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HUMOUR ABSURD ELEMENTS IN HAROLD PINTER'S *THE CARE TAKER*

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ABSTRACT

The early decades of the 20th century, especially the period after world war 1, is known as the modern age. While, the roots of modernism can be traced back late 19th century most historians agree that high point of modernism or high modernism came only after world war 1. Twentieth century British literature was developed in the English speaking world due to general sense of disillusionment with the Victorian era attitudes of certainty conservation and belief in the idea of objective truth. Harold Pinter is one of the pioneers of the theatre of absurd. The plays of Pinter are highly influenced by the philosophy of absurdism of Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre. The Humour in Pinter's plays springs from absurd situations, absurd actions, absurd behavior and absurd statements of the characters. In *The Caretaker*, we laugh at that which hurts us most and we weep at that which is most foolish in our nature. We pity Aston and Davies in *The Caretaker* but at the same time we laugh at Davies for making himself ridiculous in the end. This paper is about humour and absurd elements in Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*. It is an absurd play and he acknowledged a connection between his work as an actor and his play, "yes my experience as an actor has influenced my plays—it must have—though it is my plays—it must have—though it is possible for me to put finger on it exactly"

KEYWORDS:

Absurdism, Caretaker, Humour, Companionship

INTRODUCTION

Harold Pinter is a twentieth century British writer. He is well known for his Absurd plays and short stories. Pinter's great strengths lie in his ability to evoke the fears that lie at various levels of our individual psyches. Pinter is celebrated for possessing an ear for every day speech; however, Pinter shapes it and makes poetry out of it. Many of Pinter's characters, while exchanging remarks apparently on a common topic, and using mutually comprehensible vocabulary, are revealed as experiencing a

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profound failure to communicate with one another. Personal violence rather than public politics is a theme that runs through the early plays. Typically, these power struggles and feats of non communication take place in enclosed spaces, detached from the real world. The Second World War was broke out in 1939, which affected the childhood of Harold Pinter. He moved to Cornwall for fear of air-raids mounted by the Francists on the Jewish population and returned to London in 1944, where he attended Hackney Downs Grammar School and displayed his enthusiasm for English and the theatre. He took a keen interest in outdoor activities, played football and cricket and wrote verses and articles for his school magazines. He went through James Joyce's *Ulysses* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and wrote his own comments on these books brought him closer to Joyce in out look and taste.

Harold Pinter is one of the pioneers of the Theatre of the Absurd. His name is associated with Samuel Becket, and one of the most individual voices of the Post-war British Drama. Pinter joined in Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. Later he was brought into Shakespearean Academy. In this place he had a chance to do rehearsal and also had a chance to act in *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet*. At the age of eighteen Pinter was invited to National Service in the Armed Forces and fought against Fascism. In 1953 he met actress Vivien Merchant in Kings theatre. Later both of them fell in love and got married in the year 1956. Their marriage life was no longer exist, they got divorce in 1980.

Pinter's first work was one act play *The Room*, which was produced by Bristol University in 1957. Martin Esslin said, "The Room, which is the centre and chief poetic image of the play, is one of the recurring motifs of Pinter's work" *The Dumb Waiter*, another one act play of Pinter, was performed at the Hampstead Theatre Club in London in 1960. Pinter is considered one of three Anglophone playwrights. Pinter has created new type of Dramas, known as "the comedy of menace". Later it is developed as Pintersque theatre, which belongs to the theatre of absurd; accurately it is called as 'Sui Generis'. It is kind of psychological drama in which characters involve with fear, insecurity and sexuality.

Pinter's most characteristic stage represents a shabby retreat vulnerable to the arrival of alien threatening presence. His is the theatre of sad boarding-houses and strangely unlocked rooms. In much of the more overtly political work of his later years, however, more clues are given, as the source of the violence that hovers in the wings of most of his plays is transferred from the interior lumber-room of the psyche to the exterior world of totalitarian politics. Pinter's great strengths, then, lie in his ability to evoke the fears that lie at various levels of our individual psyches.

Absurd means contrary to reason or propriety; obviously and flatly opposed to manifest truth; inconsistent with the plain dictates of common sense; having no rational or orderly relation to people lives. A philosophy which holds that the universe is chaotic and irrational and that any attempt to impose order will ultimately fail. Harold Pinter has used these elements in that very beginning of the play;

"You ask me to sit down? Oh ! I could not have a good sit-down. I have-not have a proper sit down. Well, I am unable to tell you."(Davies)

The definition of "theatre of the absurd" was popularized by Martin Esslin's study *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) and is usually applied to dramatists such as Beckett, Genet and Ionesco who emerged in the late 1940s and in the 1950s. Esslin actually derived his expression from Albert Camus who wrote about the absurd feeling that man experiences as he tries to give a sense of purpose to his existence in a world that belies any meaning and logic. Pinter's first plays such as *The Room*, *The Birthday Party*, *The Dumb-waiter*, *The Caretaker* and *The Homecoming* are all informed by a world-view

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where there is no purpose in human existence and where all efforts at a meaningful communication between human beings is doomed to fail. Therefore, the plots and dialogues of these plays do not develop following a logical and sequential pattern. In addition, there seems to be a lack of a superior moral authority and a constant sense of threat to the characters' lives. The Theater of the Absurd is a movement in drama that refers to the work of several playwrights of the 1950s and 1960s. The term is credited to the critic Martin Esslin, who in turn derives it from an essay by the French writer Albert Camus. Camus wrote in his 1942 *Myth of Sisyphus* that human life was essentially meaningless and absurd: "in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and of light, man feels an alien, a stranger.

The Theater of the Absurd writers, including Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Harold Pinter, Edward Albee, and Eugene Ionesco, sought to expound on this belief that life was absurd –that human beings occupied a capricious and meaningless universe in which they were able to play no authentic role. Their work focused on humans trying to control the events in their lives, and the resultant chaos. Many of the characters are clowns or completely helpless and bereft of rationality. They also tend to be of the lower social classes. Overall, they seem menaced and controlled by invisible outer forces, completely unable to attain autonomy. Communication between characters is difficult, if not impossible; language is unable to create human connections. Some characters try to fight back against the stultifying incomprehensibility of their world, but are unsuccessful in their efforts.

The plays, in this tradition often try to shake the audience out of apathy and comfort, playing with their expectations about what theater is supposed to be. There is divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity." In his essay, Esslin referred to absurdism as "the inevitable devaluation of ideals, purity, and purpose." Actors, dialogue dependent on slang and wordplay, references to the theater itself, and abrasively funny or bleak moments.

Absurdity of human existence –

In the conventional comedies, the source of humour is an exaggeration of the oddities of character or comic situations to a certain extent. In the absurd drama, the source of humour is the absurdity of the existence of characters. The concept of absurdity is based on philosophy of Albert Camus who believes human beings are stranger in this world, and their existence is without any meaning. In a dark comedy, humour always springs from absurd statement, absurd situations and absurd behavior of character. Davies –the principal source of humour in *The Caretaker* is Davies –his absurd statements, his absurd situation and his behavior. It is his absurd existence in the room that causes humour in the play. So far as Aston and Mick are concerned, they are sober characters trying to make their place in the absurd world.

Davies absurd situation-

The behavior of Davies becomes absurd as soon as he begins to tell lies for making his stay surer in the room. He knows that he cannot stay without Aston for long without the verification of his identity for which he requires character references which, as he claims, lie with a man in sidcup. He puts off his visit to sidcup on two grounds. First, the weather is adverse. Secondly, he has no proper room . He becomes very glad as soon as he gets a proposal for caretaking of the house from Aston.

The problem begins with Davies after arrival of in Mick in the room. Davies questions the identity of Mick as if he was the owner of the house and Mick were an intruder. When Mick asks his

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name, Davies questions his identity and authority, "I don't know you. I don't know you are". But when Davies learns that Mick is the real owner of the house, his behavior towards Mick immediately changes. He gets very friendly to him and indifferent and unfriendly to Aston. But when he makes unsavory remarks against Aston and exposes himself as an impostor and liar, Mick dismisses him from caretaking. Then he tries to get friendly with Aston again and accepts all the conditions laid down by Aston. He offers to give him helping hand in putting up the shed. He agrees not to change his bed but Aston does not listen to him. Thus, Davies is placed in absurd comic situation. The audiences laugh but Davies is amazed at his own predicament. He is self-deceived. He does not know what to do and where to go.

CONCLUSION

A farce and tragedy –

In the *Caretaker*, there is a blanket of darkness which does not allow the rays of sunny humour to enter. This darkness in the comedy comes from the philosophy of Absurdum. The *Caretaker* is, therefore a successful dark comedy in the sense that all the three characters in the play are grouping in dark to find a home and meaning of life for themselves but not without a lighter side of it. Laughter and tears go together. The play has both humour and absurd qualities and makes us laugh, at the same time draws our attention with suspense. Each and every action of the play deals with comical elements particularly the activities of Davies with Aston and Mick.

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