



## *The Caretaker: Cain and Abel Replayed*

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### Pour citer cet article

Gordon Lois, « *The Caretaker: Cain and Abel Replayed* », *Cycnos*, vol. 14.1 (Harold Pinter), 1997, mis en ligne en juin 2008.

<http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/publication/item/532>

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### *Cycnos, études anglophones*

*revue électronique éditée sur épi-Revel à Nice*

ISSN 1765-3118      ISSN papier 0992-1893

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# EPI-REVEL

Revue électronique de l'Université Côte d'Azur

*The Caretaker: Cain and Abel Replayed\**

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As in many of Samuel Beckett's plays, whose couples demonstrate the complex ambiguity of human relationships, the question of whether or not we are our brother's keeper underlies Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*. Despite their many differences, both Pinter and Beckett compel us to consider brotherhood as a human imperative. In Beckett, however, the *why* and *how* we must care for others are more apparent. God, or Godot, or an ultimate purpose in life is missing, and so we are obliged to help each other in the matter of getting through it all — comforting and even entertaining one another. In the Beckettian universe, in the absence of a Divine Caretaker, we must help our brothers and sisters as best we can.

In *The Caretaker*, the impulse to brotherhood is, I think, also a given, but the motivation and impact of brotherly action are unclear. It is difficult to define *why* one stretches a hand to another. It is difficult to gauge the *degree* to which one genuinely touches the other, and, it is difficult to avoid the *misunderstandings* that a would-be brotherly gesture may incur. The complications of caretaking are incalculable. Pinter sets into motion, in *The Caretaker*, a series of interactions between possible "brothers," while not offering a clear explanation of either intention or response.

We get only bits and pieces, and we experience something akin to the kaleidoscopic surfaces of, say, a Cubist painting. When we think we have put something together, the image shifts, because others begin to take its place. This is not because the play evades clarification but because, as Pinter has said of human motivation and event: "Verification remains impossible."

Although Aston and Mick may have been together a long time, we don't really know, for example, the nature of their relationship. Are they bound by love, by obligation, or by fearful dependency? After Aston brings Davies home, why does Davies behave as he does? Is he basically exploitative? Is it his unfortunate nature to befoul the nest that would comfort him? Has he been driven to distrust and paranoia by his past? Has he been so scarred over that his cynicism mistakes kindness for weakness?

Despite these ambiguities, we sense something very human about these characters; we empathize with them, although there may be as many different "readings" — or reasons for our empathy — as there are people in an audience.

Perhaps we sense that the best we can do in life is settle in a room. And if we have another person there, so much the better — at least so we hope. We will share our room — full or part time — but in those moments of double occupancy because complications may arise, we will maintain a role that suits us, while it accommodates our companion. We won't always say exactly what we think or feel. But that's all right, as long as we can maintain our niche in the room. The problem is that at any moment, the unspoken or the unforeseen might gain utterance. Or, at any moment, someone else might enter the room and upset our partnership.

Aston and Mick, in their brotherhood or co-tenancy, complement each other in mood and interest, like two halves of a whole. For most of the play, Mick is tough, at times, even brutal — as, for example, when he terrifies Davies with the bike. Otherwise, he is officiously rational, sophisticated, and bourgeois. He is Aston's caretaker, and he provides a place for his brother to tinker and build (although it seems entirely unlikely that Aston will build the shed, let alone decorate the flat with teak and tiles). But this is the brothers' "arrangement."

If we take the gentle and vulnerable Aston as he is played, he has rejected the world of people and affairs — or perhaps been rejected by it — although as the junk in his room indicates, he

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\* This essay is a revised version of a talk presented at Harvard University in 1993.

has retained the trappings of the bourgeois life. He has had vision or visions, and his insight or his hallucinations have precipitated his shock therapy. Now, he seems to function as a man of feeling primarily, but there are moments when he slips into a silent world all his own and functions we-know-not-where. But it is in a moment of feeling, so it appears, that he brings home the needy, homeless Davies — because it's the decent thing to do, above and beyond — as they say. But as the play proceeds, it is unclear if Aston merely sees Davies just like another piece of bric-à-brac to bring home. Or perhaps he, Aston, would be another's caretaker. Or perhaps he seeks someone to replace Mick in the room. Or perhaps he recognizes a soulmate in the socially-rejected Davies.

Davies has been called tragic, his ejection from the room compared to Adam's expulsion. In many productions, the final tableau beautifully suggests this, as Aston stands, arms outstretched, before an exterior light — his back to a darkened room where Davies holds his finger toward him, like Adam to God in the Sistine Chapel.

At the same time, the play fully portrays Davies' unsympathetic qualities. He is a man who has difficulty either giving or accepting care. At first, he *does* seem pathetic and helpless, truly our generic brother, most in need of caretaking. He is basic humanity — naked and unaccommodated — a man without shoes, papers or a name, a man without cards of identity, a man who does not know his birthplace and, for all his boasting, a man in every way without reference. It's difficult not to sympathize with Davies in his existential and social homelessness.

Yet as the play progresses, we see how Davies survives. He manifests a mixture of defensiveness, demanding insatiability, arrogance, distrust, prejudice, and paranoia. His madness, however, is not the kind for which one gets institutionalized. It is manifest in his stereotypical prejudice, his complaints that nothing is good enough, and his fears that a black person or a draught will do him in.

Davies acts as though there are only two roles in life — that of the master or the slave, the victim or the victimizer, and his two names correspond to his duplicitous roleplaying with the brothers and the roles they fulfill for each other. As the play progresses, in his eagerness to meet his own needs, he readily becomes the supplicant or the lord and master — depending upon his assessment of the power he can wield.

In his dangerous game with the two brothers, he thus goes from being a needy transient to the ostensible recipient of two job offers. At his moment of apparent triumph, the once-shoeless vagrant sits lounging in his smoking-jacket, arrogantly believing that he controls the situation. But in short order, he is forced to realize that he controls nothing.

I think that what resonates in us, Pinter's audience, is the attempt the *three* characters make to deal with their fundamental loneliness and vulnerability, which I take to be Pinter's vision of the human condition. What makes for the combination of tragedy and comedy — terms Pinter himself used in discussing *The Caretaker* — is the way the play reveals the stratagems that people contrive to cover this loneliness and vulnerability — to cover their nakedness — as well as the transparency of those very stratagems. These, Pinter demonstrates in his unique use of language. That is to say, he demonstrates how language both expresses and hides true identity, how words, often banal, correct, disguise, and reveal. Pinter's people all fear the slightest disturbance of their precariously structured identities and whatever sense of status they have achieved. One senses that they are always on the verge of fracturing.

After all is said and done, at the end, each character is left with his own monologue, in his own world, no more connected to another than he was at the beginning. Even Mick, for all his bullying behavior and dreams of accomplishment — for all his fanciful descriptions of gentrifying his habitat — seems forlorn at the end. His last speech and his inchoate rage give to his dreams as hollow a ring as Davies' boasts about his past.

The Cain and Abel story is an ancient telling of the difficulties of brotherhood. It is interestingly a triangular situation, involving needs of power and approval. The Divine Parent shows preference for one child's gift over another's, and the rejected son, Cain, murders his preferred brother. God then interrogates Cain, who replies with the question that echoes in the play: "Am I my brother's keeper?" Cain is then forsaken by God who marks and expels him, without blessing, to a life of wandering.

The moral usually drawn is that one *is* one's brother's keeper. Yet the Biblical text stirs an uneasiness in the modern reader. Why is the Divine Caretaker unreceptive to Cain's offering and unsympathetic to his despair? Why does God arbitrarily favor one child over another? Could God not have made each brother feel powerful and worthy?

Moreover, why is *Abel* not more sympathetic toward his rejected brother? Should he not be *his* brother's keeper as well? The modern reader might further ask what actually happened when the two brothers went into the field, prior to Cain's attack. Did Abel lord over Cain God's favor or the superiority of his gift? Or did he try to reason with his brother? The Bible's silence on this last question — what happened in the field — frustrates our wish to understand the nature of this first brotherly relationship. And if I might be so bold, I would suggest that the perplexity of motivation in Pinter is not unlike the Biblical silences.

Setting aside these thorny textual issues, it seems to me that in *The Caretaker*, Pinter has reexamined the problems of brotherhood and that his brothers may be Cain's descendants for several reasons. On the one hand, they all seem lonely and disconnected, and in need of brotherly or paternal caretaking. They also have needs for power or respect.

But the even larger parallel concerns their overwhelming vulnerability, their deep longing for caretaking in the face of what Pascal calls "the eternal silence of these infinite spaces."

This silence and space terrified Pascal, as it seems to terrify Pinter's people — whether the silence is the absence of faith or the absence of a coherent self. Ultimately, this absence of connection compels their unceasing quest for an utterly dependable caretaker. It is this quest that, to me, accounts for the poignancy of their dilemmas.