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Exiles in *No Man's Land* and *The Caretaker*: A Comparison of Two of Pinter's Tramps

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No Man's Land is, as Bernard Dukore wrote, "[...] an encapsulation of familiar Pinter themes and techniques, and an exemplar of Pinter's distinctive tragicomedy" (63). There are inherent similarities between Pinter's tramp plays, *The Caretaker* and *No Man's Land*. The plays open with two people in a room who become locked in a battle for control. There are typical Pinter pauses, silences, and ellipses strewn throughout both texts. They are the "mysterious strangers from outside" (Goddard, 253) brought home by the almost silent occupants of the dwelling. The characters follow Pinter's themes and mirror one another's tactics in their attempts to achieve their goals. If "*No Man's Land* is an echo chamber of the Pinter canon" (Dukore, 63), then what makes Spooner one of the "magnificent parts giving rise to unforgettable performances" (Esslin, 191)? Physical similarities and plot parallels do not explain why *No Man's Land* is considered a powerful vehicle with a powerful message (191). The similarities are important when analyzing the characters. However, by exploring the stakes they place on their goals, the way they play their games, and the audience's reaction to their downfall it can be shown that Spooner is serving a different purpose in *No Man's Land* than Davies in *The Caretaker*.

When comparing the two works a seemingly significant plot parallel is discovered. By their own actions, both men sabotage any chance of achieving their goal. Davies' super objective is to be accepted into the household, yet everything he does counteracts his desire. Aston opens up and tells the story of his confinement in the mental institution (1977, 63). Davies, unable to react with sympathy and compassion, uses the information for his own benefit. He enjoys the thrill of placing himself above another human being, "I'm a sane man! So don't start mucking me about. I'll be all right as long as you keep your place" (1977, 76). Davies needs to treat Aston as a lunatic, because in the process he raises his status by being sane. These actions are as Esslin states, "the hubris of Greek tragedy" (100) and contribute to Davies' downfall.

Spooner possesses the same hubris. He wishes to be appreciated for his past, his age and experience. Yet Spooner and Hirst are cast aside, their wisdom ignored. Hirst speaks of his past life as one filled with afternoon teas, a wife, a daughter, and a country home. Spooner informs Hirst of his needs hoping to be asked to fulfill them, and thus achieving his own desires. "You need a friend, you have a long hike, my lad, up which, presently, you slog unfriended. Let me perhaps be your boatman" (1981, 95). Later, Spooner's tone changes as he blurts out a lengthy monologue touting his triumphs and blunders, and praising Hirst's talents as a poet. Spooner is candid and heartfelt in his plea, yet not a word is uttered by Hirst. Spooner no longer has any claim, his impassioned plea is cruelly ignored. Spooner finds his common ground with Hirst, but sabotages the companionship by asserting a superiority over his host. He proclaims in the heat of the duel, "It is you who have behaved unnaturally and scandalously, to the woman who was joined to me in God" (1981, 135). Once again, a tramp raises his status by asserting superiority, and Hirst proceeds to reassess Spooner's purpose in visiting his home, which leads him to the revelation that if Spooner were to join the household, he would be as domineering as Foster and Briggs. Thus, when Spooner finally asks the question, "Let me live with you and be your secretary" (1981, 146), Hirst replies with "Is there a big fly in here? I hear buzzing" (1981, 146). Spooner regroups and tries another tactic to move into the home and life of Hirst.

One of the typical Pinter tactics the two characters use, is game playing. Davies and Spooner's "comic posing and scheming launch the play's conflict" (Diamond, 180). Spooner and Davies undercut their chance to achieve a home by their own manipulations. However,

unlike Davies, Spooner insists on a degree of respect not only for himself, but for Hirst. In both Spooner and Davies' cases the stakes are high, for they deal with basic human survival. The men seek a roof over their heads and food in their bellies. However, Spooner's desires delve deeper, he needs companionship and a purpose in life. Spooner is in a desperate fight. Davies' fight is desperate as well, but his motivations are centered on his supposed rightful place in society where the Blacks, the Poles, and the Greeks will give him his due. He constantly tries to boost his image, at the expense of others. "All them toe-rags, mate, got the manner of pigs" (1977, 18). Davies feels he is owed more than life has dealt him, but Spooner feels that he and Hirst have earned their rights, "[...] Respect our age [...]" (1981, 109). Spooner is fighting to be granted the earned respect that his age and experience deserves, instead of becoming entombed in insignificance. His thoughts are far more evolved than that of the self-centered, primitive Davies.

It is Spooner's age that causes his rejection at the hands of the younger Foster and Briggs. Davies is exiled because of his feigned superiority which gets in the way of a mutual relationship with Aston. However, it is Spooner's demand for respect, and for Hirst to achieve, that causes Spooner's exile. Hirst sees Spooner as a jailer, asking him to do what he feared most, to live again. "You would be there in body. It would bring you to the young, the young to you. The elderly, also, those who have almost lost hope [...]" (1981, 148). With Foster and Briggs in charge, Hirst can slip into insignificance and just stop living. He is the elderly Spooner speaks of, he has lost hope. Spooner cannot reinstate the zest for life and significance that would enable both men to live out their days in relative happiness. Hirst states, "Let us change the subject. For the last time" (1981, 149), thus signifying his end and Spooner's exile.

In the fight against exile, the men use language as a game. Spooner and Davies use language forcefully by rarely allowing their hosts to speak. Davies schemes throughout the play. He uses language to create a power he really does not possess. Saul Bellow stated, "Powerlessness appears to force people to have recourse to words" (72). Davies does all of the talking about his job, the other races of people, and shoes while Aston continually works to fix a plug (1977, 17). He plays the language game with Aston with such expertise that Aston offers him a place to stay, that he will go out and get his things for him, and give him the shoes off of his feet. Davies tries on the shoes and marvels at the style, the leather, and the quality. "Not a bad pair of shoes [...]. They're strong, all right [...]. Yes, good shoe this" (1977, 24). Yet when the matter seems settled, Davies states that they don't fit. Aston agrees to seek a new pair later. Davies manipulates Aston so that he can control the situation.

Davies' scheming ways are mirrored in Spooner. He is ingratiating toward his host, "May I say how very kind it was of you to ask me in? In fact, you are kindness itself, probably always are kindness itself, now and in England and in Hampstead and for all eternity" (1981, 79). This exhibits the absurd, nauseous flattery that Spooner uses to wheedle his way into Hirst's confidence. When it fails, he tries another tactic, that of bettering himself. Rambling on, Spooner boasts of his world travel, "I've been to Amsterdam [...]. I mean that was the last place... I visited. I know Europe well" (1981, 101). He is placing himself on the same level of society as Hirst. He states, "We share something. A Memory of bucolic life" (1981, 91). Spooner speaks freely with Hirst, reminiscing of the bygone days with a grace and a flair. The scheme fails as well, and Spooner takes one final tactic: helping Hirst and offering him respect. "I bend my knee to your excellence" (1981, 147). Spooner is old, alone, and homeless, and although "a free man" (1981, 83), he longs for the elusive home.

Spooner desperately seeks his lost significance through words, whereas Davies seeks to control his host through language. Yet both men mutely cower when the real power in the household is unleashed. Spooner is barraged with words when Foster enters, and his lengthy

monologues are replaced with short sentences. Davies is physically assaulted when Mick enters the room, and words are replaced by screams, utterances, and silence.

Language is not the only game the two men use in their quest for a home. Memory games are also played. Almansí and Henderson coined Davies' memory game as "hide and seek" (52). The characters in *The Caretaker* play double roles. In particular, Davies lies about his name and station in life in order to acquire information. It is a dangerous game because of the threat of being found out (52). Davies is found out, by Mick. In Act three, he allows Davies to discredit himself by unmercifully criticizing Aston. Thus, for Davies, the hide and seek game is over, as is any chance of shelter.

Spooner plays the same game, but the memory constantly shifts to adapt to the strategic moves in the verbal chess game he plays with Hirst. Deciphering the real past from the modified memory, is difficult. When Hirst enters in Act two, he immediately begins telling a lie concerning Spooner's true identity. He calls Spooner "Charles" and speaks of playing squash, attending Oxford, and what role he played in the war (1981, 126). Spooner, adept in the dueling memory game, jumps right in without missing a beat:

HIRST: You did say you had a good war, didn't you?

SPOONER: A rather good one, yes.

HIRST: How splendid. The RAF?

SPOONER: The Navy (1981, 129)

Spooner knows how to play the game; however he does not know how to win. The most critical departure in the games that Spooner and Davies play, is that with *No Man's Land* the game is out in the open right from the start:

HIRST: As it is?

SPOONER: As it is, yes please, absolutely as it is. (1981, 77)

The gauntlet is thrown down, the rules are understood. Hirst and Spooner spar with their supposed memories throughout the play. Spooner even blatantly explains to Hirst, "Temperamentally I can be what you wish" (1981, 147).

Spooner is an accomplished game player. By contrast, Davies is inadequate against Mick's quiet attack. His tragic flaw, pride, never allows him to achieve his goal. He is granted a place to stay, yet criticizes the four walls and all they contain, including the human contact. He maliciously reveals his trump card when he says, "I never been inside a nuthouse" (1977, 71), and so he relegates Aston to the level of "them [...] Blacks, Greeks, Poles [...]" (1977, 17). When he pathetically pulls the knife on Aston in Act three, he becomes a man trying desperately to assert his humanity. As he fights for the lair, he is forced to the animal-like behavior of barring his teeth (Baker, 76). Davies feels the world owes him certain rights. In Act one, his speech about tea pitifully shows his delusion. "Ten minutes off for a tea-break in the middle of the night in that place and I couldn't find a seat, not one. All them [...] the lot of them [...] doing me out of a seat, treating me like dirt" (1977, 17). Davies' fight for the room is his quest for basic human needs. He desires food, a bed, and dignity. He seeks a "minimum but secure final place in society that he must achieve at all costs" (Baker, 81).

Throughout Act one, Davies asserts his status and defends it to the bitter end. Aston invites Davies home because of a fight he had with co-workers regarding his employment duties. However meager his position, Davies is compelled to allow no one to usurp his supposed rights. But, his inadequacies prevail. Davies desperately hopes to acquire possessions, as shown through his plan to be the caretaker of the apartment building. However, his desires stem from a need to belong in a society that judges its people by its possessions. He is not included in that same society, a fact that is made clear when Mick states, "You're a barbarian. And to put the old tin lid on it, you stink from arse-hole to breakfast time" (1977, 83). Earlier, Mick strings him along promising to include Davies if he can supply the proper references, "There's only one thing [...]. Can you give me any references" (1977, 60)? Davies' supposed references are in Sidcup, yet he never psychologically is able to make the journey to get them.

Mick uses Davies' inaction against him, "You make a long speech about all the references you've got down at Sidcup, and what happens? I haven't noticed you go down to Sidcup to obtain them" (1977, 83). Davies' fear of failure prevents him from becoming a member of the household. His final pleas are ignored by Aston who has concluded that Davies does not belong. Davies' exclusion is complete, shown by the brothers' smile at the end of Act three. The familial bond that makes up their society will never include Davies.

Davies fumbles, playing semantic games off the cuff, whereas Spooner has a strong command of language. Davies never quite gets a handle on it. Penelope Gilliatt observed that in the film version of *The Caretaker* — *The Guest* — "Davies' defensive use of language is haunted by suspicions of malevolence, but he has no one to ask about them; so when he is talked to he often says 'What?' not because he hasn't heard, but as a hopeless way of gaining time and puzzling out how much ground he has just lost" (Gale, 235).

Davies is a blunt man blurting things out that decorum prevents most from saying:

DAVIES : You sleep here, do you?

ASTON : Yes.

DAVIES : What, in that? (1977, 20)

Additionally, Davies is questioned in the morning by Aston about dreaming and the noises he made in the night. Davies flatly denies it. He blames the noise on "them blacks" (1977, 32) and later on Aston himself. In Davies' world it is always someone else's fault. He has a great need to secure a home, yet obviously destroys his chances with Aston. He is "bitter, weak, and constantly deceiving others as well as himself" (Esslin, 96). So, when Davies is put out into the night, the audience does not feel the same empathy as they do in *No Man's Land*. Instead, we understand that Davies was the cause of his own demise.

Davies pits brother against brother to gain his goals. He buddies up to the brother in charge. He schemes to obtain the basics: food and shelter. His fellow man is of no consequence. These desires are also inherent in Spooner. However, Spooner understands the plight of Hirst and feels the same anxiety of being caged and stuck in "no man's land."

Spooner's loss is a loss of his soul. His physical life is not merely terminated, but it has become non-existent. He is brushed aside to live out his days in "the frozen region between life and death" (Esslin, 200). Spooner's fight is against death without significance. Throughout a person's life one has a glimmer of a chance to succeed, but when a person grows old the chances slip further and further away (200). Spooner's biological clock is running out. The last scene of the play is, in essence, Hirst's burial; his entombment in "no man's land." Spooner's silence is an acknowledgment of the fact that not only Hirst's, but also his chance in life has passed (1981, 153). This follows Hirst's monologue explaining, once again, his dream. Earlier in the play, Spooner feels that he is the drowned man in Hirst's dream, but in the end, he too accepts that no one is there to be saved.

Spooner's concern for his contemporary is seen throughout the play. He tries to help Hirst up from the floor after he falls in a drunken stupor, "He has grandchildren [...]. As I have [...]. We are of an age. I know his wants. Let me take his arm. Respect our age [...]. There's no pity in these people" (1981, 109). Foster and Briggs proceed to tear Spooner apart for his concern. Later, Spooner fights against Hirst's jailers, "I had rather bury myself in a tomb of honor than permit your dignity to be sullied by domestic enemy or foreign foe" (1981, 147). Spooner wishes to overturn Foster and Briggs not only for his own needs, but for Hirst's, because in Hirst, he sees himself.

When Spooner is condemned to live as a homeless man, the audience feels pity for both Spooner and Hirst. Hirst is condemned to live in bondage when he desires freedom, and Spooner is free when he wishes to be indentured. Both men fear death and in their fight to avoid it, they end up in the lifelessness of "no man's land." Spooner acknowledges their common fate: "You are in no man's land. Which never moves, which never changes, which never grows older, but which remains forever, icy and silent" (1981, 153). Both men are left

to live out their remaining days in an icy existence devoid of any purpose. A silence follows Spooner's words, a dead stop, because there is nothing more to say on the subject.

The final contrast between Spooner and Davies lies in their exit. Davies is oblivious to his loss, his final lines are pitiful pleas to be allowed to stay. "Listen... if I... got down... if I was to... get my papers... would you... would you let... would you... if I got down... and got my... (long silence)" (1977, 87). Davies does not turn to see the brothers' knowing smile, or to recognize his own fate. The curtain falls with Davies pitifully trying to plead for acceptance, his language skills decimated to mere babble. Aston turns his back and does not even acknowledge Davies' words.

Spooner's exit is dignified and accepting. He joins in the ritual, aids in the entombment of Hirst, and then acknowledges his own fate. Spooner speaks his last lengthy monologue in an effort to save the two men from their now inevitable fate. Within the monologue, Spooner offers the idea of organized poetry readings, in which Hirst can make his comeback. "I can guarantee a full house, and I will be happy to arrange a straightforward fee for you or, if you prefer, a substantial share of the profits. The young, I can assure you, would flock to hear you" (1981, 148). He continues to paint a picture of notoriety and celebrity to bring Hirst out of his retirement. Silence follows Spooner's words as Hirst refuses to turn the tide and live. Hirst states, "Let us change the subject. (pause) For the last time. (pause) What have I said?" (1981, 149). Spooner is left out of the final dialogue. Foster and Briggs take over steering Hirst toward insignificance. The two controllers do the controlling with such grace that Hirst's final barrage of questions are merely trampled with their power. Hirst's dream of the drowning man is brought up again, but this time Hirst sees nothing. "There is nothing in the water. I say to myself, I saw a body, drowning. But I am mistaken. There is nothing there." (1981, 153). Spooner finally ends his silence and acknowledges their fate, "No. You are in no man's land. Which never moves, which never changes, which never grows older, but which remains forever, icy and silent" (1981, 153). Hirst proclaims, "I'll drink to that" (1981, 153), and the lights slowly fade. The entombment is complete. Spooner acknowledges the end, rather than Davies' pitiful grasps for what he has lost.

At first glance, Spooner and Davies are the same character in sequel. They appear physically identical, and the plots parallel. However, major contrasts distinguish the two characters and the themes of the two texts. The stakes the characters place on their goals, and the games they play have vastly different rules. As the curtain falls, the audience feels differently toward the exiled characters. Davies is a mere animal, fighting tooth and claw for what he thinks he rightly deserves. Spooner has higher stakes, complex motives, and a highly developed sense of purpose. He is a more evolved Davies. *No Man's Land* deals with people "at the extreme edge of their living [...]" (Gabbard, 274). Though Davies must go out into the world to live or die, Spooner must go out and live in that icy silence that never moves or changes.

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