

Harold Pinter

DCUS.online — ঢাকা কেন্দ্রীয় বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়ের শিক্ষার্থীদের জন্য

Overview — the story in simple English

The *Caretaker* is a play by the English writer Harold Pinter, first put on the stage in 1960. It has only three characters (চরিত্র) and almost all of it happens in one dirty room full of junk (আবজনা / অকেজো জিনিস) in a poor part of London. Aston, a quiet and gentle man, saves an old homeless tramp (ভবঘুরে) named Davies from a fight in a café and kindly brings him home to sleep. Davies turns out to be rude, greedy and full of excuses; he complains about everything and blames other people for his troubles. He keeps saying that his identity papers (পরিচয়পত্র) are in a far-off town called Sidcup, and that he must go there to prove who he really is — but he never actually goes. Aston's younger brother, Mick, owns the house; Mick is sharp, quick-tongued and a little frightening (ভীতিকর). At different times both brothers offer Davies the job of "caretaker" (তত্ত্বাবধায়ক) of the house. Foolishly, Davies tries to turn the two brothers against each other so that he can feel safe and stay. Slowly we learn that Aston was once shut in a mental hospital and given electric shock treatment (বৈদ্যুতিক শক চিকিৎসা), which damaged his mind and his power to concentrate. In the end the brothers grow tired of Davies; his lies are exposed, and they push him out. Under the funny talk there is always a strange feeling of danger (বিপদ) hiding, and the play ends with Davies begging (কাকুতি) to stay, with no clear answer given.

 **One-line meaning:** *Under the small quarrels of three lonely men in one room, Pinter shows how people fight for a little power, a little shelter, and a sense of who they are — and how easily kindness turns to cruelty.*

Quick Facts	
Published / First staged	1960 (Arts Theatre, London)
Genre	Comedy of menace; tragicomedy; linked to the Theatre of the Absurd
Setting	One cluttered room in a run-down house in west London, late 1950s
Narration / Form	Stage play (drama) in three acts; no narrator — only dialogue, stage directions, and famous pauses
Famous author remark	Pinter said the play is "funny, up to a point," and beyond that point it stops being funny

Themes & Technique

- Menace hidden under ordinary life.** The talk is everyday and often funny, but a threat (হুমকি) is always felt underneath. Mick suddenly attacks Davies in the dark, stares silently, and asks strange questions. This mix of laughter and fear is why critics call it a "comedy of menace."
- The search for identity.** Davies does not even use his real name; he calls himself "Bernard Jenkins." He says the papers that prove who he is are down in Sidcup, but he can never get there. His lost papers stand for a lost self — a man who no longer knows, or cannot prove, who he is.
- Power and dominance (আধিপত্য).** The whole play is a quiet fight for control of the room. Mick and Aston hold power because they own the space; Davies has nothing, so he schemes and flatters. Whoever controls the room controls the other person, and Davies keeps choosing the wrong side.

4. **Loneliness and the failure to communicate.** All three men are isolated (বিচ্ছিন্ন). They talk a great deal but rarely truly reach one another. Aston tells his deepest pain in a long speech, yet Davies barely listens. Words become a way to hide, not to connect.
5. **Shelter, home and the Room.** The single room is warmth, safety and a place to belong — everything a homeless man wants. But it is also a trap and a battleground. To be inside is to be safe; to be pushed outside is to be nobody. The room is the real prize of the play.
6. **Illusion versus reality (কল্পনা বনাম বাস্তব).** Every character clings to a dream that never comes true. Aston plans to build a shed and fix the house; Mick dreams of turning it into a smart modern flat; Davies dreams of Sidcup. None of these plans ever happens. Their futures stay stuck in talk.
7. **Charity and betrayal.** Aston's simple kindness in rescuing a stranger is repaid with insults, threats and betrayal. Davies mocks Aston's mental illness and tries to use Mick against him. The play asks whether real care between broken people is even possible.

Classroom techniques (know these terms):

- **Pinteresque** dialogue — flat, everyday, repetitive speech that hides strong feeling beneath the surface.
- **Pause** and **silence** — Pinter writes exact pauses into the script; what is *not* said carries the real meaning.
- **Subtext** — the true thought or threat lying under the ordinary words.
- **Comedy of menace** — comedy shadowed by an unseen danger.
- **Tragicomedy** — the play is funny and painful at the same time.
- **Non-communication / failure of language** — people speak past each other.
- **Naturalistic setting** — one realistic, junk-filled room, closely observed.
- **Repetition** — Sidcup, the papers, the shoes, the shed come back again and again.
- **Open / ambiguous ending** — nothing is fully explained or resolved.

Key Quotations — memorize

(Only the author-and-critic lines below are given in exact words. The play's lines are described in simple English, without quotation marks, so you never write a wrong quote in the exam.)

- **Harold Pinter (author's remark):** "The Caretaker is funny, up to a point. Beyond that point, it ceases to be funny, and it was because of that point that I wrote it." — Use to show the play is a tragicomedy, not just a joke.
- **Harold Pinter (on his craft):** "There are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed." — Use for the theme of pauses, silence and non-communication.
- **Irving Wardle (critic's term):** the phrase "comedy of menace" — Wardle used it for Pinter's early plays. Use in every menace/violence answer.
- **Martin Esslin (critic's term):** the phrase "Theatre of the Absurd" — Esslin linked Pinter to this movement. Use for absurdism and the meaningless, threatening world.
- **Davies (described, not quoted):** He repeatedly insists his papers are down in Sidcup and that he must get there to prove who he is — but bad weather and the wrong shoes always stop him. Use for the identity theme.
- **Aston (described):** He quietly tells how, in the hospital, they put a kind of pincers on his head and gave him electric shock treatment, and says he has never been able to think clearly since. Use for menace, contemporary society, and pathos.
- **Davies (described):** He hides his real name and gives it as Bernard Jenkins. Use for the lost-identity theme.
- **Mick (described):** He dazzles Davies with big talk of turning the broken-down house into a smart, modern flat. Use for illusion versus reality and class ambition.

- **Both brothers (described):** Each in turn offers Davies the job of caretaker, a post he never really takes up. Use for the title and the power game.
- **The ending (described):** Davies pleads to be allowed to stay as his sentences break into broken fragments and the Sidcup excuse finally collapses into silence. Use for the open ending and the theme of rejection.

Critics' Views (safe to cite)

Critic	View	Use for
Irving Wardle	Coined the term "comedy of menace" for Pinter's early plays — laughter shadowed by an unseen threat.	Menace & violence essays
Martin Esslin	Placed Pinter within the Theatre of the Absurd; saw the room as a fragile refuge in a threatening, uncertain world.	Absurdism, the Room, contemporary society
Austin Quigley	In <i>The Pinter Problem</i> argued Pinter's dialogue is about people negotiating power and relationships, not just absurd nonsense.	Language, power struggle
John Russell Taylor	In <i>Anger and After</i> placed Pinter among the new wave of British playwrights after 1956.	Contemporary society, background
Peter Hall	A leading director of Pinter's plays; insisted the pauses and silences are exactly written and full of meaning.	Technique, pauses and silence
Harold Pinter (himself)	Said the play is "funny, up to a point," and that he wrote it because of the point beyond which it stops being funny.	Comedy versus seriousness; tragicomedy

Exam Q&A Bank

Part A — Reference to Context (5 marks)

RTC 1 — Aston's hospital speech (close of Act II) — Very likely

This passage comes from Harold Pinter's play *The Caretaker* (1960). The speaker is Aston, the gentle elder brother, and he is speaking to Davies, the old tramp he has sheltered. It closes Act II, when Aston, standing alone in the dim light, quietly tells how he was once taken into a mental hospital and given electric shock treatment, which he believes damaged his mind and his power to concentrate. The significance is huge. First, it is the emotional heart of the play: the strange, slow Aston is suddenly shown as a wounded, sympathetic human being. Second, it explains his broken behaviour — his half-finished plans and his slow speech. Third, it turns the play from comedy toward tragedy, showing society's careless cruelty to the weak. Davies barely responds, which proves the theme of failed communication. After hearing this secret, Davies later cruelly uses it against Aston — the moment that begins his downfall.

RTC 2 — Davies and the Sidcup papers — Very likely

This context is from Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker* (1960). The speaker is Davies, the homeless old man, and the idea returns many times throughout the play. Davies repeatedly claims that the papers proving his true identity are down in Sidcup, and that he must travel there — but the weather is always "too bad," or he lacks the right shoes, so he never goes. The significance lies in the theme of identity. Davies does not even use his real name (he calls himself Bernard Jenkins), so the missing papers stand for a missing, uncertain self: a man who cannot prove who he is. The endless excuses also show his laziness and self-deception — like Aston's shed and Mick's flat, Sidcup is a dream that never happens. It becomes a symbol of every promise the characters make but never keep, and of the empty, drifting lives Pinter puts before us.

Part B — Short Notes (5 marks)

1. Significance of the Room — 🔥 Very likely (in both 2019 and 2020 lists)

Almost the whole play takes place inside one cluttered room in a run-down London house, so the room is far more than a background — it is a central symbol. First, it stands for **shelter and belonging**. For a homeless tramp like Davies, a warm room with a bed is the greatest prize; to be let in is to exist, and to be shut out is to be nobody. Second, the room is a **battleground for power**. Mick and Aston control it because they hold it, while Davies, who owns nothing, must scheme and flatter to keep his place in it. Whoever rules the room rules the person inside. Third, the room shows **isolation and blocked lives**: it is packed with useless junk — a broken toaster, a disconnected sink, a Buddha statue — objects that go nowhere, just like the characters' unfinished dreams. Critic Martin Esslin saw such rooms as a fragile refuge in a threatening world. Thus the room carries the play's meaning about safety, control and human loneliness.

2. Justify the title / the meaning of "caretaker" — 🔥 Very likely (in both 2019 and 2020 lists)

The title points to the job that both brothers, at different moments, offer to Davies: to be the "caretaker" (তত্ত্বাবধায়ক) of the house. The word is rich in irony. First, Davies is completely **unfit** to care for anything — he cannot even care for himself, and he never truly takes up the post; the offer stays a promise, like every other promise in the play. Second, the title asks *who really cares for whom*. It is Aston who "takes care" of Davies by rescuing him, feeding him and giving him a bed, while Davies repays this care with insults and betrayal — so the true caretaker is the one who is finally thrown out into the cold. Third, the word hints at **control**: to be "caretaker" is to be given a small piece of power over the room, and the fight over this tiny job drives the whole plot. The title therefore captures the play's themes of shelter, charity, power and broken human care. It is both a real job offer and a bitter comment on how little care these lonely men actually give one another.

Part C — Essays (15 marks)

"Consider The Caretaker as a comedy of menace and violence." — 🔥 Very likely (both years; marked v.v.i.)

Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker* (1960) looks, on the surface, like a comedy about three odd men bickering in a dirty room. Yet under its laughter runs a constant thread of fear and danger. The critic Irving Wardle famously described Pinter's early work with the phrase "comedy of menace" — comedy shadowed by an unseen threat. This essay argues that *The Caretaker* fully earns that description: it is genuinely funny, but the humour is always crossed by psychological cruelty, sudden aggression and real acts of violence, so that laughter and dread live side by side.

The comic surface of the play is real and strong. Davies is a figure of pure comedy: he grumbles endlessly, blames everyone else, refuses shoes because the laces are the wrong colour, and boasts about a Sidcup he will never reach. The bickering between the men, and Davies's impossible pride for a man who owns nothing, make an audience laugh out loud. Pinter himself accepted this, remarking that "The Caretaker is funny, up to a point." The important words, though, are "up to a point" — the comedy is deliberately limited, and Pinter added that "beyond that point, it ceases to be funny, and it was because of that point that I wrote it."

That darker "point" is menace. Again and again the ordinary talk suddenly turns threatening. Mick's very first appearance is an ambush: he seizes Davies silently in the dark and throws him down. Later Mick terrifies the old man in the dark by rushing about with a roaring vacuum cleaner, pretending it is innocent housework. He fires strange, rapid questions and long baffling speeches at Davies, keeping him off balance and afraid. The menace is created not by loud action but by **pause** and **silence**, and by the gap between calm words and hostile intent. As Pinter said, "There are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed." Mick's floods of talk are exactly such a silence — words used as a weapon.

The play also contains real violence, both of the body and of the mind. Mick smashes the Buddha statue against the stove in a burst of anger, a shocking act after so much quiet talk. There is cruelty of speech, too: Davies coldly mocks Aston's time in the mental hospital and threatens to have him thrown out. Worst of all is the remembered violence in Aston's great Act II speech, where he describes the electric shock treatment forced on him in the hospital — an act of institutional violence that broke his

mind long before the play began. This memory shows that menace is not only Mick's game; it is woven into the world these men live in.

Finally, the ending turns the menace into genuine pain. Both brothers reject Davies, and the tramp is left pleading to stay as his sentences fall apart into broken fragments. Here the laughter dies completely, and we feel only the cruelty of a homeless old man cast out into the cold. This is the "point beyond which it ceases to be funny." Martin Esslin, linking Pinter to the Theatre of the Absurd, saw such endings as images of human beings left helpless in a threatening, uncertain world.

In conclusion, *The Caretaker* is rightly called a comedy of menace and violence because its two moods are inseparable. The jokes never cancel the fear, and the fear never quite kills the jokes. Through Mick's silent threats, the smashed statue, the memory of the shock treatment and the merciless ending, Pinter shows that laughter and dread are two faces of the same human loneliness — which is exactly why the play still disturbs its audiences.

"How does *The Caretaker* represent contemporary society?" — 🔥 Very likely (in both years' lists)

At first sight, Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker* (1960) seems too small to be about society at all: three men, one room, no politics, no crowd scenes. Yet by looking closely at these ordinary, damaged lives, Pinter holds up a mirror to post-war England. This essay argues that the play represents contemporary society through its picture of homelessness, class and money, the careless treatment of the mentally ill, everyday prejudice, and the deep loneliness of modern life.

The most obvious social reality is **homelessness and poverty**. Davies is a rootless old tramp with no fixed place, no steady work and no papers, drifting from one shelter to the next. The setting itself — a cold, run-down London house crammed with junk — reflects the shabby, bomb-scarred England of the late 1950s. Critic John Russell Taylor, in *Anger and After*, placed Pinter among the new wave of writers who brought such ordinary, working-class realities onto the British stage. Davies is the forgotten man of that society: the one everybody steps around.

The play also reflects **class and the hunger for money and property**. Mick actually owns the house and speaks constantly of turning the broken rooms into a smart, modern flat, full of stylish furniture. He is the small entrepreneur of a changing, money-minded Britain, dreaming of property and profit. Against him stands Davies, who owns nothing at all. The gap between the man with property and the man with none, and the false promise that the poor might rise, mirror the class tensions of the age. The bright modern flat, like Sidcup, is a dream of a better life that never arrives.

Society's **careless treatment of the weak and mentally ill** is shown through Aston. His long speech about being taken into a hospital and given electric shock treatment reveals how the vulnerable are handled roughly and then left to cope alone. Aston is gentle and kind, yet society has quietly broken him and abandoned him with his half-finished plans. Through him, Pinter criticises a world that damages its weakest members and offers them no real care.

Everyday **prejudice** appears too. Davies is full of suspicion and dislike toward foreigners and the neighbours he imagines around him, revealing the small-minded fears and racial tensions simmering in ordinary post-war communities. Pinter does not preach about it; he simply lets it show in Davies's grumbling, which makes the criticism sharper and more honest.

Above all, the play represents the **loneliness and failure of connection** in modern society. Three men share one room, yet none can truly reach another. Aston pours out his deepest wound and Davies barely listens; kindness is repaid with betrayal; the "caretaker" job — a chance for people to care for one another — collapses into a power game. Martin Esslin, reading Pinter through the Theatre of the Absurd, saw this as an image of modern people isolated in a world without shared meaning. The single room becomes all of society in miniature: crowded, yet full of separate, lonely lives.

In conclusion, *The Caretaker* represents contemporary society not through grand statements but through three small, believable lives. In its homeless tramp, its property-owning dreamer, its broken and abandoned patient, and its everyday prejudice and isolation, the play quietly exposes the poverty, class divisions and coldness of post-war England. By shrinking society to one junk-filled room, Pinter makes its loneliness and quiet cruelty impossible to ignore.

⚡ One-Page Revision Sheet

Item	Remember this
Story in 3 lines	Kind Aston rescues an old tramp, Davies, and shelters him in a junk-filled room. Davies schemes to play Aston against his sharp brother Mick, and both offer him a "caretaker" job. His lies exposed, Davies is finally thrown out, pleading to stay.
2 must-quotes	Pinter: "The Caretaker is funny, up to a point. Beyond that point, it ceases to be funny, and it was because of that point that I wrote it." — Pinter: "There are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed."
2 backup quotes	Wardle's term "comedy of menace"; Esslin's term "Theatre of the Absurd" (both safe to quote as critical phrases).
2 critics	Irving Wardle (comedy of menace); Martin Esslin (Theatre of the Absurd, the fragile room).
Technique words	Pinteresque, pause, silence, subtext, comedy of menace, tragicomedy, non-communication, open ending.
Top 3 likely essays	1) The Caretaker as a comedy of menace and violence (v.v.i.). 2) How the play represents contemporary society. 3) Significance of the Room / justify the title (short notes).

Exam-timing tip: In a 4-hour paper, give each 15-mark essay about 40–45 minutes — spend 5 minutes planning your thesis and paragraphs first, so you always finish with a clear conclusion rather than stopping in the middle.