sleep in the second bed, until he is able to make it on his own, and gives him some money. They clear away the accumulated furniture and junk, so Davies can get to the bed. In the morning, Aston asks why he was making groaning and jabbering noises, but Davies insists that he doesn't do that. It must have been the Blacks next door, he says. Aston goes out, leaving Davies with a key to the room and the front door. Alone, Davies explores the contents of the room, boxes and chests. Suddenly, Aston's brother Mick, who is in his early twenties, is in the room. He forces Davies to lie on the floor, while he looks the room over.

Act 1 Analysis

The precipitating event for this story is the firing of Davies because of his own unwillingness to do a job that he considers beneath him. This foreshadows the outcome. Davies' unjustified expectations of a person who has rescued him leads to Davies' being "fired" from his caretaker's job.

This is a parable about altruism, philanthropy, and welfare. Aston, out of the kindness and generosity of his heart, has stepped forward to stop the assault on an old tramp. He not only takes him home and offers him a bed and some money, but he also gives him a key to the room. All of these are truly altruistic behaviors. The desire to help those who are less fortunate is a very human reaction to suffering. There are examples if this from the beginning of recorded history. Altruism was defined and given its name by Auguste Comte, the founder of Positivism in the 19th Century. It is a value of every major religion. However, critics have always asked whether humans do, in fact, have a moral obligation to secure happiness for anyone other than themselves.

Those questions did not occur to Aston as he followed his own instincts and reached out to help Davies. Aston's motivation was in no way self-serving or egocentric. He was simply touched by the old man's plight, he had the means to help, and he did so.

Philanthropy, which is the use of one's own resources to help make a better societyand provide for the downtrodden and deprived, is also as old as human life. It can be as institutionalized as The John D. Rockefeller Foundation or Ford Foundation, both of which sprang from the generosity of individuals who felt a responsibility to help others out of their own prosperity. It is also practiced at every level of civilized societies, even at the individual level. Aston behaves in a philanthropic way, when he uses the resources he has to make life better for a poor old man.

Welfare is the organized sharing of wealth with the poor. While Aston's efforts were not a part of an organization, they do have some aspects of a welfare system, in that nothing is required of the person receiving the help.

The conflicts in this story arise out of Aston's altruism, Mick's attempts to put a stop to it, and the old tramp's behavior, which makes it difficult for the older brother to continue to help out. The Buddha would indicate that Aston's kind impulses are religiously motivated. The Buddha's resting place on top of a disconnected gas stove suggests that there is no life in the religious feelings that are prompting the kindness, and that it will not long endure.

BOOKRAGS

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

Mick lets Davies get up off the floor, and the two get acquainted. We find that Mick has a construction business, is the actual owner of the house, and that Aston is his brother. Aston is supposed to be fixing up the house for Mick, who offers to sell the house to Davies.

Aston quietly returns to the room and continues to work on a toaster he has been trying to fix since the beginning of the play. He has brought a bag with him, which he says is Davies,' but Mick grabs it and makes both of them struggle to get it from him.

Davies' bag had been stolen, and the one that Aston brought to him is one he has purchased and filled with clothing. Davies complains about the clothing, saying he would rather have striped shirts instead of checked ones. There is a velvet smoking jacket in the bag, and he likes it.

Aston wants to build a shed in the back yard where he can have a workshop. He can work with his hands, he says. He offers Davies the job of caretaker, to look after the building, and polish bells. He also offers him a white overall to wear.

Mick surprises Davies again, and the tramp pulls a knife to protect himself. Mick has been running a vacuum sweeper, ostensibly cleaning up the room, and makes it clear that he is the one who is working and owns the house. He offers Davies the job of caretaker, which he accepts, assuring Mick that he has references, if he can just get down to Sidcup to pick them up.

Now it's morning, and Aston is waking Davies. That the noises the old man makes are keeping him awake. They argue about having the window open, and Davies insists that the rain blowing in on his head is keeping him awake. Aston is firm about the fact that he can't sleep without the window open, but Davies is unwilling to switch the end of the bed he's sleeping on to get his head away from the open window. Davies nags Aston about the shoes he was supposed to bring him.

Aston speaks now and tells the story of his life. He has been mentally ill, suffered from hallucinations, and was sent to an institution, where he was treated with electric-shock therapy. He had resisted, but there was no one to intervene, and he experienced the trauma of the shock. His thought processes were slowed down, and he doesn't go out where there are people anymore. He has thought of going back and finding the man who did this to him, but first he wants to do something. He wants to build a shed in the garden.

Act 2 Analysis

Critics of altruism, philanthropy, and welfare question first of all the motives of the one who is doing the giving, but also the effect of the gifts on the recipient. Is it somehow self-serving to experience the good feelings that come from helping another? Is helping someone who is less fortunate a way to feed one's own ego about his/her own superior position or prosperity?

If this is true in the case of Aston, then the rewards are beginning to wear thin in Act 2. It was one thing to give Davies a bed for a night and a few coins, but giving up his own sleep and putting up with the old man's whining and continuing demands is another. Even so, he continues to try to help. He has taken the trouble to try to recover Davies' bag, and when he wasn't able to do so, he spent his own funds to replace what he felt the old tramp would need.

Davies is a classic example of the product of generosity toward the downtrodden. He's a professional welfare recipient. He refuses to make the concessions necessary to hold a job. He wheedles help out of Aston and is never satisfied that enough is being done to make his life better. He's arrogant, belligerent, and capable of violence, which is a stereotypical portrait of welfare mentality and behavior.

Mick seems to be the cold voice of reason. We know that Mick would not be subject to an attack of altruism or philanthropy toward a down-and-out tramp. He sees through Davies' devious use of his brother and eventually devises a scheme for putting an end to it. Even so, he does have altruistic feelings toward his older brother. He makes it possible for him to have a decent place to live. We don't know where Aston's money comes from, but there's reason to suspect that Mick takes care of that, also. Through the brothers' relationship, Pinter gives us another look at giving and receiving of help.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

Davies complains to Mick about Aston. He hasn't given him a knife, he hasn't provided him with a clock, his bed is too near the gas stove, he wakes him in the middle of the night, and he doesn't talk to him. Mick's response to all of this is to talk about all the wonderful things that could be done with the house.

Aston returns and brings Davies a pair of shoes, but Davies complains that they have no laces. Aston finds him a pair of laces, and Davies complains that they are the wrong color. Even so, the shoes fit this time.

When Aston wakes him because of the noises he is making, Davies makes insulting remarks to him about his mental illness, and Aston tells him it's time he found another place to live. Davies says that Aston is the one who needs to find another place to live, because Mick offered Davies a job as caretaker. Aston tells him he stinks and begins to pack Davies' bag, reiterating that he must leave.

In the next scene, Mick and Davies are back in the room. Davies is complaining about what Aston has said to him. Davies suggests that Mick should tell Aston to move out. Mick agrees to do that, providing Davies is the first-class experienced interior and exterior decorator he has claimed to be. Davies has made no such claim, but Mick presses his demand that he follow through on those claims. When Davies says that Aston is nutty, Mick tells Davies that he has been nothing but trouble from the time he first came to the house. "You're nothing else but a wild animal," he says. "You're a barbarian. And to put the old tin lid on it, you stink from arse-hole to breakfast time." He pays him off with a half-dollar.

Mick angrily throws the Buddha against the gas stove and breaks it. He is frustrated that he is trying to get his business going and that he must worry about this house. He refuses to do it any more. He is leaving it to his brother to worry about.

Aston returns, and he and Mick exchange smiles. Suddenly, reality hits Davies, who grovels and makes promises. He even promises to help Aston put up his shed. But Aston's answer is "No."

Act 3 Analysis

The climax of the action comes when Mick forces Davies into a corner and forces him to admit that he is of no use. It becomes apparent that Aston offered Davies the caretaker job to justify his charity, and Mick made the same offer to put an end to Aston's relationship with the tramp. It's reality that wins out in this conflict, not altruism. This is underscored by Mick's throwing the Buddha at the stove and smashing it, as if to say, "So much for religious impulses."

Is Pinter saying that this is the result of all efforts to help? Does he mean that the one on the receiving end exploits the system, until the system shuts down? While there is a difference in the viewpoint of Aston and Mick regarding the old man throughout the story, at the end they are together on the decision that the helping has ended. The exploitation of Aston's kindness and generosity will not go on.

Davies, for his part, is revealed for the greedy, lazy, self-centered, self-serving old man he is. He is driven, not by what is right, but by what is in his own self-interest. So we are back to motivations for all sides in the altruism, philanthropy, and welfare issues. While the benefactor may give out of principle, there is a limit of personal comfort beyond which those impulses will not go. Welfare recipients do not come off very well in Pinter's story. Their motivation, at least in this story, is purely one of self-service. One who is helped by others, Pinter might seem to say, all too often becomes one who is unwilling to help himself/herself.

However, the reader should notice the real caretaker of this story, Mick. Mike is taking care of his brother. Because Aston is willing to give back to the world, Mick wants to help him in ways he would not help Davies. Pinter seems to suggest that altruism is meaningful when its recipient also has the capacity for giving.

Characters

Aston

Aston, in his early thirties, is Mick's brother. He seems quite generous, as is indicated by his rescuing Davies from a potential brawl and later bringing the tramp into his own house. Once he brings Davies home, Aston continues to try to care for him, giving him tobacco, attempting to find shoes for him, and even replacing Davies's bag when it is stolen. Unlike Mick, Aston is gentle and calm, enduring Davies's continual complaints about all that he is offered.

At the end of the second act, Aston reveals what may be at the root of his exceedingly calm nature; sometime before he reached adulthood, he was committed for a time to a mental institution, where he received involuntary electroshock therapy. When in the hospital, Aston says, he counted on his mother to deny permission for the treatments. When she did not, he attempted to escape and, when that failed, physically fought those who attempted to treat him, although his efforts were ultimately futile.

At the time of the play, Aston lives in his brother's house, planning to build a shed that the audience realizes will never materialize. Aston initially accepts a great deal of abuse from Davies, who uses his confession of psychiatric treatment against him. Aston is finally pushed to his limit, however, and tells the old man he must leave. As the play ends, Aston literally turns his back to Davies, as the tramp begs to be allowed to stay.

Mac Davies

Davies is an old man who temporarily moves into the room when Aston rescues him from a brawl. Although Davies was just fired from his menial job, wears old clothes, has no money, and is obviously a tramp, he insists on maintaining what he considers his proper station and refuses to do work he considers beneath him. He also considers himself, as a white Englishman, superior to the Blacks, Greeks, and Poles he rails against. Although Davies does thank Aston for his kindnesses, he complains constantly. Nothing Aston does is good enough for him□the shoes don't fit, the clothes aren't warm enough, and the room itself is too drafty. Davies is also deceitful, even lying about his own name when it suits him. He speaks often of going to Sidcup for the papers he needs in order to find work, but the weather is never good enough. The audience realiz es that Davies has no intention of taking the trip, of taking care of himself instead of taking advantage of others.

Davies only thinks of himself. When Aston reveals his history of mental illness, Davies is incapable of any sort of sympathy and taunts Aston with his past. He tries to play the brothers against one another, attempting to ingratiate himself with Mick by criticizing Aston. Finally, Aston tires of Davies's criticism, complaints, and personal attacks, and tells the tramp to leave. Davies desperately begs Aston to reconsider, and the old man

finally becomes a pitiable figure, having nowhere to go and no one to whom he can turn. This complicates audience reaction to Davies. He has been depicted as a cunning, deceitful, and ungrateful tramp, but finally becomes also a pathetic and poverty-stricken old man.

Mick

Mick, Aston's brother, is in his late twenties. He is the owner of the building that contains the room in which the play's action occurs. Mick identifies himself as a successful businessman, although whether he is truly successful and what he actually does for a living are not clear. Since Mick allows Aston to live in his house, it seems that in the wake of Aston's electroshock treatments, Mick has become a sort of caretaker for his brother.

Mick is a much more suspicious person than Aston, who is quick to take Davies into the house. Although Mick has to have heard the voices of Aston and Davies together as they came toward the room at the play's beginning, when he finds Davies alone after Aston leaves, Mick physically attacks the old man. Mick follows the physical attack with a verbal attack as he fires quick questions, the same questions over and over, at the frightened tramp. Later, when talking with Davies, Mick alternates between politeness and brutality. Knowing that Davies has no pertinent experience, Mick offers the old man a job as a caretaker, but he later grows angry and accuses Davies of trying to pass himself off as a skilled interior decorator.

Mick also alternates between criticizing and defending his brother. Mick's frequent changes in attitude make it difficult to ascertain his motivations, and his inconsistency seems to indicate that, at least part of the time, he is lying. His one moment of emotional truth comes when he smashes Aston's statue of Buddha against the gas stove.

Themes

Truth, Lies, and Fantasy

In *The Caretaker* none of the characters can be trusted to speak the truth. All are, to some extent, deceptive, twisting reality in order to manipulate one another and to delude themselves. The character who is the most deceptive is probably Davies. From the beginning, it is clear that he is a liar, first attempting to win Aston's respect by pretending to a past that rings false. "I've had dinner with the best," he says. He also calls everything he says into question when he admits to having used a false name; the audience cannot even be sure that his true name is Davies. Davies's talk of the future is also filled with lies and fantasy and serves two purposes□to manipulate Aston and Mick and to bolster his own self esteem. He speaks of getting even with the man whom he says attacked him: "One night I' ll get him. When I find myself in that direction."

Davies also tells Aston and Mick that he will go to Sidcup to get his papers. He talks throughout the play of his supposed plans to go to Sidcup, plans he will act on if he acquires shoes, if the weather gets better, plans that the audience soon realizes will never materialize. By his insistence that he is not merely a tramp, that he has a grand past and will support himself in the future, Davies manipulates Aston into continuing to let him stay in the room.

Mick and Aston are not obvious liars like Davies, but the truth of what they say is also questionable. When Mick, after hurling the Buddha against the stove, says, "I got plenty of other things I can worry about... I've got my own business to build up," it is unclear whether he is speaking the truth or trying to persuade himself and Davies of his own importance. When he discusses his grandiose plans for turning the house into a vision from a home and garden magazine, he is either playing with Davies or deluding himself with plans for a future that will never arrive.

Aston's honesty is also questionable. Pinter himself has said that a common mistake among audiences watching *The Caretaker* is to assume that Aston is telling the truth about his experiences in the mental hospital. But even if Aston is truthful about that experience, he deludes himself with his talk of building a shed. Like Davies's trip to Sidcup and Mick's decorating plans, Aston's shed is a fantasy that will never materialize.

All of the characters in the play not only deceive one another but also delude themselves. Instead of revealing the truth, communication in the play obscures reality. In the world of *The Caretaker* truth itself becomes an illusion.

Family

Ideally, the family is a source of strength and support for its members, but in *The Caretaker*, family members are disconnected and even hostile. The brothers Mick and Aston say little of their parents; in fact, the audience does not even know if their mother

and father are alive. The little they do say, however, reveals relationships that are strained at best. At one point, Mick speaks to Davies of his "uncle's brother," who may simply be another uncle, but who is more likely Mick and Aston's father.

If this is, in fact, the case, Mick is so disconnected from his father that he cannot use the familial term "father" to identify him. "I called him Sid," he tells Davies, and in fact, Mick himself seems unsure of what his relationship with this man is: "I've often thought that maybe ... my uncle was his brother and he was my uncle." Although Mick's speech is obviously intended to have a comic effect, it does indicate that there is no real relationship between Mick and the man who may be his father.

Aston's mention of his mother is brief but revealing. While in the mental hospital, he says, he believed he was safe from electroshock therapy because he was a minor and his mother would have to give permission for such treatment. Although he wrote and asked her not to give permission, she signed the papers anyway, allowing the doctors to give Aston electroshock treatment. Aston's one memory of his mother is of his trust and her betrayal of that trust. his house, and Mick tells Davies that he and his brother take turns cleaning. And when Davies describes Aston as nutty, Mick takes offense, or pretends to take offense. But the brothers are also disconnected. They rarely speak to one another, rarely, in fact, stay in the same room together. In addition, just after Mick expresses anger at Davies's comment about Aston, he himself picks up Aston's Buddha and destroys it. This action reveals some hostility toward his brother.

The meaning of Mick's action is complicated, however, when Aston enters immediately afterwards, and, for the first time, the two brothers face one another, "smiling faintly." The meaning of the smile, however, is ultimately ambiguous. It may indicate a sort of reconciliation or connection, possibly a united front against Davies. Yet it could also indicate that a surface kindness, an appearance of connection, masks the hostility and estrangement of the brothers. It could even be intended to highlight the ambiguous nature of the brothers' relationship. However, even if the relationship is somewhat ambiguous, what does seem clear is that in *The Caretaker* the family is not an idealized haven from the world but a collection of various relationships, sometimes distant, sometimes hostile, always complicated.

Power

Much of the action in *The Caretaker* follows from the characters' pursuit of power over one another. This is evident from the beginning, when Davies, rescued by Aston from a possible brawl, first attempts to raise Aston's estimation of him by suggesting a past grander than his present, claiming social superiority over those with whom he has been working, and finding fault with virtually everything that anyone does for him. Davies presents himself as one who deserves much more than life has given him and so suggests that he has no reason to feel himself inferior to Aston.

Aston acts kindly toward Davies, but his motives are not entirely clear. For instance, by leaving the tramp in the room alone at the end of the first act, knowing that Mick could

come in at any time, Aston leaves the old man vulnerable to Mick's anger□and thus may be asserting a sort of familial power. When Mick does find Davies alone, he first attacks Davies, establishing physical power over him, then threatens to take Davies to the police, reminding the tramp that he has little control over his future. Mick further establishes his power over Davies by his relentless questioning of the tramp, which leaves Davies confused and frightened.

The remainder of the play sees continual struggles for power. Mick keeps Davies's bag from him, frightens him with the vacuum cleaner, and angrily accuses Davies of falsely presenting himself as an interior decorator. Davies attempts to gain power by trying to get Mick to side with him against Aston. Davies also attempts to assert his own power over Aston by continually reminding Aston that he has been in a mental hospital and telling Aston that he could easily have to back there. Davies's attempts to gain power, however, finally backfire. Mick defends his brother, again establishing a sort of conjoined familial power, and Aston tells the tramp he must leave. In the final scene, it is Davies who is powerless in spite of his efforts. It is he who is alone and has no place to go.

Style

Setting

The Caretaker is set in a single room, a dismal space full of assorted junk and with one window half covered by a sack. Among the objects in the room are paint buckets, a lawn-mower, suitcases, a rolled-up carpet, a pile of old newspapers, and a statue of the Buddha atop a gas stove that does not work. A bucket, used to catch water from the leaking roof, hangs from the ceiling. The room has so much junk in it that it seems more a storage area than a place to live. The room stores not only useless junk but, metaphorically, useless people such as Aston, who can no longer have a real life in the outside world, and briefly Davies, who, in a sense, is just another useless thing that Aston has picked up and brought back to the room.

With its collection of junk, its leaky ceiling, and its window with a sack instead of curtains, the room is the antithesis of the kind pictured in home and garden magazines, which are parodied in a speech by Mick in Act III. In that speech, Mick describes for Davies his supposed plans for the room: "This room you could have as the kitchen ... I'd have teal-blue, copper and parchment linoleum squares .. . venetian blinds on the window, cork floor, cork tiles." This exaggerated description has a comic effect but also serves to highlight the distance between the reality of the room and the assorted fantasies of Mick, Aston, and Davies. And no Aston and Mick's relationship is also one of distance, but that distance is relieved with some evidence of familial feelings. Mick has taken some responsibility for Aston□he allows Aston to live in matter what dreams are spoken of in the play, the room is a constant reminder of harsh reality.

Comedy

In past centuries, a comedy has been a play with a so-called "happy ending," in which the main character's problems are resolved, the "good" are rewarded, and the "bad" are punished. Modern drama, however, has seen the development of a hybrid of tragedy and comedy, sometimes called tragicomedy, in which there are comic elements with dark undercurrents. *The Caretaker* is such a play.

In *The Caretaker*, Pinter uses numerous comic devices. The character Davies himself is a sort of stock figure from vaudeville, the tramp/clown, which was also used as a persona by actor Charley Chaplin. Similar to the tramp/clown in a vaudeville sketch, Davies provides a great deal of physical, slapstick humor. For instance, Davies removes his trousers to go to bed, and when Mick arrives he takes them, teasing the old man by flicking the trousers in his face, further emphasizing the connection to Vaudeville, in which a man is often stripped of his dignity when his pants fall down. Mick also takes Davies's backpack, which gets tossed around the room as Davies tries to retrieve it. And later, when Davies flees Mick's electrolux (vacuum), this scene of panic also connects him to the classic tramp/clown.

In addition to the physical comedy in the play, there is also a great deal of verbal comedy. In Davies's dialogue, the difference between reality and Davies's words often has a comic effect. "I've had dinner with the best," he tells Aston. "I've eaten my dinner off the best of plates." This highly doubtful statement from the tramp has a humorous effect, as does Davies's story of his experience at the monastery near Luton. In this story, Davies tells a monk, "I heard you got a stock of shoes here," but the monk replies, "Piss off.... If you don't piss off .. .I'll kick you all the way to the gate." This story has a comic effect because the monk's supposed response to Davies is so unexpected and because of the contrast between the monk's words, "Piss off," and his traditionally reserved and pious position.

Mick's interrogation of Davies, his quick questions and his claim that Davies represented himself as a professional interior decorator, are also humorous, again because of contrast□this time between the tramp Davies and the professional qualifications Mick describes.

Although there are many comic elements in *The Caretaker*, there is also a dark side to Pinter's play. The ending, in which Davies becomes a frightened old man with no place to go, creates a sense of pity for the tramp's condition. In the final scene, Davies is too pathetic to be funny; in fact, he almost becomes a tragic figure, and the tragedy of his situation is made more profound by the comedy that preceded it.

Symbolism

In literature, a symbol stands for something other than itself. Probably the most important symbol in *The Caretaker* is the Buddha that sits atop the gas stove. This Buddha is an object that Aston has picked up and brought back to the already cluttered room. In this sense, the Buddha resembles Davies, who can also be seen as something useless that Aston has picked up. The Buddha, therefore, could be a symbol of Davies.

It should be noted here, however, that there is not always a clear one-to-one correlation between a symbol and what it represents. A complex symbol can have a number of possible meanings, all of which can be joined together to create a greater whole. Mick's smashing of the Buddha in the third act, therefore, could have several interpretations. Whether the Buddha symbolizes Davies, is a representation of Aston's inner peace, or is just another item that Aston has brought back, Mick may destroy it because it represents his brother, whom he may even hate. The Buddha, however, as another piece of junk in a house that belongs to Mick, could also symbolize the life he leads. In that case, Mick may destroy the Buddha because of his frustration with his life as a whole. The Buddha could represent all of these things, or it could represent something else. Sometimes the success of a symbol lies in its ambiguity.

Historical Context

The years following victory in World War II were a time of hardship in Britain. A 1947 fuel crisis left many without heat, and food shortages resulted in the continuation of wartime rationing well into the late-1940s. These years also saw a serious housing shortage. During the war, when construction of housing had ceased, two hundred thousand houses were completely destroyed and half a million more required extensive repair. Some Britons saw hope for the future in socialism, and the late-1940s saw the development of the Welfare State, which placed responsibility for the relief of the poor on the government. In 1946, the National Insurance Act and the National Health Service Act were passed, providing insurance and medical care to the poor. The National Assistance Act was developed to provide a safety net for the poor. Many believed that new government policies would end poverty altogether.

Such optimistic assessments, however, were soon proven false. In addition, those who saw socialism as a solution to Britain's problems were disillusioned by the Soviet Union's 1956 invasion of Hungary, which showed that a socialist system could be as violent and corrupt as any other political system.

These years also saw a decline in Britain's status among nations. Previous generations had said that the sun would never set on the British empire,but now that empire was crumbling, with former colonies such as India gaining freedom from British rule. In 1956, the Suez crisis, in which Britain was condemned by the United Nations for its attempt to gain control of the Suez Canal in Egypt, resulted in international humiliation for the former empire. British troops were forced to withdraw, and the Prime Minister resigned over the incident.

In spite of political difficulties, however, the late-1950s saw some domestic economic recovery, and Britain saw the rise of a consumer culture focusing on the acquisition of material goods. Ownership of what were formerly luxury items, such as refrigerators, washing machines, and automobiles, rose significantly between 1953 and 1960. In addition, the development of television led to a new perceived need. Magazines enticed consumers to buy with photographs and descriptions of beautifully decorated homes. Not surprisingly, British citizens were exposed to more advertising than everbefore. It is, in fact, the language of house and garden magazines and of advertisements that Mick uses when he describes for Davies his vision for the future of *The Caretaker's* squalid setting.

In the 1950s, treatment of the mentally ill was undergoing change, as the introduction of new psychiatric medications made it possible for patients to leave institutions and live in their communities. Nonetheless, many patients remained institutionalized and, although more humane than those of past eras, mental hospitals of the time were sometimes little better than warehouses for those whose illnesses had no real cure. In addition, in spite of advances in medications, little was known about the biological causes of severe mental illness, and such illnesses were still generally believed to have psychological bases. Psychiatrists often blamed the family unit for illnesses such as schizophrenia

and manic-depressive disorder, and particular blame was laid at the feet of the mother and the ways in which she brought up her children.

As early as the sixteenth century, physicians had attempted to cure schizophrenia by inducing convulsions with camphor. In the 1930s, modern electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) was developed in Rome. In the 1950s, ECT was commonly used to treat depression and schizophrenia. At that time, however, treatments were often given without muscle relaxants, which prevent broken bones during seizures, or general anesthesia. In addition, the mentally ill had not yet benefited from the patients' rights movement of the 1960s, and so the involuntary ECT that Aston was subjected to was much more common than it is today.

Critical Overview

The first production of *The Caretaker* at the Arts Theatre in London on April 27, 1960, met with an enthusiastic audience response. In his book *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter,* biographer Michael Billington quoted the *Daily Herald's* description of the play's reception: "Tumultuous chaos. Twelve curtain calls. And then, when the lights went up, the whole audience rose to applaud the author who sat beaming in the circle." Early reactions from the critics were positive as well. Billington noted that the *News Chronicle's* critic wrote, "This is the best play in London." Michael Scott, in his book *Harold Pinter: The Birthday Party, The Caretaker, The Homecoming*, quoted critic Charles Marowitz: *"The Caretaker,* Pinter's latest play, is a national masterpiece." Indeed the play was recognized as such by others; it received the *Evening Standard* Award for best play of 1960.

Many critics compared *The Caretaker* to Samuel Beckett's 1955 play *Waiting for Godot*, in which two tramps wait for a man they know only as Godot to arrive and give meaning and purpose to their lives. T. C. Worsley, in a 1960 review quoted by Scott, remarked, "Certainly we seem to be in Godot country," then noted that Pinter's play seems more accessible: "We are in the Beckett climate, but not the Beckett fog where everything means something else." Marowitz, who also pointed out the resemblance to Beckett's work, remarked that such a resemblance takes nothing away from Pinter: "The mark of Beckett on Pinter is dominantly stylistic; as for the subject matter, it may have a Beckettian tang to it, but the recipe is original."

Pinter's use of language in the play has also been the subject of much discussion. Playwright John Arden, also quoted by Scott, discussed language in terms of the play's "realism." According to Arden, previous realist playwrights wrote plays in which "a series of events were developed, connected by a strictly logical progression of fact, and we could be sure that anything done or said on the stage had its place in the *concrete* structure of the plot." The dialogue in Pinter's work, however, reflects a new type of realism, meandering speech that shows "not merely what [the characters] would have said if the author thought it up for them, but what they actually *did* say."

An important aspect of Pinter's dialogue for Arden was "his expert use of 'casual' language and broken trains of thought," which presents a more natural use of speech. For Marowitz, however, Pinter does not simply reflect real speech, but enhances it: "If Pinter uses tape-recorders to achieve such verisimilitude, he also edits his tapes poetically to avoid stale reproductions of life."

Other critics, however, who agreed that the dialogue is realistic, found fault elsewhere. Kenneth Tynan, writing in 1960, and quoted in *File on Pinter*, commented on Pinter's realism. "Time and again," Tynan wrote, "without the least departure from authenticity, Mr. Pinter exposes the vague, repetitive silliness of lower-class conversation." Yet Tynan suggested a certain cruelty in the quality of Pinter's dialogue. "One laughs in recognition," he wrote, "but one's laughter is tinged with snobbism."

Alan Brien, writing for the *Spectator* in 1960 (also quoted in *File on Pinter*) disagreed, arguing that Pinter's characters are like the members of the audience. The critic emphasized that this aspect is an improvement over Pinter's earlier plays: "His characters are now people rooted in a world of insurance stamps, and contemporary wallpaper, and mental asylums. They are still lost in mazes of self-deception, isolated behind barricades of private language, hungry at the smell of the next man's weakness□in other words, just like us."

The Caretaker continues to be considered a classic of modern drama by most critics, but in recent years, some complaints about the play have been voiced. Kitty Mrosovsky, writing of a 1981 production and quoted in *File on Pinter*, once again compared the play to *Waiting for Godot*, but not favorably: "It has dated in a way that the earlier *Waiting for Godot* (1955) has not....Not that the tramps nowadays are any fewer, nor the derelict attics with their buckets to catch the drips. But the patina of social comment can almost be peeled off the play's core, leaving at most a wry proposition about the purgatory of sharing a bedroom with your neighbor."

Critic Elizabeth Sakellaridou, in her book *Pinter's Female Portraits,* faulted the play on feminist grounds. Sakellaridou noted that the women mentioned in the play never appear onstage, and so "they reflect the idiosyncrasies and moods of the three male characters, and therefore, they are highly subjective creations which can hardly be identified as real people." Sakellaridou went on to suggest that the characterization of women in the play reflects a negative attitude in general on the part of Pinter. The text of the play, she noted, "reveals mistrust and fear, abuse and contempt for women."

It is not only feminists who see global problems with Pinter's play. Bernard Levin, writing of a 1977 production (quoted in *File on Pinter*), found little redeeming value in the play at all and spoke of the "emptiness, weightlessness, and triviality" of *The Caretaker*. "We come out exactly the same people as we were when we entered," he continued. "We have been entertained ... we have not been bored. But we have advanced our understanding and our humanity not a whit." Levin further suggested that the great praise the play has received has been undeserved: "The needle is sharp, the thread fine, the material sumptuous, the seamstress the best. But the Emperor's clothes do not exist."

By his reference to the traditional tale of the emperor's new clothes, Levin acknowledged the high esteem in which the play is held. In spite of such criticism as his, *The Caretaker* continues to inspire numerous revivals as well as much critical attention. Although the play is not without its detractors, most critics of modern drama consider *The Caretaker* a contemporary classic.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Cross is a Ph.D. candidate specializing in modern drama. In this essay, she discusses Aston's motivations in his relationship with Davies.

Numerous critics have said that much of the action of *The Caretaker* is dominated by the characters' struggle for power over one another. As Michael Billington remarked in his book *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter,* "Power is the theme: dominate or be dominated." Pinter shows, Billington continued, "that life is a series of negotiations for advantage in which everything comes into play." Indeed, in *The Caretaker*, this often seems to be the case. Davies tries to play Aston and Mick against each other as he struggles to establish a foothold in the room. Mick maintains power over Davies by physical as well as verbal assaults. And at the end of the play, Aston exerts his power by forcing Davies to leave; the struggle for power is a dominant theme in the play.

To suggest, however, as Billington and others have, that all of the characters are primarily motivated by power is an oversimplification of Pinter's play. It is true that such an assessment seems to apply to Davies. If he is to stay in the room and have Aston or Mick see to his needs and desires, he needs to gain control over them, even if he has to do so by making himself sometimes appear, not powerful, but needy. In essence, Davies cares for no one but himself and will do whatever he thinks will allow him to stay in the room. Mick, defending his territory against an intruder, attempts to control Davies primarily by physical and verbal violence. He has no real regard for the tramp. On the other hand, Mick does have at least some feeling, even if only a sense of obligation, for his brother and is, in fact, taking care of at least some of Aston's needs by allowing him to stay in the room. Although he expresses anger at his brother when he breaks the Buddha against the stove, although he tells Davies that Aston's trouble is that he does not want to work, Mick does defend Aston against Davies's cruel remarks□and he allows Aston to stay in the room. The desire for power motivates him but it is not his only motivation. Nonetheless, it does seem fair to consider the desire for power as a primary motivation for both Davies and Mick.

While Davies and Mick are dominated by their own drives for power, to suggest quite the same of Aston is to simplify his character as well as the play as a whole. Aston's attempts to care for Davies and to talk to him seem motivated, at least in part, by kindness and concern for the tramp. On the other hand, it is hard to see Aston as motivated entirely by altruism. Indeed, one could argue that Aston is kind to Davies because he wants to control him, because he wants to meet his own needs and thus is as motivated by power as are Davies and Mick. In truth, neither interpretation of Aston's character captures the whole man. Aston does make an effort to meet his own needs but not in a cynical search for power. What Aston truly desires throughout most of the play is real contact with another human being. It is only when his efforts at connection fail that Aston exerts simple power over Davies.

In Act I, after the opening scene in which Mick looks about the dismal room, then leaves, Aston comes onstage followed by Davies. Upon entering the room, Davies

begins to speak of the encounter that led Aston to bring him home. Davies was involved in some sort of scuffle at the restaurant where he was working, and Aston saw a man "have a go" at Davies. In relating this incident, Davies complains a great deal about his treatment at the restaurant, claiming that he was not being treated according to his station, that he was told to do work he considered beneath him.

In spite of his concern with his place in the world, however, it is clear from Davies's clothes that he is a tramp and, whether such a viewpoint is moral or not, most so-called "respectable" people would consider him beneath them. While many would feel sorry for someone in Davies's position,almost no one would actually take such a person home to care for him. Aston's bringing Davies home, therefore, seems an act of incredible kindness. Such kindness can also be seen to some extent in the way Aston and Davies converse. For the most part, Davies speaks and Aston listens, enduring the old man's complaints, never challenging even the most absurd of Davies's claims, such as his assertion that women have often asked him if he would like to have them look at his body. When Aston does speak to Davies, most of the time he asks questions about the old man's needs and desires.

As Act I continues, Aston makes a number of offers to Davies and these offers seem to escalate in extremity. He offers the tramp a cigarette, shoes, and money. He says he will retrieve the belongings Davies left in the restaurant. He offers to let Davies stay in his own room and even gives the tramp the keys to the house. By the end of the first act, Aston's offers of help become so extreme that they would seem incredible to most people. So unbelievable is Aston's kindness to Davies that it raises the question of motivation. It is hard to accept that a person could be that kind simply out a sense of responsibility towards one's fellow man.

There are, however, some hints that Aston may be acting from something other than kindness, may in fact be seeking to have Davies satisfy his own needs. In the first act, Aston twice tells Davies of incidents from his own life. First he tells Davies a simple story□that he went into a pub and ordered a Guinness, which was served to him in a thick mug. He tells Davies that he could not finish the Guinness because he can only drink out of a tin glass. Davies completely ignores Aston's story and immediately begins speaking about his own plans to go to Sidcup. Later, Aston tells Davies of his sitting in a cafe and speaking to a woman who, after a brief conversation, put her hand on his and asked if he would like her to look at his body. Davies responds first with disbelief, saying "Get out of it," then goes on to say that women have often said the same thing to him, not quite ignoring Aston's remarks this time, but using Aston's experience simply as a means to boast about himself.

In both cases, there is no logical prelude to Aston's stories. They seem to come out of nowhere. The most likely interpretation seems to be that Aston simply wants someone to talk to, and this interpretation seems borne out in Aston's speech in the second act in which he tells of how he was put in a mental hospital after he "talked too much." This suggests that Aston's kindness might stem from his own need to connect with a human being, any human being, even Davies. If this is the case, Davies offers no satisfaction to Aston, for the tramp is interested only in himself.

Toward the end of the first act and throughout most of the second, Aston begins to seem less motivated by simple kindness. His leaving of Davies alone in the house seems, on the face of it, an act of consideration and of trust but it is in fact somewhat ambiguous. Aston almost certainly knows that Mick may come into the house and that, if he does so, he will view Davies as an intruder. In a sense, Aston, while not at this point confronting Davies with his own power, leaves Davies in a position in which he may have to face the anger and power of Mick. Thus Aston exerts a sort of familial power over Davies.

After Mick's encounter with Davies and Aston's return to the room, Aston continues to show ambiguity in his treatment of Davies. When Mick keeps Davies's bag from him, Aston makes some attempt to get the bag back to him, but finally, he gives the bag to Mick, and it is Mick who returns it to Davies. Aston still attempts to acquire shoes for Davies, and makes noises when he sleeps. When Davies complains about the draft and rain from the open window, Aston asserts himself by telling Davies that he himself cannot sleep without the window being open.

Toward the end of the second act, though, Aston temporarily gives in to Davies on the matter of the window. He tells Davies he can "close it for the time being." In his giving in to Davies in this way, Aston may be motivated by simple kindness, or he may seek to appease Davies so that he can again attempt to talk to the man, to engage him in some sort of relationship. Again, this can be interpreted as an effort to control Davies in order to meet his own needs.

At this point in the play, it is more difficult to believe that Aston acts only from kindness. It seems possible that Aston may truly be motivated by the desire to manipulate Davies in order to use him to satisfy his own need for contact. The situation becomes more complicated, however, at the end of Act II, when Aston, in a lengthy monologue, speaks to Davies about his mental troubles. Aston tells the story of his talking too much in the cafe, of his hallucinations, his commitment, his mother's betrayal, his experience of involuntary electroshock treatments. This monologue is like nothing else in the play. Aston tells the tramp a serious story about what is almost certainly the most painful experience of his life.

Aston seems again to want someone to listen to him, and one could again argue that he simply wants Davies to meet his own needs. Such a view, however, would be too simplistic. In telling this story to Davies, Aston takes a serious risk. The social stigma attached to those who have received such treatment in a mental hospital, particularly electroshock therapy, is strong, especially in the time in which Pinter is writing. When Aston tells Davies about his hospital experience, he makes himself extremely vulnerable to the tramp. He gives Davies ammunition to use against him. This is not a man in search of power but one who desperately seeks to make real human contact.

But Aston ultimately cannot make that contact with Davies. Pinter uses lighting to illustrate this. By the end of Aston's monologue, he alone can clearly be seen; Davies stands in the shadows. This shows that no connection is made. His attempt to connect with a human being leaves him vulnerable and alone.

In the final act, Davies exploits Aston's moment of honesty. He attempts to ally himself with Mick and against Aston. Aston, once again seeming to attempt an act of kindness, continues to seek shoes for Davies, but the tramp scorns Aston's efforts to help. In fact, Davies verbally assaults Aston, insulting him, accusing him of being insane, telling Aston that he could go back into the hospital, that he could receive electroshock treatments again. It is at this point that Aston finally tells Davies he has to leave. His attempts to be kind to Davies, to connect with him, have completely failed. Even when he tells Davies to leave, however, Aston again shows kindness, offering Davies money. But still he finally and literally turns his back on Davies as he looks out the window and waits for the tramp to leave.

While it is clear that Davies, with no place to go, is alone at the end of the play, what is often overlooked is the fact that Aston is also alone. He has shown kindness to Davies. He has desperately attempted to make real human contact with him. In the end, however, Aston's desire for connection cannot be saved. It is only power that Davies understands.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, noted theatre critic Brustein examines Pinter's play as a work of existentialism, concluding that The Caretaker *is "a work in which existence not only precedes essence but thoroughly destroys it*."

When Harold Pinter tells us that his plays contain no meaning outside of the material itself, I think we should believe him, giving thanks for his unusual, though somewhat self-incriminating, honesty. *The Caretaker*being little more than the sum of its component parts and dramatic valuescertainly seems totally free from either significance or coherence. In this, no doubt, it has something in common with real life. But while the work displays a surface painstakingly decorated with naturalistic details, these are so peculiarly selected that the effect is quite distorted: the play is a slice of life, sliced so arbitrarily that it has lost all resemblance to life. Because of the mystery surrounding Pinter's principles of selection, therefore, suspense is the play's greatest virtue. Pinter manipulates this with considerable skill, tantalizing us with the promise of some eventual explanationbut he stubbornly refuses to deliver. He refuses, in fact, to communicate with us at all. His language, while authentic colloquial speech, is stripped bare of reflective or conceptual thought, so that the play could be just as effectively performed in Finno-Ugric. You might say that *The Caretaker* approaches the condition of musicif you could conceive of music without much development, lyric quality, or thematic content. For the play is so scrupulously non-analyticalso carefully documented with concrete (though pointless) happenings, specific (though atypical) character details, and particularized (though unrecognizable) responsesthat it goes full circle from its surface naturalism and ends up a total abstraction.

The basic anecdote is this: A slavish, peevish, vicious old down-and-out named Davies is offered lodging in a junk-filled room, part of a network of apartments waiting to be redecorated. His benefactor, the would-be decorator, is a listless, dull-witted chap named Aston, who has collected Davies in much the same impersonal way he has collected the other useless articles in the place. Aston gives Davies abed, money, shoes, clothes, and a caretaking job, which the derelict, consumed with defenses and prejudices, accepts or rejects with alternating gratitude and grumbles. Though they live in the same room and share a quality of spiritual paralysis (Aston wants but is unable to build a tool shed; Davies is desirous but incapable of going to Sidcup for his papers), they cannot connect. Nor do they connect with Aston's brother, Mick, a mordant young entrepreneur who hardly says a word to Aston and who relates to Davies mainly by baiting him with cruel practical jokes. Following Aston's confession that shock treatments had addled his brain (a confession alien to the style of the play), Davies tries to form an alliance with Mick to evict Aston from the room. Mick first encourages Davies' scheme; then, smashing his brother's statue of Buddha for emphasis, ridicules it. After a petty altercation between the two roommates over Davies' noisy sleeping habitswhich climaxes when Davies, flourishing a knife, lets slip some unfortunate remarks about Aston's "stinking shed"Aston asks him to leave. Whimpering like a rebellious slave whipped into submission, Davies begs to be allowed to remain.

That, apart from a wealth of equally mystifying details and a few comic episodes, is the meat of the play; and I'm perspiring from the effort to extract this much coherence. One is forced to respect Pinter's command of the stage, since he has composed scenes of substantial theatrical force dominated by a compelling air of mystery, but his motive for writing the play escapes me. I would be delighted to be able to tell you that Pinter nurtures some of the seeds he plants in the work—that *The Caretaker* is about the spiritual vacancy of modern life, the inability of slave types to achieve dignity, or (favorite theme of "sensitive" contemporary playwrights) the failure of human beings to communicate with one another. But I cannot honestly conclude that it is about anything at all, other than itself. The situation, apparently ordinary, is so special, and the characters, apparently human, are so unrepresentative, that we are totally alienated from the events on the stage; and finally begin to regard these creatures as a bacteriologist might examine germ life on another planet.

For this reason, the present tendency to couple Pinter and Beckett is more misleading than it is illuminating. Pinter has obviously borrowed some of Beckett's techniques and conventions—the tramp figure, the immobility of the central characters, the repetitions in the dialogue, the occasional vaudeville stunts, the mixture of comedy and seriousness—but he has used them for totally different purposes. In *Waiting for Godot*, the action is metaphorical and universal; in *The Caretaker*, it is denotative and specific. Beckett's play reveals the feelings of a metaphysical poet about the quality of human existence. Pinter's, excluding both feeling and thought, bears almost no relation to any known form of human life, and is so impersonal it seems to have written itself. What Pinter has created, in short, is a naturalism of the grotesque wrapped around a core of abstraction—something less like Beckett than like Sherwood Anderson, though lacking the compassion of either.

The production takes full advantage of ample theatrical opportunities. Donald McWhinnie approaches the play, quite correctly, as if it were a perfectly conventional kitchen drama, adding a note of casual imperturbability with his direction which enhances the oddness. Brian Currah's setting—an artfully arranged hodgepodge of vacuum cleaners, lawn mowers, broken-down beds, paint buckets, and other articles of junk—provides the proper air of imprisonment. And the acting is further proof that the new English proletarian style is now more flexible than our own. Pinter, who writes succulent parts for actors, has created a really juicy character in Davies, excellently played by Donald Pleasence with a kind of shambling, sniveling, corrosive nasti-ness. But for me the best performance of the evening is contributed by Alan Bates as Mick, whose alternating cruelty, irony, wit, and injured innocence are etched with such assurance that one is almost convinced that there is something of consequence beneath the baffling exterior of the part.

But the surface refuses to budge. In *The Caretaker*, Pinter has gone beyond the most extreme theories of the most radical Existentialists: he has created a work in which existence not only precedes essence but thoroughly destroys it. Without some hint of the essential, all judgments must be relative, and a critic of the drama becomes as useless as those critics of Action painting who are given to analyzing their own subliminal responses to a work instead of the work itself. My subliminal response to

Pinter's play was a growing irritation and boredom, somewhat mitigated by admiration for his redoubtable theatrical gifts. If these gifts can someday be combined with visionary power, beauty, heart, and mind, then we shall someday have a new dramatic artist and not just an abstract technician of striking scenes for actors.

Source: Robert Brustein, "A Naturalism of the Grotesque" in his *Seasons of Discontent,* Simon & Schuster, 1965, pp. 180-83..

Critical Essay #3

Kerr offers a favorable appraisal of Pinter's play in this review, citing the play as a challenging work of theatre.

I was instantly fearful that *The Caretaker* would become popular for the wrong reasons. There was the chance, for instance, that it would be regarded as zany comedy, and forcibly laughed at. One response that is regularly made to contemporary plays of the profoundest despair is the tittering pretense that the author has carved his vast zero as a joke. This is not emptiness, the nervous laughter says, but an irresponsible playfulness. People are always mentioning the Marx brothers in connection with the "comedy " of carefully illustrated nothingness, as though we had once laughed at the Marx brothers because they struck us as irrational in the clinical sense.

Thus laughter was felt to be obligatory as three remarkable actors played out the following sequence in Harold Pinter's remarkable play. A filthy old ingrate who had been given shelter in a refuse-littered attic was offered a satchel by the vacant-eyed brother who had admitted him. Another brother, hostile for no known reason, intercepted the satchel each time it was presented. The satchel was thrust forward, snatched away, thrust forward, snatched away, thrust forward, snatched away, finally hurled to the floor in a burst of dust. The repeated gestures did have an echo of a vaudeville routine in which a chair was invariably whisked out from under the comedian as he was about to sit on it. But the routine we once laughed at had had a rationale: we understood the sequence of events, however unlikely or unlucky, that led to each experience of frustration. Here, deliberately, no causes were indicated. The bag was offered without charity and retrieved without reason. The old man's frustration was absolute; it was also—to him, as to us— incomprehensible. To laugh at it almost suggested malice. Or, at the least, the defensive sound of the giggle that is meant to ward off a threatened dissolution of the mind.

There was, further, a strong likelihood that *The Caretaker* would become necessary theatergoing merely because it was, as dramaturgy, novel, eccentric, hence a conversation piece for tired dinner tables. Three characters moved in and out of a domestic graveyard, most often with a sense of stealth, to sit and stare at one another, to recite unseeing monologues (on several occasions the listener on stage simply went to sleep, or otherwise abstracted himself), sometimes to engage in eye-to-eye conversation in which each participant pursued his own thoughts and failed to grasp the other's. All three were kept at arm's length from us, almost at species' length. The homeless old man was indecent at every turn of mind: he hesitated to use the toilet for fear the "blacks" next door might have used it; he treated the benefits doled out to him with fastidious contempt ("Them bastards at the monastery let me down"); he threatened to usurp, with a snivel and a whine, the refuge he did not deserve. The brother who was his benefactor was mindless; doctors had done something to his brain. The brother who visited came to challenge, to sneer, to torment; he was the brazen, mesmerizing pseudo delinquent none of us understands. Such sympathy as stirred in us went, by inversion, to the disreputable vagrant; horror that he was, he was

recognizably human and not a robot or a Martian. But in general we were in the company of the loathsome, the lamed, and the spiteful. It was lamentably easy for so defiant a play to become, through its very violation of our ordinary tastes and our ordinary expectations, simply fashionable.

The Caretaker merited, and I think required, another kind of attention. There were two levels on which it might have been attended to, one with deep communion and hence satisfaction, one with detached but genuine curiosity.

To have been deeply satisfied, perhaps even moved as one is moved by an instant recognition of a kindred soul, it would have been necessary to share Mr. Pinter's vision of the present state of man. This vision was not reduced to a series of editorial statements; it stood as a vision, as a fluid image, as an atmosphere. But what it saw and showed us was a world wholly opaque, wholly impermeable, and, beyond the fact that we could neither see into it nor probe it with our fingers, wholly hollow. Mr. Pinter had attempted to construct, and had succeeded in constructing, a poetry of the blind: the sensed experience of a man who has suddenly lost his sight and is now in an unfamiliar room. This man gropes his way, hesitantly, talking to himself to keep himself company. There are objects about, and they can be touched when they are stumbled over; though they can be vaguely identified by cautious exploration, they remain unfriendly. There are people about, and they can be called to: but what they say is misleading because the tone of voice is not supported by the expressiveness of a face. One can guess, and do the wrong thing. One can plead, and not know when the others present are exchanging cold glances. Man□ and the grimy caretaker was most nearly man in the play□is lost, rejected by what he had thought were his own kind, ousted from what he had thought was his home. Appeal is at last impossible: there are no hearts or heads to be reached.

To say that this tense, concentrated, sustained position was superbly illustrated in performance is to say too little. The play itself, given its particular insight and its precisely appropriate method of articulating that insight, must be regarded as perfect. For it to have been perfectly satisfying in the theater, however, one would have had to be ready not only to attend closely but to nod firmly and say, "Yes, beyond doubt this is the life we live."

Short of such utter identification, there was a second level at which the play's fascination might have been honestly felt. A playgoer might have gone to the play without having yet surrendered all hope of speaking to his fellow men, without having concluded that all dialogue is a dialogue with the figures on Easter Island, without having agreed to regard the world about him as a disarray of ripped umbrellas, broken Buddhas, and empty picture frames. It is nonetheless true that a considerable segment of twentieth-century society has so come to see the neighborhood it inhabits. The antiworld is with us, late and soon; it faces us from the paintings on our walls no less than from the increasingly impotent people within our prosceniums. What exists□in the public reality or the private mind□had better be known, whether in detachment or in surrender, whether in cool appraisal or in assent. There may have been no better way of

knowing it in the early sixties than through the already cool, ruthlessly framed, astringently orchestrated survey of the wreckage called *The Caretaker*.

Adaptations

The Caretaker was adapted as a film in 1964. This British production stars Alan Bates as Mick, Donald Pleasance as Davies, and Robert Shaw as Aston. The producer was Michael Birkett. The film also appeared under the title *The Guest*.

A made-for-television version was filmed and shown on the BBC in 1966. This version was directed by Clive Donner and starred Ian MacShane as Mick, John Rees as Aston, and Roy Dotrice as Davies.

Topics for Further Study

The Caretaker has often been compared to Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*. Compare Beckett's play to Pinter's. How do the tramps Vladimir and Estragon compare to Davies? What are the thematic similarities and differences between the two plays?

Research the historical treatment of the mentally ill, considering especially societal attitudes, and compare past times with the present. Discuss Aston's treatment and Davies's reaction in terms of the history of the treatment of mental illness.

None of the women mentioned in *The Caretaker* appear onstage, and the audience only knows of them through what other characters say. What attitudes toward women are reflected in the characters' dialogue? What is the effect of having none of the women onstage?

Compare the characters and situations of Pinter's *The Birthday Party* to those in *The Caretaker*. How are the two plays alike? How are they different?

Discuss *The Caretaker* as a comedy. What are the comic elements of the play? What is the effect of Pinter's use of comedy on the plays' ending?

Compare and Contrast

1960: Many government programs for the assistance of the poor have been developed, but the efficacy of such programs begins to be called into question.

Today: Although government programs continue to help millions, many begin to doubt that the government is truly capable of offering real solutions to the problem of poverty. Focus on the assistance of the private sector grows, and there is a new emphasis on volunteerism.

1960: The domestic economy is recovering from its Postwar malaise, and the so-called "consumer culture" grows. Television becomes popular, and people are exposed to more advertising than ever before.

Today: Emphasis on consumer acquisition continues as corporate power grows and advertising becomes even more pervasive (and persuasive).

1960: New medications begin to revolutionizetreatment of the mentally ill, but psychologists and psychiatrists often blame severe illnesses such as schizophrenia and manic-depression on psychological factors.

Today: Scientific study has revealed a biological basis for major psychiatric illness, but the mentally ill and their families still face discrimination, as the social stigma of mental illness continues.

1960: Immigrants and members of minority groups face difficult times, much prejudicial treatment, and little legal protection.

Today: Members of minority groups are protected by law, and racism is generally socially unacceptable. The rise of the militant right and hate groups, however, present new threats to immigrants and people of color.

What Do I Read Next?

Waiting for Godot, a 1955 play by Samuel Beckett, is often compared to *The Caretaker* and generally recognized□as many of Beckett's plays are□ as a major influence on Pinter's style.

Look Back in Anger, a 1956 play by John Os-borne, is often cited as a turning point in modern British drama, the first play of the so-called "Angry Young Men" theatre movement. The play focuses on the struggle of a young couple, the unemployed Jimmy Porter and the wife he abuses.

The Birthday Party, a 1958 play by Pinter, concerns Stanley, the only lodger in a dilapidated boarding house, who is terrorized by two mysterious men who arrive looking for him. Although this play originally received negative reviews, it is now regarded as one of Pinter's most important works.

Old Times, a 1971 play by Pinter, focuses on a married couple, Deeley and Kate, who are visited by Kate's old friend Anna. The play centers on a power struggle between Deeley and Anna, each of whom wants to prove his or her possession of Kate.

The Bell Jar (1963), an autobiographical novel by American poet Sylvia Plath, chronicles Plath's experience with mental illness in the early-1950s. The novel records one person's experience with mental health care and electroshock treatment in that time period.

Further Study

Billington, Michael. *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter*.Faber, 1996.

This is the first authorized biographical study of Pinter. Billington uses information gleaned from interviews with Pinter and his friends to illuminate the playwright's life and work.

Briggs, Asa. *A Social History of England: From the Ice Age to the Channel Tunnel,* Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994.

This book provides a careful examination of the history of British society and contains considerable material on Postwar Britain.

Diamond, Elin. *Pinter's Comic Play,* Associated UP, 1985.

Diamond focuses on the use of comedy in Pinter's major plays. This book includes a chapter on *The Caretaker*.

Dukore, Bernard F. *Harold Pinter* Grove Press, 1982.

This is a brief introduction to Pinter's major plays.

Scott, Michael, editor. *Harold Pinter: The Birthday Party, The Caretaker, The Homecoming,* Macmillan, 1986.

This book is a compilation of numerous reviews and essays on the works cited in the title.

Bibliography

Page, Malcolm, compiler. *File on Pinter*, Methuen Drama, 1993, pp. 23-25.

Sakellaridou, Elizabeth. *Pinter's Female Portraits: A Study of Female Characters in the Plays of Harold Pinter*, Macmil-lan, 1988, pp. 127-29.

BOOKRAGS

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Drama for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

©1997-2002; ©2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc.

Gale and Design® and Thomson Learning™ are trademarks used herein under license.

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.
No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any

form or by any means—graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems—without the written permission of the publisher.

For permission to use material from this product, submit your request via Web at http://www.gale-edit.com/permissions, or you may download our Permissions Request form and submit your request by fax or mail to:

Permissions Department
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535

Permissions Hotline:
248-699-8006 or 800-877-4253, ext. 8006
Fax: 248-699-8074 or 800-762-4058

Since this page cannot legibly accommodate all copyright notices, the acknowledgments constitute an extension of the copyright notice.

While every effort has been made to secure permission to reprint material and to ensure the reliability of the information presented in this publication, The Gale Group, Inc. does not guarantee the accuracy of the data contained herein. The Gale Group, Inc. accepts no payment for listing; and inclusion in the publication of any organization, agency, institution, publication, service, or individual does not imply endorsement of the editors or publisher. Errors brought to the attention of the publisher and verified to the satisfaction of the publisher will be corrected in future editions.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". © 1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". © 1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Drama for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535