**Identity in *The Caretaker***

Before the action begins the room is given some moments to make its impact on us. It is cluttered with many of the appurtenances of modern suburban bourgeois living, but they are deprived of the functions which that context would give them: the sink and gas-oven are not connected; the coal-bucket is not used for coal, nor the shopping-basket for shopping, nor the joinery and decorating utensils for actual renovations; there are sideboard drawers without a sideboard, a lawn-mower without a lawn ('You'd need a tractor, man'); the electric toaster is broken, the solitary chair on its side, the roof leaks. The room is a parody of a 'normal' room, an inversion of the values and order implied by the typical modern home. As such, it serves as a refuge for characters who have failed to come to terms with the outside world.

Mick flits in and out of the room, ill-at-ease there; obviously, though he owns it, out of place. Two articles in the room are also strangely out of keeping – Aston'a Buddha and Mlck's electrolux, which actually works. The electrolux represents Mick's effort to introduce some of the order of the outside world into the room – 'Can't help being houseproud'. But something more thoroughgoing than a spring-clean would be needed:

> 'You couldn't make a home out of this. There's no way you could arrange it'.

He dreams of turning the place into a penthouse, a palace – a display-piece of 'good taste', modernity, conspicuous consumption; an exaggerated image of the affluent society and its unquestioned values. His 'deepest wishes' are taken over directly from the glossy magazines.

Mick is always on the move (he has his own van), he is 'with it', streetwise, at home in the world of shady property deals, H.P. agreements, red-tape. But where does all his go go to? The limits of his life are mapped out by the London transport bus-routes. Has he a real identity, or is he a newspaper figure, a figment of the ad-man's fancy?. Mick lives to consume and

exploit. His life lacks creativeness or integrity, and he finds an. outlet in pointless sadism and violence, bullying the old tramp Davies, and smashing Aston's Buddha – a symbol of inwardness, serenity, and unwordliness. Mick is the man who accepts whatever values he is offered by a consumer society; he is both business-man and juvenile delinquent.

Davies, too, attempts to live in the world, but is a permanent misfit. Like Mick he believes in 'exploit or be exploited'. But in the struggle for survival he is one of the least fit. He is the hindmost whom the Devil takes. The world conspires, he feels, to menace him with violence, jail, abuse. A piece of human flotsam, he got left behind by the tide of progress 'a good while back', and now catches everyone else's backwash. If only he could get back to the point where he got out of step, everything would come right. Perhaps it was, as he says, during the war, when a number and paybook might have given him an identity easily lost in civvy street. (Sidcup, the headquarters of the Army Pay Office, is to him what Moscow was to Chehov's three sisters.) Certainly it was before check shirts became the fashion, before you had to stick stamps on your card, before gas and electricity brought the menace to your very bedside. At a deeper level it is, perhaps, before man fell from grace; and Sidcup is his Eden.

Davies compensates for his lost identity with delusions of grandeur about his remote past and an obsessive concern for respect and rights and rank. He consoles himself that he is not the lowest in status – there are Blacks, Greeks, Poles, aliens inferior to him. 'Aliens' includes the Scotch git and the Irish hooligan, which explains his intense discomfort when asked if he is Welsh.

Any responsibility is too much for hire, His only talents are for lying, filching, thieving and stinking the place out. The job of caretaker, with a white coat and a bell with 'Caretaker' on it, offers him an identity. But the challenge is too great, the world on the other side of the door too implacably hostile:

> All I'd do, I'd hear the bell, I'd go down there, any Harry might be there. I could be buggered as easy as that, man. They might be there after my card ,.. They ring the bell called Caretaker, they'd have me in, that's what they'd do, I wouldn't stand a chance.

In trying to play the brothers off against each other Davies miscalculates because he does not allow for any deeper qualities than his own. ‘He's got no feelings’ he says of Aston, mistaking his compassionate smile for another subtle threat: ‘What the hell's he smiling at?’ Nor does he allow for the real trust and respect which exists between the brothers.

Davies continually protests against being treated like dirt:

> What do you think I am, a dog? What do you think I am, a wild animal?

But there is nothing in him to set against these insults. Only the supposed papers at Sidcup can be shored against his ruins. But he must take care that weather and shoes are never good enough to get him there.

Aston is the only character we know to have had an identity. He had unusual thoughts, could see things very clearly, and attempted to communicate his special vision to his fellows. He is, surely, the artist or teacher, rejected by his audience for failing to conform to their standard of normality – the average. Aston’s abnormality has been purged by society by electric shock treatment. After it, his creativeness has found expression only in slow manual work. He thinks at half-speed, feels at half-strength, and can hardly write his name. Yet he still exerts a moral authority, and embodies the play's only positives, even though we recognize that his new identity as carpenter making sound structures of good clean wood is also an illusion. But the illusion itself has an integrity lacking in the selfish illusions of the others. Only Aston is capable of gentleness and compassion; only Aston is prepared to think about his own case, to grapple with the essential question of whether his visions were valid. He can sit still and quiet, while Davies fears the silence and darkness which press to fill the void at the centre of him.

Perhaps Pinter sees these forms of not-being and half-being as the only alternatives open to us in the modern world. We can swim, like Mick, in the given direction, or drown, like Davies, in the attempt; but

if we oppose the current, or strike out in a new direction,
we shall be buffeted into conformity and helplessness.
At least *The Caretaker* strips this world and provokes
us to query both its assumptions and our reasons for
thinking that we exist.